

Israel's Hasbarah War:  
Learning in Israeli Public Diplomacy

David Kozer

Thesis Advisor:

Dr. Ben D. Mor

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## Introduction: The Research Problem

For centuries, states have understood the need for diplomacy, both with their allies and with their enemies. In the current age of internet, twenty-four-hour news networks, satellite communications, and blogging, most nations have come to understand that there is a pressing need to make themselves appealing to foreign publics, not only elite dignitaries. The new trend away from traditional diplomacy towards public diplomacy has left governments seeking for a way to gain the attention and approval of audiences beyond their own borders (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). Governments eager to pursue effective public diplomacy policy have gone to great lengths to do so, relying on both the public and private sectors for experience and counsel.

“Public Diplomacy” (PD) is an ever-evolving term whose definition remains a point of contestation between political science scholars. One general explanation describes public diplomacy as the efforts to “persuade foreign elites and publics that the values, policies, and actions of the state deserve their—and their government’s—support”(Mor, 2006). There is no consensus, however, regarding any single definition, and the literature on the subject continues to expand and draw upon multiple fields of study in order to provide the broadest and most modern classification possible.

Nearly all states engage in public diplomacy in order to gain political, military, and economic support. The degree to which they succeed in swaying public opinion depends heavily, but not entirely, on the efforts and resources invested. It is a widely accepted assumption that Israel has been maintaining a failing public diplomacy policy for the past four decades (Gilboa, 2006). Israel’s efforts to explain its policies, known in Hebrew as “*hasbarah*,” have long been a focus of academic works, policy papers, and editorial grumblings. The general consensus is that the Israeli government simply does not place enough of an emphasis on its public diplomacy efforts to mitigate the heavily negative images generated by the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict (ibid).

One may wonder why Israel, which seems to be struggling for its mere survival on a daily basis, should concern itself with the opinions of civilians living abroad, most of whom cannot fathom life under the constant threat of attack. The answer is that foreign support is no less critical to Israel's survival than fighter jets and tanks. As the world enjoys expanding democratization, foreign populations are becoming increasingly integral forces in their governments' policy-making (Mor, 2006). A successful appeal to those publics may well translate into increased economic and political support, thereby justifying the initial investment in the PD campaign. Furthermore, stronger ties with these nations would lead to increased security and stability, allowing the Israeli government to shift some of its limited resources away from the defense sector to education, infrastructure, welfare, research, and development.

Once we accept the importance of effective public diplomacy, the question becomes: why has Israel been unable to improve its image abroad? Existing literature has, so far, failed to address this question satisfactorily. Rather than seeking answers in Israel's ethos, in world anti-Semitism, global politics, or even in budgetary considerations, I propose that the answer lies in the Israeli government's learning process. Israeli leaders, both political and military, have largely failed to learn from their previous *hasbarah* failures. Rather than taking stock of its methods and reworking them to produce more successful results, Israel continues to maintain the same stances and processes that have led to embarrassing blunders and scathing criticism in the past. The government seems to lack the ability to evaluate itself and implement change based on that evaluation—an ability which is crucial to the success of any organization. The absence of a reevaluation process transforms what should be a learning loop into an open-ended linear process.

In order to practice more effective *hasbarah*, the Israeli government and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) require a feedback mechanism to judge the efficacy of their current methods as well as the ability to adjust their work accordingly. The major objective of the proposed research is therefore to

isolate the feedback mechanism that enables the official bodies responsible for PD in Israel to learn from past experiences. Once the mechanism has been identified, we will then attempt to understand what hinders Israeli leaders from learning from their mistakes by properly processing incoming information. Hopefully, by revealing these elements, it will become easier to develop a method for improving *hasbarah*, as suggested by Gilboa. By introducing elements of learning theory, I will attempt to elucidate the nature of Israel's decision-making process vis-à-vis public diplomacy and to identify the point at which feedback fails to be properly processed. I will further seek to identify those factors that have blocked Israel's learning.

Since feedback is either gathered from one's environment or provided by colleagues, subordinates, and advisors, foreign peers, etc., the second portion of this paper will deal with the impact of one, specific American, Jewish organization on Israel's learning process: The American Jewish Committee (AJC). I will strive to determine the nature of the feedback that this group provides to the Israeli government, if any. By understanding how these two actors affect each other, we may be able to reveal yet another element of Israel's learning process. This organization, which exists primarily to support Israel's public outreach, has historically enjoyed a special relationship with Israeli leaders. It is possible that the AJC may play a key, and as yet unappreciated, role in Israel's learning process.

In order to clarify the nature of the relationship between the Israeli *hasbarah* system and its private counterparts, I will be conducting interviews with key members of both. I will use this data to construct a model of Israel's learning process. By comparing key messages used by both parties during the Second Lebanon War, I will attempt to establish whether Israeli *hasbarah* bodies mimicked private initiatives or whether there was no interaction whatsoever. A change in Israeli PD tactics during the war would suggest the presence of some learning mechanism; a comparison with AJC's simultaneous messages could then indicate the level of influence that organization has on Israel. These data will lead

to a conclusion about the nature and scope of the Israeli system's feedback mechanism and the circumstances in which it is most likely to lead to changes in Israeli practices.

This proposal will first explain the need for systematic research on Israel's public diplomacy efforts. Following a brief review of the literature on public diplomacy and learning models, as well as learning in foreign policy, I will turn to several well-known theories currently dominating this field. Having reviewed the existing literature, I will present my own propositions regarding Israel's failed *hasbarah* policies. Next, I will elucidate the methodology being used to collect data and measure the variables I have chosen to monitor. Finally, the proposal will outline the general importance and potential implications of this research for the fields of public diplomacy and Israeli *hasbarah*.

### **Literature Review**

The term "public diplomacy" was coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion to describe a new academic field that would deal with the "influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies" by combining elements of international relations, traditional diplomacy, media studies, public relations, and communications.<sup>1</sup> As a practice, however, it had come into existence much earlier. In 1960, Richard Fagen examined German efforts to influence public opinion abroad in 1914. Without referring to these efforts as "public diplomacy", the German government engaged in an extensive campaign to test public opinion and manipulate it to support the impending war. Berlin crafted its policy with an eye to public opinion, granting it no less weight than quantifiable variables such as materiel and manpower (ibid). This attitude towards foreign communities may still serve as a relevant model today.

Another revolution in public diplomacy was ushered in by a group of dictatorships and failed states in the 1970s. Albritton and Manheim (1985) conducted a survey of five highly-criticized states that contracted private American public relations firms in order to improve their images in the eyes of

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<sup>1</sup> Early brochure distributed by the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy, as quoted in Cull (2009:1).

the American public. These cash-strapped governments preferred to expend resources in order to utilize experts in foreign markets rather than to make ham-fisted, albeit less expensive, attempts on their own. They were able to initiate a remarkable improvement in their respective images through the strategic employment of a professional, coordinated, and culturally sensitive publicity campaign.

In 1992, Signitzer and Coombs sought to unify the fields of public relations and public diplomacy in light of the tremendous effect of technology on both. Though their work actually predates the introduction of the internet into every home and office, they were quick to realize that a communications revolution would take diplomacy out of the realm of professional diplomacy and into the living rooms and voting booths of the general public (ibid). They cite a previous definition of public diplomacy—“[i]nformation exchange, the reduction of clichés and prejudices, the creation of sympathy for their own foreign policy and model of society, self-portrayal, and image-building”—as further evidence of the overlap between the fields of public relations and public diplomacy (Koschwitz , 1986, cited in ibid:139.).

More than a decade later, Ben Mor outlined public diplomacy’s indispensable role in grand strategy. Due to real-time reporting, the global reach of the media, and the pre-eminence of television, policy makers are forced to weigh the tactical benefits of their decisions against their potential impact on that nation’s entire grand strategy. This new reality has critical implications for the role of nearly every single level of power in shaping a country’s diplomacy; the prime minister must be able to influence the tactics used in military operations in order to prevent diplomatic crises, and soldiers must be made aware that their actions may have far-reaching implications for their nation’s image abroad. Furthermore, the increased proximity between the tactical and strategic levels means that those at the helm must learn to adapt and act as quickly in order to keep pace of and respond to developments in the field.

Some of the most extensive research on Israel's public diplomacy policy has been performed by Eytan Gilboa. His landmark article, "Public Diplomacy: The Missing Component in Israel's Foreign Policy", serves as an invaluable overview of Israel's policies prior to the Second Lebanon War and outlines the tenets of New Public Diplomacy (NPD).

NPD . . . is pursued by states and non-state actors . . . it is based on 'soft power', two-way communication, strategic PD, information management, nation branding and e-image; it involves domestication of foreign policy and it deals with both short- and long-term issues (Gilboa, 2006:718).

In order to reverse its failed *hasbarah* policy, Gilboa proposes that Israel completely overhaul its public diplomacy efforts using the tenets of NPD as well as feedback provided by the World Standing Index (Gilboa, 2006). The benefit of embracing NPD rather than classic public diplomacy is that the two-way communication it fosters encourages organizations to amend objectionable public diplomacy strategies by judging public reactions to them. This adjustment is enabled by the presence of a feedback mechanism by which officials not only monitor public opinion, but create a pathway for that information back to policy-makers.

Gilboa's recommendations are certainly useful, but they assume that the Israeli *hasbarah* system is capable of properly processing the feedback generated by its actions. The general complaint from academics, journalists, and citizens alike has long been, however, that Israel continually fails to learn from its prior mistakes. Professor Yehezkel Dror, a member of the Winograd Committee, which was charged with investigating Israel's failures during the Second Lebanon War, criticized this failure to implement changes in his searing editorial on the Mavi Marmara debacle. He provided a partial list of the Committee's recommendations and detailed the government's failure to adopt these recommendations when considering its plan of action regarding the flotilla. Amongst the many ignored directives was one to "[i]nvolve the Foreign Ministry in decisions on operations that will affect Israel's foreign relations. This means not only the foreign minister, but also the diplomatic staff, so that proper weight can be given to considerations of foreign relations and our image abroad. All the signs show that



this was not done" (*Ha'aretz* Online English Edition, June 6, 2010). In light of these allegations, we must examine the process by which Israeli bureaucracy incorporates new messages and realities and adjusts its behavior. Defining this process will be crucial for achieving the ultimate goal of understanding where, exactly, the learning process is failing to produce positive results. Furthermore, because the IDF's structure is so rigidly hierarchical, it would be especially helpful to pinpoint the level at which feedback ceases to influence future decisions. I have, therefore, chosen to focus my thesis on the crucial element of feedback in the theory of New Public Diplomacy, which has remained largely unexamined until now.

### **Theory**

It is important to note that while Israel's foreign policy may often seem either disorganized or merely like a series of ad hoc reactions to world events and criticisms, its policy does, in fact, represent the cumulative effects of a series of conscious decisions. Brecher, who studied the Israeli decision-making process, argued that, "[a] foreign policy decision may be defined as the selection, among perceived alternatives, of one option leading to a course of action in the international system. . . . A decision is an explicit act of choice which can be located precisely in time and space" (Brecher, 1973:73). If that is the case, the next step is to identify the series of decisions that create the phenomenon we hope to study and to attempt to understand why they were made.

In a perfect world, decision makers would enact policy, observe the subsequent changes to their environment, learn from this feedback, and adjust their future decisions accordingly, as outlined by Argyris (1976) in his work on single and double-loop models:

Learning is here defined as the detection and correction of errors, and error as any feature of knowledge or of knowing that makes action ineffective. . . . The detection and correction of error produces learning and the lack of either or both inhibits learning (p.73).

It is the latter portion of the definition of learning which is most germane to our question. Our goal is to determine whether the Israeli government suffers from a lack of an ability either to

detect errors in order to learn from its prior PD mistakes, or whether the problem lies in the correction stage of the process.

While governments are, clearly, responsible for maintaining their own public diplomacy, the modern demand for instant gratification and an incessant flow of information does leave room for additional players. Jian Wang (2005) asserts that governments, and the information that they disseminate, will always be viewed with some measure of suspicion. Therefore, independent organizations and groups must become involved in national public diplomacy in order to lend it an air of legitimacy. Though Wang does not sufficiently develop this aspect of his theory, the nascent idea may allow us to reinterpret Israel's relationship with foreign Jewish organizations. It is with Wang in mind that I intent to examine AJC's work on behalf of the Israeli government and what role it may play in Israel's ability to develop a coherent PD policy.

Brecher addressed the issue of outside influence on governmental decision-making regarding policy in his aforementioned work, but his theories can easily be projected onto the PD process as well. Brecher found that during Israel's deliberations regarding German reparations, the sheer length of the process exposed leaders to increased external pressures, even more so than during seemingly far more critical decisions. "Decisions allowed to gestate over a period of several months are more open to [interest] group influence than decisions that must be made in a few days" (Milbrath, 1967, cited in Brecher, 1973:101). The question of time adds an invaluable piece to the theoretical puzzle, especially as it relates to the question of how public diplomacy policy is created and by whom.

The Israeli political system, like that of many states, suffers from a time lag in its learning process. Just as states are known to apply the outdated military tactics of their previous war to a new one, Israel has yet to update its political tactics to match an evolving media environment (Levy, 1994). Whereas in battle Israel may only find itself one war behind the times, politically it is mired in the same mindset that guided its actions in 1967. With the exception of minor, cosmetic changes, PD bodies such

as the MFA and IDF Spokesperson's Unit, guided by a highly-visible succession of foreign ministers and IDF spokespersons, have yet to adjust their methods and messages to meet emerging challenges to Israel's stability. These organizations have largely failed to process the fact that due to its military prowess and its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the global community no longer views Israel as the "David" in the David and Goliath metaphor. Their perseverance in sticking to outmoded tropes while CNN continues to broadcast Israeli tanks exacerbates the world's perception that Israel is a mighty war machine rather than a beleaguered democracy in a sea of enemies.

There is no shortage of PR professionals both in the private sector and at Israel-advocacy organizations who have offered their services and suggestions for improving Israel's *hasbarah*. Though their campaigning may fall on deaf ears in the upper echelons, there is a cadre of young, motivated, forward-thinking civil servants who have been more receptive to these groups' messages. I propose that it is these young soldiers and officers in the IDF Spokesperson's Unit and employees of the MFA who are better able to adjust their own rhetoric and policy in keeping with the cues they receive from the private sector.

The theory of tactical learning states that the belief system that supports any given policy is arranged hierarchically, with tactical beliefs at the lowest level and strategic assumptions at the apex (Holsti, 1977 as cited in Tetlock, 1991:28). The higher up the pyramid a belief is located the more difficult it will be to change that belief through learning. I propose that this same structure may be applied to military and governmental hierarchies as well, which would suggest that those individuals in relatively low-ranking positions, i.e. those operating at the tactical level, are better able to learn from their mistakes. If these men and women experience less pressure to conform to preexisting notions, then they should be more capable of "causal learning"—which tactics may be most effective—as well as "diagnostic learning," namely how global relationships as a whole are shifting (Levy, 1994).

Based on the existing body of learning and public diplomacy theories, I propose that:

- I. *Learning in Israel's hasbarah system is occurring mainly at the tactical level, such that any adjustments individuals within the structure are able to initiate are made on the micro level.*

As these changes travel up the "chain of command," they will encounter increasingly greater resistance as previously-held beliefs are more strongly entrenched at the strategic level. This obduracy on the part of senior officials may be attributed to political pressure to maintain consistent policies, personal limitations, or a strong belief in the existing narratives and prejudices currently pervading Israeli society (Tetlock, 1991 and Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

- II. *The upper echelons of the Israeli government, whether consciously or not, have come to rely upon Israel-advocacy groups to conduct public diplomacy on their behalf. This dependence is restricting senior Israeli officials' ability to judge the effects of their own public diplomacy efforts and incorporate this data into future decisions.*

The American Jewish Committee, though it attempts to aid Israel with its PD efforts, may be unwittingly creating a barrier in what should be a natural learning process. The consistent failure of a given strategy is generally believed to lead to its reconsideration; Israeli policy makers may be too sheltered from the failure of their current policies to be sufficiently convinced of the need for change (Tetlock, 1991).

## **Methodology**

Determining whether an entire government or organization has learned from its mistakes is a challenging proposition for any researcher. Because learning is based on perception and perceptions are a purely subjective construct, any measure of learning will have to take into account individuals'

shifts in perceptions. The first step will be to determine whether a noticeable change took place in Israel's tactics and rhetoric during the war. A shift in position will be indicative of learning, or at least adaptation, having taken place. Once this point has been identified, I will strive to uncover which considerations led to the implementation of a new strategy. In order to do so, I will interview the men and women from the MFA, IDF Spokesperson's Unit, and the Prime Minister's Office who were involved in tactical discussions and who influenced those deliberations. The ultimate goal will be to distill an outline of the learning process as represented by dialogue and deliberations during strategizing sessions and high-level meetings during the war.

A further goal of these interviews will be to ascertain the degree to which both senior and junior officials within the *hasbarah* system have been influenced by their counterparts in the American Jewish Committee or by environmental feedback in the form of international media. These personal accounts of meetings with AJC's officials or even exposure to its published material could provide valuable insight into the way this particular form of feedback was processed first by individuals, and later, by the Israeli system as a whole. These impressions could then be compared with the impact of standard, unmitigated media coverage on lower and higher level Israeli officials.

By speaking with individuals from both the public and private sectors, I hope to paint a more revealing picture of Israel's *hasbarah* system, as well as the nature of the relationship between the Israeli government and Jewish organizations. Such qualitative data would be difficult to establish based solely on information provided in the public record. However, one of the greatest drawbacks of interviewing as a method for data collection is that it relies on people's memories and self-perceptions. Therefore, I will be conducting both qualitative and quantitative research in order to try to paint a picture of Israel's past and current *hasbarah* efforts and of its relationship with the American Jewish Committee. Personal interviews will also be able to reveal the state of mind of those members of the

*hasbarah* system who have been open to change, but also those who have been resistant to transformation. See Appendix A for a partial list of interviewees.

Another important piece of the puzzle will be to establish current Israeli attitudes towards public diplomacy. To do so I will compare the annual budgets for the MFA and the IDF Spox for the years 2004-2010. I will be looking for any fluctuations in those budgets that might coincide with major events such as the Second Lebanon War or Operation Cast Lead. (If the budget for either of these bodies increased in the year *following* these events, it might indicate an increased understanding of their work's importance.) I will also be comparing those budgets to overall defense spending as well as to the PD budgets for the AJC during the same timeframe. Israel's annual budget provides a clear picture of PD's *relative* importance as it compares to the country's annual security budget. The government attitudes towards *hasbarah* will also be judged using reports prepared by the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee as well as extensive reports prepared by the State Comptroller and Ombudsman's Office in 2002 and 2007. I will also look for any structural or didactic changes at these three institutions. (Were any courses added to the curriculum for their members? Were any departments added or removed? Did the number of recruits increase or decrease? etc. )

Yet another set of data will be drawn from publicity materials created before, during, and after the Second Lebanon War. I will compare the main messages from press releases and interviews from the IDF Spokesperson's Unit and the MFA's Spokesperson with press releases, editorials, interviews, and internal bulletins generated by the AJC . Through qualitative content analysis of PD materials, I hope to track how messages changed from the time of relative quiet preceding the two separate kidnappings (Gilad Shalit and Eldad Regev & Ehud Goldwasser), over the course of the war with Hizbullah, and in the weeks following it. By comparing the content of these messages, I hope to determine, first, whether Israeli PD bodies were able to unify and publicize a single set of messages, or whether the bodies were in conflict and competition throughout the war. Furthermore, I will be examining whether Jewish

organizations abroad took their cue from the official, Israeli “party line”, vice versa, or whether there was no interaction whatsoever. By establishing a pattern in these materials, I hope to determine whether Israel learned anything during the war itself—either from environmental feedback or from Jewish organizations.

### **Contributions and limitations of the proposed research**

It is my hope that the research conducted here will provide Israel’s PD structure with some insight into its own workings. Since most literature on this subject has dealt primarily with criticism or with historical trends, I intend to add the more practical dimension of organizational learning. How an organization processes information and environmental cues is as essential to its nature as its history, personnel, and budget. Therefore, by uncovering the mechanism by which the Israeli *hasbarah* system reviews itself and its impact, we will be able to improve our overall understanding of its methods, motivations, successes and failures.

Furthermore, if I am able to identify some feedback mechanism in the structure, that information may also be put to use by those who would like to contribute to Israel’s PD from their positions in the private sector. AJC has free access to a wide range of political and military figures, and may be eager to know how best to impart helpful information so that its message is well received.

Since much of the thought process behind the selection of certain messages during the war was not published or even recorded, I am forced to rely on interviews. People’s memories of events are not always accurate, especially since nearly four years have gone by. Furthermore, most people are unable to remain objective regarding their own roles in historical events, or those of their colleagues and superiors. These shortcomings will, however, be offset by crosschecking these sources and comparing them to one another and to independent, academic, organizational, and government sources.

Appendix A- List of Interviewees

Name	Position
David Harris	Executive Director, AJC
Jason Isaacson	Director, Office of Government and International Affairs, AJC
Kenneth Bandler	Director of Communications, AJC
Dr. Col. (res.) Eran Lerman	Director, Israel & Middle East Office, AJC Former Deputy Director of the Military Intelligence Research and Production Division
Ido Aharoni	Head, Branding Desk, MFA
Major (res.) Jacob Dallal	Acting Head, International Press Branch, IDF Spokesperson's Unit (during the Second Lebanon War)
Major Noa Meir	Head, North American Desk, IDF Spokesperson's Unit (during the Second Lebanon War)
Major Avital Leibovitz	Head, International Press Branch, IDF Spokesperson's Unit (currently)
Captain Avichai Adraee	Head, Arab Press Desk, IDF Spokesperson's Unit
Yarden Vatikay	Head, National Information Directorate
Col. (res.) <i>Miri Eisin</i>	Former Media Advisor to the Prime Minister



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