

Beyond Hasbara: A Strategic Doctrine for Winning the Battle of Ideas

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Israel is investing tens of millions of dollars to stem the loss of support in the United States. According to a report in Haaretz, the government is significantly expanding its influence efforts, with a budget exceeding \$40 million directed primarily at Republican and Christian audiences. The main contract with a public relations firm has reportedly been expanded from \$1.5 million per month to \$4.5 million. The state has also contracted with American companies specializing in digital storytelling, content production, and advertising.

Credit must be given to the government: it is not resting on its laurels. It has correctly identified the disturbing decline in support for Israel — even among audiences once considered reliable bases of support — and it is willing to invest substantial resources to address the challenge.

The problem, however, is not a lack of activity, but the strategic concept guiding it.

From the report, it appears that the Israeli influence effort is designed mainly to halt the decline in support, win back distancing audiences, refute claims against Israel, and justify its actions — including the war against Iran. These are important efforts, but they remain essentially defensive and preventive in nature. They seek to prevent further losses rather than create new strategic gains.

Rahm Emanuel's recent interview with Yonit Levi on Israel's Channel 12 provided a clear illustration of the problem. While Israel is accustomed to standing in the position of the accused and explaining its actions, Emanuel — a senior figure in an administration whose Middle East policy left behind a record open to serious criticism — positioned himself as the prosecutor. Israel was required to explain itself; he was not required to explain the worldview, assumptions, or consequences behind his own arguments.

This is precisely the structure of the arena that Israel must change.

As long as Israel accepts a division of roles in which its critics set the indictment and it supplies the defense, even excellent hasbara leaves it on the defensive. An influence offensive begins by changing the agenda: not merely responding to Emanuel's claims, but examining the worldview from which they stem, its record, and the price paid for it by the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and Israel itself.

The lesson of October 7 must apply to the cognitive battlefield as well.

The Military Lesson That Must Not Be Forgotten

Israel's original national security doctrine was offensive and decisive. It sought to prevent the development of threats, remove them while they were still in their infancy, and act with initiative at a time of its choosing. Over the years, this concept was gradually replaced by a defensive-deterrent approach — containment instead of removal, postponement instead of initiative.

The "mabam" — the campaign between the wars — is the most prominent example. Israel carried out many sophisticated and daring operations that thwarted arms shipments, damaged infrastructure, and delayed the next war. Yet, measured by outcomes, these operational successes did not prevent the enemy's strategic buildup.

Hezbollah nevertheless succeeded in building a deep, broad, and complex military threat. This exposed the gap between operational success and strategic achievement: one can win hundreds of small operations and still discover that the overall strategic balance has shifted against you.

October 7 was the terrible price of allowing continuous prevention to become a substitute for a strategy designed to remove the threat.

We must not repeat the same mistake in the battle of ideas.

From Military Mabam to Cognitive Mabam

There is no need to elaborate at length on the evidence of Israel's failure in the influence arena. A broad consensus exists regarding the erosion of its standing, the decline in support, and the growing difficulty of defending the legitimacy of its actions.

The more interesting question is the mechanism of failure.

Here lies the parallel to the military mabam. The problem is not necessarily the absence of activity, or even the absence of pinpoint successes. One can accumulate millions of impressions, produce successful videos, refute lies, influence search results, and win media confrontations — and still lose the overall campaign over legitimacy, support, and the idea itself.

When success is measured by views, shares, and refutations while the strategic balance continues to shift against Israel, the same gap familiar from the military mabam appears: operational achievements that do not produce strategic achievement.

This is the danger inherent in a “cognitive campaign between the wars”: extensive and professional activity, pinpoint achievements, and impressive performance metrics — without any real change in the direction of the campaign.

One can win a thousand battles over facts and still lose the war over the idea.

The problem begins with the very term “hasbara.” Hasbara is intended primarily for friends — to explain, clarify, and keep them informed so they can continue their support. Against an active ideological adversary, offensive influence operations are required — operations whose goal is not only to defend existing positions, but to change the very structure of the contest.

In the Israeli case, one of the central objectives must be to transform the adversary operating against Israel — and especially the forces operating from within the Western space against its own foundations — from what is perceived as an “Israeli problem” into what is understood as a threat to the West itself.

No longer: “Why should you help Israel?”

But rather: “Why is the campaign Israel is waging also your campaign?”

From the End of History to the Clash Within the West

As the West sobers from Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” vision — according to which the victory of liberal democracy in the Cold War heralded humanity’s gradual convergence toward a shared political order — it finds itself approaching another reality foreseen by Samuel Huntington: the clash of civilizations.

Yet this is not, at least not yet, a grand clash between civilizations. At this stage, much of the clash is occurring within the West itself: between the existing Western order and radical forces operating inside it to undermine its foundations.

On one side are radical woke currents seeking to dismantle the Western order in the name of liberation; on the other are Islamist and jihadist currents seeking to dismantle it in order to replace it with an order of their own.

These are not two identical camps, nor do they share a common vision for the world after the existing order is dismantled. On the contrary, their values and ultimate goals contradict each other. Yet at the present stage, and for different reasons, they are riding the same train toward a shared interim station: the weakening of the Western order and the dismantling of its legitimacy.

The campus protests in the West after October 7 provided a tangible illustration of the phenomenon. Under the same slogans and in the same political spaces, radical activists from the Western left appeared alongside movements, organizations, and voices associated with Islamist worldviews.

Not all participants shared the same ideology, intentions, or vision for the future. Nevertheless, they often acted in the same direction: denying Israel's legitimacy, portraying it as a colonial and oppressive force, and, in many cases, undermining the legitimacy of the Western order with which Israel is identified.

The irony is that the woke passenger seeks to reach a world in which the jihadist passenger would not be willing to live — and vice versa. Yet jihadism seeks to fill the vacuum created with a content that woke ideology itself would reject.

This is precisely the clash now taking place within the West: not yet a total war between civilizations, but a struggle over the West's identity from within, and over whether it will continue to exist as a civilization of liberty.

The Enemy and the Threat: The Woke-Jihadist Alliance

Israel is not facing merely an anti-Israel campaign, but a political-ideological linkage between woke forces in the West and jihadist and Islamist forces.

This linkage does not require ideological identity, a formal alliance, or direct coordination. It arises when different forces, for entirely different reasons, act in the same historical moment to weaken the same order.

One seeks to dismantle the moral and cultural foundations of the West's legitimacy; the other seeks to exploit the vacuum thereby created and impose an order of its own.

One of the central vulnerabilities of the progressive camp is its attitude toward identity itself. Those who view nation, religion, tradition, and historical memory primarily as power structures to be dismantled may have difficulty understanding their enduring power in other societies.

Here the dismantler and the filler meet.

One weakens the identities upon which Western society was built; the other arrives with a strong, comprehensive, and demanding identity of its own.

Precisely for this reason, the synergy between them is doubly dangerous. An offensive influence effort must expose this connection, emphasize its internal contradictions, work to dismantle it, and prevent it from recruiting additional audiences.

Its goal is not to convince the woke activist that he is a jihadist — a claim that would be untrue — but to show him where the path he is advancing may lead, who is traveling with him for part of the way, and who seeks to seize control of the station they reach together.

There is no need to tell every progressive that he is a jihadist. It is necessary to confront him with the paradox: whoever dismantles the house in the name of liberation may discover that someone else is already waiting to fill the vacuum.

The deep threat is not only to Israel, but to the entire civilization of liberty.

It is therefore incumbent upon Israel — the state of the people that first brought the idea of liberty into the world — to bear the manufacturer's responsibility for it: to defend this idea against all those who seek to empty it of content, whether they come from woke or jihadist quarters.

Liberty. Our legacy. Our duty.

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