

# PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN TIME OF WAR. ISRAEL'S WAR ON GAZA CASE STUDY

Ecaterina HLIHOR<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper aims to study the conflict between Israel and Hamas and its public diplomacy implications. In contemporary societies, war is viewed negatively as a phenomenon that destroys the peaceful life of society and dramatically changes people's lives. It has the potential to do great harm and spread systematic disruption, fear, and uncertainty in societies at war. It also produces profound changes in the perceptions of others in public opinion. These negative transformations affect all aspects of international political life at the regional or even global level. In such situations, there is an urgent need to take measures to remove such states of affairs. Public diplomacy can be one way to return societies to pre-war normality. It can lead to the restoration of trust in societies affected by war. It can also repair these misperceptions and reconnect people and societies to a normal life. All these are possible if public diplomacy informs a wider audience as objectively as possible. Many specialists argue that during wartime, states used public diplomacy in order to promote their subjective positions by influencing public opinion in national, regional, and global contexts. The main question is whether public diplomacy can achieve its aims and objectives during wartime.*

**Key words:** *public diplomacy, Gaza war, soft power, Hasbara, country image*

## 1. Introduction

After the aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine, since February 2022, and after the terrorist attack by Hamas forces on October 7, 2023 and the intensification of Houthi guerrilla attacks in the Red Sea, the geopolitical landscape has changed radically. Peace, stability and security seem more threatened than ever in the last two decades. The war in Ukraine and the war in Israel have a distinctly different character, they seem to belong to different types of wars. One is a war of imperial conquest, waged by a great expansionist military power against a sovereign state (Plochy, 2023; Galeotti, 2022; Götz, Jørgen, 2022, pp. 482–497), the other is the struggle of a sovereign state against non-state actors who want a state of their own (Peer, 2023; Hokayem, 2024, pp. 57–66). However, a close analysis also reveals common features. One of these, reveals that both

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<sup>1</sup> Romanian National Defense University, [hlihor.ecaterina@myunap.net](mailto:hlihor.ecaterina@myunap.net)

wars are fought for territory and the recognition of sovereignty over that territory. Following Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October, the Houthi rebels said they would try to support Hamas militarily and launched rocket and drone attacks against Israel (House of Commons Libraries, 2024). The Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a German think tank, estimates that due to ship hijacking in the region, the number of containers transported through the Red Sea has fallen from 500,000 per day in November 2023 to 200,000 in December, affecting an entire supply chain of goods with a direct impact on the world economy.

The October 7, 2023 attack by the Palestinian Islamist militant group Hamas on southern Israel from Gaza, in which approximately 1,200 Israeli civilians and security personnel were killed and more than 200 hostages were taken was an event that profoundly marked Israeli society and international public opinion. *"The October 7 attack was the deadliest terrorist attack against Israel since the state's establishment in 1948, and the scale of the death toll was unprecedented in Israeli history"* (Byman, 2023). This act deeply surprised the Israeli society which considered itself sheltered from such attacks. *"In the past two decades, successive Israeli governments had believed that the Palestinian 'problem' could be boxed in, shrunk and ignored as they pursued territorial expansion in the West Bank and regional integration and normalization with Arab states. Many Western and Arab states seemed satisfied, complacent or resigned. This mindset has badly backfired"* (Hokayem, 2023). The assault was perceived by Hamas as a success over a security system considered impenetrable. *"In response to the October 7 attack, Israel launched Operation Iron Sword, a large-scale military campaign in Gaza. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has articulated the following "prerequisites for peace": destroy Hamas, demilitarize Gaza, and deradicalize Palestinian society"* (Singer, 2024). The speed and overwhelming superiority of the Israeli military forces led to a relatively quick occupation of almost the entire territory known as the Gaza Strip. The human losses are enormous, considering the scale of the battlefield and the forces engaged in the conflict. According to Shay Shabtai, *"the ratio of casualties between the IDF and Hamas and other Palestinian factions is over 1:40. This is an extremely high ratio by any standard, one of the highest in history. It is based on the almost absolute operational efficiency and superiority of the IDF, stemming from the synergy between ground forces and effective close air support, the integration of precise intelligence with operational implementation on the ground, and the IDF's proactive learning and knowledge dissemination processes, which exceed those of the enemy"* (Shabtai, 2024). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is undoubtedly the most complicated international conflict in the world, and although many serious attempts have been made to resolve it over the years, very little has changed (Peer 2023, 4). The effect of these wars and conflicts was not only limited to the actual military operations, but was extended to all parts of the world and through social media sites. One of the most intense battles is taking place in cyberspace for each side to win for its side as much of the public opinion as possible. In this effort, public diplomacy, along with other means and tools used to win the image can be an option for the actors directly involved in the conflict in Gaza, but also for those who support one or the other of the parties (Hlihor, 2023, pp. 7-18). Both camps have launched into the public space narratives to legitimize/justify the

actions taken since October 7, 2023, but given the situation in the Gaza Strip, we can say, paraphrasing Matt Armstrong, that public diplomacy, in this case, “wears combat boots” (Armstrong, 2008).

## **2. Public Diplomacy (Hasbara) in the Gaza War: Potential in the Influence Arena**

The public diplomacy of the state of Israel is not different from that of other states in contemporary society, as a goal and means of promotion, it only has some specific characteristics. One of these lies in its very name - *Hasbara*. The Hebrew term can be translated by explaining and disseminating information in order to promote a desirable image of the Jewish state in international politics, based on the democratic-liberal tradition of the regime in Israel, which reacts promptly to what is perceived as propaganda, associated with lies and misinformation. *“That is the reason the official authorities prefer to deal only with the ‘clean’ side of hasbara, and to leave the ‘dirty’ side to the secret services”* (Schleifer, 2003, p.124). Clearly demarcating itself from the propaganda of the totalitarian regimes of the left, but also of the right, which sometimes filled the public space to the brim for decades, *“the Israeli hasbara has remained entirely defensive, and aimed completely towards the public opinion in faraway lands that were not involved in the conflict”* (Schleifer, 2003, p. 134). According to Avner Golov, *“Israeli public diplomacy — hasbara as it is commonly called — is a special case because it does not have to deal with the typical needs of small countries, neither in the field nor within the population. (...)”* Israel is always singled out; undergoes frequent crises; draws wires; casts a giant shadow far beyond its size; always has to fight for its positions; has many messages and few images, even though it needs different images; is replete with problematic aspects (such as the occupation and human rights); has difficulty presenting attractive traits and needs constant legitimization” (Golov, 2018, p. 31). Hasbara is a means by which Israel seeks to strengthen its country image among international public opinion, to increase its influence on a target audience and, through it, on governments in democratic societies, and to expand the base cooperation in the international arena. Depending on the objectives pursued, Hasbara carries out activities in the short, medium and long term. In the short term, it aims to influence the behavior of other actors in a period of crisis, to quickly gain the support of other states, to create a positive image and to damage the image of the opponent. Most of the activities aim to disseminate materials and content tailored to target groups on social media, including the intention of encouraging people to upload presentations, organize and participate in pro-Israel demonstrations. The constant conflicts, mainly those generated by the Palestinians in this region, create intense interest among the foreign media. It is estimated that approximately 350 foreign reporters are permanently in Israel. During periods of heightened tensions, it is estimated that more than 1,000 foreign journalists arrive in Israel to cover events (Magen, Lapid, 2018).

In the long and medium term, the aim is to improve the image of the country. In today's world, a country's image is a major component of its power projection, which translates into the ability to protect itself, dictate terms, or take an active part in a decision-making process. Moreover, thanks to information technology and the

democratic revolution that resulted in the creation of new communication points, the provision of social network infrastructure (for which physical borders are no longer an obstacle), free access to information, the involvement of citizens in politics by electing governments, influencing state policies and building economic, cultural and social relations with foreign actors and emerging non-state actors have shaped public diplomacy through completely different means than those used in the past.

The power of image is important to anyone concerned with how they are perceived by others. How someone is perceived, especially the first impression, is integral to the outside world's opinion and reaction/action to that person. This, it seems, is no different for a government or the society in which that government exists. Israel is no exception to this rule. Israel's political leaders have understood the importance of image in shaping its foreign policy, given that, for many years, the country has been engaged in a war that is not always reflected in the international media in accordance with how the reality is perceived inside the country. Also, they have to face a permanent disinformation activity, or, under these conditions, the public diplomacy activities carried out in different societies with a higher degree of sensitivity towards the Palestinian issue must be extremely well and professionally carried out. This is even more evident after the Israeli military had to react to the attack launched by Hamas on October 7, 2023: *"Israel must face the difficult task of explaining the need for its offensive against Hamas when images of the humanitarian situation in Gaza make headlines special in the international media"* (Horovitz, 2023). Unlike public diplomacy institutions in Europe, in Israel there is no single institution that carries out specific activities, in the sense that the main public institutions and the central administrative apparatus are also tasked with carrying out public diplomacy activities and that works together to implement them. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there is the Directorate of Public Diplomacy which collaborates with specialized structures within the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs, with the spokesperson of the army (IDF). Noting that the efficiency of public diplomacy actions was not what was desired, at the end of 2021 a Directorate of Public Diplomacy was established next to the Prime Minister's Office to facilitate the synchronization of the narratives and messages transmitted by Israel in the international public opinion (Starr, 2021). On this occasion, Gadi Ezra, who was appointed director of this governmental structure, emphasized that *"Today was the opening shot of the National Hasbara Forum, which has not convened for years, and today convened and started a new path of coordination and accuracy of the Israeli message in order to march Israeli Hasbara forward"* (Starr, 2021). Another peculiarity of Israeli public diplomacy is that, in addition to official institutions, there is also hasbara that operates in parallel with them. The reason for the existence of an unofficial hasbara results from the assumption *"that governments are poor agents of persuasion. Thus, the success of hasbara policies depends on an ability to communicate with bodies and institutions that the target country will trust. This element was similarly well internalized by the Israeli apparatus and it has established organizations in various countries throughout the world whose purpose is to deliver hasbara messages through "indirect channels" without officially identifying themselves as such (i.e. as a part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). This process reflects a deep recognition of the limits of "official" messaging"* (Molad,

2012, p. 29). Thus, the success of hasbara policies depends on the ability to communicate with bodies and institutions that the public in the target country will trust. This element has been quite well internalized by the Israeli government, that has established organizations in various countries whose purpose is to transmit hasbara messages through "indirect channels" without officially identifying themselves as such (as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). This approach reflects a deep recognition of the limits of "official" messages.

Given the frequency of terrorist attacks and the responses the IDF is required to make to secure the population and property, it was almost impossible for this institution of the Jewish state not to engage in public diplomacy activities (Magen, Lapid, 2018, pp. 287-298).

From this perspective, the Israeli military is a major communication actor, including through public diplomacy activities. The IDF is present on social media, particularly on Twitter (renamed X), posting a significant amount of resources and information about the war against Hamas. Clémence Martin noted that on the Israeli army's Twitter site, information is delivered in cyberspace in seven languages: Hebrew, English, French, Spanish, Russian, Farsi and Arabic. Through this channel, the IDF (Israeli military) communicates live about the military operations they carry out in the Gaza Strip, publishes information continuously, sharing testimonies of Israeli soldiers. On social networks, it is virulently critical of Hamas leaders and claims that it monitors the false information disseminated by them. With a 24-hour news studio that responds to journalists' requests, *"the Israeli military demonstrates a military culture (...) characterized by open and accessible communication"* (Martin, 2023). The increasing involvement of the IDF in public diplomacy indicates the authorities' need to uphold the legitimacy of Israel's military activities in the international public space. For this purpose, it uses both classical means and those belonging to new media, with all the limits of communication that are imposed on a military organization in any society, but especially in one in a state of war. One of these limits is censorship, to protect military information that, once it reaches the enemy, could create big problems. When it was found that an extensive practice of censorship *"could be negatively perceived by the public and, as a result, could lead to a loss of confidence in the institution"* (Jędrzejewska, 2020, p. 113), the area of information that could not be classified as being of public interest was narrowed. Therefore, social media networks and platforms have also become a battlefield for Israeli public diplomacy, in which a special type of ammunition is used to re-draw the geopolitical imaginary of public opinion in order to win this war. According to Karolina Jędrzejewska, *"Using new media makes it possible for Israel not only to deepen the knowledge of the country among foreign audiences but also to undermine anti-Israel campaigns. Internet monitoring helped to identify potential image crises as early as possible. Once the potential crisis was identified, due to the approval issued by the Ministry of Public Diplomacy, hasbara crises started to be managed in real time by activating a virtual network of Internet social media users all around the world to combat online criticism against Israel"* (Jędrzejewska, 2020, p. 112).

For this, new strategies have been tested since 2008 in the public diplomacy activity carried out by the IDF. In the military structures acting to restore security in various

crisis situations, cameramen were employed to provide live images. Karolina Jędrzejewska illustrates this point with one of the videos uploaded by the IDF, entitled *"Weapons Horde in Gazan mosque"*. *"An Israeli soldier who is showing to the viewer a mosque in Gaza and the weapons held there by Hamas explaining to the public why it was necessary for the IDF to bomb the mosque. Therefore, a target that would be considered unacceptable by the public became in some way justified"* (Jędrzejewska, 2020, p. 113).

A strategy that has proven successful has been to conduct activities for the knowledge of Jewish history and culture on the university campuses of major universities in the US and Europe, but not only. According to Fatemeh Shafiee Sarvestani, Saied Reza Ameli and Foad Izadi *"U.S. university campuses are the site of most of Israeli network expansion activities. This is largely to combat the potential influence of anti-Israel activities at campuses which could decidedly change the course of young people's attitudes towards Israel for the rest of their lives. Older cohorts, on the contrary, usually come across anti-Israel information only through the media which they could choose to ignore"* (Sarvestani, Ameli, Izadi, 2019, p. 14). Centers for Hebrew studies operate in major universities in Europe. In Great Britain *"On July 20, 2008, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown launched a new academic exchange program in signing a joint declaration to establish BIRAX - the Britain-Israel Research and Academic Exchange Partnership. BIRAX was developed by the British Council in collaboration with the Pears Foundation following a statement of intent from British Minister for Higher Education Bill Rammell to strengthen academic collaboration between the United Kingdom and Israel during an official visit to the Jewish State in 2007. The program targets junior academics by awarding those studying the exact sciences and social sciences with grants for research and exchange opportunities. The program was initially to run for five years"* (Britain-Israel Relations). In Romania, at the University of Bucharest, the Center for Jewish Studies "Goldstein Goren" operates within the Faculty of Letters; at "Vasile Goldis" University in Arad, "Academician Nicolae Cajal" Center for Jewish Studies and History of the Jewish People was established. At the Babeş Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, the Dr. Moshe Carmilly Institute of Judaism and Jewish History was established in 1991, as part of the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and operates within the Department of Medieval and Premodern History and History of Art; in Iaşi, the Center for the History of Jews and Hebraistics operates within the organizational and legal framework of the Faculty of History of A. I. Cuza University, but also in other university centers in other cities. In these institutions, didactic, cultural and educational activities focused on in-depth knowledge of the history, civilization and culture of the Jewish communities, including those in the Romanian area, are carried out.

Perhaps the most effective strategy for the development and efficiency of public diplomacy activities was the one that led to the training of young people through school programs in this field. *"Two Israeli universities, Haifa University and Tel Aviv University, now offer programs in Hasbara. The Haifa course is meant for Israeli students, the Tel Aviv one for foreign students. Both are supported by Israeli ministries: the Haifa one by*

*the Ministry of Propaganda and Diaspora (Ministry of Hasbara, in Hebrew) and the Tel Aviv program by the Foreign Ministry"* (Gurvitz, 2012).

## **2. Palestinian Public Diplomacy**

The Palestinians, for their part, have been concerned with developing public diplomacy structures both at the level of the Central Authority and in the private sector. The Palestinian National Authority is the current governing body of the Palestinian population and is subordinate to a Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in addition to which public diplomacy structures also operate. They are subordinated to the Palestinian International Cooperation Agency (PICA), "*which is the only official government tool for Palestine's public diplomacy*" (Ayoub, 2023, p. 210). Thus, PICA aims to change the attitudes of international public opinion, an approach that is widely used by all governments to improve their public diplomacy programs. In order to fulfill such objectives, the PICA management would have two essential tasks: to follow up on the internal Media, Training and Political strategy programs and to report to the PD state central player (the President, his key advisers, and the Foreign Affairs Minister). By "Political Strategy" and "Media" is meant the formation of think tanks in these fields. These think tanks have the role to design, recommend and improve the policy and decision making through scientific researches and analysis. Through local and international networks, this Department can operate efficiently and without high financial costs, if the Diaspora Palestinians and friends are harnessed to the Palestinian interest (Allain, 2005, pp. 31-34).

The extraordinary development of digital communication technologies in recent years has made it possible for public diplomacy structures affiliated/subordinate to the Palestinian National Authority to carry out activities without much difficulty and which are not very expensive. Public diplomacy activities can be conducted mainly through websites, CD-Roms, e-mails, teleconference programs and other means made available by the ongoing digital revolution. For example, a series of social media pages titled 'Palestine in "a country"' (such as the 'Palestine in India' Facebook page) have been used to disseminate messages that emphasize shared perspectives between the two nations (Palestine in India). The 'Palestine in the UK' Facebook page, which is the official page for the Palestinian mission in the UK and is used to communicate with the British community as well as the Palestinian community, hosts cultural events such as musicals and Dabkeh performances to promote and share Palestinian identity with the international community (Palestine in the UK). Such Facebook pages also work for other countries, but it should be noted that these pages do not have a large number of followers or high engagement rates, which means that the reach of the messages is quite small and even for those pages with a more numerous audience there are few reactions or comments (Ayoub, 2023, p. 211).

In the private sector there is only one non-governmental organization specialized in public diplomacy in Palestine - the Palestinian Institute for Public Diplomacy (PIPD). Since the organization's goal is to disseminate the „Palestinian story" to the world, it focuses on various aspects of life in Palestine. The content the organization shares on its

website and social media pages includes videos of Palestinian athletes and images of Palestinian heritage, along with the stories and testimonies of victims of the Israeli occupation (Iriqat, 2021). It is very important to note that the organization's programs, unlike government programs, are exclusively Web-based, actually operating on the Rābet Digital platform. The main goal of the Rābet is "to seek to strengthen Palestinian's collective sumud - Arabic for "steadfastness" - as a global, intersectional movement for freedom, justice, equity and rights for all" (Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy). The Palestinians have built up, even with the few resources they have, a good capacity to launch and sustain a wide range of public diplomacy activities, especially online, to promote their image and long-term interests.

### **3. Public Diplomacy: the battle over Gaza war narratives**

The wars of the 21st century are waged simultaneously on several battlefields, one of which is "the one of images", as each side tries to justify its ideas, beliefs and actions that led it to conflict (Michalski, Gow, 2007; O'Loughlin, 2011, pp. 71–91). Images, if not accompanied by a narrative, do not mean much to a viewer in a target group of a public diplomacy activity. Notions and words with special meaning are the most important cargo of a narrative launched through one means or another of public diplomacy. A conflict between Palestinians and Israelis has been going on in Gaza for decades. Therefore, any narrative, especially those launched into the international public space after October 7, 2023, includes notions and concepts for framing this conflict. War? Invasion? Terrorism? Self-defense? War crimes? Genocide? Which party is guilty and who is the victim? Who is the aggressor and who is defending? Actors in direct conflict on the classical battlefield will launch into the public space antithetical narratives to illustrate what is happening. From this point of view, it can be said that, beyond images, we are also dealing with a war of narratives. Analyst Alexander E. Gale, specialized in security studies, believes that *"The battle to control the narrative is an essential element of modern warfare, especially given the prevalence of social media, the 24-hour news cycle, and the rapid speed at which events on the battlefield are shared to a global audience. The Israel-Gaza conflict, being just the latest round of intergenerational fighting between Israelis and Palestinians, is certainly no exception to this rule. Indeed, the emotional impact of the conflict extends far beyond the borders to which it is confined and has galvanized strong reactions across the world. As such, the belligerents of the conflict have an interest in presenting their side in the best possible light to attract international sympathy and support"* (Gale, 2023).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been going on with moments of maximum intensity and moments of apparent calm for many decades. What transcends both dynamics is the narrative of facts that knows no moment of truce or pause. A battle where stories and perceptions hold as much power as the combatant military forces. In this complicated struggle, public diplomacy, although this is not its purpose, appears as a powerful weapon, skillfully wielded by those who want to gain legitimacy and support for their actions. A single tweet or a short TikTok video, that is insufficient to distill decades, if not centuries, of these peoples' history, have the ability to quickly shape



people's minds, influence their reactions, and even influence the reaction of elites politics at the international level. As such, an examination of how narratives developed by public diplomacy institutions and organizations is necessary; they are supposed to be politically neutral, non-partisan, but they become part of a war.

After the surprise terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7, the narrative of the war that Prime Minister Netanyahu and Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant had to wage told the whole world that Israel was the victim of aggression by monsters worse than all terrorists known until then. *"Citizens of Israel, the 7th of October is a dark day in our history. We will fully clarify what happened on the southern border and in the area adjacent to the Gaza Strip. This failure will be thoroughly investigated. Everyone will need to provide answers, myself included, but all of this will happen only after the war. As Prime Minister, I am responsible for ensuring the future of the country, and at present it is my responsibility to lead the State of Israel and the people to a crushing victory over our enemies. Now is the time to unite for one goal: To storm forward to victory. With shared forces, with deep faith in the justice of our cause and in the eternity of Israel, we will realize the prophecy of Isaiah 60:18: "Violence shall no more be heard in your land, desolation nor destruction within your borders; but you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise"* (Prime Minister Netanyahu's address, 2023). The media impact of the official speeches of the Israeli prime minister and other members of the government was important and produced positive effects among political elites in Western democracies, but there were also unfavorable reactions, especially in the Arabic-language press and in some countries with which Israel does not have very close relations. Under these conditions, *"The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's Subcommittee for Foreign Policy and Public Diplomacy, chaired by MK Zeev Elkin (National Unity Party), convened today (Sunday) to discuss the budget for Israel's public diplomacy efforts against the backdrop of the Swords of Iron war. During a meeting of the subcommittee held on November 14, 2023, it was revealed that the current budgets of the bodies that are in charge of Israel's public diplomacy were insufficient"* (Knesset News, 2023). As a result of these discussions, the Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs and Public Diplomacy received an additional 10 million shekels for public diplomacy activities to be carried out until the end of the year, and for the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Anti-Semitism a budget increase of 20 million shekels. All members of the subcommittee emphasized the importance of public diplomacy activities in such situations. Committee Chair MK Elkin said *Israel's public diplomacy was a „significant front in the war, in the battle for public opinion and the position of international leaders, in order to enable [Israel to continue fighting] in the proper conditions until the goal of destroying Hamas's rule in Gaza is achieved. The sums that have been allotted to date for the purpose of public diplomacy were insufficient, and have not enabled the State of Israel to achieve its goals"* (Gale, 2023). And deputy Tzvi Suktot emphasized that *"There is an important public diplomacy issue that is not being handled, and that is the campaign regarding settler violence, which is based on [information provided by] B'Tselem and Yesh Din, and is gaining momentum, unfortunately. These are false figures, and it is causing damage to the State of Israel. We hear the President of the United*

*States talk about this repeatedly, and, regrettably, the official State of Israel has no presence in this event” (Knesset News, 2023).*

The Palestinian side's narrative focused on how October 7 was a consequence of the enduring Israeli occupation and the marginalization of the Palestinian cause. This thesis of the terrorist group Hamas results from the so-called report on the attack of October 7, 2023, in which Hamas states that it was „*a necessary step and a normal response to confront all Israeli conspiracies against the Palestinian people*” (Aljazeera, 2024). This justification of the crimes committed was not accepted in any democratic society and was fought even in societies with a significant segment of the Muslim population, as was, for example, India. “*After Hamas launched a multipronged attack against Israel from Gaza over the weekend, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, quite appropriately, sharply upbraided Hamas's horrific actions. However, he has so far expressed no concern about the dire plight of the Palestinians trapped in Gaza. „We stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour”, he posted. „Our thoughts and prayers are with the innocent victims and their families”. After speaking with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Modi added, „India strongly and unequivocally condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. Neither statement nodded at people in Gaza” (Ganguly, Blarel, 2023).* Newspaper headlines and TV shows in the Middle East have been full of news from Gaza since Hamas launched its attack on Israel on October 7 and the Israeli army began its combat actions against the terrorist group Hamas. The narratives launched by Palestinians in the area and those in the diaspora who deal with public diplomacy were reflected in the media and new media from the Middle East and they „*appear to reflect the domestic political interests and social sensitivities in each country as much as they do the horrific reality of what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank*” (The Gaza War in Middle East Media, 2023). The battle of narratives launched in the local and international public space by the actors involved in the war in Gaza, through activities and actions specific to public diplomacy, is far from ending, even if the military operations will end at some point. What can be seen is that these narratives have divided international public opinion. There are few regions on the planet where the pros and cons of this conflict are not discussed.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Public diplomacy in crisis and war situations, no matter how well is carried out and how great the resources allocated, cannot have the same effectiveness as in times of peace and relative stability in international politics. The analysis of public diplomacy activity in an ongoing conflict cannot have final conclusions, they only draw attention to some limits that are sometimes insurmountable barriers for any practitioner in the field. One of these limits is caused by the historical psychofixations and prejudices found within a society against another people. As Susan Hattis Rolef observes, when Israeli public diplomacy narratives, explaining the rationale for launching the operation to eradicate the terrorist group Hamas, reach a target group with ideological beliefs

opposed to Israeli society or have anti-Semitic beliefs „everything we say in our own defense is considered nothing but fabricated lies, even when backed up with evidence” (Rolef, 2023). Another limit that decreases the credibility of Public Diplomacy activities is related to their interference with the actions of disinformation and deception, specific to the hybrid war, especially when specialists in the field are involved from countries whose governments do not have good relations with the Israeli one. „Accounts tied to China, Iran, and Russia have sought to capitalize on the conflict to spread anti-Western propaganda. Iranian state-linked accounts have glorified Hamas's attack as an act of resistance against a „neo-colonial” power, and amplified narratives accusing the U.S. of being responsible for Palestinian suffering, according to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Russian and Chinese government accounts have promoted similar content, accusing Western countries of turning a blind eye to alleged Israeli war crimes” (Cortellessa, Bergengruen, 2023). All wars are also information wars, and military propaganda is not a new element. But the torrent of fake and misleading online images from Israel and Gaza has become a visual cacophony that has many wondering what's really going on and whether the near-instant news is informing anyone. The images include videos from past conflicts, scenes from action movies, fake posts and screenshots, and fake statements and photos. The posts are then shared and promoted by partisans or others just looking for likes and followers. People involved in the daily practice of public diplomacy are challenged by both the speed and stature of these issues on mainstream media news channels and social communication platforms. The dramatic experience of this war will provide raw material and lessons learned alike for researchers and practitioners in the field of public diplomacy, a necessary vector of communication that can lead to the resolution of conflicts, to the restoration of security in societies affected by crisis and war only if “it re-invents itself”.

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