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## Diplomat's bid to 're-brand' Israel

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You might think it easier to run up Masada every day with a bag of rocks on your back than take on Ido Aharoni's mission: to improve Israel's public image.



For three years, the urbane diplomat has headed the Israeli foreign service's "brand management team", charged with encouraging people elsewhere to see the country in a more positive light.

But he has an upbeat message for those in the diaspora who want to aid his work. "Help us celebrate Israel's success."

Across the world, Israel has actually enjoyed greater backing than the Palestinians, according to research conducted for his team.

"Globally, you get a pretty good picture," he explained, during a recent visit to London to attend a Foreign Office conference. Sympathy for Israel can be found not only in the USA but in Russia, China, India and Mexico, although "we do have a problem in England, France and Spain with public opinion".

For Mr Aharoni, however, politics is not the issue. The problem is that even those with pro-Israel leanings abroad tend to view the country in terms of the Middle East conflict. And that is not helpful for tourism or investment.

"Every place has a DNA, a personality, just like a human being," Mr Aharoni said. "Brazil's is about fun, Paris is about romance, so Israel is about what? We researched worldwide, and it came up almost universally that Israel's image is identified with conflict. Even people who support Israeli policies are not attracted to what the conflict represents.

"In today's world, which is highly competitive, it is no less important for Israel to be attractive than to be right."

His team has now identified a number of areas which he hopes in the long-term will help win Israel that all-important "attractive" rating: from environmental fields such as renewable energy and desert agriculture to film, modern dance and other arts, or lifestyle and leisure.

"You have people like Rio Ferdinand, who go to Israel all the time," he said. "Israel is very attractive, but the world doesn't know that."

Much of Mr Aharoni's work is done in Israel, passing the message on to local groups. As a result, a new organisation has been founded by Dame Shirley Porter's granddaughter, Joanna Landau; called Kinetis, it is modelled on the Association for a Better New York, created in the 1970s to help turn around the city's then poor image.

For Israel's friends, Mr Aharoni has the following advice. Political advocacy is important. "But don't let it be the only thing you do. Advocating Israel's positions vis-a-vis the conflict is not going to bring more tourists to Israel or foreign investment.

"We have a database, Faces of Israel - which we'd like to recommend to every Jewish organisation - of interesting people in Israel we'd like to incorporate into schedules of visits - experts in all sorts of fields. We have a workshop about it which we will be introducing to the Jewish community in the UK in the near future.

"I meet many British groups and, so often, they don't get a sense of the real Israel. I look at the schedule - a military base, another military base..."

Instead, it might be better to take visitors to an experimental lab, or a winery.

"I want people to understand," Mr Aharoni said, "that Israel may not be the most normal place - but it is far more normal than most people think."

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