

#Blog

Israel is our business

By [ISRAEL21c Staff](#) | JULY 25, 2004, 6:00 PM

BNIC turns routine business trips into influential pro-Israel advocacy opportunities. The Business Network for International Cooperation (BNIC) is a joint venture between Israeli business leaders and policy experts in the fields of foreign affairs and communication. It is a non-profit and apolitical organization whose purpose is to improve Israel's international image, especially in Europe.

In the last decade, Israel has become a major player in the hi-tech industry. The economic reforms and recovery of the late 1980s, the influx of educated immigrants in the early 1990s, a high level of education and of R&D investment, and a unique entrepreneurship spirit, all have contributed to Israel's technological edge in the global economy. In the mid-1990s, Israel's international stance improved both economically and politically: as a result of what seemed then as an imminent resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel's international image improved dramatically. The Israeli economy benefited from two main assets: the excellence of its technology and the prospect of a peaceful Middle East.

The second asset no longer exists. Israel's economy and international image have been dramatically affected by the war that erupted in September 2000. The sharp decline in the revenue of the tourism and construction industries is a direct consequence of the war. The high-tech industry was less directly affected by the war because its growth is export-driven, and therefore the difficulties it experienced at the turn of the new millennium were due to global slowdown rather than to local turmoil.

However, the decrease in demand for Israeli products and technology is not only the result of a business cycle. It is also caused by a growing unwillingness to do business with Israel for political reasons, and this growing unwillingness is itself the consequence of Israel's negative international *image*.

Opinion polls conducted over the past two years unequivocally reveal a rising popular hostility toward Israel in the world. This tendency is especially patent in the European Union (EU). According to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 62% of Europeans had a negative opinion of Israel in December 2002. A survey published by the EU in October 2003 revealed that 59% of Europeans believe that Israel constitutes a bigger threat to world peace than North Korea, Iran or Afghanistan. This negative image has a damaging impact on Israel's business activity in the EU. A boycott policy that was originally initiated by citizens and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is gaining support from European political and business leaders.

Israel's negative image in Europe is progressively affecting the Israeli economy, and this tendency is deteriorating with every passing day. This image is objectively unfair and mostly unjustified, and it is very much shaped and influenced by the sophistication of the well-funded Palestinian PR strategy in Europe.

The war launched by the PA in September 2000 had two objectives: 1) to exhaust and demoralize Israeli society by making life impossible to Israelis, 2) to invite international pressure and intervention by presenting Israel in the foreign media as the powerful and ruthless aggressor of a powerless and desperate people.

The first objective has failed; the second has succeeded – especially in Europe. Israel's citizens have stood firm and resolute in the terror war, and the Israeli government has mostly turned the tables on the PA. But, so far, Israel has been completely defeated in the media war.

The current war between Israel and the PA is being waged on the ground and in the media. It is the responsibility of governments to lead the fight on both fronts. However, while governments have (or should have) a legitimate monopoly over the use of military force and of diplomacy, they do not have (and should not have) such a monopoly over the use of channels and arguments aimed at influencing world public opinion.

Israel is not the only country where business leaders are taking action to improve their profits through diplomatic activism. In January 2004, Keith Reinhard, an American advertisement guru, launched an initiative to improve his country's poor international image for the sake of American business.

His central argument is that something is amiss in the perception of America abroad, that this perception is economically damaging, and that it can and must be changed. He incorporated, together with other senior executives in America's advertising industry and a few academics, Business for Diplomatic Action, a group aimed at finding a business-oriented solution to America's image problems.

BNIC's core idea, which was conceived by Ruder Finn Israel, is to use Israel's business leaders to improve Israel's international images. In Europe, as compared with the US, our best strategy for influencing public opinion is to communicate directly with decision makers so that they are more inclined to consider Israeli business and Israeli policy based on judgment rather than the images they receive through the mass media. European political and economic leaders constitute 'hubs of influence' that reach most people with the greatest level of influence. Israeli business leaders can have an impact on European public opinion through personal interactions with European business leaders.

BNIC's 'business diplomacy' strategy consists of providing travelling Israeli business leaders with the knowledge and skills they need in order to have an impact on the perception of their counterparts, and to utilize their presence overseas to make them meet with foreign opinion makers, talk to the press, and talk on campuses. BNIC turns routine business trips into influential pro-Israel advocacy opportunities.

BNIC currently has a membership of about 40 Israeli business leaders and companies, and this network is constantly expanding. We are actively training CEOs as well as marketing and sales people to help them make the case for Israel, and we arrange additional, advocacy-related meetings for them overseas. The more business leaders join this network, the stronger its impact and efficiency. If you join, it is not a dream.