

Israel's Public Diplomacy Strategies "Hasbara" Case Study: Pinkwashing in Israeli Politics

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Abstract

This research examines the Israeli strategy of public diplomacy, referred to as "Hasbara," which Israel uses to shape an international image and reputation to distract attention from its human rights violations against the Palestinians. Public diplomacy serves as a tool for states to influence governments by influencing foreign peoples through branding and selective narratives. Israel has used this success effectively and with huge funding to successfully portray itself as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, especially through disinformation initiatives and promoting itself as the only supporter in the Middle East and protector of the rights of Palestinian queers and bisexuals to hide its violations against them. This research reveals how public diplomacy works, and in the Israeli case study, how it builds its reputation as a progressive and open society while killing and exterminating Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and violating their rights. Through the descriptive analytical approach, the research examines the Israeli tactics in its public diplomacy, including media campaigns and digital influence, by focusing on marketing the city of Tel Aviv as the gay capital in the region, while it randomly kills Palestinians who may also be gay. In this research paper and in the case study of Israeli pinkwashing, I will evaluate Hasbara in shaping foreign public opinion and how Israel was able to hide colonial policies and manipulate public diplomacy as a propaganda tool.

Keywords: *Public Diplomacy (PD), Hasbara, PinkWashing.*

Introduction

For more than 70 years, Israel has been trying to polish its image in front of the world, and I can say that it has succeeded in doing so "to some extent." Over the past years, Israel has promoted itself as a democratic state in the Middle East and as the state that protects minorities in the region (i24 news, 2024) But is this true? And what are the implications of that?

The basis of public diplomacy is to reach foreign audiences and convince them of the story to attract the attention of peoples and influence governments. This is what Israel does, for example, with heterosexuals. It promotes itself as protecting the rights of homosexuals in the region and is the only country that hosts Pride Month every year in Tel Aviv (elal) This is what attracts foreign audiences and even boosts tourism there, but what foreign audiences do not know is that in the same city, "Tel Aviv", where Pride Month takes place and Israel brags about its democracy to the world, it hides the fact that Tel Aviv is a city built on the lands of the village of Sheikh Munis, whose people were displaced by Israel and whose lands were annexed to the city of Tel Aviv (Encyclopedia of Palestinian Villages).

This is not the only issue in which Israel exploits its public diplomacy to polish its image before the foreign public. Despite Israel's entry into many international treaties that protect human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the four Geneva conventions (UN, 2009) And other treaties that oblige Israel to protect human rights, Israel always violates these treaties. For example, it commits heinous crimes against Palestinian prisoners, treats them in the worst way, and deprives them of their most basic rights. The latest thing Israel did was sexual assaults against Palestinian prisoners in prisons (الحرّة, 2024). Israel has also been classified as an apartheid state according to Amnesty International (international, 2022).

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In this research, using the descriptive and analytical approach, we will understand more deeply the concept of public diplomacy and why public diplomacy is important for governments and how governments use it. We will also review more of the Israeli public diplomacy “Hasbara” and how Israel uses it to polish its image in front of the foreign public.

Literature Review

Some books and articles are used in this paper to help understand the definition of public diplomacy and how diplomacy developed, and to explain pinkwashing and its effect on public diplomacy. While (Melissen, 2005,16-27) focused on public diplomacy and the ordinary individuals effect, he mentions the importance of propaganda, nation-branding, and foreign cultural relations and how they are similar with public diplomacy, (Seib, 2013) shows how the media affects the public and how honesty is important to convince people with verified sources that can easily be trusted. (Cull, 2009,17-23) introduced PD and its evolution as a concept by delving into the core approaches of this medium. (Snow, 2020) explained how public diplomacy developed and how politicians were underestimating its importance and viewing it as an aid to the official diplomacy conducted by state actors. (Gregory, 2014,282-286) presented the importance and interrelation of social sciences, psychology, culture, anthropology, scholarship, and political communications in public diplomacy. Samuel Huntington believes that civilizations will be the main source of conflict after the Cold War. (Cicek, 2022) moved to showcasing how soft power has begun to take its place in government policies in the form of soft diplomacy on the principle of shared value to the world, especially in countries that use art, sports, and culture as an essential part of the statecraft to reflect its civilized image to the outside world. (Golan, 2019) focused on the importance of employing digital means in the field of public diplomacy, which includes digital platforms, television broadcasting organizations, or even websites. (Stelowska, 2015,63-68) works are displayed to show how foreign diplomacy works depending on art and culture, important tools for PD. (Manor, 2019,409-411) evaluates the importance of interaction through social media platforms and its impact on changing the public's opinion online. (البياس) describes the definition of pinkwashing and how Israel uses it with other terms like greenwashing, it also focuses on how Israel's public diplomacy changes from being the oppressor to being the savior. (Alqaws, 2020) focused on the Palestinian queers' life under the Israeli occupation while they face apartheid every day at Israeli checkpoints, it also shows the fact about the queer-friendly city (Tel Aviv). (Shafie, 2015,83-86) discusses one of the most important techniques that Israel uses in the Pink Sage, which is rescuing Palestinian queers from their anti-gay families and societies by bringing them to live in Tel Aviv

Theoretical Framework

The Evolution of Public Diplomacy

The term public diplomacy was first coined in 1965 by Edmund Julian, Julian defined public diplomacy at that time as the influence of public attitudes on the formation and implementation of foreign policies. It goes beyond traditional diplomacy in international relations, as it focuses on the development of public opinion by governments in other countries and interacts with groups and interests among the country whose interests can be benefited (Saliu, 2019).

Since the end of World War II, the activities of diplomats have expanded from being confined to secrecy to establishing relations between governments and citizens, which is known as public diplomacy, and its goal is for governments to feed public opinion in other countries. Public diplomacy supports the interaction of groups, private institutions and interests in one country with their counterparts in other countries, which makes the flow of information and its passage between countries easier. The most important thing that distinguishes public diplomacy in its development is that, first, it is characterized by transparency and that it is rapidly spreading, which does not apply to old official diplomacy. Second, the practice of diplomacy has moved from governments only and officially to citizens and societies as well. Third: The topics associated with old official diplomacy are always linked to governments and their policies, while public diplomacy topics are related to the positions and behaviors of citizens (سيراكوسا, 2010).

Today, public diplomacy includes a wide range of activities provided by the state, such as cultural exchanges that help bring peoples closer together, educational programs that enhance the exchange of knowledge, in addition to media and digital communication in the age of technology that helps spread messages and shape the public image of the novelist at the international level. Today, the world is witnessing many new terms in the world of diplomacy, which we can all put under the umbrella of public diplomacy. Among these terms are: digital diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and many other new terms in the world of diplomacy (يونس, 2024).

What is Public Diplomacy

We can define public diplomacy as the practice of dealing with foreign publics to enhance trust and build relationships with the public. It works by enhancing interaction with the public as well (USC)

Public diplomacy can also be defined as the efforts sponsored by the state that aim to communicate directly with the foreign public. It includes all official efforts to persuade all sectors targeted by foreign public opinion according to a strategy that supports the government's goals. It includes targeted campaigns carried out by non-governmental organizations or decision-makers to influence public opinion, or even efforts made in the media to persuade the public of the narrative that the state wants to convey. (McClelland, 2025)

There are two types of public diplomacy approaches: branding and advocacy. Branding is the strategy a country uses to promote a positive image of itself. It reflects the identity of the country and highlights certain elements of its history, cultural production and foreign policy in order to make it attractive and link it to the positives of the country (learn).

Advocacy refers to objective strategies to achieve specific goals, and here the role of diplomats is to contribute to placing a specific issue on the local political agenda and encouraging governments to take measures (learn).

For example, in the recent conflicts in the Middle East, when America intervened in Iraq in 2003 and presented its initiative as a war against weapons of mass destruction under the pretext of spreading democracy (learn).

What is Israel's public diplomacy (Hasbara) and how Israel succeeded by using it ?

If we translated the word Hasbara it mean " explaining" and it was created in the early 20th century by the polish zionist and journalist Nahum Sokolow, we can consider Hasbara as a modern face of propaganda but it can also consider as a description of the more granular (Hamad, 2023).

Hasbara can also be defined as a multi-faceted process through which Israel deals with public relations through various media outlets and educational initiatives, such that these outlets show the Israelis as victims and that the Palestinians are the ones trying to kill them or erase them from existence, Indeed, for example, Israel claimed in the war of extermination on the Gaza Strip in 2023 that Hamas beheaded 40 Israeli children during its attack on October 7. This claim was refuted and was never true, despite Israel's attempt to convince foreign peoples of the truth of this statement (Suraya).

Hasbara imposes the free flow of information and does not restrict it. It lets information flow within an open market of opinion. In this context, it seeks to promote selective listening. The purpose of this is to restrict the demand for information, not its free flow. Thus, Hasbara focuses on limiting the public's acceptance of information, although it adapts to new information technology. We notice this in the last war on the Gaza Strip, as Israel declared war on Twitter (X). We saw how Israel always tries to turn the truth upside down and show its argument, which is self-defense under the pretext of eliminating terrorism (policy council)

According to the Jewish daily newspaper Forward, Israel has been working on its brand since 2005. The Israeli Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's Office and the Finance Ministry concluded three years of consultation to launch the "Brand Israel" campaign, which calls for shaping the country's image so that it appears relevant and modern (Schulman, 2011).

This is not reflected in Israel's internal laws. For example, Israel passed the Jewish Nation-State Law (قانون اساسي، 2018)، which makes any non-Jew a second-class citizen and does not have the same rights as a Jew in the state.

During the journey of Israeli Haszbara Israel succeeded by promoting itself as a democratic country in the middle east, otherwise many terms appeared to make those terms clear and let people understand the reality behind those terms such as Pinkwashing, whitewashing and green washing .

In this research we will take pinkwashing as a case study to talk about and explain how Israel uses it in its public diplomacy and how Israel showed itself as a savior of palestinians queers.

Case study: Pinkwashing and how Israel deceived foreign.

What is pinkwashing

Pinkwashing was first coined in 1985 by the advocacy group breast cancer action; however, pro-Palestine gives it a different meaning which refers to Israel's promotion of LCBTQ+ rights as a strategy to divert attention from human rights violations in Palestine (Elsesser, 2024).

Israel is exploiting the issue of Palestinian queers in an exaggerated way to show the world that it is the first protector of homosexuals in the region and that they are at risk if they do not resort to it, but how does this happen and Israeli propaganda works on it? Israel's strategy of pinkwashing began in 2005 under the slogan "Oasis of Middle Eastern Democracy" and it reflects the image of sexual and gender diversity within a policy aimed at washing Israel's hands of blood (play, 2023).

In 2007, Israel began to attract young males through marketing aimed at heterosexual men. David Saranga of the Israeli Consulate General started a project with Maxim magazine, a photo shoot called "Women of the Israel Defense Forces," which featured Israeli women who looked like models serving in the military in swimsuits. In 2009, Israel ranked 192nd out of 200 countries in the Brand Index, worse than Yemen and North Korea. That year, Israel announced a conference in October through the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association to promote Israel as a global gay destination. The Lebanese gay and lesbian organization Helem called for a boycott. In 2010, the Israeli Foreign Ministry allocated NIS 100 million to develop its brand, according to The Globe. That same year, Scott Biro, a public relations and social media specialist, announced Gay Jew Ban Israel's Ministry of Tourism and the largest gay advocacy organization "Agoda" will promote Tel Aviv as a suitable tourist destination for European gays TEL AVIV GAY VIBE (Schulman, 2011).

With an investment of 340 million NIS (88.1 million\$), an international marketing campaign was launched to market Tel Aviv as an international tourist destination for gays, especially in the Middle East. The campaign will be run in England and Germany, noting that these countries include large numbers of gays and lesbians. The campaign will include advertisements on websites and magazines dedicated to the gay community and will showcase everything the city has to offer gays through gay tourism. The campaign has dedicated pages on Facebook and Twitter to support the efforts and promote Tel Aviv as the new gay capital. A new website, Gay Tel Aviv, has also been created. The website begins with a sentence that summarizes the essence of the campaign: "Among the golden shores of the Mediterranean, one of the most interesting new gay capitals in the world stands out." The matter did not stop there, as there are now direct and cheap flights from both England and Germany directly to Tel Aviv (Sadeh, 2021).

"In the name of love" is a phrase written in Arabic and English on a rainbow flag raised by an Israeli soldier in Gaza over the rubble (Masarwa & Alsafadi, 2023) caused by the Israeli destruction of the entire region during the war of extermination on the Gaza Strip. In doing so, Israel is trying to show itself as having come to protect the rights of homosexuals in the Strip and that it is coming in the name of love.

The pinkwashing narrative is not limited to the issue of homosexuality as a right for the Palestinians and Israel protects them through its democracy and openness, but there is more to this issue, as it in turn takes a racist colonial logic that strips the original identity of the Palestinian people and strips them of their humanity by portraying the Palestinian people as sexually and gender-suppressing its individuals, and here Israel plays the role of the savior in whom the occupier dissolves and becomes a haven for rights violators in Palestine, and this is a strategy to legitimize Zionist colonialism in a larger and broader way. Here, the idea of pinkwashing consecrates the idea of Israeli liberation and Palestinian backwardness, as it confines homophobia to the Arab Palestinian society only, and thus pinkwashing does not deal with the Israeli/Palestinian reality as a dynamic of colonizer and colonized, but rather as a distinction between the open and modern on the one hand and the backward and gender- and sexually oppressive on the other. In this case, the dynamic of colonizer and colonized replaces the binary of enlightened-backward, accepting-homophobe, and becomes, according to the Zionist narrative, the truth (جمال, 2015).

On December 11, 2023, during the genocidal war on the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, Israeli accounts published a post on Twitter showing a picture of two gay couples, one of whom was kneeling down and proposing to his partner, who appeared in military uniform. The post read: "Shmuel went to the border to see his partner, Dennis, a combat soldier, a company commander, then got down on one knee to propose to his partner." (israel, 2023)

At first glance, upon reading the post, the reader will see the extent of Israel's freedom and that same-sex marriage in Israel is legal. This is what Israel is working on by promoting the city of Tel Aviv as the "gay capital of the Middle East." However, in reality, there is no law regulating same-sex marriage in Israel to this day (حمدان, 2023). Even in 2018, the Israeli Knesset objected to passing a bill that would allow same-sex marriage, which reflects the lack of acceptance by all segments of local society, while Israeli official bodies continue to defend homosexuals, their rights, and their right to marry (MCD, 2020). Israel uses random killing in Palestine, as it did in the war of extermination in the Gaza Strip. It also kills homosexuals because it does not differentiate between queer and non-queer Palestinians when killing them.

Israeli officials and organizations like Agoda, which collaborate to promote gay tourism to Israel, often work through the false representation of visiting Tel Aviv. Agoda points out that it does not take sides and is always on the side of gays, as if gay lives are the only things that matter, which implies that it is acceptable to visit Israel as long as you believe in peace, and as if what is happening between Israel and Palestine is merely a struggle of equal forces, not an Israeli military occupation aimed at erasing Palestinian identity or an oppressive force against Palestinians. In order to encourage the final product of "globalization" to be removed from the moral implications of the manufacturing process, tourists are encouraged to forget about politics and the Israeli crimes taking place in Palestine, and to distract tourists by simply enjoying what they hear about the gay-friendly city (Schulman, 2011).

The most dangerous thing is Israel's focus on the cafes and luxury shopping malls in Tel Aviv at the same time that the Arab towns in Israel suffer from neglect of a question on the security level or other levels. We have witnessed the crime rate among Arabs due to the lack of presence of Israeli security forces and police in the Arab towns (i 24 news, 2024), which constitutes evidence that Israeli society is exactly like the Israeli state itself, which also reflects Israel's racism from building barriers and the annexation wall and racial segregation. Israel has been classified as an apartheid state (HAMS, 2022), contrary to all its claims of openness, democracy and protection of human rights. The matter becomes different when it comes to dealing with the Palestinians.

Conclusion

Israel always tries to succeed in positioning itself as a democratic state that respects human rights, especially homosexuals, while systematically suppressing Palestinians. The main aspect that Israel adopts is the strategy of deception, which involves exploiting the rights of homosexuals to distract attention from all of Israel's colonial policies and apartheid in Palestine.

The research showed how Israel portrays the city of Tel Aviv as the city of peace and love in the Middle East and that it is the capital of homosexuals in the region. At the same time, Israel works to distract people from the reality of the violations it commits against the Palestinians and that the city of Tel Aviv is originally a Palestinian village whose residents were displaced in 1948. The Israeli occupation also displaced the residents of the city of Jaffa (TRT, 2023) and attempted to Judaize the city and expel Palestinians from it.

When we use public diplomacy as a tool of propaganda, it is a double-edged sword. It can be useful in distorting reality and shaping foreign public opinion. The campaigns that Israel has undertaken to promote itself in a case study of pinkwashing illustrate the same time that it violates international law and human rights. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of increasing awareness of how we view progressive issues that can hide many violations of human rights and international law. By revealing the mechanisms behind propaganda, this research helps to understand the impact of public diplomacy, the media, and misleading propaganda sponsored by states.

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