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Hasbara Dilemmas: A Critical Analysis of Israel's Communication Strategies

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1. Introduction

The intricate interplay between media narratives, external communication strategies, and the pursuit of influence unfolds in Israel's media system and its approach to public diplomacy. Since asymmetric conflicts challenge journalistic ethics and practices, this paper explores the impact of asymmetry on external communication strategies by discussing the intersection of hegemonic influences, asymmetric conflicts, external communication, and public diplomacy. The Israel-Palestine conflict is used as a prime example given the disparities between Israel and Palestine in military strength, economic development, institutional recognition, and governance structures that contribute to the highly asymmetric nature of the conflict. This paper explores these key dimensions, encompassing hegemonic influences within the Israeli press, the conscious biases ingrained in journalistic narratives, and the paradoxes inherent in Israel's public diplomacy (*Hasbara*). This paper further navigates into the debate of Israel's *Hasbara*—a facet that intricately intertwines with external communication and branding. It examines how *Hasbara* adapts to reclaim the narrative amidst ongoing challenges, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Israeli public diplomacy strategies. It also delves into the transformation of *Hasbara* over the years, from traditional approaches to the digital era, shedding light on the intersection of media, hegemony, and public diplomacy, and their profound implications on Israel's intended public image and the contrasting reality of its actual international perception.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Communication in Asymmetric Conflicts

There is no universal definition of what an asymmetric conflict is and there are no fixed characteristics (Fronczak, 2019). In the realm of discussions on asymmetric conflict, the term gained prominence through the work of American scholar and professor Andrew Mack. In his article titled "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars", Mack offers a defining perspective on asymmetric conflict within the context of the Vietnam War. Among the distinctive features of

asymmetric actors outlined by Mack are imbalances in military resources, technological superiority on one side, the employment of both conventional and unconventional weaponry, disparities in manpower, the utilization of guerrilla warfare by the weaker side, and the influential role of social institutions within the superior side (Mack, 1975).

Asymmetric conflicts, often defined by a violent armed struggle between unequally matched adversaries, unfold when a powerful "topdog" confronts significantly less powerful "underdog(s)" (Daase, 1999, 12). In such conflicts, the imbalanced distribution of power capabilities shapes distinct interests and opens up varied ethical considerations in the realm of communication.

Journalism ethics can be viewed from different angles. *Formal journalism ethics* are the agreed-upon professional codes within certain systems, whereas *informal journalism ethics* are present through the discourse and the debate of the public. In formal journalism ethics and all documented professional codes within different frameworks, "truth", "objectivity", and "accuracy" are considered to be agreed-upon foundations when it comes to journalism ethics (Hafez, 2002). The established principles of journalism ethics can be shifted to the dynamic exploration of communication strategies in the realm of conflict representation. Examining literature about public diplomacy, persuasion, propaganda, and other related literature that explores communication in the settings of conflict, external communication can be defined as the unidirectional communication of an official organization that represents a conflict party and is directed towards foreign audiences (Hirschberger, 2021). In the analysis of external communication within conflict settings conducted by Hirschberger, two key phenomena emerged. One phenomenon, as explored in literature, underscores the efficacy of external communication when negative attributions are employed against the opponent "*shaming*". Conversely, the second phenomenon emphasizes the effectiveness of positive self-attribution "*branding*". Shaming is considered an effective tool in harming the reputation and the relationship of opponents within the international community, whereas branding is considered to be a strong tool in maintaining and improving the existing relationship of a party within the international community. Communication actors convince decision-makers of their

appealing qualities by winning the support of the public opinion of the targeted country or group, hence motivating the target audience to support the communicating actors (Hirschberger, 2021). The dynamics of asymmetric conflicts are shaped by the significantly unequal distribution of capabilities among conflict parties, leading to distinct advantages and disadvantages. Underdogs, with limited capabilities, are burdened by drawbacks, while topdogs, possessing ample capabilities, enjoy benefits. These disparities shape the interests of each party, as underdogs seek to challenge the status quo and address negative implications, while topdogs aim to maintain the status quo and safeguard their benefits. These interests, in turn, influence external communication strategies, with underdogs securitizing the conflict in their communication, while topdogs normalize it (Hirschberger, 2021). The theory suggests that "shaming" is well-suited for underdogs' communication, aligning with their needs, while "branding" is a strategy fitting for topdogs. Consequently, underdogs adopt a shaming-dominated strategy, and topdogs choose a branding-dominated approach for their external communication.

Hirschberger's study (2021) focuses on the Israel-Palestine conflict, delving into the impact of asymmetric structures on external communication strategies. The conflict is characterized by Israel's overwhelming dominance over Palestine, evident in significant disparities across military strength, economic development, institutional recognition, and governance structures. Israel, established in 1948, possesses a well-equipped military, a strong economy, and enjoys international recognition, while the Palestinian territories face economic fragility, limited international recognition, and challenges to governance due to occupation and internal conflicts. These multifaceted disparities contribute to a highly asymmetric conflict, shaping communication dynamics in profound ways (SIPRI 2018: 236; UNDP, 2016; Bouris & Kyris, 2017; Pitta, 2018). It is also essential to recognize a different perspective that suggests that non-state actors can often enjoy an advantage over states due to the romanticized image of the revolutionary figure. Whether portrayed as a modern-day Robin Hood or a champion of noble goals like liberty and national self-determination, these actors can engage in unspeakable atrocities and manipulation of

information while still garnering sympathy. By amplifying grievances, emphasizing suffering, and promising a better future, non-state actors create a narrative of victimhood. They exploit real and perceived injustices to fuel religious, ethnic, or economic crises (Kiss, 2012).

2.2. Public Diplomacy and Hasbara

Public Diplomacy

There has been a large amount of literature defining public diplomacy, and although there is still a high degree of vagueness in the definition, there is a consensus among social scientists (Melissen, 2007; Szondi, 2008; Gilboa, 2008; Gregory, 2008; Cull, 2009) that public diplomacy is a form of communication that occurs between governments, foreign governments, foreign audiences, international actors to persuade, inform, explain, and influence. Two overarching perspectives emerge regarding public diplomacy. The first perspective views it with skepticism, often portraying public diplomacy as an evil manipulative tool wielded by governments to advance their interests covertly. In contrast, the second perspective perceives public diplomacy as a necessary framework within which nations engage; this view recognizes it as an essential mechanism for fostering understanding, collaboration, and mutual benefit across borders (Snow & Taylor, 2009, 3-11).

Public Diplomacy of Israel: Hasbara

Hasbara, Hebrew for 'to explain', is Israel's method of conducting public diplomacy and is part of a national effort that is used as a tool to increase Israel's status in the international arena (Cummings, 2016). While explaining and persuading through public diplomacy is the known paradigm, the case of Israel is considerably comparable with the less neutral term of 'state propaganda' which can be defined as manipulation rather than persuasion (Aouragh, 2016). Some Israeli scholars believe that Israel's negative global image and diplomatic isolation stem from shortcomings in *Hasbara's* practices. They criticize the constant efforts of *Hasbara* to explain and justify Israel's actions, arguing that it may not be the most effective approach. However, this tendency in *Hasbara* traces back to its origins in the Zionist movement, led by Herzl, who

emphasized the importance of using *Hasbara* to convince and explain why the state of Israel needed to be established (Jędrzejewska, 2020).

3. Israel's Communication Strategies

3.1. Hegemonic Bias

Historically, the term “*hegemony*” referred to leadership or sovereign ruler, but the term has expanded to include the military, economic, and political dominance of one nation. Marxist scholars are usually concerned with the threat of hegemony in capitalist economies where there is exploitation of labor capitalists (the bourgeois) own the means of production and the workers (the proletariat) are producing the goods and the services (Herrmann, 2017). Beyond Marx’s focus, Gramsci discussed how hegemony is created when the view of the ruling class is considered the norm of the society and when the ruling class manages to actualize the status quo, hence reproducing “moral and political passivity” (Gramsci, 1971, 333). Tamar Liebes explores the pervasive hegemony within the Israeli press when it comes to reporting on Palestine and Israel and identifies four primary constraints contributing to this dominance. The first factor is the technical limitations that disallow reporters from seeing both sides, pushing reporters and viewers to one side. The second factor is the fact that even beyond conflict, journalists and publishers see themselves as actors of the Zionist movement and not outsiders. The third factor is that there is difficulty when it comes to criticizing the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The fourth factor is that the public sets a limit to the capacity of the press to criticize the establishment as it cannot afford to alienate its clients (Liebes, 1997). The press, influenced by the hurt inflicted on their side, may find themselves feeling misunderstood by the global community, leading them to inadvertently assume a missionary role. This deviation from previously discussed journalistic ethics raises concerns about impartiality and objective reporting. During the initial stages of the *First Intifada (1987--1993)*, the Palestinian uprising, the media initially included interviews with Palestinian victims. However, as the confrontations escalated, these individuals seemingly vanished from coverage, replaced by portrayals of them as "stone-throwing demons obliterated behind their Keffiyehs." (Liebes, 1997,

3). According to Liebes, the absence of the Palestinian perspective occurred because reporters faced challenges in traveling to unsafe areas, and Palestinian witnesses were generally hesitant to speak to Israeli journalists.

Consequently, the Palestinian side became associated with the stereotypical role of terrorists, allowing hegemony to take over unnoticed (Liebes, 1997). News coverage primarily focused on incidents where Israelis were harmed, contributing to a skewed narrative. This hegemonic skewed coverage is not solely a product of unconscious bias but also reflects the conscious awareness of Israeli journalists regarding their own Zionist identity. Whether there is a conflict or not, they have a responsibility towards what they consider the new, fragile, struggling society of which they are part (Liebes, 1997).

Zionism stands in contrast to the Jewish existence in exile, and this dichotomy is vividly portrayed through the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The IDF encapsulates the profound metamorphosis of the Jewish identity—from a physically vulnerable and economically dependent figure without territory or political autonomy to a resilient pioneer fighting to gain and preserve independence. Journalists are attuned to their audience, avoiding lines that might upset them. While they act as watchdogs in internal political matters, the same isn't true during security crises (Liebes, 1997). The public craves emotional unity and prefers reports that align with their side rather than presenting a balanced view. They want to hear from security hawks defending their position, not doves advocating compromise. People like a national rallying against a common enemy, communal celebrations of victories, and ceremonies for honoring heroes (Liebes, 1997, 5).

After the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, the Israeli right launched furious media campaigns against the government, which reached its peak with the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by a fanatic in 1995. (Reporters Without Borders, 2003).

The lack of neutrality, the phenomena of wanting to hear from defending security hawks, not compromising doves, and the emotional aspect of rallying against an enemy can also be observed in the Israeli press during the *Second Intifada*. In October 2000, in the first months of the *Second*

Intifada, the Geocartographia Institute conducted a survey in Jaffa to explore the impact of the Al Aqsa intifada on the coexistence between Arab and Jewish residents. The survey revealed notable findings, such as 30% of Jewish respondents expressing increased negative feelings towards Arabs, supporting extreme measures like closure, annulment of citizenship, or expulsion. Additionally, 40% of Jewish residents believed that, in the event of war, Jaffa's Arab residents would attack Jewish residents. However, a significant contrast emerged, with 83% of Arab residents and 55% of Jewish residents expressing belief in the resumption of coexistence. Despite these nuanced results, the newspaper "Yediot Ahronot" published a misleading headline, "In case of war - Jaffa's Arabs will attack Tel Aviv," accompanied by a misleading image depicting a rioting crowd (later revealed to be Jewish, not even Arab). The headline and image misrepresented the survey's actual findings and turned a study on the sentiments of Jaffa's residents into an incitement against its Arab population. While it's unclear if the editorial decision was a conscious act of incitement, the editors prioritized a sensational and dramatic front page over accurately representing the survey's nuanced results. This incident reflects a broader trend in the portrayal of the October 2000 events in the Israeli press, raising concerns about journalistic integrity and the potential impact of biased perceptions on media coverage (Dor, 2004). According to the annual report by Reporters Without Borders in May 2002, since the onset of the Second Intifada on September 29, 2000, there were 45 reported cases of journalists sustaining serious injuries from bullets. Reporters Without Borders attributed responsibility to the Israeli army and urged prompt investigations. However, when the IDF disclosed the results of its inquiries, it acknowledged only nine cases and absolved itself in all but one. Concurrently, in December 2002, Israeli authorities chose not to renew press cards for Palestinian correspondents working with foreign press outlets. Instead, they issued a "special assistant" orange card valid only in specific territories, restricting access to Israel. The justification cited was that Palestinian journalists were accused of "spreading propaganda" and failing to meet standards for balanced coverage. In addition to that, Tel Aviv introduced its Arabic TV channel to counter what it perceived as the "propaganda" of Arabic media. Despite the Israeli press's reputation

for independence and professionalism, there were claims that it functioned as a mouthpiece for the army, adopting the same language used by the IDF (Reporters Without Borders, 2003, 53-57).

3.2. Hasbara: Israel's Public Diplomacy

Hasbara has been extensively researched by scholars like Eytan Gilboa who is recognized as the first pioneer in studying this phenomenon comprehensively (Jędrzejewska, 2020). Gilboa's critique of *Hasbara* revolves around the perceived neglect by Israeli authorities, highlighting inadequate funding and the failure to engage with non-state actors effectively. He also notes the absence of efforts in the Arab world to present the Israeli perspective, allowing anti-Israel rhetoric to flourish. According to Gilboa, media coverage of Israel often tends to be distorted, inaccurate, and biased, resulting in diminished public support for Israeli policies. He asserts that Israel lacks a coherent nation branding strategy and lags behind its adversaries in utilizing new media effectively (Gilboa, 2006). Gilboa identifies that there is a "war of words," emphasizing how language frames conflicts and shapes global perceptions of justice and injustice. He argues that Israel has struggled to assert its preferred terms and vocabulary in shaping international discourse. Collaborating with Nechman Shai, Gilboa proposed a revamped *Hasbara* strategy to address the challenges posed by technological advancements and shifts in international relations (Gilboa & Shai, 2011). From 2000 to 2005, anti-colonial resistance intensified both online and offline, leaving a lasting impact on collective memory. Significant military campaigns like Operation Cast Lead (2008–09), Operation Pillar of Clouds (2012), and Operation Protective Edge (2014) subjected Gaza to violent campaigns condemned as war crimes. Gaza's blockade since 2006, causing economic strangulation and widespread impoverishment, has distinctively contributed to the deterioration of Israel's public image (Philo & Berry, 2011).

In the summer of 2014, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge, a seven-week military offensive on Gaza resulting in over 2,000 Palestinian deaths, 10,000 injuries, and 500,000 displacements. A concurrent cyber war emerged, flooding social media with graphic images, and leading to global protests. Citizen journalism played a crucial role in documenting the Palestinian tragedy and

disrupted the mainstream media, sparking debates about Israel's media approaches.(Aouragh, 2016). Aouragh characterizes *Hasbara* as the process of “manufacturing consent” for Israel's dominance and “manufacturing discontent” towards Palestinian self-determination, revealing inherent ambiguities in conventional public diplomacy frameworks. *Hasbara* faces a significant challenge because public diplomacy research is typically centered on 'liberal democracies,' creating a core contradiction. It struggles to present a sanitized global image of colonial policies toward Palestinians while maintaining domestic support. Navigating a complex terrain, *Hasbara* grapples with a dual pursuit—international approval for Israel's occupation and the management of military interventions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This challenge is profound due to Israel's unwavering commitment to Zionist and colonialist objectives, hindering any reevaluation of moral standing (Aouragh, 2016). The persistent tension within Israel's goals impedes the possibility of enhanced moral authority for *Hasbara*, making any shift towards a theoretical 'post-conflict' stance challenging. P.Taylor's argument that public diplomacy takes a backseat during wars contradicts *Hasbara's* attempts to function in a “post-conflict” setup (Taylor, 2009). On the other hand, Ron Schleifer criticizes Israel's *Hasbara* for being too soft, suggesting a focus on undermining the other side through psychological operations (psyops) rather than traditional diplomacy (Schleifer, 2003). *Hasbara* volunteers engage in manipulating facts or making unsupported accusations of anti-Semitism, a behavior often referred to as 'trolling.' They establish public fronts to attract supporters by disseminating repetitive views and resources through online groups. This marks the evolution of *Hasbara* into a more confrontational aspect of Israeli public diplomacy, involving tactics like digitally altering images through Photoshop, such as changing texts on placards from 'Stop Israeli Terrorism' to 'Stop Hamas Terrorism in Israel.' Additionally, they may attribute pro-Israeli quotes to historical figures like Martin Luther King(Kiblawi, 2004). Between 2008 and 2012, Israel responded to a damaged international reputation, exacerbated by the 2006 Lebanon war and Operation Cast Lead in 2008, by intensifying its *Hasbara* efforts. *Hasbara* 2.0 emerged, reflecting a conceptual debate on adopting aggressive propaganda or subtle public

diplomacy and a technical upgrade labeled as digital diplomacy. The shift aimed to counter global solidarity with Palestinians and negative perceptions of Israel, particularly through social media. Guidelines evolved to advocate for a more nuanced *Hasbara* strategy in response to real events and increased pro-Palestinian activism (Aouragh, 2016).

3.3. Branding and External Communication

“The Israel Project’s 2009 GLOBAL LANGUAGE DICTIONARY”, leaked on Newsweek online immediately after it was created, acts as a guide on effectively utilizing *Hasbara* volunteers and has strongly influenced Israeli public diplomacy (Cockburn, 2014). The report outlines the strategies behind well-organized media *Hasbara*, highlighting Israel's shift toward a positive and soft discourse. It specifies the language to be used in promoting the pro-Israel perspective and offers an example of reframing the 'right of return' (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) as an unreasonable Palestinian 'demand' hindering peace efforts. The document, penned by conservative U.S. pollster and strategist Frank Luntz, draws on thorough opinion polls and suggests utilizing a more positive language approach while sidestepping specific conflict-related subjects (“D1. The Israel Project, “25 Rules for Effective Communication,” 2009). Similarly, research conducted by the Israeli center-left think tank Molad (Molad, 2012) and Vibe Israel, a private non-profit organization aiming to “enhance Israel's image”, recommended that Israel should focus on its positive attributes (Gilboa, 2006). Concentrating on positive attributes is considered as a branding strategy in the context of external communication, serving as a tool to uphold and enhance current relationships or establish new connections with the global community or specific third-party entities. In this approach, communicators aim to persuade foreign decision-makers of their positive qualities, either directly or indirectly, by garnering support from public opinion in the targeted country (or its politically influential segments) (Hirschberger, 2021). This, in turn, pressures decision-makers to adopt favorable stances toward the communicators. If successful, this branding approach yields two benefits: firstly, it can inspire the target audience to support the communicator (and refrain from negative interventions), and secondly, it offers supporting arguments to existing

backers abroad, justifying their support for the communicator (Hirschberger, 2021). Israeli practitioners emphasize the need to move beyond the exclusive depiction of Israel through the lens of the conflict, deeming it disadvantageous. They see showcasing Israel's economic attractiveness as crucial, presenting a significant opportunity to safeguard, foster, and potentially enhance the country's economic status. Recognizing the potential of nation-branding campaigns, Israelis believe in the capacity of positive national image promotion to attract foreign direct investments, boost tourism, and elevate diplomatic standing (Manor, 2015). Given Israel's capabilities and the advantageous structure provided by the conflict, Israelis are content with the status quo and aim to defend the benefits they derive from political and military control, economic prosperity, and strong global ties. Rather than solely focusing on the conflict, Israel seeks to utilize external communication to safeguard its various privileges and benefits. Since branding is the most effective strategy for highlighting, promoting, safeguarding, and fostering Israel's non-conflict-related strengths, the Israeli side, being the dominant “topdog” adopts a strategy dominated by branding in external communication such as focusing on narratives that highlight achievements beyond the conflict to protect and enhance the Israeli economy and international standing (Hirschberger, 2021).

4. Discussion

Israel's media system has factors that contribute to hegemonic influences on journalistic narratives, and the media coverage during the *Second Intifada* exemplifies how this hegemonic influence can skew narratives. Palestinian perspective diminished in coverage and was replaced by stereotypical portrayals that reinforced the biased narrative that primarily focused on Israeli harm. The characteristics of hegemony and biased media in the Israeli system are reflected on the examples provided in 3.1. In the realm of internal communication, communicating with domestic audiences, a noticeable deviation from established journalistic ethics is evident, giving rise to concerns about impartiality and objective reporting. Liebes argued that the impartial coverage was also a result of the journalist's conscious identification with Zionism (Liebes, 1997), and the audience's preference for a unified stance against a common enemy further limited domestic reporting. When it comes to

external communication, and communicating with foreign audiences, Israel adopts branding as a dominant strategy, centered on positive attributes and non-conflict-related strengths, encapsulating Israel's endeavor to sustain and enhance its privileges while simultaneously defending its current status quo (Hirschberger, 2021). The current status quo and the privileges that Israel aims to sustain were defined as a perfect example of asymmetric conflict by Hirschberger, and it can also be more concretely defined as a settler *colonial apartheid entity* (*A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution* | HRW, 2021; *Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians, 2022*; *A Regime of Jewish Supremacy From the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid*, 2021).

Israeli scholars frequently critique *Hasbara*, arguing that it consistently strives to present a favorable image of Israel and suggesting a need for a more assertive approach (Schleifer, 2003). Despite *Hasbara's* common classification as Israel's public diplomacy, there are inherent contradictions in this label. The primary contradiction arises from the conventional understanding of public diplomacy as a tool utilized post-conflict. According to Taylor, public diplomacy should take a backseat during wars (Taylor, 2009), and this contradicts the nature of this ongoing conflict and the current pre-existing occupation. Hence, improving Israel's *Hasbara* and public diplomacy strategies does not work given that it is against the whole colonial essence of what Zionism is about and that there is no "post-conflict" setup as long as the Israeli government is fueled by modern Zionism, which in nature aims to ethnically cleanse Palestinians (Pappe, 2007). Another contradiction is that public diplomacy analyses are researched and analyzed in liberal democracies, whereas Israel does not pass as a liberal democracy. Israel deploys *Hasbara* methods, branding itself as the sole democracy in the Middle East. Despite arguments by scholars, including Robert Dahl (1971), that Israel is a Jewish democratic state, it is regarded as an ethnocracy, applying democratic principles selectively. Claims of "Israeli democracy" within academia aim to project a democratic image, despite the reality of millions of Palestinians governed under military occupation or with secondary citizenship status (Lustick, 2020).

Since the 1990s, many critical Israeli scholars such as Sabbagh (2021), Busbridge (2018), and Ariely (2021) have started questioning the presumed democratic nature of Israel. These scholars have denied the mainstream Israeli discourse and have characterized the Israeli regime as an "ethnocracy" rooted in colonialism, with some such as Anderson (2016) and Yiftachel (2006) characterizing Israel also as an apartheid.

Participating in public diplomacy is justified by the belief that opposition to a nation's power could hinder its pursuit of interests. While *Hasbara* is officially categorized as Israel's public diplomacy, it draws parallels with the less neutral term "state propaganda," suggesting manipulation rather than neutral communication or "explaining". Looking at the previous point mentioned in section 2.2 and Snow and Taylor's debate regarding whether public diplomacy is necessarily evil or not, the literature review of Israeli public diplomacy shows that the idea of public diplomacy as "evil" is in tune with the Israeli approach to public diplomacy (Aouragh, 2016).

Eytan Gilboa argues that Israeli authorities' neglect of *Hasbara* has failed to persuade the world to adopt its vocabulary (Gilboa, 2006). This assertion aligns with Tamaer Liebes' discussion that highlighted how the "*Intifada*" or Palestinian uprising was labeled the Palestinians' vocabulary. Despite Israeli media hegemony, US correspondents reported outside the typical Israeli framing. The word "uprising" in Hebrew was deemed threatening, but the IDF couldn't control the reporting scenes as the American press collaborated with Palestinians on the ground, equipping them with cameras. "*The intifada transformed the glamorous image of the brave and moral Israeli soldier fighting a war against an enemy to an aggressive ruthless occupier*" (Liebes, 1997, 46).

Jędrzejewska's study found that Israel struggled to control the narrative not only during the *Second Intifada* but also on multiple occasions. Gaps in Israeli public diplomacy, particularly in the *Hasbara* strategy, were identified through a qualitative analysis. Examining challenges in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, where traditional media failed to control the global narrative, resulted in a decline in Israel's image. In response, the paper outlined a revised *Hasbara* strategy by Israeli authorities, emphasizing the use of online platforms, including social media, to disseminate

real-time information, shape public opinion, and counter anti-Israel campaigns (Jędrzejewska, 2020). In recent years, Israel has increasingly incorporated online platforms and social media into its *Hasbara* strategies, notably establishing a permanent *Hasbara* department within the IDF in 2012, and according to the IDF's social media chief, Avital Leibovich ““The military is a closed organization, it doesn't share with other people—it uses harsh language. Here we are exactly the opposite, we are creative, we are open, we are interacting, and we are sharing. This is something very unique.” (Borgstede & Semler, 2013, 59) and this is exactly what this *Hasbara* department was trying to do by branding the military as a creative and fun organization. During times of conflict, dedicated social media teams are established in what is known as war situations or operation rooms, to participate in political *astroturfing* (Corporate Watch, 2012).

As Israel's *Hasbara* techniques advanced, journalism practices also evolved with a heightened presence on social media, as seen in the coverage of the 2014 Gaza war. Journalists not only reported from the field but also engaged on platforms like Twitter, operating outside the traditional confines of official media. This mirrors the observed changes in journalistic storytelling rhythms during the Arab Spring in 2011 (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). These journalists witnessed the immediate aftermath of the bombings and their raw and unfiltered accounts portrayed the reality of their experiences, which contrasts with the polished and prepared corporate-style *Hasbara* content. For instance, CNN's Diana Magnay, who was then fired from CNN, showed discomfort when she reported from a hilltop where Israelis cheered bombings in Gaza (Calderone, 2014). Similarly, Peter Beaumont described witnessing an Israeli naval shelling that killed four children playing football on a beach, his shock was evident in his Twitter comments and Guardian article (Beaumont, 2014). NBC's Ayman Mohyeldin captured the parents' reactions to this incident as they realized what had happened (Greenwald, 2014). These journalists' emotional responses become part of the news story itself, spreading further through their connected platforms. The journalists' reporting in the summer of 2014, coupled with an increased online presence, led to a divergence between Israel's *Hasbara* message and the actual reporting. This was particularly

impactful since these journalists predominantly worked within mainstream media networks, intensifying existing fault lines and potentially causing further fractures in the *Hasbara* vision. During this phase, *Hasbara* becomes more predictable and vulnerable, and when pushed to extremes, it tends to inflict greater harm. For example, encouraging individuals to follow a propaganda page promoting Israel's tourism amid the ongoing severity of war diminished the emotional impact of *Hasbara's* efforts. (Aouragh, 2016). Even though Israeli experts stress the critical importance of branding Israel beyond the conflict lens, and focusing on Israel's "attractiveness" (Manor, 2015), and that this is a *Hasbara* method of promoting Israel with nation branding and tourism is the strategy (Hirschberger, 2021), it was ineffective in the case of Gaza in 2014. During the 2014 Gaza war, the IDF had a significant online presence with 292,000 Twitter followers, in contrast to al-Qassam's (Hamas military wing) more modest 11,900 followers. The digital disparity is influenced by the colonization of digital infrastructures, revealing cyber imperialism. Major platforms, often based in the U.S., frequently block Hamas' accounts, highlighting the lack of internet neutrality. Despite this, pro-Palestinian hashtags gained more traction than *Hasbara*-generated content. This perspective provides a more insightful explanation for why, despite Israel's reputation as a formidable rival with an undoubtedly impressive media apparatus and well-funded public diplomacy, *Hasbara* struggles to effectively sway hearts and minds. (Aouragh, 2016).

A series of surveys conducted between 2002 and 2012, captured the evolving international sentiment towards Israel, particularly in response to those military actions. Polls conducted in the UK following the 2014 Gaza attack revealed significant shifts in public opinion. According to surveys by YouGov (2014) and The Sunday Times (2014), 62 percent of the British public believed that the Israeli government was committing war crimes, and 51 percent considered Israel's actions unjustified. These findings underscored a growing critical perspective within traditionally pro-Israeli media outlets. An increasing proportion of individuals categorized Israel, alongside Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea, as among the most unfavorably regarded nations and Israel was

considered the fourth most negatively viewed one. The trend extends beyond the UK, with EU countries such as Spain and France showing increased negativity, as well as other English-speaking nations like Australia and Canada (*Negative Views of Russia on the Rise: Global Poll*, 2014).

Additionally, there was already a decline in support among the UK's Jewish community, attributed to discomfort with Israel's right-wing politics and ethno-racial expectations for solidarity (Miller et al., 2013).

More recently, and in the ongoing Israeli state-sponsored attack on Gaza that started in October 2023, or what is also characterized as a genocide as per South Africa's International Court of Justice case (Rauhala & Fahim, 2024), it is also valuable to observe how *Hasbara* is struggling to own the narrative. An article discussing the current *Hasbara* in the Gaza war highlighted that public opinion has shifted, with Palestine gaining sympathy for Israel. Despite Israel's initial support due to Hamas's brutal attack, the narrative has changed, favoring Palestine. The article suggests Israel's traditional *Hasbara* approach is inadequate and calls for a more impactful strategy to shape its narrative effectively. (Siman-Tov et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion

The complex dynamics of the asymmetrical Israeli-Palestinian conflict and occupation impact Israel's media system at both the internal and the external levels. Internally, when communicating with domestic audiences, Israel's communication revealed a complex interplay of hegemonic influences and conscious biases. Whereas Israel's external communication with foreign audiences and the practice of public diplomacy, *Hasbara*, highlight the intricate interplay between information dissemination, power imbalances, and the pursuit of influence on the international stage. Formal journalism ethics, emphasizing truth, objectivity, and accuracy, intersect with the challenges posed by both domestic and external communication strategies in situations marked by asymmetry, as seen in Israel's occupation of Palestine. The analysis of Israel's media system and *Hasbara* strategies reveals a complex interplay of hegemonic influences, conscious biases, and attempts to shape international perceptions; the hegemony within the Israeli press, as highlighted by Tamar

Liebes, contributes to skewed narratives.

Israel's *Hasbara* faces inherent contradictions. The constant emphasis on branding and positive external communication appears at odds with the ongoing conflict and occupation. Moreover, the limitations of *Hasbara* become apparent in asymmetric conflicts and ongoing settler colonial contexts, where the pursuit of moral standing faces obstacles rooted in the commitment to Zionist ideals. The integration of online platforms and social media into *Hasbara* strategies, notably during conflicts like the 2014 Gaza war, shifted media dynamics. Journalists, venturing beyond traditional outlets, challenged the polished *Hasbara* content. Emotional and unfiltered reporting in moments of conflict could diverge from the intended message, potentially fracturing the narrative. Global public opinion gradually shifted towards viewing Israel as a military aggressor, challenging attempts to conceal conflict images. The concealed reality of colonialism, masked by ideological bias (Zionism), hindered *Hasbara* from presenting logical explanations. In response to Schleifer's question about how a state with nuclear weapons and reputable intelligence services can face failures (Schleifer, 2013), the answer lies within the question itself. The constant prioritization of military doctrines, a persistent condition for Israel, points to the root cause of the *Hasbara* stalemate. *Hasbara* is unable to undergo a "post-conflict" shift as long as it remains disconnected from justice for Palestinians, a stance that would inherently challenge the foundations of the Zionist project. The widening gap between Israel's intended image and international perception is evident, with growing public support for pro-Palestinian movements.

This paper illustrates how, especially during times of war, alternative narratives challenge prevailing media perspectives. This was expressed in numerous capitals in 2014 and again in 2024 with chants like "*In our thousands—in our millions—we are all Palestinians,*" signifying the strength of (pro-) Palestinian public diplomacy as a grassroots, people-driven objective, independent of government interventions. The fundamental observation, therefore, is that each time Israeli propaganda secures increased budgets, it ultimately results in disillusionment. Paradoxically, grassroots diplomacy—public relations grounded in universal principles of justice and

equality—possesses qualities that money cannot buy. Hence, a more assertive *Hasbara* tends to motivate greater solidarity for Palestinians in the process.

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I herewith declare that I have composed the present work myself and without the use of any other than the cited sources and aids. Sentences or parts of sentences quoted are marked as such; other references concerning the statement and scope are indicated by full details of the publications concerned. This work in the same or similar form has not been submitted to any examination body and has not been published. This paper/thesis was not yet, even in part, used in another examination or as a course performance.

Erfurt, 03.03.2024

