



## Israel's Public Diplomacy Will It Touch a New Generation of Singaporeans?

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Jasmine Ashley Kolano

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## Israel-Asia Relations: New Trends, Old Challenges?

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Much of the scholarship on Israel's foreign policy focuses on its relations with countries in the West or with its Arab neighbours; the significant rapprochement between Israel and countries in Asia has been largely neglected. There have been many indicators in the past decade pointing to these burgeoning ties – from China's involvement in Israel's infrastructure (in particular, Haifa port), the rise of Israel-India economic and security cooperation, and the expanding trade between Israel and Indonesia to the recent establishment of a new quadrilateral forum, the "I2U2", comprising India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States.

Against the backdrop of these burgeoning relationships, the Middle East Institute at NUS convened a two-day workshop in February 2023 gathering together scholars from across the world – including Israel, China, the United States, Turkey, Indonesia, France and Singapore – to explore the depth of Israel's partnerships across Asia. The seminar delved into the political and economic drivers of these relationships as well as their scope (and limitations). Particularly, it discussed the evolution of Israel's policy towards China, India and Japan. It also looked into lesser known areas, such as Israel-Azerbaijan relations and the development of Holocaust studies in China. Altogether, the seminar shed light on a research topic – Israel's Asia policy – that is likely to expand in the coming years. This is one of the papers based on the seminar.

Cover image: Students from Temasek Polytechnic posing with Singapore's then Second Minister for Education Indranee Rajah after winning first prize at a MakeAThon event organised by the Tikkun Olam Makers, a non-profit organisation founded in Israel. The event was held in June 2019 as part of the celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Israel and Singapore. Courtesy Temasek Polytechnic.

# Israel's Public Diplomacy

## Will It Touch a New Generation of Singaporeans?

Jasmine Ashley Kolano\*

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Israeli public diplomacy has traditionally relied on military exchanges to strengthen ties with Singapore. Israel's recent influence efforts include cultural and religious diplomacy aimed at young Singaporeans. However, the effectiveness of these efforts in disseminating Israel's strategic narrative and advancing its soft power is in question owing to the lack of long-term investment in public diplomacy and the lingering Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite these constraints, Israel needs to implement a sharper public diplomacy strategy to tell its story to a new generation of Singaporeans unfamiliar with Israel's contributions to Singapore in its early days of independence.

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A little known fact about Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, is the impact that the novel *Exodus* – a fictional account of the founding of modern Israel – had on him as a young man: “The story left a deep impression on me.”<sup>1</sup> The prime minister admits that his admiration of Israel can be traced, in part, to the narratives of remarkable resilience and innovation that he had first read about in Leon Uris's bestseller. Prime Minister Lee's Singapore continues to maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Wai, “Israel's story ‘resonates with, inspires S'poreans’”, *Today Online*, 29 April 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/israels-story-resonates-inspires-s'poreans>.

the close relationship with Israel forged since the island republic's independence. The projected opening of a Singapore embassy in Israel, announced in 2022, marks a watershed moment in their 53 years of diplomatic relations.

In many ways, Prime Minister Lee's encounter with *Exodus* – a book that “put Israel on the map in a positive light” according to Israeli officials<sup>2</sup> – is the kind of benchmark that would mark the success of Israel's public diplomacy programmes around the world: gaining prominence with up-and-coming decision-makers in order to “change the course of [their] attitudes toward Israel for the rest of their lives.”<sup>3</sup>

“Prime Minister Lee's encounter with *Exodus* – a book that ‘put Israel on the map in a positive light’ – is the kind of benchmark that would mark the success of Israel's public diplomacy programmes around the world.”

Public diplomacy, a state's efforts to advance its foreign policy goals by engaging with foreign publics, is a critical tool employed by the state of Israel to normalise relations with other states and establish its *raison d'être* – its right to exist.<sup>4</sup> Public diplomacy is a critical tool in developing soft power, what Joseph S. Nye describes as attraction towards a state's immaterial assets – its values, culture and policies.<sup>5</sup> Soft

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<sup>2</sup> Ron Schleifer and Jessica Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel* (Chicago, IL: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Fatemeh Shafiee Sarvestani, Saied Reza Ameli, and Foad Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States: A Network and Narrative Approach”, *Asian Journal of Communication* 29, no. 2 (December 2018): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2018.1531898>.

<sup>4</sup> Eytan Gilboa, “Public Diplomacy: The Missing Component in Israel's Foreign Policy”, *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 4 (October 2006): 715. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310600890006>.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 94–109.

power can be cultivated when states communicate “authentic, compelling and attractive” narratives in strategic ways to key audiences.<sup>6</sup>

## Soft Power Through Military Exchanges

The beginning of the bilateral relationship between Singapore and Israel was a “fortuitous”<sup>7</sup> development – Israel happened to be the only nation to respond to Singapore’s call for assistance in building its new army in 1965. By 1967, Singapore’s first officer cadets had been commissioned upon completing courses conducted by advisers from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF),<sup>8</sup> while more than 9,000 young Singaporean National Service conscripts were enlisted, also upon training by the Israelis.<sup>9</sup>

Israel’s legacy as an invaluable friend whose assistance came at the height of Singapore’s vulnerability lives on among Singaporeans, who credit the beginnings of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) – currently the best equipped army in Southeast Asia – to Israel’s “act of faith” and “empathy” towards the burgeoning city-state.<sup>10</sup> Singapore supports a two-states solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, consistent with relevant UN Security Council resolutions, but continues to maintain close and friendly relations with Israel. Despite Israel’s faltering image abroad over the Palestinian issue, Singapore has hosted Israeli leaders such as then Israeli President Chaim Herzog, whose visit in 1986 drew

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<sup>6</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”, 195.

<sup>7</sup> Chong Guan Kwa, “Growing in Strength: Responding to National and Regional Realities”, in *Giving Strength to Our Nation: The SAF and Its People*, eds. Eck Kheng Goh and Judith D’Silva (Singapore: Ministry of Defence, 2015), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Ho, “A Mexican Fandango with a Poisonous Shrimp”, in *Beating the Odds Together: 50 Years of Singapore-Israel Ties*, ed. Mattia Tomba (Singapore: Middle East Institute, NUS, and World Scientific Publishing Co., 2020), 40.

<sup>9</sup> “Implementation of National Service”, ROOTS, July 10, 2022, <https://www.roots.gov.sg/stories-landing/stories/implementation-of-national-service/story>.

<sup>10</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, “Singapore: Israel in Southeast Asia”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 3.

public protests in Singapore's neighbouring countries.<sup>11</sup> Such interactions demonstrate the resilience of Israel-Singapore ties.<sup>12</sup>

**“Paramount to the resilience of Israel-Singapore ties is Israel’s relationship-building efforts with individuals of influence, namely public sector professionals, through exchanges.”**

Paramount to this resilience is Israel's relationship-building efforts with individuals of influence, namely public sector professionals, through exchanges.<sup>13</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, a pioneering scholar of public diplomacy, calls such exchanges “the soul of public diplomacy” because of its ability to form a valuable communication network.<sup>14</sup> This network provides Israel with the credibility that it needs to continue effective public engagement with Singaporeans, even after the exchange has expired. Internationally acclaimed architect Moshe Safdie, designer of Singapore's Marina Bay Sands hotel and Changi Airport's Jewel complex, maintains that his Israeli identity “opened doors” for his design work in Singapore due to the Singaporean public's familiarity with Israel during their “military service visits” and/or business and leisure excursions, attesting to the power of citizen-to-citizen exchanges in meeting Israel's public diplomacy goals.<sup>15</sup>

George Yeo, Singapore's minister for foreign affairs from 2004 to 2011, was appointed to visit key sites in Israel and an Israeli Air Force

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<sup>11</sup> Winston Choo, “A Special Relationship that Continues to Grow,” in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Choo, “A Special Relationship that Continues to Grow”, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”. 192.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Safdie, “The Story of Israeli Architecture in Singapore”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 96.

base in his younger years as a new Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) captain. Subsequently, Yeo frequented Israel and received professional mentorship by Israeli Air Force Commander David Ivry and Colonel Yaakov Gal. When Yeo became a cabinet minister, he “endeavoured to foster close ties with Israel” and coordinate closer Israeli-Palestinian collaborations.<sup>16</sup> Yeo writes about his experience:

I developed a healthy respect for the IDF and learned much from their successes and setbacks. Some of their experiences were profoundly relevant to us... I became an ardent student of the history and condition of Israel and the Jewish people... Through [Yaakov], David Ivry and others, I had a sense of the intensity of daily life in Israel. ... So many personal friendships now bind our two countries together.<sup>17</sup>

Yeo's testimony is a key example of how professional exchanges fostered positive views of Israel among Singapore's decision-makers. This hallmark of Israeli public diplomacy, or *hasbara* (“explaining”) in Hebrew, has extended into growing science and technological exchanges as well.<sup>18</sup> By orienting its public diplomacy initiatives towards skills-sharing and technological progress, Israel capitalises on shared values of innovation and development with Singapore's public and private actors, further cementing bilateral ties. Since 1997, approximately 2,250 Israeli and Singaporean researchers and engineers have participated in Singapore-Israel Industrial Research & Development Foundation (SIIRD) projects, bearing witness to the growing professional links between the two countries.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> George Yeo, “Reflections on Singapore-Israel Relations”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Yeo, “Reflections on Singapore-Israel Relations”, 29–32.

<sup>18</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”, 195.

<sup>19</sup> Simona Halperin, “Celebrating the Israel-Singapore Golden Jubilee: Working Towards Continued Partnership”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 20.

## Harnessing Cultural and Religious Diplomacy

Nonetheless, critics of Israeli public diplomacy suggest that Israel's *hasbara* messaging has not fully penetrated important groups, particularly younger audiences, who have grown more critical of Israel in light of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>20</sup> While the sentiments of young Singaporeans towards the Israel-Palestine issue have not been sufficiently studied, online discourse shows the conflict holds emotional resonance with Singapore's Christian and Muslim populations.<sup>21</sup>

Online archival sources dated from 2013 demonstrate that Israeli public diplomacy efforts in the last 10 years have targeted Singaporean youth in both secular and religious communities, intending to promote positive Israeli narratives. The following section examines three key initiatives by the Israeli embassy in Singapore and their potential for fostering long-term relationships of mutual understanding.

### (A) *Tikkun Olam* – Israel's Youth-Oriented Cultural Diplomacy

In June 2019, the Israeli embassy in Singapore partnered with the Tikkun Olam Makers (TOM), a global nonprofit organisation launched in Israel in 2014, to hold the first TOM “MakeAthon” in Singapore. The event was intended to mark 50 years of diplomatic relations between Singapore and Israel. *Tikkun olam*, the Hebrew phrase for “repairing the world”, harkens back to a virtue in Judaism that calls on human beings “to enhance the lives of others, to fight injustice, to utilise [their] talents and ability to serve humanity, and to be creators and not destroyers.”<sup>22</sup>

The TOM MakeAthon event brought together eight competitive teams of 70 Israeli and Singaporean volunteers to produce innovative tech solutions for individuals with disability. Students from Singapore's

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<sup>20</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Faizah Zakaria, “Gaza through Diverse Singaporean Eyes”, Academia.sg, 11 June 2021, <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/gaza-through-diverse-singaporean-eyes/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Pierre Fettmann, “The Jewish Practice of Tikkun Olam and Interfaith Relations in Singapore”, in *Beating the Odds Together*, ed. Mattia Tomba, 67.



Temasek Polytechnic won the top three prizes.<sup>23</sup> All design blueprints – including a mobile application to ensure safer, easier commutes for people with Down's syndrome – were made available online for free so that the technology could be readily accessible to those needing it most.<sup>24</sup>

In seeking to depict the convergence of Singaporean and Israeli values – building an “egalitarian society... [with] equal access to education, welfare, and human dignity”<sup>25</sup> – the event shed positive light on Israel's image as it continues to face accusations of human rights abuses. The event, opened by Singapore's second minister for education, received some coverage in the Singapore and Israeli media.<sup>26</sup> Despite the event's success, however, no announcement has been made to build on that success through a second MakeAthon, conceivably because of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Without adequate follow-up, the impact of this cultural exchange is limited to the participants.

## **(B) *Colours of the Bible* - Youth-Oriented Religious Diplomacy**

Jointly organised by the Bible Society of Singapore and the Israeli embassy in Singapore, the *Colours of the Bible* art competition and exhibition was inaugurated in 2014 and has been held annually since then. The objective of the event is “to celebrate the beauty, culture and

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<sup>23</sup> “Tikkun Olam Makers (TOM) MakeAthon: GEM Winners,” Temasek Polytechnic, 17 October 2019, <https://www.tp.edu.sg/about-tp/media-centre/campus-news/tikkun-olam-makers-tom-makeathon-gem-winners.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Simona Halperin, “Celebrating the Israel-Singapore Golden Jubilee”, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Fettmann, “The Jewish Practice of Tikkun Olam”, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Wai Yee Yip, “Cooking Blind with Talking Tech”, *The Straits Times*, 26 June 2019, [https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/cooking-blind-with-talking-tech?fbclid=IwAR1j1-](https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/cooking-blind-with-talking-tech?fbclid=IwAR1j1-ZNvanHwB4hjhrdPVnNv_aI_DzFLCmtFlGrc7AjaoDKccVQ0kQSnlw)

[ZNvanHwB4hjhrdPVnNv\\_aI\\_DzFLCmtFlGrc7AjaoDKccVQ0kQSnlw](https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/cooking-blind-with-talking-tech?fbclid=IwAR1j1-ZNvanHwB4hjhrdPVnNv_aI_DzFLCmtFlGrc7AjaoDKccVQ0kQSnlw); “Repairing the world reaches Singapore”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 June 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/repairing-the-world-reaches-singapore-592591>.

history of the Bible and the land of Israel”; the wider aim is to project Israel as being central to the Biblical narrative.<sup>27</sup>

Nearly all the contest categories are for young people aged 18 and below. The current Israeli ambassador, Sagi Karni, celebrates the contest as one of the longest-running Israel-Singapore diplomacy initiatives that “engage young people and children”.<sup>28</sup> Initially geared towards Singaporean and Israeli contestants, it has since been opened to contestants from around the world and serves to bridge Christian and Jewish communities through shared Biblical values. Although the contest has a substantial Facebook following and is a conduit for vibrant Singaporean-Israeli exchanges, the participants are mainly Singaporean youth, given the small Israeli community in Singapore.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, they are given little to no opportunity to hear Israeli narratives before, during, or after the contest, suggesting that the initiative may only produce a low-public diplomacy impact.

### **(C) *Iftar* – Another Youth-Oriented Religious Diplomacy Effort**

In 2015, Israel’s then ambassador to Singapore, Yael Rubinstein, hosted Muslim students from Singaporean universities to a Ramadan *iftar* (breaking-of-fast) dinner attended by prominent members of Singapore’s Muslim and Jewish communities, including an imam and a rabbi.<sup>30</sup> Rubinstein talked about the rising prominence of the Arab community and the Arabic language in Israel while elucidating on links between

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<sup>27</sup> “Colours of the Bible”, Colours of the Bible, accessed 1 February 2023, <https://coloursofthebible.org/about/>.

<sup>28</sup> “Colours of the Bible Exhibition 2021 with the Embassy of Israel”, The Bible Society of Singapore, 13 October 2021, Facebook video, 2:04, <https://fb.watch/ipTTK9ayOS/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Colours of the Bible,” Facebook page, accessed 2 May 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/coloursofthebible>.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Sim, “Embassy of Israel in Singapore hosted breaking-of-fast dinner with Muslim community”, *The Straits Times*, 16 July 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/embassy-of-israel-in-singapore-hosted-breaking-of-fast-dinner-with-muslim-community>.

Judaism and Islam.<sup>31</sup> Given the high value placed on multiculturalism and plurality in Singapore, the event made headlines. More importantly, it gave Israel the unique opportunity to cultivate friendships with a constituency that has deep concerns about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>32</sup>

A second interfaith *iftar* co-hosted in 2019 by Singapore's Jewish Welfare Board, the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), and a local youth-driven interfaith group was held at former Israeli ambassador Simona Halperin's residence in Singapore.<sup>33</sup> No outreach to Muslim students by the Israeli embassy has been reported since then, conceivably another victim of the pandemic's safe distancing measures.

## Need for Long-term Investment in Youth Diplomacy

Currently, the Israel Film Festival is the most notable cultural diplomacy initiative conducted by the Israeli embassy in Singapore. "Carefully selected feature films" are showcased annually to "tell stories of a vibrant, conflicted, modern [Israeli] society that is relatable to the audience in Singapore."<sup>34</sup> However, most of the attendees may be individuals already won over to Israel's cause. Moreover, while films can inspire audiences and promote more attractive Israeli narratives, they constitute one-way communication, which fosters only limited audience engagement. Thus, public diplomacy initiatives that promote Israel's arts and culture alone cannot address "the real problem of Israel's reception

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<sup>31</sup> Walter Sim, "Embassy of Israel in Singapore hosted breaking-of-fast dinner with Muslim community."

<sup>32</sup> "PM Lee Hsien Loong responds to Pergas letter on Israeli-Palestinian conflict", *The Straits Times*, 24 February 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapolitics/pm-lee-hsien-loong-responds-to-pergas-letter-on-israeli-palestinian-conflict>.

<sup>33</sup> "Interfaith Iftar hosted at Singapore's Jewish Community Centre", The Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore, 3 June 2019, <https://iro.sg/press-release/interfaith-iftar-hosted-at-singapores-jewish-community-centre/>.

<sup>34</sup> Halperin, "Celebrating the Israel-Singapore Golden Jubilee", 21.

in the world”, according to Moshe Yegar, who was formerly in charge of the *hasbara* department of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>35</sup>

“Films can inspire audiences and promote more attractive Israeli narratives, but they constitute one-way communication, which fosters only limited audience engagement.”

The importance of Israel's youth public diplomacy initiatives cannot be overstated. In 2021, a young Singaporean Muslim attempted to attack three Jews at a synagogue in Singapore, stirred by narratives he had consumed regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is evident from this incident that amid an information vacuum, young people who are exposed to extremist religious and geopolitical ideologies could be prone to making dangerous judgement calls.<sup>36</sup> There is a willingness, however, on the part of some Singaporean youths to listen to alternative narratives: Goh Ker Liang, a student from the National University of Singapore (NUS) studied entrepreneurship in Israel because of his “personal interest” in the Middle East region; Eunice Lee from the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) interned in Israel despite hearing about the tensions between the Palestinians and Israelis.<sup>37</sup> Goh and Lee are among an increasing trend of young Singaporeans studying

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<sup>35</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Luca Farrow, “Islamophobia and Antisemitism in SG: Narratives of Grievance”, RSIS Commentary No. 057, 7 April 2021, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/islamophobia-and-antisemitism-in-sg-narratives-of-grievance/#.ZFNC43ZBxRY>

<sup>37</sup> “Pick a Pier Featured in the Straits Times, Singapore's Most Popular Newspaper”, Pick a Pier, 6 February 2020, <https://company.pickapier.com/post/pick-a-pier-featured-in-the-straits-times-singapore-s-most-popular-newspaper/>.

and interning in Israel.<sup>38</sup> Both are examples of Singaporean youths who are part of the “soft middle” – individuals curious about exploring Israeli narratives and open to the effect that an experience with Israel could have on their lives.

**“Public diplomacy programmes geared towards youths are most influential because of the wide information networks that students possess and their potential to be future leaders.”**

As Etyan Gilboa, Israeli expert on public diplomacy, suggests, “Asia should ... be targeted for intensive PD [public diplomacy] programmes, because Asian nations [are likely to] have much more influence on the world stage in the future.”<sup>39</sup> Israel now faces “the largest cohort of ASEAN youth in history”, with 34 per cent of ASEAN’s population comprising young people aged 15–34 years,<sup>40</sup> a good number of whom further their studies alongside Singaporeans in Singapore’s educational institutions.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “More Singapore students heading to Israel to learn about technology, start-ups”, Channel News Asia, 17 December 2019, news feature, 3:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7OWgg75sm8>.

<sup>39</sup> Etyan Gilboa, “Public Diplomacy: The Missing Component in Israel’s Foreign Policy”, *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 4 (October 2006): 743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310600890067>.

<sup>40</sup> Arizza Ann Nocum, “ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary – “Same but Different” ... and Better for It: A More Cohesive ASEAN Built on Youth Leadership”, RSIS Commentary No. 109, 3 November 2022, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CO22109.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> There were approximately 2,000 students from Southeast Asia studying at the National University of Singapore in the fourth quarter of 2022. See: “Speech by Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies Heng Swee Keat at The Times Higher Education Campus Live Southeast Asia 2022 on 7 December 2022”, Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, 7 December 2022,

While research suggests that public diplomacy programmes geared towards youths are most influential because of the wide information networks that students possess and their potential to be future leaders,<sup>42</sup> Israel has traditionally left the delivery of youth exchange programmes to universities or partner organisations. This may be part of Israel's grander strategy to avoid exercising a heavy government hand in public diplomacy initiatives due to associations with negative World War II propaganda.<sup>43</sup> As Nye acutely points out, "postmodern publics are generally sceptical of authority.... Thus, it often behoves governments to keep in the background and to work with private actors."<sup>44</sup>

**“Israel must overcome traditional barriers to public diplomacy, which include budget constraints and a lack of faith in the ‘tangible results’ of cultural diplomacy.”**

However, public diplomacy initiatives driven by the private sector are subject to the budgets and agendas of their governing bodies, which can result in the intermittent nature of such programmes. Furthermore, they may be conducted by “untrained spokespersons”, adding to the multiplicity of Israel's advocacy messaging.<sup>45</sup>

Israel must therefore overcome traditional barriers to public diplomacy, which include budget constraints and a lack of faith in the

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<https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/DPM-Heng-Swee-Keat-at-The-Times-Higher-Education-Campus-Live-Southeast-Asia-2022>.

<sup>42</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, “Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States”, 192.

<sup>43</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ilan Manor, “Israeli Public Diplomacy: Between Fusion and Confusion”, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 26 January 2015, blog,

<https://usepublicdiplomacy.org/blog/israeli-public-diplomacy-between-fusion-and-confusion>.

“tangible results” of cultural diplomacy”,<sup>46</sup> to develop a long-term strategic plan to nurture its civil society resources that can help to productively engage young Singaporeans. It must also recognise that expecting quick or tangible benefits from relationship-building programmes is often unrealistic. At the same time, it should capitalise on new digital technologies, such as AI and virtual exchange programmes, to cut down on the time – and the costs – traditionally required to connect with new audiences.<sup>47</sup>

“The day will come when a new generation of Singaporeans will no longer be familiar with Israel’s rich contributions to a pioneering Singapore, and fresh friendships with the state of Israel would need to be forged.”

The three public diplomacy initiatives discussed in this paper – TOM MakeAthon, *Colours of the Bible* art competition and *iftar* dinner gatherings – involved public–private partnerships between the Israeli embassy in Singapore and nongovernmental entities, and they were a good start. More sustained efforts of this nature are needed to redress Israel’s public image and educate Singaporean youth on the complex narratives surrounding Israel’s nationhood and experience with antisemitism. Singapore’s unique, multicultural context and burgeoning

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<sup>46</sup> Ronit Appel, Irony Assaf, Steven Schmerz, and Ayela Zi, “Cultural Diplomacy: An Important but Neglected Tool in Promoting Israel’s Public Image”, *The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya* (May 2008) 41,

[https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/pdf/research/books/cultural\\_diplomacy/Cultural\\_Diplomacy\\_-\\_Ronit\\_Appel\\_Assaf\\_Irony\\_Steven\\_Schmerz\\_Ayela\\_Ziv.pdf](https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/pdf/research/books/cultural_diplomacy/Cultural_Diplomacy_-_Ronit_Appel_Assaf_Irony_Steven_Schmerz_Ayela_Ziv.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is already heading in this direction with the 2022 launch of a new Digital Diplomacy unit headed by Israeli Ambassador David Saranga. See: “The next frontier: Israel taps AI and metaverse for aid in digital diplomacy”, *The Times of Israel*, 26 March 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-next-frontier-israel-taps-ai-and-metaverse-for-aid-in-digital-diplomacy/>.

interfaith efforts, in particular, create new opportunities for Israel to engage young Singaporeans in genuine two-way discussions that can help to promote mutual understanding and tolerance.

The day will come when a new generation of Singaporeans will no longer be familiar with Israel's rich contributions to a pioneering Singapore, and fresh friendships with the state of Israel would need to be forged. Without a long-term strategic plan or adequate financial commitment towards youth diplomacy, Israel's network expansion may stagnate or grow only among the converted.<sup>48</sup> A consistent and centrally coordinated Israeli public diplomacy strategy based on robust exchanges can facilitate the process of genuine dialogue and memorable trust-building with young Singaporeans. Such activities may help to reframe Israel from being the "perennial problem" of the Middle East to a potential partner of Southeast Asia.<sup>49</sup> ◆

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<sup>48</sup> Sarvestani, Ameli, and Izadi, "Israeli Public Diplomacy toward the United States", 193.

<sup>49</sup> Scheifer and Snapper, *Advocating Propaganda: Viewpoints from Israel*, 33.





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