



Hasbara Doesn't Work: Israel Needs A New Form Of Messaging

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It's long been an accepted fact that Israel is terrible at hasbara (public diplomacy). For decades, the Jewish state has struggled to convey its point of view, and explain its actions, to largely hostile global publics. All too often the traditional ways it has tried to do so – speeches, interviews, and formal communiques – have failed to move the needle on world perceptions in a meaningful way.

Even so, the six months since the horrible events of October 7 have been a wake-up call. It would be an understatement to say that Israel has been caught off guard by the explosion of global anti-Israel and antisemitic sentiment that followed Hamas's campaign of terror and the subsequent Gaza offensive.

It has found itself unprepared for a global media environment where Hamas claims and statistics are treated uncritically, where Israeli communiques are scoffed at, and where foreign actors such as Russia and China help amplify disinformation that is intended to erode the Israeli position.

Simply put, Israel now finds itself not only in a physical fight against Hamas (and, increasingly, Iran itself), but in an informational one as well. Against this backdrop, a qualitatively new approach to winning global "hearts and minds" is required.

How can Israel salvage its public diplomacy?

Such a rethink starts with definitions. After all, Israeli hasbara isn't public diplomacy, per se. Rather, it derives from the Hebrew word for "explaining." Implicit in this notion is the belief that, if only audiences could hear Israel's side of the story, they would invariably both understand it and embrace it.

But it's abundantly clear that isn't the case. In the contemporary global narrative, Israel has become defined as the aggressor, and no amount of "explaining" about the extent of Hamas atrocities or Israel's legitimate war aims is likely to change that perception – especially amid a protracted military campaign in which the enemy has managed to become a core source of information for a news-hungry global audience.

INSTEAD OF "explaining," therefore, Israel would do well to embrace a new approach to strategic communications built around speed, engagement, and influence.

Here, manpower matters. To be sure, Israel is a small country with real-world resource constraints. It simply doesn't have the finances or the workforce to field a robust public diplomacy apparatus. Even by that standard, however, Israel's investments in strategic communications to date leave much to be desired. Quite simply, in recent years Israel's government has prioritized other issues far above messaging, leaving it up to the Diaspora, entities like the Jewish Agency, and even private influencers to tell Israel's story.

To their credit, Israel's existing public diplomacy professionals have done what they can within these constraints. For instance, the Foreign Ministry's digital bureau has made significant investments over the past two years in both social media messaging and the use of next-generation technologies (such as artificial intelligence) to better reach global audiences.

Up until now, though, all of that has very much been a peacetime endeavor. Today, by contrast, Israel's foreign policy and security needs are anything but normal. Meeting the urgency of the current moment requires bigger budgets, additional manpower, and sustained governmental attention to strategic communications if the country hopes to truly cut through the noise of our chaotic media sphere.

Finally, there's the question of pace. Israeli communications efforts of preceding years tended to be either reactive in nature or the product of drawn-out governmental deliberations. Today, that will no longer do. Rather, Israel's messaging should be placed on a political campaign footing – one in which mischaracterizations and falsehoods are promptly and thoroughly debunked.

A famous quote, often attributed to former British prime minister Winston Churchill, posits that "a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." In an era of ubiquitous social media and unaccountable news sources, the problem is worse – and faster – still. And because it is, Israel communications need to prioritize speed, agility, and flexibility.

Of course, by itself, a new approach to public diplomacy won't fix Israel's current image problem. A great deal naturally depends on the country's larger foreign policy priorities, and its broader political interaction with the rest of the world. But more prompt and impactful messaging would unquestionably help Israel better maintain the support of allies, chief among them the United States. A more competitive approach to today's increasingly adversarial media environment would permit Jerusalem to do a better job laying out the true stakes of the current conflict.