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Winning the Battle of the Narrative

A Working Paper for the 2010 Herzliya Conference

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The following document summarizes the main issues and the arising conclusions that were deliberated at the preliminary discussion. The document does not detail all that was discussed and therefore is not binding upon the participants or the Conference's management.

Winning the Battle of the Narrative

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Background and Purpose

Israel's international standing is in dire straits, as the legitimacy of its policies, positions, military operations, and even its very existence as a Jewish-Democratic state, are constantly contested and, as some claim, its legitimacy abroad is being eroded. Clearly, Israel's national interests are severely constrained by its incapability to create, mobilize and sustain international support. Israel has a good story, but it must better engage itself in the "battle of the narrative" in order to be able to push its national interests and attain its operational objectives.

The Institute for Policy and Strategy, as part of the preparatory process for its flagship event – The Herzliya Conference – took upon itself to lead an expert roundtable meeting with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, to commence the debate by analysing current strategies and charting directions for future policies. Preceding the Herzliya Conference, the purpose of the working group is to lay the foundations for two sessions at the 2010 Conference, opening the discussion to the public. The first session will discuss the need for strategic communication for Israel. The second session will focus on methods for channelling Israel's messages to international audiences, including the use of new media.

Executive Summary

The forum exhibited differences of opinion on several issues, revealing a growing body of discourse between the official authority and major NGOs over the right path for Israel's strategic communication.

- The differences among the roundtable participants lie at the very basic political issue – while some think that a political agreement with the Palestinians will stop the attacks on Israel on the international arena, others believe that the anti-Israeli campaign will continue regardless.
- The content of Israel's messages was a particularly contested point. The current prevailing branding strategy of the Israeli Government, drawing away from conflict-related issues and focusing on repositioning and branding Israel, met disagreement from some participants. Oppositionists underlined that the strategy is unlikely to achieve political ends.
- Some participants believe in the potential power of engaging parts of Western societies currently unengaged with the Israeli-Palestinian issue, others strongly underlined the need to target specific audiences abroad, first and foremost the political elites.
- The use of the new media and internet-based outlets as a platform for Israel's strategic communication was another point of disagreement. Those in favour highlighted the benefits of its rapid development and the fact that it requires very little financial investment. Those who opposed the use of new media insisted that the traditional media is still the main channel for forming people's opinions on foreign policy issues.
- The debate manifested that the Israeli government is rather content with allowing a multiple-strategy approach, which for some appears to be an attempt to conceal the lack of decision regarding grand-strategy and the lack of commitment to principles of strategic communication. Most NGOs support a stricter approach to constructing Israel's strategic communication

Main Findings:

1. 'Getting the Message' of Strategic Communication

Strategic communication, as borrowed from the business world, is parallel to the traditional Israeli HASBARA. However, in contrast to HASBARA, strategic communication proposes systematic planning of communication. Strategic communication is a broad term which advocates, at minimum, the conveying of coordinated messages across different agencies. More importantly strategic communication strives for the establishment of an overarching, long-term approach, which takes account of aspects, such as the impact of the environment, information flow, available resources and image care.

Participants at the meeting pointed out the shortcomings in Israel's strategic communication. Although Israeli authorities identify communications as a crucial arena for engagement with Israel's opponents and for the furthering of its national interests, strategic communication is not usually integrated into the political decision-making process and is generally marginalized. Likewise intelligence, which can be used as a tool in fighting the war of information, is not readily available to the relevant authorities. Furthermore, Israel did not attune its response to the changing nature of the attacks, nor did it fashion a cause which would mobilize people around the world in its favour. Threats are no longer primarily military, but a resistance movement organised according to political logic. Organised in ideological hubs, its method of choice is political delegitimization.

2. Israel, the Conflict and the International Community

The differences among the roundtable participants lie at the very basic political issue – what is the role of the conflict with the Palestinians in Israel's relations with, and image in, the international community?

A view, pervasive in some groups in Israeli society and among many abroad, and likewise shared by some of the participants at the meeting, presents a simple equation: Israel's troubled international position is a direct result of the conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab World. Israel's questionable human rights record undermines its attempts in drawing support from Western Europe and from some audiences in the US. The logic follows that once Israel will reach political agreement with the Palestinians, the assault on Israel within the international arena will cease.

Opponents of this view observe a wider scheme of challenges, which are not directly and primarily nested in the conflict. According to this view, the conflict is only one dimension in a multi-faceted and well-coordinated attack launched by anti-Israeli elements, some of which are pro-Palestinian organizations, while others have a broader anti-Israel agenda. The end of the conflict with the Palestinians will not ensure the stop of such attacks on Israel and may only bring about their spill-over into other policy areas, e.g. the Jewish character of Israel is expected to be targeted and delegitimized.

In fact, the two views may not conflict, but rather each relates to a different form of criticism directed at Israel. While 'soft critics' of Israel's policies, who in essence do not oppose Israel's right to exist and are primarily concerned with its policies, are likely to stop their activities once Israel reaches a political settlement, other 'hard core' critics most certainly will remain as vocal and obstructive as they are today, regardless of any changes in Israel's policies. In that respect, identifying the target-groups is key.

3. Identifying the Target-Group

The first and most crucial step towards successfully communicating ideas is accurately identifying target-groups and tailoring the messages to different audiences.

The participants of the roundtable meeting emphasised the interaction between public opinion and policy-making. Whilst foreign policy decision-making includes a closed circle of people, usually consistent of the very elite of each society (politicians, advisors and renowned academics included), public opinion and atmosphere still matter. The

political elites in Europe and in the US are much more tolerant towards Israel's policies than the wider public in those same countries; however, the public's mood and the media's coverage (especially in the UK) determine the government's leeway to pursue a pro-Israeli foreign policy agenda. It has also been noted that the political elite in the West has become more sensitive to the mounting anti-Israeli public opinion, often peddled by immigrant Muslim communities in the West.

The BrandAsset Valuator, which provides information to firms to manage their brands better, and to which Israel was added in 2003 as a brand, reveals interesting indicators regarding public opinion on the brand of Israel. According to BAV, Israel correlates with the terms daring and independent, but not fun or creative, which represent the relationship-building elements of a brand. Unsurprisingly BAV shows that Israel polls less favourably among Europeans, while Americans are more favourable to Israel. American Democrats tend to correspond with European polling results.

Opinion polls also show that in many Western countries more than 50% of the surveyed population is disengaged from the topic and did not form an opinion on Israel, leading some to the conclusion that Israel can engage the unengaged. Yet others noted that the audiences unengaged with foreign policy issues often do not have any impact on decision-making in their respective countries.

4. Crafting the Message and Content Choice

Narratives of victimhood and survival, adopted by Israel over the years, are no longer relevant for its diplomatic efforts and dialogue with the West. Nowadays Israel's opponents capitalise on using the same narratives to achieve and mobilize support. Mass media, the main vehicle for shaping public opinion, is an inherently problematic medium for putting across Israel's message. Heavily based on images, it often plays into the hands of Israel's opponents. Asymmetric warfare, in terms of media exposure, allows weaker parties certain advantages when faced with a camera-lens, such as the well-known images of Palestinian children 'fighting' Israeli tanks.

'Creative Energy' is the official Israeli Government concept of branding and repositioning Israel on the international arena, which steps outside the traditional boundaries of HASBARA. This country-positioning and branding approach, advocated by some of the participants at the meeting, attempts to reframe the debate by diverging it from the 'crisis-management' approach. Creative Energy repositions Israel away from an image of a country in a state of war and conflict to a brand which represents positive values and ideals like 'building the future', 'vibrant diversity' and 'entrepreneurial zeal'.

Studies show that Creative Energy has been proven an apt common denominator by most Israelis and can be translated into: hi-tech and science, environment, lifestyle and culture – all positive brand essences and relationship-building values. Creative Energy communicates specifically well to the unengaged audience in the West, corresponding to their preferences and interests. It shifts the weight from what Israel wants to say to what audiences abroad are interested in consuming. Most importantly, it bypasses Israel's disadvantages, rooted at the prejudices of mass media coverage of asymmetric conflicts, and allows Israel to capitalise on its strengths – its strong economy, vibrant society and lifestyle and culture. It has been noted that this strategy is not meant to be a substitute for Israel's other efforts of public diplomacy, but to diversify its policies and to offer a long-term overarching concept for Israel's positioning in the International arena. Moreover, constantly addressing conflict-related issues, especially to unengaged audiences, does more harm than good.

Creative Energy was met with strong opposition from several directions by those who conferred that not only can Israel's image be dealt with by addressing indispensable issues, such as the conflict, but rather when crafted properly such efforts can be successful. Those who oppose Creative Energy determined that they failed to master the essentials of successful branding i.e. to devise an image that reflects the "product" and to find strategies to promote it. It has been said that Israel's position remains defensive and apologetic, looking for what others want to hear and not for what Israel wishes them to hear.

Others declared that Creative Energy will simply not best serve Israel's ends. Foreign policy decision-makers consider branding a distraction at best and indecorous at worst. The strategy will not influence the influential elite, hence it is unlikely that it will serve the purpose of changing Western government's foreign policy towards Israel or that it will allow the Israeli government greater political manoeuvrability to execute its policies on the domestic and international arenas.

Finding political messages that work, according to the supporters of these views, is easier than what is commonly perceived. People respond well when addressed in a familiar language that uses well-known terms and are susceptible to simple, repetitive consistent messages. The various government agencies will have to coordinate their messages when they address audiences abroad. However, others pointed out that since Israel is a liberal democratic society, the messages conveyed by the said governmental agencies are often confusing and contradicting.

Messages which are ends-oriented are usually more successful. As much as people are responsive to Palestinian and Hezbollah messages on 'resistance', they are also responsive to the simple notion that 'Israel wants peace'. Messages which underline Israel's good work towards peace are more likely to be well received abroad. Notwithstanding, it has been noted that in order for such messages to work they have to correspond with Israel's policies.

In view of the debate, some participants underlined that the strategies do not necessarily contradict each other and can be in fact used to compliment each other. Israel should communicate the correct messages regarding its part in the conflict and its right for self-defence; however, at the same time Israel can communicate messages of normalcy thereby attracting those who seek lifestyle, tourism and investment. Since there is no formula to fit all purposes, Israel can communicate strategies concurrently.

Aside of disagreements over content choice, the language used should also be relevant to specific audiences. Terms used by Israelis like "The War on Terror" or the "Axis of Evil" repel European audiences and the Democrats in the US, where Israel's deficiency in support is greatest. Israel has to readapt to the language of international legitimacy, which has been almost unilaterally abandoned by the Israeli authorities, surrendering it to the Arabs, since it is most relevant to the international audiences and to Western elites.

5. Relationship-building and informal diplomacy

Creating real-life bonds and relationships is an irreplaceable mean for gaining people's support. Several participants pointed out that audiences are especially sensitive to their social and political association and thus often stay clear of associating with a country with troubled policies. To create and mobilize support, one must point to convergent morals and similar values. In that sense, messages should be coupled with examples of similar compatible values of Israel with the West. Gaining the trust of members of Western elites and thus strengthening their association with Israel can influence Israel's image very favourably.

Participants noted that introducing people to daily life in Israel has been very successful in gaining their support; spending a night out in Tel-Aviv or taking part in a tour of Herzliya proved to be the best way for foreigners to understand and relate to Israel.

6. Tools and Vehicles for 'Getting the Message Out'

The new media, which includes internet based news-outlets, social networks, blogging and mini-blogging communities, has become increasingly important for channelling messages and mobilising public opinion. The penetration of the new media is reflected in the attention it receives from political and commercial actors.

The new media poses a series of challenges to the official Israeli communication planner. Widely used by pro-Palestinian organisations, and a vehicle for informal communication, it is not the easiest fit for the Israeli Government. Non-governmental, radical and anti-Israeli organisations acting as middlemen for the Palestinian cause use the internet to spread political messages and to recruit support. On the web, small groups of people who are often

marginal, i.e. ideological hubs, can generate political support through networks which "multiply" these messages. However, government and official publications on the web are disregarded and viewed as propaganda. Yet successful web-based political campaigns demonstrate that the new media has great advantages, such as creating positive resonance and reaching wide audiences while using very limited resources. For example, Queen Rania of Jordan runs a very successful web-based campaign featuring a YouTube channel which deals with the very sensitive issues of Woman and Islam in order to improve the image of the Muslim religion in the West.

The Israeli government, according to the proponents of the new media, will have to adapt to new rules – generating and distributing content, but not having full control over it. In fact, in order to succeed online one has to detach oneself from strictly official messages and to develop an online "personality". Furthermore, one also cannot expect to control the content of all outgoing messages. Since the new media is a free enterprise, it can only be used when outsourced. The Israeli Government cannot do this alone; the use of NGOs and academic institutions is crucial for Israel's online success. During operation Cast Lead, for example, the IDC Herzliya operated a Twitter page.

The success and effectiveness of the new media can be seen over in the long-term time and, most importantly, New Media Operations Centers. The centers should have content-monitoring units, distribution units (alert to the dynamics of search engine optimization and that understand automatic gatekeepers), in addition to units that can manage social networks and develop an outreach to professional journalists' social networks. Such operation centres were used during the last US Presidential campaign.

Some participants noted that new media's importance should not be over estimated. Although the trajectory of media development points towards the internet and new media, polls show that most people still receive news from the conventional news outlets: BBC, CNN, Fox News and the leading local newspaper. In order to impact today's opinion-makers, working vis-à-vis conventional media is still the chief objective.

7. Optimising Available Resources and Setting Priorities

Considering the magnitude of the attacks on Israel, the resources available for Israel's diplomatic efforts are scarce. This fact was reflected in the debate on both the content choice for Israel's diplomacy and on the appropriate choice of tools for channelling the messages. The steps required for optimising Israel's resources are:

- The debate manifested that the Israeli government is rather content with allowing a multiple-strategy approach, which for some appears to be an attempt to conceal the lack of decision regarding grand-strategy and the lack of commitment to principles of strategic communication.
- Taking account of the resources available in setting policy priorities is crucial to long-term strategic planning. Tailoring messages addressed to targeted audiences and ideological hubs must not come at the expense of striving towards a comprehensive approach to Israel's strategic communication. Choosing multiple strategies may diversify Israel's efforts but may also hinder its cause by spreading too thinly its already limited resources.
- Prioritising the optimal strategies and channels of operation stands at the very basis of the debate and is key in improving Israel's international standing. Israel's strategies will have to be prioritized according to their effectiveness and to reflect the resources available for the tasks.