

# Israel losing the hasbara battle because of a broken public relations playbook, experts say

*Communications experts point to chaotic bureaucratic organization and structure, lack of discipline and unity, and bad policies -- as well as the age-old scourge of antisemitism*

By [Ruth Marks Eglash](#) March 21, 2024



Over the past five and a half months, Israel's former ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, has given hundreds of interviews to international media outlets, penned multiple op-eds, and spoken to countless communities worldwide about the horrific events on Oct. 7, the existential threats facing Israel and its war against Hamas in Gaza.

Yet, he told *Jewish Insider* in an interview this week, he has received little support from the Israeli government, including any kind of formal briefing or even a list of comprehensive talking points that could help him to get Israel's vital message across.

Previously a deputy minister in charge of public diplomacy for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Oren said that instead, a private PR firm sets up his media appearances and often he must remind interviewers that he's not

an official representative of the State of Israel but a volunteer and the views he expresses are solely his own.

“That’s all fine,” Oren, who is also an author and a historian, told JI, “But it would be nice if, every once in a while, when I really need an answer, I could reach somebody official.”

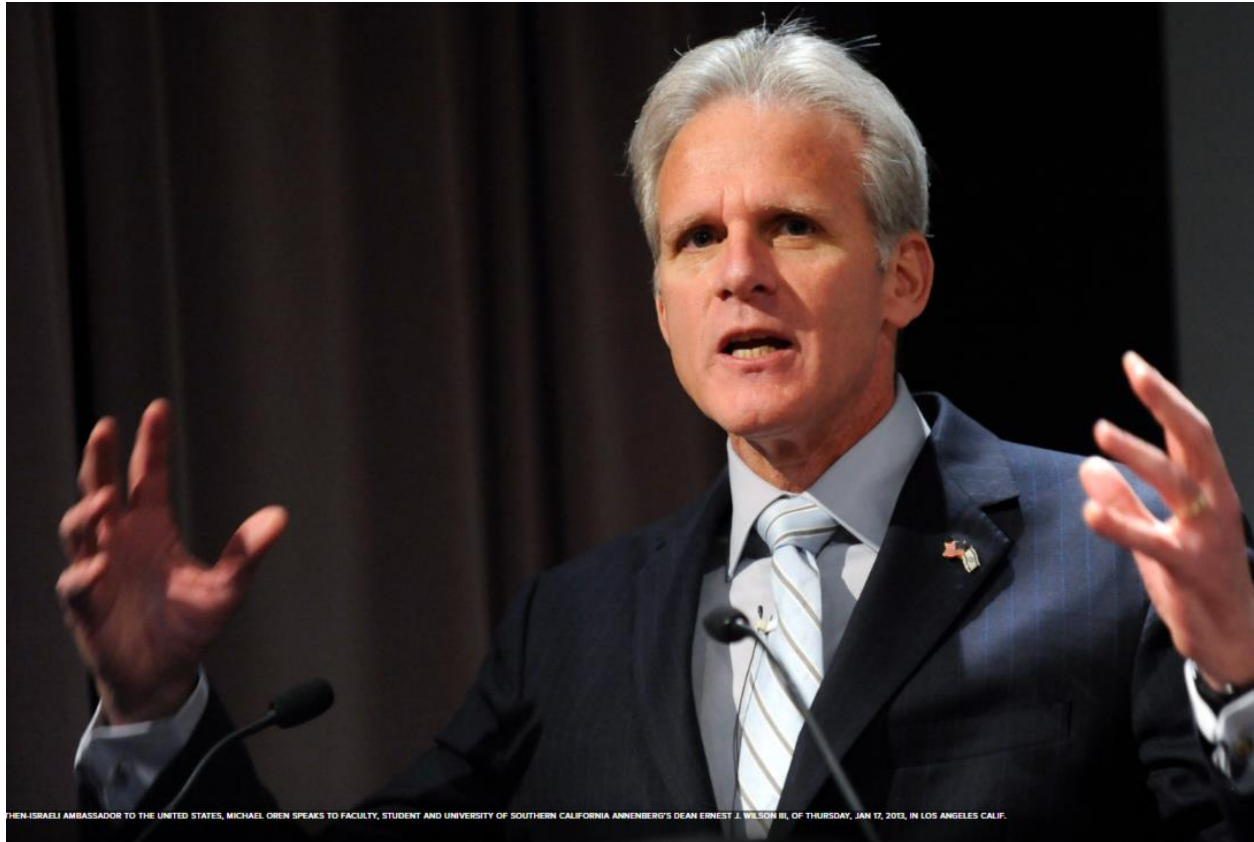
While some Israeli leaders take a defeatist outlook, citing rampant international antisemitism and hatred of Israel as a reason for the bad PR, Oren and others interviewed for this report said simply improving basic tactics like a better understanding of the specific audience officials are speaking to and improving bureaucratic organization and structure would offer some help in the court of international public opinion.

Now, with even some of the fiercest supporters of Israel questioning the Jewish state’s actions in the Gaza Strip, public diplomacy or “*hasbara*” – as Israelis have traditionally called it – is playing an increasingly pivotal role in how the country’s actions could play out at home, in the battlefield and on the world stage.

In a phone call on Monday, President Joe Biden cautioned Netanyahu about carrying out a sensitive operation in the final Hamas stronghold of Rafah, where more than a million displaced Gazans are sheltering, and requested that the prime minister send a delegation to discuss tactics in the war. Last week, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), a lifetime supporter of Israel and the highest-ranking Jewish elected official, sharply criticized the Israeli leader’s handling of the war.

The issue of failing public diplomacy has even become cause for concern in Israel that the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee questioned the prime minister Tuesday on his government’s PR strategy. In response to a question about whether there has been enough investment in international *hasbara*, Netanyahu responded “of course not.”

“But it’s not just a lack of money,” he reportedly said. “There simply are no people, you are surrounded by people who can’t put two words together [in English]. We need to find them.”



“Israel is failing miserably in its public diplomacy, we’re just really bad at it,” said Yaakov Katz, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute and a former editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, told JI.

“There’s no discipline and there’s no unified message,” Katz, who also worked as a foreign policy adviser to former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, continued. “Essentially, anyone in the government can do [and say] whatever they want.”

He pointed out there have been far too many examples of the prime minister pushing a certain policy, while the ministers do or say something completely contradictory. By default, said Katz, that means official bodies such as the army operate with little or no PR strategy and they don’t always consider the view of Israel worldwide.

“One perfect example is that we’re fighting a war in Gaza and we’re saying that we’re creating a plan for the day after and then two senior ministers in

the government go to a rally calling to resettle the Gaza Strip,” said Katz. “How do you then explain to the world that you don’t plan to resettle the Gaza Strip?”

The dissenting messaging is, Katz said, derived directly from Israel’s political structure. He pointed out that in the U.S. “if the secretary of transportation were to say something about the Gaza war, or about the U.S. war in Afghanistan, he’d be out of a job because it’s completely inappropriate, but in Israel, the minister of transportation will tell you how you should be fighting the war in Gaza, even though that minister is not supposed to comment.”

This week the lack of discipline came into sharp focus when Israeli government spokesperson Eylon Levy, who has become internationally recognized through his media appearances since the Oct. 7, Hamas attack, was reportedly suspended from his role after fighting publicly with U.K. officials on social media.

An additional problem, Katz continued, is that there are “too many cooks in the kitchen and no clarity of who is in charge.”

“This is an historic problem, although there have been attempts to fix this,” he said, giving the example of recent images released by the army showing arrested Hamas terrorists stripped and blindfolded. “To an Israeli audience this is great but to the rest of the world, it is awful.”

Katz pointed out that for any kind of PR, there are multiple target audiences – the local audience, the international audience and more.

“Who is making these decisions? Who decides what the target audience is and are they even thinking, ‘I’m gonna make my Israeli audience feel great but what will be the impact around the world?’” he said. “The army has this data and footage, and they can do whatever they want with it and they’re not thinking it through, but again, that comes down to the fact that there’s no coherent policy of how they’re supposed to consider things.”

“One of the other big problems for Israel, as I see it, is that we’re not articulating what we want to see happen in the Gaza Strip the day after the

war, and that creates a lot of frustration around the world,” Katz continued. “No matter how good your PR is, or how great your spokespeople are, that cannot make up for bad policies.”

Michal Cotler-Wunsh, Israel’s special envoy for combating antisemitism, said that not only must Israel better organize its public diplomacy efforts – and sharpen its messaging – it must urgently recognize that the war for public opinion is a no less serious war front than the war on the ground.

When it comes to Israel, she explained, “there is an unconventional war for public opinion that has been raging for decades.”

Cotler-Wunsh said that after a series of conventional wars seeking to destroy the State of Israel failed, “Israel’s enemies turned their attention to the war for public opinion, systematically co-opting and weaponizing international institutions, mechanisms and principles to demonize, delegitimize and apply double standards to Israel.” She noted the 1975 “Zionism is racism” resolution at the U.N., the 2001 Durban Conference, which labeled Israel an apartheid state and undermined its legitimacy to exist, and, most recently, “the Orwellian inversion of facts and law accusing Israel of perpetrating a genocide, even as it defends itself from genocidal terror group that committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, and openly declares intent to commit them — again and again.”

“We need to recognize that this unconventional war for public opinion is a national security threat,” Cotler-Wunsh continued. “If that is not reflected in the way Israel prepares for this unconventional war, creating and executing a multifront, holistic national strategy that includes allocation of resources, we’re just reacting from the dock of the accused on which Israel has been seated, we’re just responding, which is where *hasbara* comes in, we are explaining all the time.”

The former member of Israel’s parliament said that she stopped using the term *hasbara* because it already assumes that Israel has done something wrong, and demands Israel “explain itself.”

“More than ever, Israel needs an authority mandated to roll out and implement a national strategy for combating antisemitism, recognizing that this is a part of the war that’s raging,” Cotler-Wunsh said.



Oren, who recently returned to Israel from a two-month speaking tour in the U.S., said that amid soaring antisemitism – and the fact Jews are vastly outnumbered around the world – “we must not give up speaking out for Israel.”

He outlined several areas where Israel’s public diplomacy strategy is flawed and needed to be addressed.

First, Oren said that deeply ingrained in the Zionist ethos is the idea that it is not important what the non-Jews think about the Jews.

“Secondly, we are a nation of 9 million who are up against 1.4 billion Muslims with vast resources – even with all our technological know-how and innovation, numbers and resources count,” he said.

Another issue, Oren pointed out, is that Israel’s “narrative is far too complex.” While the other side uses a few powerful key words such as occupation, apartheid, oppression, imperialism, Israel’s story “is far too long and convoluted.”

“We are now living in a post-factual world where facts are meaningless and only feelings count,” he said. “Our whole explanation relies on facts, when everyone else is talking about feelings.”

“But the real reason, the conclusion I have come to after years of being involved in this, is not that we are up against 1.4 billion Muslims but that we are up against 2,500 years of antisemitism,” Oren said. “If you look closely behind the headlines, you see classic antisemitic tropes... accusations that Israel purposely massacres innocents or kills journalists on purpose.”

However, while the odds are stacked against Israel, Oren emphasized that Israel must still make every effort to fight back against disinformation.

“Of course, we have to fight this,” he said. “But we have to be realistic in what we can achieve, and we cannot forget that we are the Jewish state and as a Jewish state we are going to be judged by a different set of criteria.”