How to Improve Israel's Public Diplomacy

written by Lahav Harkov | 19.06.2024

- Public diplomacy is an essential element in Israel's war effort, but is important to Israel's international standing at all times.
- Israel's Public Diplomacy Directorate was unprepared for a crisis and improvised solutions, which have been insufficient. The IDF's Spokesperson Unit was better prepared.
- A larger Public Diplomacy Directorate with full-time professional staff that goes beyond on-camera spokespeople and includes researchers, public relations professionals, graphic artists, representatives of intelligence bodies and more is necessary.
- The various government offices handling public diplomacy, as well as the IDF Spokesman's Unit should improve their cooperation and coordination.

Introduction:

Public diplomacy has long been a problematic area for Israel. The Hebrew word for "public diplomacy," *hasbara*, is a hint at Israel's longstanding challenges in this area. "Hasbara" means "explanation" – but explaining what happened after the fact is far from sufficient to meet Israel's international challenges.

Effective public diplomacy is essential for Israel at all times, but that need is even more acute in wartime, when distorted images and interpretations of the Jewish state's actions can limit its ability to defend itself and attain its war aims. While "good PR" is not a magic wand that will solve all of Israel's problems – especially when there is a sizable global audience predisposed against the Jewish state for a variety of reasons – it can only help, and "bad PR" is an unforced error that continues to damage Israel's international standing and war effort.

Israel's government needs a fully staffed team of professionals in communications, marketing, intelligence and other relevant areas to bring positive results that will support Israel's war effort and boost its standing in calmer times.

The Misgav Institute hosted a webinar with three experts who played a role in Israel's public diplomacy in the war with Hamas that began on October 7: former government spokesman Eylon Levy, Lt. Col. (Res.) Jonathan Conricus and Matt Krieger, CEO of strategic communications firm Gova10 and the chief communications officer of the campaign advocating for Israeli-American hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin's release from Hamas captivity. This paper is based on the insights reached in that webinar.

The Problems

Civilian public diplomacy efforts:

When Operation Swords of Iron began, Israel's National Public Diplomacy Directorate, a unit within the Prime Minister's Office, had a new head and a small staff. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not have a spokesperson for the foreign press. The system that eventually came about, of daily online briefings in English and a system of coordinating television and radio interviews for official government spokespeople, was improvised after October 7. Publisher Rotem Sella, of his own initiative, sought out media contacts (including the author of this paper, who was unable to participate) to try to share details of the October 7 massacre with the world. Levy was one of the first people he called, as well as journalist Tal Heinrich. Within weeks, their volunteer operation was absorbed by the Public Diplomacy Directorate, with some of the staff paid by a contractor to avoid byzantine government hiring practices, but many remaining volunteers.

This system has mostly remained, with a rotating team of spokespeople for daily briefings and TV and radio interviews, but little other staff to research and prepare the spokespeople. Nor did the Public Diplomacy Directorate hold regular briefings in any languages other than English and, for a time, Arabic.

The limitations of the current system are such that the address for handling print and online written media inquiries and requests remains unclear, and the spokespeople in the briefings are given broad talking points, instead of detailed information to answer journalists' questions. They are also unable to take initiative and pitch the stories that Israel may want to be widely known, both due to time constraints and their narrow remit.

The National Public Diplomacy Directorate has tried to work on Israel's online presence, and reports launching over 200 advertising campaigns, using physical

billboards as well as digital platforms, producing videos and still content emphasizing Israel's messages. They launched a website titled the "October 7 Hamas Massacre." They also invited influential figures to their command center. The directorate reports over 2 billion hits for its campaigns, and 43 million for the Hamas massacre website in its first three days.

IDF public diplomacy efforts:

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit dominates Israel's international public image. The unit is a veritable empire compared to the Public Diplomacy Directorate, but when men in uniform are conveying Israel's messages, "it begins to look a little bit like martial law," as Levy put it in the webinar. And while this has not always been the case, the prominent representatives of the IDF in the media in this war have not represented Israel's diverse population.

The unit has, to a great extent, resolved some of its past problems in international communications, such as its longtime penchant for prioritizing access for Hebrew-language media outlets even in times of international crisis. In the current war, IDF Spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari has put international media at the center of his strategy, viewing global communications as a tool through which to enable the IDF to operate. Hagari also has sufficiently proficient English to address foreign outlets himself, which he has done in briefings, press conferences, and appearances in foreign news segments.

However, like Israeli government communications, much of this came together in wartime rather than be part of an overarching strategy. Many of the prominent figures in the IDF Spokesperson's Unit in recent months were reservists who left jobs and families to spend their time helping the army, which in most cases was not sustainable long-term, though some have been hired by the IDF.

There is also a lack of effective coordination between the IDF and the Public Diplomacy Directorate; Levy said he would look to Conricus's social media accounts for information – as opposed to communication being shared between the offices in which they served in a timely manner. This is true for the Foreign Ministry and Diaspora Affairs Ministry, which engage in related activities, as well.

Recommendations

Israel needs a formal, professional, civilian body responsible for public diplomacy, with a budget and full-time paid personnel enabling it to operate more fully at all times, not only in wartime. Having consistent names and faces that journalists and the public know will allow for more effective communication when a crisis breaks out. That full-time public diplomacy team would prepare a crisis communications plan, to be put in place during wartime.

That plan could include "enlisting" additional spokespeople temporarily, but capable people able to represent the government on camera in key languages – not only English – should be employed full-time. Foreign Ministry employees, many of whom have useful experience in this area, can be loaned out to the Public Diplomacy Directorate for this purpose, in a similar way to how some are loaned out as diplomatic advisers to government ministries and the Knesset speaker.

Visual communications are often as important as what is said by the spokespeople. Therefore, while their abilities are the highest priority, the team of spokespeople should have an appropriate gender balance and reflect Israel's diverse society.

Permanent spokespeople are not the only employees that a more robust public diplomacy system needs. The IDF Spokesman's Unit should have an intelligence officer permanently on its staff to examine open-source intelligence for Israel's advantage, as well as to rapidly respond to accusations of wrongdoing. Public relations experts who would not necessarily be on camera are important as well, to field reporters' questions and work with non-broadcast media. Graphic and video artists are needed, as well as fact-checkers and researchers to support those who are speaking to the press and the public.

A larger staff for the PMO Public Diplomacy Directorate would also allow for the cultivation of relationships with journalists, facilitating deeper and more frequent background briefings and the pitching of stories that show Israel in a more favorable light.

More foreign media should be allowed to embed with IDF troops in Gaza. When foreign media are allowed to directly accompany the IDF, this often leads to more accurate and nuanced portrayals of IDF operations.

The Public Diplomacy Directorate is meant to coordinate between different bodies communicating the government's messages at home and abroad – it must make a greater effort in that respect, especially by integrating the IDF into the broader structure, without putting obstacles in front of its efforts that are working well. Cooperation between the Public Diplomacy Directorate, the Foreign Ministry and the Diaspora Affairs Ministry should be deepened as well, to ensure that a consistent message is being sent and that all of Israel's public diplomacy assets worldwide are being used effectively.