

Nov 04, 2016 by , Naomi Leight-Give'on, Paul Rockower

## Lost in Explanation <sup>[1]</sup>

In the past month, Israel's attempt to rebrand itself through citizen public diplomats caused a stir in the realm of public diplomacy. Israel's Minister of Information, Diaspora and Public Diplomacy, Yuli Edelstein announced a plan in early January to recruit Israelis living abroad, as well as the multitude of Israeli travelers, as citizen public diplomats.

The notion of citizen diplomacy is not a new concept. The United States conducted similar projects under the Eisenhower administration, where the government provided leaflets for American travelers and enlisted private citizenry to engage in people-to-people diplomacy (Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agencies*, p. 119, 2008).

Since Israelis, especially after army service, often partake in a rite of passage trek to either Southeast Asia, India or Latin America, in theory, Israel has a reservoir of public diplomats. Israeli backpackers are ubiquitous travelers creating the perception that Israel is a far more populous country than it is, given the over-representation of backpackers abroad.

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On February 17, the government of Israel launched the citizen diplomat campaign, entitled Masbirim or "Explainers." Posted on the campaign's website are three videos, produced by the Ministry in English, French and Spanish, satirically explaining how foreigners view Israel. The tongue-in-cheek description of Israelis using camels to get to work and carrying ammunition pokes fun at supposed foreigner perception of this "desert-warrior" country.

Through this campaign, Israeli citizens are encouraged to learn how to fight misperceptions about Israel by explaining various aspects of the country. The Ministry plans to distribute information to Israeli travelers on all three of Israel's airlines. According to YnetNews, these brochures encourage travelers to discuss "personal stories, feelings and experiences—share them. We're all human. Present new points of view – it's worth noting that each side has its own version of events. Speak concisely—long speeches are likely to lose your audience's interest. Clear sentences aid understanding. Use humor—it always helps."

The media *khamseen* (sandstorm) ensued with the launch of this public diplomacy campaign to socialize Israeli citizenry as public diplomats, with media outlets of all stripes weighing in on the endeavor. The most chatter regarding the new public diplomacy campaign has come from within Israel as Israelis on both sides of the political divide have responded to the plan.

Some offered their kosher seal of approval for the campaign. From *The Jerusalem Post*, columnist Liat Collins praised the Ministry's decision to encourage Israelis to act as envoys abroad. YnetNews correspondent Itamar Eichner offered similar sentiments of approval. According to right-wing media outlet Arutz Sheva, the Ministry pronounced the initial campaign successful with "more than 130,000 entrances to website in the five days since its

creation.”

Yet others have declared the efforts *treif* (unkosher), *The Jerusalem Post's* Editor-in-Chief, David Horovitz poked fun at the Ministry's attempts to foster banal conversation as public diplomacy and offered a sarcastic scenario on the London Underground between an Israeli and a Brit. He goes on to question the nature of the Ministry itself, saying:

“Of course. It's easy to scoff. And everyone's a critic. But really, our new ministry and its new minister, created as a function of coalition arithmetic rather than in recognition of a strategic need that does genuinely exist, should stop deluding themselves and the rest of us about the nature of the challenge, and instead start meeting it properly.”

Meanwhile, *The Jerusalem Post* also reported that Peace Now secretary-general, Yariv Openheimer sent a letter to PM Binyamin Netanyahu protesting the new website over its “right-wing” slant. The liberal Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* echoed the sentiments that the campaign simply mirrors the Likud-led government's attempts to explain its policies not rebrand Israel as a whole. In its editorial, *Ha'aretz* slammed the campaign, stating:

“Explaining Israel” exposes in full the two-faced nature of the prime minister and his government. Even worse, the campaign does not offer hope for working toward a solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict, only baseless faith that hasbara-public diplomacy-will lead the international community to abandon the Palestinians and begin supporting the settlers. This attitude should deeply distress all Israelis “tired of seeing how we are portrayed in the world.”

In the global discourse, the campaign received considerable coverage as well. The launch of the Israeli citizen diplomacy campaign came on the heels of an assassination of a Hamas commander in Dubai that many speculate to have been carried out by Israel's Mossad. *The Independent* in Britain and the *National* in Abu Dhabi highlighted the juxtaposition of the public diplomacy campaign alongside the Dubai hit and noted that increased public diplomacy does not change questionable policy moves.

Across the Atlantic, Israeli-American Ami Kaufman discussed in *The Huffington Post* the campaign website and how it is an embarrassment to Israelis. In a section discussing myths and facts, Kaufman cites his favorite absurdity:

**“Myth:** Because of the settlements there is no peace.

**Not true.** ...Tel Aviv and Jerusalem may also be seen as settlements by the Arabs ...”

Kaufman railed against the campaign as Israel shooting itself in both legs. Meanwhile, in *The New York Times*, Israeli political scientist Shlomo Avineri highlighted the deficiencies of

the campaign. He stated, “The campaign stems from a genuine fear that Israel is misrepresented, sometimes in very vicious ways... On this level it is understandable. But I think it is puerile. Some of the information is ridiculous, and behind it I find a Bolshevik mentality — to make every citizen an unpaid civil servant for the policy of the government. There is never any intimation that some of our problems have to do with actual policies.” The Hebrew University professor points out that the issue is not people’s dislike of Israelis—it is the dislike of Israeli policy.

As noted, there were mixed reviews across the board on this public diplomacy campaign. While the concept of creating a cadre of citizen diplomats to engage in people-to-people diplomacy is sound, the execution and implementation has left a bad taste in the mouths of many public diplomacy practitioners. For one, the Ministry acted in a particularly tone deaf fashion by calling upon the Israeli citizenry to serve in the “Israeli Public Diplomacy Forces”; while the name is derived from the Israeli Defense Forces, describing a public diplomacy initiative in military language is somewhat discordant. Meanwhile, those like Oppenheimer, Kaufman and Avineri object to the notion of turning Israeli citizens into shills for Likud policy. The Israeli governments’ official term for public diplomacy is *hasbara*, translated as explanation. Israel doesn’t seem to understand that no amount of *hasbara* will change the world’s perception of a nation whose policy of continued occupation and settlement expansion they do not support. Time and again, Israel forgets that public diplomacy is not just about advocacy—it is also about listening. Similar to the failed U.S. “Shared Values” public diplomacy initiative, the problem with the Israeli campaign, as The Jerusalem Post’s Jeff Barak notes, offers answers to questions that are not being asked and demonstrates a political tin-ear to global critiques. In a very candid video, David Sable, a leading marketing and branding specialist and an Israeli-American, explained the short-comings of trying to do public diplomacy amid bad policy. As the oft-cited public diplomacy maxim states, “good public diplomacy cannot make up for bad foreign policy” and until the policy of occupation ends—the world’s view of Israel will not change no matter how many highly-trained citizen diplomats.

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