

When the Intelligence Officer and the Public Diplomat Meet

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Background

On April 30, 2018 at 8:10 PM, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took the stage in VIP Hall 3 at the Kirya (IDF headquarters) in Tel Aviv, and before dozens of Israeli and international journalists dramatically unveiled materials from the Iranian nuclear archive, seized not long before by Mossad agents from the heart of Tehran. The press conference was broadcast live on television in Israel and worldwide, on websites and social media, providing exposure to millions of viewers.² The event was also mentioned in a speech by US President Donald Trump the following week (on May 8) as part of the motives leading to his decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA).

The press conference concluded almost two months of preparatory work following the clandestine raid conducted by a small group of intelligence, communications, and political officials. The preparatory work was characterized by constant tension between public diplomacy versus intelligence considerations. Many questions were discussed, such as: what is the purpose of the exposure and who are its target audiences? Which materials displayed will achieve the greatest effect? What kind of intelligence materials will best support the political messages? How should these materials be made

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2 The picture and text of his speech appear on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <https://bit.ly/2kkNcIG>.



Prime Minister Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly, September 27, 2018. Photo appears in the video of the Prime Minister's address on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

suitable for media display, and how might complex materials be simplified in order to be presented in a clear and accessible manner that could be grasped by the general public and target audiences? Which materials should not be revealed? What needed to be concealed? How would the exposure be perceived by the various target audiences, including in Iran? How could all this be done without jeopardizing intelligence sources and modus operandi?

This event serves as an instructive example of the importance of the close connection and fruitful dialogue between intelligence organizations and communications experts engaged in “influence” campaigns aimed at advancing national security objectives. One possible and significant conclusion to be drawn from the event is that a combined diplomatic-communications-intelligence effort is capable of leading to significant achievements in the political arena serving the most critical national interests.

Another example that illustrates the issue was provided in the Prime Minister's speech at the UN General Assembly on September 27, 2018. In this speech, Benjamin Netanyahu revealed two additional Israeli discoveries: a secret warehouse in Tehran in which the Iranians were concealing equipment used for their nuclear program, including nuclear materials, and three Hezbollah sites located next to Beirut's international airport that were used for the



Iranian nuclear warehouse, Turqzabad, Tehran, displayed by Prime Minister Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly, September 27, 2018. See video of the address on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

development and production of precision guided missiles. The Prime Minister also added a specific deterrent message to these revelations: “Israel knows what you’re doing, and Israel knows where you are doing it. Israel will never let a regime that calls for our destruction to develop nuclear weapons. Not now, not in 10 years, not ever.”³

It was clear that these discoveries caused embarrassment in Iran and Lebanon and troubled their leaderships. Three days after the Prime Minister’s speech, the Lebanese Foreign Minister led a tour for journalists to the sites in Beirut that Israel had exposed in order to refute the allegations and supposedly prove that no covert missile-production activity was taking place there. The IDF Spokesperson responded quickly, posting a short and humorous video that ridiculed these actions, showing how much can be done in three days, including removing missiles from the sites.

A third example of fruitful cooperation between the intelligence apparatus and public diplomacy officials is a slideshow prepared by the National Information Directorate for the Prime Minister, to help illustrate Israel’s central interests and arguments. The presentation is used during all the

3 For a transcript and video of the speech on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, see <https://bit.ly/2m28ZoW>.



From a slideshow prepared by the National Information Directorate

Prime Minister's meetings with heads of state and other senior officials. And indeed, at almost every diplomatic meeting with world leaders, whether in Israel or abroad, Prime Minister Netanyahu illustrates his remarks on the various issues with these slides. They include Iran's entrenchment in Syria, the Iranian influence and the presence of the Islamic State in the Middle East, the ranges of long range missiles that Iran is developing, attempts to execute terrorist attacks around the world that were foiled thanks to intelligence provided by Israel, Hezbollah's activity in southern Lebanon, Hamas's army of terror, and more. The military and intelligence components of the slideshow, which are updated daily, are based on high quality intelligence material. At the same time, the presentation is characterized by the simplicity of its messages and the effectiveness of the depicted images. The process of designing the slideshow is made possible through an ongoing dialogue between public diplomacy and intelligence officials at the Prime Minister's Office, and between them and the Prime Minister. The process involves a number of challenges: first, selecting a topic that needs to be added to the presentation; second, determining the information and data that can be used; and third, designing each relevant slide.

The graphic design process of the slideshow is by no means technical. Its importance is no less than the previous stages; the design stage is essential for achieving public diplomacy objectives. The central goal is to achieve

maximum simplicity and clarity of the message contained in each slide, such that will be instantly understood by the viewer. The result is a very visual slideshow, with minimal text and few figures, focusing on the core points (each slide relays only one message) and without burdening the viewer with too much information. Our experience in hundreds of meetings indicates that the slideshow is effective and enhances the messages conveyed by the Prime Minister in his diplomatic meetings.

Intelligence as a Central Tool for Public Diplomacy

The examples provided above illustrate the importance of intelligence information as a central tool for public diplomacy, emphasizing the need to make optimal use of intelligence material for the needs of “influence campaigns.” Effective use of intelligence is relevant and meaningful at all levels and organizations in Israel that are engaged in influence/public diplomacy campaigns. For example:

- a. The ability of the IDF Spokesperson to refute false information, which can become a negative smear story at a dizzying speed, depends to a large extent on his ability to receive intelligence information in real time and reveal it to the media.
- b. The ability of the Prime Minister’s Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to cope with “public diplomacy/political attacks” in the international arena depends to a large extent on relevant intelligence information.
- c. The ability of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs to cope with delegitimization attacks against Israel can be fortified by the prudent use of intelligence.

Maximum utilization of intelligence for the use of public diplomacy is based on a series of principles, some of which are also challenges. The main ones include: simplifying the message that arises from the intelligence material; deciding whether or not there is a need to “blanch” intelligence materials; and adhering to professional ethics.

Simplifying the Message and the Intelligence Material

Public diplomacy messages directed at target audiences like world leaders, or the international press, face two main challenges. The first is the lack of familiarity of these audiences with the issues discussed, for example, the complex Middle East reality or technological issues. These audiences will have difficulty coping with a complex message that requires prior or

deep knowledge and understanding. The second pertains to leaders and populations that have a personal or historical set of beliefs and conceptions that are inconsistent with reality, sometimes contradicting simple facts and information. In this case, the messages conveyed to them need to be sharp, clear, and fact-based enough to penetrate that layer of existing beliefs and opinions.

Simplicity seems to be an obvious principle: the simpler the message, the better it will be received. However, experience shows that the conventional wisdom regarding this notion does not accord with the powerful “punch” that may be needed to achieve the desired result – namely a catchy understandable message that sticks in one’s mind. This is especially true with respect to the conveying of complex messages from the political-military world, which are also based on intelligence materials.

In order to formulate a brief and clear message, it is necessary to take the initial concept and the existing intelligence materials and information on the given issue and put them through a process of reduction, simplification, and refinement, until the message and the way it is presented can pass the test of the “quick look” or first hearing. The intention is to reach a situation in which listening to the message once or taking a quick look at a visual representation of it are enough to be understood and consequently convinced. To a certain extent, the reduction process contradicts the existing approach in the intelligence community toward the use of information. Due to the nature of their work, intelligence experts tend to maintain the complexity of each phenomenon, the different angles that exist for understanding it, and the subtleties that it contains. However, maintaining such complexity and nuances can sometimes “kill the message.”

Another common tendency of many intelligence officials is to present a wide range of details to explain a phenomenon. This tendency is based on the premise that adding details strengthens the validity and credibility of the statement. However, the overabundance of details seriously harms the effectiveness of the message, at least when it is directed to the general public. For example, a few years ago, one of the intelligence organizations prepared a special presentation for public diplomacy purposes following a military operation as part of the efforts to counter delegitimization of Israel. Preparation of this presentation lasted weeks, with hundreds of work hours invested in it. But when it was presented to public diplomacy officials, their

immediate response was that it was overloaded with details, thus blurring the message (in addition to the fact that it was submitted too late for effective use in the media), and the whole effort was shelved.

The conclusion is that the message must be brief and focused. A brief message has few words, and if expressed, it must appear in one display (picture, map, or other visual image). A focused message is one that minimizes complexity and ambiguity. In addition, it is important to consider how suitable the message is to its specific target audience. For example, an infographic that presents ranges and distances of enemy missiles should be prepared in a number of versions that use different measuring systems (km, miles), making it readily suited to the measuring system found in each country. Another example: if we want to address Iran's terrorist activity around the world, it is best to prepare versions that provide incidents from different international locations, so that in each country the incidents that occurred within or near its territory can be highlighted.

Getting the target audience to identify with the message can be better achieved by adapting it to the culture and internal worldview of that audience. Prominent examples can be seen in the video clips that Prime Minister Netanyahu posts occasionally in a direct appeal to the Iranian public and highlight Iran's extreme leadership. These clips include references to events that take place in Iran and are recognizable to the average citizen there. They might include mentioning streets and places in Iran or real problems that are of local concern, such as air pollution and water shortage. Many Iranian citizens respond to these videos favorably and even emotionally, because the sense of familiarity with Iranian culture, and even the effort to get to know them, makes them feel respected.

“Blanching the Secret”: The Use of Classified Information in Public Diplomacy Campaigns

Public diplomacy pertaining to issues of policy and national security sometimes involves presenting the negative actions and intentions of enemies and adversaries. Thus, it must sometimes make use of classified information and intelligence materials in order to expose enemy plans and actions of which the target audiences are not aware. This raises questions and creates tensions relating to the diplomatic and political benefits of exposing such

information versus the risks to intelligence sources and the possible harm to operational methods.

The exposure of the nuclear sites in Iran and the missile production sites in Lebanon are prominent and current cases that underline this tension. But they are not precedents. One major example that received publicity was revealed on June 6, 1967, the second day of the Six Day War, when the political leadership in Israel decided to publicize a classified conversation between Egyptian President Gamal Abdal Nasser and King Hussein of Jordan that was recorded by Israeli military intelligence. In the conversation, the Egyptian President offered to declare that the United States and Great Britain participated in the attack on the airfields in Egypt. The following day, the Arab media did indeed begin to broadcast this message, which led to an uproar in the Arab world and to political pressure on the US. After deliberation, the Israeli political leadership decided to release the recorded conversation, anticipating that Egypt might try to drag the Soviet Union into the war, based on their bilateral defense treaty, which was followed by the USSR's intention to support Egypt in case the US were to do so on Israel's behalf.

In such cases, the best way to choose between public political needs and the risk to intelligence sources is to have a joint consultation between the political leadership and the intelligence community on the nature of the material and the method and degree of its exposure. The political echelon retains the right to make use of intelligence information even if the professional echelon opposes its exposure. This was the case in the Nasser-Hussein phone call, despite the opposition of then-Director of Military Intelligence Aharon Yariv.

More recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu has articulated this approach, stating that "we are a country that has intelligence, not intelligence that has a country." However, the country's leadership should prefer a shared dialogue with the heads of the intelligence community, so that any final decision will be based on an understanding of all the considerations, including the perspective of maintaining intelligence assets. This has in fact been done in practice, in the past and the present.

Along with these momentous exposure events, there is less dramatic and much more frequent and daily use of intelligence materials for the purpose of public diplomacy. Intelligence materials are used in the ongoing activity of the political leadership, in its public statements, in diplomatic meetings,

and are released to the media. Coordination regarding the level and form of exposure of sensitive information occurs daily in the professional echelons between intelligence, communications, and diplomatic officials.

In general, the need for simple messages in public diplomacy considerably helps reduce potential harm to sources. The process of simplifying the message leads to “rounding numbers” and to schematic presentation of visual information, thus creating some distance from the specifics found in intelligence material and the sources on which it is based.

Intelligence at the Service of Policy

Public diplomacy officials are committed first and foremost to supporting policy, and so tend to leave content that does not serve that purpose “outside the editing room.” Public messages will not, of course, include falsehoods, but neither must they necessarily present the entire picture with all of its angles. Intelligence people, on the contrary, have more comprehensive knowledge of the picture, and their professional ethics require adhering to that aspect. Therefore, the work of preparing public tools, items, and content needs to unfold as a dialogue between the two, with the public diplomat attempting to mold content in a way that best serves policy and effectively conveys the message, and the intelligence official assisting him in his work, while ensuring that the final product remains true to reality as the intelligence community understands it. This inherent tension, along with the work of simplifying and refining the message (“keep it simple”) and illustrating it in a visual and catchy manner, leads to the best end products that serve the national interests of the state.

Conclusion

Colossal attempts are made in world politics in order to shape the narrative and influence public opinion. This is done through the press, on social media, in WhatsApp groups, and in cyber operations, sometimes mixing facts and rumors, truths and lies. Israel’s many challenges in this arena require it, more than other states, to invest in effective public diplomacy efforts to maintain its freedom of operation and promote its national objectives and interests.

At the same time, Israel’s intelligence prowess offers important capabilities and opportunities that can be tapped for the purpose of political-public diplomacy efforts. Furthermore, the controlled exposure of intelligence

materials can help not only with the general dissemination of public messages among broad target audiences, but also serve as an actual operative tool, that can help develop legitimacy for conducting kinetic military operations, or even replace them.

The utilization of intelligence for purposes of public diplomacy and efforts to influence should be expanded. Possible directions include augmented cooperation between intelligence agencies and those involved in public diplomacy; development of the intelligence community's knowledge of the public diplomacy echelon and objectives and the ability to contribute to it; and the development and acquisition of technologies that support and advance these national goals. Public diplomacy is and should be perceived even more than before as a national effort that needs to be supported by any resource available, especially by the intelligence community.