US team using Twitter, Facebook to fight militants

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This image downloaded from the internet on Thursday, April 11, 2013 shows the Facebook page of the U.S. Digital Outreach Team, a group operating within the U.S. Department of State. A 50-member group of U.S. government workers comprised of Americans and foreign nationals called the Digital Outreach Team is countering extremist propaganda on sites like Twitter and Facebook, with the top official on the team, Alberto Fernandez, saying the goal is to contest space that had previously been ceded to extremists. Page title in arabic reads "US Digital Outreach Team - US Department of State". (AP Photo/U.S. Digital Outreach Team)

(AP)—The U.S. official who oversees American efforts to counter al-Qaida and other militants in the online battlefield keeps a quote on his desk from a "Most Wanted" jihadi from America's South. The Alabama native wrote that "the war of narratives has become even more important than the war of navies, napalm and knives."

"I keep that on my desk because that is true," Alberto Fernandez, the top official at the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, told The Associated Press. "It doesn't mean I think he's a great thinker or anything. I just thought that was right."

The wanted fighter behind the quote is Omar Hammami, who joined the Somali militant group al-Shabab about seven years ago and is a prolific user of Twitter, where he nostalgically posts about America—like the U.S. children's television show Reading Rainbow or his grandmother's cooking—as well as analyses of al-Shabab's battlefield strategy.

Fernandez' Digital Outreach Team has had online exchanges with Hammami in Arabic, though Fernandez says that while Hammami is engaging, silly and flippant in English, his Arabic is "staged and formal, as if someone is doing it for him."

One example of that flippancy: After the U.S. recently announced a $5 million reward for Hammami he responded on Twitter: "As I'm a bit low on cash, how much is my left leg going for?"

Hammami, Fernandez says, has responded to the U.S. online efforts "in superficial ways ... he hasn't engaged in a substantive way."

"We are focused on specifics on al-Qaida/al-Shabab actions in Somalia, their violence and brutality against the Somali people, the disconnect between their words and their actions," Fernandez said in a telephone interview from Washington. "A week ago they beheaded an 80-year-old

Somali imam for disagreeing with them."

The Digital Outreach Team tweets, posts updates on Facebook and uploads video to YouTube in Arabic, Punjabi, Somali and Urdu. The 50-member team is comprised of Americans and foreign nationals who are native speakers of the four languages. The unit had more than 7,000 what it terms "engagements"—postings, updates or uploads in 2012, its second full year in operation.

For example, on Wednesday the Digital Outreach Team said on its Arabic Facebook page that Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the most powerful Islamic militant groups fighting alongside Syrian rebels against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, is not in Syria "to support the revolution and the Syrian people, but to impose al-Qaida's political agenda."

Foreign fighters once mostly confined their online conversations to militant chat rooms and forums, but they have been migrating to more public Internet platforms in recent years, Fernandez said.

"The goal is to contest space that had previously been ceded to extremists, to confront them, to expose the bankruptcy and contradictions, the incoherence of al-Qaida, their friends and allies," said the Arabic-speaking Fernandez. "Previously they could monopolize, they could post their lies and no one was there to challenge them. And now we're there to challenge them on whatever platform they're at."

Terrorism expert J.M. Berger said Fernandez's group faces challenges.

Tens of thousands of social media users with an interest in violent ideologies can be identified, Berger, who published a paper last month about countering violent extremism on social networks for the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, told AP in an email.

But it's "very difficult to figure out which users are worth watching. For students of extremist movements and those working to counter violent extremism online, deciphering the signal amid the noise can prove incredibly daunting."

Berger said he has a high opinion of the work of Fernandez' team, which is working in an online environment that is both new to the government and fraught with pitfalls.

"There's a massive amount of work needed to develop the expertise to back such efforts up. Because it's Twitter, you don't think of it as requiring a lot of knowledge to wade on in, but these guys need all kinds of linguistic, regional and subject matter expertise," Berger said.

The Digital Outreach Team briefs Congress, think tanks and "others in government," Fernandez said.

Hammami says he is unimpressed with Fernandez's team.

He regularly chats online with a group of American terrorism experts and, in a tweet last month, said: "so far the digital outreach is quite lame. I think being in arabic hides that fact from you guys."

Hammami's online exchanges are so colloquial and so infused with Americana that many in the counter-terror field have formed a type of digital bond with Hammami. Fernandez even says: "I feel pity for him."

"I feel like he's one of those young men whose life has been ruined by getting into crimes or drugs and it turns out to be far different than he expected and they can't get out," Fernandez said.

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