

The Delegitimization of Israel: Trends and Responses

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The Israeli expectation was that given the regional challenges and turbulence, and the collective sense of Salafist jihadism as a severe global threat, the State of Israel, the only functioning democracy in the Middle East and an element on the frontlines of the battle against radical Islam and terrorism, would gain international stature. Many are therefore surprised that the international delegitimization of Israel has continued to increase in scope and intensity, influencing a wide range of audiences, opinion makers, and intellectual circles. This growing delegitimization, characterized by a profound, fundamental hostility to Israel, could exacerbate Israel's standing in the international arena, negatively affect its political and military freedom of action, and perhaps even damage its economy. Therefore, the topic is relevant to the country's national security and requires a systemic response.

The delegitimization phenomenon relies on a conceptual infrastructure and a network of groups and activists located in many countries around the world. It is marked by sweeping criticism of Israel's policies as well as political, cultural, and economic activism against Israel. The boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement has succeeded in disseminating an idea that is multidimensional (academic, economic, legal, cultural, diplomatic, and media-related) to political and public spheres in the West.

The BDS movement and its supporters have integrated many groups with different objectives and varying degrees of opposition to Israel. Some would like to see the end of Israel's existence as the nation state of the Jewish people; some would like to help the armed struggle against Israel by limiting

the country's ability to use military force for self-defense. Others want to force Israel to accept international dictates on how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The more extreme objectives, however, are not presented outwardly; rather, the movement uses messages couched purportedly in legitimate criticism of the Israeli government's policies, focused primarily on the efforts to end the Israeli occupation and guarantee human rights and equality in Israel and the areas controlled by it.

The phenomenon has become more challenging and dangerous for Israel as a result of the movement's intellectual foundation that informs and reinforces its seminal ideas. These ideas are informed by legal formulations presenting Israel as a rogue state that refuses to honor the most fundamental values of the international community and whose basis for existence is legally questionable. An anti-Israel language, conceptualization, and consciousness have crystallized, rendering Israel as a colonial aggressor; a law-breaking, racist nation; and the sole guilty party for the plight of the Palestinian people. According to the BDS movement, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict feeds the radicals in the Muslim world, and is even a factor in the rise of radical Islam, including the Islamic State. These messages have permeated broad liberal circles, including the younger generation of intellectuals who, in the future, will form the backbone of politics, government, culture, and business in the West.

What differentiates the debate on the delegitimization of Israel from other international conflicts around the world? Besides the preoccupation of both the media and the public, the delegitimization movement does not seek to exert pressure on Israel to change its policies, in and of itself a legitimate thing to do; rather it demonizes Israel and seeks to undermine its legitimacy as the nation state of the Jewish people. In this context it is important to distinguish between delegitimization and legitimate criticism of Israel. Criticizing Israel, like any other nation, is acceptable conduct in the international arena, and should be done through diplomacy and other standard tools of foreign policy. Lumping all critics and types of criticism together is a grave error, as it strengthens those who delegitimize Israel by placing them together with those who are simply critical of some of Israel's policies. It also radicalizes the "legitimate" critics by pushing them, unwisely, towards the camp of the delegitimizers.

The perception of Israel as being opposed to the two-state solution and ending the occupation as well as not upholding the human rights of those it governs, has facilitated the wide dissemination of Israel's delegitimization and its influence on politicians and decision makers around the world. Much of the criticism is also linked to the way Israel's use of force is assessed and to the relatively high number of civilian casualties resulting from Israel's military operations. Therefore, when Israeli officials decide on a policy or issue a statement, they should consider the possible implications and weigh the costs versus the benefits. Considering the implications of actions and statements on world public opinion does not necessarily mean conceding to external dictates, as is sometimes claimed; rather, it means deliberating important strategic considerations that should be taken into account, as any other strategic factor. At the same time, it behooves Israel to continue to present and clarify the complexity of the conflict, both politically – the difficulty in reaching a settlement acceptable to both sides, and militarily – the challenges of confronting an enemy operating from within a civilian population and under its cover.

The negative perception of Israel in world public opinion does not stem solely from Israel's conduct in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and from opposition to one policy or another of a given government. Indeed, the Israeli side has claimed that delegitimization is a modern manifestation of anti-Semitism. Although we cannot examine in depth the nature of this claim and its validity, messages that emphasize the anti-Semitic nature of the criticism against Israel are, from a purely utilitarian perspective, a double-edged sword; they undermine any serious attempt to address the substance of the criticism and lead to unwillingness to pay attention to Israel's position. This is especially true when anti-Semitism is attributed to the larger public, which is not part of the core group leading the campaign and does not identify with its essential objectives.

Israel and its supporters need to highlight some of the characteristics of the BDS movement: its aggressive behavior, designed to scare and silence anyone who expresses support for Israel; elements of discrimination based on race, religion, and nationality that are evident in the movement's beliefs; and its infringement upon freedom of expression, academic freedom, and pluralism. Emphasizing these characteristics could make it possible to

harness others who are not necessarily supporters of Israel, but who are opposed to such discrimination and violation of these values. It is imperative to point out that the delegitimization movement does nothing to contribute to resolution of the conflict; on the contrary, it only feeds and amplifies it. Supporting Israel's delegitimization weakens the moderate forces on both sides and strengthens the extremists, while it diminishes and even neutralizes incentives to engage in negotiations for a political settlement. This assertion, however, is more persuasive when Israel is not seen as adopting policies that undermine the possibility for such a settlement.

In formulating an overall policy, four major categories of response are recommended:

- a. Reactive response to delegitimization events and/or initiatives that could not have been foiled or disrupted ahead of time;
- b. Preventive response to thwart delegitimization actions before they occur, including foiling and/or disrupting delegitimization projects, taking action against their instigators, their financing, the dissemination of their messages, and so forth. The credibility of the core members needs to be questioned, their radical agenda exposed, and actions foiled before they occur. This means investing in appropriate intelligence capabilities and working in a more sophisticated way with organizations, university campuses, and others.
- c. Proactive response to influence various groups in order to block the effects of delegitimization. In this context, it is important to create personal contacts and host delegations in Israel in order to present the complexity of the situation in an unmediated fashion. Furthermore, given the mass of anti-Israel texts that are being published and taught, academic counteraction is necessary, such as by publishing research, influencing curricula and syllabi, creating courses and research programs, supporting pro-Israeli researchers and teachers, and so forth.
- d. Constructive response to expose target audiences to Israel's contribution to the well-being of populations in the Middle East and around the world as an antithesis to Israel's portrayal as an apartheid, racist, and colonialist state. For example, Israel could help establish an action network of Israeli organizations and entrepreneurs working around the world for the betterment of humanity, helping weak populations with

water, food technologies, humanitarian issues, and so forth. It is important to integrate into international and local institutions representing civil society in the fields of human rights, workers' rights, and environmental protection. These institutions are usually the most vocal of Israel's critics. To be effective, it is imperative to hold a dialogue also with the critics of Israel, as long as their criticism is legitimate, both in essence and in language, in order to distinguish them from those who are promoting Israel's delegitimization.

In addition to government and institutional agents, civil society – individual players and organizations, Jews and non-Jews, in Israel and abroad – needs to be enlisted to question and disprove the assertions made by the delegitimization movement, brand Israel with a more positive image, and shore up its international standing while taking maximum advantage of the relative strengths of each player and organization.

Israel is facing difficult challenges on every front, yet the BDS and delegitimization movement is not a decree of fate. If Israel acts in an informed manner and invests the required efforts and resources, the scope of the delegitimization movement could be reduced. Its negative implications could be all but eradicated, causing it to eventually peter out.