

World dispatch

Selective Memri

Brian Whitaker investigates whether the 'independent' media institute that translates the Arabic newspapers is quite what it seems

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For some time now, I have been receiving small gifts from a generous institute in the United States. The gifts are high-quality translations of articles from Arabic newspapers which the institute sends to me by email every few days, entirely free-of-charge. The emails also go to politicians and academics, as well as to lots of other journalists. The stories they contain are usually interesting.

Whenever I get an email from the institute, several of my Guardian colleagues receive one too and regularly forward their copies to me - sometimes with a note suggesting that I might like to check out the story and write about it.

If the note happens to come from a more senior colleague, I'm left feeling that I really ought to write about it. One example last week was a couple of paragraphs translated by the institute, in which a former doctor in the Iraqi army claimed that Saddam Hussein had personally given orders to amputate the ears of military deserters.

The organisation that makes these translations and sends them out is the Middle East Media Research Institute (Memri), based in Washington but with recently-opened

offices in London, Berlin and Jerusalem.

Its work is subsidised by US taxpayers because as an "independent, non-partisan, non-profit" organisation, it has tax-deductible status under American law.

Memri's purpose, according to its website, is to bridge the language gap between the west - where few speak Arabic - and the Middle East, by "providing timely translations of Arabic, Farsi, and Hebrew media".

Despite these high-minded statements, several things make me uneasy whenever I'm asked to look at a story circulated by Memri. First of all, it's a rather mysterious organisation. Its website does not give the names of any people to contact, not even an office address.

The reason for this secrecy, according to a former employee, is that "they don't want suicide bombers walking through the door on Monday morning" (Washington Times, June 20).

This strikes me as a somewhat over-the-top precaution for an institute that simply wants to break down east-west language barriers.

The second thing that makes me uneasy is that the stories selected by Memri for translation follow a familiar pattern: either they reflect badly on the character of Arabs or they in some way further the political agenda of Israel. I am not alone in this unease.

Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations told the Washington Times: "Memri's intent is to find the worst possible quotes from the Muslim world and disseminate them as widely as possible."

Memri might, of course, argue that it is seeking to encourage moderation by highlighting the blatant examples of intolerance and extremism. But if so, one would expect it - for the sake of non-partisanship - to publicise extremist articles in the Hebrew media too.

Although Memri claims that it does provide translations from Hebrew media, I can't recall receiving any.

Evidence from Memri's website also casts doubt on its non-partisan status. Besides

supporting liberal democracy, civil society, and the free market, the institute also emphasises "the continuing relevance of Zionism to the Jewish people and to the state of Israel".

That is what its website used to say, but the words about Zionism have now been deleted. The original page, however, can still be found in internet archives.

The reason for Memri's air of secrecy becomes clearer when we look at the people behind it. The co-founder and president of Memri, and the registered owner of its website, is an Israeli called Yigal Carmon.

Mr - or rather, Colonel - Carmon spent 22 years in Israeli military intelligence and later served as counter-terrorism adviser to two Israeli prime ministers, Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin.

Retrieving another now-deleted page from the archives of Memri's website also throws up a list of its staff. Of the six people named, three - including Col Carmon - are described as having worked for Israeli intelligence.

Among the other three, one served in the Israeli army's Northern Command Ordnance Corps, one has an academic background, and the sixth is a former stand-up comedian.

Col Carmon's co-founder at Memri is Meyrav Wurmser, who is also director of the centre for Middle East policy at the Indianapolis-based Hudson Institute, which bills itself as "America's premier source of applied research on enduring policy challenges".

The ubiquitous Richard Perle, chairman of the Pentagon's defence policy board, recently joined Hudson's board of trustees.

Ms Wurmser is the author of an academic paper entitled Can Israel Survive Post-Zionism? in which she argues that leftwing Israeli intellectuals pose "more than a passing threat" to the state of Israel, undermining its soul and reducing its will for self-defence.

In addition, Ms Wurmser is a highly qualified, internationally recognised, inspiring and knowledgeable speaker on the Middle East whose presence would make any "event, radio or television show a unique one" - according to Benador Associates, a public relations company which touts her services.

Nobody, so far as I know, disputes the general accuracy of Memri's translations but there are other reasons to be concerned about its output.

The email it circulated last week about Saddam Hussein ordering people's ears to be cut off was an extract from a longer article in the pan-Arab newspaper, al-Hayat, by Adil Awadh who claimed to have first-hand knowledge of it.

It was the sort of tale about Iraqi brutality that newspapers would happily reprint without checking, especially in the current atmosphere of war fever. It may well be true, but it needs to be treated with a little circumspection.

Mr Awadh is not exactly an independent figure. He is, or at least was, a member of the Iraqi National Accord, an exiled Iraqi opposition group backed by the US - and neither al-Hayat nor Memri mentioned this.

Also, Mr Awadh's allegation first came to light some four years ago, when he had a strong personal reason for making it. According to a Washington Post report in 1998, the amputation claim formed part of his application for political asylum in the United States.

At the time, he was one of six Iraqis under arrest in the US as suspected terrorists or Iraqi intelligence agents, and he was trying to show that the Americans had made a mistake.

Earlier this year, Memri scored two significant propaganda successes against Saudi Arabia. The first was its translation of an article from al-Riyadh newspaper in which a columnist wrote that Jews use the blood of Christian or Muslim children in pastries for the Purim religious festival.

The writer, a university teacher, was apparently relying on an anti-semitic myth that dates back to the middle ages. What this demonstrated, more than anything, was the ignorance of many Arabs - even those highly educated - about Judaism and Israel, and their readiness to believe such ridiculous stories.

But Memri claimed al-Riyadh was a Saudi "government newspaper" - in fact it's privately owned - implying that the article had some form of official approval.

Al-Riyadh's editor said he had not seen the article before publication because he had

been abroad. He apologised without hesitation and sacked his columnist, but by then the damage had been done.

Memri's next success came a month later when Saudi Arabia's ambassador to London wrote a poem entitled *The Martyrs* - about a young woman suicide bomber - which was published in *al-Hayat* newspaper.

Memri sent out translated extracts from the poem, which it described as "praising suicide bombers". Whether that was the poem's real message is a matter of interpretation. It could, perhaps more plausibly, be read as condemning the political ineffectiveness of Arab leaders, but Memri's interpretation was reported, almost without question, by the western media.

These incidents involving Saudi Arabia should not be viewed in isolation. They are part of building a case against the kingdom and persuading the United States to treat it as an enemy, rather than an ally.

It's a campaign that the Israeli government and American neo-conservatives have been pushing since early this year - one aspect of which was the bizarre anti-Saudi briefing at the Pentagon, hosted last month by Richard Perle.

To anyone who reads Arabic newspapers regularly, it should be obvious that the items highlighted by Memri are those that suit its agenda and are not representative of the newspapers' content as a whole.

The danger is that many of the senators, congressmen and "opinion formers" who don't read Arabic but receive Memri's emails may get the idea that these extreme examples are not only truly representative but also reflect the policies of Arab governments.

Memri's Col Carmon seems eager to encourage them in that belief. In Washington last April, in testimony to the House committee on international relations, he portrayed the Arab media as part of a wide-scale system of government-sponsored indoctrination.

"The controlled media of the Arab governments conveys hatred of the west, and in particular, of the United States," he said. "Prior to September 11, one could frequently find articles which openly supported, or even called for, terrorist attacks against the United States ...

"The United States is sometimes compared to Nazi Germany, President Bush to Hitler, Guantanamo to Auschwitz," he said.

In the case of the al-Jazeera satellite channel, he added, "the overwhelming majority of guests and callers are typically anti-American and anti-semitic".

Unfortunately, it is on the basis of such sweeping generalisations that much of American foreign policy is built these days.

As far as relations between the west and the Arab world are concerned, language is a barrier that perpetuates ignorance and can easily foster misunderstanding.

All it takes is a small but active group of Israelis to exploit that barrier for their own ends and start changing western perceptions of Arabs for the worse.

It is not difficult to see what Arabs might do to counter that. A group of Arab media companies could get together and publish translations of articles that more accurately reflect the content of their newspapers.

It would certainly not be beyond their means. But, as usual, they may prefer to sit back and grumble about the machinations of Israeli intelligence veterans.

The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and Clarifications column, Wednesday August 21 2002

In an article headed Atrocity stories regain currency, page 13, August 8, and in an article headed Selective Memri on the Guardian website, we referred to Dr Adil Awadh, an Iraqi doctor who alleged that Saddam Hussein had ordered doctors to amputate the ears of soldiers who deserted. Dr Awadh has asked us to make it clear that he has no connection with Memri (Middle East Media Research Institute), and that he did not authorise its translation of parts of an article by him. He is no longer a member of the Iraqi National Accord (INA). He is an independent member of the Iraqi National Congress (INC). His reference to orders by Saddam Hussein to cut off the ears of deserters has been supported by evidence from other sources.

