Reflections on Israel's Public Diplomacy

Meron Medzini
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1 One of the least understood and most reviled activity of virtually all of Israel's governments since 1948 has been its public diplomacy, also known as Hasbara, the Hebrew term that can be translated as explaining and disseminating information in addition to being propaganda. The last term became intolerable due to its use by the Nazis. Most critics of Israel's public diplomacy efforts, both at home and abroad, focused not on the policies of Israel but on how they were marketed and their success or failure in convincing opinion and decision makers in the justice of Israel's cause. Few realized that Hasbara was at best a supportive action, not an end in itself. But it was always an easy target with which to attack any government in Israel and thus Israel's advocacy gained far greater attention than it deserves. The purpose of this paper is to argue that the focus on Israel's public diplomacy has been greatly exaggerated and over-inflated and that a more rational understanding of its nature will lead to placing Hasbara in a broader context of Israeli foreign and defense policies. The basic premise derives from a statement attributed to the founder of Israel David Ben-Gurion who said: “Never mind what the gentiles say, what counts is what the Jews will do.” I fully subscribe to his dictum, while the critics of Israel's foreign and defense policy challenge it.

2 For the purpose of discussion, the history of Israel will be divided to five distinct periods: 1948-1967, 1967-1977, 1977-1991, 1991-1996 and the last one since 1996 to the present. The Hasbara efforts of each era will be considered from the perspectives of Israel's political leadership of the time, information content, organization, structure, implementation and success-failure. Obviously, special attention will be paid to the major political-defense developments of the time and the role of the Israeli leadership in dealing with Hasbara. The paper is based not so much on academic research but on the experience of the writer gained over many years as head of the Government Press Office in Jerusalem, and in that capacity as occasional spokesman for the bureaus of three prime ministers (Eshkol, Meir and Rabin), as a senior officer for the United Israel Appeal dealing with disseminating information among Jewish communities in the Diaspora, and finally as an academic, teaching courses on Israeli foreign policy at the Rothberg International...
School of the Hebrew University for the past forty years. This will explain the absence of footnotes.

1948-1967

This era can be characterized for Hasbara purpose as one of Israel emerging from a long War of Independence, still under siege, not yet recognized by many nations, and usually treated with kid gloves out of the desire not to attack Jews so soon after the Holocaust. Israel also spoke with one authoritative voice, was governed during those years by one major party (Mapai), and although Mapai headed a coalition government, the top positions, those of Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Foreign Minister were held by ministers belonging to that party. The country's leadership still felt it had to justify Israel's existence and had to convince others that the new political reality was going to be a permanent factor and feature in the Middle East. Their goal at the time was to ensure the survival of the state. They realized this could be achieved by mass immigration, vast economic aid and availability of weapons. This applied to the years 1949-1956, before the Sinai War, when many doubted Israel's chances for survival.

The foreign press corps in Israel, numbering less than fifty permanent correspondents, many of them Israelis working for foreign outlets, provided the main source of information on Israel. What counted at the time were the print media, radio, and the emerging new instrument – television. The technology was by today's standards rudimentary, overseas phone calls were rare and had to be ordered hours in advance and cables and telexes were the most modern means of communications. Under these circumstances it was easy for the government to impose censorship on sensitive military and even political information, and that was often extended to item regarding sources of immigration, weapons, oil and even the names of key officials such as heads of the Mossad and General Security Services. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion did not even bother to have a spokesman. Secrecy was the norm. There were few official organizations dealing with the media – chief among them were the IDF Spokesman's Unit, the Foreign Ministry Spokesman, the Government Press Office in the Prime Minister's Office and on the domestic scene the Information Center which sought to disseminate and instill democratic values to the very heterogeneous Israeli society then in the midst of absorbing mass immigration from over 100 countries and territories speaking some twenty languages and coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. There was little intra-agency infighting and it was easy to obtain coordination among the information bodies. Official spokesman did not have a difficult task of disseminating the official viewpoint as the country spoke in one voice.

However, even then questions about Israel's defense and foreign policies began to emerge. They focused on the policy of cross border retaliatory raids, ties with Germany, its policy of neutrality in the Cold War that ended in 1950 when Israel opted to join the Western camp led by the United States after the outbreak of the Korean War. From 1955, when Egypt began receiving vast amount of modern weapons from the Soviet Union, the question arose if Israel should embark on a defensive war. Following that war Israel's image improved significantly and in the late 1950's it was obvious that Israel was here to stay. By then Israel began to implement large scale foreign aid programs mainly in the new nations of Africa and was beginning to act as a normal nation no longer under immediate threat to its existence. Two major events attracted hundreds of foreign
reporters to Israel 800 for the Eichmann Trial in 1961 and 1200 to cover the visit of Pope Paul VI in January 1964. The media coverage was well organized by the Israeli government and afforded many reporters a glimpse of Israel they never knew existed – a country quietly going about its way in developing science, technology, medicine, literature, dance, drama, cooperative agricultural settlements such as Kibbutzim and Moshavim and even successfully revived its ancient language. One major item was censored, Israel's nuclear development efforts. They remain secret to this very day. By and large, it can be said that the international media treated Israel fairly and its image was positive.

In spite of these seeming normalcy, already in the early years of Israel, the heads of the Hasbara faced a major problem – how to portray Israel. Should they focus on a nation at war, a country still largely under siege, constantly involved in small border skirmishes with its neighbors. That would be helpful for the purposes of fund raising. The other option was to depict Israel as a normal nation, involved in a long and difficult process of nation building. Siege mentality would frighten potential immigrants, tourists and foreign investors. Portraying Israel as a nation at peace would not reflect reality. Israel's faces the same issue today in dealing with the threat of a nuclear Iran.

1967-1977

All this changed abruptly with the unexpected and unplanned Six Days War in June 1967. As a result, and at the time of waning colonialism, Israel was increasingly seen as an occupying power, ruling over millions of Palestinians, involved in building settlements on disputed land, engaged in a prolonged War of Attrition. From dealing with the Arab-Israel conflict in general, the focus was now on the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the emergence of Palestinian nationalism. A new generation of reporters, many of them grew up well after World War II, who knew little of the Holocaust, concentrated on depicting the plight of the occupied Palestinians. In Israel itself serious disagreements rose over its policies. There was no longer unanimity among the Mapai leadership. Prime Minister Meir, Defense Minister Dayan and Information Minister Galili (who was responsible for information in Israel alone) favored an activist policy of not yielding territory to the Arabs without the achievement of a full fledged peace treaty obtained as a result of direct negotiations. The Arab policy stressed three No’s – no peace, no recognition and no negotiations with Israel. Foreign Minister Eban was far more conciliatory and felt Israel should make territorial concessions in advance of direct negotiations. Finance Minister Sapir wanted to return the territories even without a peace treaty. It can be safely said that the domestic and the international media focused mainly on the issue – the future of the territories. Israel's Hasbara officials could only explain the various approaches in the country to central issue and arrange for many points of view to be heard. They ranged for annexing the territories to returning them back to Jordan, Syria and Egypt even without a peace treaty. The Meir government saw the territories as bargaining chips for future negotiations with Arab countries and shunned any negotiations with the emerging Palestine Liberation Organization, seen as a terrorist group intent on destroying Israel. As a result, there was virtually no movement towards any political settlement of the conflict and Israel’s image took a beating.

Blame was placed at the door of the information agencies who were subjected to a number of inquiry commissions who drew up various recommendations to improve the
situation. Few argued that Israel's policies were at the root of its problems and not the organizational structure and effectiveness of its Hasbara. By now new actors entered the field of information – a spokesman for the Defense Minister, a spokesman for the Prime Minister, a spokesman for the IDF military government in the territories under Israel's control, not to mention scores of others who sought to speak for Israel among them the Jewish Agency, the Histadrut trade union organization, various political parties and the many fund raising organizations. This resulted in much confusion as to who really speaks for Israel. From 1967 to 1970 there was also a government of national unity that compounded the problem, as it included for the first time Menahem Begin a strong supporter of the status quo and massive settlement in the territories. Ideas of setting up a separate ministry of information were vehemently opposed by Foreign Minister Eban who argued that overseas Hasbara was a central foreign ministry responsibility.

The Yom Kippur War demonstrated the confusion and lack of central direction in Israel's information efforts and led to additional inquiry committees that recommended once again centralizing the efforts under one roof – either a cabinet level ministry or a government authority. It was also realized that new technologies required new solutions. There was direct overseas dialing, fax machines were introduced and television satellite stations were also installed. The foreign press corps in Israel grew from some 50 to over 300 and the country became a major source of information. The focus of attention was now once again on the very legitimacy of Israel and its right to exist as a separate political, sovereign, Jewish and Zionist state. This became acute especially after the adoption of General Assembly Resolution 3379 in November 1975 equating Zionism with racism. The new Rabin government, that succeeded the Meir cabinet which resigned in April 1974, did set up for a brief time a separate Ministry of Information, but that did not resolve the problem as serious disagreements soon erupted between Prime Minister Rabin, Defense Minister Peres and Foreign Minister Allon. Once again, Israel did not speak in one voice. The ministry failed because the incumbent, Aharon Yariv, did not insist on centralizing all the information efforts under one roof, it was also poorly funded. But above all Prime Minister Rabin was not that keen on its existence and thought that overseas information should be under the Foreign Ministry. In spite of progress on the diplomatic front and the signing of two major agreements between Israel and Egypt (Separation of Forces in 1974 and an Interim Agreement in 1975) and a Separation of Forces agreement with Syria in 1974, there was no real progress towards broader peaceful relations with the Arab neighbors. More attention was devoted to domestic Israeli politics, settlements, corruption in high levels of government and a sense of a drifting Israel with no effective, visionary and imaginative leadership.

And yet, during that decade (1967-1977) Israel produced vast amount of information in the international media, far exceeding its size and/or the importance of the country. Israel became a big story in every respect. Why the focus on Israel, and not, for example, on the 22 Arab state members of the Arab League with their vast oil wealth and huge population? The columnist Tom Friedman may have given the right answer to this question. He once wrote that Israel's story in many respects is the tale of Western civilization, which is based on the Judeo-Christian traditions and ethics. These were well understood in the in the West and Israel was expected to behave accordingly. It, too, sought to be Light unto the Nations. Israel therefore was measured in a different manner and yardsticks than the Arab states. When Israel is charged with what is deemed to be war crimes, it becomes the subject of international condemnation and subject to censure.
by the United Nations, the European Union and other international bodies. It is threatened with boycotts, both economic and academic. When Arabs commit the same crimes, as witnessed in the civil war raging in Syria since 2011, with the loss over 30,000 people mostly civilians, their actions are not criticized as Israel’s would be. There is a well known saying: “When Arabs kill Arabs – no news; when Jews kill Arabs – that’s news. No amount of positive Israeli information can overcome this dictum. From 1968 Israel started its own television broadcasts and now Israelis could see how others viewed them, and the interest in Hasbara intensified.

Another dilemma arose – most of the reporters and stringers covering Israel were Jews. Israelis expected them to be supportive and friendly. They themselves wanted to be seen as fair and honest irrespective of their religion. Their editors also wanted to appear as open minded and fair. This by and large hurt Israel’s image. Israel’s image was the victim of this anomalous situation.

1977-1991

The 1977 Knesset elections brought to power the Likud right wing nationalist party headed by Menahem Begin, for years considered as hawkish. He appointed Moshe Dayan as his foreign minister. Both leaders made no efforts to create a separation information body. Suddenly, on 19 November 1977 Israel’s and the Middle East history changed dramatically when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat arrived in Jerusalem for a two days visit. That brought to Jerusalem over 1200 reporters from around the world, including some of the most prominent journalists. They focused predominantly on Sadat’s vision and less on what was perceived as Begin’s unimaginative response. The foreign, mostly American media played a major role, when, for example, Begin and Sadat were interviewed separately albeit on one screen by the stars of the three leading American networks. Sadat, a master of drama, won the battle for the American media (and Congress and the American Jewish Community) for what was perceived as his sincerity and broad vision. Attention was now on the evolution of the peace process, and when it foundered in the course of 1978, Begin was blamed for much of the failure. Within several weeks after Sadat’s visit, Begin appeared to have lost the support of the American media, which was also fed by a hostile Carter Administration. Growing doubts in Israel about Begin’s intents and sincerity that prompted, among other things, the creation of the Peace Now Movement, also made it difficult for those responsible for information to make headway. Some of Begin’s closest advisers on Hasbara were totally opposed to making territorial concessions to Egypt in return for peace. The signing of the Camp David Framework Agreements in September 1978 came as a shock to Israelis and Egyptians. It was negotiated in total secrecy and led for the first time in Israel’s history to the signing of a peace treaty (with Egypt in March 1979). Begin’s spokesman had a major problem explaining why members of Begin’s own party either voted against or abstained in the Knesset vote on adopting the Camp David Accords and it was passed only because the Labor Party voted in favor.

But Israel’s image problems did not improve overnight. Focus was now on settlement activities and the growing realization stressed by Begin that he gave up all of Sinai for peace with Egypt and in order to retain the West Bank. Between 1979 and 1982 focus was on the implementation of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty and from June 1982 on the first war in Lebanon, a war of choice to use Begins description. That war split Israeli society
and this was reflected in the dispatches of the foreign media. Initial restrictions by the IDF on the coverage of that war from the Israeli side, meant that the story was sent by reporters based in Beirut, and represented the Arab side. New technologies now included cellular phones and greater use of TV satellite transmissions which resulted in instant access in any place on earth.

When Begin resigned in August 1983 he was succeeded by Yitzhak Shamir who espoused a policy of strict adherence to the status quo. There was no progress on the Israel-Palestinian track and that inevitably led to the outbreak of the first Palestinian Intifadah (shaking off) in December 1987. That uprising was a disaster for Israel’s Hasbara. The Israeli response was not coordinated, once again Israel spoke with three voices – that of Prime Minister Shamir, Foreign Minister Peres and Defense Minister Rabin, all members of a rotating national unity cabinet that existed from 1984 to 1990. The government of Israel seemingly lost control over the coverage of the uprising in which the Palestinians were far more adept at dealing with the foreign media.

One event in 1991 helped Israel’s image – the first Gulf War. The country came under attack by Scud missiles fired from Iraq, Prime Minister Shamir wisely decided to accede to the American demand and refrain from an Israeli military involvement. Israel was once again portrayed as a victim of Arab aggression who bowed to American and international pressure and kept out of the war. The war led directly to an Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid, with the participation of the two super powers, the European Union, the Gulf States and above all Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. The chief Israeli spokesman was Benjamin Netanyahu who shone as one who understood the media, especially television, its needs, requirements and deadlines. He became the Israeli information star, and was not eclipsed even by the Palestinian star Hanan Ashrawi. The very fact that five Arab states were sitting and negotiating with Israel publicly helped improve Israel's image.

1991-1996

The years 1992-1996 were marked by the Oslo process whereby Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization negotiated and signed in Washington in September 1993 the Declaration of Principles. This time a new Israeli government headed by Rabin, with Peres as his foreign minister, was able to negotiate and deliver an agreement with its arch enemy Yasser Arafat head of the PLO. Israel’s image soared. Peres spoke of a new Middle East and even suggested downgrading the Hasbara effort in favor of concentrating on economic ties. Once again it was seen that when Israel pursues a policy deemed conciliatory that has the support of the international community, there is no need for a Ministry of Information or a central Information Authority. The deeds speak for themselves and those responsible for Hasbara basically have to make sure the reporters cover the events, among them the singing of the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty in October 1994 and the Israel-PLO Interim Agreement in September 1995. But like Begin’s problem in 1978, Rabin’s spokesmen had much difficulty in explaining why the Israel-PLO Interim Agreement with the PLO was adopted by the Knesset in September 1995 by a majority of one.

By then brand new technologies were at the disposal of the media – internet, emails, cellular phones and camcords. This meant that Israeli military censorship lost its effectiveness. The number of the foreign press corps in Israel and the Palestinian
territories grew vastly. That now included scores of Palestinians acting as stringers and resource persons for the Israel based correspondents using camcords and cell phones as their main tools. Speed was now of essence. Israel was also helped very much by a very friendly Clinton Administration.

1996 to the present

All this came to an abrupt end when Rabin was assassinated on 4 November 1995.

The first Netanyahu government decided not to abrogate the Oslo agreements but effectively to slow down the process. Very little progress was achieved by Netanyahu during his first term as Prime Minister. Among them the withdrawal from Hebron in early 1997 and the beginning of some withdrawal in the West Bank in late 1998 that brought down his government. Serious disagreements with his foreign ministers David Levy and later Ariel Sharon were evident and did not help matters. Prime Minister Barak started negotiations with Syria that eventually failed, withdrew the IDF from Lebanon and made unexpected offers to Arafat in their July 2000 Camp David summit. But Arafat failed to respond mainly on the issues of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees and end of conflict clause. The failure of Camp David summit was followed once again by the second Intifadah which this time was lethal, costing the lives of some 1400 Israelis. Since Barak seemed to have failed to stem the uprising, he lost the support of his loose coalition and resigned. He was succeeded by Ariel Sharon who put down the uprising by force in a series of military operations. Their success was noticeable, but the cost in terms of Israel's image was hard to swallow. Israel was accused of committing war crimes and violating the various Geneva Conventions applying to occupied territories. Sharon paid little attention to Israel's image. In this respect he followed his mentor Ben Gurion. He was far more interested in improving ties with the Bush Administration, in which he succeeded, that with any dramatic moves. But he, too, realized that some drama was needed and ordered the withdrawal of all Israeli presence from the Gaza Strip and small parts of the West Bank. Once again Israel was praised, but the cost in terms of dissent in Israeli society and politics was vast. In early 2006 Sharon suffered a stroke from which he did not recover.

His successor Ehud Olmert launched a war against Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and once again serious public relations errors were evident. The media was not taken to the fighting area, it had to rely on IDF briefings and the entire information effort was harshly criticized by a commission of inquiry that followed the war.

In the past twenty years there have been few changes in Israel's image. There are many reasons for that. Among them, growing fatigue with the Arab-Israel conflict, the rise of a new generation that did not know the Holocaust, and for whom Israel has always been there and was a living fact. It was clear that Israel did not solve the “Jewish Problem” or help eradicate anti-Semitism. The opposite is true. Serious misgivings in Israel over the country's policies were also reflected in the reporting of the foreign press corps whose numbers now stands at some 350 (print, radio, television). There has been little effort on the part of the first Netanyahu government, the Barak government (1999-2001), the Sharon government (2001-2006), the Olmert Government (2006-2009) and the second Netanyahu Government (2009-2013) to make major structural changes in Israel's information apparatus. The key change was to create in 2009 a Ministry for Public Diplomacy which was tacked onto the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs.
The main flaws of Israel's information efforts remain to this very day. They include multiplicity of agencies dealing with the foreign media, chief among them the National Information Headquarters centered in the Prime Minister's Office and directly under the guidance of the Prime Minister. That has eclipsed the Public Diplomacy Ministry whose chief is not even a member of the inner cabinet. The Foreign Ministry has effectively been frozen out of the international Hasbara effort, partly because the minister since 2009 (Avigdor Lieberman) has come out openly against the policies of Prime Minister Netanyahu and was not even aware that secret indirect negotiations were taking place in 2010 and 2011 between Netanyahu and Defense Minister Barak and Bashar el-Assad in Syria on the other. Two events hurt Israel's image badly – one was the Second War in Lebanon in July – August 2006 and the second Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in December 2008-January 2009. Serious differences of opinions erupted between Prime Minister Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni during the Second War in Lebanon. In Gaza, the foreign media was not allowed into the strip for many days causing false information to emerge from there that could not be verified. One result of the war was the issuing of the Goldstone Report that accused Israel of war crimes. In the field of technology the 21st century witnessed the emergence of the social media in the shape of Facebook, Twitter and various web blogs that became a major source of information and could in no way be controlled. No wonder that repeated State Comptroller reports dealing with Hasbara found for a constant lack of an overall strategic public relations conception and objective, lack of coordination between the many organizations and very modest funding.

Conclusion

It is almost impossible not to agree with Abba Eban who in addressing the Knesset in December 1973 said that he felt a “sense of intellectual frustration when the issue of how the government communications is taken out of the context of the political reality. Because what really affects our image at the end of the day is not the skill of the policy advocate; it's not the salesman, nor the wrapper, but the goods themselves that matter... Israel's image is not a product solely of the words its diplomats use; it is a product of the entirety of Israel's reality as seen from the outside. Her position, style, atmosphere, the way her society conducts itself, her approach to peace, to relations with neighboring countries, her position on universal human values, her view of her own and the world's culture and heritage – all these are taken into account”. Eban was absolutely right when he argued that Israel's image is not made by official representatives or ministers, but by the totality of factors. His words ring true to this very day.

He omitted to mention two other factors that harmed attempts at centralized government guided information structure. The first was a free press in Israel, protected by law and by the Supreme Court. The Israeli media has been notably critical of all of Israel's governments. It serves as a major source for the foreign press corps in Jerusalem, which is still the largest in the Middle East. It was very difficult to fault foreign correspondents in Israel for reports that were based on reports in the Israeli media. The second factor is Israeli democracy. This means that there is access to most events, getting government accreditation is easy, and above all in a country where there are at least ten political parties at any given time, there are at least ten views. This may be confusing but Israel prides itself on its democracy which admittedly, makes it impossible to control the media, both domestic and foreign. Unlike Arab states or other non-democratic societies,
where the government control both information and accessibility to events, in Israel the press can operate freely with minimal restrictions, with the exception maybe during military operations such as the war in Lebanon or in Gaza. The coalition make up of all of Israel's governments also means that it cannot speak in one voice.

In the battle between freedom of the press, democracy and the right to know, against information convenience and control of the press for the purpose of gaining a better image, the choice is obvious – democracy and free press.

ABSTRACTS

Israel's public diplomacy has been the subject of much abuse and vilification both in Israel and abroad. This is largely due to the misunderstanding between policies and the marketing of those policies. Critics of Israel's Hasbara efforts usually argue that poor funding, organizational infighting, multiplicity of bodies dealing with Hasbara, low level and quality of officials are responsible for Israel's poor image mainly in Western countries. They fail to look at the broader picture in which information is a supporting action, designed to assist the formulation and implementation of a policy by marketing it properly. The fact remains that when Israel pursued what was seen as a positive policy, signed peace treaties and made territorial concessions, its image improved dramatically. When it adhered to a policy of immobilism its image plunged. The paper describes the evolution of Israel's public diplomacy since 1948.

La diplomatie publique d'Israël a été souvent vilipendée en Israël et à l'étranger. Ceci est largement dû à une différence entre la politique et le marketing de la politique. Les critiques de la hasbara israélienne soutiennent généralement que le maigre financement, les luttes intestines et la multiplicité des organisations responsables, le faible niveau professionnel sont responsables de la médiocre image d'Israël, surtout dans les pays occidentaux. Ils n'élargissent pas leur perspective jusqu'à voir que l'information soutient l'action, afin d'aider à formuler et à mettre en œuvre une politique par un marketing adéquat. Il demeure que lorsqu'Israël a poursuivi une politique positive, signé des traités de paix, fait des concessions, son image s'est considérablement améliorée. Quand le pays a choisi l'immobilisme, l'image s'est dégradée. Cet article décrit l'évolution de la diplomatie publique israélienne depuis 1948.

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