

Israel Cranks Up the PR Machine

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It's deploying all its resources to fight the growing world movement against the occupation.

In the post-Oslo era, as the strategy that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's inner circle refers to as "peace without peace" captured the Israeli consensus, human rights activists ratcheted up grassroots efforts to challenge the occupation of Palestine and Israel's prevailing structure of ethno-religious discrimination. Popularly known as BDS, the movement to boycott, divest from and sanction Israeli institutions involved in occupation has generated shock waves in international pro-Israel circles and within the top levels of Israel's military-intelligence apparatus. The government-linked Reut Institute has designated BDS as a key national security threat and produced a blueprint for sabotaging Palestine solidarity networks around the world.

While paranoia mounts inside Israeli policy circles about the rising tide of nonviolent global resistance, Netanyahu has grown obsessed with Israel's withering image in the West. Under his guidance, the term "delegitimization" has become a household word signifying BDS and nearly everything done in the name of exposing Israel's violations of international law. And thanks to Netanyahu's instigation, Barack Obama has become the first American president to explicitly pledge to battle the pressure campaign.

Groping for a convenient solution to its public relations problems, the Israeli government has turned to hasbara. The literal meaning of this Hebrew word is "explanation," but when put into practice, most informed observers recognize it as propaganda. The more the State of Israel relies on force to manage the occupation, the more it feels compelled to deploy hasbara. And the more Western media consumers encounter hasbara, the more likely they are to measure Israel's grandiose talking points against the routine and petty violence, shocking acts of humiliation and repression that define its treatment of the Palestinians.

Under the leadership of Netanyahu—a professional explainer himself, who spent the early years of his political career as a frequent guest on prime-time American news programs perfecting the slickness of the Beltway pundit class—the Israeli government has invested unprecedented resources into hasbara. Once the sole responsibility of the foreign ministry, the task of disseminating hasbara now falls on a special Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, led until 2013 by Yuli Edelstein, a right-wing settler and government minister who has called Arabs a "despicable nation." (Edelstein is now speaker of the Knesset.)

Edelstein's ministry boasts an advanced "situation room," a paid media team, and coordination of a volunteer force that claims to include thousands of bloggers, tweeters and Facebook commenters who are fed the latest talking points and then flood social media with hasbara in five languages. The exploits of the propaganda soldiers conscripted into Israel's online army have helped give rise to the phenomenon of the "hasbara troll," an often faceless, shrill and relentless nuisance deployed on Twitter and Facebook to harass public figures who express skepticism about official Israeli policy or sympathy for the Palestinians. These efforts have been complemented by the office of the prime

minister, the IDF spokesperson's unit, and the ministry of tourism and culture, each of which hosts newly created hasbara units. Even the Jewish Agency, a state-funded para-governmental organization primarily engaged in absorbing and settling new Jewish immigrants, employs a full-time social media operative named Avi Mayer, who spends his days on Twitter attacking Palestine solidarity activists with usually baseless claims of anti-Semitism and deception.

Whether they like it or not, every Jewish Israeli citizen is a potential recruit for the national hasbara brigade. While Tel Aviv University sends hasbara delegations to campuses across Europe and the United States, the National Union of Israeli Students offers Israeli college students \$2,000 to spread propaganda "from the comfort of home." El Al Airlines deploys its flight attendants in American cities to make the case for Israel during specially allotted paid vacation days. Meanwhile, back at Ben Gurion International Airport, large billboards posted by the Ministry of Public Diplomacy instruct Israelis to "be good diplomats" when they travel abroad. By corralling an entire population into promoting Israel as "the only democracy in the Middle East," the state strengthens a culture that treats dissent and critical inquiry with instinctive hostility.

Watch: *Israel's New Racism*, Max Blumenthal and David Sheen's documentary video uncovering the persecution of African Migrants in the holy land:

<http://www.thenation.com/article/176703/israel-cranks-pr-machine?page=0,0>

In 2005, the American reality TV program *The Apprentice* reappeared in Israel as *The Ambassador*, a hit show featuring hundreds of Israeli citizens engaging in heated hasbara competitions before a national audience and a panel of judges that included top army generals and journalists. At stake were cash prizes, a chance to speak in international parliaments and the adulation of their fellow citizens. At a 2010 conference of liberal intellectuals in Herzliya sponsored by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the think tank of the German Green Party, I encountered the winner of the second season of *The Ambassador*. She was pretty in a classically telegenic way, slender and extremely poised. The 30-year-old woman in a gray pantsuit was Melody Sucharewicz, but to many Israelis who viewed her as a celebrity, she was simply known as "Melody." Since her victory, Sucharewicz has spoken about Israel's "quest for peace" at the United Nations and secured a plum position at the Peres Center for Peace.

During a question-and-answer session at the conference, Sucharewicz leapt to defend Israel against even mild criticism from various panelists, including the renowned Israeli historian Tom Segev. For five minutes she delivered a breathless, semi-coherent rant, as though she were in a contest to spin as many current events in Israel's favor as possible. Finally, the moderator asked Sucharewicz to conclude her remarks with a question. "Of course you want me to stop talking," she snapped at him. "You will never let a woman speak long enough to express herself." Having shamed the moderator into submission, Sucharewicz plowed ahead for five more minutes of hasbara.

When I interviewed her in the hallway afterward, I found her unflappable. To my question about the wave of anti-democratic laws flooding the Knesset, she responded, "Israel is not perfect. They can only strive to be more perfect.... I wouldn't go as far as saying there is pure discrimination." On issues ranging from civilian casualties in the 2008-09 attack on Gaza (Operation Cast Lead) to the

bulldozing of Bedouin villages in Israel's Negev region, Sucharewicz always returned to one point: Israel is not perfect, but it is constantly improving.

The same year that The Ambassador hit Israeli airwaves, the government focused on rebranding Israel as a cosmopolitan, technologically advanced party playground for Western visitors, especially sex-hungry, upwardly mobile men between 18 and 35. A series of edgy commercials promoting tourism highlighted the new Brand Israel campaign. The first of the ads, released in 2006, depicted two randy young men sitting shirtless on the Tel Aviv beach while a parade of scantily clad Israeli women appear before them:

Man #1 (staring at a nubile young woman rubbing lotion on her thighs): Holy shit, man!

Man #2: Holy fuck!

Man #1 (glancing at the bouncing breasts of a bikini-clad blonde jogging in his direction): Holy Jesus! Oh! Come to papa!

A brunette bikini model drops a paddle ball near the men and gives them a sultry look.

Man #1 (overcome with passion): Ooooooh!

Slogan appears on-screen: "Israel: No Wonder They Call It the Holy Land."

With \$90 million from the municipality of Tel Aviv to promote the city as a gay paradise, and with free trips provided by the tourism ministry for gay Israelis willing to "conduct public diplomacy activities abroad," the Brand Israel campaign has increasingly centered on what many international gay activists call "pinkwashing," or using the country's relatively progressive gay rights record to conceal its human rights abuses. The campaign has included sending openly gay Israeli soldiers to speak on college campuses, screening pro-Israel films at gay rights festivals, and even sending a bizarre float into the 2011 San Francisco Gay Pride parade featuring a blow-up doll of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad being sodomized by a nuclear missile.

Among the most aggressive promoters of Israel's supposedly queer-friendly culture was Michael Lucas, one of the world's wealthiest gay porn producers. A fervent supporter of Israeli airstrikes on Iran and a vehement Islamophobe ("I hate Muslims absolutely"), Lucas leveraged his fortune to found a company promoting gay tourism to Israel. "I find it absolutely maddening that gay people, who are the number one target of Islam, are so ignorant of the facts," he told an interviewer from the far-right US journal FrontPage Magazine. "They are romanticizing the same Palestinians that hang gay people on cranes, but demonizing Israel, which is a safe haven for gay people." Lucas's most heavily promoted porno film, *Men of Israel*, which became a vehicle for his gay tours, featured two actors having sex inside a Palestinian village that was ethnically cleansed by Zionist militias in 1948.

Incorrectly claiming that the village had been depopulated hundreds of years before, Lucas wrote in a press release, "We went to an abandoned village just north of Jerusalem. It was a beautiful, ancient township that had been deserted centuries ago...however, that did not stop our guys from mounting each other and trying to repopulate it. Biology may not be the lesson of the day, but these men shot their seeds all over the village." After the filming concluded in the "abandoned" village, Lucas and his cast were received by a news crew from Israel's Channel 1, which covered the porn shoot as a boon to Israeli public relations.

In June 2011, when activists around the world convened in Greece for the attempted launch of the second Gaza Freedom Flotilla—one year after the Israeli military attack on the Mavi Marmara that

killed nine activists—the Israeli government released a YouTube video designed to tar the flotilla organizers as homophobes. The video depicted a gay activist who called himself “Marc3Pax” talking about how the organizers had refused to allow him on board because of concerns expressed by their supposed partners among the anti-gay Hamas. Marc3Pax closed the video by warning gay viewers that joining the Palestine solidarity movement meant “getting in bed” with bearded jihadis who hate homosexuals.

Sensing that the video was a hoax, US-based writers Ali Abunimah and Benjamin Doherty of the Palestinian news and opinion website Electronic Intifada quickly unmasked the star of the video as an Israeli actor and nightclub promoter named Omer Gershon. When I investigated the video’s origins, I learned that the first person to promote it on Twitter was a character named “Guy Seemann.” At first, I could not believe that an actual person named Guy Seemann was disseminating a gay hoax video. I soon discovered that Seemann was not only real, but that he was a low-level operative working in the office of Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The Marc3Pax hoax was followed by another dunderheaded and downright weird video designed to undermine the Gaza Freedom Flotilla. Produced by a Tel Aviv-based production company with links to the prime minister’s office, it’s titled “Sex With the Psychologist.” It features an attractive and extremely bothered young woman reacting to Rorschach inkblots displayed by a leering, gray-haired psychologist. As the woman descends into varying stages of agitation, shots of her thighs flash on the screen. “All you want to do is live in peace,” she complains in South African-accented English, “but you keep trying to embarrass her and attack her and harass her.” Her words are interrupted by jarring montages of knives and clashes on the deck of the Mavi Marmara. “Doctor, why are you showing me these pictures?” she protests. “Stop telling me lies and presenting me only one side of the story.... Leave her alone, stop provoking her!... What do you want? For her to disappear off the map?”

The woman was apparently a metaphorical representation of Israel as it wishes to be seen: peaceful, cosmopolitan and erotic, but also traumatized, vulnerable, and driven to neurosis by marauding terrorists and Jew-hating activists—an innocent victim in need of rescue. At the video’s end, the woman storms out of the psychologist’s office and a message appears on-screen: “Don’t support another violent flotilla.”

The lurid hasbara of Brand Israel was directly inspired by corporate PR, and no single figure has devoted more energy at refining its techniques of damage control than Frank Luntz. Luntz earned acclaim—and notoriety—in 1996 when he crafted a memo for Newt Gingrich, the Republican speaker of the House, called “Language: A Key Mechanism of Control.” The memo advised Gingrich to promote the GOP agenda with positive words like “moral,” “lead” and “prosperity,” while hammering Democrats with terms like “abuse of power,” “corrupt” and “intolerant.” Luntz went on to garner lucrative contracts from Enron, ExxonMobil and, most recently, the financial industry, which hired him to help undermine the Occupy Wall Street movement. Luntz’s bestselling vocabulary guide, *Words That Work*, was originally titled *Killer Words*.

Given his history of helping corporate crooks talk their way out of crises, perhaps it was appropriate that Luntz was contracted by the Israel Project, an international pro-Israel activism outfit with ties to the country’s foreign ministry, to craft its official hasbara handbook. In the 116-page guide, fine-tuned for the sensibilities of an audience high on passion and low on information, Luntz outlines strategies for promoting Israel in the media and on campus. Throughout the document, Luntz urges pro-Israel activists to lead attacks on adversaries by “start[ing] with empathy for both sides first.” He advises Israel advocates to feign humility and concern for Palestinian children before opening up a relentless focus on the “Iran-backed Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad.”

In an unusual—and probably unintentional—moment of candor, Luntz warns that if Israel remains in a perpetual state of war with no plan to resolve its crisis, “Americans will not want their government to spend tax dollars or their president’s clout on helping Israel.” To hold off the looming storm, Luntz advises Israel supporters to “remind people—again and again—that Israel wants peace.” For him and professional hasbarists like Sucharewicz, the word “peace” is, of course, nothing more than a rhetorical device.

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While the Israeli government deployed a steady barrage of sophistry and diversionary tactics to guard its image, the military-intelligence apparatus resorted increasingly to repression to silence its internal critics. One of the most effective was Yonatan Shapira, an air force pilot who in September 2003, at the height of the second intifada, organized twenty-seven active-duty and veteran pilots to sign a public letter of refusal to fly any more missions that endangered civilians in the territories. After leaving the military, Shapira joined the BDS movement, incurring the wrath of the Israeli right-wing media as well as a threatening interrogation by the country’s internal security service, the Shin Bet.

In September 2009, Israeli authorities detained Palestinian human rights activist Mohammed Othman when he returned from a trip to Norway, where he had lobbied Norwegian officials to support BDS and the grassroots campaign against Israel’s separation wall. Othman was released months later, but only following a sustained campaign by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to publicize his status as a political prisoner. In December 2009, Israel detained Jamal Juma, a leading member of the Palestinian BDS National Committee, designating him as a dangerous “security prisoner” before releasing him without charges weeks later.

Among the dozens of Israeli activists caught in the Shin Bet’s dragnet was Leehee Rothschild, a 29-year-old human rights activist who was a constant presence at unarmed Palestinian demonstrations against the occupation in the West Bank, and who had recently joined a small group of pro-BDS Israeli activists and academics called Boycott Within. In March 2012, a year after police raided her apartment and rummaged through her belongings, Rothschild was detained by the Shin Bet while returning home from a trip to Europe, during which she had participated in a series of educational BDS events. At Ben Gurion International Airport, she was interrogated by “Shavit,” the director of the Shin Bet’s “extreme left and right department,” who suggested that his agency was listening to her phone calls, reading her e-mails and had bugged her apartment. When she was released, Rothschild wrote, “[Shavit] said that for now, I’ve stayed within the law, but once I broke it, I’d better remember that they are watching me, and that they view me as a leader, so I could be held responsible for leading other people into illegal acts.”

The mounting panic over BDS fed directly into a Knesset effort to criminalize the boycott of Israeli products. In March 2011, a bill was introduced by the Likud Party’s Ze’ev Elkin, a right-wing populist from the party’s cadre of thirty- and fortysomething upstarts, and passed a committee vote, sending it to the Knesset floor for a final vote. The bill represented a streamlined version of a previous proposal that would have punished boycotters with actual jail time, while deporting noncitizens who called for boycotts of Israel in their own country. In its new, diluted form, the bill explicitly punished speech considered harmful to the Jewish state, allowing any Israeli who felt his or her business had been damaged by another Israeli’s call for a boycott—no evidence required—to sue the perpetrator in civil court. The bill read: “It is forbidden to initiate a boycott against the State of Israel, to encourage participation in it or to provide assistance or information in order to promote it.”

Anat Matar was one of the first Israeli citizens to publicly promote a boycott. A professor of

philosophy at Tel Aviv University and the mother of prominent left-wing journalist Hagai Matar, Anat quickly became a hate figure for Knesset right-wingers, who demanded that she be ousted from her tenured academic post. In a speech before Tel Aviv University's 2010 graduation ceremony, the super-hasbara super-lawyer Alan Dershowitz accused Matar and two other pro-BDS Israeli academics, Rachel Giora and Shlomo Sand, of "impos[ing] their ideology on students," and urged "patriotic" students and faculty members to "stand up to propagandizing professors...in appropriate forums outside of the classroom where different rules govern." Matar told me that 250 of her academic colleagues were inspired by Dershowitz to sign a public letter condemning her in vitriolic terms.

Matar told me that despite the mounting intimidation, she was not the real target of the anti-boycott legislation. "If the law passes, it's not only me who gets hurt," she said. "And if I'm fired, that's actually the least important thing. The most important is what will happen with the NGOs like Adalah [the legal center for Arab minority rights], with [the occupation monitoring group] Yesh Din, with B'Tselem. If I'm fired, it's a personal inconvenience—but if that happens, it's much more than a sweeping attack on a lunatic from academia. I really don't know what's going to happen, and I don't see any way out of this."

Max Blumenthal

P.S.

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* Max Blumenthal is an award-winning journalist whose work has appeared in The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, The Daily Beast, The Nation, The Huffington Post, the Independent Film Channel, Salon.com, Al Jazeera English and other publications. He is the author of the bestselling book Republican Gomorrah. His new book, just published, is Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel (Nation Books).