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Israeli Public Diplomacy's Longstanding Blind Spot: Arab Publics ^[1]

As oppressive Arab regimes totter and topple under the pressure of democratization movements, Israel needs to engage directly with the region's increasingly politically empowered peoples. But can Israel implement an effective public diplomacy and harness "soft power" with the citizenry of its neighborhood? The answer must be yes; but Israeli public diplomacy strategy and analysis over the past decade provide little guidance for outreach to Arab publics.


Israeli governments and researchers have been thinking hard for years about how to employ the attractive and coöptive qualities of soft power to advance the state's strategic interests . But the focus has generally been on publics in the US and Europe. The target groups have with very few exceptions not included Arab populaces, whom the Israelis have generally either ignored or written off as implacable enemies of Zionism and the Jews.

The problem runs deep. Early Zionists looked at Palestine and saw, as a slogan of the time put it, "A land without a people for a people without a land." Casting an eye on the peoples who lived beyond Palestine's borders, Theodor Herzl declared in his seminal 1896 work *The Jewish State*, "We should [in Palestine] form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism."

These two formative sensibilities concerning Arabs and other native peoples of the Near and Middle East—willful myopia and disdainful hostility—find a strong echo in contemporary Israel's public diplomacy efforts. The thematic continuity is evident in a 2009 study on Israeli public diplomacy undertaken jointly by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Neaman Institute for National Policy Research at Haifa's Technion university. The study analyzes at length the concept of soft power while recommending strategies to improve Israeli outreach toward the US, Europe, and even India as a representative eastern nation. But in over 190 pages it says not a word about public diplomacy with the Arab world. The Arabs show up exclusively, as they often have in Israeli PD analyses , as devilishly effective purveyors of anti-Israeli international propaganda.

Israeli public diplomacy over the past decade has generally encompassed *hasbara*, or "explanation," and recurring efforts at "branding"—or more precisely, re-branding—Israel. *Hasbara* operates on the basic principle that Israel's policies aren't inherently problematic but need to be explained properly to American and other overseas observers in order to garner international support. The Foreign Ministry-sponsored "Brand Israel" public relations campaign is a *hasbara* outgrowth. According to program director Ido Aharoni, "there is a very real need to talk about Israel beyond the conflict."

Both *hasbara* and "branding" have self-evident shortcomings, as the former seeks to justify Israel's position on the Occupation

and such controversial policies as the massive 2008-09 Operation Cast Lead military campaign in Gaza, and the latter essentially seeks to change the subject altogether. Beyond these broad structural problems, they neglect to engage Arab publics, at whom they're not aimed in any event. A few Israeli Cassandras have intermittently complained about Israel's inattention to the region's citizens. Most notable among those are the Israeli State Comptroller, foreign policy analyst and current World Jewish Congress Secretary General Dan Diker and Israeli communications professor (and current CPD Senior Scholar) Eytan Gilboa . Their complaints have gotten little official traction.

The State Comptroller's office issued reports in 2002 and 2010 decrying the lack of public diplomacy outreach to Arab peoples. Nonetheless, the 2010 report shows a *hasbara*-oriented sensibility, referring to "systemic failures" of communication during Operation Cast Lead—as if a better explanation would have mollified an Arab public that overwhelmingly viewed the Israeli military response as brutally disproportionate. (It's cold comfort that Muammar Gaddafi recently likened his own brutal military campaign against Libyan anti-regime protesters to Cast Lead.) The Israeli government's ineffectual response to the 2010 Comptroller's critique was to appoint the Arabic-speaking but untelegenic Ofir Gendelman as the "Prime Minister's Bureau Arabic-language spokesman for public diplomacy", a would-be one-man counterpoise to Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya.

Israel's inability to engage with Arab publics was painfully on display with the government's response to the Egyptian revolution, which alternated between stony silence and dark mutterings about Egypt transmogrifying into a second Iran should Hosni Mubarak fall. Perhaps most damaging was Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom's statement on Israeli radio that "if regimes neighboring the Israeli state were replaced by democratic systems, Israeli national security might significantly be threatened." The Egyptian newspaper Al Ahram reported Shalom's pronouncement under the damning headline, "Israel Dreading a Democratic Arab World."

It's time for the Israeli government's lack of engagement with the region's peoples to come to an end, for reasons of both peril and opportunity. Concerning the former, Israel no longer has the luxury of dealing in its neighborhood with leaders divorced from public opinion. Reforming Arab governments will increasingly respond to their peoples' will in order to retain their support. If Israel fails to court and communicate with newly empowered publics it will end up with Arab analogues to Turkey, where voter antipathy to Israeli policies has contributed to the Erdogan government's dramatic downgrading of the Turkish-Israeli alliance. Silvan Shalom is right at least in the short term about an erosion of Israeli security in the face of properly represented, anti-Israeli Arab populaces. Short-term will become long-term if Israel continues to do nothing to alter the dynamic of its relations, or more precisely non-relations, with these populaces.


Israel's opportunities as a prosperous, economically vibrant democracy are plentiful. The Israelis are potentially well positioned to assist in the development of Arab civil society structures concerning effective governance, quality education and other forms of human capital development, and press freedoms. They can help via investment and advice to foster the growth of entrepreneurship already taking root in the region. And Israel can and should play a defining role in the creation of a widespread sense of regional interdependence, in which peace and prosperity are embraced by the great majority of citizens as a common good. In doing so, Israel has the opportunity to significantly reduce deep-seated Arab public antipathy toward the Jewish State and Jews in general. It's noteworthy that a recent Pew poll

indicated that 90 percent of Arabs outside of Israel feel negatively toward Jews, but only 35 percent of Israeli Arabs, suggesting that stronger and more widespread relationships can make a substantial positive difference.

But in order to grasp these opportunities, Israel must make at least three key changes.

First, the Israelis must abandon once and for all the mindset of standing aloof from the region and move toward full investment in the Near and Middle East as an integral citizen.

Second, Israel must shift decisively away from the conception of public diplomacy as explanation, or simply one-way “outreach.” PD requires two-way engagement and relationship-building. Israel must be committed to policies that entail listening, learning, and increasing mutual understanding over time.

Finally, all the regional public diplomacy in the world will be completely ineffective as long as Israel maintains its current Palestine policies, which polling data indicates is of first- magnitude importance to Arab publics. While achieving a just settlement with the Palestinians is not a panacea for Israel’s capacity to effectively engage with the peoples of the Middle East, it is a sine qua non. As so many Israeli officials and analysts are enamored of the idea of soft power, they would do well to keep in mind the words of Joseph Nye: “Actions speak louder than words, and public diplomacy that appears to be mere window dressing for the projection of hard power is unlikely to succeed.”
