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Learn from Arafat

Emmanuel Navon

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(February 10) - Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's recent op-ed in The New York Times confirmed that the PLO is one of the best PR companies in the world. Publishing opinion articles under the name of famous leaders in first-class newspapers is a powerful way of getting one's message through.

As opposed to an interview, an opinion article, by its nature, cannot be arbitrarily altered, and a piece submitted by a senior government official is unlikely to be turned down. National leaders can therefore have an impact on public opinion in the most hostile environments.

This is where Israeli leaders could contribute to Israel's media battle in Europe - and this is where they are remarkably absent from the battlefield.

European public opinion is mostly hostile to Israel because it perceives Zionism as a colonial movement and believes that Arafat has abandoned his hope to destroy the Jewish state. Therefore, Europeans consider Israel's insistence on keeping some parts of the West Bank as totally unjustified and unacceptable both on historical and strategic grounds. Moreover, most Europeans mistakenly believe that Israel started the Six Day War and that UN Security Council Resolution 242 calls for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 armistice lines.

Israel cannot always rely on its diplomats to defend the case of the Jewish state in Europe. In France, for instance, Israeli Ambassador Eli Barnavi keeps expressing views that blatantly contradict those of his prime minister. Barnavi recently declared to the foreign affairs commission of the National Assembly that "the dismantling of the settlements is obviously one of the conditions for peace." In an interview with Courrier International Barnavi stated that "East Jerusalem will be the capital of the Palestinian State." For legitimate as they are, these positions are clearly not those of Israel's prime minister.

Incidentally, the only articles published by Israeli academics in a newspaper such as Le Monde are those that slam Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and provide arguments to Israel's foes. Most recently, Tel-Aviv University history professor Shlomo Sand submitted an op-ed in Le Monde to "explain" to its readers that there never was a conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews, that in Judaism "Zion" never constituted a homeland but a holy site towards which Jewish immigration is forbidden until redemption, that Jewish historical claims over the land of Israel are "imaginary," and that Israel's national memory is "counterfeited." Moreover, he said, Israel started the Six Day War and behaved during this war like someone who "tramples on a sick man whose hands and feet were bound."

There will be no peace, Sand concludes, until Israel "fixes the injustice of 1948" and returns "all the territories conquered in 1967, including Arab Jerusalem."

The views expressed in France by our ambassador and his colleagues from Tel Aviv University undermine the argument that Israel has a historical, strategic and legal case to retain some parts of the West Bank in a peace settlement with the Palestinians. For if the Jews do not have a historical connection to Palestine, if Israel started the Six Day War against harmless and peaceful Arabs, and if UN Security Council Resolution 242 entails Israel to return "all the territories" conquered in 1967 - then Israel has a very weak case indeed.

All the above assertions, however, are wrong and if the Israeli government wishes to defend its case in Europe, Israeli ministers and officials should do in European newspapers what Arafat did

last week in The New York Times: do the job themselves.

In the course of his research, Abba Eban came across a letter from president Thomas Jefferson to his secretary of state, which said: "We have not heard from our ambassador in Spain for two years. If we do not hear from him this year -let us write him a letter." It seems that, despite today's countless communication channels, the Israeli government has not heard from its ambassador in France for the past few months - and if it has, it should explain to the Israeli public why the positions of the Israeli government are not defended by one of its most important diplomats.

Many Israeli ministers complain about the Foreign Ministry's poor hasbara. And indeed, if the State of Israel were a PR company, I wouldn't recommend buying its shares. But senior Israeli officials can use their name to have an impact on European public opinion, and if the besieged Arafat can find the time to write an op-ed, so can they.

(The writer is a political science lecturer at Bar-Ilan University and CEO of Navon Consulting.)

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