Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

CENTCOM's Digital Engagement Tries To Counter Extremists [1]

TAMPA --- At the headquarters of U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida, some young civilians are pushing back at extremist messages that permeate Internet forums. This Digital Engagement Team's members, who are fluent in Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu, comb through online postings in their respective languages looking for incendiary or inaccurate commentary about U.S. military operations or related activity. When these messages are found, the team prepares "engagements" that challenge the writer's logic or facts.

A recent example: a Farsi-speaking member of the team found a commentary defending the suicide bombing in Baghdad that killed more than 40 Iraqi Army recruits. This engagement specialist responded by challenging the premise that such murderous attacks, which kill mostly Muslims, can be justified.

In their online posts, members of the CENTCOM team identify themselves as working for Central Command, and this sometimes leads to their being kicked out of an online forum. But more often, the CENTCOM engagement is allowed to remain posted and it sometimes elicits online conversation.

Whether these engagements in cyberspace are changing anyone's outlook about the United States is open to question, but this work must be done. To allow the voices of extremism to go unchallenged would be folly and would amount to surrendering the intellectual battleground. Even if just a relatively few online forum readers are exposed to official U.S. viewpoints, that is a step forward.

During a visit to CENTCOM, I was impressed by the persistence and energy of the digital engagement team and the other people working on public affairs projects. While I was there, activity centered on getting out news about the U.S. military's role in relief efforts in the flood zones of Pakistan, an effort that will save lives and might also soften the strong anti-American feelings in that country.

Central Command is not the only source of online engagement efforts. The approach of the State Department's Digital Outreach Team is much the same as the CENTCOM unit, although its purpose does not include advancing a military public affairs agenda. As stated on the State Department's website, the job of the Digital Outreach Team is "to explain U.S. foreign policy and to counter misinformation." It is about the same size as the CENTCOM group and presumably has a similar talent pool for its outreach operations.

Cooperation between Defense and State projects exists, such as CENTCOM working with the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan on flood relief matters. Overall, however, CENTCOM's engagement efforts have specific military intent in that they seek to delegitimize and disrupt the activities of violent extremists. The State Department has found itself sometimes operating

on similar ground, using its soft-power efforts to undermine extremist ventures.

Defense and State share the goal of advancing the U.S. national interest through these engagement/outreach projects. It would be nice to think that someone in the government maintains an overview of what all the players in this field are doing and would see to it that much-needed additional resources are provided. For now, at least, that may be wishful thinking.