

# Israel Wins the War of Ideas



OR 20 years, I have been giving speeches to predominantly Jewish audiences on Israel-related subjects. Few of those speeches go by without someone asking, “Why does Israel have such lousy PR? Is there anything that can be done to turn Israel’s image around?”

I’m no public-relations expert. But I am in the arguments business, and after so many years of fielding the questions, it’s inevitable that I’ve given them some thought. My answer to the second question is: Yes, of course something can be done. As for the first, the problem is that Israel’s usual defenders keep trying to win over the wrong kinds of people with the wrong kinds of arguments in the wrong kinds of places.

## *Who are the wrong kinds of people?*

I do not mean ordinary critics, who object to this or that Israeli policy without questioning Israel’s basic legitimacy or defaming it with outright falsehoods. I mean anti-Zionists of all stripes, people

who deny Israel’s very right to exist as a Jewish state, who belong to the Blame Israel First crowd, who think that the words “apartheid” or “genocide” or “racist” attach to Israel the way that “juice” attaches to “orange,” and whose views generally stem either from ignorance that is irremediable or hostility that is irredeemable.

For decades, many of these critics have played a rhetorical game of “When did you stop beating your wife?” designed to bait Israel’s defenders into grappling with one false premise after another. (E.g., “Why does Israel kill so many Palestinian children?”) Merely to engage with their charges is a loser’s game, because it legitimizes bogus assumptions and bigoted arguments, and because liars always retain the local advantage in the territory of lies. The best response to this kind of criticism is not agitated outrage. It’s indifferent silence.



*What are the wrong kinds of arguments?* The list is long, but let me mention a few.

- *The legal-historical case:* This argument often comes laden with references to distant events such as the San Remo conference of 1920, or to details such as the missing “the” in Resolution 242. Unfortunately, the battle for Israel’s good name isn’t being duked out between scrupulous pedants.
- *The Israel-as-the-bigger-victim case:* This is a common theme at pro-Israel events, in which videos are sometimes shown of Israelis seeking cover from Hamas’s rockets under the blare of air-raid sirens. But a major military power is never going to win an international pity contest, nor should it want to: Israel came into being to *end* Jewish victimization, not to showcase it.
- *The Israel-the-virtuous case:* This one seeks to remind people of all the ways in which Israel has repeatedly exited conquered

territories, offered Palestinians a state, saved Palestinian lives in Israeli hospitals, and performed other good deeds. But if this line of argument did any good, elite public opinion in much of North America and Europe would not have shifted *against* Israel with every conciliatory step Israel has taken over many decades.

- *The Israel-versus-terrorism case:* This is an argument about the *means* being used by Israel's enemies, which most everyone condemns. But the Palestinian rebuttal—that their land has been stolen—is an argument about *ends*. The asymmetry between means and ends will usually favor the side speaking about ends, provided it can make people believe that the ends are inherently justified.

Each of these arguments may be right on the merits, yet they rarely do more than preach to the converted. As for the unconverted, the best argument is that Israel is under no obligation to justify its existence to anybody, least of all those who despise it; that, like any democratic and sovereign nation, it has every right to do what it must to safeguard its vital interests and security; that it isn't interested in winning popularity contests; and that sincere and constructive criticism is always welcome, but its policies won't be swayed by those who fundamentally wish it ill.

#### *What are the wrong kinds of places?*

Israel's defenders seem intent on fighting their battles in the settings where they are most likely to lose: elite universities, prestige media outlets, and other venues where opinions tend to range from the left to the far left. This has led to depressing spectacles such as an Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom being rushed out of the London School of Economics by her security detail, or a former Israeli foreign minister being called "smelly" by a student at Harvard Law School, or anti-Israel calum-

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nies in the media being met by indignant, if somewhat pathetic, 200-word Letters to the Editor by leaders of Jewish organizations.

Might things change if only better pro-Israel speakers appeared on campus, or if more energy could be invested in correcting media misreporting, or if more people could show up at pro-Israel rallies? It's always worth a try. But decades of effort and failure on both scores don't give good grounds for hope.



Which isn't to say the situation is hopeless. Far from it.

Year after year, perceptions of Israel at places like Northwestern, NYU, and even some Jewish rabbinical seminaries—that is, enclaves of progressive self-righteousness—seem to worsen, causing intensifying bursts of anxiety within the Jewish world. And yet, year after year, positive perceptions of Israel among the American public at large have generally risen, according to Gallup, from a low of 58 percent in the wake of 9/11 to 75 percent in March 2021. This should be a source of satisfaction to Israel's supporters, even if not everyone in the Jewish community is keen on the sources of that support, much of it from the political Right. It's also an indication of where Israel's supporters can make further inroads in terms of outreach, programming, and philanthropy. Why run after people who keep running away from us, instead of reaching out to those who are reaching out to us?

Outside the United States, things look even more promising. For decades, it has been conventional wisdom that Israel would find itself

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totally ostracized unless it withdrew to the 1967 lines and meekly acceded to various Palestinian demands. Israel largely refused. Yet it has forged increasingly close relations with formerly unfriendly states, from Uganda to Greece to India to the United Arab Emirates. These countries do not want better ties because Israel caved to the demands of larger powers, but rather because Israel resisted them. They are less interested in Israel's concessions than they are in its resourcefulness, its capabilities, its ability to add value in common causes. What others lament or envy about Israel, they tend to admire. They are the countries toward which Israel must turn to make new friends and influence people.

*How so?*

By winning the battle of ideas in the philosemitic (or, at the very least, potentially philosemitic) world.

How might an Emirati tech entrepreneur, an Indian aerospace engineer, a Vietnamese agronomist, a Mexican anthropologist, or a Colombian cybersecurity expert meet his or her Israeli counterparts? Barring an expensive and time-consuming trip to Israel, or an encounter at an international conference or trade fair, or a politically fraught visit to an Israeli consulate or an embassy, the chances of such meetings are slight. The Jewish state exerts a global fascination on people from around the world, particularly those at the top of the knowledge economy. And yet, for most of those people, Israel remains a faraway destination, at best visited once in a lifetime.

To change this, I propose the establishment of a nongovernmental,

not-for-profit Israel Center, modeled on the British Council, which does so much to extend the U.K.'s cultural and linguistic footprint around the world. The purpose of the Center would be to give Israel—the country and its people—an institutional home in places far from the usual hubs of Jewish life. Chongqing. Taipei. Seoul. Osaka. Manila. Hanoi. Bangkok. Mumbai. Tbilisi. Tirana. Thessaloniki. Cordoba. Abu Dhabi. Casablanca. Kigali. Montevideo. Medellín. Monterrey. Salt Lake City. Bentonville. Calgary.

The first rule of Israel Centers is that they would be apolitical. They would not be places for Israeli officials or nonofficial spokespersons to deliver talking points about the conflict with the Palestinians or the threat from Iran, much less to comment on (or involve themselves in) the politics of their host country.

The second rule is that they would not be religious. That's not to say that religious people would be unwelcome, only that the Centers would not be in the business of offering religious instruction or being sites for Jewish services.

The third rule is that the Israeli government would have to honor the Centers' independence by not meddling in their activities, above all for covert purposes. For this, the Israel Centers would have to be independently staffed, funded, and governed.

The fourth rule is that all the Centers would offer courses in Hebrew, as well as in ancient and modern Jewish history, but otherwise would be free to determine their own programming, as befits different locations.

Finally, while open to all, Israel Centers would mainly seek to attract local elites with high-level programming in elegant, discreet, small-group settings. Their principal role would be to cultivate close relationships by offering opportunities for dialogue that could blossom into academic exchanges, business partnerships, and other fruitful ties.

What would Israel Center programming look like? Imagine a Center in, say, Osaka, Japan, inviting an Israeli Nobel Prize-winning chemist to visit the city for a week. Along with the usual sightseeing,

the Center could host a reception and a dinner in the scientist's honor, inviting deans from the science faculty of Osaka University to join in the evening. The dinner could be followed by a formal lecture and perhaps an opportunity to teach a seminar to the University's top graduate students. Following the visit, an Israel Center headquarters in Jerusalem could reciprocate by hosting Japanese faculty for a week- or monthlong program in Israel, or even a year-long sabbatical.



As with chemistry, so, too, with everything from astronomy to linguistics to zoology. And not just academia. Israel Centers should be destinations for Israeli archeologists, film producers, celebrity chefs, marine biologists, social entrepreneurs, water-management experts, winemakers, app designers, robotics engineers, medical-device makers — you name it. They should be places of culture, exchange, collaboration, partnership; places to communicate the vibrancy and excitement of a country that consistently punches above its weight; places to form deeper bonds in settings where political questions aren't allowed to get in the way.

*And what does this have to do with winning the battle of ideas?*

Not everything: There will still be many occasions when the case for Israel will have to be made in the usual places, before the usual audiences, with the usual arguments.

But arid fields can be plowed only so many times. Israel needs to win the battle of ideas in places, and among people, where it can do more than just maintain an intellectual stalemate. It needs to do so not through mainstream or social media, where Israel's enemies have the advantages of scale and moral fervor, but in small-group settings among thoughtful people who exert a quiet but powerful influence in their respective countries and communities. It must put Israel's greatest strength to the fore, which is the quality of its

human capital, not its uneven efforts at *hasbara*. It should have confidence that, for all the loud haters, there are also potential admirers who can be engaged in long-term relationships *without asking them to take a political position*. It should have faith that the best way to get other people to support Israel isn't by making arguments, but by inviting them to fall in love with a country and its people.

As in personal affairs, so, too, in international ones: People tend to find reasons to like, and defend, what they already love. The core problem with most pro-Israel arguments is that they ignore this basic point of human psychology, trying to win the argument first and the person second. The point of the Israel Centers is to win the person, first and last.

I have no illusions that this idea can be brought off on the cheap or that it can achieve a quick payoff. It's a philanthropic commitment of many millions of dollars to a decades-long project. If that seems too costly or time-consuming, consider the cost, and the waste, of doing things as before while expecting different results. \*