



## **International Misrecognition**

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## **International misrecognition:**

### **The politics of humour and national identity in Israel's public diplomacy**

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#### **Abstract**

Recognition, or the lack of it, is a central concern in International Relations (IR). However, how states cope with international misrecognition has so far not been thoroughly explored in IR scholarship. To address this, the article presents a theoretical framework for understanding international misrecognition by drawing on discursive and psychoanalytical theories of collective identity formation and humour studies. The article conceptualises international misrecognition as a gap between the dominant narrative of a national Self and the way this national Self is reflected in the 'mirror' of the international Other. We argue that humour offers an important way of coping with misrecognition by ridiculing and thereby downplaying international criticism. The significance for international relations is illustrated through an analysis of the public diplomacy campaign, 'Presenting Israel', which, through parodying video clips, mobilised ordinary Israeli citizens to engage in peer-to-peer public diplomacy to explain Israel when traveling abroad. Public diplomacy campaigns are commonly seen by scholars and practitioners as attempts to improve the nation's image and smoothen or normalise international Self/Other relations. However, after analysing the discursive and visual components of the campaign – which parodied how European media portrayed Israel as primitive, violent and exotic – this article observes that in the context of international misrecognition, such coping attempts can actually contribute to further international estrangement.

Keywords: Humour, Israel, Misrecognition, National identity, Public diplomacy

## Introduction

*'This is the camel. The camel is the typical Israeli animal used by the Israelis to travel from place to place in the desert where they live. It is the means of transport for water, merchandise and ammunition. It is even used by the Israeli cavalry'* (Masbirim's channel, 2010a).

With these words, a British TV reporter, dressed in khaki, depicts Israel, as he is walking past a caravan of camels in a desert. However, the reporter is not starring in an actual documentary film, but in a satirical video clip. One that was produced in 2010 by the newly established Israeli Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs (MPDDA). As part of the campaign 'Presenting Israel', the objective of the video was to mobilise ordinary Israeli citizens travelling abroad to become citizen diplomats. An accompanying campaign website coached citizens how to counter foreign myths and portray Israel as a modern, sophisticated and peace-loving state. The campaign was part of a series of initiatives meant to improve Israel's global image, which according to many indications had hit rock bottom.<sup>1</sup> Israeli officials promoting the campaign argued that despite the humorous tone, 'Presenting Israel' was responding to an actual threat to Israel's image, as foreigners 'paint a picture so different from the reality in the eyes of Israelis, and with such little regard for their point of view' (Seaman, 2010).

The campaign was widely contested within Israel and abroad. Israeli media and academics criticised the campaign for being 'ridiculous' and for neglecting the link between international criticism and Israel's ongoing policies, such as the military occupation of the West Bank and the 'separation wall' (Bronner, 2010; Caspi, 2010; Haaretz, 2010). Foreign reporters were also offended for being portrayed as 'stupid' and 'gullible' (Rabinovsky, 2010). Nonetheless, according to the MPDDA, the campaign was a great success, seen by 86 per cent of Israeli survey respondents as an 'effective call to action' (Attias, 2012: 477). Between 2010-2012, over three million users visited the campaign website, hundreds of advocacy coaching sessions were provided to delegations, and over 100,000 advocacy pocket

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<sup>1</sup> According to EU's 2003 *Eurobarometer*, Israel was perceived in Europe as the biggest threat to peace in the world (EC, 2003: 78) and the *Anholt Nation Brands Index - Q3 Report* (2006) estimated Israel to be the worst brand overall.

guides were distributed at the national airport (Attias, 2012: 478-9). The conception of a growing gap between the image that many Israelis have of their country and the way the world sees it has become increasingly central to Israel's foreign policy, and in recent years, it has ignited a plethora of public-private advocacy partnerships, attempting to mediate Israel's growing sense of international estrangement.

To understand the campaign – and more broadly how states struggle for international recognition – this article explores the phenomenon of *misrecognition* in international relations. To do so, we need to go beyond the binary distinction between recognition and non-recognition that is so prominent in IR theory. Drawing on insights from poststructuralist discourse analysis and concepts from psychoanalytic social theory, we argue that articulating a discourse of a coherent national Self requires recognition in the 'mirror' of international Others. This always entails the possibility of misrecognition, arising from the gap between domestic discourses of the national Self and the way in which Others understand and represent this Self. As identities are inherently unstable and incomplete, the reflection in the 'international mirror' will always disappoint. Misrecognition is thus inherent in any process of identification. However, once a specific sense of misrecognition is articulated into a collective discourse – for instance through international condemnation and criticism – it opens up new terrains for international politics.

Humour, we argue, plays a key role in handling misrecognition. Psychoanalytical theorists, perhaps most prominently Sigmund Freud, argued that joking not only helps release tensions; it can also create a sense of superiority. Developing this insight for the study of international relations, we argue in the second part of the article that humour is not merely a distraction from the serious problems of foreign policy and security; humour is an important social mechanism through which states discursively process and negotiate sensitive issues in international relations. State leaders joke about difficult conflicts and ambiguous problems. For example, when Denmark faced global criticism over the publication of the Muhammed Cartoons (Hansen, 2011), hostile reactions from Muslim voices were portrayed as aberrant to democracy and it was suggested that 'Muslims should get a sense of humour' (Rolfe, 2009: 262). While rarely taken seriously in IR theory, humour is intrinsic to the very conduct of international relations. And as this article will illustrate, humour can, when used in public diplomacy campaigns, be a powerful tool to handle international misrecognition and consolidate a discourse of common identification against international and domestic Others.

The article is divided into four parts. In the first part, we suggest that misrecognition, as a discourse, is central to international identity politics. In the second part, we argue that public diplomacy represents attempts to reconfirm and stabilise a fragile and contested national identity, and we draw on theories of humour to show how states use humour to handle misrecognition. We then turn to the case of Israel in part three, providing a brief analysis of the dominant national identity markers in Israel and the way in which global criticism has helped create a discourse of international misrecognition, which has come to play an increasingly central role in Israeli foreign policy and public diplomacy. In the fourth and final part of the article, we apply our theoretical arguments in an analysis of the public diplomacy campaign ‘Presenting Israel’, demonstrating how humour, visuals and discourse interact to reiterate dominant identity markers and marginalise alternative visions of Israel. We conclude that rather than improving Israel’s image abroad, such public diplomacy attempts to mediate international misrecognition are likely to deepen Israel’s international estrangement. The article shows how a focus on misrecognition and humour provides key insights into how international relations work and how national identities are maintained and resisted.

### **Recognition, misrecognition and national identity politics**

International recognition, or the lack of it, is central to IR theory. As its most fundamental political unit – the sovereign state – is a relational entity, it can only exist if recognised by other sovereign states (e.g. Anghie, 2007; Ringmar, 2014). With the emergence of the European territorial state and the so-called Westphalian system, membership of the international society and its laws required formal recognition of sovereignty by other sovereign states (Biersteker and Weber, 1996; Krasner, 1995). Further developed in the context of colonialism through the reciprocal recognition of the European states and the denial of recognition from the non-European Others (Anghie, 2007), ‘[i]t was through practices of recognition, affirming sameness, and through practices of non-recognition, affirming difference, that international society came to constitute itself as such’ (Ringmar, 2014: 447). From this perspective, recognition becomes an either/or question: Either the state is recognised as a sovereign state or it is not. Yet, this conceptual dichotomy between recognition and non-recognition is challenged the moment we move from formal recognition of sovereignty in international law to identity and moral politics, as the recent

surge of interest in recognition within IR theory testifies (e.g. Agné et al., 2013; Burns and Thompson, 2013; Daase et al., 2015; Greenhill, 2008; Gustafsson, 2016; Lindemann and Ringmar, 2014). For example, while Israel's sovereignty is internationally established, the recognition of its national identity narratives is much less stable and frequently challenged not only by its traditional enemies but also by friendlier nations (see Adler 2013).

Embedded in colonial heritage, dynamics of recognition and misrecognition occur in a discursive space where states articulate themselves and others as part of a certain moral community. This discourse of belonging to a community differentiates states from one another, expressing a structural bias or hierarchy. Whereas much postcolonial critique focuses on non-recognition by the West or Europe, this bias also applies to those recognised as belonging to (or sitting on the fault line) of a Western/European community. At the Jerusalem Post diplomatic conference in 2014, the Danish Ambassador to Israel explained the consequences of this structural bias for Israel: 'there is the allegation that Europe is applying double standards [when criticizing Israel] This is because you are one of us'. Accordingly, the ambassador continued, while Israelis may say "look what is going on in Syria, look at what is going on elsewhere", those are not the standards that you are being judged by, [instead we] put you to the same standards as all the rest of the countries in the European context' (Jposttv 2014). Israel is thereby interpellated as a member (or a borderline member) of a superior European community, differentiated from the Arab/Muslim Other.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Israel's former Prime Minister Yitshak Shamir remarked about Europeans: 'They don't [...] understand us' (Shamir quoted in Del Sarto, 2006: 106). For Shamir, the problem was not a lack of formal recognition or non-recognition, but *misrecognition*.

Within IR theory, it has been suggested to distinguish between thin and thick concepts of recognition: Thin recognition refers to the legal status of a sovereign state while thick recognition refers to the recognition of specific identity narratives of an individual, group or indeed state (Strömbom, 2014). Thick recognition has largely been addressed through social identity theory, which stresses people's ontological needs – that humans need a particular Other's confirmation of their identity 'lest they feel insecure about who they really are' (Wolf, 2011). Or put more radically, 'unless we are recognised, we have no social identity'

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<sup>2</sup> The 2006 *Anholt Nation Brands Index* illustrates the exclusion: While it reports that Israel has the worst overall national brand, apart from Egypt, none of Israel's neighbouring countries are even considered as 'brands'.

(Ringmar, 2014: 8). Applying this position to international relations, states are perceived metaphorically as people that need their national identity confirmed by other states. If this confirmation is denied, this is seen to be ‘traumatic’ (Ringmar, 2014: 7; see also Mitzen, 2006; Ringmar, 2002). As Ned Lebow (2008) puts it, drawing on Hegel, there is a need of ‘Others’ for recognition and inclusion. In this sense, misrecognition is ‘the *feeling* of [...] the negative difference between a claimed self-image and the image given to us by others’ (Lindemann, 2014: 543). Accordingly, a state’s actions are driven by attempts to close this gap and stabilise the Self in order to gain ontological security (Mitzen, 2006), and this is ultimately what Ringmar (2014) calls international recognition games.

In a similar vein, yet drawing more on political theories of justice, fairness and entitlement, others see misrecognition not as much as an ontological concern but rather as ‘a failure to recognise the status of the Other as a “moral equal of a person”’ (Pilapil, quoted in Martineau et al., 2012: 4). For Wolf (2011), for example, recognition is not really a question of identity confirmation, as states do sometimes know who they are. Instead, it is when they feel unfairly treated – or misrecognised – that they insist on getting the treatment they feel entitled to. States may even start conflicts in order to get the recognition they feel they deserve. However, more peaceful ways of handling misrecognition are also possible. Drawing on Aristotle and Heidegger, Berenskoetter (2007) contends that the friend as the ‘significant Other’ is capable, even at the international level, of reducing anxiety and pave the way for recognition.

Despite differences, these accounts conceptualise states as having ‘feelings’ and ‘needs’. Yet, the problem is not just anthropomorphism - i.e. that ‘states are people too’ (Wendt, 2004; see also Epstein, 2011: 344), and the downplaying of the gap between dynamics at the individual and collective level, but the essentialist assumption that the national Self as such can become more or less stable – that the gap between a state’s self-perception and how it is seen internationally can be bridged (Bartelson, 2013: 112).

In the next section, we propose a different take on recognition that draws on a poststructuralist understanding of national identity and a psychoanalytical conceptualisation of misrecognition. We argue, unlike the predominant recognition theories in IR, that the ability to close the gap between the national Self and the image reflected by the international Other is impossible. Instead, what becomes politically salient is the process through which a multitude of diverse and ambiguous individual experiences are articulated into a public discourse of misrecognition through textual and visual representations. We will thus not

focus on how Israel – or its leaders or citizens – really *feel*, but on how international misrecognition as a discursive construct affects Israeli public diplomacy and foreign policy.

### ***National identity, misrecognition, and the international Other***

To understand how identity becomes internationally misrecognised requires first a clarification of national identity. In poststructuralist IR theory, national identity is a public discourse that arises around predominant identity markers of a collective Self, and as all discursive formations, it is characterised by instability and fragility. From this perspective, foreign policy and public diplomacy as a sub-phenomenon of foreign policy are interwoven with the constitution and performance of national identities (Campbell, 1993; Neumann, 1998; Wæver, 2002; Hansen, 2006). This is because ‘foreign policies rely upon representations of identity, but it is also through the formulation of foreign policy that identities are produced and reproduced’ (Hansen, 2006: 1). By differentiating between juxtaposed representations (Wæver, 2002: 24), ‘foreign policy discourse always articulates a Self and a series of Others’, since ‘identity is always given through reference to something it is not’ (Hansen, 2006: 6). Here, Self/Other relations are placed at the core of foreign policy analysis (Campbell, 1993), since international relations as such basically represent the relations between estranged groups of Self and Others (Der Derian, 1987; Neumann, 1998). From this perspective, the ethical task is to find ways to maintain identity without Othering – or at least by creating less radical degrees of Otherness (e.g. Campbell, 1993).

We believe that psychoanalytical social theory provides a key to understanding the specificity of misrecognition in foreign policy discourses. Indeed, psychoanalytical social theory is often associated with various forms of poststructuralism. Ontologically both focus on the role of language in the discursive construction of identity. However, Lacan’s major contribution to poststructuralism is through his introduction of the Freudian unconscious, i.e. as the element of subjectivity that has not and often cannot be articulated into language, and thus is resistant to discursive ordering (see Edkins, 1999). This un-signified residue, however, has political significance, since it serves as the source of the human desire for identification. In this way, it can contribute to the exploration of identity politics (see Jones and Spicer, 2005; Mouffe 2009) and particularly to the understanding of misrecognition.

As Lacan suggests in his *mirror stage* thesis, misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) is central to identity formation. Lacan argues that humans are born lacking the ability to



communicate and thus differentiate themselves from the world. Mimicry therefore plays a central role in the development of a child. As the infant begins to recognise her or his own reflection in the mirror and identify with it, in this process, by differentiating him- or herself from the world, the infant develops a conscious sense of Self, i.e. ego. However, this identification with the mirror image also fragments and traumatically alienates the child from a previous sense of unity. For Lacan, the mirror stage becomes a general paradigm for identity dynamics, where recognition of the Self in the mirror of the Other *always* entails a sense of misrecognition from a previous sense of ‘wholeness’ and unity (Edkins, 1999; Lacan, 1985). A move to a Lacan-inspired understanding of identity thus fundamentally ‘undermines the cohesiveness presumed in the psychological study of the ‘self’ (Epstein, 2011: 328), because the search for the unity of the Self can never be complete. Instead, in order to make social relations bearable, our everyday experience is structured by the invention of imaginary relations of identification, which seek to stitch up the gap between the split Self and its image. Destabilising these imaginary relations is one of the core tasks of psychoanalysis, and it requires confronting the subject with the repressed gap (Žižek, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

In applying these insights to international relations it is important to clarify the link between the individual and the collective levels of analysis. While Lacan developed his theory to discuss identity formation at the individual level, social theorists such as Žižek (2008) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) began discussing its broader societal implications, arguing that discourse analysis should be complemented by an attempt to articulate and analyse that which is unsaid or repressed, yet nonetheless directs human behaviour. More recently, attempts have been made to introduce the Lacanian theory into IR theory (e.g. Edkins, 1999; Epstein, 2011, 2013; Zevnik 2009) to stress, as Epstein puts it, that ‘the fundamental alienation is precisely the lack that lies at the heart of identity [...] what defeats the possibility of a closed, cohesive self’ (Epstein, 2011: 336). Yet, because states are not people and ‘have no biological mechanisms’ (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014: 492), representations are ‘a key link’ between individual experiences and collective political dynamics (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014: 505). Assembled into a discourse, representations serve as a mirror – or ‘big Other’ – through which collectives seeks meaning and purpose. Thus, by analysing representations, be they textual or visual, we can examine how specific

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<sup>3</sup> Ghandi (2006) draws on ideas of a dislocation and openness of the self to construct a utopic ‘noncommunitarian’ community, estranged from Western civilization.

images of national Self are constructed and mobilised, drawing on a multitude of actual or potential individual experiences, thus creating new conditions of possibility for politics.

Applying these insights in IR helps us conceptualise how discourses of national Self relate to the perceived image of the state by other states, and, in this way, how the international serves as ‘the big Other’ vis-à-vis the state. Today, for example, international governance rankings, economic indicators and nation brand indexes (see Löwenheim, 2008), play a key role in this regard, by presenting the state with ‘mirror’ images through which the national Self is reflected. These images can then be mobilised politically to promote a privileged image of the national Self. Israeli leaders, for example, use R&D indicators as a sign of recognition of an Israeli ‘Start-up Nation’ narrative, inspired by a bestseller with the same name (Senor and Singer, 2011).<sup>4</sup> The international Other, however, can also destabilise discourses of national Self. Whereas stigma management concerns the management of deviance in international relations (Adler-Nissen, 2014, see also Zarakol, 2010), misrecognition refers to how states cope with sense of a gap between a claimed national Self and its representation by the international Other. For instance, when international sanctions or shaming articulate an image of the nation that does not resonate with the predominant domestic identity markers, they may engender a multitude of individual instantiations of misrecognition. Yet, to be politically salient, these individual instantiations have to be translated and publically articulated into a collective discourse of misrecognition, expressing explicitly a gap between the discourse of national Self and the international image.

In response to such – discursively constituted – gap or crisis of representation, various management techniques can be used to address and mediate international misrecognition, thereby (re)creating imaginary relations of unity with the international Other. One of the increasingly common ‘gap-stitching’ techniques in international politics is public diplomacy.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechDavos230114.aspx> (accessed 10 August 2017).

## **Managing international misrecognition**

### ***Public diplomacy as national identity management***

In a poststructuralist reading, diplomacy is the practice of mediation between estranged political communities or groups of Self and Others (Der Derian, 1987). On the face of it, public diplomacy is engaged in reducing the degree of Otherness. Understood as ‘direct communication with foreign publics, with the aim of affecting their thinking, and ultimately, that of their government’ (Malone, 1985: 199), public diplomacy can be seen as a de-radicalising form of foreign policy discourse. Unlike security discourses, where radical differentiations present the Other as a threat to the privileged self, public diplomacy discourses seem to aspire to inscribe less radical degrees of Otherness, with a view to winning the hearts and minds of foreign populations (Fitzpatrick, 2009: 1). Indeed, this projection of national identity through public diplomacy appears – to its proponents at least – to be an effective way to communicate national interests; one that lacks the ‘chauvinistic’ and ‘antagonistic’ elements of more reactionary forms of nationalism (Van Ham, 2001).

More specifically, public diplomacy draws on mundane similarities, where the national and the international are not in opposition, but work in concert. Arguably, the purpose of public diplomacy is to ‘maintain smooth international relationships’ (Melissen, 2005: 21, for a discussion of digital diplomacy, see Bjola and Holmes eds. 2015). While accepting that identities are fragile and unstable, nation-branding professionals and public diplomacy consultants promise to help correct foreign misunderstandings and prejudices by constructing and projecting a distinct and positive national identity, consciously highlighting certain meanings and myths while ignoring others (Anholt, 2002; Aronczyk, 2013; Hocking, 2005; Melissen, 2005). The underlying assumption in much of public diplomacy theory and practice is that such campaigns work by showing the best version of the national Self. Public diplomacy – and its promise of closing the gap between how the world sees the state and the state’s own representation of itself – can be understood as a strategy. One that articulates a fantasy of unity between the estranged Self and the world by presenting a positive Self without a concrete devalued Other. However, there is little evidence to suggest that this has ever succeeded. In fact, such public diplomacy may even further radicalise foreign publics against the state (Khatib et al 2012).

Moreover, public diplomacy does not just market a particular version of the national image abroad but also engages in a difficult and contentious domestic struggle to stabilise a

particular version of national identity. In this process, according to critics such as Browning, new public diplomacy and nation branding, tend to turn national identity into ‘decontextualised, depoliticised and dehistoricised montages’ (Browning, 2013: 12). As Graan observes, the assumption that countries must be marketable to international consumer publics ‘authorises a space of state governance concerned with regulating public space, public behaviour, and representational discourse on the nation’ (Graan, 2013: 165). Public diplomacy thus creates subjects in order to justify or develop policies. For instance, China’s nation-branding exercises ‘are part and parcel of Beijing’s nation building exercises to instil loyalty to the Party brand and strengthen Beijing’s own legitimacy, amongst both its domestic population and international audience’ (Barr, 2012: 81). Public diplomacy, in other words, is as much intended for internal consumption as it is directed at foreign publics (Melissen, 2005: 13). This is also the case in Israel, where the ‘Presenting Israel’ campaign led to much debate among Israelis about its purpose and the nature of Israeli identity, primarily due to the technique it employed: humour. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the impact of the campaign and how it worked discursively and visually, without taking its use of humour into account.

### ***Humour as a coping mechanism***

In the social and human sciences, humour has for many decades been the subject of critical and systematic inquiries. Here, humour is often seen as essential to the construction of identities, and it plays a central role in maintaining and sometimes disrupting a social order. Humour can serve both to politicise and depoliticise particular social relations (Kuipers, 2005). Within IR scholarship, however, humour has not received much attention, with a few, but notable exceptions: Wedeen (2002) has provided a superb analysis of the subversive function of humour in Assad’s Syria, while other IR scholars have discussed humour in the context of postcolonialism (Krishna, 1993), conflict resolution (Kuusisto, 2009) and pop culture (Payne, 2017). Yet humour is still largely seen as an epiphenomenon in world politics, one that is not relevant to issues of war and peace. We wish to argue, however, that humour is a central coping mechanism when it comes to handling international misrecognition.

The most fundamental definition of humour, proposed by Emmanuel Kant is that it arises out of incongruities (Morreall, 2011: 17). More specifically, its mechanism is an

unexpected, often sudden clash, ‘which can be between real and unreal (absurd humour), between taboo and non-taboo (e.g. sexual humour, toilet humour, aggressive humour), or between the gruesome and the innocent, the banal, or even the cheerful’ (Kuipers, 2005: 456). As a result, ‘there is something odd, abnormal or out of place’ in a humorous situation, ‘which we enjoy in some way’ (Morreall, 2005: 68). In other words, humour occurs when two ideas or events, that are usually considered incompatible, are juxtaposed, shifting in perspective from seriousness to play (Kuipers, 2008). Humour, then, plays on the multiple possibilities within an utterance or concept.

Humour has a specific semantic domain of ambiguity that gives its particular political power. Moreover, precisely because of its play with meanings, humour can generate a strong sense of self-identity (as a member of an inclusive, ‘us’ group) resting on the fact that ‘sometimes people just don’t get it’ (Hutcheon, 1994). This combination of semantic ambiguity and insider-knowledge is particularly apparent when states object to being ridiculed internationally. For instance, Kazakhstan complained against the mockumentary comedy film, *Borat*, starring a fictitious Kazakh journalist who travels through the United States, and sought to rehabilitate its international image by publishing advertisements in *The New York Times* and *Foreign Affairs*. However, the Kazakh government ended up reinforcing the image of a tragi-comic repressive state (Schatz, 2008: 58). The Kazakh government was up against the powerful semantics of humour, making it extremely difficult for it to protest against defamation.

In using humour studies to understand how states cope with misrecognition, two theories seem particularly relevant: *release* and *superiority* theory. Within the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, humour is typically understood as a means to release stress/tension and nervous energy (see Zijderfeld, 1968). According to ‘release’ theorists, the pleasure of laughter is rooted in relief from anxieties and fears. In *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1903), Freud claimed that funniness was caused by the economic release or avoided expenditure of psychic energies stemming from unconscious repression. Humour thus gives people the opportunity to subvert a power they cannot otherwise combat and to release repressed sensibilities. According to release theory, humour allows taboo subjects, thoughts and feelings to be expressed in culturally permissible ways and thus create ‘catharsis’ and ‘anti-shame’ affects (Scheff, quoted in Kuipers 2008: 371).

The second perspective represents humour as a symbolic victory over the victim or target of humour. ‘Superiority’ or ‘disparagement’ theorists consider humour to be a means

by which individuals and groups mark their superior position vis-à-vis a subject. Often attributed to Thomas Hobbes, this understanding of humour relates ‘laughter to power and traced the origins and purposes of laughter to social rivalry’, by laughing, we establish ‘some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others’ (Boskin and Dorinson quoted in Kuipers, 2008: 375). In this sense, collectively, humour helps to re-draw the boundaries of a political community. Indeed, studies of national identity have long emphasised the identity- and solidarity-building functions of humour.

However, the play with taboos can also allow for self-critique, i.e. a *reversed* superiority argument. For example, Wang and Hallquist (2011) examine how the TV shows *South Park* and *The Daily Show* systemically depict China as mysterious, authoritarian and threatening, mimicking the general media coverage of China in the US. However, in doing so, the shows also mock Americans’ cultural ignorance about China and their paranoia of its rise. As the authors conclude, the shows invite their viewers to be reflective of their existing perceptions on China (Wang and Hallquist, 2011). As such, humour can also play a subversive or emancipatory role, allowing for ‘direct or indirect critique of an established idea, order or practice’ (Payne, 2017: 7). In holding up a mirror, humour can make people laugh at themselves. Yet, as the next part will show, the use of humour in the ‘Presenting Israel’ campaign does not seek to enable experimentation or self-critique by making Israeli laugh of themselves, but rather – in a combination of release and superiority – works to circumvent international criticism and thus re-legitimise existing policies domestically.

### **Israel’s international misrecognition and its techniques of mediation**

The search for international recognition has always been high on the agenda of Israel’s foreign policy (Bialer, 2002). Since the early days of Zionism, Israeli public institutions have been engaged in various international public awareness activities, often referred to as *Hasbara* (Hebrew for ‘explanation’ or making reasonable or sensible) on behalf of the state (Toledano and Mckie, 2013). Despite the desire for recognition, Israel has also, somewhat paradoxically, been characterised by a tendency to ‘discount’ international opinion and institutions (Adler, 2013). Historically, its diplomacy has been suspicious of the international community and unilateralist (Peri, 1993). This, together with the widely shared belief that the world would stay biased against Israel regardless of its actions (Gilboa, 2006), helps to explain why public diplomacy has largely been neglected in the past. Within recent

years, however, this has changed, and as this section shall show, the search for international recognition has become central to Israel's foreign policy focusing on public diplomacy

### *Israel's national identity*

Israel is 'deeply divided along religious, ethnic and political lines' (Waxman 2006, 2), and its narratives of national Self are ripe with internal tensions. From the beginning, official state attempts were made to forge a common Israeli identity through the 'melting pot' doctrine, encouraging immigrants, and particularly the Mizrahi Jews, to shed their diasporic identity and adopt the cultural values developed by Western Ashkenazi immigrants (e.g. Toledano and Mckie, 2013). However, scholars have long noticed the failure of this process, and with immigration from the former USSR and Ethiopia in the 1990s, together with the persistent exclusion of the Arab-Israeli narratives from the national Self, a common Israeli identity has never stabilised. Nonetheless, among the Jewish-Israeli population that holds the reins of power within the state, three identity markers are commonly identified as central: Israel as a security provider, Israel as Jewish, and Israel as a democracy (Lupovici, 2012).

First, Israel is depicted as a security provider for its citizens, able to deter its enemies. This identity marker is associated with the traumas of life in diaspora and the Israeli people's sense of victimhood, the existential insecurities of a persistent state of war, and a collective 'siege mentality' (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992; Barnett, 2013; Peri, 1993; Waltzer, 2013). Second, while the majority of the Israeli population is not religious, Jewishness is commonly articulated as being 'fundamental' to Israeli identity, yet understood more in nationalist than religious terms.<sup>5</sup> Third, the idea that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East has become integral to Israeli discourses of Self (Lupovici, 2012; Sucharov, 2005; Waxman, 2006), often expressed publically through phrases such as 'villa in the jungle'.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, these narratives of Israeli identity are highly politicised and contested, subject to constant academic and popular debates.

For example, being a security provider and defending the border between the inside and the outside, is an inherent marker of any sovereign state. In Israel, however, the

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<sup>5</sup> On the distinction between Judaism and Jewishness, see Cooper (2015).

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/20/jewish-majority-israel-villa-in-the-jungle> (accessed 8 December 2016).

boundaries between outside and the inside were always blurred due to the inclusion of non-Israeli Jews from around the globe, and the exclusion of the Israeli non-Jews from the parameters of the national Self. Moreover, being a Jewish state often clashes with being democratic one due to the status of the Arab minority and the ongoing policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, leading some to argue that Israel's democratic identity is in 'recession' (Chazan, 2013; Lupovici, 2012).<sup>7</sup> As if to compensate for the demise of the democracy marker, with the stagnating peace process, a new marker of identity has emerged in recent years – as Israeli elites have begun to self-identify as a 'Start-Up Nation'.

Despite these tensions, in many periods of its modern history Israel managed to maintain a relatively stable and mostly positive international image,<sup>8</sup> 'seen by most in the world with benevolent eyes: as 'David' confronting 'Goliath'' (Adler, 2013: 3). However, with the stagnation of the peace process, the expansion of West Bank settlements, the construction of 'the separation wall', and Israel's wars in Lebanon and Gaza (e.g. Marzano, 2013) in the aftermath of the second intifada, 'Israel's reputation abroad has dramatically deteriorated' (Gilboa, 2006: 715). With the military occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of the Gaza Strip, accusations of grave human rights and international law violations, global opinion polls showed that Israel's public image became increasingly negative (see Gilboa, 2006: 731-735; Greenfield, 2012). Particularly in Europe, where the EU's 2003 *Eurobarometer* revealed that Israel was perceived as the biggest threat to peace in the world by European populations (EC, 2003: 78).

An example of the link between international criticism and national identity destabilisation can be seen in the case of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions movement (BDS). Emerging in 2005 as a coalition of 170 organisations claiming to represent Palestinian interests, the BDS movement attempts to delegitimise Israel by branding it as a violent apartheid state. The movement frequently appeals to the international community to put pressure on Israel, with the aim of ending the occupation, dismantling the separation wall, granting the right of return to Palestinian refugees etc. (Ananth, 2013). These discourses clearly negate the three traditional markers of Israeli identity: The demands to end to

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<sup>7</sup> Arguably, these tensions make Israel an 'overburdened' polity (Horowitz and Lissak, 1989) and place Israel in a 'triangle dilemma', where it 'can be any two of the following – a democracy, an occupier of the territories [i.e. 'security provider'], or a Jewish state – but not all three at the same time' (Lupovici, 2012: 825).

<sup>8</sup> Particularly due to the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and the Oslo agreement with the Palestinian Authority.



occupation by dismantling the separation wall challenges Israel's self-perception as a security provider, since the occupation, according to Israeli policy makers, was initiated for national security reasons. The call to end colonialism entails the right of return of Palestinian refugees, which challenges the Jewish marker of the Israeli identity. Invoking the term apartheid challenges Israel's democratic identity and its privileged differentiation from the non-democratic Arab Other.

### *Israel's New Public Diplomacy*

The rapid deterioration of Israel's image has not gone unnoticed within Israel and insufficient attention to public diplomacy has increasingly been identified as the cause. The 2002 annual State Comptroller report (2002: 9-11) pointed to 'severe deficiencies' in Israeli public diplomacy and the government was reproached by Israeli academics for 'lack of awareness and understanding of the critical role public diplomacy plays in contemporary international relations (Gilboa, 2006: 716). When the 2007 State Comptroller report, published after the second Lebanese war, pointed out that many PR disasters could have been avoided (State Comptroller, 2007: 451-2), the Israeli government began introducing major reforms to its 'Hasbara' apparatus (Greenfield, 2012).

In 2008, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) became responsible for nation branding and a British consulting firm was hired to develop Israel's brand strategy. According to the MFA's executive director, the strategy was meant to close 'the unbearable gap between our image abroad and who we really are' (Shilo, 2008) by promoting narratives of the Israeli 'special energy', 'entrepreneurial seal' and 'vibrant diversity' (Acanchi, 2008). In 2009, the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs (MPDDA) was established, along with a national 'Hasbara' coordination headquarters, as part of the Prime Minister's office. While the MFA was still in charge of classic public diplomacy and nation branding, the MPDDA was to develop a strategy for an informal 'people's diplomacy'. By empowering Israeli citizens travelling abroad with information and advocacy skills, this peer-to-peer diplomacy aimed to weaken the delegitimation campaign through counter-networks of pro-Israel advocates (Knesset Research and Information, 2010).

MPDDA's survey of 60,000 people in Israel and in the diaspora revealed that over 90 per cent of the respondents agreed with statements such as 'Israel is not perceived correctly in the world' and it is 'important for me to represent Israel abroad and I am willing to take an

active part in it' (Attias, 2012: 476). Backed by these results, the campaign 'Presenting Israel' was launched in 2010, with the aim of 'building Israel's modern public diplomacy ability through its citizens and diasporas' (Attias, 2012: 477). Unlike the 2008 nation branding initiative, the campaign focused on mobilising 'the communication potential' of Israeli citizens (Attias, 2012: 474). Explaining the project, the Minister of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, Yuli Edelstien argued that in order to fight demonisation and delegitimisation, the ministry had to 'bring back the human dimension of Israeli faces [...] by creating and encouraging direct communication, without governmental mediation, between our 'explainers' and the peoples of the world' (Pyoterkovsky 2010).

Our analysis of the campaign builds on a range of written sources, including protocols and notes from parliamentary committees, reports by governmental agencies, think tank papers, academic publications and Israeli and foreign media coverage of the 'Presenting Israel' campaign. Moreover, we interviewed two senior officials who were responsible for the campaign. We used the Way Back Machine Internet archives (<https://archive.org/web/>) to access an archived version of the website of the campaign (as the site has been closed down and the MPDDA no longer exists). The campaign videos were accessed through the campaign's channel on YouTube. All non-English sources were translated by us. For illustrative purposes, we reproduce a few screenshots from the campaign (see Figure 1-4).<sup>9</sup>

## **'Presenting Israel': Humour, visual imagery and the representation of Others**

To mobilize Israeli citizens, Israel's Government Advertising Agency produced three video clips in English, French and Spanish that used humour to parody how the global media portrays Israel. Between 2010-2012, the three clips were broadcast on national Israeli television accompanied by radio jingles and printed press advertisements. The videos depicted how the foreign media portrayed Israel as a primitive and war-mongering state and called on Israeli citizens to become active in changing this image abroad. For that purpose an accompanying website was established, telling Israelis how the world looked at Israel and

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<sup>9</sup> These reproductions are very partial and for non-commercial research purposes only as per the 'fair dealing' doctrine'.

what they should do. The mix of genres and platforms rendered the campaign as much visual as textual.

The first video clip (Figure 1), and perhaps the most emblematic and widely remembered, presents itself as a typical BBC documentary, infused with Orientalist audiovisual motives. A caravan of camels is passing through a beautiful desert landscape with a rising red sun in the background. A reporter with a pronounced British accent appears, wearing a khaki coloured outfit. He describes the camel as ‘the typical Israeli animal, used by the Israelis to travel from place to place in the desert where they live. It is the means of transport for water, merchandise and ammunition. It is even used by the Israeli cavalry’ (Masbirim’s channel, 2010a). The music then changes to an upbeat tune and a voiceover in Hebrew says: ‘Are you tired of seeing how we are represented in the world? You can change the image. Visit the website of the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, and receive information about the right advocacy [*hasbara nekhona*]. Explaining [*masbirim*] Israel, you can also do it!’.



Figure 1: ‘British’ video (source: screenshot from Masbirim’s channel, 2010a)

A similar *leitmotif* is apparent in the second video. In what appears as a ‘breaking news’ bulletin, a French news anchor reports gravely (in French with Hebrew subtitles): ‘We are now receiving reports that in recent hours the sounds of war can be heard throughout Israel. Our correspondent reports gunfire and loud explosions that can be heard everywhere’. However, the images that are displayed on the screen in the background, as all Israeli viewers

will immediately recognise, are images of the Israeli Independence Day celebrations featuring fireworks, aerobatics planes, official ceremonies and street parties.



Figure 2: The ‘French’ video (source: screenshot from Masbirim’s channel, 2010b)

Finally, in the third video, a Spanish-speaking lifestyle reporter strolls through a sunny park amongst barbecuing Israelis, commenting enthusiastically on Israeli everyday life: ‘In Israel technology is under-developed, and in most houses there is neither electricity nor cooking gas. That is why the Israelis still use ancient cooking methods, like scorching meat on an open fire, referred to as *Mangal* [barbeque in Hebrew] by the locals. May I? [one local offers her a skewer, which she takes a bite from, declaring with a smile:] ‘Mmm... primitive but delicious!’.



Figure 3: The ‘Spanish’ video (source: screenshot from Masbirim’s channel, 2010c)

### ***The politics of representation***

The videos are clearly parodies mimicking the style of another genre – the travel documentary or the news broadcast – exaggerating these formats to mock the stylistic habits of foreign media such as the *BBC* or *TV5Monde* (see Twark, 2007: 21). The displayed incongruity between Israeli identity markers and the claims in the videos generate humorous clashes through combinations of inconsistent audio-visual elements – the real and the unreal. As such, the videos play with the widespread notion of misrepresentation by the European Other. As explained by one of the ministry officials behind the campaign, the strategy was to mobilise Israeli citizens by provoking them into action, based on research among 60,000 individuals that aimed to examine ‘what pains them in the gut’ (Petah Tikva, 07.01.2016, interview). According to the research, these videos were seen as an ‘effective call to action’ (Attias, 2012: 477), serving the aim of the campaign of mobilising individual actions through collective articulations of misrecognition.

Psychoanalysts and surrealist painters often use the strategy of generating individual responses such as irritation through visual incongruous symbolic staging. In this process of *over-identification*, the strategic visual staging provokes the viewer by ‘embracing simultaneously, within the same space, the multitude of inconsistent [...] elements’ (Žižek, 2006: 56) from which subjectivity is constituted. That way, the fictitious visual incongruity confronts the viewer with that which is repressed and cannot be articulated linguistically, nor enacted otherwise in real life. By playing with the visual representation of the unarticulated, the viewers are provoked to identify with the underlying elements, which unconsciously guide subjective perception (Žižek, 2006). The videos provide a telling example of this process of incongruous strategic staging: According to officials in the MPPDA, the foreign media represents a threat to Israel’s international image, by being persistently biased in their representation of Israel (Interview, Jerusalem, 03/01/2016). In the videos, the representation of foreign media articulates a collective discourse of international misrecognition, by turning Israel’s dominant identity markers around.

For example, the British BBC-style reporter’s fictitious depiction of Israel confronts the narrative of Israel as a technologically advanced security provider. It uses a belittling Orientalist image where Israel is depicted as a backward place, where camels are still used by ‘the Israeli cavalry’. Similarly, the French ‘breaking news’ video clip generates humorous

incongruity by misrecognising peaceful and festive Independence Day celebrations for violence and war, tapping into a wider concern amongst the public and policymakers that Israel is associated with war and terror. Finally, the incongruity of the Spanish video is created by exoticising a banal leisure activity, barbecuing, and presenting this way of preparing food as an indication of Israel being a primitive and backward place without modern kitchens, thereby negating the ‘Start-Up Nation’ narrative. Doing so, the videos draw on a range of ambiguous, often unspoken, individual experiences of misrecognition and assemble them into one collective discursive formation. Once articulated publically, this discourse opens up new possibilities for politics, privileging the circumvention of international criticism.

This articulation of misrecognition is strategic and political, and does not necessarily represent how Israelis *really feel*. Instead, there is a gap between representations and that which they seek to represent and in this gap, the politics of representation – and choices of inclusion and exclusion – are located. For example, much of drive for the campaign came from the minister’s search for a purpose and legitimacy of a newly established ministry. As argued by Caspi (2010), the campaign was crucial to the minister’s self-promotion: ‘Without ‘Presenting Israel’, there is a doubt whether many would have known that [the MPDDA] exists.’ However, as noted by an editorial in *Haaretz* (2010), the campaign ‘must not be viewed just as a gimmick, or an attempt to justify the unnecessary existence of the [...] Ministry. Instead, it represents how the government wants its citizens to understand their country and represent it to the world’. Indeed, at the end of each video, viewers were encouraged to visit the campaign’s newly developed website and learn more about how they could help in improving Israel’s image abroad. Once launched, the campaign, and its representations of the Israeli Self and its Others, became politically salient regardless of the original motivations behind it.

The political significance of these representations is perhaps most evident in a section of the website called ‘Myth vs. Reality’. While the Israel-Palestine conflict is commonly seen as central to Israel’s representation abroad, according to Edelstein, the campaign seeks to ‘stop apologising’ and to advocate ‘beyond the conflict’ (The Committee for Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs, 2012). Instead, the campaign website engages with the international criticism by staging certain ‘myths’. These myths are based on a consensus about how Israel is seen abroad, which has developed within various Israeli ministries (Interview, Jerusalem, 03/01/2016). For example, the myth that ‘Israel is a desert and they all

ride camels’, ‘your women wear kaffiyehs’; and that in general, Israel is a religious and primitive military dictatorship that ‘really doesn’t want peace’. The campaign website then carefully refutes these ‘myths’ by pointing out that Israel is actually a secular and technologically advanced democracy and reminds the reader about Israel’s achievements in technology, agriculture, medicine, etc. (Ministry of Public Diplomacy & Diaspora Affairs, 2010a). Overall, the website affirms positive aspects of Israeli identity, beefed up with stock photos of Israeli cuisine and nature (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Screenshot from the campaign website. Source: Ministry of Public Diplomacy & Diaspora Affairs, 2010

Engaging more directly with the international criticism, the website also explains that is a ‘myth’ that the UNSC Resolution 242 requires Israel to return to the 1967 borders since its demand for withdrawal from the occupied territories never specified where the border should be. Similarly, it is a ‘myth’ that ‘[m]illions of Palestinian refugees are not allowed to return to Israel’, since their numbers are much lower and many of them were not native to the land to begin with. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the website also claims that it is a ‘myth’ that ‘[t]here’s no peace because of the settlements’ because the conflict does not

originate ‘in the size of the state but in its very existence’. The citizen-diplomat is then encouraged to remind foreigners that Israel evacuated some settlements in 2005, but it was the Palestinians who chose to continue the violence (Ministry of Public Diplomacy & Diaspora Affairs, 2010a). In a section called ‘Israel and the Arab world’ the website further explains that ‘the settlements reestablish historical Jewish settlements, and do not uproot Arab residents in the process’. Arguably then, the settlements do not violate international laws, such as article 49 of the Geneva Convention, and the website even lists the biblical names of several Palestinian towns and villages to illustrate that ‘Arab towns [...] were founded over ancient Jewish towns’ (Ministry of Public Diplomacy & Diaspora Affairs, 2010b).

Evidently, these narratives are extremely controversial, not only abroad, but also within Israel, where some observers note that ‘under the guise of training citizens as explainers [the campaign] tries to engineer a broad consensus around hawkish and nationalistic positions’ (Caspi, 2010). As argued by an *Haaretz* editorial, the campaign ‘reveals the worldview of Benjamin Netanyahu's government: limitless self-righteousness, eternal hostility toward the Arab and Muslim worlds, a view of Palestinians as invaders and inciters, and commitment to developing the West Bank settlements’ (Haaretz, 2010). The ‘Peace Now’ movement demanded that the Israeli Prime Minister put a stop to the campaign altogether because ‘Israel's positions as presented on this site reflect an extreme rightwing ideology’ contradicting the two-state solution (Ynet, 2010). Indeed, the campaign silences Israel’s own complex and contradictory identity narratives, especially those of the Arab-Israeli and the secular left, overwriting religious and political divides. Instead, the Israeli citizen-diplomat is constituted in a homogenous and morally superior subject position, where ‘the starting point is that we are Ok. Now we just need to explain it’ (Mendel, 2010).

Armed with this narrative, the section called ‘Tips for the Novice Public Diplomat’ guides citizen-diplomats to ‘first listen, then talk’, constantly maintain eye contact, while emphasising that ‘body language is just as important as verbal content’. Citizen-diplomats are encouraged to: ‘Tell your own personal story [...]. After all, and before all else, we’re all human beings’. When travelling abroad and meeting foreigners, one should use humour and personal examples, and even ‘carry around pictures from home to get your message across’ (Ministry of Public Diplomacy & Diaspora Affairs, 2010c). Seeking to mobilise the credibility of subjective everyday experiences of ordinary Israelis and channel it through state endorsed narratives, this strategy resembles the promotion of Israel – and particularly Tel



Aviv – as gay-friendly. Criticized as ‘homonationalism’ (Puar, 2013) and ‘pinkwashing’ (Schulman, 2012), this strategy appeals to Western ideas of tolerance and pluralism, while drawing attention away from Israel’s controversial policies. Citizen participation is central to this strategy. As Edelstein explains, ‘[i]n every situation of interpersonal contact with people from other countries and with foreign media, [...] every Israeli has a duty to tell people about Israel and explain the facts’ (Ministry of Public Diplomacy & Diaspora Affairs, 2010d). Humour is central to this strategy of fighting international misrecognition.

### *The role of humour*

Two interrelated humour dynamics – the aforementioned release and superiority – are at work in ‘Presenting Israel’. First, as related in the second part of the article, humour is often associated with relief from anxieties and fears. This occurs through the release of energies stemming from unconscious repression of issues related to taboos or shame (Wedeen, 1999: 121; Zijderfeld, 1968). In this reading of the videos, the staging of incongruity through over-identification facilitates a release of collective anxieties and fears. Indeed, the issue of international criticism have been increasingly depicted in Israel in existential terms. A report by the Reut Institute (2010), for example, defined the BDS movement as a ‘strategic’ and ‘existential’ threat to Israel. Moreover, influential Israeli scholars and politicians began arguing that Israel’s international image, and delegitimation in particular, are issues of national security which the state is ill equipped to handle due to insufficient attention to public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2006). The anxious nature of the Israeli responses to its deteriorating international image has been described by some as ‘hysteria’ (Peled, 2010). From this perspective, the videos were successful exactly because they brought about a cathartic relief through humour’s ‘anti-shame’ effect, thus helping Israeli society cope with the misrecognition in the mirror of the international Other.

Second, a reading drawing on superiority theory, points to the way in which the videos stage a symbolic victory in relation to the international Other. This is done by degrading the victim of the joke through shaming or ridicule (Kuipers, 2005). In this light, the rivalry between the MPDDA and the foreign media over the representation of Israel played out in the campaign could be interpreted as an attempt to stage a symbolic victory over the international Other. By ridiculing foreign journalists for being ‘stupid’ and ‘gullible’, the campaign establishes ‘some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the

infirmity of others' (Boskin and Dorinson quoted in Kuipers, 2008: 375). Offended foreign journalists claimed that the campaign added fuel to the fire, which not only radicalised relations between the Israeli state and the foreign press and, but with Europe as such. In response, Minister Edelstien, discarded these claims by saying that he spoke to many reporters, and that 'those who had a sense of humour were not offended' (Rabinovsky, 2010). Precisely in this ambiguity lies the political power of humour: Edelstein is effectively claiming that humour has a license to be offensive. By saying the campaign is 'only joking', Edelstein is using 'the classic let-out clause when for instance a racist joke falls on unreceptive ears' (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008: 812). The excuse assumes that a joke is just a joke and cannot be taken seriously. This is exactly the rhetorical effectiveness on which offensive comic discourse relies.

However, the semantics of ambiguity can also be seen through a more speculative reading of the videos. While the campaign explicitly attempts to ridicule foreign media, its underlying subtext could be interpreted as a differentiation from the Arab Other. Whereas the exotic, violent and barbaric representations of Israel invoked by the campaign are not shared by most Europeans, they do seem to conform to the typical depiction of Arabs in the Orientalist discourse within Israel. Here, Arabs are 'either violent, irrational and evil or authentic and antiquated' (Ras-Krakotskin quoted in Mendel and Ranta, 2016: 10), thus serving as a constitutive Other for Israeli identity. In this reading, the negation of 'myths' presented by the campaign, such as 'Israel is a desert and they all ride camels', 'your women wear kaffiyehs', and 'Israel is a religious and primitive military dictatorship', signals to the world – and perhaps more importantly to the Israelis themselves – that *we are not like the Arabs!* Thereby, a symbolic victory is established, which would be less legitimate to articulate explicitly. Moreover, in the context of the Western/European community and its colonial heritage, where Israel is seen as a borderline member, this differentiation from the Arab Other expresses Israel's quest for Western recognition, by signalling: *we are like you, Europeans!*<sup>10</sup>

In sum, though the latter interpretation is speculative, taken together with the other elements of the campaign, it illustrates that the usage of humour is neither subversive nor

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<sup>10</sup> This quest for European recognition can be seen more explicitly in the IDF meme 'What would you do?' from the 2014 Gaza war, See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-gaza-conflict-rockets-fired-at-the-houses-of-parliament-in-idf-propaganda-image-intended-to-9619380.html> (accessed 9 August 2017).

emancipatory, but serves as a depoliticising strategy. Indeed, all three videos humourously depict a sense of Israel's global misrecognition, represented by the growing gap between the dominant domestic discourses of national identity and the international image. What appears to be mocked in the first place are uninformed Western – or more precisely European – journalists. Yet the videos are used to stabilise the Israeli Self through a form of visual play, where the exotic (camels), violent (fireworks) and barbaric (outdoor barbecue) become the twisted mirrors of dominant Israeli identity markers: security provider, Western democracy and Start-Up nation. The only identity marker that appears to be not directly addressed is the Jewish identity. However, it could be argued that it is present in the campaign's tacit play with Orientalism, wherein the exotic, violent and barbaric are, in fact, the devalued markers of the Arab Other, from which the Israeli Self seeks differentiation.

'Presenting Israel' embodies the tension between two discourses – one of being 'distinct and better' and the other of being 'similar'. On one hand, the campaign presents a 'normal', modern Israel – a feel-good, Western place. Reflecting the desire for recognition and release, it appeals to the idea that Israeli identity is compatible with the European, seeking to close the gap between the estranged Self and its global image. On the other hand, the campaign mocks European misrecognition, and signals that the Israeli Self is somehow superior to the misinformed European Other and that there is fundamentally no international understanding. Though the campaign ended in 2013, such strategies of parodying Israel's misrecognition are still widely at play. For instance, in a video ridiculing the foreign media coverage of the war in Gaza, produced by the Israeli MFA in 2015, a short-sighted foreign reporter mistakes Hamas' underground tunnels for a subway network. The reporter is then offered glasses and told: 'Open your Eyes. Terror rules Gaza' (Tibon, 2015). Indeed, humour reinstates a certain consensus about the Israeli Self-Other relations and thus depoliticises Israel's domestic and foreign policy. However, without changing the policies for which Israel is being criticised, this strategy seems to strain rather than assist the mediation of Israel's estrangement.

## **Conclusion**

This article made three contributions to IR theory. First, we argued that international misrecognition can be understood as a gap between a dominant narrative of national Self and its image abroad, reflected in the 'mirror' of the International Other. Contrary to most

approaches to recognition within IR theory, we proposed that misrecognition is inherent in any identification process. However, misrecognition only becomes politically salient when it is publically articulated as a specific discourse of misrecognition, drawing on a multitude of unarticulated and ambiguous individual experiences. Second, the article argued that one of the prominent ways in which states cope with a discourse of international misrecognition is through public diplomacy. We thus explored public diplomacy as an attempt to stitch the gap between dominant national identity markers and the state's global image, creating a fantasy of unity between the national Self and the international Other.

Third, introducing insights from humour theory to IR theory, we explained how humour plays a key, albeit often overlooked role in international relations, contributing both to maintain and to disrupt social order. Following *release* theory, humour contributes to 'gap-stitching' strategies by providing relief for anxieties. Humour's semantic ambiguity can promote self-critique and reflection, creating bonds between states. However, as *superiority* theorists explain, humour can also establish a sense of superiority and serve as a political weapon to defend a particular version of national Self against criticism from within or outside. Since humour is frequently used to articulate what is seldom stated directly – to manage misrecognition – and deal with taboos, the analysis of humourous practices provides us with important insights into the mechanisms of identification and conflict in international relations.

More specifically, the article explored how the public diplomacy campaign 'Presenting Israel' mobilised citizen diplomats through videos displaying, in a caricature format, how the world sees Israel. By promoting a discourse of international misrecognition, the campaign served to reconstruct and repair a damaged and contested image of the Israeli Self. It did so by exaggerating stereotypes visually and propelling foreign 'myths' about Israel that could easily be contradicted, at least by most Israelis. In the face of international misrecognition, humour thereby performed anxiety release. However, humour also provided a powerful way to circumvent European criticism because any potential serious import of 'Presenting Israel' could be downplayed with the argument that it was 'only joking'. The campaign fought misrecognition by claiming that Israel was a modern, high-tech, peaceful and secular democracy, thereby appealing to sameness and compatibility with European Others. Yet, at the same time, by mocking Western criticism, the campaign also presented an Israeli Self that appeared to be better than the misinformed European and (possibly) inferior Arab Others. In this sense, rather than explaining Israel, the campaign not only reinforced a

particular version of Israeli identity, it also signalled that there is fundamentally no possibility of an international understanding of Israel's situation.

At a more general level, this article argued that the attempt to fight misrecognition and gain acceptance through public diplomacy does *not* necessarily 'smoothen' national characteristics or elude radical differentiations (Browning, 2013). Instead, it can be used to shrug off international critics by using humour to cope with anxiety and further radicalise international estrangement. This underlines the point that 'the struggle for recognition may as well lead to an entrenchment of existing differences between Self and Other, thus aggravating their sense of separateness without giving rise to any shared identity in the process (Bartelson, 2013: 120). A deeper understanding of international misrecognition will therefore provide invaluable insights to the way in which states cope with international approval or criticism, and thus how they construct their national identity and foreign policy.

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