Palestine in Hebrew: Overcoming the Limitations of Traditional Diplomacy

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Abstract:
The digitalization of public diplomacy has seen diplomats embrace digital tools as a means of overcoming some of the limitations of traditional diplomacy. Such is the case with virtual embassies that enable states to formulate virtual ties with foreign publics in place of physical ones. In this study we evaluate the recently launched Palestinian Facebook Embassy to Israel. Results of a four month analysis suggest that the Palestinian Embassy focuses on depicting the attributes of the future state of Palestine, its values and desire to co-exist peacefully alongside Israel. Moreover, results demonstrate that the Embassy engages in two-way conversations with followers, albeit to varying digress. In summary, our results suggest that Palestine in Hebrew demonstrates a willingness to engage in two-way conversations with online followers and focusing on a positive future.

Key Words:
Digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, Facebook, Virtual embassies, Palestine, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

Introduction

Recent years have the emergence of digitalized public diplomacy. This process coincided with a conceptual shift known as the "new" public diplomacy which placed an emphasis on communicating with foreign populations with the goal of long term relationship building.[1] It was against this backdrop that diplomats and foreign ministries (MFAs) sought

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[1]   Melissen, J. (ed.). (2005). *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations.* Springer; Cull, N. J. (2013). "The Long Road to Public Diplomacy 2.0: The Internet in US Public Diplomacy." *International Studies Review*, 15 (1), 123-139.

to launch virtual embassies and engage with online publics. In this study, we explored the online strategies of a new virtual "embassy" – Palestine in Hebrew, a Facebook page meant to facilitate interaction between the Palestinian government and Israeli citizens. We begin the article by reviewing previous attempts to manage virtual embassies before discussing the motivation behind Palestine in Hebrew and assessing the embassy's ability to create relationships with Israeli Facebook users. Notably, in this study we examine the functional dimension of digitalized public diplomacy, as our analysis explores how digital tools can be used in public diplomacy activities.

On Virtual Embassies and Virtual Ties

Manor[2] has argued that there were four events that led MFAs and diplomats to migrate online. The first was the need to counter Al Qaeda's online recruitment efforts and its narrative of Jihad against Western imperialism.[3] The second was the Arab Spring which led diplomats to view social media as a forecasting tool enabling them to anticipate events in foreign countries. The third was the rise in prominence of citizen journalists who, during the Arab Spring, used social media to curate and disseminate information in real-time and on a global scale.[4] Even more important was citizen journalists' ability to frame events and influence coverage of Arab protests.[5] This framing ability led MFAs to migrate on-

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[2]   Manor, I. (2016). "Are We There Yet: Have MFAs Realized the Potential of Digital Diplomacy?". *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 1 (2), 1-110.

[3]   Hallams, E. (2010). "Digital Diplomacy: the Internet, the Battle for Ideas & US Foreign Policy". *CEU Political Science Journal*, 4, 538-574.

[4]   Seib, P. (2012). *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era*. Springer; Causey, C., & Howard, P. N. (2013). "Delivering Digital Public Diplomacy". In R. S. Zaharna, A. Arsenault & A. Fisher (Eds.), *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy: The Connective Mindshift* (pp. 144-56). Oxford: Routledge.

[5]   Xiguang, L., & Jing, W. (2010). "Web-based Public Diplomacy: The Role of Social Media in the Iranian and Xinjiang Riots". *Journal of International Communication*, 16 (1), 7-22.; Meraz, S., & Papacharissi, Z. (2013). "Networked Gatekeeping and Networked Framing on #Egypt". *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 18, 138-66.

line so as to counter citizen journalists' depiction of events when necessary. Finally, diplomats migrated online given a desire to interact with connected publics, foster long term relationships with foreign populations and create a receptive environment for their foreign policies.[6] In other words, diplomats viewed social media as a tool for direct, two-way engagement with foreign publics and, subsequently, a means of practicing the "new" public diplomacy.[7]

However, MFAs' migration to social media was also facilitated by a desire to overcome the limitations of traditional diplomacy, conceptualized here as a reliance on face-to-face interactions, slow dissemination of information, and heavily state-centric activities.[8] These perceived limitations include both spatial and temporal elements. Several MFAs launched virtual embassies that could transcend borders, conflicts, long time horizons of information dissemination, and even spatial limitations. The Swedish MFA was the first to launch a virtual embassy in 2007.[9] The embassy, called Second House of Sweden, was created in the virtual world of Second Life, an online environment where users can interact with created avatars. According to Pamment, the embassy was meant to serve as a cultural institution promoting Swedish art among a global audience. Between 2007 and 2012 Sweden's virtual embassy hosted gallery openings, art exhibits, movie screenings and lectures all celebrating Swedish cultural achievements. In addition, the embassy held events commemorating Swedish history or celebrating Swedish national holidays. Notably, all these activities were meant to facilitate engagement between Sweden and individuals the world over. However, in his analy-

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6   Hayden, C. (2012). "Social Media at State: Power, Practice, and Conceptual Limits for US Public Diplomacy". *Global Media Journal-American Edition*, 11 (21); Kampf, R., Manor, I., & Segev, E. (2015). "Digital Diplomacy 2.0? A Cross-national Comparison of Public Engagement in Facebook and Twitter". *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 10 (4), 331-62.

7   Melissen, J. (Ed.). *op. cit.*; Cull, N. J. *op. cit.*

8   Holmes, M. (2013). "The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions". *International Organization,* 67 (Fall): 829-61; Holmes, M. (2018). *Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Social Neuroscience and International Relations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

9   Swedish Institute (2007, March). "Second House of Sweden 2007-2012". Retrieved from *https://secondhouseofsweden.wordpress.com/*.

sis of Second House of Sweden, Pamment writes that the global embassy failed to meet its potential, and perhaps its own goals. While it provided its visitors with a unique virtual experience, events were poorly attended and the embassy was unable to create a vibrant online community. In addition, some Second Life users protested against the embassy viewing it as a state sponsored invasion of a virtual world devoid of politics, borders, and governments.[10]

The second ministry to open a virtual embassy was the US State Department. In 2011, under the tenure of Hillary Clinton, the State Department launched Virtual Embassy Iran, a web based platform meant to facilitate interactions between American diplomats and Iranian web users. Virtual Embassy Iran was conceptualized as a tool that would overcome the absence of bi-lateral ties between the US and Iran who served diplomatic representation in 1979. As such, American diplomats could not engage with Iranian citizens, narrate US foreign policies, comment on regional and global events and proactively manage America's image amongst the Iranian population.[11] Virtual Embassy Iran was also meant to serve as a substitute for a brick and mortar embassy offering consular services ranging from visa applications to information about scholarship to US universities.[12] Importantly, one of the embassy's stated goals was to facilitate online discussion between US diplomats and Iranian citizens. However, in her analysis of the embassy's activities, Metzgar found little evidence of actual two-way engagement between US diplomats and Iranians. She concluded that while the embassy offered diplomats the ability to manage America's image, and increase its Soft Power resources in Iran, it served mostly as a one way information hub.

In 2013 the Israeli foreign ministry launched its own virtual embassy on Twitter. Named "Israel in the GCC", the embassy was meant to foster relations between Israel and the populations of six gulf countries who

[10]   Pamment, J. (2013). *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century*. New York: Rutledge.

[11]   Metzgar, E. T. (2012). "Is It the Medium or the Message? Social Media, American Public Relations & Iran". *Global Media Journal*, 1-16.

[12]   VOA. (2011, December 5). "US Opens 'Virtual Embassy' for Iran". *VOA News*. Retrieved from *https://www.voanews.com/a/us-opens-virtual-embassy-for-iran-135129423/173325. html*.

do not officially recognize Israel – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain.[13] The embassy's stated mission was to facilitate dialogue with Arab and Muslim social media users on a host of issues ranging from business and science to politics and society.[14] Over the past two years, the embassy has invited its followers to online Q&A sessions with Israeli leaders including the President and the Prime Minister. In addition, the embassy shared goodwill messages from Israel's leaders such as a video message from the Israeli Prime Minister wishing Ramadan Kareem to Muslims around the world. However, Manor found that the embassy failed to engage in conversations with followers on a regular basis or answer criticism posted on its Twitter feed.[15]

For Israel, the Twitter embassy may have also served as a means of overcoming a critical media. By using Twitter the Israeli MFA could frame Israeli foreign and security policies and directly disseminate these frames among connected publics thereby bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as the media or local governments. While the embassy's scope of daily activity varies greatly, it currently has more than 2,000 followers.

The case studies reviewed thus far suggest that virtual embassies offer three benefits. First, they can overcome limitations of traditional diplomacy such as lack of bi-lateral ties, the inability to interact with a global public, and the slow pace of non-digital communication. Second, they enable diplomats to narrate their nation's policies without going through traditional gatekeepers. Third, they can facilitate two-way engagement as a means of creating relationships between governments and foreign populations. However, these case studies also suggest that continuous online engagement is the Achilles' heel of virtual embassies, who often fail to create thriving and sustainable online communities.

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[13] Bekker, V., Kerr, S., & Allam, A. (2013, July 23). "Israel Bypasses Diplomatic Freeze with Gulf 'Virtual Embassy'". *The Financial Times*. Retrieved from *https://www.ft.com/content/4495b17c-f3a7-11e2-942f-00144feabdc0?mhq5j=e5*.

[14] Ravid, B. (2014). "Israel Opens Virtual Embassy to Gulf States". Retrieved August 21, 2014 from *http://blogs.haaretz.co.il/barakravid/773/*.

[15] Manor, I. (2016). "Are We There Yet: Have MFAs Realized the Potential of Digital Diplomacy?". *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 1 (2), 1-110.

In this study, we investigated a relatively new virtual embassy launched by Palestine at the end of 2015. The embassy's goals and activities are reviewed in the following section.

Palestine in Hebrew

From a diplomatic perspective Palestine is a puzzling case study. On the one hand, it is a member state of the UN. On the other hand it has no internationally recognized borders. Similarly, while in some countries Palestine has an official embassy, in others it has offices of interests or offices managed solely by the PLO as is the case in the US. The relationship between Palestine and Israel is also complex as Israel partially recognizes the Palestinian government in the West Bank but does not recognize the Hamas government in Gaza. Additionally, although Israel and Palestine have signed several accords, they have not established official bi-lateral ties. Subsequently, there is no official Palestinian representation in Israel and there are limited opportunities for Palestinian diplomats to engage with Israeli citizens.

It is against this backdrop of limited diplomatic recognition that the Palestinian government in the West Bank launched the Palestine in Hebrew Facebook page in November of 2015.[16] The page, which posts content solely in Hebrew, is managed by the PLO's Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society which has the stated goal of "Reaching a just and sustainable solution to the Middle East conflict through the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel on the basis of the 4 June 1967 lines and a just and agreed-upon solution to the refugee problem on the basis of UN resolution 194". As of September 2017, the page has some 8,000 followers and another 8,000 Likes.

Given that there is limited interaction between Israelis and Palestinian diplomats, and given that Palestinian officials are rarely interviewed in the Israeli media, the Palestine in Hebrew Facebook page represents another attempt by a government to overcome the limitations of traditional

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[16]   Times of Israel. (2015, "November 8). PLO launches Facebook page – in Hebrew". *Times of Israel*. Retrieved from *https://www.timesofisrael.com/plo-launches-facebook-page-in-hebrew/*.

diplomacy through digitized public diplomacy. In this study, we analysed the online strategies of the Palestine in Hebrew Facebook page by formulating three research hypotheses.

Research Framework

Based on the experiences of the MFAs discussed above, and the literature that has developed analyzing them, our first hypothesis was that content on the Palestine in Hebrew Facebook page would be used to depict the future attributes and values of the Palestinian state. This assumption stemmed from the fact that both Sweden's embassy to Second Life and Virtual Embassy Iran were, among other, tools for national image management and Soft Power accumulation. Therefore, it was plausible that Palestine in Hebrew would use Facebook Posts to offer Israelis a positive vision of the future Palestine.

Second, we assumed that that administrators of Palestine in Hebrew would attempt to engage in two-way conversations with Israelis. Although previous case studies suggest that such engagement is rare, we nevertheless assumed it would take place on the Palestinian Facebook page given that it is managed by the committee for *interaction* with Israeli society. Moreover, two-way engagement could lead to the formulation of relationships between the PLO's Interaction Committee and Israeli Facebook users thus practicing the "new" public diplomacy and creating a receptive environment for its foreign policy.

Finally, we assumed that Palestine in Hebrew would focus on issues that are believed to be of utmost concern to Israelis and that lead some Israelis to oppose a peaceful settlement to the ongoing conflict between both sides. Recent polls suggest that the most contentious issues among Israelis are Palestine's refusal to acknowledge the historical and religious ties between Jews and the land of Israel and the possible Palestinian control over the Holy Sites in Jerusalem.[17] Additional issues include Hamas' rule in Gaza

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[17] The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research. (2017). *Palestinian-Israeli Pulse: A Joint Poll*.

and its calls to annihilate Israel, the possibility of the West Bank also falling under the rule of Hamas, indoctrination in Palestinian schools against Jews and the West Bank governments' financial support of terrorists' families.

In order to tests our three research hypotheses we analysed 40 Facebook posts published between January and April of 2017. This sampling period was selected as it saw an initiative by the Trump White House to resume peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine. We thus assumed that Palestine in Hebrew might increase its online activities to support possible peace talks and create a receptive Israeli environment for Palestine's foreign policy.

Results

Content Shared on Facebook

Analysing the Posts shared on Palestine in Hebrew was achieved through thematic analysis which Braun and Clarke define as a method for reporting on recurring themes within a research corpus, similar to methods of recovering identity from written texts.[18] Within the scope of this study, thematic analysis was used to group Facebook posts into subject matter categories. Overall, we found that Palestinian Facebook Posts could be classified into nine subject matter categories.

As Graph 1 (below) indicates, the most prevalent category focused on exhibiting Palestinian values. These included posts celebrating the role of women in Palestinian society, posts featuring Palestinian culture such as a theatre festival and the Palestinian national orchestra, posts depicting the Palestinian government as open to criticism and posts celebrating the virtue of non-violent resistance. These posts were similar to those in a less prevalent category depicting Palestine as "a state in the making" with a national soccer team, a national contender in the "Arab Idol" reality

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18   Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2014). "Thematic Analysis". In *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* (pp. 1947-1952). Springer New York; Hopf, T. and Allan, B. (2016). *Making Identity Count: Building a National Identity Database*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

show and a national philharmonic orchestra. Additional posts dealt with Palestine's economic viability should it obtain independence.

Graph 1. Prevalence of Topics Addressed in Posts January-April 2017
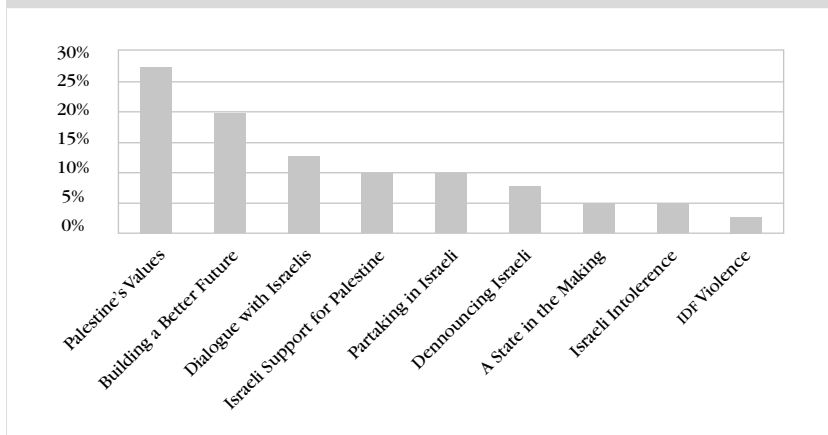
The second most prevalent category consisted of Posts emphasizing the need to create a better future for both Israeli and Palestinians. Such posts tended to highlight that only a mutually beneficial future would be a prosperous one. A notable example was a Post wishing Israelis a happy Passover and hoping that by the next year Israelis and Palestinians will live peacefully one next to the other. This post echoes the Israeli Prime Minister's Ramadan blessing published by the Israeli virtual embassy to the GCC.

The third most prevalent category included Posts illustrating Palestine's desire to engage in dialogue with Israelis. This included images from meetings between Palestinian officials and Israeli university students or members of Israeli NGOs and Israelis who host Palestinian leaders for informal talks in their Livingroom. Likewise, another category included posts in which high ranking Israeli politicians and security officials expressed support for a Palestinian State and argued that such a state would benefit Israel's national security.

The fifth most prevalent category included Posts in which Palestine in Hebrew commented on internal political debates in Israel. One notable

example was the denunciation of Israeli politicians who expressed support for hosting BBQs opposite jails in which Palestinians were staging a hunger strike. Likewise, Palestine in Hebrew published cartoons referencing Israel's taxation policies.

Notably, the least prevalent categories were those denouncing the Israeli occupation as a violent one; Posts depicting Israeli intolerance towards Palestinians and Posts exhibiting IDF violence towards Palestinians through images and videos. Thus, it seems that Palestine in Hebrew focused on depicting a desire for dialogue, and peaceful relations, rather than accusing Israel of maintaining a violent military occupation.

Two-Way Engagement

In order to assess the scope of two-way engagement between Palestine in Hebrew and Israeli Facebook users we first analysed the extent to which Israelis engage with Palestinian Facebook Posts. As can be seen in Graph 2, the average Palestinian Post received 45 likes and 4 shares. More importantly, the average Post received 14 comments. Commenting on posts may be seen as more intensive form of engagement as it requires more effort, and is more public, than Liking Facebook content. These results suggest that Facebook users are willing to share Palestinian content with their Friends thus increasing the reach of Palestinian messages. If these are indeed Israeli Facebook users than they may be aiding Palestine in Hebrew reach among the target audience. However, a qualitative analysis of Israeli comments suggests that several of these were negative, and included normatively negative content such as profanities, or calls to violence.

Next, we analysed the extent to which Palestine in Hebrew replied to comments posted by Israelis thus practicing two-way engagement. As can be seen in Graph 3, Palestine in Hebrew was found to exhibit a low response rate replying, on average, to 1.8 Israeli comments.

Given a desire to better explore Palestine in Hebrew's engagement practices, we analysed Palestinian replies to Israeli comments in each month. As can be seen in Graph 3 (below) this analysis yielded a more complex picture. In January of 2017, Palestine in Hebrew replied 66 times to Israeli comments. Similarly, in March it replied a total of 13 times. But

there were no replies during February and April. While these results pre-clude us from reaching a definitive conclusion, it seems that Palestine in Hebrew does engage in conversations with its target audience. We postu-late that the decline in response rate may be related to the fact that many Israeli comments were negative.

Graph 2. Average Level of User and Profile Engagement January-April 2017
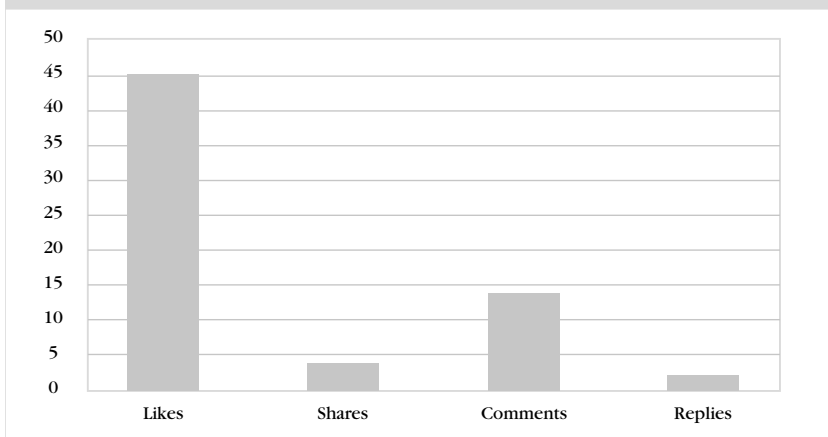
Graph 3. Number of Replies to Follower Comments January-April 2017
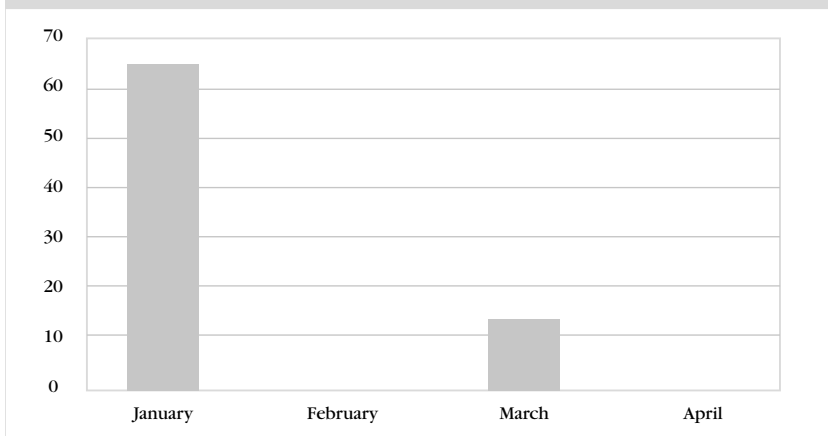
Contentious Issues

Throughout the sampling period we found few posts on contentious issues and no posts referencing issues that are of concern to Israelis in general, and Israelis who oppose the peace process in particular. While Palestine in Hebrew called for a Two State Solution, it did not recognize the historic and religious ties between Jews and the land of Israel. Likewise, there were no Posts dealing with incitement to violence, financial aid to families' of convicted terrorists or the manner in which the West Bank will remain free from the influence of Hamas. However, there were also no Posts that depicted a Palestinian desire to control the holy sites in Jerusalem nor were there any references to Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state.

Discussion and Recommendations for Practitioners

The digitalization of public diplomacy corresponded with a conceptual shift among scholars and practitioners of diplomacy commonly referred to as the "new" public diplomacy.[19] As Bruce Gregory summarizes, public diplomacy is now an instrument to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviours, to build and manage relationships and to mobilize action.[20] Social media, and digital platforms, were seen as *the* tools of "new" public diplomacy as they facilitate two-way engagement and dialogue which can lead to the creation of online relationships. Such relationships can, in turn, translate to offline support of another country's foreign policy.[21] Additionally, cultivating and maintaining relationships are the very foundation of social media sites.[22]

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[19]   Melissen, J. (Ed.). *op. cit.*; Pamment, J. *op. cit.*

[20]   Gregory, B. (2011). "American Public Diplomacy: Enduring Characteristics, Elusive Transformation". *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 6 (3-4), 351-72.

[21]   Manor, I. (2016). "Are We There Yet: Have MFAs Realized the Potential of Digital Diplomacy?". *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 1 (2), 1-110.

[22]   Kampf, R., Manor, I., & Segev, E. (2015). Digital Diplomacy 2.0? A Cross-national Comparison of Public Engagement in Facebook and Twitter. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 10 (4), 331-62.

The need to engage with foreign populations, and the desire to overcome the limitations of traditional diplomacy, led diplomats and MFAs to experiment with virtual embassies. Theses could overcome spatial limitations and enable an MFA to engage daily with a globally diverse public. Such was the case with Sweden's cultural embassy to Second Life. Virtual embassies could also enable diplomats to overcome the absence of official diplomatic ties as was the case with Virtual Embassy Iran.[23] Lastly, virtual embassies could help nations overcome hostile governments and highly critical media outlets. Israel's Twitter embassy to the GCC was supposed to foster engagement with Muslim and Arab social media users while also narrating Israel's polices.[24]

Yet in all cases virtual embassies faced a similar problem – lack of continuous two-way dyadic engagement between diplomats/officials and their target audiences. In an attempt to explain such findings, Cassidy and Manor[25] have argued that diplomats are still reluctant to converse with online audiences given fear of loss of control over the communication process and the view of online publics as volatile and unpredictable.[26] Others have argued that MFAs are change resistant organizations who, like other government branches, fail to adapt a web 2.0 mentality that focuses on interactions and relationship building.[27] Yet one must also bear in mind that social media interactions necessitate resources as content has to be produced, comments have to be evaluated and responses must be drafted. Given that MFAs now manage hundreds of social media

[23] Metzgar, E. T. *op. cit.*

[24] Bjola, C., & Jiang, L. (2015). "Social Media and Public Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of the Digital Diplomatic Strategies of the EU, US and Japan in China". In C. Bjola and M. Holmes (Eds.), *Digital Diplomacy Theory and Practice* (pp. 71-88). New York: Routledge.

[25] Cassidy, J., & Manor, I. (2016). "Crafting strategic MFA Communication Policies During Times of Political Crisis: A Note to MFA Policy Makers". *Global Affairs*, 2 (3), 331-343.

[26] Haynal, G. (2011). "Corporate Diplomacy in the Information Age: Catching Up to the Dispersal of Power". In J. G. Stein (Ed.), *Diplomacy in the Digital Age: Essays in Honour of Ambassador Allan Gotlieb* (pp. 209-224). Ontario: Signal.

[27] Copeland, D. (2013). "Taking Diplomacy Public". In R. S. Zaharna, A. Arsenault & A. Fisher (Eds.), *op. cit.* (pp. 56-69); McNutt, K. (2014). "Public Engagement in the Web 2.0 Era: Social Collaborative Tech-nologies in a Public Sector Context". *Canadian Public Administration*, 57 (1), 49-70.

accounts, their ability to engage with audiences over long durations of time is limited.

In this study, we examined a new virtual "embassy" – the Palestine in Hebrew Facebook channel launched by the PLO with the goal of interacting with Israeli citizens. The Palestinian case study is unique for two reasons. First, Palestine and Israel are in a state of active conflict. Thus, a Palestinian embassy to Israel is unlike the US embassy to Iran or Israel's embassy to the GCC, where relations may not be ideal, but lack active violence. Second, Palestine is a diplomatic liminal being: only a semi-recognized state with semi recognized borders and two governments that are unwilling to collaborate. Yet the rationale behind Palestine in Hebrew is similar to that of other virtual embassies – using social media to overcome the limitations of traditional diplomacy, in this case the lack of Palestinian diplomatic presence in Israel.

In this study, we explored Palestine in Hebrew's online practices through the content it shares on Facebook, it two-way interactions with Israelis and its willingness to address issues that are of concern to Israelis. The content analysis suggests that Palestine in Hebrew focuses mostly on depicting the attributes of the future state of Palestine and its values. Like Israel, Palestine will have a democratic government that shall be open to criticism. Like Israel, Palestine shall celebrate minorities and gender equality and will cherish culture. Importantly, Palestine in Hebrew advocates the value of non-violent resistance thereby rejecting calls for Palestinian violence against Israel. These messages may have resonated with Israelis who often view their country as the only democracy in the Middle East. Moreover, Palestine in Hebrew also depicted Palestine as a "state in the making", one that has national institutions and that will be financially viable and not wholly dependent on the Israeli economy. Such messages may have also resonated with Israelis who fear the financial ramifications of an independent Palestine and who fail to imagine what a unified Palestine will look like given the split between the West Bank and Gaza.

Second, Palestine in Hebrew argued that only a mutually beneficial future will lead to the propensity and security of Israelis and Palestinians. By so doing, it argued that the future of both people was inter-twined and that one could not prosper while the other suffers. This could be seen as a sophisticated argument stating that a free Palestine equals a safe Isra-

el. Palestine in Hebrew also repeatedly demonstrated a desire to engage in dialogue with Israelis and quoted Israeli security officials who argued in favour of the Two States solution. Both arguments may have been employed to build trust between the Palestinian government and Israelis.

The least prevalent issues on Palestine in Hebrew were contentious issues, such as those condemning the Israeli occupation or Posts highlighting Israeli violence against Palestinians. Thus, it seems that Palestine in Hebrew is using Facebook to present Israelis with a positive and credible vision of the future, as was hypothesized. Positive as it will yield prosperity and credible as it is backed by Israeli leaders and security officers. As such, Palestine in Hebrew demonstrates the potential applicability of digital tools to overcome the limitations of traditional diplomacy. Through Facebook, Palestine may be able to cultivate a receptive environment for its main foreign policy objective – independence.

It should be noted that Palestine in Hebrew commented on various political debates taking place within Israel. This may have been an attempt to demonstrate the manner in which the two political entities are intertwined and the extent to which Palestinians are familiar with Israeli politics. Moreover, by addressing Israeli social issues the Facebook Page was also commenting on topics that were of concern to Israelis such as taxation policies. Studies have suggested that by meeting the informational needs of followers, organizations can begin to foster relationships with publics.[28]

When analysing the scope of actual two-way engagement on Palestine in Hebrew we found conflicting results. On the one hand, it appears that Israeli Facebook users are willing to Like and, at times, Share Palestinian messages. Such sharing is of crucial importance as people are more receptive to messages disseminated by Friends than those disseminated by governments, let alone the government of an adversary.[29] While we also found that Israelis comment on Palestinian Posts, many of these

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[28]   Taylor, M., & Kent, M. L. (2014). "Dialogic Engagement: Clarifying Foundational Concepts". *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26 (5), 384-398.

[29]   Attias, S. (2012). "Israel's New Peer-to-Peer Diplomacy". *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 7 (4), 473-82; Manor, I. (2016). "Are We There Yet: Have MFAs Realized the Potential of Digital Diplomacy?". *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 1 (2), 1-110.

were negative. Similarly, when analysing Palestine in Hebrew's response rate to Israeli comments we found that these varied greatly throughout the sampling period. However, there were months in which Palestine in Hebrew actively engaged in conversations with Israelis in Hebrew. Such conversations are the very foundations of the "new" public diplomacy and may enable the Palestinian government to foster a vibrant online community on its Facebook channel. Such a community can, in turn, be mobilized into action in support of Palestinian causes.[30]

Finally, we found that Palestine in Hebrew failed to comment on the most contentious issues in the eyes of Israelis. The Facebook Page did not address Israeli security, political and religious concerns nor did it comment on Palestine's support of terrorism or incitement to violence. From a public diplomacy perspective one might argue that this was the result of a strategic decision to focus on the positive attributes of the future Palestinian state. But from a "new" public diplomacy perspective failure to discuss issues that are of interest to foreign populations could prevent relationship building. From a digitalized public diplomacy perspective, failure to address criticism, or explain contentious policies, may lead social media users to abandon a government's profile without bothering to return. Crucially, it is by commenting on contentious issues that a state demonstrates a true desire to engage in dialogue, both online and offline.

There are several limitations to the current study that call for the need for further research. First, as is often the case with digital diplomacy, it is difficult to show the causal effect of any particular tweet, post, or even a large online community. Put simply, what is the effect of Palestine in Hebrew when it comes to broader questions of international politics? Is the Facebook page changing hearts and minds? Future research will need to isolate causal processes and mechanisms, linking the digital to public opinion beliefs and state action. Second, our sample of Facebook posts was necessarily limited. Palestine in Hebrew is still a relatively small "embassy" and it is not a particularly prolific page. Collecting and analyzing posts and responses to them over a longer time horizon will be benefi-

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[30] Gregory, B. (2011). "American Public Diplomacy: Enduring Characteristics, Elusive Transformation". *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 6 (3-4), 351-72.

cial. Lastly, given the unique nature of the Israel/Palestine conflict, it may be that the Palestine in Hebrew embassy is *sui generis*, not amenable to comparison to other online MFAs. While we have built our theory off of literature analyzing the typical digital MFA experience, there is nothing typical about the Israel/Palestine conflict, which suggests the generalizability of the Palestine in Hebrew experience may be limited.

In summary, our results suggest that Palestine in Hebrew succeeds where others have failed given an increased willingness to engage in two-way conversations with online followers, focusing on a positive and credible future and dealing with issues that of concern to Israelis such as internal politics. However, Palestine in Hebrew must be careful moving forward. It may well be that dealing with the most contentious issues in the eyes of Israelis and responding to comments posted by Israeli Facebook users is the key to building a sustainable enterprise.

This case study offers important insight to practitioners.

- Virtual embassies are not like other digital diplomacy accounts. They require dedicated staff so that there is ongoing two way engagement. Engagement and discussion needs to be a priority, with fresh content, and responses, occurring daily if not hourly.
- Prior research should be done to identify target audience interest, informational needs and background knowledge on relevant issues. The specifics here will relate to the goals and mission of the virtual embassy.
- Messages should be tailored to the values, norms, history and language of target audience. Positivity is king.
- Two-way conversations over time build a community. The community should then be mobilized to *share* content with friends and other relevant stakeholders. In the end this is the logic of peer-to-peer diplomacy.
- Dealing with contentious issues will likely create some level of backlash. But diplomats are used to backlash and should not be afraid of it in the digital context. The critical component is differentiating strong engagers with good intentions from "trolls" who seek only to disrupt.
- Virtual embassies are best viewed as a means to proactively cultivate and manage a national impression, and to demonstrate shared values and world view. As one diplomat recently put it, "the world is full of similar people; we just need to show this to everyone".