

Nov 04, 2016 by **Neal Rosendorf**

Israeli PD & Arab Publics II: An Addendum on Leon Wieseltier ^[1]

In March 2011 I wrote a piece for the CPD Blog entitled "Israeli Public Diplomacy's Longstanding Blind Spot: Arab Publics," in which I posited that historical attitudes reaching back to the dawn of the Zionist movement provide a context, if not a continuous mode of thought, lying behind Israel's inability and unwillingness to construct a public diplomacy program that directly engages newly empowered Arab publics.

After having taken some brickbats for discerning evidence of the early Zionists' "willful myopia and disdainful hostility" toward the native peoples of the region and tying it to recent public diplomacy policies or the lack thereof, it's reassuring to find something of a kindred spirit in the redoubtable Leon Wieseltier, the *New Republic's* literary editor. And I looked back a mere century—Wieseltier has gone back a millennium to make his case.

Wieseltier has published an article in the 15 June 2011 issue of *Haaretz* entitled, "Learning to Trust Our Neighbors," in which he notes a deep historical Diaspora Jewish propensity for constructing "vertical alliances" with leaders--"kings and princes, of popes and bishops"--rather than "horizontal alliances" with volatile publics who might suddenly turn violently against Jewish minorities.

Wieseltier writes that "Israel's long preference for monarchs and dictators as its Arab interlocutors looks to me like another version of the vertical alliance. If this is so, then it is important to note that verticality was possible only with authoritarian regimes." He concludes sensibly that "[a] deal with a strongman will no longer be enough. The opinions of the Arab publics will matter. Israeli diplomacy, if ever again there is to be such a thing, will have to broaden its purview and find ways to address nations and not just leaders. Israel will need to be not only feared, but also understood."

Amen, Brother. Historically deeply ingrained attitudes matter greatly. What may once have been functional, or at least understandable, modes of thought and operation can become dangerously counterproductive. Israel's fear of Arab/Muslim publics and their gaining true democracy is Exhibit A in this regard.

I would only add, pace one of my earlier article's key points, that Israel will have to not only make more of an effort to be understood—Leon Wieseltier has implicitly invoked the *Hasbara* "explanation" policy that I have previously critiqued—but to *understand*, as part of a larger program of direct engagement with Arab publics.
