

I

A Public Relations Imperative

Hasbara is a Hebrew term that one hears frequently in public parlance in Israel. Literally, *hasbara* means “explanation.” In its usage in the public realm in Israel, *hasbara* relates to explanations given about Israel’s policies and actions, explanations aimed at an audience abroad. It is how Israel explains itself to the world. *Hasbara* can be carried out by individuals. It can be carried out by government agencies. *Hasbara* in the realm of Israel’s explanations of itself is sometimes defined as “public diplomacy.” To some, Israel’s practice of *hasbara* is a benign way of gaining acceptance abroad for actions and policies that fall within the realm of acceptable behavior but may not be immediately understood without explanation.¹ To others, *hasbara* is “the Israeli euphemism for propaganda,” a deceptive practice that is used to give a false explanation for actions and policies for which there is no valid justification.²

All peoples and governments have a public face. They try to show themselves as worthy citizens of the planet. This function may be performed by any governmental official or ministry that has occasion to comment on an issue. It may be performed by an official press office. In some countries, one finds a cabinet-level ministry, sometimes called a ministry of information.

In Israel, one finds particular emphasis. Israel has been subjected to frequent criticism over the way it deals with the Arab population in the Palestine territories it occupied in 1967. That criticism has heightened a felt need to explain Israel to a world audience. Some say that *hasbara* is a national obsession in Israel. Government ministers are often criticized for failures in *hasbara*. They have not, it is said, adequately explained to the world why Israel engaged in one or another action. Israel acts correctly and justly in the world, so the criticism runs, but others do not understand. If only our government gave a better account of itself, the world would love us more.

The government of Israel has devoted considerable bureaucratic effort to *hasbara*. At various times, *hasbara* has been carried out by a cabinet-level ministry devoted to it, a ministry that has borne different names. As a governmental function, the term *hasbara* carries in Israel a positive connotation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a public diplomacy division that deals with issues that yield negative public relations. In 2015 that division spearheaded Israel's effort to counter a move by the Palestinian football association to have Israeli football teams suspended from the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA in its French acronym). The basis for the Palestinian move was that Israel's football leagues included teams from Israel's settlements in the Palestinian West Bank occupied by Israel, an occupation said to be illegal. The Palestinian association further charged that Israeli officialdom impeded travel by Palestinian footballers, through restrictions at border crossings and at internal highway checkpoints.

The prospect of being unable to field football teams in international competition was one that the government of Israel did not relish. A ban on Israeli football teams would have highlighted the settlement issue to the international public. Under the direction of Yuval Rotem, who headed the Ministry's public diplomacy division, personnel at Israeli embassies in a number of countries lobbied local officials, arguing that politics should be kept out of sports activity. The Ministry was ultimately successful in gaining support for its view, and the Palestinian football association decided to drop its effort to exclude Israeli teams. However, even the raising of the issue highlighted the issue of Israel's settlements and their legality, as well as Israel's restrictions on travel by Palestinian Arabs. Those aspects of Israel's policy were ongoing topics of criticism of Israel by human rights organs at the United Nations.

They were also matters that increasingly were being raised by non-governmental groups in various countries who urged a boycott of Israel. Criticism of Israel from such diffuse sources required expansion of the scope of public diplomacy. "I know what to do in the United Nations," said Rotem, in a reference to Israel's efforts to influence opinion in its direction at the United Nations. "I know what to do in Geneva," he continued, in a reference to Israel's efforts to influence opinion in the UN human rights organs based in Geneva. Those organs were inclined not infrequently to issue strong condemnations of Israel for one policy or another. "Now I need to build a base of power," Rotem bemoaned, "to deal with a trade union in Ireland or a church in Panama." Israel's public diplomacy had to contend with opinion at "campuses and universities, and all those conferences of

sciences, all museums and art exhibitions. Every element of Israeli activity,” he said, “is basically challenged.”³

Hasbara has come to occupy such a prominent role in Israel’s public agenda because of Israel’s atypical history. Most countries do not need to justify their existence. China is accepted as a country because it has been on the map for so long. We may be vague on the names of China’s ancient dynasties, but we know of China’s lineage. Particular policies of China’s government may be questioned, even condemned. The extent of China’s territory may be debated – does it include Taiwan, or does it not? China may disseminate information to justify its policies, or to substantiate its claim to Taiwan, but it does not need to convince anyone about its status in the world. No one disputes that China is a state that should be allowed to continue to function as such. China is accepted as a fact.

The modern Israeli state, to the contrary, appeared only recently in historical terms on the international stage, and in circumstances of great controversy. It was formed through the efforts of an association of Jews in Europe, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century. Taking its name from Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, the World Zionist Organization aimed at a state for the Jews of the world. In 1948, those efforts were crowned with success, with the declaration and subsequent international acceptance of a state in the territory of what at the time was Palestine. The propriety of the World Zionist Organization’s efforts was questioned, given that the existing population in Palestine fiercely objected and was not prepared quietly to acquiesce. Israel’s early-twenty-first-century Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is at pains to condemn criticism of Israel as aimed at “delegitimizing” it.⁴ His government mounted an effort to counter “delegitimization.”

One of Israel’s most successful early practitioners of *hasbara* was Abba Eban, who gave voice to Israel’s story when it sought support to establish itself in the years that followed the end of World War II. Eban said that Israel was unusual as a state in its extreme concern over the opinion of others. “Other sovereign nations do not continually ask themselves what others think of them,” said Eban in 1972, when he was serving as Israel’s Foreign Minister. “We never relax,” he explained, “to improve and expand on what is called our ‘image.’”⁵ For Israel, *hasbara* plays a central role in its relationship with the rest of the world.

AN UPHILL BATTLE

Eban was not alone in Israel’s first years as a state in identifying the importance of burnishing Israel’s image as it sought its place in the world

community. From early on, *hasbara* has been seen as crucial in gaining the acceptance of a Jewish state. In 1951, the World Zionist Organization, which was instrumental in bringing Israel into being, set out a series of tasks for itself. One was “Organization of propaganda, and political aid for Israel in cooperation and coordination with the State.”⁶ The World Zionist Organization, originally called simply Zionist Organization, predated the modern state of Israel. In part through successful efforts in the realm of *hasbara*, it was able to gain territory for a Jewish state. At the turn of the twentieth century, much territory in the world was controlled by outside powers, so the logical approach to gaining territory was to gain agreement from powers that controlled territory abroad. These powers needed to be convinced of the worth of the Zionist project. The Zionist Organization sought to establish territorial control in Palestine, a land inhabited by a population with long-standing roots there.

Success in this endeavor was by no means a foregone conclusion. The Zionist Organization could point only to a few settlements initiated there in the previous decades by handfuls of Jewish farmers from Russia. Even counting them, Jews constituted less than 5 percent of Palestine’s population. The numerically dominant sector of the population was at that point in time referred to as Arab. That designation stemmed from conquest in the seventh century by Arabs invading from the east. Those Arabs spread their language and culture to a population that had inhabited the area from ancient times. At the turn of the twentieth century, the territory was under the political control of the Ottoman Turkish empire, which had been in place there since the sixteenth century. There was little reason to think that it would readily cede territory to the Zionist Organization.

Moreover, the Arab population of Palestine harbored its own aspirations for political control, so even if the Turkish government could somehow be convinced to acquiesce, the Zionist Organization would not be the only contender. Palestine had enjoyed a certain level of autonomy under Ottoman Turkish rule. The Arab population was predominantly rural. By the turn of the twentieth century, it had developed a commercialized agriculture with exports being shipped out to Europe and elsewhere from three Mediterranean ports. Olive production thrived on the hillsides, while grain crops flourished in the valleys. Orange groves dotted the coastal area. The major towns – Acre, Jerusalem, Hebron, and Nablus – housed a burgeoning urban middle class. The Zionists harkened back to their predominance in a portion of Palestine in ancient times, asserting self-determination as their battle cry. Yet they confronted a strong claim to self-determination of

the Arab population. Palestine in the late Ottoman Turkish period was a thriving territory that would not readily be displaced.

The sources of Zionism's eventual success were several. The Zionist Organization was Europe-based, hence might seek support from European governments. European powers would replace the Ottoman Turkish empire in the territory of Palestine after the Great War. Europe would come to call the shots on territorial disposition there. The Zionist Organization personnel were of European origin, while spokespersons for the opposing Arab side were not. The Zionist Organization prevailed at key junctures. At major turns, as the European powers made the decisions, the Zionist Organization outmaneuvered the Arabs.

A major factor in these successes was the Zionist Organization's ability to frame the issue for debate. In turn, the framing not infrequently involved convincing key international actors of underlying facts in a direction favorable to the Zionist Organization's positions and objectives. Its diplomacy has rested in large part on shaping facts in its favor. The Zionist Organization benefited from astute spokespersons who projected an image of integrity and credibility. Nonetheless, the task they faced was daunting. And it remained daunting even after the Jewish state was established.

A STATE UNDER SIEGE

"Ever since its creation in 1948," writes Aharon Klieman, a student of Israel's foreign relations, "Israel has had to counter diplomatic isolation deriving from the basic fact of Arab enmity."⁷ Klieman says, "Israel still sees itself as besieged."⁸ Whether one views that enmity as a product of anti-Jewish sentiment, or as a reaction to the actions of the Zionist movement, and of Israel itself, the enmity nonetheless colors Israel's international relationships.

In the diplomatic arena, the self-image that Israel projects is that of a state that may need to take extraordinary action to protect itself. An example is Israel's ratification in 1991 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. One provision of this instrument prohibits arbitrary detention. A person taken into custody must be informed of the reasons for the detention and must be brought promptly before a judicial officer holding the power to determine if the detention is justified.⁹ Though desirous of joining the Covenant, the government of Israel said it could not be expected to comply with this provision. Under the Covenant, a state may enter a formal derogation from the provision on

detention “in time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation.”¹⁰

A state of emergency was in fact authorized by Israel's parliament, the Knesset, within days after Israeli statehood was declared in May 1948, allowing for the nullification by the executive authority of any provision of law.¹¹ That state of emergency, declared at that time by the provisional government of Israel, remains in effect. Israel's derogation statement, filed with the United Nations in 1991, is instructive as an official self-portrayal of Israel's situation in the world. “Since its establishment,” the derogation statement reads, “the State of Israel has been the victim of continuous threats and attacks on its very existence as well as on the life and property of its citizens. These have taken the form of threats of war, of actual armed attacks, and campaigns of terrorism resulting in the murder of and injury to human beings. In view of the above, the State of Emergency which was proclaimed in May 1948 has remained in force ever since.” The statement recites that this situation constitutes a “public emergency,” hence that Israel has “found it necessary” to take measures “for the defence of the State and for the protection of life and property, including the exercise of powers of arrest and detention.”¹²

In 1999, the state of emergency was challenged before the Supreme Court of Israel by Israelis who said it was no longer necessary, and that it led to violation of human rights by the government. In 2012, however, the Supreme Court upheld the emergency as still being required. Judge Elyakim Rubinstein explained that “Israel is a normal country that is not normal.” It is “not normal,” he clarified, “because the threats to its existence still remain.”¹³

One of the ways that the government of Israel has coped with the perceived threats and with having to prove itself to the international community is to devote considerable attention to portraying their actions and aims in terms that show Israel in a favorable light. This orientation in its diplomacy grew out of a body of diplomatic practice by the Zionist Organization. The story of *hasbara* in Israel's diplomacy begins with the diplomacy of the Zionist Organization.

2

Promises, Promises

For Jews in Europe who wanted territory for a Jewish state, the range of possible strategies was limited. They had no army to take territory. They focused on the states that controlled territory that might potentially serve the purpose. They hoped to convince some sovereign to cede territory. Theodor Herzl, a Viennese journalist, developed contacts with various governments and traveled widely in pursuing this endeavor. “I cling to the hope,” Herzl wrote to the Grand Duke of Baden in 1896, “that the truly high-minded sovereigns of Europe will bestow their gracious protection on the cause.”¹

To have any chance of success, Herzl needed to provide some quid pro quo, or at least a potential quid pro quo. Giving territory for a Jewish state had to be in the interest of a sovereign.

Herzl explored a number of possible sites but early on focused on Palestine, then part of the sprawling Turkish empire in the Middle East. He approached Turkish officials, offering to buy Palestine. Herzl did not have ready access to the funds that would be necessary, but he hoped to raise cash from wealthy Jews in Europe. Herzl did have some leverage. Turkey was in dire straits, its economy faltering, hence the term “sick man of Europe” that came to be commonly applied. Turkey was heavily in debt to European countries, which had set up a debt administration system to manage repayment by Turkey. Herzl’s idea was to pay off the debt. He planned, as he explained it, “to liberate Turkey from the Debt Control Commission.”² This desperate situation opened the possibility that Sultan Abd al-Hamid might be receptive to the financial assistance Herzl was dangling.

Herzl’s offer was attractive. It got the attention of Turkish officialdom. “The benefits in money and press support which you promise us are very

great,” one Turkish official told Herzl.³ As discussions continued, Herzl came to realize that Turkish officials were not prepared actually to allow the carving out of territory for a Jewish state, so he modified his terminology with them. Even though Herzl did seek an actual state, he stopped calling what he wanted an “independent Jewish state” and instead told them he wanted an “autonomous vassal state” that would be “under the suzerainty of the Sultan.”⁴

Herzl tried one other tack with the Sultan. Herzl suggested that Jews would help prevent an Arab uprising against the Empire.⁵ Throughout Turkey's Arab territories, the population was chafing against Turkish rule. So this offer too was potentially attractive to the Turkish government. Jews would help the Sultan keep the Arabs quiet. Just how they would do that was not clear. Herzl had trouble selling the idea. Turkish officials were skeptical just what a population of Jews could do. Herzl never succeeded in convincing them that a Jewish population could curb an Arab uprising. The Sultan was unimpressed by the argument.

To make matters worse for his scheme for gaining territory from the Sultan, Herzl encountered difficulties on the financial front. He was promising vast sums of money to the Sultan, but without knowing if he could get it. In 1896 Herzl approached two wealthy financiers, Baron Maurice de Hirsch and Baron Edmond de Rothschild, asking for funds to bail Turkey out of its debt as a way of acquiring territory for a Jewish state. These two men had funded colonies to settle Russian Jews in Argentina and Palestine from the early 1880s. A Russian organization called Lovers of Zion promoted settlement outside Russia, in reaction to longtime discrimination against Jews in Russia. Jews were restricted both as to area of residence and as to occupation. The situation of Jews deteriorated after the 1881 assassination of the relatively liberal Tsar Alexander II. The new tsar, Alexander III, tightened restrictions on Jews. At that period as well, organized assaults (pogroms) were carried out against Jews in Russia.

The two financiers had been willing to provide financing for Jewish colonies, but neither took to Herzl's scheme of buying territory. They declined to commit funds. Despite this setback, and with only slim hope of acquiring the necessary funds, Herzl went on visiting Constantinople and promising funding to Turkey, whose officials did not realize Herzl might not have money behind him.⁶

Herzl was in any event making little headway. With his idea of buying territory producing no results, Herzl saw a need for a public-participation organization to agitate for a Jewish state. If he had a base of public support, Herzl surmised, he might be better able to make the case for a Jewish

state. He wrote a small book to explain his concept. Published in German and in English, its title was *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*. A founding congress was held in Basle, Switzerland, in 1897. It sent a message of greeting to Sultan Abd al-Hamid. From this conference was born the Zionist Organization. The name, taken from Mount Zion in Jerusalem, indicated which territory was contemplated for a Jewish state. The Russians who were already promoting settlement called themselves Lovers of Zion.

A BOON TO GERMANY AND TO EUROPE

Seeking a new way of approaching the Sultan, Herzl hit on the idea of enlisting one or another European government to lobby the Sultan on his behalf. He would try to convince them that a Jewish state in Palestine would benefit them. Germany figured most centrally in Herzl's thinking because it held influence in Constantinople. Kaiser Wilhelm II was keen on Germany pursuing economic penetration in Turkey, and German industrialists were already actively involved in his project.⁷ Herzl approached Philipp Eulenburg, a German diplomat and a confidante of the Kaiser. Herzl asked Eulenburg to arrange a meeting for Herzl with Kaiser Wilhelm. To Eulenburg, Herzl stressed the importance such a meeting could have. "One word from the Kaiser," Herzl wrote to Eulenburg in a letter of September 21, 1898, "can have the greatest consequences for the shaping of things in the Orient." To Eulenburg, Herzl listed five points to show that a Jewish state in Palestine would benefit both the Turkish Empire and Europe.

First on Herzl's list was "The relief for the internal situation of the different countries if those parts of the Jewish population that are considered superfluous are diverted. At present they are supplying the revolutionary parties with leaders and lieutenants." Jews were prominent in antimonarchist and socialist movements. If they left for Palestine, Europe's monarchs would be secure.

Second, Herzl averred, the "drainage" of Jews from Europe would eventually "come to a standstill along with anti-Semitism itself." European governments would no longer have to cope with anti-Semitism. "For the stimulus to emigrate, which, as it is, is lacking or only slight in the upper economic strata, would then be eliminated." So the Jews who would leave for Palestine would be the poor Jews, and with anti-Semitism diminished the wealthy Jews would be more secure in Europe.

Third, Herzl focused on what he said were advantages that would flow to the Turkish empire. "For Turkey," he wrote, "the influx of an intelligent,

economically energetic national element would mean an unmistakable strengthening.” Financial benefits would flow: “Turkey would have direct benefits (a large payment of money on our part, and possibly a further improvement of her finances) as well as indirect benefits, through the general increase in commerce.”

Fourth, “[t]he return of even the semi-Asiatic Jews under the leadership of thoroughly modern persons must undoubtedly mean the restoration to health of this neglected corner of the Orient. Civilization and order would be brought there. Thus the migration of the Jews would eventually be an effective protection of the Christians in the Orient.” European powers had long shown concern about the status of Christians in the Turkish Empire. The Jews would be a counterweight against the Muslims, with resultant benefit to the Christians.

Fifth, Herzl turned to transportation. “The needs of all of non-Russian Europe call for the creation of a direct Southern route to Asia: that is, a railroad from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. The Jews could and must build this great road of the nations, which, if undertaken differently might call forth the most serious rivalries.”⁸ A possible rail connection to the region, extending east to Baghdad, had been on the agenda of European governments for some time. The Sultan too was interested, because rail lines could move troops quickly if needed to suppress unrest in the Empire’s Arab territories.⁹ Herzl was promising Jewish help in the construction.

Herzl prepared a letter for the Kaiser, in which he elaborated on how Zionism would benefit Turkey economically. Herzl was giving the Kaiser arguments that Herzl hoped the Kaiser would use with the Sultan. “We are honestly convinced,” Herzl wrote, “that the implementation of the Zionist plan must mean welfare for Turkey as well. Energies and material resources will be brought to the country; a magnificent fructification of desolate areas may easily be foreseen; and from all this there will arise more happiness and more culture for many human beings. We are planning to establish a Jewish Land-Company for Syria and Palestine, which is to undertake the great project, and request the protection of the German Kaiser for this company.”¹⁰ Herzl met the Kaiser in 1898 while the Kaiser was visiting Jerusalem. The encounter ended with no commitment on Germany’s side. The Kaiser did raise the issue with the Sultan but with little result.

Even though his promises were making no dent with Turkish officials, Herzl kept up his efforts. Herzl visited the Sultan in 1901 and renewed his offer to find funds to pay off the debt the Turkish empire owed in Europe.