

# Civil Public Diplomacy (*Hasbara*) in the Gaza War: Potential in the Influence Arena

David Siman-Tov, Inbar Noy-Freifeld, Attila Somfalvi, and Ella Keinan<sup>1</sup> | No. 1797 | December 11, 2023

Unlike in previous rounds of fighting with Hamas, it appears that in the Swords of Iron war, thousands of Israeli citizens have joined “professional” network influencers in the global struggle over the narrative. In addition, dozens if not hundreds of civilian “war rooms” have been set up to stream public diplomacy explanatory material, and work groups focusing on technology and the cognitive campaign were formed, designed to make *hasbara* – Hebrew for public diplomacy – more effective. Israeli hi-tech has also joined the fight, and numerous *hasbara* initiatives have emerged in work premises that have been converted into volunteer war rooms. Relevant government ministries and the security community seek to make use of the civilian *hasbara* potential. However, over time, a significant number of these initiatives have shut down when the those who launched them discovered that their efforts were ineffective against the tsunami of pro-Palestinian narrative worldwide, or because they had to go back to work. Large-scale *hasbara* by civilians is a new phenomenon, and with the ongoing war, it is necessary to study its features and consider how best to expand its contribution in the cognitive campaign, a campaign that Israel usually loses.

Mapping Israeli civilian *hasbara* – public diplomacy – initiatives aimed at the West in early December 2023, researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), with the help of the [Israeli Hasbara Map](#), found some 120 operations rooms, 40 organizations engaged in developing technological tools for *hasbara* purposes, and 100 databases dealing with various kinds of public diplomacy. Significantly, these numbers represent a decline from earlier stages of the war. Most of the initiatives (about 72) are based on volunteers and are not for profit, while a minority of these initiatives (about 13) were engaged in *hasbara* before the war. Joining the volunteer groups are technology companies and publicity

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<sup>1</sup> Ella Keinan is a content creator and leader of a social media influencing initiative that has reached 300 million organic views in less than two months. The authors thank Noam Manella for his helpful comments toward preparation of this article.

companies that have converted part of their work into *hasbara* efforts, professionals from the world of higher education, and organizations that were engaged in pro-Israeli activity and the fight against antisemitism before the war. Most of the initiatives that were examined directed their activity to English-speaking Western audiences, including the veteran [Stand With Us](#), as well as [DiploAct](#), a program from Reichman University that deals with *hasbara* worldwide. Many operations rooms are engaged in developing and disseminating content; one of the most prominent is the headquarters for Getting Them Back (i.e., the abducted and missing). There are also influencers operating independently to promote Israeli *hasbara* overseas.

The rationale underlying these organizations comprises several elements: first, recognition that the discourse on social media tends to be anti-Israel while the Palestinians enjoy almost automatic support. Second, in view of the growing antisemitism worldwide, there is a need to spread messages that defend Jewish communities overseas. Third, some volunteers feel that the official Israeli response is deficient – and was so particularly at the start of the war – and the initiatives represent civil activism. Another reason was the desire of some to contribute personally and creatively to the war effort.

#### Methods Used by Civil *Hasbara*

Most civil *hasbara* focuses on spreading material and content tailored to a range of audiences on social media, including with the intention of encouraging people to upload presentations, organize pro-Israeli demonstrations, and participate in them. These actions are taken overtly or without identification (No Logo). Many elements set up websites specifically to collect information and narratives that support the Israeli position, to be used on social media. Another method is to create technical tools: hi-tech companies convert existing products toward translation, collection, and management of relevant material. In addition, leading professional elements may train teams in civil operations rooms.

Some of the organizations stress the need to move from *hasbara* to influence, to set the agenda, and to move from reactive to proactive initiatives, in the effort to reach populations that do not support Israel. While *hasbara* is rooted in the attempt to defend Israel, influence does not apologize; rather, it tells a story and addresses the emotions of the respective target audiences. Other methods are to stress the values shared by Israel and the liberal Western world, while showcasing the terror that threatens the entire Western world. The narrative that equates Hamas with ISIS is important to deflect criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza, and to underscore to Western audiences the dangers that threaten their societies.

Collaborations between various organizations are a significant force multiplier. One such example: groups that combine a number of operations rooms, such as Synchronized Hasbara War Rooms, which covers about 100 independent organizations. The partnerships are important not only for the spread of content but also for exchange of advice on modes of action, insights, and the precise tailoring of messages. Other WhatsApp groups upload content and messages to be disseminated (for example, the Hasbara Material for Dissemination, with about a thousand members).

### The Contribution of Civil Hasbara

The contribution of civil *hasbara* and influencers lies in their ability to respond quickly and in their extensive activity on social media. These assets were illustrated in the incident of the explosion at al-Ahli Hospital (October 17), which while initially blamed on Israel, was quickly proven to be caused by Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However, several hours elapsed between the false claims of Hamas and the presentation of the full facts by the IDF spokesperson, during which the Hamas narrative took root in the Middle East and in the West. The official Israeli response waited for the findings of the IDF investigation, while “murderous Israel” dominated the main international media channels. It was the intensive, determined, and long hard work by Israeli influencers who were backed by senior journalists with thousands of followers in Israel and worldwide that managed to counter, if only slightly, the destructive effect of the Hamas lies.

Nonetheless, there are questions about the ability to measure the impact of these organizations in the international arena: it seems that much of the *hasbara* activity by civil elements reverberates within domestic Israeli society but is less prominent elsewhere in the world. One way of assessing the effect is to examine the distribution of the narratives promoted on social media. For example, the calls to free the hostages and their personal stories were very effective on social media, compounding the condemnation of people around the world who removed the posters with the hostages’ pictures from public spaces. Another method of measurement is action taken against those who deny the Hamas crimes, which are shared many times on social media. For example, Samantha Pearson, director of the Sexual Assault Centre at Alberta University in Canada, who denied the crimes committed against women by Hamas, was fired after intensive action by Israeli activists, which also went viral on social media.

At the same time, there are messages and moves that could hurt Israeli interests, for example, videos and atrocity materials posted by a private initiative on a site

allegedly linked to Hamas. The content included boasting about murders as well as pictures and videos of atrocities. The benefit of such a site for the Israeli interest is doubtful, particularly because it was quickly found to be fake. In addition, some of the messages that were intended to raise Israeli morale could actually have an adverse effect on Israel's image in the eyes of a Western audience. For example, a widely distributed picture shows a soldier sitting on an armchair in Gaza, with Hebrew graffiti on the wall behind him: "We've started speaking Arabic, welcome to hell."

### The Linkage between Civil *Hasbara* and Government Ministries

Some of the *hasbara* initiatives operate independently, with no links to official *hasbara* elements, and are not interested in guidance regarding their messages or methods. These organizations have advanced capabilities in the fields of media, publicity, and social media, and have therefore achieved noticeable success in responding quickly and effectively to developments in the digital realm. There are also groups interested in collaboration with government elements. Recent weeks have seen closer contact between such groups and the government, evidenced by their receiving resources and official messages. Government ministries provide assistance to interested civil organizations, for example with grants for various initiatives. For example, the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs issued a call for proposal offering resources for civil *hasbara* initiatives, and there is also support for organizations that provide information to support *hasbara* efforts.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Civil organizations working on behalf of Israeli *hasbara* or influence in the international arena are a new and refreshing phenomenon working independently and/or closely with government ministries. These organizations are authentic and highly credible since they originate from ordinary civilians (like the Palestinian and the Ukrainian efforts). They do not seek to replace the system but to convey an aspect that the state as a state cannot do. Another clear advantage of civil groups in the activity of bottom-up campaigns is that they enable a high level of involvement of their target audiences, far more than in government campaigns.

However, about one month after the start of the war, there was a rapid decline in the extent of these civil organizations, and the gap widened between those that were successful in promoting narratives that served the Israeli interest in the international arena and other operations rooms that lacked real impact on the discourse or only influenced domestic Israeli society. In order to halt this trend and encourage civil organizations to continue their activity:

1. There is a need for a conceptual move from defensive *hasbara* that tries to justify Israel's position by means of facts alone, to influence efforts aimed at shaping the agenda among relevant target publics.
2. Government ministries engaged in *hasbara* must help provide resources, such as reserve duty days for people with functions in civil organizations, e.g., training, information, providing access to professional *hasbara* material.
3. Some of the organizations that have arisen during the war wish to retain their independence and do not want state guidance. They have a unique voice that has a place on the map of civil *hasbara* in Israel and can lead authentic and even surprising influencing efforts.

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Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen