

DID YOU KNOW?

The Pentagon Paid to Create Fake News About Al-Qaeda for Iraqis



Concern over Russian involvement in promoting fake news during the 2016 election is a justified hot topic in the news. But what about our own involvement in similar operations? In October 2016, Crofton Black and Abigail Fielding-Smith reported for the Bureau of Investigative Journalism on one such very expensive—and questionable—operation.

The Pentagon paid a British PR firm, Bell Pottinger, more than \$660 million to run a top-secret propaganda program in Iraq from at least 2006 to December 2011. The work consisted of three types of products: TV commercials portraying al-Qaeda in a negative light, news items intended to look like Arabic TV, and—most disturbing—fake al-Qaeda propaganda films.

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A former Bell Pottinger video editor, Martin Wells, told the bureau that he was given precise instructions for production of fake al-Qaeda films, and that the firm’s output was approved by former Gen. David Petraeus—commander of the coalition forces in Iraq—and on occasion by the White House. They reported that the United States used contractors because “the military didn’t have the in-house expertise and was operating in a legal ‘gray area.’”

Documents show Bell Pottinger employed as many as 300 British and Iraqi staff at one point, and its media operations in Iraq cost more than \$100 million a year on average. It’s remarkable that an operation on this scale has been totally ignored in the midst of so much focus on “fake news” here in the U.S.

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