Israel needs a new approach to ‘hasbara’

written by David M. Weinberg | 31.01.2025

Israel’s Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar and Deputy Foreign Minister Sharren Haskel are looking for smart ways to spend NIS 500 million on public diplomacy. This new government hasbara (Israel advocacy) budget is to be 20 times what it was before the Israel-Hamas War began in 2023. The two leaders have been brainstorming with influencers and public opinion leaders as to the allocation of the funds.

The challenge is enormous, the effort is worthy, and the range of initiatives suggested is impressive. But Sa’ar and Haskel must be careful not to waste funds on feckless enterprises. This includes the establishment of a government hasbara bureaucracy and more. Mainly, they ought to revolutionize Israel’s messaging. This means matching resolute messaging to Israel’s necessarily aggressive strategic and defense posture and restoring the Jewish faith and traditions to Israel’s diplomatic arsenal.

What Israel should not do with the new hasbara budget is this: Set up a grand government hasbara directorate or fiefdom. There are plenty of existing mechanisms to simply coordinate matters, including the Foreign Ministry’s own public diplomacy division; and in any case, government bureaucracies have never been good at implementation. Give the money to fast-moving independent actors.

Secondly, don’t spend big chunks of cash on hasbara “research” projects or on international public relations firms – who will be only too happy to “advise” Israel at great expense after conducting polling and focus groups and opposition research and more. This has been done so many times.

Thirdly, don’t try to outdo bad actors by spending tons on TikTok videos, even though many will say this is critical in reaching younger audiences. There is simply no way at present to outspend and overwhelm the billions of anti-Israel posts on this Chinese-controlled medium.

Instead, invest in a broad swath of cool Gen-Z activists, in media training for Israeli officials, in Arabic and other multilingual and multiethnic young

spokespeople, in a 24-hour English TV network, in efforts to expose the moral bankruptcy of the United Nations and the venality of Qatar-backed ventures at universities, and in programs that highlight the non-political faces of Israel in culture, sports, technology, and medicine.

Most importantly, and most of all, invest in missions to Israel. Over my 45 years in pro-Israel activism and outreach to global leaders and intellectuals, it has become piercingly clear that nothing, but nothing, more effectively develops friends for Israel than a well-planned trip to the land. Such visits are always overwhelmingly transformative.

Getting relevant influencers to visit Israel is hard work, especially since the violent anti-Israel hordes abroad are attempting to make the Jewish state into a contaminated product and have succeeded – partially – in raising the social cost of sympathy and support for Israel. Indeed, at the current moment, there are certain groups that simply won't visit Israel.

But there are many good and important target sectors with residual basic goodwill towards the state whose thought leaders and community activists can and must be invited to visit here to discover Israel in all its richness; its aspirations, beauty, and battles; warts and all.

Missions, missions, missions. Working through pro-Israel organizations abroad. That is my main operational advice to the Israeli government.

MINISTERS SA'AR AND HASKEL must also lead a messaging revolution. This means matching resolute messaging to Israel's newly and necessarily aggressive strategic and defense posture.

'Hasbara' is not working

Twenty-five years of Oslo-era hasbara epistles have not worked. It is simply insufficient to explain Israel's security dilemmas or emphasize Israel's past and potentially future diplomatic generosity towards the Palestinians. What are needed are three additional themes.

The first is the reintroduction of realism and truth-telling to the global dynamic.

This means a basic restatement of the Jewish People's profound historical and

national rights in Israel and Jerusalem. To this, add Israel as the Jewish People's contribution to science, technology, arts, and culture in the modern world, and as a reliable anchor for democracy in a dangerous part of the world.

Second, there is no choice but to own up and embrace Israel's strength. Israeli messaging must affirm Israeli power and articulate how that strength is justifiably and wisely being used to fight Iran, Islamic jihadism, and annihilationist (against Israel) Palestinianism.

The fact is that Israel is acting with overwhelming military power to reset the regional strategic architecture and roll back its enemies. It is seeking to restore its dominance and deterrence across all its borders, and in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) too, and it will yet act even more forcefully. A fierce takedown of Iran is surely next.

Of course, this presents a heightened hasbara challenge for advocates of Israel, but there is no way to avoid the state's ferociousness. The challenge must be met defiantly and unwaveringly.

Remember David Ben-Gurion's famous adage about the Messianic era when the lion will lie down with the lamb, as per Isaiah? "That will be great," said Ben-Gurion, "as long as Israel is the lion!"

So, supporters of Israel cannot be shy about Israeli military prowess. They must articulate the reasons why the Jewish state must be the "lion" and use crushing force to deter enemies and defend its homeland. In my mind, this is the most important turnabout necessary in Israeli public diplomacy and global pro-Israel activism.

Indeed, I have found that such forthright talk has a salutary impact. Without being nasty or unfeeling regarding Israel's adversaries, one can convey a deep sense of sincerity by clarifying red lines and owning up to Israel's necessarily aggressive strategic posture. People are forced to respect that, even if they may not impute to Israel spectacular charity.

THIRD, AND this is a theme hinted at above, Israeli and Jewish public diplomacy must become more candidly "Jewish." In the past, secular themes have dominated – Israel's security needs and diplomatic bigheartedness. This was because secular messaging was most comfortable for secular Israeli leaders and diplomats

themselves, and they also surely thought that such an approach was most relatable for foreign leaders and Diaspora Jews.

These days, given the ideological assault on Judaism and Zionism that underpins violent Palestinianism and its “progressive” fellow travelers, this must change.

We all must insist on a narrative that proclaims incontrovertible, indigenous Jewish rights to Israel, and which speaks of the land as a grand reunion of faith, people, and land. We can win only if we speak about history, justice, and the Jewish nation. I sense that Jews abroad, in particular, now recognize that one cannot escape core Jewish identities and creeds in any effort to support Israel.

Indeed, in repeat visits to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, I have found that urbane Arabs such as the Emiratis respect Israelis for their faithfulness to Jewish tradition, for their belief in the power of Jewish history, and for their loyalty to ancient heritage and unique national identity.

Believe it or not, the Emiratis seem to understand – perhaps better than we do ourselves, sometimes – that these anchors of identity are the greatest source of strength and authenticity.

To all this, I add a comment about tone and timbre. Hasbara needs to be smart and sophisticated and delivered in a reasonable manner. Radical talk and wild action are the modus operandi of Israel’s enemies; not ours. Hot-headedness only drives potential friends away.

Nevertheless, there must be a way to express outrage about genocidal anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish sentiment, and, as I say, to explicate Israel’s determination to beat all enemies. After 2,000 years of demonization and persecution, and after 16 months of heroic battle to defeat Hamas, Hezbollah, and others, Jews and Zionists in the 21st century no longer have to bear body blows on a regular basis!

We are no longer powerless. It is time to engage in the fight for Israel with passion and conviction, not apologetics or apprehension.

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