

Israeli military confronts new foe: the Internet

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In this undated photo, originally posted on a Facebook page belonging to Eden Aberjil, and taken from the Israeli blog site sachim.tumblr.com, an Israeli army soldier poses in front of blindfolded men identified in the Israeli media as Palestinian prisoners. The Hebrew in the top right translates as, "Eden Arberjil's photos - army...the best time of my life." Israeli news media and bloggers have identified the soldier in the photos as Aberjil. (AP Photo/sachim.tumblr.com)

(AP) -- The security obsessed Israeli military is confronting a new adversary - trying to control what its own soldiers post to the Internet.

Facebook, along with [YouTube](#) and other popular sites, is turning into a formidable nuisance for the [army](#), as young recruits in this tech-crazy country post embarrassing and potentially sensitive information online, circumventing tight [military](#) controls.

The issue exploded onto the national agenda this week when a young ex-soldier posted pictures of herself in uniform, posing in front of handcuffed, blindfolded Palestinian prisoners on her [Facebook](#) page under the heading "Army - The Best Time of My Life."

The controversial posting, along with a series of other recent gaffes, highlights the challenges facing Israel's high-tech military - known, among other things, for its shadowy electronic-warfare units - as it struggles to keep up with the ever-shifting sands of the Internet.

Last month, a video of Israeli soldiers dancing to the drunken party anthem "TiK ToK" during a patrol in the West Bank emerged on YouTube, earning them a reprimand.

Around the same time, a secret intelligence unit launched a Facebook group for its members that divulged details of the secret base where they served. The site was removed several days later after the army found out.

And, in perhaps the most serious breach, a military raid in the West Bank had to be called off earlier this year after a soldier posted details about the upcoming operation on Facebook.

Such incidents illustrate "how difficult it is for the military to operate, stick to policy, and keep people in line in light of the new communication realities," said Sheizaf Rafaeli, director of the Sagy Center for Internet Research and the Study of the Information Society at the University of Haifa.

That's in stark contrast to the traditional media, over which Israel's military censor has long maintained tight control.

Both Israeli and international news outlets are required to submit reports with potentially sensitive material for review, and the censor's office

often returns them with words or even entire sections blacked out. Access is severely limited to military personnel, from field soldiers to the army's top echelons, and it can take weeks to line up an interview with key commanders. Once approved, there are tight restrictions - quotes often must be run through the army spokesman's office and soldiers frequently can't be named or photographed.

The emergence of the latest pictures dominated Israeli news shows Tuesday, drawing tough criticism from the army and receiving heavy coverage in the Arab media.

Palestinians, along with Israeli human rights groups, denounced the photos as a cruel symbol of Israel's four-decade occupation, and the Arab satellite channel al-Jazeera interspersed its coverage with pictures of Abu Ghraib, the notorious U.S. prison in Iraq where American soldiers tortured inmates.

The former Israeli officer, Eden Aberjil, struck a defensive tone in interviews with Israeli media, insisting she did nothing wrong and saying she was surprised she had offended anyone.

"I have nothing to say sorry about. I treated them really well, I didn't abuse them, I didn't curse them, I didn't humiliate them. I merely took a picture near them," Aberjil told Channel 2 TV.

She said the men were civilians from the Gaza Strip who had been caught trying to enter Israel, apparently in search of work, and she posed for the pictures because she had never met anyone from Gaza.

Aberjil, who the army said is in her mid-20s, denounced any comparisons to Abu Ghraib as "delusional," saying she was astonished by the attention she had received and accusing the army of abandoning her. She claimed similar things take place in the army "every day."

She did, however, say she was sorry if the pictures, taken in 2008, had hurt anyone's feelings. She said she removed them after learning that others felt they were inappropriate.

Asked whether the posting violated Facebook's code of conduct, the company said "it appears that the girl in question removed the photos from her account on her own - and we were not involved in the removal of these photos in any way." It declined further comment.

The army said it permits soldiers to utilize social-networking sites, but only to upload unclassified material. It said all soldiers are taught about the guidelines.

One officer, speaking on condition of anonymity under military guidelines, said the censorship office has ways to monitor the Internet and make sure sensitive information does not appear online.

However, in cases deemed embarrassing but not a threat to security, such as the Aberjil pictures, "there is nothing anyone can do," he said.

Capt. Barak Raz, an army spokesman, said the issue was about morals, not security.

"I'm not concerned with the fact that photos were uploaded. As the military, we're concerned that such photos were taken to begin with, which are a gross violation of our ethical code," he said. "This isn't who we are as a military."

Because Aberjil is no longer in the army, it's unclear whether she can be punished.

Rafaeli said that while the military would like to curb the use of social media for the purposes of secrecy, PR and internal control, it is

"probably up against an insurmountable challenge."

Before, soldiers would have words censored out of letters that were sent home, but because of the Internet and social media, this is "no longer feasible," he said.

Social networks are a part of everyday life for today's generation of American military service members as well.

Many keep in touch with friends and family using Facebook, and they are savvy users of YouTube, Twitter and Flickr. A YouTube video featuring Afghanistan-stationed soldiers re-enacting Lady Gaga's "Telephone" music video, for example, gained viral popularity earlier this year.

Recognizing the reach of these services, the Pentagon announced earlier this year that everyone from troops in the field to the highest brass and civilian leaders will be allowed to use social networking sites on the military's non-classified computer network.

The policy followed a seven-month review in which the Defense Department weighed the threats and benefits of allowing the wide use of Internet capabilities. It permits commanders to cut off access - on a temporary basis - to safeguard a mission or reserve bandwidth for official use.

With the decision, the army unblocked YouTube, MySpace and more than a dozen sites that had been closed in May 2007.

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