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3 women set out to improve Israel's image – even in the Arab media

The Israel Project aims to present the 'objective facts' to journalists around the world, most of whom have never visited Israel.

By [Natasha Mozgovaya](#)

Israel's image may not be at its best at the moment, but the pro-Israeli scene in the U.S. is quite lively. One of the most interesting pro-Israeli organizations currently operating in the U.S. is "The Israel Project", which was launched in 2002 by only three women - Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, Margo Volftsun and Sheryl Schwartz, who have taken upon themselves the daunting task of improving Israel's image in the foreign media.

Despite the recession, last year "The Israel Project" received \$7 million dollars in donations, expanded its staff to 44 employees and recently added projects in Latin America and outreach to the Arab media in addition to its activities in the U.S., Europe and Israel.

Laszlo - Mizrahi, one of the founders, explains that the main motivation behind the establishment of the organization was the fact that many reporters covering Israel were not exposed to the Israeli position.

"The idea is simple," she says. "Our poll among 800 journalists worldwide covering Israel revealed that 65 percent of them have never visited it. We are the reverse Birthright – we bring Israel to them."

North-Carolina-born Laszlo-Mizrahi was initially groomed for an entirely different path - management of the family-owned cosmetics company in France - but she chose politics and worked for years with the Democratic Party as a media and political consultant. The coverage of Israel in the days of the Second Intifada gave her the idea to establish the organization.

Having started out with a modest mailing list, today the organization sends its fact sheets to tens of thousands of reporters, bloggers, diplomats and policy makers. Its website operates in 6 languages, with aggressive social media outreach on Twitter and Facebook, and it claims to work with reporters in 53 countries. Not long ago, the group recruited veteran Reuters correspondent Alan Elsner to become its spokesman, and former army radio correspondent Shimrit Meir to take charge of Arabic operations.

TIP supporters argue that in fact the recession prompted donors to drop "inefficient organizations" and rethink their donation strategy, favoring the small organization.

Another idea that the founders set as a condition, which apparently worked, was to require board members to commit to a minimum \$100,000 donation every year they serve on the board, "so they really care about the success of this organization and its efficiency," Laszlo-Mizrahi explains.

The desire to offer positive information rather than to dismiss critics of Israel or label them as anti-Semites, as some other small pro-Israel organizations do, brought even more supporters. The founder's personal energy, methodical work, connections and conscious effort to stay away from controversies probably didn't hurt either.

Unlike AIPAC, which prefers to promote Israel's interests far away from the press, TIP reaches out to journalists whenever and wherever it can. The group dispatched a team to the recent Sharm el-Sheikh peace summit and intends to send one to Paris if the talks continue – to provide world media with Israeli or pro-Israel sources and handy up-to-date information, such as the number of rockets fired from Gaza, recent remarks by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or any other data upon demand.

Shimrit Meir, in charge of the group's relations with the Arab media, admits that the challenge to improve Israel's image within the Arab world is a tough one.

"None of the stories in other outlets can be compared to the amount of poison in Israel's portrayal in Arab media. Arab media deals with Israel endlessly, they write about Israel so much it creates an impression they have no other problems. We started with polling in Arab countries and even the Hamas controlled Gaza and translated this information into professional media work on the ground with the journalists," Meir says.

"I understand perfectly they don't want propaganda, they want sources, interviews, meetings with top Israeli officials, because Arab journalists many times suffer from lack of access in Israel – and they want headlines. We facilitated some visits to the army bases, arranged commentaries, op-eds and interviews with Israeli ministers – for the first time the officials were being accountable directly to Arab journalists and made it to the front pages of the Arab media, even the Iranian outlets," she adds.

"When you communicate directly with the Arab world, without prejudice – they tend to listen. We took them to Gaza checkpoints to show how goods enter Gaza and there is no need for another flotilla. We have more than 500 Arab journalists on Facebook – at least 3 times a day there is something on the wall with facts or press releases or videos about Israel in Arabic. And there are positive headlines – for example, minister Avishai Braverman, before the Arab League meeting, wrote an op-ed in Hebrew - we translated it to literary Arabic and [placed an op-ed in Al-Quds - I call for an Arab League to support peace – that was the headline," she says.

It took some lobbying at the White House and among the diplomats, trying to convince them to convey the message to Arab leaders to allow the media to be more open to the Israeli messages, "asking them to print things that are factually accurate," as Meir puts it. "There were even press-releases published without any changes in the Arab media."

Among its recent efforts, TIP managed to bring five journalists from Gaza to visit Tel-Aviv this summer. "We pulled some strings and managed to get them, to meet with some sources – and when we sat at a café in Tel-Aviv, they even refused to charge us as a gesture of hospitality. But when they got back to Gaza they got into real trouble. We were very worried but we did our best to make sure they were all right," Meir recalls.

"We try to explain basic things, like the fact that the Arabs in Israel have the same rights as Jews. But we take Arab journalists to the military bases - the IDF fatigues always represented something horrific for them, and here they were received very warmly and kindly," Meir says.

With a tense background of conflict and widespread belief that "objective facts" don't actually exist, TIP, despite its clear positioning as a pro-Israeli (though not a Jewish pro-Israeli group), has its difficulties confronting criticism from the left. Critics say that TIP's wooing of pro-Palestinian groups, and a recent meeting they arranged in New York with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, are meant to delegitimize the Jewish left and to prove that "even the Palestinians have adopted Israeli narrative."

Some difficulties arose with right wing donors as well, after the group aggressively publicized the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

"People make the mistake of saying you are either pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian", says Laszlo-Mizrahi. "At the end of the day, people need jobs and not jihad. If you are pro-Israel you are not automatically anti-Arab."

"We are post partisan. I come from very partisan politics - I was spokesperson of the Democratic Party. But I always stand with America although I might not always like what some administration does."

"They say that Israel is a country of 7 million prime-ministers. I don't want to be the Israeli prime minister on the Potomac, telling them what to do. Braverman and [Foreign Minister Avigdor] Liberman are two Israeli ministers in Israel today - and there is a vast ideological span between them and we want to show it. To give journalists access to the newsmakers and to put the facts on the table," she adds.

For obvious reasons, TIP won't usually react to events that present Israel in a negative light, unless they have something positive to add for counterbalance.

"We don't have a position on settlements", Laszlo-Mizrahi says of one of the explosive issues. "We only present facts, but we don't take a side. We can stress that there are no settlements in Gaza but Hamas is still calling to kill Jews, and still firing rockets."