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Pentagon propaganda efforts continue

Tom Vanden Brook

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The Defense Department wants to continue working with contractors to pump propaganda into Afghanistan despite a recent Government Accountability Office report that shows the programs are inadequately tracked, their impact is unclear, and the military doesn't know if it is targeting the right foreign audiences.

The military deems the capability so integral to its effort in Afghanistan that it has extended the contract of the Leonie Group, its top private producer of propaganda, according to Air Force Lt. Col. Damien Pickart, a Pentagon spokesman.

The company's co-owner, Camille Chidiac, was suspended for a time last year for admitting that he launched an online smear campaign against USA TODAY. The campaign, which Chidiac said in a letter to the Army, was started by public relations firm he had hired and wasn't his fault. The campaign began after the paper learned that Chidiac and his sister, Rema Dupont, the company's co-owner, owed the federal government \$4 million in back taxes.

They paid their tax bill, and Chidiac agreed to put his ownership stake in a trust and relinquish management of the company. That satisfied the Pentagon, which dropped its suspension of Chidiac and continues to do business with Leonie.

Congress, however, took note of Leonie's tax woes. Rep. Jackie Speier, the California Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, co-sponsored a bill that passed 407-0 in April to prohibit the government from contracting with companies whose owners don't pay their taxes. She told USA TODAY that she had Leonie in mind when she wrote the legislation. The bill, however, would have exempted Chidiac and Dupont because they had entered a payment plan with the IRS.

In any event, the Pentagon is taking bids until July 19 for its propaganda enterprise in Afghanistan, known in military-ese as, Military Information Support Operations (MISO).

Since 2005, the Pentagon has spent hundreds of million of dollars on MISO. These propaganda efforts include websites, leaflets and broadcasts intended to change foreigners' "attitudes and behaviors in support of U.S. Government" objectives, according to the GAO. Some of them disclose the U.S. military as the source; others don't.

The Pentagon sought to keep the report from public view, but USA TODAY obtained a copy from a source.