

Inside Hasbarah Central (2003)

By Adam Dickter



It's 7 a.m. Monday, a time when many people are still sluggish. But even before his morning coffee, Alon Pinkas seems to be at the top of his game, sitting in the glass-enclosed Fox News Channel studios on Sixth Avenue. "The Arab League has done less to help the peace process than the National Football League," Israel's consul general tells Fox's Steve Doocy.

If Palestinians didn't like Ehud Barak's offer at Camp David, he says, "They could have simply said this plan sucks" and continued negotiating, rather than resort to violence.

Throughout the interview, Pinkas refers to those who've killed hundreds of Israelis as "homicide bombers" or "homicidal maniacs," eschewing the more colloquial designation of "suicide bomber."

"When I hear suicide bomber, I think of someone who straps a grenade to himself and jumps off a bridge," explains Pinkas in his bulletproof car en route to the consulate. "These are people committing mass murder."

As Israel faces an onslaught of world criticism over its incursion into Palestinian territory, Pinkas has become his country's most visible spokesman, averaging eight to 10 interviews per week. He has developed a keen mastery of his status as something less than a celebrity but more than a diplomat. The New York consulate he runs may be Israel's most important foreign post, the center of Israel's hasbarah, or public relations effort in the U.S.

"There's an important Jewish community in L.A., a wealthy Jewish community in Montreal, and a lot of Jews in Miami," says Pinkas. "But New York is the center of the media world, and the place where major organizations have unparalleled influence on the American Jewish agenda. Even the

politicians here, especially the congressional delegation, are more visible on the national scene."

Pinkas, 40, a Tel Aviv native, can't compare these troubled days to more tranquil times. After a stint as chief of staff to the foreign minister, he arrived in New York in December 2000, several months after the second intifada erupted. Most of his staff hit the ground running, too. (Foreign ministry workers are routinely rotated, probably out of concern that they will become too comfortable in the diaspora.)

Escorting a reporter through a stringent security checkpoint, Pinkas says he considers the Fox interview a success, although he and an aide, Adina Kay, discuss the merits of having said "sucks" on national television (albeit cable.)

A good portion of the consulate's focus is on media. It has taken the unprecedented step of retaining a public relations firm, Rubenstein Associates, and has hired separate employees as liaisons for print, radio and broadcast media. In one darkened room of the consulate, at 42nd Street and Second Avenue, recently renamed Yitzhak Rabin Way, five cable boxes and VCRs are poised to record news segments.

"We don't do a critique of each show, but if Nasser al Kidwe gets 20 minutes and Alon gets five, we'll make a note of that," says Kay, a Long Island native who specializes in relations with the Jewish media. Al Kidwe is the Palestinian representative at the UN.

Pinkas, who says the media generally try to be fair, explains one of the unwritten rules of the game: TV interviewers will often give him several minutes of uninterrupted air time up front in exchange for a few tough questions later. Images from the West Bank, however, have been harmful, he concedes.

"Tanks don't look nice. But you can't change policy to make it look good," he says. "If we went into Jenin with pink Volkswagen Beetles, it's not very effective."

The consulate is just coming to life at 8:40 a.m. on a hectic day that will see a major rally in support of Israel. Yasir Arafat has just rejected any call for a truce before an Israeli pullout, Colin Powell is in Damascus, and Jerusalemites are recovering from yet another bomb blast.

Staff members were up late the night before assembling hundreds of boxes of materials for the Washington rally, and up early on Monday distributing them. What's more, it is the eve of Yom Hazikaron, memorial day for Israel's soldiers; and the consulate has an event planned in Midtown. About 200 people work at the consulate, including about 15 American Jews, most of them media liaisons.

Lighting a Marlboro in his office, which is filled with plaques, portraits of prime ministers and a Barbie playset for his daughter, the stocky, white-haired Pinkas -- whose accent is barely detectable -- says keeping up morale can be difficult. "The Israelis here speak to Israel about three times a day. They all have sisters, mothers, or best friends from the army," he says. "The Americans, many of them have friends in Israel." Pinkas says the violence has touched him personally only once, when a former secretary from the Foreign Ministry was killed at the Moment Café last month.

He insists he is neither pessimistic nor optimistic about the peace process, but believes there will be an eventual "political accommodation," if not a peace agreement. "Peace, the way we understand the concept, is not something the Palestinians can digest," he says.

Shortly after 9 a.m., Pinkas joins a weekly video conference with counterparts around the world as the consulate's telephone and e-mail gatekeeper, 29-year-old Sharon, arrives at her desk, her back aching from lifting boxes for the rally.

Sharon, who withheld her last name, says she always answers calls politely, even when the caller is hostile. "I try to be nice and say, 'Sir, can we talk,' " says Sharon, a Tel Aviv native with a tiny diamond stud in her nose. She uses

preset talking points to answer angry comments, rather than hang up.

"But sometimes you get a call, or a voice mail where they use language like 'c---suckers,' or other curses. Someone like that, you can't talk to rationally."

Equally annoying are callers who complain that Israel is not doing enough to get its message out. "They see a 30-second spot on the news, and they think that's all there is," she says. The switchboard is still silent as her boss, Ido Aharoni, the consul for media and public affairs, arrives.

Sitting in his office, the Mevasseret Zion native recalls arriving three weeks before Sept. 11. "It was all downhill from there," says Aharoni, 40, who studied broadcasting at Emerson College in Boston to pursue a career as a documentary maker, which he now considers "a suicidal act" because there is no market for such films.

Reviewing the past few months, Aharoni laments that he's been locked in a reactive mode. "We have no ability to implement any degree of advance planning," he says. "We have to respond to an ever-changing reality." He fears that the worst danger to Israel is that supporters are exhausted. "There's a growing impatience. People want to see an end to it."

Aside from Pinkas, other Israeli commentators are making the talk-show rounds, including former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former ambassadors Dore Gold and Zalman Shoval, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert and various cabinet ministers. (David Ivry, the outgoing ambassador to Washington, has kept a decidedly low media profile.)

Within hours of a recent major address on the Middle East by President George W. Bush, five Israeli officials were reacting on the U.S. airwaves, Aharoni notes.

With so many voices, messages and data sometimes conflict. Earlier this month Netanyahu publicly claimed a 10-year-old Palestinian had lured 13 Israeli soldiers to an

ambush in Jenin, information not confirmed by the Army. He later backed off the claim.

"We do have a problem with message discipline," Aharoni concedes. But he said politics has been largely put aside as Israelis wage war on terrorism. "In times of war it is less necessary to coordinate."

Aharoni, who traces his own Bukharan family roots in Israel back to 1874, says the most important aspect of hasbara, which is generally defined as image-polishing, is education, or disseminating useful facts. "Most people don't know that Syria and Jordan won their independence in 1946, Lebanon in 1935, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in 1922," he says. "Most people think Israel is the new entity in a region that was well-established."

Kay, 25, who lived in Israel as a child and later as an adult in the Year Course program run by Hadassah's Young Judaea, says she is considering aliya. But in the meantime, she feels her work is a contribution to Israel's cause.

"The feeling of helplessness, that's the worst," says Kay, a former reporter for the Jerusalem Report who underwent a four-month security screening to get her position. "I don't think anyone would work here if they didn't have a commitment."

Around 9:30 a.m., Sharon answers the first of the morning's aggravating calls. "It was a man who wants to speak to Ariel Sharon immediately," she says. "He said he has some advice."