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A CRYING NEED

THE MOST beguiling argument advanced so far against the establishment of a Ministry of Overseas Information (*hasbara*) is that the foreign minister doesn't like the idea. Reportedly he has up his sleeve an even more convincing argument: he will resign if such a ministry is established. The minister has also shown no sign that he is disturbed by the major failure of the information services in the present war. He is satisfied that they have done their duty as well as can be expected and that if Israel has suffered defeat, then defeat was foreordained and inevitable.

In fact, he is not far wrong. Defeat was indeed foreordained; and neither the devoted people actually handling information services in the Foreign Ministry, nor the director-general, the minister himself or the prime minister, could make much difference to the result. The simple reason for this is that the foreign Ministry is neither structured nor equipped to meet the challenge of Israel's enemies or the needs of Israel's friends.

APOLOGISTS for the present system point triumphantly to the frightening evidence of an international campaign of distortions, lies and libels, motivated, at least in part, by old-fashioned anti-Semitism. You cannot, they say, break through this wall of hatred, whatever you do. Of course, Israel cannot break through the wall of hatred. But its duty is to arm its friends and well-wishers.

More appalling than the manifestation of the widespread hatred let loose against Israel – and against the Jewish people – has been the weak or belated response of Jewish communities and of Israel's sworn friends. Subjected to the barrage of PLO lies avidly disseminated by television, radio and the printed press, Israel's friends lacked the ammunition to respond quickly to the flood of propaganda, and to still the doubts that Israeli silences, and incoherence, aroused in their hearts.

Why did this have to happen? This is not a new problem. Seldom in the past have Israel's friends been supplied with ammunition for speedy and effective response. That, after all, is why for years Jews and other friends throughout the world, specifically in the U.S. and Europe, have been complaining bitterly that attacks on Israel go unanswered. There simply is no permanent, established machinery adequate for the task and ready to handle the very special problems faced by Israel.

ONE NEED NOT go far to find grim examples of silences in Israel's information services. In June 1981, the Air Force, with characteristic brilliance, destroyed Iraq's atomic reactor. The operation was, of course, months in the planning. Should it not have been obvious that the operation would be met by expressions of horror in the international community? It is apparent that throughout those months, the Foreign Ministry did not lift a finger to prepare explanatory material or the rationale of the operation; on the nature and purpose of the deadly installation at Baghdad; and to arrange for its release with the attack, *before* the chorus of hypocritical denigration could begin.

Where were the many Jewish organizations in the U.S., who spend many millions of dollars annually on *hasbara*, and where were the usually voluble leaders of the community? They were either tongue-tied, or they identified with the malicious reactions

of Israel's Labour opposition. It was weeks before they were provided with the excellent survey and analysis put out by the Foreign Ministry's Information Department. Why was this so? Obviously because that department first learned about the attack on the reactor when you and I did – the day after.

In the present war, there are millions of people around the world, Jews and friends of Israel, who still believe the horrendous lies disseminated by the PLO through its many anti-Semitic and anti-Israel channels in the West. It sounds incredible, but even the figures of 600,000 homeless civilians and 10,000 killed were not immediately challenged. Why not? Because the Foreign Ministry is not authorized to issue such information. That is for the Army to do, and naturally, the Army did not know the exact figure, and began collecting statistics. The obtuseness of the Army information service was such that it did not, for example, know that there were only about 500,000 civilians in the whole Lebanese area involved.

What prevented the Army from preparing a briefing *before* the invasion, not only for the foreign press, but also for Jewish information services all over the world, setting out the vital information on the barbarism of the PLO in establishing its camps and fortified positions in the midst of civilian concentrations, which should have been contrasted with the orders given to the IDF to take every possible measure to avoid civilian casualties. There is much else that could have, and should have, been foreseen. However, the Army is even less equipped than the Foreign Ministry for the fearsome battle of propaganda.

This war has only provided a gruesome climax to a situation that has been developing since Abba Eban became foreign minister. Failure to make the essential drastic changes not only increasingly hurts "Israel's image," and not only increases the bewilderment of Jews throughout the world, but, in the chain of circumstances created, it also is ultimately paid for in lives.

Even if a Ministry of Information is established immediately, a properly structured one, adequately equipped and manned, it will need many months before it can operate in a reasonable fashion against the gargantuan propaganda machines of Israel's various enemies.

HAD ISRAEL such a ministry, the first drastic change would be the presence at the cabinet table of the minister absolutely dedicated to the task of information. His battles would never end as long as newspapers and T.V. and radio stations chatter on around the world. The minister, absorbed in the conduct of that war in all his waking hours, must examine every subject put on the cabinet table with an eye to the *hasbara* challenges and tasks that may be involved. He will see to it his ministry should take action accordingly.

Apart from the acknowledged experts already working in the existing services, his ministry will be staffed by men and women who will undergo a rigorous test *inter alia* in history, politics and modern communications. The ministry will provide them with an intensive course in specialized subjects, including for example, the United States – its constitution, its media, its communities. Separate departments will deal with the various aspects of *hasbara*, some of which have been handled by the Foreign Ministry, some of which have never been touched.

At the top level in the ministry will be a class of ambassadors with knowledge and authority, some of whom will be stationed abroad, some in Jerusalem. These two groups

will provide a 24-hour-a-day service for preliminary briefing and instant response. Consideration will be given to the difference in clock-time between Israel and the Americas. In moments of crisis, the minister himself will be instantly available for rulings. In the U.S., these ambassadors will work in close collaboration with an information task force representing the Jewish organizations with *hasbara* programmes. The main burden of and responsibility for serving the vast, heterogeneous American “constituency” will be borne by the Jewish organizations. There are many thousands of able and dedicated Jews across the U.S., who willingly, even enthusiastically, would answer a call to take part in such a machine. Many of them will be only too glad to be given a course – similar to the one in Jerusalem – in the subjects on which they lack knowledge.

In skeleton outline, this is one face of the ministry that should be established. Space permits mention of only one other fact: The ministry must embrace Israel’s various information services, including the Army information service, whose officers, whatever their more martial qualifications, must be, first of all, articulate specialists in imparting information. In time of war, maintenance of this principle is crucial; failure in its observance can be fatal.

How long must the battle for a sane and rational policy on information go on?