The Israeli Community in the United States: An Untapped Asset

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Diplomacy has two main forms: classic diplomacy, which is based on channels of communication between state officials, and public diplomacy, in which official and unofficial parties from one state create relationships with civil society organizations and different population groups from another state in order to indirectly influence the policy of their government.[1] Take for example the United States, Israel's most important strategic ally: alongside the official channels of communication that Israel has with the administration, Congress, and various individual states, Israel operates a public diplomacy system whose goal is to promote Israeli messages within American society and thus maximize its influence over American decision makers. Two main groups are known for the connection they have developed with Israel and their supportive attitude toward the state: the Jewish community (despite the recent trend among some of the younger generation and among left-liberal circles of becoming more distant from Israel),[2] and pro-Israel Christian communities, especially Evangelicals and Protestant pro-Israel Christians. These groups have a central role in the struggle against the campaign to delegitimize Israel in the United States. Analysis of pro-Israel activities demonstrates that in the context of this struggle, these communities are, surprisingly, far more dominant than the Israeli community in the United States (a sub-group of the Jewish community).[3] This article offers an analysis of the obstacles preventing the Israeli community from fulfilling its advocacy potential and presents the inherent advantages in mobilizing this community

for the struggle against the threat of delegitimization. The purpose of this analysis is to provide a snapshot of reality, based on meetings held with experts and pro-Israel activists over the past two years. The article ends with three policy recommendations whose aim is to utilize the potential of this advocacy asset.

The Israeli-American Community

According to different estimates, the Israeli community in the United States numbers between 200,000 and 800,000 people.[4] It is concentrated in the big cities – New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Boston, and Chicago – and is very varied, comprising students, families who have moved from Israel to America, families with Israeli parents and children who were born and raised in the United States, and others. Over the years the Israeli community has developed organizations that are active in different sectors, in particular academia and the business world. In addressing the campaign to delegitimize Israel, the Israeli-American community must cope with five obstacles that may explain their unfulfilled potential as Israel advocates.

Lack of an Umbrella Organization

The wide distribution and varied characteristics of the Israelis who live in the United States have made it difficult to create a communal umbrella organization. This situation has affected the Israeli community's ability to address the needs of the community effectively and comprehensively and deal with the threat of Israel's delegitimization. However, the experiences of the second generation, which include encounters with anti-Israel activity, have increased the parent generation's awareness of the need for an umbrella organization in order to cope with such activity. In recent years the Israeli-American Council (IAC) was established to serve as an umbrella organization for the different communities and fill a void in the leadership of the Israeli-American community.[5] One of the organization's recent initiatives was to launch a campaign against delegitimization. In addition, a new organization called Israeli-American Nexus (IAX) started to promote legislation against the BDS movement in different states.[6] Another initiative, ACT.il, was designed together with the Interdisciplinary Center at Herzliya to create a network of media rooms operating in different communities in the world against anti-Israel social media activities. The first rooms to operate are in Boston and New Jersey.[7] IAC seeks overall to represent the interests of the

Israeli-American community and to become an umbrella organization that maximizes the public relations potential of the community.

The Question of Who is Responsible

There is a feeling among Israelis who live in the United States that they are unable to cope with the delegitimization threat both because of its scope and because it is a problem that is the responsibility of the Israeli government. A common argument is that it is for the Israeli Foreign Ministry, as the most present and active official Israeli body in the United States and the one responsible for Israel's advocacy policy, and not the Israeli-American community, to address this threat. The reasons for this attitude seem to lie in the absence of community leadership, cultural characteristics originating in Israeli society, and primarily, the view that the government is responsible for a wide range of areas, particularly when talking of a threat that has clear political and security characteristics.

Legal Status

Many of the Israelis living in the United States have temporary status as students or researchers or status as immigrants who have not yet received residency certification or citizenship. This status is extremely sensitive as it is not stable. In the case of students or researchers, their presence in the United States is dependent on the approval of their department and university. In the case of immigrants, controversial behavior could harm their chances of receiving permanent residency or citizenship. This fragile status deters people from participating in public activity of a political nature. This factor is especially critical among Israelis in academia (faculty members, researchers, or students) – the arena that currently poses the biggest challenge for Israel advocacy.

The Professional and Personal Price

Another deterrent for Israelis considering joining the struggle against anti-Israel activity is the personal price they might have to pay for their participation. Public identification with Israel and participation in political arguments may, for example, undermine their professional standing or affect work relations. Siding with Israel, along with condemning and attacking anti-Israel activity, could also single out Israelis and their families and cause them to be ostracized by neighbors, non-Israeli community members, or

friends from their children's schools or after-school activities. There have been reports of attacks that have harmed Israeli families' sense of personal security, but these have not yet been collected as part of an organized study and their frequency is unclear. In the absence of an ability to guarantee their professional and personal security in the face of these threats, many Israelis claim that they would rather refrain from political discussions, even when they are exposed to anti-Israel messages.

Absence of Advocacy Tools

There is a feeling among Israelis that they do not have the tools to deal with anti-Israel claims or with difficult questions relating to Israeli policy. One major problem is the lack of access to facts and figures that could refute or undermine anti-Israel claims. Furthermore, there is a feeling of lacking the communication skills necessary to conduct a sensitive discussion in accordance with American social codes. Thus, for example, Israelis find it difficult to cope with extreme accusations of Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, Israeli apartheid in the Palestinian territories, and other charges. Some state that they are unsuccessful in getting their message across and that arguments sometimes turn into fierce debates. A lack of confidence in their ability to change the other person's views and the fear of getting involved in a personal debate and harming personal relationships are other factors deterring Israelis who are bothered by anti-Israel activity.

Despite these obstacles and taking them into consideration, Israel must develop a strategy that addresses this challenge and encourage the involvement of the Israeli community in the United States in the struggle against the delegitimization campaign. This community can contribute three unique elements to the struggle: credibility, the ability to bridge between societies, and the promotion of the "Israeli story" in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Credibility: Israelis in America are usually seen as a credible source of information about events in Israel and Israeli policy. Contrary to their feelings, they have a great advantage over the rest of the pro-Israel communities when it comes to knowledge of events in their country and an understanding of the cultural and regional context by virtue of their familiarity with the region and the fact that they tend to follow Israeli news sources. It is clear from conversations with leaders of pro-Israel activity that the pro-Israel

camp in the United States attributes great credibility to Israelis, as do those who do not have fixed opinions about Israeli policy. However, it should be noted that the credibility of Israeli-Americans depends on their ability to be seen as authentic and not as spokespeople for the Israeli government. This aspect is especially critical in discussions with groups of activists on campus – those who support Israel as well as those who are involved in anti-Israel activity but who are not as yet extremists. These campus-based groups tend, in general, to oppose the establishment and venerate activity based on personal initiative and preservation of authenticity.

Bridging the gaps between societies: The Israeli establishment is neither responsible for nor suited to the task of bringing together Israeli and American society. This is a task for civilians. No one is more suited to the task than Israelis in the United States who are familiar with the social and cultural codes of both societies and can bridge the gaps between them. When it comes to advocacy, this bridge has two goals. First, American society must get to know Israeli society in all its different aspects. Branding surveys have indicated the dominance of the security and religious aspects in American conceptions of Israel and ignorance of all others. As a result, the vast majority of the American public, including university students and faculty, do not take an interest in Israel or see the issue as relevant to their lives.[8] Consequently, the pro-Israel camp loses out on groups that might take an interest in Israeli society in other areas, such as the environment, hi-tech, business, entrepreneurial initiatives, and medicine, and thus improve Israel's image among these groups. By expanding the scope of the discussion on Israel and enriching its social context through content that is tailored to large sectors of the American public, we can undermine the negative image that anti-Israel organizations seek to disseminate in American society, including issues connected to Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. This may even enable recruitment of new groups that are not currently involved in the struggle that could act as a shield against anti-Israel activity in the future. Businesspeople and students who are currently exposed mainly to political, security, or religious discussions might be attracted to Israel's social diversity, technological success, or culture of innovation. Such exposure could offer them alternative sources of information to those providing negative information about Israel, which they could then access when facing political questions too.

A second goal of bridging the gap between the two societies is to create among Americans a feeling of identification with Israeli society by showing

the similarities between them and by overturning the image of a militant, religious, and alienated society that has shown up in the branding surveys. This too could create a psychological shield that undermines anti-Israel propaganda, or at least encourages people to check this negative information against other more reliable sources.

Promoting the "Israeli story" in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: In the specific discussion on Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, the Israeli community in the United States can provide the Israeli angle and thus help change the framing of the existing discussion, especially in liberal circles. These circles, which emphasize the issue of human rights and the Israeli policy of building settlements in the West Bank, form the support base for anti-Israel activity.[9] The Israeli perspective includes liberal elements alongside ones of national security and thus offers the discussion a broader and more complex analysis than the prevalent simplistic liberal approach that presents Israel mainly in a negative light. Due to the obstacles described earlier, the Israeli story is minimalized precisely in the places where the discussion takes place and from where the conceptual basis for anti-Israel activity is propagated, for example, the academic domain and liberal political circles. In presenting the Israeli story and the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Israeli Americans can alter the discussion currently taking place and influence the opinions of the younger generation on and off campus.

Promotion of the Israeli story by NGOs can enable dialogue with those who criticize Israeli policy but do not hold extreme opinions such as opposing the existence of Israel. This dialogue becomes more problematic when it involves the official Israeli establishment, whose ability to engage in public discussion with its critics is far more limited than NGOs due to the latter's political flexibility. In addition, critics of the Israeli government seem to find it easier to engage in open dialogue with non-official Israeli parties. This dialogue is critical in order to enable areas of consensus between pro-Israel groups and liberal groups that are not hostile to Israel but are critical of its policy, and to enable the latter to express their opinions without being dragged into extreme anti-Israel activity. It is, in addition, important to hold this kind of dialogue with organizations and individuals from within the Jewish community who support the campaign to boycott Israel from a belief that they are doing what is best for the State of Israel or furthering the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). The Israeli American

community can serve as a bridge between the State of Israel and those groups and individuals within the Jewish community and thus combine forces with Jews who support the existence of the State of Israel against those who oppose it, while maintaining the right to discuss and criticize Israel's policies.

Policy Recommendations

This analysis leads to three policy recommendations that aim to maximize the potential of the Israeli community in the United States for dealing with the threat of delegitimization: reinforcement of the Israeli presence, provision of tools for getting Israel's message across, and mechanisms of cooperation with the Jewish community.

First, in order to give wider expression to Israeli positions and dilemmas in discussions conducted in the United States about issues connected to Israel, the Israeli presence in places where liberal American public opinion is shaped must be enhanced. For example, programs that send Israeli academics, researchers, and lecturers to campuses must be expanded. Unlike students, this group is more permanent in the academic field and tends to enjoy some political latitude under the principle of academic freedom. One ongoing example of such activity is the Israel Institute.[10] Connections must be made between Israelis and the relevant faculties and departments, ideally those not dealing with Israel's security policy but with less politically sensitive topics. The professional connection can serve later on as a basis for presenting the Israeli narrative on politically charged issues. For example, Israeli businesspeople can address students of business administration, Israeli doctors can lecture at medical and biology schools, Israeli female entrepreneurs can meet with women's groups. There must, of course, also be dialogue on political and security issues alongside attempts to present the Israeli discourse and connect it to the liberal discourse.

The promotion of pro-Israel efforts requires a plan for Israeli preparedness on campuses. To this end, a network of Israeli faculty members who teach at American universities is essential. There is currently almost no official connection among Israeli faculty members, nor has the State of Israel developed effective channels for staying in contact with Israeli faculty members. Creating an Israeli network would increase the Israeli presence on campuses and put the State of Israel in direct contact with its "ambassadors" – the Israeli professors and researchers who work at American universities. An Israeli academic framework of this kind could facilitate the coordination of pro-

Israel activities among different universities and enable direct professional and logistical state support. Reinforcing the Israeli presence on campuses both quantitatively and qualitatively could help address anti-Israel activity and, in the long term, contribute to changing the balance of power within American academia between those who are willing to listen and consider the Israeli story, even if they are also critical of Israeli policy, and those who support the delegitimization of the State of Israel.

Young Jews active in American Jewish youth movements are another important target audience, since this is a group that has not yet been exposed to massive anti-Israel activity and has, on the whole, yet to form an opinion. We must initiate dialogue with this community with the aim of presenting the Israeli story and preparing those who are interested to lead the struggle against anti-Israel activity and confront the anti-Israel claims they will be exposed to at a university. Even if all of these young people do not, ultimately, become ardent supporters of Israel, it will at least reduce the risk of their being sucked into the anti-Israel camp.

Second, we must train Israeli activists in channeling their presence in the promotion of pro-Israel activity. As mentioned above, many Israelis are not confident in their ability to respond to anti-Israel activity; they don't know how to bridge the cultural differences or knowledge gaps between the Israeli community and the American liberal community. In order to make the Israeli story accessible, we must train Israelis to deal with difficult questions on political and security matters and with anti-Israel activity and, in particular, provide them with tools for developing an effective system for conveying the message to liberals. It is most important to keep in constant communication with these activists in order to improve their tools and maximize the effectiveness of pro-Israel activity.

Finally, it is important that the Israeli-American community work in coordination and cooperation with the rest of the Jewish community with its clear numerical advantage and the fluency of some of its members in the liberal discourse. A mechanism should be established for coordinating pro-Israel activity on two levels: the strategic level – by coordinating, within the framework of overall Israeli policy, activity between these two communities, for example, holding frequent meetings with the leaderships of both; and the tactical level – by creating mixed local leadership groups to maximize the power of the two communities to cope with the anti-Israel challenge. A central challenge will be how to integrate American Jewish activists so

that they feel comfortable operating within a single advocacy system and action plan with the Israeli community. It is therefore important that these groups be established on a local basis, with activity that suits the specific characteristics of the activists.

These recommendations do not constitute the basis for a comprehensive solution to the threat of delegitimization facing Israel in the United States. It is a strategic threat that requires a strategic response. Still, the recommendations and the analysis at their core may stimulate thinking about a course of action that can address the obstacles preventing the fulfillment of the advocacy potential of the Israeli community in the United States in order to maximize their inherent advantages.

Notes

1   Moran Yarchi, Gadi Wolfsfeld, Tamir Sheafer, and Shaul R. Shenhav, "Promoting Stories about Terrorism to the International News Media: A Study of Public Diplomacy," *Media, War & Conflict* 6, no. 3 (2013): 264; Eytan Gilboa, "Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 56-58; Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp, "Public Diplomacy," in *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy* (London: SAGE, 2016), pp. 440-45, http://sk.sagepub.com/Reference/the-sage-handbook-of-diplomacy.

2   See the Pew Research Center, "Connection With and Attitudes Toward Israel," in *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, pp. 81-94, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-5-connection-with-and-attitudes-towards-israel/.

3   For example, see, "Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC) 2014-2015 Campus Trends Report," *ICC Reports*, 2015, https://israelcc.org/icc-2014-2015-campus-trends-report/. This finding also came up in conversations with leaders of pro-Israel activity – both Israelis and non-Israelis.

4   According to the last population census conducted in 2000, 106,839 Israelis lived in the United States. In the absence of a more recent census, different researchers have offered different estimates regarding the community's growth over the past fifteen years. See, for example, Haim Handwerker, "How Many Israelis Live in America Anyway?" *Haaretz*, June 20, 2014, http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/.premium-1.599966.

5   The organization existed under a different name and format from 2007 to 2013. See http://www.israeliamerican.org.

6   In recent months IAX has been working to promote legislation prohibiting the activity of the BDS movement in California. See http://goo.gl/QtKPo4.

7   For more information, see the initiative's website: http://act-il.com/.

8   For analyses by BAV Consulting that present country branding metrics and measure the performance of the Israeli campaign, see Scott Siff, "Brand Israel: Its Evolving Impacts On The Country's Political Credibility," BAV Consulting, http://bavconsulting.com/brand-israel-its-evolving-impacts-on-the-countrys-political-credibility/. Another example is the study carried out by the Israeli consul general, Ido Aharoni, "How to Market a Country," *YouTube*, August 22, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUpybNIXLb8. This phenomenon is also strengthened by a 2016 WPP study that examines Israeli metrics in a wider international perspective. For further reading, see Joanna Landau, "Sometimes You Need to See the Cup as Half Empty," *Walla News*, March 2, 2016, http://news.walla.co.il/item/2939998. For an analysis regarding academic faculty, see Samuel M. Edelman, "An Israel on Campus Coalition White Paper: Mapping the Territory Facing Pro-Israel Academics on Colleges and Universities in the United States," *Israel on Campus Coalition's White Paper*, 2014.

9   Israel on Campus Coalition, "2014-2015 Campus Trends Report"; David Bernstein, Todd Young, Matthew Ackerman, Sean Savage, Avi Fuld, and Eli Shaubi, *A Burning Campus? Rethinking Israel Advocacy at America's Universities and Colleges*, The David Project, 2012; Dan Fefferman, "University Campuses in the U.S. and the Delegitimization of Israel – in Perspective," Jewish People Policy Institute, October 25, 2015, pp. 67-88.

10   See http://israelinstitute.org/.