

# Internet warfare team unveiled

Twitterers paid to spread Israeli propaganda

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Nazareth. The passionate support for Israel expressed on talkback sections of websites, internet chat forums, blogs, Twitters and Facebook may not be all that it seems.

Israel's foreign ministry is reported to be establishing a special undercover team of paid workers whose job it will be to surf the internet 24 hours a day spreading positive news about Israel.

Internet-savvy Israeli youngsters, mainly recent graduates and demobilised soldiers with language skills, are being recruited to pose as ordinary surfers while they provide the government's line on the Middle East conflict.

"To all intents and purposes the internet is a theatre in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and we must be active in that theatre, otherwise we will lose," said Ilan Shturman, who is responsible for the project.

The existence of an "internet warfare team" came to light when it was included in this year's foreign ministry budget. About \$150,000 has been set aside for the first stage of development, with increased funding expected next year.

The team will fall under the authority of a large department already dealing with what Israelis term "hasbara", officially translated as "public explanation" but more usually meaning propaganda. That includes not only government public relations work but more secretive dealings the ministry has with a battery of private organisations and initiatives that promote Israel's image in print, on TV and online.

In an interview this month with the Calcalist, an Israeli business newspaper, Mr Shturman, the deputy director of the ministry's hasbara department, admitted his team would be working undercover.

"Our people will not say: 'Hello, I am from the hasbara department of the Israeli foreign ministry and I want to tell you the following.' Nor will they necessarily identify themselves as Israelis," he said. "They will speak as net-surfers and as citizens, and will write responses that will look personal but will be based on a prepared list of messages that the foreign ministry developed."

Rona Kuperboim, a columnist for Ynet, Israel's most popular news website, denounced the initiative, saying it indicated that Israel had become a "thought-police state".

She added that “good PR cannot make the reality in the occupied territories prettier. Children are being killed, homes are being bombed, and families are starved.”

Her column was greeted by several talkbackers asking how they could apply for a job with the foreign ministry’s team.

The project is a formalisation of public relations practices the ministry developed specifically for Israel’s assault on Gaza in December and January.

“During Operation Cast Lead we appealed to Jewish communities abroad and with their help we recruited a few thousand volunteers, who were joined by Israeli volunteers,” Mr Shturman said.

“We gave them background material and hasbara material, and we sent them to represent the Israeli point of view on news websites and in polls on the internet.”

The Israeli army also had one of the most popular sites on the video-sharing site YouTube and regularly uploaded clips, although it was criticised by human rights groups for misleading viewers about what was shown in its footage.

Mr Shturman said that during the war the ministry had concentrated its activities on European websites where audiences were more hostile to Israeli policy. High on its list of target sites for the new project would be BBC Online and Arabic websites, he added.

Elon Gilad, who heads the internet team, told Calcalist that many people had contacted the ministry offering their services during the Gaza attack. “People just asked for information, and afterwards we saw that the information was distributed all over the internet.”

He suggested that there had been widespread government cooperation, with the ministry of absorption handing over contact details for hundreds of recent immigrants to Israel, who wrote pro-Israel material for websites in their native languages.

The new team is expected to increase the ministry’s close coordination with a private advocacy group, giyus.org (Give Israel Your United Support). About 50,000 activists are reported to have downloaded a programme called Megaphone that sends an alert to their computers when an article critical of Israel is published. They are then supposed to bombard the site with comments supporting Israel.

Nasser Rego of Ilam, a group based in Nazareth that monitors the Israeli media, said Arab organisations in Israel were among those regularly targeted by hasbara groups for “character assassination”. He was concerned the new team would try to make such work appear more professional and convincing.

“If these people are misrepresenting who they are, we can guess they won’t worry too much about misrepresenting the groups and individuals they write about. Their aim, it’s clear, will be to discredit those who stand for human rights and justice for the Palestinians.”

When The National called the foreign ministry, Yigal Palmor, a spokesman, denied the existence of the internet team, though he admitted officials were stepping up exploitation of new media.

He declined to say which comments by Mr Shturman or Mr Gilad had been misrepresented by the Hebrew-language media, and said the ministry would not be taking any action over the reports.

Israel has developed an increasingly sophisticated approach to new media since it launched a “Brand Israel” campaign in 2005.

Market research persuaded officials that Israel should play up good news about business success, and scientific and medical breakthroughs involving Israelis.

Mr Shturman said his staff would seek to use websites to improve “Israel’s image as a developed state that contributes to the quality of the environment and to humanity”.

David Saranga, head of public relations at Israel’s consulate-general in New York, which has been leading the push for more upbeat messages about Israel, argued last week that Israel was at a disadvantage against pro-Palestinian advocacy.

“Unlike the Muslim world, which has hundreds of millions of supporters who have adopted the Palestinian narrative in order to slam Israel, the Jewish world numbers only 13 million,” he wrote in Ynet.

Israel has become particularly concerned that support is ebbing among the younger generations in Europe and the United States.

In 2007 it emerged that the foreign ministry was behind a photo-shoot published in Maxim, a popular US men’s magazine, in which female Israeli soldiers posed in swimsuits.

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