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From *Hasbara* (Public Diplomacy) to Influence in the Gaza War

David Siman-Tov, Vera Michlin-Shapir, and Ofer Fridman¹ | No. 1783 | November 8, 2023

The Gaza war that began after the murderous Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 in the western Negev is also a war in international public opinion. Although at the start of the war, due to the brutality of the attack, Israel received broad public sympathy, now it appears that Hamas is perceived as a victim that enjoys the decided advantage in the struggle for public sympathy in the international arena. One of the explanations for the Hamas success is that unlike Israel, which tries to justify itself to the world, Hamas clings to the Palestinian narrative that addresses emotions, and adjusts it to what its target audiences want to hear. In this war, Israel must complete a conceptual transition from traditional Israeli *hasbara* (public diplomacy), which is based on explanation, to influence. Otherwise, Israel will find it hard to obtain understanding and sympathy for its narrative among large sections of the public or persuade them to identify with its struggle and its objectives.

Hamas terrorists documented in great detail the slaughter they carried out in the western Negev villages. Pictures and accounts of the horrors, which led to displays of support for Hamas – both in the Gaza Strip and in the Arab and Muslim world – swayed international sympathy toward Israel. Many parts of the Western societies, which previously accepted the Palestinian narrative, were shocked by the cruelty of the Hamas terrorists and the Gaza residents who joined in the killing and looting spree, and expressed public support for Israel’s right to defend itself. However, once the military initiative moved to the Israeli side, Israeli *hasbara* was forced, as succinctly put by a senior BBC reporter, to fight against “pictures of thousands of Palestinian civilians going through absolute misery and hell” (November 2, 2023). This challenge was particularly difficult for Israel’s *hasbara* efforts, and was evidenced by a change in the map of support for Israel. This change was also reflected in the UN resolution that called for a ceasefire without even mentioning the Hamas massacre that caused the outbreak of war.

¹ Lt. Col. (res.) David Siman-Tov is a senior research fellow at INSS.

Dr. Vera Michlin-Shapir is the Director of Education at Symposium Institute for Strategic Communication. She was previously a researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Strategic Communication at King's College London. From 2010 to 2016 Dr. Michlin-Shapir worked at the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office., and from 2016 to 2020 was a research fellow at INSS.

Dr. Ofer Fridman is a senior lecturer at King's College University.

In spite of the severe criticism, Israel's *hasbara* efforts have improved significantly in the course of the war. Hundreds of civilian organizations, influencers, and ordinary citizens have taken to social media to share the terrible sights and events of October 7 with the international public. IDF Spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari became a leading source of reliable reports to the public in Israel and worldwide, and he provides effective information and explanations about developments in his regular briefings and on his website, which includes numerous videos from the battlefield in the Gaza Strip as well as intelligence that supports the Israeli version of the background to the war and the objectives that Israel wishes to achieve. In addition, since his return to the National Public Diplomacy Directorate in the Prime Minister's Office, interviews given by Amb. Mark Regev to the international media have contributed a great deal to explaining Israel's response and actions in Gaza.

Nevertheless, in spite of the dedicated efforts of those engaged in the Israeli *hasbara* system (government and civilian), most are not focused on influence. An illustration of the difference between *hasbara* and "influence" can be found in the field of cinema. While feature films and documentaries share some characteristics, there are three important differences between them. First, unlike documentaries whose purpose is to explain or educate (and occasionally generate emotions), the main purpose of feature films is to tell a story. Second, unlike documentaries that are usually structured in a journalistic style, feature films focus on the narrative, developing characters and fostering emotional attachment to the characters. Finally, unlike documentaries whose aim is to persuade the audience by presenting facts, feature films influence their viewers by presenting well-defined characters, plot lines, conflicts, and resolutions in a way that arouses identification among viewers and lets them form their own opinion about the events.

Like documentaries, *hasbara* seeks to explain and educate by presenting an accurate account of events. Like documentaries, it is driven by the wish to present facts – in this case, about Israel (or about its enemies) – and strive to bring the truth to the global public. Like many documentaries, *hasbara* assumes that everyone should watch it, although in fact people hardly ever watch documentaries.

One of the problems is that Israeli *hasbara* is barely interested in its viewers. Like a good documentary, it focuses on "how" to convey the message that Israel wants people to hear, instead of focusing on "why" people may wish to hear what Israel has to say. The reality is that the majority of international audiences is not interested in Israel and its conflict with Hamas or the Palestinian issue in general. First, people are primarily concerned about domestic developments in politics, economics, security, and so on. Second, with regard to international news, horrific events in Israel compete with atrocities in Ukraine (including murders of civilians, kidnapping of children, and whole populations under rocket fire) and tragic events in Sudan, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. In the West, the problem is even greater, since the pro-Palestinian narrative is integrated within the postcolonial narrative, which is the dominant narrative in political and academic discourse. Israeli *hasbara* cannot change this situation, however right it is or however loud it shouts; being a documentary, it is not made for this.

Thus Israel's struggle against Hamas for international support is an asymmetrical struggle. While Israel is engaged in efforts to explain itself and educate international audiences, Hamas integrates its narratives into the general story of the Palestinian people with which audiences identify. While Israel produces an excellent documentary film, the Palestinians direct a mediocre feature film, with which even a murderous organization manages to influence large numbers of viewers. An example of this difference is the explosion at the al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza, for which Israel was originally blamed. Although one side lied and the other told the truth, both sides see themselves as winners in this case. For its part, Israel won points after proving what actually happened and therefore in the future Israeli *hasbara* may be treated as a more credible source. However, Hamas's lie fitted neatly into the narrative woven by the organization and continues to serve the general story about the suffering of the civilian population Gaza at the hands of what it calls the "Zionist colonialists."

In order to balance the equation in this struggle, Israel with all its professional mechanisms (from government ministries and the IDF to civilian groups) must move from the concept of *hasbara* to the concept of influence. While it is true that in some parts of the security establishment there are organizations that aim to create influence, the overall approach still seems to be the explanatory (*hasbara*) approach that was used in previous wars. Israel must change from trying to explain and justify itself to international audiences, to an approach that strives to create a multilayered dialogue with those audiences. It must transition from explanation that reacts to events, to proactive influence that shapes its own narrative line, with well-defined characters and a general storyline that connects with the existing cognitive, conceptual, and linguistic frameworks of specific target audiences. In other words, Israel must understand that being right is not enough to get people to listen; it must understand its target audiences, telling them a clear and interesting story with which they can identify.

The first signs of this change were already visible in the past few weeks. For example, drawing parallels between Hamas and ISIS was a successful attempt to create a new plot line that defines the enemy in a way that resonates with many Western audiences. However, without a suitable concept of influence, Israeli *hasbara* missed the opportunity, and the Hamas-ISIS narrative was not sufficiently developed to realize its full potential. In order to develop a plot, it was necessary to connect with the intellectual and emotional aspects of the target audiences and shape a perception in which revulsion against ISIS and its deeds isolates Hamas from the Palestinian story and creates revulsion against it. For example, it was possible to show the ideological link between the organizations with expert analysis and comparison of documents or speeches from their leaders. It was also possible to show that both organizations use similar methods, using archive videos of executions and ISIS fighters entering towns on pickup trucks and slaughtering civilians (like Hamas did).

The current war follows an erroneous political, intelligence, and operational conception. The statement that "what was will not be" has become the slogan of the need for political, security, and above all conceptual changes. These changes must include a move from the concept of "*hasbara*" to "influence," without which – i.e., without the ability to tell a story that resonates with the viewers and creates

identification among wider parts of the international audiences – Israel will struggle to achieve its goals. No matter how well designed, vociferous, and justified, Israel's hasbara efforts will be, their ability to shift the perceptions of target audiences and to influence them will remain very limited.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen