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The Domestic Dimension of Israeli Public Diplomacy

Abstract: The paper adds to the body of recent scholarly literature that emphasizes the role of domestic publics in public diplomacy – a field until recently examined with only minor attention to the domestic realm. It suggests conducting analysis of the domestic dimension of public diplomacy on three levels: individual, organizational, and national. By doing so, we are able to understand in a complex manner the environment from which public diplomacy practice grows, and thus also its specific dynamics. Applying this model of analysis to the case of Israel, the paper describes major domestic factors shaping Israeli public diplomacy: the culture of individual engagement (individual level), the clash of organizational ethea of institutions responsible for public diplomacy (organizational level), and the intertwining of public diplomacy and nation building (national level). The analysis also allows us to better grasp the dilemma faced by Israeli public diplomacy between efficiency and democratic character.

Keywords: *Israel; public diplomacy; Hasbara; divided society; the domestic dimension of public diplomacy*

Introduction

The domestic level of public diplomacy has been a subject of growing importance within the field of public diplomacy. With the increase of the role of non-state actors in international politics, a growing attention has been attributed to them as to the actors shaping state's efforts to improve their image abroad. When looking at the terrain of the domestic level of public diplomacy, we discover that this field is shaped by dramatically different phenomena, from narratives influencing whole nations to specific non-governmental organizations and to individuals engaged with public diplomacy.

This paper takes the domestic dimension of Israeli public diplomacy to examine different aspects of the public dimension of the state's public diplomacy, systematizing its findings. It thus goes beyond the current analysis of the domestic level of public diplomacy. The paper claims that merely considering "domestic" level of public diplomacy is a too

rough grid. It suggests analyzing this dimension of public diplomacy on three subsequent levels – individual, organizational, and national. The individual level considers the extent of engagement of individual actors within public diplomacy; the organizational level focuses on organizations dealing with public diplomacy in the state and their potential multiplicity or even contradictoriness; and the national level allows us to examine major narratives and topics shaping public diplomacy and rendering it specific in comparison to other nations' public diplomacy practices.

The paper is limited in its scope and thus does not claim to be an exhaustive study of the outlined phenomena. It nevertheless suggests an approach that allows for a complex understanding of a public diplomacy's domestic environment, in which certain trends might be contradictory and intertwined in a complicated, dynamic manner. Israeli public diplomacy's domestic level is a vivid one, with a multitude of actors playing varying roles, as the paper suggests. The paper finally points to the one of the dilemmas of contemporary public diplomacy: that between efficiency and democracy. A democratic state naturally has a domestic scene characterized by discussions and disagreements about external representation. Thus, also the engagement of a variety of non-governmental actors has its consequences for public diplomacy. While the state can enjoy the benefits of such engagement, it at the same time loses the control over the coherency of the narrative presented abroad. The Israeli case testifies to this dilemma.

Public diplomacy: Theoretical framework

Within its home field of International Relations, public diplomacy is related to the influential notion of soft power (e.g., Osgood and Etheridge, 2010). The term "soft power" was first coined in 1990 and then further developed by the Harvard scholar Joseph Nye who, within his argumentation as to why the U.S. will remain the only world superpower, besides the military and economic sources of power (which he calls "hard power") points also to the ideational ones. Soft power is defined as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 2004, p. X). Its sources, according to Nye, are culture, values, and foreign policies, which, if attractive, can induce others to follow leadership without coercion.

Public diplomacy is among the tools of soft power enhancement. It is a governmental technique that uses various means such as information campaigns, broadcasts, cultural and educational exchanges etc. to communicate with the audience in a foreign country to gain its sympathies, and potentially also support for the country's foreign policy aims¹. While governmental facilitation is necessary for an activity to be understood as a method of public

¹ For other definitions of public diplomacy see Snow and Taylor 2001; Bátorá 2005; Appel, Irony, Schmerz, Ziv, 2008, et al.

diplomacy, partnership with non-governmental actors is common and desired, as especially the notion of “New Public Diplomacy” suggests (Melissen, 2005).

Literature on public diplomacy is a burgeoning field of study, its growing body mirroring the growing importance of the technique in international relations, and the prominence of the term in political practice. Major scholarly works deal with various public diplomacy methods (Melissen, 2005), its efficiency and evaluation of the success (Gonesh and Melissen, 2005), and its shifting concept in general (Snow and Taylor, 2001). Mostly, the focus has been on what happens on the foreign territory which a public diplomacy enters. This paper, however, focuses on the domestic environment – the realm where the consensus about the need for public diplomacy emerges, and its framework is formed. This dimension of public diplomacy needs to be understood in a complex manner for us to be able to better grasp specific dynamics of each of public diplomacy practices. Nevertheless, I do not consider public diplomacy to be determined, in the rigid sense of the word, by the cultural environment of each of the countries. Such an approach would imply cultural essentialism. Public diplomacy’s practice is an outcome of an interplay of a multitude of factors, from domestic circumstances to the changes in the international environment, media technologies, etc. Moreover, each of these factors is in flux, albeit to a different extent. Let us thus consider this study of domestic dimension of Israeli public diplomacy as being a snapshot in time.

The domestic dimension has traditionally been paid less attention to, but there are some valuable works in this field, too. One of the most substantial research studies conducted on a country’s domestic dimension of public diplomacy is d’Hooghe’s study of China (d’Hooghe 2014). The study aptly characterizes the changing nature of international relations in a way that, especially in the field of public diplomacy, makes the domestic aspect harder to ignore:

“...until recently most scholars and practitioners held the view that public diplomacy concerns reaching out to foreign, as opposed to domestic, publics and that activities that target a domestic audience belong to the domain of public affairs or public relations.... This view, however, seems to be changing. A growing number of public diplomacy scholars argue that the domestic dimension of public diplomacy has developed into a new concept that goes beyond public affairs and that has to be understood within the context of broader changes in diplomacy: the blurring of the border between domestic and international politics; the transformation toward the more network-based public diplomacy model...; and the democratization of foreign policymaking, which leads to a growing need for the participation of domestic stakeholders. As Ellen Huijgh points out, what we traditionally understand as public affairs ignores or minimizes the ‘domestic–international nexus,’ and the concept of domestic outreach ‘surpasses public affairs in stressing the increasingly (inter)active role of domestic citizens in public diplomacy.’ Domestic civil society has become a target as well as an actor in public diplomacy. Domestic outreach strengthens a country’s

national identity, opens new channels of communication, and enhances its public diplomacy capacity.” (d’Hooghe, 2014, p. 32).

Recently, Katarzyna Pisarska has conducted a major research project based on interviews with policy makers. In her book *The Domestic Dimension of Public Diplomacy: Evaluating Success through Civil Engagement* (Pisarska, 2016) she documents the shift that slowly takes place within the official structures, moving public diplomacy from a monologue-based to a more dialogue-based approach and thus ceding more space to civil society actors in this realm.

As another (above quoted) pioneer of the research of the domestic dimension of public diplomacy, Ellen Huijgh (2012) points out, the domestic public comes into the picture both as a passive and an active element. As a passive element, the domestic public is a target of public and cultural diplomacy. Governments present ideas about representation of the country abroad to their citizens, thus gaining legitimacy and support.

As an active element, the domestic public is a discussant of the state’s representation abroad, entering into a dialogue with the government through opinion polls, or active inquiries and advocacy. In this regard, the discussion about public diplomacy may become a discussion about national identity, values, approach towards minorities, etc., as has been illustrated by multiple cases (Paulmann, 2007; Curtis & Jaime, 2012).

Furthermore, domestic actors also sometimes partner up with their government in representational efforts abroad. They may take part in events organized by governmental or diplomatic structures, or vice versa – they may organize a foreign representational activity, requesting governmental involvement. In this regard, non-governmental actors have recently gained a tremendous potential: As Huijgh points out, “scholarship ... has stated that domestic groups of non-state actors can develop similar strategies or counterstrategies [to the government] ... as the key intermediaries between domestic and international politics” (Huijgh, 2012, p. 360). This very idea of network-based, two level public diplomacy in which governments cooperate with domestic non-state actors on the country’s representation abroad is at the very core of the “new public diplomacy” concept. Also, non-governmental actors have more credibility in the eyes of the audience, and access to new audiences (Huijgh, 2012, p. 363).

Domestic level of Israeli public diplomacy

Israeli public diplomacy (in Hebrew “hasbara”) is a prominent topic in Israeli society, and thus also for Israeli scholars. There are several major works in this field. In 2016, Israel’s *Public Diplomacy: The Problems of Hasbara, 1966–1975* by Jonathan Cummings (Cummings, 2016) was published, making a major contribution to an already solid body of literature on Israeli public diplomacy, notably a comprehensive historical account by Meron Medzini (Medzini, 2012), an account of current challenges to Israeli public diplomacy by Raphael D. Harkham

(Harkham, 2015) and the influential critical study by Eytan Gilboa from 2006 (Gilboa, 2006). Additionally, a substantive study from the field of PR by Toledano and McKie called *Public Relations and Nation Building: Influencing Israel* was published in 2013, examining the role of public relations professionals and mass media in the internal as well as external dimension of Israel's nation building. Most recently, Hadari's and Turgeman's article summed up the findings, adding some recommendations for Israel's public diplomacy (Hadari & Turgeman, 2016). Harkham's, Gilboa's, Toledano's and McKie's, and especially Cummings' accounts are detailed examinations of Israel's structures responsible for cultivation of its foreign reputation, tracing trends that have formed it since the establishment of the state until today and carefully evaluating the interplay of the international political context, the domestic situation, and the public diplomacy efforts. Papers on framing of Israel-related topics in international media by Eli Avraham are also a significant contribution to the field (Avraham 2003; Avraham 2009a; Avraham 2009b; Avraham 2015 et. al.).

Building on the previous body of research, this paper systematizes scholarly findings and proposes an examination of Israeli public diplomacy based on the suggested model.

Individual level

The Individual level is that on which opinions, desires, and ambitions of citizens of a state as individuals interact with public diplomacy. The level to which individuals interact with public diplomacy obviously differs in major way from state to state: in more democratic countries, and those countries whose citizens ascribe major importance to their symbolic standing abroad, this is a more important component than in less democratic countries where the shaping of public diplomacy is entirely a matter of state administration, and those that are less concerned with their image.

As for Israel, it was suggested by Cummings that "it is hard to imagine another society in the world that attaches such strong value to the issues of international legitimacy but is so dissatisfied with its record" (Cummings 2016, Loc. 107). According to a benchmark survey conducted in Israel in 2005, 91 % responded that "Israel is not perceived correctly in the world", 90 % of respondents said they believed that "Israel is perceived in the world as being a country mostly afflicted with terror and wars" deeming this evaluation to be unfair and incorrect (Attias, 2012, p. 476).

There is a strong domestic criticism of governmental efforts in the field of public diplomacy. Israeli society has led a long and vivid discussion about its image cultivation abroad and has not refrained from expressing its fierce disapproval towards its leaders. The Jerusalem Post, in an extensive piece on the topic, quoted a source characterizing those responsible for Israeli public diplomacy as "total incompetents" (Frantzman, 2014, p. 11); a recent special session of the Knesset grilled Netanyahu over public diplomacy, exposing "a list of Israeli failures against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and the general state of Israel's public diplomacy" (Puder, 2016).

However, even though the agreement on the national image deficit is widely shared, the ways in which this problem is tackled are widely heterogeneous. The proactive nature of the Israeli public, and the existence of a large Diaspora, is conducive towards major public engagement in Israel's foreign representation.

For instance, during the military operation "Pillar of Defense" (2012) hundreds of students turned up to volunteer and help with telephonic and online communication of the Government Press Office (Frantzman, 2014, p. 12). This was an engagement of civil society in public diplomacy on an outstandingly large and significant scale facilitated by extreme circumstances. But other avenues allow individual citizens to engage with Israeli public diplomacy, too: Israel has been officially represented abroad by university students within the Ambassadors Online program of the Haifa University (Gurevich, 2017) that invited ad hoc partnership of the state's administration. Another example was a major campaign conducted by a then-existing Ministry of Public Diplomacy, encouraging and tutoring individuals online and via free booklets to represent Israel abroad - the Masbirim campaign (Attias, 2012). There was also the Hashagrir reality TV series which tested young people in their ability to represent Israel abroad. The winner was awarded a public diplomacy job in the USA (Toledano & McKie, 2013, p. 5). For such a small nation, this scale of individual engagement is unprecedented; as far as my knowledge goes, there is not another state that would have a reality TV show recruiting individuals for public diplomacy.

While the initiators hoped for a mobilization of untapped public diplomacy through individual engagement (Attias, 2012, p. 475), this ambition also brings challenges: individuals are hardly able to follow a comprehensive line of public diplomacy. Furthermore, tutoring individuals to positively promote a nation abroad may be seen as borderline propaganda, which is also the reason why states' administrations, including the Israeli one, has traditionally refrained from including their domestic population into public diplomacy (Cummings 2016, Loc. 1253). However, the strong level of interest in the country's symbolic standing abroad, and the belief that public diplomacy can change things for better, along with the ethos of individual engagement in public affairs, makes Israeli public diplomacy a matter for a great variety of actors, and will probably continue to do so.

Organizational level

Apart from individuals, specific organizations have varied impacts on the forming of a state's public diplomacy, too. On an organization level, we can follow how organizational culture, leadership, standing etc. of an institution responsible for public diplomacy shapes its execution. If multiple organizations are involved, different notions of the tasks and values of a state and its place on the international scene may influence public diplomacy, even in contradictory ways.

A major influence on Israeli external presentation is the difference between organizational cultures of the two major institutions responsible for formulation and financing of

foreign policy – the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which deals with cultural diplomacy, scientific exchanges, and the management of press abroad through its embassies, and the Prime Minister’s Office which is currently responsible for the major part of the budget ascribed to public diplomacy, handles information campaigns, foreign press stationed in Israel, etc. The headquarters of Hasbara is also located in Prime Minister’s Office (Molad, 2012). As has been described by scholars, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is rooted in “diplomatic” political culture, based in the ethos of negotiation and compromise, and aims at presenting Israel as a regular member of international community. On the other hand, the Prime Minister’s Office displays a prevalence of “activist” political culture, emphasizing security needs, is less willing to compromise, and is rooted in the narrative that can be described as “no matter what we do, it will always be wrong, let’s focus on our security goals” (Cummings, 2016; Cofman-Wittes, 2005, etc.).

This schism emerged as a deep rift within the Israeli political scene after the Six Day War (Harkham, 2015): the issues of the handling of the newly gained territories and the legitimacy of the current territory of the state were born, and have persisted until today as a major topic of contention in regard to Israeli identity and its international symbolic standing.

It is not reflected merely on the governmental level, but also within non-governmental institutions. Israeli NGOs cannot be far divided into two opposing camps, as their stances are varied and nuanced. However, we can identify a number of NGOs that target an international audience to improve the image of Israel, and those that internationally campaign against controversial Israeli policies to gain the support of the foreign audience and thus increase the pressure on their own government. For instance, the Israeli office of TIP (The Israel Project, a US based NGO) runs a major international social media campaign de-facto aiming to support Israeli policies². On the other hand, a number of NGOs, often funded from abroad³ focus on disseminating information internationally on supposedly unethical or unlawful occurrences in Israel – including, but not limited to: B’Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (focused on “documenting human rights violations in occupied territories”⁴), Breaking the Silence (aiming to end the occupation through publishing testimonies of soldiers serving in the territories)⁵, the

² <https://www.theisraelproject.org/mission>

³ https://www.ngo-monitor.org/reports/ngos_in_israel_background_to_the_debate_and_faqs/#appendix1

⁴ https://www.btselem.org/about_btselem

⁵ Breaking the Silence identifies itself as „an organization of veteran combatants who have served in the Israeli military since the start of the Second Intifada and have taken it upon themselves to expose the Israeli public to the reality of everyday life in the Occupied Territories.“ - <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/about/organization>

Israeli Committee Against House Demolition (a group opposed to Israeli settlements)⁶, etc. Besides domestic activities, all these institutions run international information campaigns in English, thus clearly aiming (also) at foreign audience.

Besides those bodies that publicly proclaim a specific stance towards Israeli policies, there are also those that make explicit their belief that when an Israeli organization is excelling, it also helps the Israeli image abroad. This only illustrates the fact that the issue of Israel's negative image abroad is seen as pressing by many e.g., the director of Weizmann Institute of Science – an outstanding Israeli public research university – Meyers, suggested that improving the Institute's image abroad means improving Israel's image abroad too (Toledano, McKie 2013, p. 94). In sum, the quest for framing Israeli image abroad has been appropriated by many, making Israeli public diplomacy an issue of a struggle of institutions, but also individuals.

Also the organizational level, then, is a field where negotiations and combats take place, and where public diplomacy takes on its form through complex processes that should be studied within the research of its domestic level.

National level

While the two previous levels emphasize the contest of different actors co-creating a state's public diplomacy, the analysis of the national level encourages us to ask about national narratives, broadly discussed topics related to national representation, and major trends in a nation's self-understanding that make a public diplomacy practice specific in comparison to others.

Israeli public diplomacy is tightly connected to a nation-wide enterprise that has been co-forming it for decades: nation building. For Israel, the discussion regarding the country's representation abroad has always been an essential part of the process (Cummings 2016, Loc. 107). As Harkham shows, the attempts to reconcile domestic constituents and the foreign audience over the issues of the country's representation abroad have been mostly unsuccessful, as the same images that resonate with the domestic audience often reap a negative response abroad. Where the Israeli government seeks unity in danger, aiming to "rally the nation around the flag", abroad these efforts are perceived as militarism (e.g., the term "Operation Cast Lead" refers to a Hanukkah song, but has militaristic connotations abroad) (Harkham, 2015).

Naturally, major historical trends have shaped Israeli public diplomacy, too: For one, the constant threats that Israel faces has resulted in the domestic society reliance on its leaders, which is related to the great expectations that Israelis have towards the power of public diplomacy as tailored by political representation (Cummings 2016, Loc. 107), and

⁶ <https://icahd.org/>

necessarily subsequent disappointments, as the criticism of governmental conduct in this regard quoted previously illustrates.

Another essential determinant for Israeli public diplomacy has been the formation of the Israeli state itself, based on massive immigration which created a need for a distinct and unified system of symbols and narratives (Toledano & McKie, 2013, p. 3). A good example of the interplay of public diplomacy and nation building is the story of Israeli TV: it was introduced only in 1966; before that, the government was afraid of potential import of foreign culture since Israel did not have enough capacity to manufacture the content at home. Since the Israeli TV's establishment in late 60s until 1993, only one - governmentally controlled - channel was allowed, used to increase cohesion of the newly emerging Israeli society, and simultaneously for public diplomacy targeting the Arab population on the newly gained territories⁷ (Toledano & McKie 2013, p. 60).

Another phenomenon shaping Israeli public diplomacy on the national level is its Diaspora. National diasporas are usually defined as transnational actors; thus we will not discuss the Diaspora's specific role in Israel's public diplomacy here while we are focusing on the domestic level. However, it is worth noting that the relationship between the Jewish Diaspora and Israelis has been that of many discontents, the State of Israel and the Zionist movement defining itself from the very beginning in certain way in a contrast to the image of a typical diasporic Jew, defining a Zionist as "the New Jew" – the active, fit, autonomous, rational, future-oriented citizen, as opposed to the weak, intellectual, religious, somehow unmanly diasporic Jew (e.g., Conforti, 2011). This way of self-definition also has its bearing on the relationship to the outside world: while the diasporic Jews needed to co-exist with their host societies and were dependent on them, "the New Jew" does not have to be called to account by others, as he is now self-sufficient. And while various streams of Israeli society aim for different types of relationships with the external actors, as outlined above, a vast majority of them reiterate that the State of Israel should exist as an autonomous entity, and defines themselves as Zionists (Pánek Jurková, forthcoming). Thus, nation building, a very present Israeli experience difficult to understand to contemporary Western societies, has impacted heavily on Israeli public diplomacy, and will continue to do so.

Conclusion

By applying the proposed three-level analysis of the domestic dimension of public diplomacy, we have been able to understand in a more nuanced way how external representation is formed. External communication is heavily intertwined with the domestic level and is shaped by the points of contention as well as of agreement between various domestic stakeholders.

⁷ Indeed, this is the case bordering domestic communication, but we can probably agree that the new Arab population had all the characteristics of „foreign audience”.

The domestic audience plays a role as a passive as well as an active element of public diplomacy on three levels. While focusing on the individual level, we can observe a strong motivation of individual actors to influence Israel's external standing, and their engagement with public diplomacy through various avenues as individual actors – volunteers, citizens, critics and supporters of Israeli external policy. On the organizational level, a rift between differing organizational cultures can be seen, notably of that standing for a more diplomacy and compromise-based approach towards external communication, and that based on an activist, more militaristic attitude. Finally, on the national level, we can observe nation building processes and the dynamics related to them, mostly the broad narrative forming Israel's self-understanding vis-à-vis the external world, and various influences shaping it.

Specifically, in the case of Israel, we can observe the dilemma between public diplomacy's efficiency and the inclusion of various domestic actors (in general inclined to participation in public diplomacy) in the country's representation abroad. Israeli society has been described as "deeply divided" by multiple scholars (Al-Haj, 2002; Avraham, 2003; Yaish, 2001; Lerner, 2011). At the same time, its public diplomacy is not strictly centralized, as we have seen; thus various actors, often with contradicting ideas, are engaged in discussion on, and formulating of, the country's public diplomacy. I suggest that for deeply divided societies, decentralization of public diplomacy does indeed hamper the efficiency of the enterprise, but at the same time, it testifies to a certain level of democracy of the domestic debate. Each nation's public diplomacy will display its specific dynamics upon application of the suggested analytical model.

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