

Israeli LGBT Public Diplomacy: Progress or Diversion?



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Abstract

Israel uses public diplomacy to broadcast the message to other western liberal democracies that it has advanced LGBT rights in order to gain and maintain closer ties with these states. However, this public diplomacy strategy has become contested as allegations are raised that Israel is merely using this strategy as a way to divert from its human rights violations in Palestine. The goal of this research is to investigate what the extent and the effect of this public diplomacy are and to what degree the contestation thereof has damaged the effectiveness of it. Two research questions have been formulated: “To what extent and how does Israel engage in public diplomacy concerning LGBT rights in order to gain and maintain support from the Benelux and to what extent does that improve its public diplomacy?” and “To what extent and how is the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy contested in the Benelux and to what extent does this damage its public diplomacy?”. To answer these research questions, Israel’s LGBT public diplomacy has been contextualised and a content analysis of publications and statements by LGBT organisations, political parties in the Benelux has been conducted. Furthermore, the tool Google Trends has been used to analyse whether the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy and the contestation thereof have been actively looked up by individuals in the Benelux. The research, however, shows that neither the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy nor the contestation thereof seem to have any desired effect in the Benelux as the topic remains largely uncovered.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem

Over the span of the last decennia, the persecution of LGBT people has become a worldwide contested issue that is far from being resolved. In the West, LGBT rights have been seriously addressed, even though there are still several ameliorations that would still be desirable. Outside of the West, however, there are a lot of places where harsh persecutions are still happening every day, with one of these regions being the Middle East. The punishments for LGBT people in the Middle East can range from three-year prison sentences in Egypt (BBC News, 2017) to executions in Iran (AP News, 2022). Nevertheless, there is one state in the Middle East that strongly differs from the others: Israel. Whether it is in terms of religion, culture, governance or political orientation, Israel often seems to be a different case from other states in the region. In terms of religion and culture, Israel is the only state in the Middle East with a Jewish majority (74%), and it also has an 18% Muslim and a 2% Christian minority (U.S. Department of State, 2022, p. 5), whereas the other Middle Eastern states, whether theocratic or secular, all have an overwhelming Muslim majority with varying percentages of Christian minorities and a strongly diminished Jewish presence. When it comes to political governance, Israel is one of the only democracies in the Middle East. The other two democracies, Lebanon and Iraq, are classified as “weak democracies”. This paints a stark contrast compared to most Middle Eastern states, which are defined as autocracies (IDEA, 2021).

These differences play a vital role in the way Israel seeks to conduct its foreign policy and how Israel presents itself to its current and potential future allies. Israel makes use of the reputation of its specific cultural and social characteristics that it has spread among various states, especially in the West. Two of the most well-known propagated talking points are the claims that “Israel is the only (true) democracy in the Middle East” and that “Israel is a safe haven for LGBT people”. These claims are being used by both the Israeli government and some of its citizens, as well as by some of Israel’s supporters abroad in a multi-layered web of public diplomacy with the goal of gaining and maintaining support from western liberal democracies.

However, the claim that Israel is a safe haven for LGBT people has come under academic scrutiny for various different reasons. One such reason for this scrutiny is the phenomenon called “pinkwashing”. Proponents of this phenomenon opine that this claim is a diversion tactic through

which Israel aims to distract from its human rights violations in the Palestinian territories that it occupies by appealing to shared (progressive) values between Israel and the West. A second reason is that several critics of the Israeli government claim that Israel's LGBT-related laws are not advanced enough (yet) to live up to the claim that Israel is a safe haven for LGBT people. One example thereof being that same-sex marriage is not fully possible in Israel. It is therefore important to analyse how exactly Israel uses LGBT rights to gain and maintain support from western liberal democracies and whether a perceived discrepancy between Israel's claims regarding the LGBT rights in Israel and the actual situation in Israel may have a negative impact on these public diplomacy efforts. This thesis wants to investigate the relative success of Israel in employing its LGBT rights in its public diplomacy towards progressive target states and actors within those states.

1.2. Theoretical Approach

Because Israel appeals to the values and civil rights it shares with these western liberal democracies, the theory of social constructivism will be central to this thesis. The theory of social constructivism claims that ideas, religious beliefs, identities, etc. of individuals and states are the most important factors when it comes to understanding international relations (Pease, 2017, pp. 106-109). Two manifestations of social constructivism are public diplomacy and soft power. Both concepts are part of the social constructivist accounts of a state's foreign policy. Public diplomacy is defined as "*the process by which international actors advance their ends abroad through engagement of specific publics*" (Cull & Snow, 2020, p. xi). Soft power is defined as "*power deriving from economic and cultural influence, rather than coercion or military strength*" (Nye, 1990, pp. 166-167). In this thesis, a theoretical framework of soft power and public diplomacy will be used. This framework helps to account for the conditions under which a state may gain and maintain support from western liberal democracies by highlighting its advancements in LGBT rights.

1.3. Research Design

As there is a vast array of western liberal democracies with varying legislatures and public opinions on LGBT rights, this thesis will focus on a limited scope of liberal western democracies that, in relevant aspects, are similar to Israel and that are generally seen as most accepting of LGBT rights: the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Together, they are known as the Benelux.

These three states are culturally very similar and have very similar progressive laws concerning LGBT rights. All three have legalised same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, have laws against LGBT discrimination (in general, as well as concerning employment and housing), allow LGBT people to serve in their armies, equalised ages of consent and allow their citizens to change their legal gender, etc. (Equaldex, 2024).

In order to achieve the research goals, it is important to formulate the following research questions.

- “To what extent and how does Israel engage in public diplomacy concerning LGBT rights in order to gain and maintain support from the Benelux and to what extent does that improve its public diplomacy?”
- “To what extent and how is the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy contested in the Benelux and to what extent does this damage its public diplomacy?”

The case of the influence of Israel’s LGBT public diplomacy on the Benelux states will be observed from 2005 onwards in a “most likely” case study. This means that, because the Benelux states are often the most progressive in terms of LGBT equality, one can reason that both the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy and the contestation thereof ought to be the most effective in those states. If these phenomena are found to not have a significant effect in the Benelux, it is unlikely (or less likely) that they will have a significant effect in states that are less progressive. In order to answer the first research question, an analysis of Israeli LGBT public diplomacy and soft power will be conducted. This analysis will include a description of the ways of public diplomacy through which Israel aims to influence its potential allies in the West. In order to answer the second research question, a variety of sources from the Benelux will be analysed, consisting of content analyses of LGBT organisations and political parties, as well as an empirical analysis of individual behaviour.

1.4. Thesis Structure

The thesis will be structured as follows: first, an overview of the relevant theories will be provided. These relevant theories are realism and social constructivism. In the theoretical outline of realism, the topics of hard power and neoclassical realism will be studied in order to set the stage for the social constructivist theory and how it manifests itself through soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding and whitewashing. Both theories will be criticised and evaluated, from which expectations will be produced. These evaluations will in turn be used to formulate the

hypotheses of this thesis. In the methodology chapter, there will be a case study selection, a demarcation of the topic in time and space, an explanation on how the research will be conducted, an overview of the advantages and disadvantages to these approaches and an operationalisation of key concepts. The empirical part of the thesis will be split into two chapters. The first empirical chapter will provide a historical overview of the conflict, as well as an overview of the progress and shortcomings of LGBT rights in Israel, and a comparison between Israel, its neighbouring states and the Benelux. The thesis will conclude by applying the theories of realism and social constructivism and its manifestations (soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding) to the case. The second empirical chapter will be more analytical in nature. In this chapter, the extent and the contestation of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy will be analysed, followed by an analysis of the effectiveness of both of these concepts on the foreign target audiences (LGBT organisations, individuals and political parties). The thesis will end with a chapter that will discuss the conclusions of the tested hypotheses, a reflection on the conducted research and potential future research possibilities, and a discussion about the topic and conclusion of this thesis.

1.5. Scientific and societal relevance

The scientific relevance of this thesis is provided by an analysis on the effectiveness of Israel's public diplomacy and soft power. The combined analysis of the veracity and effectiveness of Israel's claims can shed a light on the effect of public diplomacy and nation branding. A pressing issue concerning this topic is that there are gaps of knowledge that currently persist in the existing literature. The academic literature barely covers the Israeli perspectives, as most literature on this topic is written through the lens of the Palestinian perspective. Another pressing issue is that the debate on this topic appears to be academic whereas, at first sight, it does not seem to be an active debate among the population. This thesis can provide insight in whether this is actually the case and how this could affect the perception of how problematic these situations actually are in practice. Proceeding from this point, the societal relevance can be established. In a globalised world, it is essential to know how actors are influenced by other actors and how this shapes the world around us. Furthermore, it is also important that those who wish to support either, neither or both parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are able to make a well-informed decision. It is vital that if there is a genuine desire for peace, all affected parties ought to be heard and analysed.

2. Theory

2.1. Power in International Relations

At the core of all politics, there is a defining concept: power. Power is defined as “*the capacity to influence, lead, dominate, or otherwise have an impact on the life and actions of others in society*” (Munro, 2024) and “*the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests*” (Weber, 1978, p. 53). In short, those who hold power have the ability to shape politics. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that political actors would want to obtain that power in order to influence other actors to do as they please. However, not all forms of power are the same and not all ways to use them are similar either, it is therefore important to explore these different kinds of power and how they are utilised in order to obtain a better understanding of the power dynamics that are at play in international politics.

2.1.1. Realism and Hard Power

2.1.1.1. Realism

Realism is one of the classic theories of international relations, which is based on the post-Westphalian system. It describes an international political arena wherein nation states are the most important actors. These nation states are primarily occupied with gaining and maintaining power within the international anarchy (Pease, 2017, pp. 43-59). This international anarchy is called as such because there is no supranational body which is capable of effectively keeping these nation states under control. These nation states thus operate on the highest level of sovereignty. Even in our current timeframe, with supranational unions such as the United Nations and the European Union, there is often a degree of either failure or unwillingness to sanction nation states which are in violation of charters that they have previously agreed to, resulting in both its effectiveness and legitimacy being questioned (McMahon, 2006). This in turn reinforces the idea of nation states operating in anarchy, as long as they consolidate enough power in order not to fear repercussions from other actors or when they obtain the right to veto certain decisions.

When it comes to the philosophical question between “is and ought”, the theory of realism is not too preoccupied with how things ought to be, but rather the way things are and how the status quo can be used to gain and maintain power (Pease, 2017, p. 46). This way of engaging in politics is described as “Realpolitik” and consists mainly of calculating risks versus rewards, keeping only one’s own interests in mind, because others’ interests are a risk in and of themselves, should they conflict with the interest of the realist actor. Realism is therefore often described as having a pessimistic outlook on human nature, with the assumption that it is inherently power-hungry. A realist will therefore be predominantly reliant on physical and demonstrable force, in order to create a sense of deterrence, but also to force other actors to behave according to the will of the realist, should those actors interfere with the realist’s goals.

2.1.1.2. Hard power

From the realist perspective, a clear notion of a certain kind of power is established: hard power. Hard power is defined as “the ability to use military force or economic pressure in order to make others do as you want” (Nye, 2003).

Military force is one of the most well-known sources of power, often because of its directly visible effects. War leaves behind a trail of destruction that seldomly ends with a low number of casualties and often traumatises generations to come. It is for this very reason that actors will either want to have enough military force in order to win armed conflicts with relative ease and speed or to deter other nations from even starting a war with them. If an actor is strong enough, or at least appears as thus, it could make other actors afraid to start a conflict with them out of fear of losing much more than they hope to gain with a military intervention. Deterrence therefore relies heavily on the element of fear, which is an element talked about extensively by Niccolò Machiavelli, whom many realists have been inspired by. In his work “Il Principe”, he wrote:

“Is it better to be loved rather than feared, or vice versa? The answer is that one would prefer to be both but, since they do not go together easily, if you have to choose, it is much safer to be feared than loved.”

(Machiavelli, 2015, p. 66).

This notion touches upon the pessimistic nature of realism, as someone who is feared will have a higher chance of enacting consequences in cases of danger and betrayal, whereas the person who is loved is easily manipulated and betrayed. However, this is nuanced with the notion that

one should not make others so feared that the fear turns into hatred, as this can cause a reverse effect and lead to revolts.

Examples of military force are more abundant than anything in the field of political science, as the entire history of mankind has been signified by war. So much so that the political scientist Fukuyama (1989, p.3) argues that, with the rise of western liberal democracies, and the peace resulting from that, history would “end” when there are no more wars. In the last century, the horrors of military force have been clearly demonstrated on an international scale with two “World Wars” and a “Cold War”. It was even believed that World War One was going to be the “war to end all wars”, but that was proven to be one of history’s greatest overestimations. The Cold War marks an interesting shift in military force, however, as it put more emphasis on the deterrence aspect, rather than the interventionist aspect. Even though the contenders for hegemony, the United States (and its western liberal allies) and the Soviet Union (with its socialist and communist allies) were engaged in many proxy wars to secure alliances, they did not face each other directly. This was largely due to the development of nuclear bombs in World War Two. While a nuclear bomb has the ability to annihilate the enemy, the enemy could always strike back in time with their nuclear arsenal, which would simply destroy most human life in a chain reaction of nuclear warfare. This resulted in a situation where a direct attack would never be worth it, no matter the objective.

A contemporary example is the case of the ongoing war in Ukraine. In essence, it is a revival of the Cold War. Russia claims that there are several reasons for its invasion like the protection of Russian minority groups and the “denazification of Ukraine”, but the Russian *casus belli*, that revolves around hard power, is the encroachment of NATO onto its borders. Ever since NATO came into being, more states have joined the defensive pact wherein all member states vow to protect one another should any of them get attacked. This is already a strong example of deterrence, for one can no longer attack any NATO member without fearing the retaliation of the other 31 member states. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many Eastern European states have sought to enter this defensive pact, as they feared that their independence may be short-lived if Russia would regain its former strength (NDISC, 2023). As this expansion contained multiple states that border Russia and its ally Belarus, Ukraine was one of the only states that was not a NATO member on Russia and Belarus’ western border. As political tensions were rapidly changing in the state and NATO was considering membership for Ukraine since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia launched an invasion into Ukraine stating that the expansion of NATO was going too far (France24, 2022). This was followed by a western arms and aid supply to Ukraine, which showcases the military might of NATO. However, just like in the Cold

War, one can observe that there is no direct military intervention between NATO and Russia. Russia knows that it cannot afford to face the 32-member state strong NATO head-on, nor can NATO intervene directly against Russia out of fear for nuclear repercussions (Trevelyan, 2024). In conclusion, the current war in Ukraine serves as a prime example of both military intervention and deterrence signified by hard power.

A different way to manifest hard power is the use of economic pressure. There are many sayings that power lies with the one who holds the money, and they are quite logical. Currency was invented to make trade convenient, and whosoever controls trade, controls resources. Resources are vital to life, whether it is the essentials such as food and water, or stones to build houses and oil to fuel our motors. Especially on the international scale, trade has been bigger than it has ever been, and it is projected to grow even further (WTO, 2022). Globalisation seems unavoidable at this point, which even further indicates the need for any state that wishes to gain and maintain power to have beneficial trading relations and – if necessary – gain and maintain a degree of autarky should these relations go awry. Given this importance of international trade, a state can therefore exercise its power by straining the trade of another state. These economic restrictions can range from raising tariffs to cutting all trade or even lobbying for an international embargo. Subsequently, the target state will suffer from shortages of resources, which, in extreme cases, can lead to widespread poverty. This in turn can also cause rebellions against the government, threatening the ones in power.

Examples of economic pressure being used as a tool of power also has a long history. One could say that import tariffs in and of themselves are already a tool of power aimed at strengthening the local economy and making it harder for foreign markets to dominate local markets. A recent example of an increase in tariffs is the levying of new taxes by the American government on various foreign products, especially steel from China in 2018 (York, 2018). However, the United States, and frankly every state in the world, ought to exercise care when starting a trade war with China. This is because China makes up for 19% of the world's economy (IMF, 2024). This means that any tariff or sanction placed on China will not only hurt China's economy, but also the economy of the state incurring the tariff or sanction and, in a chain reaction, the economies of all other states as well. This can be related to the example of military intervention during the Cold War, where neither party could afford to heavily attack the other due to the disastrous results it would incur on their own. However, when a state is not dependent on trade with its adversary, this can quickly lead to a (near-)complete separation of trade which disproportionately affects the targeted state. This is the case with the American embargo on Cuba. The American government has been issuing an embargo on Cuba since 1962 with the goal of inciting a regime change and a

transition from an authoritarian communist regime to a western-style democracy (Oliver & Venancio, 2022). This embargo does not only forbid trade between the United States and Cuba, but also contains threats to cut aid funding to those states that trade non-food items with Cuba. While its desired effects of regime change have consistently failed, it has contributed greatly to the poverty in Cuba, resulting in annual international calls from the United Nations to end this embargo (ibid.). However, one can make the argument that despite the embargo not having the desired result, it can still serve as a sign of deterrence in case a state plans to go against the wishes of the United States too much.

However, embargos do not only happen in cases where the ones that incur the restrictions are independent on the state they restrain. An important example of this is again the war in Ukraine. Shortly after the Russian invasion in 2022, the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom and several other states have imposed more than 16.500 sanctions against Russia, despite Russia being a key exporter of oil and natural gas (BBC News, 2024). These sanctions have therefore also taken their toll on the economies of the states imposing them. Not only financially, but morally as well. In the end, the importers of Russian oil and natural gas had to look for trading new partners, and in that industry they seldomly come without controversies. The European Union found a new natural gas partner in Azerbaijan, pledging to double their natural gas imports from them by 2027 and describing them as a trustworthy partner (Sabadus, 2023). However, this news does not sit well with Armenia and its supporters since Azerbaijan and Armenia have been in constant conflict since the dissolution of the Soviet Union over territories that have historically belonged to Armenia, but that are recognised as part of Azerbaijan under international law. Nonetheless, it seems that the states that wish to impose these sanctions on Russia are steadfast in their demands and actions, as they will keep the sanctions in place whilst trying to eliminate any loopholes that Russia utilises in order to access the global market. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, delivered sharp words to accentuate the hard power that the European Union is exercising over Russia:

“Our sanctions are eroding sharply Russia’s economic base, slashing any prospect to modernise it. We will continue to put pressure on Russia and on those supporting it on the battlefield. We will continue going after Putin’s cronies. And we will go after those helping Russia to circumvent sanctions or replenish its war arsenal.”

(European Commission, 2023).

2.1.1.3. Neoclassical Realism

Although realism at its core defines that the foreign policy of states is driven by its material power and capacities, neoclassical realism offers a nuanced view by claiming that there is a plethora of factors that indirectly affects foreign policy in a complex system of pressure, both through internal and external ways (Rose, 1998, p. 146). It is therefore imperative to the neoclassical realist that one must not only examine the strength of one's resources, but also one's ability to use them and how the societies under a neoclassical realist ruler would react to the leader using said powers (ibid, p. 147). One such example is the reaction of the public towards its leaders when said leaders engage in a war that the public deems illegitimate or unnecessary. The United States has always been known for its large spendings on its military complex and is therefore in the eyes of the realist always one of the most important actors. Despite this, the United States leadership under President Johnson suffered immensely when the public opinion on the Vietnam War changed and it became increasingly hard to justify its endeavours to the public (Achenbach, 2018). Especially in democracies, public opinions are important for leaders to stand a chance of getting themselves or their successors re-elected. Therefore, even though the United States had the military upper hand, the domestic pressure was part of the reason as to why the United States was forced to retreat.

Neoclassical realism therefore opens the path to a counter-intuitive strategy. An actor that wishes to gain and maintain support from a potential ally could therefore implement certain policies that may go against its own ideology, but that cause the actor to gain a significant amount of support. One such example is the amount of the recent changes that have taken place in Saudi Arabia. Even though the state is shrouded in religious extremism and has maintained restrictive laws on women ever since its inception, the state has become a key player in oil trade and wishes to attract western investors for its ambitious technological projects. However, these western investors, as well as their respective states, have found it harder to conduct business with Saudi Arabia the more feminism became popular in the West, without seeing a modicum of change in Saudi Arabia. It is for this reason that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman introduced several changes to ameliorate the emancipation of women in the state, allowing them to study, drive, travel and work (Sallon, 2023). To critics, it would seem hardly believable that these changes are the result of a "change of heart" and are rather a gambit in order to gain and maintain support. It is also to be noted that these kind of behavioural patterns among realists are not a new phenomenon that exclusively exist thanks to the insights of neoclassical realism, as Machiavelli already laid the groundwork for it. Citing from his work "Il Principe", which dates back to 1532:

“It is seeming to be virtuous that helps; as, for example, seeming to be compassionate, loyal, humane, honest and religious. And you can even be those things, so long as you are always mentally prepared to change as soon as your interests are threatened. What you have to understand is that a ruler, especially a ruler new to power, cannot always behave in ways that would make people think a man good, because to stay in power he is frequently obliged to act against loyalty, against charity, against humanity and against religion.”

(Machiavelli, 2015, p. 70).

2.1.1.4. Criticism against Realism and Hard Power

Realism and hard power are mainly criticised for being, true to the name, too hard. The pessimistic nature of realism which translates itself in the display of hard power often has dire consequences for those who pull the short end of the political stick, often leading to disastrous consequences for all involved parties. The self-centred nature and distrust of others leaves little room for empathy and the consideration that the adversaries are, at the end of the day, also humans. A consequence of this mindset is perpetual warfare, for there cannot be peace in a system wherein every actor is maximising its own power. The state would either continuously risk a retaliation if it becomes too powerful or risk being overtaken, should it prove too weak to defend itself. As a result, realism is a self-fulfilling prophecy. This also creates a blind spot in terms of predictability, since realism was not able to predict the changes in the political landscape after World War Two, and even more so after the Cold War (Antunes & Camisão, 2018). By looking at states as the sole actors, and not the individuals within them or the other states and how they interact, a lot of nuances that are necessary to explain the current world are lost. This is why the nuance of neoclassical realism is essential for this thesis. One would not be able to explain the degree of cooperation and relinquishment of sovereignty in the European Union simply by stating that these states formed an alliance based on fear and desire for power alone.

Applying critiques of hard power to the previously given examples, one can observe how disastrous the consequences can be. It is often argued that World War Two was unnecessarily cruel, but that the war needed to happen lest Nazi Germany would have taken over the world. Yet, looking at the reasons why the Nazis got into power in the first place, the origins lie with the sanctions Germany had received after World War One (Pruitt, 2023). There had never been greater military and economic hard power sanctions like these before, causing Germany to lose 13% of its land, having to repay over \$60 billion and a sizable reduction of armed forces to merely 100.000

compared to the 13.25 million soldiers it had during World War One. Looking even further into the history of why World War One took place, one can observe a lengthy chain reaction of declarations of war taking place in a political arena signified by realist thought: states in anarchy, with great distrust of one another, forming temporary alliances to maintain a balance of power.

The case of the current war in Ukraine also illustrates the effects of a realist train of thought, where Russia perceives the growth of NATO after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact as a threat to the balance of power, with Ukraine ultimately paying the price for it. In return for Russia's military show of force, NATO members and several allied states responded with military and economic funding for Ukraine, as well as economic sanctions for Russia. It goes without saying that these sanctions will also negatively impact the economic situation of the inhabitants of these states, as well as that of Russian civilians who are against the war and its current regime. Not only that, but in the search for a new natural gas partner, the European Union strengthened its ties with Azerbaijan, which is in conflict with Armenia. Thus, now that Russia is circumvented, yet another war is financed. This is an indication that no moral solution has yet been found and that it only shifts the problem without actually attempting to solve it.

2.1.2. Social Constructivism, Soft power and Public diplomacy

2.1.2.1. *Social Constructivism*

The theory that is central to this thesis is the theory of social constructivism. This theory states that ideas, beliefs, and identities of individuals and states are the most important actors when it comes to understanding international relations (Pease, 2017, pp. 106-109). Social constructivism emerged as a critique on objectivity. Social constructivists claim that, since these ideas and identities are constructs made by humans, there are only a very few, if any at all, objective facts when it comes to human relations. These social aspects are social constructs and are made by groups of individuals themselves, and they influence how actors act with one another (ibid.). Because these aspects are socially constructed, malleable, and of mutual interest to the involved actors, it is paramount for actors to spread their values in order to reach a better understanding. Actors can therefore also appeal to the values they share with other actors in order to stress the importance of their alliances. Conversely, an actor may even change their own values in order to gain and maintain stronger relations with a potential ally.

2.1.2.2. Soft Power

Soft power is defined as power deriving from an actor's economic image and its cultural influence, rather than coercion or military strength (Nye, 1990, pp. 166-167). While hard power is described as "making others do as you want", soft power can be described as "making others want what you want". Since the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, conventional warfare has significantly declined, and unconventional proxy-wars and public diplomacy have become the leading concepts in international relations (Overton, 2023). Just like hard power, soft power can be manifested in a variety of ways, ranging from trade to culture, education, governance and public diplomacy. The goal of soft power is to achieve that which one wants to achieve without sacrificing lives and resources in perpetual wars and to strengthen ties with (potential) allies in order to work towards a future based on common goals, rather than to form alliances based on survival instinct and distrust of other parties.

An example of soft power in trade and culture is the case of Japan after World War Two. After suffering a heavy defeat in World War Two, Japan was militarily constrained by the United States through the "Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan", signed in 1951 (Yale Law School, n.d.). While this would spell out a doomsday scenario for Japan in the perspective of realism and hard power, it actually allowed Japan to redirect its investments into other sectors. The desire for technological innovation was increasing rapidly, and thus Japan started investing in the technological industry. By the 1970's and 1980's, Japanese electronics were overflowing the western markets (Japan Dev, 2023). Through this image as a technological superpower, Japan gained a lot of positive publicity and influence. As these technological advancements boosted the Japanese economy, there was more room to invest into other sectors as well. In the 1980's, Japan increasingly invested in its entertainment industry, especially comic books (manga) and animation cartoons (anime). Especially the latter gained a lot of popularity because of the newly developed videotaping technologies such as VHS, laserdisc, etc. (Sevakis, 2019). Due to the export and translations of this new entertainment genre, western youth started to grow up watching and reading a large share of Japanese-produced books and shows and became interested in Japanese culture. This in turn cultivated a youth that had a vision of Japan as a state with a fascinating entertainment industry, which starkly contrasts the negative image of ruthless warlords that Japanese had during World War Two (Bain, 2020).

An example in the field of education is the Erasmus programme, a student exchange programme launched in 1987 with the goal of facilitating students to temporarily study abroad in other European Union or associated states, in order to promote cultural and educational exchanges in the upper echelons of higher education. Students that are selected for the programme receive a

scholarship which covers the costs for the tuition, travel and living expenses during which they spend time studying in at least two European Union member or associated states (Ferreira-Pereira & Pinto, 2021, pp. 76-77). Research has shown that the involved students and teachers have benefited from these programmes and brought them closer to each other in matters of social, cultural and academic terms (ibid., pp. 88-89). This in turn can be used to inspire other people to broaden their horizons and understanding of other cultures. As the European Union has to deal with 27 member states, each wanting to head into their own direction, it is vital that efforts are made to harmonise the bonds between the citizens.

2.1.2.3. Public Diplomacy

Since social constructivism concerns itself with constructs created by individuals, it follows that this theory can be applied to multiple layers of society within the scope of international relations. Whereas traditionally states are seen as the most evident actors in the anarchic playing field of international relations, these states consist of (groups of) individuals which in turn can also be influenced. Especially in democracies this is a very important distinction to make, since it is exactly those individuals who vote for representatives that construct their national policies. Therefore, it follows that if a state wishes to gain and maintain relations with other states, there is an option to influence not only the current leaders, but also the civilians of those states. This is where the concept of public diplomacy comes in. Public diplomacy is defined as “*the process by which international actors advance their ends abroad through engagement of specific publics*” (Cull & Snow, 2020, p. xi). Public diplomacy is therefore a very broad concept, though it can be narrowed down. Cull (2008, pp. 31-36) provides a taxonomy of five different methods of public diplomacy: listening diplomacy, advocacy diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting. A brief summary of these five methods will be given in order to demonstrate which one will be relevant for the thesis:

- Listening: gathering information about the target audience and adjusting policy accordingly.
- Advocacy: utilising international communication to promote a policy or idea.
- Cultural: making one’s cultural resources and achievements known to the target audience.
- Exchange: hosting exchange programmes for citizens to visit each other’s states.
- International broadcasting: using multimedia such as the internet to broadcast their own news to the target audience.

The thesis will predominantly focus on cultural diplomacy, as Israel is mainly preoccupied with spreading awareness of its LGBT-friendly policies and LGBT-culture in cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa. Cultural diplomacy is defined as *“an actor’s attempts to shape and influence the international environment by promoting its cultural resources, history and achievements abroad or by exporting elements of its culture to other actors”* (Cull, 2008, p. 33). One of the most well-known manifestations of cultural diplomacy is the UNESCO World and Cultural Heritage agency, with the self-described goal of promoting international cooperation in education, sciences, culture, communication and information (UNESCO, n.d.). UNESCO designates World Heritage sites, which are landmarks or areas with significant cultural, historical or natural value. This designation helps to protect and to preserve these sites and promotes international conservation efforts. As a result, people from all over the world can enjoy these conservation efforts and get in touch with other cultures in ways that would otherwise be lost to time.

2.1.2.4. Nation Branding

Nation branding (also known as country branding) is defined as *“the way in which a country develops and manages its identity, image and reputation, which in turn influences the effect of its diplomacy, tourism, urban placemaking and all aspects that deal with the perception of the country abroad”* (Cull & Snow, 2020, p. 129). The increasing importance of nation branding is partly driven by external pressures like globalisation, which causes states to compete for talent, investors and visitors. This gives states the task to present themselves as unique and noteworthy in order to maximise their attractiveness (ibid., p. 131). States with a reputation of not being seen as a “good” state, can therefore also use nation branding in order to ameliorate their damaged status on the international stage (ibid., p. 135).

An example of nation branding is “Inspired by Iceland”, a nation branding strategy undertaken by the Icelandic government and the Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise. The rebranding was felt as necessary because Iceland had received a negative connotation due to the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which halted flights for several days throughout Europe. This also gave people the feeling that Iceland was inaccessible and dangerous, damaging the Icelandic tourism industry (Björnsson, n.d.). As a small and often overlooked state, Iceland was facing the challenge of how to put itself back on the map again. Coincidentally, it is partly due to this volcanic activity that Iceland has a phenomenal landscape, so it was soon realised that this could be used in Iceland’s advantage. As tourists became attracted to the landscapes, “Inspired by Iceland” also branched out by advertising their healthy food culture and their humble and joking

personalities. Especially with the latter, Iceland managed to capture a lot of interests by interacting with the audience through the use of memes, for example by making a parody of Mark Zuckerberg's announcement of the "Metaverse", with "Inspired for Iceland" coming up with a campaign for the "Icelandverse" (ibid.).

2.1.2.5. *Whitewashing*

The term whitewashing has several meanings, even within the field of politics. While the term is nowadays most often used for "*the phenomenon that portrays the past in a way that increases the prominence, relevance or impact of white people and minimises or misrepresents that on non-white people*", the broader definition of "*glossing over or covering up something*" still applies in the field of international relations (Marriam-Webster, 2024). This term can be used to describe ways to cover up scandals or to divert the attention away from something. Two prominent examples of whitewashing are pinkwashing and greenwashing.

Pinkwashing is the process by which states present themselves on the global stage as being progressive regarding LGBT rights but are often not as progressive as they claim to be and use the LGBT rights that they do have to cover up for the ones that they lack (Luibhéid, 2018, p. 405). While this tactic can be used by states, it has in recent years also been used increasingly by companies. Rodríguez (2023) describes the phenomenon of companies using or adding rainbow colours to logo's, clothing, etc. in order to indicate a progressive LGBT-supportive image, whilst realising a minimal effort or pragmatic result. By employing this practice, companies manage to capitalise on progressive people, making them think that by purchasing those goods, they support a good cause, while in reality not making any difference. One can debate about the sincerity of the usage of rainbow colours by major companies and whether they are genuinely working on progressing LGBT rights, but for many of these companies their honest intentions often become visible once it is analysed where the changes take place. Major corporations such as Pfizer, Cisco, General Electric, Mercedes-Benz, Vogue and Bethesda changed their logo to a rainbow version for the main company and its European & Northern American departments, but not in the Middle East, where LGBT rights are arguably worse than in the aforementioned, showing that broadcasting progress only seems to be worth it in states where LGBT rights have more or less already been accepted and not in states where they could face tremendous backlash (and thereby a loss in profit), even if those are the states where the support would be needed the most (Daily Mail, 2023).

Greenwashing is defined as “*disinformation disseminated by an organisation so as to present an environmentally responsible public image*” (Gianfrate, Ghitti & Palma, 2023, p. 4). By presenting themselves as “green companies”, many corporations have been able to present themselves with an image that does not correspond to the truth, but that has delivered higher profits due to consumers being attracted to these “greener” products. An example of this is showcased by a discovery made by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, which found that Volkswagen had installed a special kind of software that allowed them to fraud emission tests, resulting in incorrect measurements of 11 million vehicles. The accusations were serious because it was not just about a small infraction, but about exceeding the legal limit by a factor of 40. As a result, Volkswagen had to pay \$4.3 billion in damages (Lindwall, 2023).

2.1.2.6. Criticism against Social Constructivism, Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

The main objection against social constructivism and the different manifestations of power that emerge from it is that these forms of power only work when the recipient is accepting of them. The benefit of hard power is that it has direct and demonstrable effects. For example, a state could, with relative ease, ignore the cultural similarities that could turn its adversary into an ally and choose to go to war with them over a preference for territorial expansion. The state relying merely on soft power would then not be able to fend off the attack that is manifested with hard power. In this aspect, one can often see how hard power prevails when the actor wielding it wants it to. To exemplify this with the war in Ukraine, almost every state in the United Nations tried to influence Russia by voting to demand Russia to retreat out of Ukraine in the General Assembly (EUEA, 2022). However, the General Assembly of the United Nations only has the power to condemn, not to intervene. The department of the United Nations which does have the power to intervene is the Security Council, and not coincidentally, Russia has a veto power there, destroying all options at achieving the use of any power through the United Nations. It seems that the opinion of 141 states has done little to change Russia’s mind. Even being banned from various multicultural events that are used to unite several states across the globe, such as the Olympics or the Eurovision Song Contest have done little to nothing to convince Russia to leave Ukraine (BBC News, 2022).

Another disadvantage of soft power that is not directly demonstrable is that it is also harder to measure. The effects of military strength and economic sanctions are, to a large degree, traceable and calculable. While these calculations may be complex and often have multiple variables leading to larger margins within answers, they still have a high degree of empiricism. Soft power on the other hand can be measured through changes in public opinion and ranking nations based on their ability to influence other nations, but it remains hard to establish causal mechanisms, especially when measuring the magnitude of the effect that certain policies or images have had (Chaturvedi, 2017, pp. 1-4).

2.1.3. Smart Power

Both objections against hard power and soft power can be amended through the use of smart power, which is a pragmatic combination of both powers (Nye, 2009, p. 7). An actor that relies mainly on hard power will be stuck in perpetual conflict, whereas an actor relying mainly on soft power is completely dependent on the goodwill of its neighbours in order to stay upstanding. Therefore, it is a necessity to employ both hard power and soft power in varying degrees depending on the situational context. To recall the quote from Machiavelli: *“It is safer to be feared than loved if one cannot be both”* (Machiavelli, 2015, p. 66). With the ideal combination of hard and soft power, one can obtain a status wherein one is both feared and loved. One such example is how the United States has profiled itself as a benevolent protector of Europe after helping it restore through the Marshall Plan and being a NATO ally with a gargantuan defence budget. At the same time, the military prowess of the United States also serves as a great deterrence, and the United States could threaten to stop the protection at any time, a threat that has been made recently by the Republican presidential candidate and former president Donald Trump (Fedor, Foy & Politi, 2024).

2.2. Evaluation of the Theories, Expectations and Hypotheses

2.2.1. Evaluation of the Theories and Expectations

The presented theories provide a helpful insight into the many ways that a state can influence other actors. Especially the ones that emerge from social constructivist thought will be useful in describing and measuring the effects of Israel's political influence on the Benelux. It is important to note that these theories and phenomena have large overlaps. For example, a state which excels in nation branding and public diplomacy will, as a result, have a significant amount of soft power. Nation branding in and of itself can also be seen as part of various kinds of public diplomacy. It is therefore important that, while the theories and phenomena have been explained separately, they ought to be used cohesively in the analysis in order to illustrate the effects that they have on one another. Having explained these theories, the expectation is that Israel uses a mix of these manifestations of soft power in order to get the message across that their national brand is one of a tolerant nation which respects LGBT rights. It is also expected that the phenomenon of pinkwashing will play a large role in the research.

An expectation about the analysis, however, is that while there will be ample room for the discussion on how Israel brands itself as an LGBT-friendly nation and which criticisms are formulated against it, there probably will not be a direct demonstrable effect of this specific policy, especially on the limited scope of the brand's successfulness in the Benelux. Considering that it is a niche topic in the vast array of possible discussions about Israel (and its conflict with Palestine), there will be too many variables at play to accurately establish a causal mechanism solely for the effect on this subset of its brand. However, that ought not to deter from analysing whether it is an active point of discussion among the foreign target audiences, which consist of LGBT organisations, individuals and political parties. These foreign target audiences can each be influenced directly, but also influence each other. LGBT organisations influence individuals, individuals vote for political parties and political parties pass policies which could affect the international relations of the Benelux states and Israel. In order to refrain from making the hypotheses convoluted, these actors and their internal dynamics will be summarised as "foreign target audiences and their internal dynamics".

Furthermore, it is observable that the phenomenon of pinkwashing has been covered broadly in academic papers. The term pinkwashing in and of itself was first used to describe the situation in Israel surrounding its nation branding. It is therefore expected that, due to the salience of academic coverage about pinkwashing, one could even expect that the branding efforts may have a negative effect on its public diplomacy due to the awareness that is being spread about it, though it is not expected to be affected to a very significant degree.

Even though the thesis will predominantly focus on the manifestation of social constructivism and soft power, it is still important to consider how a realist would explain this phenomenon. Neoclassical realism provides the perspective that an actor can implement certain policies as a gambit, meaning that they are ideologically opposed to the policy, but that they would still implement the policy in order to gain and maintain potential alliances attracted through said policy. The question therefore arises: "Is Israel genuine in its endeavours of passing LGBT legislation, or does it solely pass these laws in order to gain and maintain support from its western liberal allies?". This question will be answered by studying how LGBT rights have evolved before and after Israel's rebranding efforts and examining the context in which these laws have progressed and in which aspects they are still lacking.

This neoclassical realist explanation does have significant shortcomings, because it would only focus on the external pressures, but not the internal ones. Israel has a large religious population that does not favour progressive laws and often clashes with the government in large demonstrations whenever they feel their religion is being threatened. It therefore seems unlikely that Israel would create a gambit wherein they rely on LGBT legislature resulting into such a significant amount of foreign support that it is willing to face the internal pressure and consequences of offending its own large religious community. It is also expected that a state executing this gambit would only pass a minimal amount of this policy, virtually scraping the bottom of the barrel, in order to maximise effect with minimal effort. It is therefore expected that Israel's endeavours to pass LGBT legislature are either largely or fully genuine and that it is not a gambit to gain and maintain support from its western liberal allies.

2.2.2. Hypotheses

In order to formulate the hypotheses, there will be a short repetition of the research questions, so that the hypotheses can be derived from them:

- “To what extent and how does Israel engage in public diplomacy concerning LGBT rights in order to gain and maintain support from the Benelux and to what extent does that improve its public diplomacy?”
- “To what extent and how is the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy contested in the Benelux and to what extent does this damage its public diplomacy?”

The hypotheses will be as follows:

- “Israel uses an extensive network of public diplomacy concerning LGBT rights in order to gain and maintain support from the Benelux, but it is not expected to have a positive effect on its foreign target audiences and their internal dynamics.”
- “The Israeli LGBT public diplomacy is significantly contested in the Benelux, but this contestation is not expected to have a negative effect on its foreign target audiences and their internal dynamics.”

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

3.1.1. Case Study Selection

This master's thesis will be conducted using a qualitative case study research design. The choice for a qualitative design was made since the research rests on theories that are hard to translate into quantitative empirical data. A case study is a method of research that allows researchers to look deeper into a specific topic and analyse it in-depth, rather than to collect a randomised sample where many units are observed superficially (Gerring, 2017, pp. 18-20). The type of case study will be a "disconfirmatory crucial case study", also known as a "most likely" case study. The reason as to why a most likely case study design was chosen for this thesis is because this type of case study is characterised by the selection of a case with the highest likelihood of confirming a theory or phenomenon (Gerring, 2017, pp. 120-122). It therefore follows the logic that if the theory or phenomenon cannot even be confirmed in the most likely scenarios, then it would stand to reason that the theory or phenomenon would have significantly lower chances to be confirmed in scenarios where it would be less likely to succeed. In this case, the Benelux is a union of three states that are among the most progressive in the world when it comes to realising LGBT equality and among the first to undertake these steps (Equaldex, 2024). From that, one can deduce that these states are an ideal target audience for a state that wishes to gain and maintain support by also supporting these endeavours. If Israel does not manage to gain and maintain support from the most progressive states through LGBT public diplomacy, then there is little chance that this strategy would work in states that are less progressive concerning LGBT equality. Additionally, in more progressive states, one can also expect the target audience to be more aware of different kinds of contestation such as pinkwashing. The same logic can be applied to this case and one can argue that if the contestation of Israel's LGBT public diplomacy is not effective in the most progressive states, then it seems unlikely that it would be effective in less progressive states.

3.1.2. Demarcation of Time and Space

As there is a vast array of western liberal democracies with varying legislatures and public opinions on LGBT rights, this thesis will focus on a limited scope of liberal western democracies that, in relevant aspects, are similar to Israel and that are generally seen as accepting of LGBT rights: the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Together, they are known as the Benelux. These three states are culturally very similar and have very similar progressive laws concerning LGBT rights. All three have legalised same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, have laws against LGBT discrimination (in general and concerning employment and housing), allow LGBT people to serve in their armies, have equalised ages of consent and allow their citizens to change their legal gender (Equaldex, 2024). The empirical analysis will observe Israel from the start of 2005. The year 2005 has been chosen as the starting point of analysis as this is the year when Israel started investing more into nation branding and public diplomacy starting with its project “Brand Israel” (Dart, 2016, pp. 1406-1407).

3.1.3. Modus Operandi

There will be two empirical parts in this master’s thesis. The first part provides much-needed context and starts with a brief historical overview between Israel and Palestine. Since the full history of this conflict would exceed the length of a master’s thesis many times, it will be condensed in such a way that it is extensive enough to give a summary of how Israel came to be, how its conflict with Palestine evolved and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories resulting therefrom. These concepts are important for understanding why Israel acts the way it does, as well as why these actions are contested. Following this, a timeline of the progress of LGBT rights in Israel will be established using the Equaldex database in order to discuss which rights and protections LGBT people have in Israel and which ones they lack. Next, there will be an explanation on why the shortcomings are still persistent, as this will offer a look into Israel’s unique political system. Subsequently, this status quo will be compared to the status quo of the Benelux, as well as its neighbouring states, using the Equaldex database. Finally, the relevant theories about social constructivism, soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding will be applied to the case of Israel to show how Israel navigates itself through the international political system without using its hard power.

The second empirical part will start with an overview of the extent of Israeli LGBT public diplomacy and the different ways in which it is used. This is followed by the antithesis, which is the contestation of this public diplomacy. Finally, the effectivity of both the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy as well as the contestation thereof will be analysed. In order to analyse these effects, one needs to know first through which pathways these strategies manifest themselves. A graphical overview has been made to visualise this. The public diplomacy and contestation each affect LGBT organisations, LGBT individuals and their allies, as well as political parties. LGBT organisations influence LGBT individuals and their allies, LGBT individuals and their allies vote for political parties and these political parties form government policies.

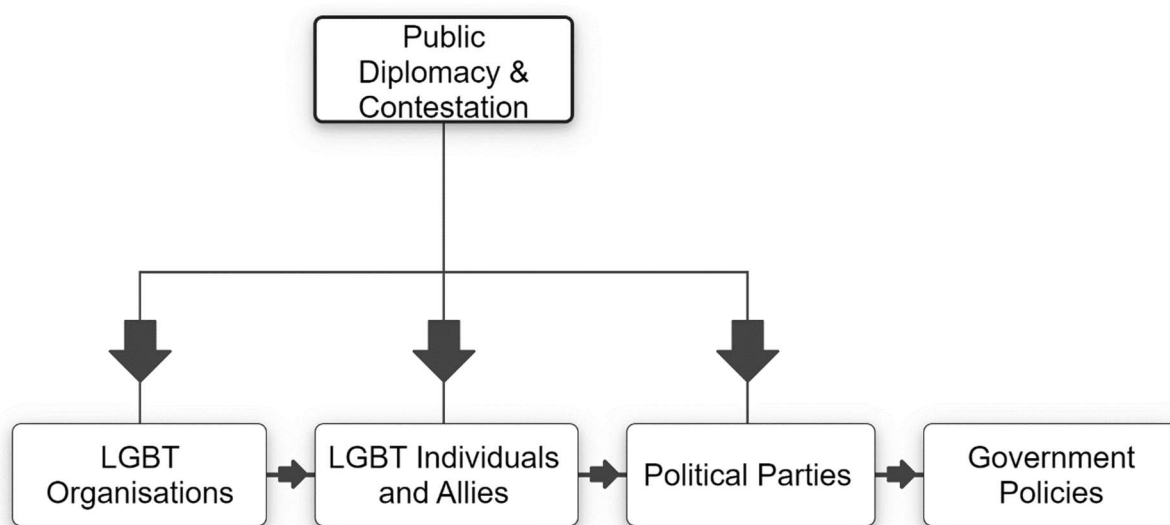


Figure 1: The pathways through which Israeli LGBT public diplomacy affects its target audiences

First, there will be a content analysis of the coverage of Israeli LGBT public diplomacy and its contestation by LGBT organisations. The LGBT organisations that will be analysed are COC (NL), LGBT Asylum support (NL), IHLA LGBTI Heritage (NL), Secret Garden Foundation (NL), Dito! (NL), Çavaria, (BE), RainbowHouse Brussels (BE), Genres Pluriels (BE), Rosa Lëtzebuerg (LU) & Centre Cigale (LU). Second, there will be various analyses on the individual level. One is a causal analysis, using data from the Israeli government to determine the increase in LGBT tourism, which is one of the main facets of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy. Additionally, data from Google Trends will be used to assess how large of a role the topic of LGBT rights and its contestation play among people in the Benelux. Third, there will be a content analysis of political coverage. This includes press releases and publications by any of the political parties of the Benelux to determine whether they have been influenced to commend Israel for its progress in LGBT rights or to condemn it for its contested practices regarding its public diplomacy on this topic.

3.1.4. Advantages and Disadvantages

Whilst it is impossible to measure the causal effect of each of these individual linkages in a qualitative study, this case study can shine a light on the salience of the topic of Israeli LGBT public diplomacy and the contestation thereof within these states in order to assess whether or not there is even a causal effect possible. If it is concluded that the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy or its contestation have indeed reached large levels of salience among the branches of society that Israel is trying to influence, then it would warrant a quantitative analysis of each of these linkages to research whether this influence is large enough to bring about significant policy change or a change in investments.

An advantage of the case study is that it allows for a deeper understanding of the context of the topic at hand. One could argue that in political science the knowledge as to why the things are the way they are is just as important as their effect. In essence, one could draw a parallel between this statement and the battle of hard power versus soft power. The pure study of causal mechanisms could lead to utilitarian calculations whereas contextualisation offers a look into the truth and desirability of the matter. One could be a realist actor and be predominantly occupied with one's own success, but a social constructivist may ponder about the moral value of perpetuating a strategy built on falsehoods. Yet, just like the critique delivered on soft power, context alone does not suffice to stand on its own, for it requires a degree of causality to have any effect to begin with, no matter in which direction the change may occur.

Google provides many useful tools, one of which is Google Trends, which allows users to gauge how frequently certain topics are being searched for on Google's search engine. Since search engines are used to look up relevant information, news, etc. and since Google's search engine is by far the most common search engine, Google Trends can be used as a tool of measurement to gauge the popularity of a subject. Filters can be used to demarcate certain time periods and locations, making it possible to narrow down which topics were popular in which locations and during which time span. A disadvantage of Google trends is that whatever is being searched on Google's search engine in a certain state and during a certain time may not always be representative of the active exchanges of thought in that location and time span. It is merely an indicative tool. If no correlation is found through Google Trends, it could still warrant a more precise analysis with individual survey inputs. Google Trends also does not provide any context, which means that certain search results could end up being popular for different reasons than one may initially suspect. For example, researching any LGBT-related topics in the month of June may yield skewed results due to a strong correlation with June being "pride month".

3.2 Operationalisation of Key Concepts

3.2.1. LGBT

Politics about sexuality and gender have been rapidly evolving, especially in the last few decades. The group that was once simply known as “homosexuals” or “gays” and “transsexuals” or “transgenderers” has now been nuanced into a broad spectrum of different sexualities and gender identities. To put this community under an umbrella, the acronym LGBT was coined, which stood for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender”. However, as more sexualities and gender identities were discovered and gained more prominence, additions were made to the acronym. One such example is “LGBTQIA+”, which includes the following groups (The Center, 2023):

- “Q” for “Queer” or “Questioning”, an umbrella term for people who generally fall outside of societal norms with their sexuality and gender expression
- “I” for “Intersex”, people with a biological aberration of the chromosomes that dictate biological sex
- “A” for “Asexual”, people who do not feel any sexual attraction
- “+” for every other group that may not feel represented by the acronym

Emphasis must be put on the fact that this is not the only alternative option. Whilst sexuality and gender politics are still the cause of heated debates, there are some people who claim that there may be hundreds, if not an infinite amount, of sexualities and genders. It would therefore be impossible to find an acronym that can be unanimously agreed upon. More conservative members of the community even argue that sexuality and gender politics ought to be split, arguing for “LGB without the T” (LGB Alliance UK, 2022), whilst more progressive members argue for the inclusion for people of colour as well, adding racial minorities and other oppressed people to the community as well (LACDMH, 2022). As this is a master’s thesis and not an opinion piece, a middle ground has been reached by settling with “LGBT”. Not only because this acronym is the most widely used and recognised one, but also because most policies in the field of sexuality and gender politics is aimed at homosexuals, bisexuals and transgenderers. By choosing to demarcate the acronym as such, one can study the effects of said policies on said community in a much more transparent and causal way.

3.2.2. Recognition of Israel and Palestine

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has always been one of the most divisive debates in international politics. In fact, the recent outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip has only contributed more to the polarisation of this conflict. Among supporters of Israel and of Palestine are individual actors, NGO's and even states which refuse to accept the other party as a legitimate state. Especially Palestine appears to have the most issues being recognised, having a special observer status in the United Nations, but not full membership (UN News, 2024). For neutrality's sake, this master's thesis will describe both nations as "Israel" and "Palestine" without any reservation and without any unnecessary partisan implication of denial of statehood of either party.

4. Historical Overview, Information and Theory

4.1. The Conflict between Israel and Palestine

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is one of the most complex conflicts that persist into the current year. It involves many international actors, with ardent supporters of either side being caught in polarised debates. It is therefore nearly impossible to accurately summarise the conflict without either side claiming that essential details were left out in order to understand the conflict better. However, in order to understand Israel's public diplomacy, one needs to know its history, which includes the war with Palestine.

The State of Israel is a relatively new nation state, but its roots go back millennia. After the expulsion from the Romans, who had occupied the ancient Jewish land, the Jewish people were scattered over the globe in the 1st century CE, predominantly into Europe. As they were a small minority that kept their ethnoreligious community together and rejected assimilation, they faced centuries of persecutions (Sloyan, 2019). One time they were blamed for causing the plague, the other for drinking blood, oftentimes for killing the Messiah and sometimes for dealing in usury. However, the Jews were never able to return to their homeland, which had been under various imperialist ownerships during the time of their exile. Still, the desire to return stayed present and at the end of the 19th century, Zionism (the ideology that states that Jews should have the right to return and obtain autonomy and/or sovereignty in their cultural homeland) started to take form (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

When World War One was coming to an end in 1917, the United Kingdom managed to seize territory in the Middle East as the Ottoman Empire crumbled. This included the lands that are nowadays known as Israel and Palestine. The British turned the territories into a "mandate state" and signed the Balfour Declaration, which allowed the Jews to settle in what was called "British Mandatory Palestine". This decision was later ratified through the League of Nations, declaring the settlements legal under international law (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). However, as antisemitism started to rise again in Europe during the interbellum, Jewish migration to the land increased in unforeseen figures. This was a cause of conflict with the local Arab population, which had been living there for centuries. Even though they did not have a unified Palestinian identity yet, they objected to the new Zionist influx and started the Arab Revolt after multiple conflicts between the Zionists and the Arabs had taken place (ibid.).

The conflict became triangular, when both the Zionists and the Arabs not only started to rebel against each other, but also against the British, who were failing at keeping the peace in the mandate state. In 1947, the United Nations convened to create a plan of partition to divide the mandate between an “Arab State” and a “Jewish State” (United Nations, 1947). This plan resembles what is nowadays known as Israel and Palestine, but it had far more land allocated to the “Arab State”, whilst designating the area around Jerusalem as a zone controlled by the United Nations. Even though the Zionist leadership accepted this deal, both the Palestinian leadership and the surrounding Arab states rejected the plan. This resulted in the British deciding to leave the mandate in 1948 without having succeeded in negotiating a peace treaty between the Zionists and the Arabs (University of Central Arkansas, n.d.).

When the British forces left the mandate, Israel declared its independence and war broke out. Israel was instantly attacked by its neighbouring Arab states, yet it managed to fight them off and conquered large swaths of land, leaving what is known as the Gaza Strip to be occupied by Egypt and the West Bank by Jordan (Office of the Historian, n.d.). During the war, many Palestinians were displaced and became refugees, predominantly in the Egyptian and Jordanian controlled areas, this event is commemorated by them as the Nakba (United Nations, 2023).

However, this war would be far from the end of the conflict. The Arab nations and the Palestinians still found the existence and the actions of the newly founded Israeli state unacceptable. It took them a while to recuperate from their losses, but in 1967 they eventually devised a joint strategy to take out Israel for good. However, as Israel had intercepted these plans, it managed to take out Egypt’s Air Force by surprise, which left Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and assisting states without the necessary support to defeat Israel. During this war, Israel had conquered all the land that is currently known as Israel and Palestine, as well as the Sinai Desert and the Golan Heights.

Israel maintained the occupation over those territories and started building settlements in the West Bank. This was seen as a violation of international law, according to resolutions 237, 252, 298 and 446 of the United Nations Security Council (United Nations Security Council, 1979). Israel, however, opined that the occupation and the settlements were legal because the attacks on Israel during the war of 1967 were illegitimate. This caused a legal battle, which lasts until today, wherein Israel still holds on to the occupation. The Palestinian Authority on the other hand claims that the reversal of the occupation of the West Bank is the bare minimum that is required for Palestine to agree to a lasting peace deal (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2017). This occupation resulted in a shortage of houses, food, water and healthcare (Hilal, 2012, p. 687). Eventually, yet another war, predominantly led by Egypt and Syria caught Israel by surprise in 1973. This time around, the

two states managed to make significant advances, but not enough to succeed, and were yet again defeated (History, 2023). This war ignited an era of change because Egypt signed a lasting peace deal with Israel in 1979 in exchange for the Sinai desert.

The tides turned again when the First Intifada (Palestinian uprising) broke out in 1987. This uprising was a reaction to the rapid expansion of settlements in the occupied areas and resulted in several labour strikes, demonstrations, clashes with the Israeli army and terrorist attacks (Araj & Brym, 2024). After the end of the First Intifada in 1993, Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation signed a temporary peace deal, known as the Oslo Accords in 1993 and 1995. Despite several key issues being far from solved, such as the fate of Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem, hope finally seemed to re-emerge. That hope was short-lived, as Hamas (a militant Palestinian Islamist organisation) initiated new attacks on Israel, which halted further peace talks (ibid.). This caused both Israel and Palestine to break the terms of the Oslo Accords, with Israel expanding its settlements and Palestine importing arms and sizing up its combatant forces. This led to the Second Intifada in 2000, which lasted until 2005 (ibid.). This marked the end of peace deals between Israel and Palestine, as the Oslo Accords were the last agreed upon piece of legislature by both parties. Ever since, several more conflicts and wars in the Gaza Strip have broken out, especially the one that is currently ongoing. Israel has not stopped expanding settlements in the West Bank and keeping a blockade on Gaza, while Palestine has not budged to sign a lasting peace treaty with less than the pre-1967 borders. Hamas militants took over the Gaza strip in 2006-2007 after being unable to make a lasting unity government with the Fatah party, and have continued their attacks against Israel (ibid.).

4.2. LGBT Rights in Israel

4.2.1. Progress and Shortcomings of LGBT Rights in Israel

In order to establish the situation of LGBT rights in Israel, it is important to research its history concerning LGBT equality. Equaldex (2024) provides a comprehensive timeline of worldwide progress in LGBT rights. The following timeline will illustrate the progress of LGBT rights in Israel:

- 1948: Equal age of consent for same-sex and different-sex intercourse
- 1953: Israeli police ordered to refrain from enforcing the law against homosexual activity
- 1963: Homosexual activity becomes legal after decriminalisation by the Supreme Court
- 1979: Gender-affirming care becomes legal for adults
- 1986: Right to change gender becomes legal after sex-reassignment surgery
- 1992: Homosexuals are allowed to serve openly in all of the IDF's branches
- 1992: Prohibition against employment discrimination based on sexuality
- 1994: Same-sex partners can obtain the status of "unregistered cohabitation"
- 1998: Expansion of gender-affirming care
- 2006: Recognition of same-sex marriages that are performed abroad
- 2014: Right to change gender after diagnosis
- 2015: Prohibition against employment discrimination based on gender identity
- 2021: Blood donation becomes legal for homosexuals without extra tests or deferrals
- 2022: Conversion therapy by medical professionals is banned by the Health Ministry
- 2022: Surrogacy for same-sex couples is legalised
- 2023: Recognition of same-sex marriages performed in Israel, registered online abroad
- 2023: Same-sex adoption legalised

As evidenced by the timeline, Israel has progressed a lot in respect to LGBT rights. In essence, LGBT people have almost all the rights that the state can offer, except for a fully legal same-sex marriage that is officiated and registered in Israel, instead of being registered abroad. However, it is a far stretch to say that therefore same-sex marriage is illegal in Israel, as it merely requires a small loophole approved by the Supreme Court. Besides rights, there are also protections. This is the area in which there is still some room for improvement in Israel. For example, whilst employment discrimination is outlawed, LGBT people are not protected from housing discrimination, as even in the progressive city of Tel Aviv, there are landlords who have and use the legal right to reject same-sex couples (Maltz, 2014). Another facet of safety is that of civil society, which is more difficult or impossible to enforce by law. There are, for example, many

people who have religious or politically conservative objections to the LGBT community and its practices in principle. As such, one can experience hostility from these groups or end up being excluded when growing up in one of those communities. These fears are especially tense because these religious and conservative communities are largely represented within the national parliament, which creates doubts that the progress in LGBT rights might one day be reversed. These doubts are further increased after Israel's push to a judicial overhaul that could give lawmakers the power to overrule the Supreme Court (Kampeas, 2023).

4.2.2. The Cause of the Shortcomings of LGBT Rights in Israel

The Israeli political system oftentimes resembles that of a regular western liberal democracy, were it not for two factors: the Chief Rabbinate and a significant orthodox religious representation in its parliament. The Chief Rabbinate is a religious institution in Israel which oversees all Jewish religious processes in the state and is a traditional relic from the times of the Ottoman Empire (Times of Israel, 2020). These chief rabbis have many tasks: appointing rabbis, overseeing Jewish schools, managing holy sites, regulating immigration, performing conversions, writing out kosher certifications, conduct burials, and officiating weddings and divorces. This is where the complex part of the matter comes in: the Chief Rabbinate is the only authority in Israel which is allowed to officiate weddings and divorces. As a result, the Chief Rabbinate only officiates weddings that are in accordance with the "halakha" (הלכה), the Jewish law. This not only excludes same-sex marriage, but also interfaith marriages and secular marriages. While Christians, Muslims and the Druze have their own legal systems in which their adherents can marry, none of them accept same-sex marriage either. The problem that arises is therefore not a "simple" ban on same-sex marriage, but rather part of a larger societal problem within a state that only knows religious marriage (ibid.). Efforts to circumvent the Chief Rabbinate, such as appealing to the Supreme Court to recognise all foreign marriages, have proven to be relatively successful, but efforts to abolish the religious institutions or the instalment of a completely secular civil service has proven fruitless due to the religious representation in parliament (Golinkin, 2013).

The second reason for the stagnation of LGBT progress and fears of reversal stem from the secular right-wing parties requiring these very same religious parties to form coalitions. The religious parties therefore hold a lot of power, because their withdrawal could result in the formation of a left-wing government. For example, the current Israeli government, led by the secular right-wing Likud party, consists out of itself and four orthodox Jewish parties (Shas, Yahadut Hatora, Otzma Yehudit and Mafdal) (Times of Israel, 2022). As Israel is a state signified by a history of hard power,

voters are motivated by promises of survival and warnings of dangers from Palestine and other Arab states. On the other hand, the left-wing parties such as Haavoda and Meretz, which aim to maximise LGBT progress, are the ones advocating for an end of the occupation of Palestinian territories and to sign a treaty for a two-state solution (Times of Israel, 2021).

Despite the homophobia spread in the circles of the religious parties, there are an increasing number of LGBT individuals and their allies who vote for these parties or their secular right-wing allies because of survivalist reasons (Robbins, 2023). For them, it is far more important that Israel continues to survive and to secure its territory than it is to have LGBT rights. The realist mindset is quickly noticeable: “How can a state even have LGBT rights if that same state is overtaken by the enemy?”. Especially if the enemy does not have LGBT rights at all. Furthermore, LGBT voters of Otzma Yehudit proclaimed that it is hypocritical to blame the right-wing for uniting with homophobic Orthodox Jews, when left-wing parties did the same by forming a coalition with the Islamist party Ra’am (Glazer, 2022).

4.2.3. Comparison to the Benelux and Neighbouring States

In order to make a visible comparison, a colour coded tabulation will be set up with green indicating “yes” and red indicating “no”. Yellow and orange indicate the need for further elaboration, with yellow leaning towards “yes” and orange towards “no”. The tabulation will be coloured according to the data from Equaldex (2024). Israel (IL) will be compared with the Netherlands (NL), Belgium (BE), Luxembourg (LU), Palestine (PA), Egypt (EG), Jordan (JO), Syria (SY) and Lebanon (LE).

Table 1: Comparison of LGBT progress between the Benelux, Israel and its neighbouring states

	NL	BE	LU	IL	PA	EG	JO	SY	LE
Same-sex intercourse	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red
Same-sex marriage	Green	Green	Green	1	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Same-sex adoption	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Discrimination protection	Green	Green	Green	2	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Free from censorship	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Military service	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	3	3	3
Changing legal gender	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	4	5	5	5
Gender-affirming care	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	4	Green	Green	Green
1. Marriage must be registered online abroad before being recognised 2. Protections against employment discrimination but not against housing discrimination 3. Allowed to be homosexual in the military, but not openly 4. Religious and biomedical approval, as well as sex-reassignment surgery, are required 5. Sex-reassignment surgery is required									

Source: Equaldex (2024)

The conclusion derived from this comparison is that, in regard to LGBT rights, Israel is almost identical in legislature to the western liberal democracies that it attempts to engage with using its LGBT public diplomacy, whereas LGBT rights in the rest of the Middle East seem extremely bleak. It is noteworthy how transgenderism seems to be more accepted than homosexuality in these states, albeit by a very thin margin.

4.3. Application of Theories

As the theories centred around social constructivism, soft power and public diplomacy play a central role in this thesis, an overview will be given of how Israel acts through the lens of these theories.

4.3.1. Social Constructivism

Social progression plays a key role in Israel's relations with the liberal west. For the past few decades, the United States has held up the frame that it has been spreading democracy and human rights in the Middle East. In the European Union's international relations, social constructivism is even more apparent as it has become the leading theory in the field of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Demmelhuber, Marchetti & Schumacher, 2017, pp. 77-78). The European Commission itself has stated clearly in its outline of the European Neighbourhood Policy that their goal is to spread their values of democracy, rule of law and human rights, as well as to maintain and improve welfare, stability and safety (European Commission, 2022). Since the Benelux states are founding members of the European Union and among the most prominent members pushing for this social progression and the spreading of said values (Government of the Netherlands, 2024), it is therefore paramount to Israel's public image to keep the frame alive that it is the only democracy in the Middle East with respect for LGBT rights (Simons, 2023).

4.3.2. Soft Power

While Israel has fought for its territory in conventional wars in 1948, 1967 and 1973, it had no direct military interactions with opponents outside of the Middle East, nor did it threaten the forces that opposed them throughout the decades with violent military incursions. Rather, to the outside world Israel has been using the concept of soft power. Israel uses soft power to its advantage in a plethora of fields in international relations. Israel's strongly developed technology sector and its branding as a start-up nation, which attracts a lot of international investments, has tremendously increased Israel's soft power (Shai, 2018, pp. 102-103).

Economic soft power is not only a method of maintaining, but also of gaining new alliances. One example of such an alliance is the very remarkable alliance between Israel and Azerbaijan. Operating under the oldest proverb of international relations "the friend of my friend is my friend, and the enemy of my enemy is also my friend", one would not expect this alliance to exist.

Azerbaijan, which is in conflict with its neighbour Armenia, has Pakistan and Turkey among its strongest allies (Cafiero, 2021). Both states are fierce critics of Israel, with Pakistan not even recognising Israel as a state. Despite that, Israel and Azerbaijan have managed to become strong allies, because of mutual economic interests and a shared cultural history. Due to Azerbaijan's richness in oil and gas and Israel's richness in military tech, both states have become mutually dependent trading partners with Israel producing almost all of Azerbaijan's drones and Azerbaijan making up for 65% of Israel's crude oil imports (Saltman, 2023). This helped Azerbaijan win the war with Armenia in 2020 and helped Israel become more independent from Russia, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Given that Israel, as a Jewish state, is also deeply concerned with the wellbeing of Jews in the diaspora, it found yet again a partner in Azerbaijan, since it is one of the only states with a Jewish minority that has never participated in persecutions of the Jews (World Jewish Congress, n.d.). This has been an exceptionally crucial split point for Israel's soft power because Armenia also has a sizable diaspora in Israel, but which did not manage to succeed in lobbying Israel to ally itself with Armenia (Piligian, 2024). Therefore, in order to gauge the effectivity of Israel's public diplomacy concerning LGBT rights, one would need to analyse Israel's soft power over its target audiences.

An important phenomenon when it comes to soft power is that, while Israel attempts to maximise its soft power over other nations, it seems that Israel is very resilient to the soft power of other states, and is often only swayed by hard power, such as the United States threatening to reduce their military aid investments. When it comes to organisations such as the United Nations, where Israel can almost always count on a veto from the United Nations in the Security Council, Israel does not seem to be preoccupied with the opinions that the other nations have of Israel's actions. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case. In the United Nations General Assembly, Israel has been condemned 103 times between 2006 and 2023, whereas many notorious human rights abusers such as China, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have escaped with zero condemnations. Syria comes in second place with 42 condemnations and North Korea with 16. In fact, Israel had amassed more condemnations than all other states combined (Neuer, 2023, p. 5). Because of this, in combination with the United Nations repeatedly stressing that Israel is not acting in accordance with international law, Israel strongly believes that it is being targeted disproportionately and that such condemnations cannot hold their ground if a blind eye is turned to all the other human rights violations happening across the globe (ibid., p. 8).

4.3.3. Public Diplomacy

Israel's efforts to culturally connect more to the West are also seen in sports and other entertainment competitions. Two such examples are Israel's participation in the European football league UEFA (Dart, 2016, p. 1402) and its continuous participation in the Eurovision Song Contest since 1973, winning four times and thereby hosting the contest three times (Eurovision, 2024). Israel used the ability to host these contests to spread a positive image of its state and culture. In the case of the UEFA U-21 tournament in 2013, the main problem with Israel's public image was determined to be a feeling of Israel being an unsafe state due to its conflict with the Palestinians and imagery of policemen using a lot of violence to break up protesting crowds. Given that football often goes paired with hooliganism and that large crowds are an attractive target for terrorism, this caused fears of escalation. However, as Israel kept tight security measures in place and the tournament ended without an incident, it demonstrated successfully that it was possible to host large events in Israel without any escalation, which broadcasted a message of a safe and peaceful Israel (Dart, pp. 1411-1414). In the Eurovision Song Contest, winners are dependent on both national jury votes, as well as televoting from audiences all over the world. Eurovision may present itself as an apolitical contest, and while that in and of itself has been doubted, one cannot change the political influence of both the jury and the audience. Statistical research has shown that both the jury and the audience have been swayed politically over the years, even showing that there are "voting blocs" of states that are more likely to vote for each other and, vice versa, states that almost never vote for each other (Price, 2022). It is therefore increasingly hard to win Eurovision with a bad political image. As a result, winning the competition during times of political adversity is already seen as a victory for public diplomacy. The most recent example was this year's edition of Eurovision, wherein several calls from the public and even fellow participants were made to ban Israel from the contest due to the war in Gaza. Despite these calls, Israel still managed to come in second place with the televote and fifth place overall (Spiro, 2024).

4.3.4. Nation Branding

Around the start of the new millennium, several surveys concluded that the Israeli public image in the West had drastically decreased compared to the decades that preceded it. One such example, the Nation Brand Index, concluded in 2006 that Israel had the worst nation-branding in the world and that it was the lowest level ever measured by them (Crilley et al., 2020, pp. 143-144). At the root of this negative image lies the conflict between Israel and Palestine, which had escalated due to the First (1987-1993) and Second (2000-2005) Intifadas (Palestinian uprisings). While the First Intifada had led to the signing of the Oslo Accords, which had brought a semblance of hope for amelioration, the Second Intifada had proven that this solution was not viable. The failure of the long-awaited peace process resulted into a negative image of Israel in the West. So much so, that in the midst of the Second Intifada, a 2003 Gallup poll revealed that European Union citizens opined that Israel was the number one threat to world security (ibid.). All in all, the stakes were high for Israel to change its public image.

At the behest of American investors, Israel already started with rebranding their public image in 2003. Their conclusion was that there was not enough knowledge in the West about Israel, and that spreading a positive image of the state across the West would help to explain Israel's actions and lead to a better understanding of Israeli policy (Shai, 2018, pp. 102-103). This strategy is known in Hebrew as "hasbara" (הסברה), which roughly translates to "explanation". Through this public relations campaign, Israel seeks to explain its policies to the outside world in order to prevent negative frames from manifesting or to correct negative frames that have already been established. Whereas hasbara was initially implied to be a neutral term (explaining actions whether or not they were justified), it has commonly been associated with the connotation of the spread of positive information by the Israeli government (Pfeffer, 2012). It was not only important for Israel to explain its actions, but also to broadcast non-violence related imagery about Israel in order to show the western world that the state was not merely a source of violence but rather a source of progress in the Middle East. This was achieved through focusing both on social progress in terms of freedom of sexuality, religion, etc. (Lazaroff, 2006) as well as technological progress by branding Israel as a "start-up nation" in which many tech companies could find a profitable climate to invest in (Shai, 2018, pp. 102-103). In the year 2005, the Israeli Foreign Ministry officially launched the public relations campaign "Brand Israel". This campaign had the aim to engage with a greater degree of public diplomacy in order to engage not only with government officials and media outlets, but also with students, teachers, religious leaders, scientists and businessmen in order to reach the western civil society as a whole and on different levels, rather than merely engaging in intergovernmental campaigns (Dart, 2016, pp. 1406-1407).

5. Analysis and Results

5.1. Extent of Israeli LGBT Public Diplomacy

When it comes to the promotion of LGBT rights, Brand Israel has played a prominent role in Israel's public diplomacy as one of its campaigns was literally called "Gay Israel", with the Israeli diplomat David Saranga citing the main goal of the campaign:

"Israel needs to show this community that it is relevant to them by promoting gay tourism, gay artists and films. Showing young, liberal Americans that Israel also has a gay culture goes a long way toward informing them that Israel is a place that respects human rights, as well."

(Lazaroff, 2006)

A major part of this public relations campaign is focused on the city of Tel Aviv, which has been branded as the "Gay Capital of the Middle East" and a "gay destination" for tourists, attracting thousands of LGBT tourists from all over the world, especially for its annual LGBT pride event, the largest in the Middle East (Hartal, 2018). Not only the pride events, but the nightlife and several activities are advertised as well: the Tel Aviv International LGBT Film Festival, LGBT parties, LGBT clubs, and even day tours for LGBT people and specific urban areas which attract LGBT people have been advertised regularly (ibid.). These campaigns tend to focus on major liberal-voting cities like Tel Aviv and Haifa, which are often referred to as "habuah" (הבועה), meaning "the bubble", since other cities with a larger religious population such as Jerusalem are less accepting of LGBT rights (Snellings, 2019, pp. 27-28). Still, attempts to revolutionise the image of Jerusalem as a LGBT-welcoming city have been taken especially after the 2015 Jerusalem Gay Pride attack, where a 16-year-old girl was stabbed to death, and which damaged the reputation of Israel as an LGBT-friendly state (Garry, 2022).

Despite attracting tourists being the largest facet of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy, there are other examples that are purely focused on political influence. These are often centred around the army. For example, Israel often advertises the IDF as an LGBT-friendly environment, calling it "one of the most progressive militaries for LGBT individuals" as they have been taking new measures to combat discrimination within the military (Ayad, 2024). A month after the start of the war in Gaza, Israel's official social media account on twitter broadcasted two pictures of the IDF soldier Yoav Atzmoni holding up two LGBT pride flags. One rainbow flag with the text "In the name of love"

in English, Arabic and Hebrew, the other flag being the Israeli flag with rainbows instead of the blue horizontal bars. The Israeli twitter account wrote:

“The first ever pride flag raised in Gaza. Yoav Atzmoni who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community wanted to send a message of hope to the people of Gaza living under Hamas brutality. His intention was to raise the first pride flag in Gaza as a call for peace and freedom.”

(i24NEWS, 2023).

This phenomenon creates a discussion that is based on interpretation and intent. Following the claimed intent, Israel is broadcasting a message of LGBT equality and a desire for peace and freedom. However, others interpret this message as an attempt of Israel to justify its war in Gaza and to get western audiences to support Israel in what critics claim to be genocidal endeavours and pinkwashing (Masarwa, 2023).

5.2. Contestation of Israeli LGBT Public Diplomacy

Pinkwashing, in the context of Israel, is defined as a method in which Israel uses LGBT rights as a front in order to portray Israel as a liberal, LGBT-friendly haven, thus diverting attention from its continued occupation and dispossession of Palestinians, as well as the usage of an LGBT rights discourse in order to justify the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories (Schulman, 2011). According to the definition, it is suggested that social progress in Israel concerning LGBT rights is a disingenuous diversion tactic that is used to gain support from western liberal states and LGBT people across the globe. This branding also results in a frame that Palestinian society – and Arab society in general – is intolerant of LGBT people and that it is therefore better for western liberal governments and LGBT people to align themselves with Israel due to their shared progressive values.

Such a strategy would have its consequences for the Palestinians, since it would mean that their occupation is overlooked, and the West would then give Israel a green light to commit human rights violations or to turn a blind eye to them. The occupation of the Palestinian claimed territories after the war of 1967 is often seen at the core of these violations – which is not in accordance with international law, which is based on Article 49 of the Geneva Convention:

“Art. 49. – Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, regardless of their motive.”

(International Committee of the Red Cross, 1949).

The results of this occupation are not limited to loss of land, but also an unequal distribution of water and food (Amnesty International, 2017) as well as medical supplies (ReliefWeb, 2020) and housing (Hilal, 2012, p. 687), which leads to further violations of articles 55 and 56 of the aforementioned Geneva Convention, which stipulate that an occupying power is responsible for adequate regulation of water, food, medical supplies, medical treatment, housing and hygiene if the occupied people are unable to provide these resources for themselves in a sufficient manner (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1949).

Weaver (2016, p. 5) brings up several examples of pinkwashing, some of which will be summarised here to give an idea about the perceived manifestations of pinkwashing. The first example is an article that was published in the New York Times by Rennick Remley which said “ Hamas, ISIS and Iran kill gays like me”. The article goes on in detail about how Remley opines that he can only live safely as a gay man in the Middle East when he is in Israel. In many of its neighbouring states, he claims that he would be jailed, mutilated or killed (Haaretz, 2014). Furthermore, he claims that in Israel, he is truly free and can serve openly in the military, adopt children and be accepted as a human being whilst also retaining his freedom of speech and association. This advertisement in the New York Times generated a mixed response. It was published shortly after the Gaza War of 2014 in which 2000 Palestinians were killed (Weaver, 2016, p. 5). It therefore seems apparent to critics of Israel that this advertisement was placed to divert attention away from the atrocities of the Gaza War, even making the claim that it does not only divert the attention away, but simultaneously creates a narrative of justification for the war by portraying Israel as the morally correct adversary. Weaver (2016, p. 5) further states that there is a double standard in the reasoning of the supporters of Israel, namely that the LGBT Palestinians who are being persecuted by Hamas would most likely not be safe within Israel either due to Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians and that many of these victims would have their application for asylum in Israel denied (Ben-Dor & Kagan, 2008, p. 44).

The second example is that organisations such as StandWithUs, an organisation whose goal is “to counter antisemitism, educate the public about Israel, empower others to educate their communities, and make it possible to have reasonable, informed conversations about Israel’s history, policies, and humanitarian aid on campuses and in communities around the world” (StandWithUs, n.d.), has ties to homophobic people, such as Pastor John Hagee, whose claims that Hurricane Katrina was divine punishment for the gay prides that were held in the city of New Orleans, a statement that he later retracted (Yglesias, 2008). Another example is that one of StandWithUs’ board members, David Brumer, texted homophobic remarks to one of his critics. However, he was removed from the board following a report against this misconduct (Silverstein, 2009), which does beg the question as to how attributable his opinions are to the image of StandWithUs.

A third example is the encouragement of gay tourism by the Israeli government and Israeli-allied NGOs in order to ameliorate its image among young and liberal audiences, which is often more damaged than in other demographics due to the focus on Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories (Weaver, 2016, pp. 23-24). In these cases, the pinkwashing is often more clearly formulated and less associative. One such example is an advert used by the NGO “Blue Star”, which asks the question to the reader:

“Where in the Middle East can Gay officers serve their country? Only in Israel. In a democracy, positions of leadership and political office are open to all citizens, no matter their race, religion, or sexual orientation. The Israeli Declaration of Independence guarantees all citizens freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, culture and equal access to holy sites. Support Democracy. Support Israel.”

(Weaver, 2016, pp. 23-24)

Here one can observe an explicit call to support Israel based on its treatment of its LGBT citizens and as such can be interpreted as a way to obfuscate any negative acts that Israel has committed under the guise of supporting the only state that supports LGBT rights.

Weaver (2016, p. 6) summarises the consequences of pinkwashing as follows:

- The incorrect portrayal of Israeli LGBT tolerance and Palestinian LGBT intolerance.
- The narrative that Israeli LGBT people demand a level of equality that already exists.
- The diversion of attention away from Israel’s human rights violations.
- The justification of the occupation because of ideological superiority.
- The prevention of the development of a unique Palestinian LGBT identity

5.3. Effectiveness Israeli LGBT Public Diplomacy and Contestation

5.3.1. LGBT Organisations

There have not been any LGBT organisations in the Benelux that have extensively, moderately or even minimally commended Israel's progress in LGBT rights or its public diplomacy. The Dutch LGBT organisation COC has reported on events relating to LGBT progress in Israel, such as the recognition of LGBT victims of the Nazi regime, debates about LGBT adoption and citizenship laws of citizens in LGBT relationships abroad (COC, 2006, 2008 & 2014). However, in these articles the COC has neither commended Israel on these achievements, nor have they condemned Israel with allegations of pinkwashing.

There has only been one documented instance of contestation of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy by an LGBT organisation in the Benelux, which was by the Belgian LGBT organisation Çavaria. In the wake of the recent war on Gaza, Çavaria issued a statement on their website that, while they commend Israel's progressive law concerning LGBT policies in its own state, they point out that they refuse to let Israel speak "in name of" the LGBT people if it broadcasts the message of tolerance whilst continuing the war in Gaza. The term pinkwashing, as well as the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, are explicitly mentioned as Çavaria explicitly describes how Israel does not make exceptions for LGBT Palestinians in their occupation and warfare. This publication was further accompanied by a call to boycott the Eurovision Song Contest if Israel participates as long as it continues its attacks on Palestinians (Çavaria, 2024). This has been the only statement made by Çavaria in regard to Israel. Other LGBT organisations in the Benelux have not publicly contested Israel's LGBT public diplomacy in any way.

5.3.2. Individuals

The impact of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy has had a very significant effect on the tourism industry. LGBT tourism increased from approximately 20.000 tourists a year in 2011 to approximately 50.000 in 2016 in Tel Aviv alone, with a \$3 million investment by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. It was also calculated that, compared with heterosexual tourists, LGBT tourists spent about 50% more money in Israel (Hartal, 2018). Starting from 2012, Tel Aviv devoted a third of its international marketing budget drawing in LGBT tourists (Heller, 2012). As a result, Tel Aviv is consistently found in many lists of LGBT tourist destinations (Langston, 2024), which often promote its image of being the "Gay Capital of the Middle East" (GayCities, 2024). Spartacus Gay

Travel Index (2024) has marked Israel as a 5 on a scale ranging from -21 to 12, which is a significant increase compared to its 2012 rating of 2.

Using Google Trends, one can detect trending topics based on search engine results. As a control example, one can plot the popularity of “LGBT” against “LGBTQIA+” to determine which acronym is more popular. The graphs below show that, despite strong variation in usage, LGBT is still the most popular acronym to describe the community in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg (Google Trends, 2024):

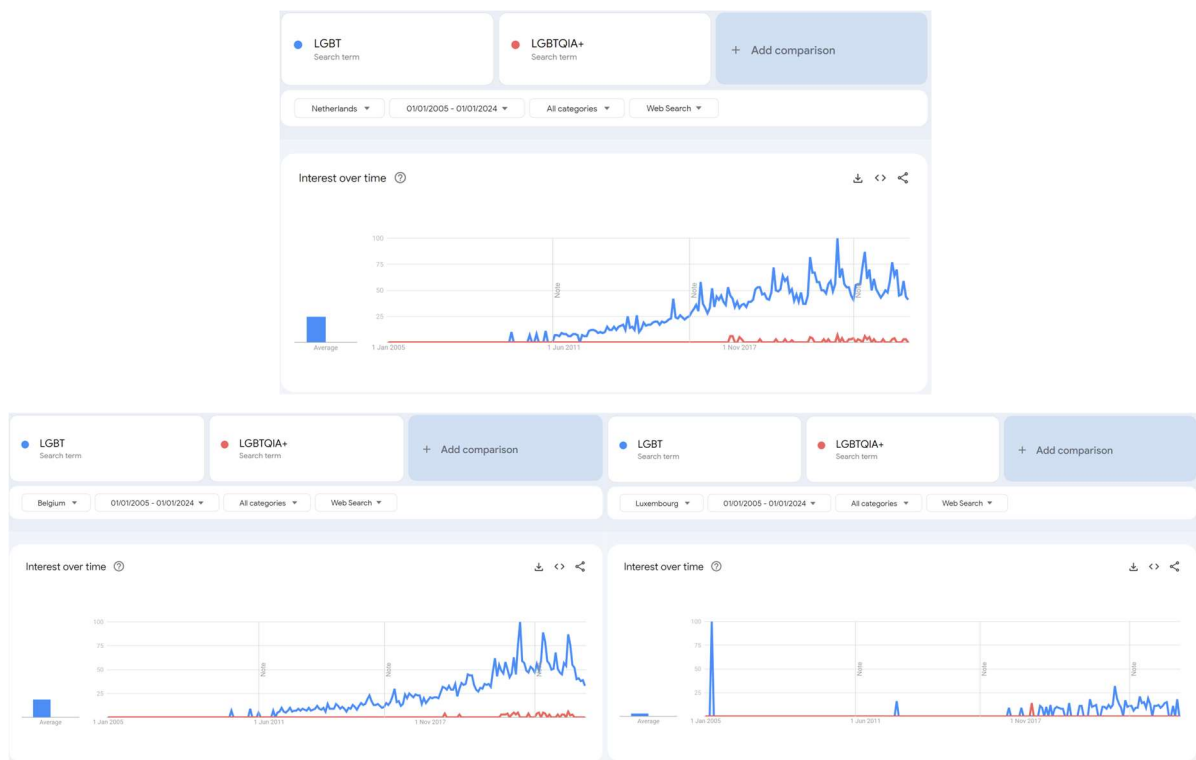


Figure 2: Google search frequencies of “LGBT” and “LGBTQIA+” in the Benelux
Source: Google Trends (2024)

In order to measure the effect of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy, the following search terms were incorporated into the analysis: “Israel Gay”, “Israel LGBT”, “Tel Aviv Gay”, “Tel Aviv LGBT” (Google Trends, 2024):

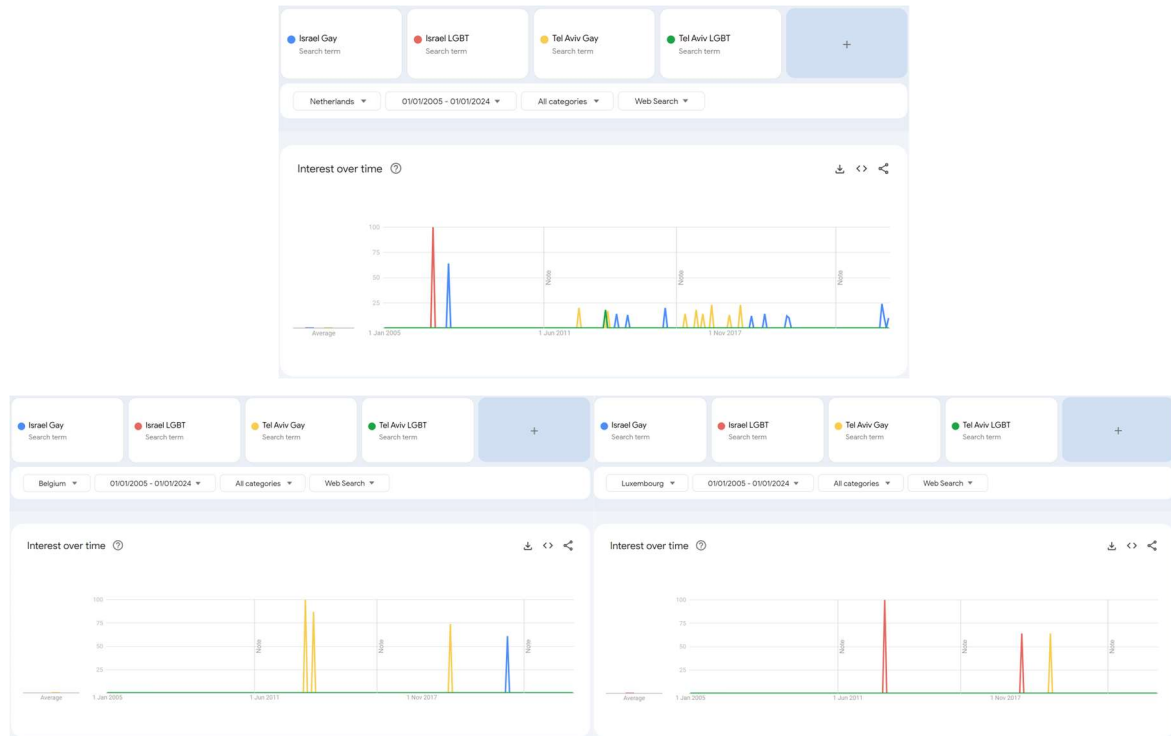


Figure 3: Google search frequencies of “Israel Gay”, “Israel LGBT”, “Tel Aviv Gay” and “Tel Aviv LGBT” in the Benelux
Source: Google Trends (2024)

The results indicate that the topics at hand are very seldomly searched, and that their peaks only occur in the short-lived spikes. The spikes are signs of outliers, which illustrate that the topic is barely ever looked up. Similar results can be observed when analysing the contestation, which is known most popularly as pinkwashing (Google Trends, 2024):

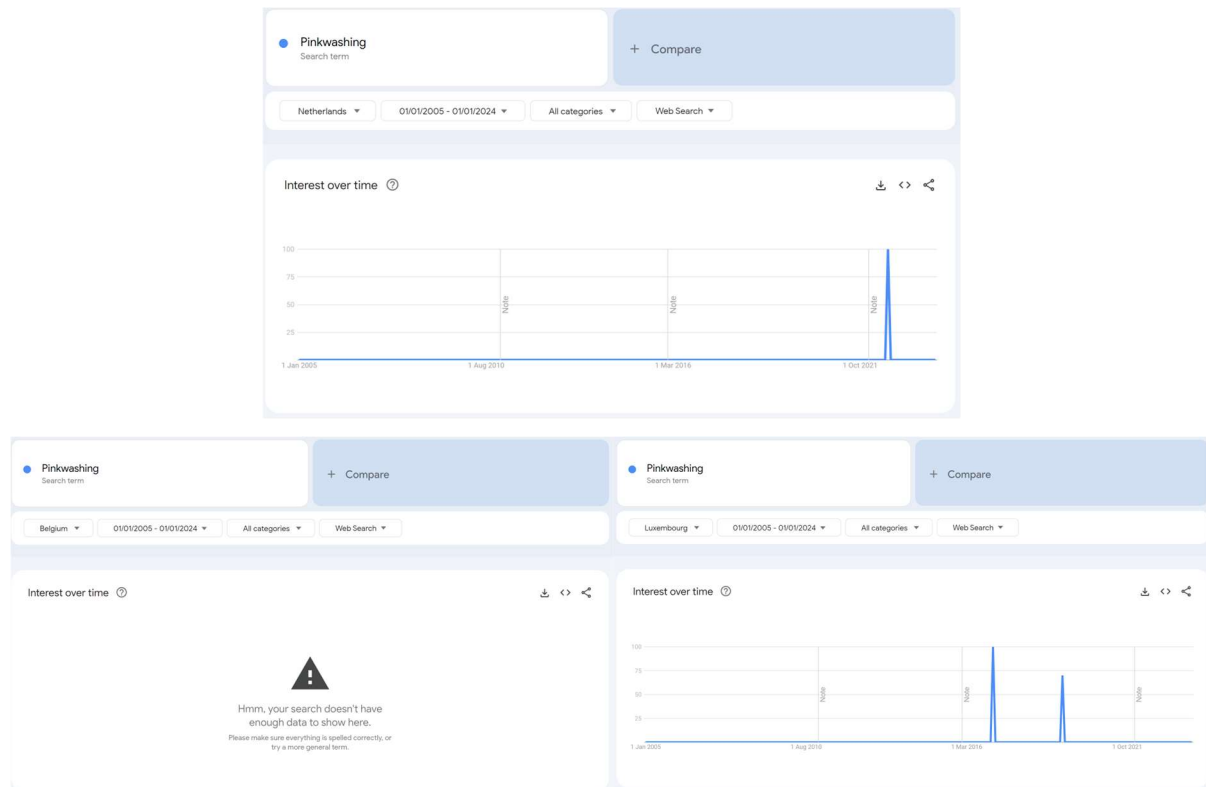


Figure 4: Google search frequencies of “Pinkwashing” in the Benelux
Source: Google Trends (2024)

These results indicate that pinkwashing is not a theme that is searched for much at all in the Benelux. Even the spikes that do exist are hard to trace back to a certain origin. However, the spike in the Netherlands could be explained by a protest against pinkwashing concerning the Amsterdam Pride Canal Parade of August 2022, which coincides with the dates of this spike. However, this demonstration was against companies being accused of pinkwashing, and therefore is not applicable to the case of Israel (NL Times, 2022).

5.3.3. Political Parties

While there are no archives of Belgian and Luxembourgian party programmes, the “DNPP” provides a comprehensive archive of Dutch political party programmes of all political parties that participated in the national elections for the chamber of representatives, whether these parties obtained a seat or not (University of Groningen, 2024). However, whilst many parties have brief statements about supporting either Israel, Palestine or a two-state solution and whether they support the expansion of LGBT rights, they are never mentioned together in the same paragraph. One can sometimes observe classical notions of Israel being called the “only democracy in the Middle East” that resembles western liberal democracies, as exemplified in the PVV party programmes of 2023, 2021 and 2012, but again without a specific mention of which aspects of western liberal democracy (such as the pursuit of equal rights for LGBT people).

In 2019, the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Xavier Bettel, was invited to a farewell dinner of Simona Frankel, the Israeli ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg. However, even though Xavier Bettel had always been seen as a friend of Israel, he decided not to attend the event because Rafi Peretz, the Israeli Minister of Education, had made comments that suggested that he supports conversion therapy for LGBT people, even though he claims this was misunderstood and misrepresented. This comment was widely criticised in Israeli politics (Times of Israel, 2019). However, Xavier Bettel had already notified Simona Frankel that, while he respects her personally, he could not attend such events as long as Israel has a minister making such statements. This prompted an Israeli response, wherein Amir Ohana, the Israeli Minister of Justice, remarked that Xavier Bettel did not show this same level of boycotting for Iran. Amir Ohana wrote this in a tweet wherein he showed a picture of Xavier Bettel shaking hands with Mohammad Zarif, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and a news article about homosexual Iranians being sentenced to death (ibid.).

Various political parties and politicians in the Benelux can be seen and heard making statements about Israel and Palestine, as well as their stances on the progress of LGBT rights. However, there are virtually no records of any politician or political party making clear statements on the juxtaposition of these two policy fields.

6. Conclusion, Reflection and Discussion

6.1. Conclusion

6.1.1. The Realist Perspective

The neoclassical realist assumption that a nation state could change its policy counterintuitively as a gambit to gain and maintain support may definitely be true in some cases, but it is very hard to make this case for Israel and its progress in LGBT rights. As exemplified, Israel has an extensive track record of enshrining LGBT rights into its laws ever since its inception in 1948. If it were the case that Israel would merely pass LGBT rights in order to gain and maintain support from its western allies, then it would not have passed these laws in the previous millennium when they were still highly contested, even in the most progressive nation states. Israel also appears to have a multipolar political playing field with a diverse selection of political parties, with the progressive ones campaigning legitimately for these rights for their citizens, and not as a gambit for foreign support.

Additionally, there does not appear to be a close correlation between the passing of LGBT rights and Israel's rebranding efforts. Despite the Netherlands and Belgium almost always passing certain policies first, Israel has often been ahead of many of its other western liberal allies (including Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Germany and France) when it comes to ratifying LGBT-friendly legislature. It would make no sense to pass progressive policies in the hopes of gaining and maintaining support from nation states that have not even passed those laws to begin with.

Lastly, the neoclassical realist perspective also talks about internal pressures, which are guaranteed to also have an effect when policy is being passed that a large section of the population seems to be heavily at odds with. Yet, despite the internal backlash from the orthodox religious community, Israel has managed to continually pass these laws.

6.1.2. Extent of Israeli LGBT Public Diplomacy and its effectiveness

In order to answer the research questions, the hypotheses generated from them will be reiterated:

- “Israel uses an extensive network of public diplomacy concerning LGBT rights in order to gain and maintain support from the Benelux, but it is not expected to have a positive effect on its foreign target audiences and their internal dynamics.”

The research in this master’s thesis has indeed shown that, while the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy is very extensive when it comes to the tourism industry and broadcasting its national brand abroad, it does not have a significant effect on LGBT organisations, individuals and political parties when it comes to the topic being an active point of discussion and influencing politics to a positive degree. However, one can see a sharp increase in the LGBT tourism industry, especially in cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa.

6.1.3. Contestation of Israeli LGBT Public Diplomacy and its effectiveness

- “The Israeli LGBT public diplomacy is significantly contested in the Benelux, but this contestation is not expected to have a negative effect on its foreign target audiences and their internal dynamics.”

Even though there are plenty of academic works written on the contestation of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy, it appears that these voices are echoed neither among LGBT organisations, nor individuals, nor political parties and politicians. As a result, the contestation does not appear to have a negative effect on the effectiveness of the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy in Benelux, which in and of itself already has a barely any positive effect outside of the tourism industry.

Summarised, the conclusion is that the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy is only effective in terms of generating tourism for Israel but seems to have neither a positive nor a negative effect on LGBT organisations, individuals, political parties and politicians in the Benelux.

6.2. Reflection

This thesis can play a role in the academic research on soft power and public diplomacy. The conclusions seem to imply that soft power and public diplomacy, whilst seemingly logical and powerful in theory, may not always have a practical effect, even if the theory would expect them to. Whilst the conclusion in and of itself is not generalisable, as it cannot be extrapolated to make conclusions about soft power, public diplomacy or Israeli diplomacy in general, it does highlight the importance to research individual cases instead of making assumptions that the theory will most likely play out in practice with an expected effect. However, it is to be noted that the discrepancy between theory and practice is not only visible within the expectations versus the outcomes, but also in the amount of academic literature versus the coverage of the topic among the general public. In a sense, this could be the preface to a new research puzzle about whether there is a disconnect between academia and the general public. It is of course not expected that academic research always has to be entirely proportional to what is being talked about in public, but awareness of the topic's true extent in practice is definitely important to gauge in order to determine whether an issue is actually problematic and causes active harm.

The theories chosen for this thesis have offered an extensive overview into why Israel acts the way it does. Trying to apply the neoclassical realist assumption has led to the conclusion that Israel's advancements in LGBT rights are genuine in nature. In fact, it has led to results that would seem counterintuitive to the critics, given that Israel has played a pioneering role in LGBT rights despite its large religious population, which would be an interesting subject to research in the field of comparative politics.

Social constructivism and its various manifestations of soft power have provided an alternative explanation as to how and why Israel uses its LGBT public diplomacy. Despite the explanatory power of these theories, it appears that the effect of the public diplomacy and its contestation are very minimal in the Benelux. While it could indeed be the case that there is no significant effect, other theories could be explored in combination with social constructivism and its various manifestations of soft power to research different ways of influence. One such theory is the theory of liberalism. The theory of liberalism in the study of international relations is signified by the cooperation between national and international organisations and institutions. This theory could be better suited to research the effects of public diplomacy on NGOs and IGOs and how those organisations in turn lobby for their respective institutions. This thesis for example only examined what LGBT organisations in the Benelux publicised for the people to read, but a liberal approach could be better suited to study what goes on behind the scenes.

The methodology of the thesis has certainly yielded positive results when it comes to understanding the extent of Israeli LGBT public diplomacy, but it has not been able to establish a noticeable effect. While this thesis mainly rests on content analysis, a follow-up study researching individual perspectives could prove helpful to determine whether the Israeli LGBT public diplomacy truly has an insignificant effect on individuals and their voting habits. To facilitate this research, it would be necessary for it to be a quantitative study wherein a broad number of participants in the Benelux can express their opinions. As such, a survey could prove to be an ideal method that suits this type of research. However, it may also be the case that surveys overlook nuances or a complex web of causes and effects, which could also be a reason to have a follow-up study wherein individuals of different persuasions can be interviewed in a deeper sense to get an understanding of their decision-making processes and how this affects their behaviour (such as voting, raising awareness, etc.).

It could also be worth researching in the first place whether the Israel-Palestine discussion plays out as much among the people as it is often made out to be. There is a possibility that many people only have a very limited understanding or interest in the conflict and that vocal minorities often make it seem like a majority is interested in the topic. It could therefore be interesting to research the salience of this topic on a deeper level with more extensive data than Google Trends before drawing generalisable conclusions, as the results may be skewed towards the extremes of the political arena. Researching a wider scope than the Benelux, for example larger states such as France and Germany, could provide more insight into whether these conclusions are merely a local phenomenon or whether this is the case for the whole of (Western) Europe.

Considering that a lot of the Israeli public diplomacy seems to be addressed to an American audience, the inclusion of the United States in the target groups could perhaps yield significant results. If such research would prove a significant effect, then the reasoning behind a “most likely” case study design could be criticised, as there may be a plethora of factors (such as the salience of a topic) that could also determine how opinions are formed and influenced by public diplomacy, even if the target audience is not the most likely case. However, one could then argue that the American public could be the most likely case, not for its advancements in LGBT rights, but for its salience in discussions about Israeli foreign policy.

6.3. Discussion

As exemplified throughout the thesis, it goes without saying that this is a very complex topic. In fact, every topic concerning itself with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a complex one. Despite the animosity involved in the conflict, one cannot help but to see that there is a certain degree of ironic pessimism present, which traces its roots back to the theory of realism. It is important to stress that both actors, Israelis and Palestinians, are sometimes more alike than they seem.

There are three dilemmas that were highlighted in the thesis that showcase this. The first is the voter dilemma. Israelis who support LGBT rights still seem to be voting more right-wing than ever, because of their fear for the survival of the Israeli state. “How could one have gay rights in Israel, when there is no Israel to begin with?” is the question for them. On the other hand, Palestinians claim that they have much more pressing issues than LGBT rights, such as fighting off the Israeli occupation.

Second, the dilemma of religious bodies and voices controlling the governments. It matters little how secularised Israel was, is or will be. As long as the Chief Rabbinate is exclusively in charge of Jewish marriages, there cannot be same-sex marriage without loopholes. Yet, in Israel’s neighbouring states, it also would not matter how secular the people would be, as many states either have strong religious bodies or religious representation among its lawmakers to prevent that from happening.

The third dilemma is that of contradicting alliances. When discussing pinkwashing, an example was raised about a pro-Israeli NGO promoting LGBT equality in Israel had ties with preachers who made condemning remarks about LGBT people. This seems to rely on the old political adage that “the friend of my friend is my friend, and the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. This contestation implies that there is a degree of hypocrisy due to “guilt by association”. However, in the international political landscape, it is impossible to escape contradicting alliances, as exemplified with the relations between Israel, Azerbaijan and Pakistan. It would be the same as discrediting LGBT people who show solidarity for Palestine, despite facing persecution or even death if they would be (openly) LGBT in Palestine or many of Palestine’s allied states.

In short, this thesis proves that this conflict cannot be tackled with simple theories and simple solutions, and contextualisation is extremely important.

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