

Israel to pay students to defend it online

August 14 2013, by Daniel Estrin

Israel is looking to hire university students to post pro-Israel messages on social media networks—without needing to identify themselves as government-linked, officials said Wednesday.

The Israeli prime minister's office said in a statement Wednesday that students on Israeli university campuses would receive full or partial scholarships to combat anti-Semitism and calls to boycott Israel online. It said students' messages would parallel statements by government officials.

"This is a groundbreaking project aimed at strengthening Israeli national diplomacy and adapting it to changes in information consumption," the statement said.

An Israeli official said Wednesday that scholarship recipients would be free to decide whether or not to identify themselves as part of the program, which would begin within months.

"Everyone who believes in the cause, and wants to join, can join," he told The Associated Press. He said the office was looking to budget \$778,000 for the project, and that the national Israeli student association would select participants from a pool of applicants.

The official spoke on condition of [anonymity](#) as the project is still under development and he wasn't authorized to speak publicly about it.

The Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz identified the official heading the

project as Danny Seaman, a [public diplomacy](#) official who has written posts on his personal Facebook page which Haaretz described as being incendiary and anti-Muslim.

Haaretz posted what it said were four screen shots of his recent posts. In one of them, Seaman wrote: "Does the commencement of the fast of the Ramadan mean that Muslims will stop eating each other during the daytime?" In another, he uses profanity in a comment about the chief Palestinian peace negotiator.

The Israeli official said Seaman's posts were "unacceptable and do not reflect the position of the Israeli government." He said the national communications directorate in the Prime Minister's Office had instructed Seaman to "immediately cease from making such pronouncements."

Seaman declined comment, and the posts could no longer be seen on his Facebook profile on Wednesday.

The official from the prime minister's office would not say whether Seaman, a former director of the Government Press Office who had a contentious relationship with the international media during his tenure, would be the project's director.

Public image is a paramount concern to Israeli officials. The prime minister's office oversees a national initiative for "hasbara"—a Hebrew term that officials translate as public diplomacy and critics call propaganda. This initiative is intended to combat what officials see as popular discourse that goes beyond legitimate criticism of Israeli policies and constitutes hate speech that threatens the very legitimacy of Israel's existence.

The Israeli army has set up an "Interactive Media" division of a few

dozen soldiers tasked with spreading the army's message on social media sites.

When Israel's army launched an offensive on Gaza militants late last year, the Israeli government set up a "media bunker" with hundreds of young volunteers posting updates reflecting Israel's point of view. Many Israelis believe the international news media are anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian.

At the time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised the volunteer [media](#) recruits in a video conference.

"We are (operating) on four fronts: The military front, the home front, the diplomatic front and the public diplomacy front," Netanyahu said. "We must fight for the truth, for the facts, and your help is worth more than gold ... refuting the industry of lies."

© 2013 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Israel to pay students to defend it online (2013, August 14) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-08-israel-students-defend-online.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--