

Toronto's Middle East proxy war

When Jerusalem's top PR man set out to rebrand his country abroad, he chose Toronto as his test market. As Michael Posner discovers, he had his work cut out for him

MICHAEL POSNER

Saturday, Nov. 07, 2009

Imagine this dilemma: You're Israel's highest-ranking public relations expert. The world's news coverage, which shapes public opinion, is at best neutral and more typically hostile to Israel.

Is there a way to change the subject - to associate Israel with something besides tanks and checkpoints? A country afflicted with warts, perhaps, but also rich in culture and high-tech innovations? Other nations and cities have successfully engaged in similar rebranding exercises. Could Israel? And if so, where should it begin?

That was the strategic exercise Amir Gissin undertook three years ago, as director of public affairs at the Israeli Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem.

Three years later, he's Israel's consul-general for Toronto - the city he chose as the pilot project for rebranding.

That Toronto is now Ground Zero of the Middle East's global propaganda war is not surprising. One of the most important cities on the continent, it's a microcosmic blend of American and European influences, as well as the country's multicultural, financial and media centre, with three large university campuses and a robust Jewish community.

Toronto was an ideal choice for other reasons: It's home to some of Israel's harshest critics - among them, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the United Church of Canada, both of which have championed the Palestinian-led Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, and a noisy coterie of left-wingers in academia and the arts, many of whom, including Naomi Klein, are Jewish.

And the city boasts a growing Muslim population of 350,000, twice the number of Jews. "The Muslims on Toronto campuses are more politically active than was their parents' generation," notes Ryerson University professor Judy Rebick, a frequent critic of Israeli policies. "There's lots of energy. Remember, they grew up here. They're Canadian. They feel a sense of entitlement as citizens. They're more savvy."

Mr. Gissin doesn't disagree. Indeed, their activism and the strength of the broader opposition - Toronto is where the now-annual Israeli Apartheid Week began - helped make his case. The mandate was never about preaching to the converted.

Rebrand Israel in Toronto, Mr. Gissin argued, and the same tactics, arguably, could be applied anywhere.

CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

If the 46-year-old diplomat's choice needed any vindication, the last year has provided it. One day last winter, eight Jewish women (including Ms. Rebeck) occupied his offices, protesting the war in Gaza. At York University, a political cauldron, Jewish students were forced to barricade themselves from angry members of Students Against Israeli Apartheid. Every month, it seemed, Torontonians were bumping into a new dimension of the conflict - at liquor stores (a picket to boycott Israeli wines), museums (an abortive attempt to block the Dead Sea scrolls exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum) and theatres (a brouhaha over a production of British playwright Caryl Churchill's provocative play, *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*). In August, an anti-Israeli coalition mounted a protest to the Toronto International Film Festival's special program of films about Tel Aviv, capturing international headlines.

All of this - accompanied by the obligatory placards, flags and incendiary rhetoric - in Canada's once peaceful cradle of multiculturalism, good-neighbour Toronto.

The Middle East, of course, is a wide and treacherous minefield, and there have been detonations in other North American and European cities. But nowhere else has there been a concatenation of events on this scale. And on no other Western city have the eyes of the world lately been so consistently focused.

So has Mr. Gissin succeeded in changing the discourse? Yes and no, he says, relaxing one recent afternoon in his Bloor Street office. A stocky mesomorph, he's spent the better part of the last decade working on Israel's image, and he chooses words carefully.

On the one hand, neither the LCBO or the ROM boycott worked, and the TIFF tiff fizzled, crippled by confused messaging. Moreover, in his regular rounds of public diplomacy with business and community leaders, his core message about Israel - a dynamic and secular society, however flawed - has met a positive reception. "A person might oppose, and oppose vigorously, settlements on the West Bank," he says. "But when they learn that Israeli doctors invented the surgical stent that saved [their] father's life during cardiac surgery, it alters their reflex perception."

Unable to win in the military arena, "anti-Israel forces want to achieve a veto right over anything positive said about Israel," he says. "This we have fought and have succeeded. They want to brand us as an apartheid and pariah state, the new South Africa, and strip us of our legitimacy, and it hasn't worked." On the other hand, he concedes, certain quadrants remain a tougher sell, notably college campuses and cultural groups. There, it's the image of Israel as the epicentre of conflict that remains dominant. Ironically, elements of the Jewish community, here and elsewhere, unwittingly reinforce the conflict stereotype. "We keep trying to prove we are right," Mr. Gissin says, "trying always to win the argument about the Gaza war or the separation fence. We're so intent on winning the broader political argument that we won't let go of the debate. That just plays into the other side's hand, because the world perceives them as the underdog and us as the overdog."

Rabbi Yossi Sapirman, of Toronto's Beth Torah conservative congregation, says the problem is that many Jews are so fixated on past horrors and future threats that they can't live in the present. His next group trip to Israel, he hopes, will be about three things - wine, art and cheese. No government official briefings, no tours of Holocaust memorials.

The critical battle for hearts and minds in Toronto is marked not only by the clash of extremists, but by concerted communal efforts to bridge religious and political divides. Next weekend, for example, as many as a dozen Toronto synagogues and mosques will participate in the second annual "twinning" program, a North American construct, in which Jews and Muslims attend services and social evenings in each other's temples of prayer. "Last year, we had Jews and Muslims dancing the hora together in our social hall," recalls Barbara Landau, co-chair of the Canadian Association of Jews and Muslims (CAJM).

Initiatives aimed at promoting tolerance won't change events on the ground in the Middle East, concedes human-rights activist Karen Mock, "but mutual annihilation is not an option. The kind of efforts we've started, including an Arab/Jewish leadership dialogue, and Together in Hope [a women's group] can help us come to terms with each other's narrative."

Can they? Writer Tarek Fatah thinks the brotherhood exercise is a charade. "These Jews are very decent people, but they're naive. They're simply not aware that contemporary Islam has been taken over by a death-cult ideology." Well-intentioned bagel-and-samosa mixers are what he called a complete fraud. "On the Islamicist side, the language is deceptive and the manipulation is mind-boggling."

Toronto, says Mr. Fatah, who is now working on a book about the roots of Muslim anti-Semitism, is going in the wrong direction. "In no other Western city has the Islamist acquired so much respectability and legitimacy." And Jews, many living in enclaves and attending private schools, haven't noticed that the public-school system "is now open to anti-Israel activity by the Muslim Students' Association, an offshoot of the radical Muslim Brotherhood. They're in every urban school and have taken over all university student associations."

Other, calmer voices see Mr. Fatah as unduly alarmist. "Tarek's become a radical secularist," says Raja Khouri, a former national director of the Canadian Arab Federation. "He equates conservative Muslims with radical Muslims and that's simplistic."

Still, Mr. Khouri, who says his meetings as part of CAJM have taught him about Jewish insecurities, says the future of Muslim-Jewish relations troubles him. "B'nai Brith, the current Canadian Arab Federation - on both sides there are those who want to polarize and radicalize and whip up hysteria. It's worrisome."

So what lies ahead? Both Mr. Gissin and local Jewish leaders can read the demographic charts. Unless rebranding or something like it works, the higher Muslim birth and immigration rates may eventually guarantee a public-relations win. Beth Torah's Rabbi Sapirman says he's more sanguine, in part because he sees local groups of Iranians, Somalis, Rwandans and Ethiopians reaching out to and connecting with Jews.

And to some extent, everyone acknowledges that whatever happens here is hostage to events on the ground overseas. Another war - in Gaza, Lebanon, or with Iran - would shake the foundations that have been laid.

Amir Gissin knows only too well how subtly the paint from his palette must be applied. Any suggestion that his government - or even other Jewish organizations - is somehow orchestrating

positive coverage of Israel would immediately negate the benefits. In other words, he says, "we can lose even when we seem to win."

But he insists that his goal is not to deny the conflict. "We can't. It's part of who we are. We don't live in the Bahamas. But conflict is not the whole story. Israel is a much more complicated place. That's my agenda, to show Israel not as demon or saint, but as it really is. Yes, we have crime and corruption, but it's also the place where the cellphone, voice mail, the Pentium chip, and the first ingestible mini-camera were invented."

It's to that more nuanced narrative - Israel as the creative incubator of quality-of-life enhancements - that Mr. Gissin thinks his target audiences will respond. "Remember, this is not an ad campaign for mineral water or an election campaign for a politician. Rebranding has no end date. Israel is here forever. So what happens tomorrow is less important than the long term. And the more we are able to tell the truth about who we are, the more friends we will win."

Occupied territory

Highlights of Toronto's year as propaganda central for the Israel-Palestine debate

February: York University

An attempt to oust York University's student government over their support for a protracted teaching-assistant strike turned into a standoff over the Israeli occupation. Organizers of a campaign to recall York's student council held a press conference in a Hillel office on campus and were joined shortly after by protesters allegedly shouting anti-Israel slogans (York Federation of Students' equity vice-president later claimed the slogans had nothing to do with Israel). The incident led to further demonstrations by both sides that were ultimately broken up by police.

April: Showdown LCBO

Is nothing sacred? Hundreds of pro-Israel protesters descended on a Summerhill liquor store to counter a planned protest by Not In Our Name, a Jewish group critical of Israel that was calling on patrons to boycott Israeli wines. Police broke up the rally, dubbed "Apartheid is not kosher," fearing the crowd was getting out of control. In the meantime, thanks to a concerted e-mail campaign among liquor-consuming supporters, the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto claims the LCBO outlet sold out of kosher wine in record time.

May: The play's the thing

B'nai Brith Canada asked Mayor David Miller to block Theatre Passe Muraille's production of *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*. The 10-minute play by British playwright Caryl Churchill has been a lightning rod for controversy. It attempts to encapsulate 70 years of Jewish history through dialogues between parents and their young children, and is seen to take a critical view of Israel. It has sparked an outcry from Jewish groups in Britain, the United States

and all the Canadian venues where it has appeared. The mayor declined to intervene and the play went ahead.

June: Scrolling boycotts

The Royal Ontario Museum's vaunted Dead Sea Scroll exhibit didn't sit well with the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, which, along with other groups, claimed the scrolls were illicitly looted from Qumran during the 1967 Six-Day War.

Calls for boycotts of the ROM exhibit found an unlikely ally in a swanky downtown restaurant: on his website, Le Select Bistro owner Frédéric Geisweiller issued a call for patrons to boycott the exhibit, pointing out that Israel is involved in "ongoing military occupation of many lands, including the West Bank from where [the scrolls] were taken."

The post was answered almost immediately with strident calls for a boycott of the restaurant from Jewish groups.

September: Film tiff

What could possibly be controversial about spotlighting Tel Aviv filmmakers at an international film festival? A lot, apparently: Especially while a United Nations committee is in the middle of drawing up a report accusing both Israel and Hamas of committing war crimes in a bloody Gaza conflict nine months earlier.

More than 50 filmmakers, academics, artists and writers signed a letter protesting the film festival's spotlight on Tel Aviv.

The letter elicited a counter-missive in support of Tel Aviv's inclusion, and such prominent figures as Atom Egoyan and Jerusalem-born Natalie Portman spoke out against a boycott.