



BRITISH-ISRAEL RELATIONS SEEN THROUGH VISITING ELITE OPINIONMAKER DELEGATIONS

By Jonathan Cummings*

This article discusses visiting delegations of British elite opinionmakers in Israel, how this affects British views of Israel, and whether they create a more supportive environment for Israel in Britain.

INTRODUCTION

It might look like an unjustifiably expensive and time-intensive undertaking. Bringing British journalists, students, academics, and politicians to Israel in the hope of moderating increasingly negative popular perceptions can feel Sisyphean; and with more immediate and more significant threats to Israel's national security, "lunching for Israel" may appear indulgent. In fact, it is none of these.

There should be no doubt about the relevance of the objective. Criticism of Israel threatens to elide into an assault on the very right of the State of Israel to exist as a democratic, Jewish state. Israel and Diaspora Jewish communities are transfixed by the phenomenon of "delegitimization," and are frantically searching for explanations and remedies. Britain is at the forefront of this challenge. With media outlets like the BBC, the *Guardian*, and the *Financial Times* playing an increasingly significant part in framing the issue well beyond its own borders, British attitudes carry far. In the meantime, calls for a one-state solution--and with it the end of the Zionist project--are gaining ground.

However, making the case that introducing British elite opinionmakers to Israel represents a significant contribution to ensuring Israel's survival requires challenging a well-rooted conception of Israel's national security. Although never formalized, three principles have emerged over time as crucial to defending Israel. First, Israel seeks to avoid conflict by adopting a deterrence posture,

keeping potential threats at arm's distance. If conflict does erupt, early warning and intelligence seek to minimize the damage. Finally, campaigns should be short and decisive, preserving Israel's limited resources and leaving future opponents discouraged from further attacks. However, such a conception of national security, dominated by military logic, is insufficient to deal with the full range of challenges Israel faces. Experience of bringing British opinionmakers to Israel, with direct feedback quoted below, indicates that in each case, a different mindset may be appropriate.

ENGAGEMENT, NOT DETERRENCE

"It's the accessibility that makes it work. Authoritative, not pushy, informal and yet making sure our time wasn't wasted." --British journalist

Israel has historically been reliant on a national security doctrine that emphasizes the use of military power for protection. Its predominant characteristic is a strong deterrence posture, which aims to prevent opponents from initiating conflict. A small standing army can be transformed into a very large force by quick enlistment of the reserve. High-quality training and equipment ensure a qualitative edge. A policy of nuclear ambiguity carries a final level of deterrence.

The deterrence doctrine has been successful in limiting--although not entirely preventing--outbreaks of conventional military conflict. Since 1973, no opponent has mounted a credible conventional military threat to Israel.

However, there is increasingly bitter public discourse on Israel on the international level, which--by promoting a one-state agenda--may yet have the capacity to defeat Israel decisively. Indeed, in this field, deterrence thinking may even be counter-productive.

In fact, confronting Israel's critics demands engagement, not deterrence. There is no better way to build relationships with British elite opinionmakers--journalists, politicians, academics, and students--than to bring them to Israel. Britain is geographically close enough that a visit can be short enough not to present a serious disruption to normal routines. A subsidized visit certainly offers a solution for media outlets whose finances are limited. Still, it is the quality of the program, the blend of concentrated high-level access and otherwise inaccessible encounters with the "real" Israel that can make the difference in opening up dialogue.

What works?:

- Talking about Israel is critical. Knowing reams of historical facts and figures is important; being able to offer analysis of difficult issues in a way that is credible, sensible, and verifiable is far better. Conveying personal commitment and enthusiasm for Israel adds a human dimension.

- Israel's best advocates are articulate and opinionated. Opinionmakers like to hear opinions, even if they don't agree with all of them. Hearing a range of such views during a delegation--which should include some critical voices--is more effective than seeking to achieve "balance." A range of opinions is appropriate as a starting point for an ongoing conversation, and not for a closing argument in a trial.

- Bringing like together with like works. The best way for a British visitor to understand Israel is through the eyes of an Israeli counterpart. Discussing professional dilemmas and challenges is more accessible than trying to master the facts. This kind of discourse encourages finding points of similarity, rather than difference. It seems to be the case that "I like people like me."

However, a necessary word of caution. Engaging Israel's critics in debate is not a

religion. There are times when there is no conversation to be had and when investing in bringing people to Israel is of dubious value. There are times when deterring Israel's critics from attacking remains the best policy. At its best, engaging critical voices in lively debate on these issues can be exhilarating, challenging, and reaffirming, and networks of communication that could be decisive in framing the ongoing discourse on Israel in Britain.

NETWORKS OF EARLY WARNING AND INTELLIGENCE

"Being able to collect the business cards of the various well-placed people you introduced us to was vital: next time something kicks off, we'll all have a lot of people to contact" -- British political advisor

Israel's national security doctrine places high value on early warning and intelligence as a way of avoiding or limiting the cost of conflict. Over-reliance on this strategy can be high-risk; the cost of its failure was brutally exposed in 1973. The logic of early warning and intelligence translates effectively to confronting the threat of delegitimization by building networks of contacts. Any opportunity to bring British and Israeli policymakers or opinionmakers together can be used to share information, increasing what each knows about the other and reducing the possibility for surprise at each other's positions. But the aim should be more strategic, encouraging sustainable networks of relationships to form and information and analysis flowing independently, long after the visit is over.

What works?:

- High-level access is important, but so is identifying new voices. Access to top-level leadership is perhaps the best indicator of relevance and caliber for the visitor. There is no better way to hear the authentic voice of Israeli politics than from an articulate and engaging Israeli politician. However, in the interest of long-term networking, it is

important to identify and promote new voices. In a similar vein, specialists are more interesting than generalists. Part of the challenge of understanding Israel is to engage in complex detail, which is often only available on the ground. Even when time is limited, an insight into a previously impenetrable issue can be more valuable than another high-altitude survey--even if the issue in itself is only one of many that require unravelling.

- Identifying mutual interests helps create relevant relationships. If the editor of a newspaper's comment pages is introduced to engaging and opinionated Israelis who can bring their insight to the readers of the British newspaper, there is a potential for greater exposure of Israeli voices in the British media. Connecting political advisors in Israel with counterparts in Britain facilitates a working-level policy conversation that can take account of each other's narratives.
- Creating networks of relationships is a long-term process. Identifying the right people to bring to Israel is not an exact science. Recently, a prospective parliamentary candidate who had been in Israel 20 years ago as a student leader returned on a fact-finding visit. Picking up contacts he had made then, he returned to the Israel-Palestine issue as a foreign policy speciality. He knew that there was a good story, and that there were people to help him.

A further word of caution: An awareness of public opinion is a critical dimension of the early warning and intelligence task. Often, this translates into monitoring media output, since what is written and broadcast has an unrivalled capacity for framing what the public thinks, and what the public thinks about. There is no doubt that this task is important, relevant and legitimate. However,

over-enthusiasm and short-termism has, in the past, resulted in fractures in relations when media coverage has been confused with national policy. Harassing the media is a counter-productive tactic, which limits dialogue. A decision to cut all relations with a media outlet, as in the five-month official Israeli boycott of the BBC in 2003, is an inexcusable admission of the failure of diplomacy.

THE PURSUIT OF SHORT, DECISIVE CAMPAIGNS

"I know you can't possibly see everything in a few days. I'll just have to come back--and back, and back..." --British student leader

Israel has traditionally preferred short, decisive military campaigns. Geographical vulnerability and the overwhelming dimensions of surrounding opponents have dictated a national security strategy that produces intense, but unsustainable, use of force to repel and deter. Yet the strategy of engaging critical audiences in order to arrest the slide into delegitimization appears to contradict that of the short, decisive campaign. Engaging with elite opinionmaking audiences from Britain--academics, journalists, politicians, and students--is a long-term proposition, and it is unlikely to be decisive.

The Israeli narrative is complex and detailed. It requires sustained engagement and contextualization. Moreover, it competes with a Palestinian narrative that boils the conflict with Israel down to a single, accusatory word--"occupation." Although Zionism contains identifiable components--a secular, nationalist ideology for the self-determination of the Jewish people-- taken as a whole, it is difficult to understand, at least for outsiders.

There are also plenty of red herrings along the way. Isn't a Jewish state a theocracy in the mold of Iran? Isn't a country at conflict, if not at war, for its entire existence a garrison state ruled by its military? Isn't Israeli democracy an oxymoron while the Palestinians remain in political limbo? The answers to these questions, of which there are multiple versions, are best chewed over.

However, a short visit to Israel can provide an intense point of contact between Israel and Britain. It may be the start of a longer-term relationship, or in the context of an existing dialogue. Either way, visiting Israel can be an important element in forming elite British opinions on Israel.

What works?:

- Finding the right visitors is crucial. It may well be the case that the discourse is far less friendly to Britain among the general public than it is among elite opinionmakers. This can produce pressure to redirect energies to broad-based public campaigns in the UK. However, limited resources require prioritization. Bringing politicians, journalists, students, and academics to Israel can help to create barriers to delegitimization, insulating policy-making environments from the most destructive discourse.
- Visitors are often surprised by what they find on a short visit. Many expect a combat zone, a theocracy, or a failed state. They rarely find one. Although armed soldiers, mostly teenage conscripts, are a common sight, visitors rarely feel like they are in a state under arms. The discourse of what it means to be a Jewish state is lively and vigorous; none of those taking part is prepared to concede defeat at this point. For those who are already familiar with Israel, continuity is more obvious than change.
- Articulating an Israeli narrative is crucial. However, it is important not to ignore the interplay of domestic and regional factors on Israeli decisionmaking. Visitors are often surprised by the dilemmas facing Israel, and the difficult decisions policymakers face. It is easier to arrive at the conclusion that Israel is both the problem and the heart of the solution from a distance; in this

case, familiarity may be the best response to contempt.

The best result of a short visit to Israel is the realization that the issues are complex and detailed, and that there are more questions than answers. The pursuit of a decisive encounter, or of a decisive answer, is probably fruitless. It is more constructive to show that Israel is open and accessible, and that long-term engagement with the issues is the best way to sharpen understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

Israel faces a potentially existential challenge of a new kind. Its traditional national security doctrine, narrowly defined in military terms, is insufficient. Israel must work to defend not only its borders, but its legitimacy in international opinion. Yet, visits to Israel by elite opinion formers are not a silver bullet. They are undoubtedly expensive and time-intensive for the organizer. They require being able to call on a large network of contacts on the ground to ensure that each trip is appropriately calibrated for the audience. They require follow-up, so that the relationships endure and are meaningful. They are long-term, sometimes speculative investments against a problem that is acute and immediate. Evaluating success is difficult, with the influence of a visit sometimes taking time to internalize fully and almost always impossible to isolate and ascribe to a particular conversation or experience.

Still, the benefits are clear. Engaging with elite opinionmakers creates a space for a deeper and more informed discussion in the UK on issues related to Israel. In the current climate, this is invaluable, and perhaps irreplaceable. Networks of relationships allow Israel to engage with critical discourses while isolating and marginalizing those who pose a grave threat by challenging its very legitimacy. These networks also allow a wider range of people to engage in the discourse--with the British Jewish community playing a crucial role in making the case for Israel in the UK. A short visit to Israel is the best catalyst

for these types of relationships and the best opportunity for bringing content to them.

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