

## **Don't Underestimate the Delegitimization of Israel**

The 63-year-old State of Israel has been through – and overcome – military and terror attacks. Israel has prevailed, and now its enemies have turned to attacking its legitimacy. This is a complex and dangerous battle. Initiatives for boycotts of Israel or of Israelis, lawsuits against Israel and Israelis for "war crimes," and so on and so forth are being aired constantly. The Internet is flooded with sites that attack Israel's legitimacy and millions of people are exposed to them.

What is delegitimization and what separates it from legitimate criticism? At its heart, it is the rejection of Israel's legitimacy as the nation-state of the Jewish people. However, this definition is not exhaustive, since a significant portion of the delegitimization campaign is not expressed in the outright rejection of Israel but rather, does so in a more nuanced and sophisticated manner. This campaign usually begins with legitimate criticism, which is then expanded to include the portrayal of Israel as an inherently immoral entity due to its birth, essence, and character.

The challenge to those dealing with this issue is to try and clear out the "gray area" in which legitimate criticism and delegitimization reside in tandem. This is not a simple challenge in light of the mass of criticism heaped on Israel in the Palestinian context. Analysts of the phenomenon disagree about the relative weight of anti-Semitic, cultural-ideological, and political motives derived from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict's negative reflection upon Israel, even when not used for delegitimization, serves to fuel its fire.

The current delegitimization campaign is spreading Westward and into the heart of the international discourse, linking radical-Islamic elements with leftist-liberal ones. The Western world – currently characterized by, among other things, an emphasis on human rights and increasing identification with the Palestinians at Israel's expense, post-national trends, and new informational forms – is open to the dissemination and reception of the message of delegitimization.

This trend must not be underestimated. Israel is indeed strong, but it is small and to a great extent dependent upon its international legitimacy. A significant increase of its delegitimization may isolate it, erode its deterrence and its freedom to act in its own defense, harm its economy, and expose it to legal assault. The delegitimizers hold before their eyes the image of South Africa, which despite its military and economic might finally caved under the accumulating pressure of years of sanctions and delegitimization.

As early as the 2001 Durban Conference, 1500 non-governmental organizations termed Israel an "apartheid state" and called for its "complete isolation." Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora awoke very late to this threat, and only in the past two years have we seen study and organization in this regard. Yet, still, there is a long way to go.

There is no one solution for every threat in every arena. We must concentrate on the main arenas – Western Europe and the United States. A distinction must be made between different actors: organizations and people who generate delegitimization, for whom this is the essence of their actions and who must be exposed as such; elements that contribute to delegitimization without intending to and to whom the significance of their actions must be clarified (as in the case of Judge Goldstone and Jimmy Carter, who retracted some of their criticism of Israel); the great mass of public opinion that, for the most part, lacks knowledge and is open to influence and who must be engaged; and potential partners in the struggle

against delegitimization - not only Jews - who must be provided with tools and with whom coalitions must be formed.

This is not just a problem of public diplomacy. It is indeed important to ask how we must react to reality, but it is no less important that we also ask how we can shape it using the tools of policy. This battle can also be won, but it requires awareness, an overall strategy, management, recruitment of forces and resources in Israel and the Diaspora, education, coalition building, proactivity and creativity. It is high time that those questioning Israel be confronted with an exclamation mark!

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