

The Phenomenon of Delegitimization in the Overall Context of Attitudes towards Israel and the Jewish People

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Background

Manifestations of delegitimization of the State of Israel have existed for many years. Ever since its inception, Israel has faced a wall of alienation, non-recognition and delegitimization, mainly by its neighbors, and has strived to dismantle and topple that wall through military might and deterrence power combined with seeking political peace and relying on the support and aid of the U.S. as a superpower. This policy has been partially successful: it has contributed to the acceptance of Israel as an undisputed fact among the majority of countries in the region, but not to the acceptance and internalization of its legitimacy as the nation-state of the Jewish people. In the international arena, the right of Jews to a state of their own was recognized first by the League of Nations and then by the United Nations, and the shadow of the horrors of the Holocaust contributed to the acceptance of Israel as a legitimate member of the family of world nations.

Yet a little over six decades later, there appears to be a reverse trend against Israel. Its delegitimization seems to be on the rise, fast becoming a growing trend progressing from the Middle East and the margins into the mainstream of international discourse. An imaginary line stretches from the Durban World Conference Against Racism in 2001, which was dedicated to the condemnation of Israel as a racist state, to the Goldstone Report of 2009, which condemned Israel as guilty of war crimes in Gaza and continues to be featured on the UN's agenda.

The manifestations of this phenomenon are numerous, its tools of proliferation are diverse, and it threatens both individuals and collectives. The discourse of

delegitimization is prevalent in Israeli public opinion and reverberates in the international arena with initiatives of economic and academic boycott against Israel and Israeli bodies, legal complaints filed against Israeli leaders and military commanders in various countries for “war crimes,” cancellations of scheduled concerts in Israel by international artists, the silencing and removal of Israeli speakers from international podiums, and calls for divestment reported daily in the news media. Opinion polls in Europe indicate a marked and continuous decline in Israel’s image. In a speech delivered to the Saban Forum in November 2009, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu counted delegitimization among the three most critical strategic threats facing Israel, along with the nuclearization of Iran and the proliferation of missiles and rockets in the Middle East.

Concurrently, we are witnessing dangerous phenomena of delegitimization of the Jewish people and its connection to the State of Israel. Clearly, there is no complete overlap between “attitudes toward Israel” and “attitudes toward the Jewish people;” there is, however, a deep and important relation between the two, since the discussion of the delegitimization of Israel essentially touches upon critical questions such as, is there a justification for the existence of a nation-state for the Jewish people, what are the loyalties of Diaspora Jews, and so on. On the one hand, ever since its founding Israel has been a central factor in the life of the Jewish people and a major influence on attitudes toward it, and on the other hand, anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism have always had an impact on, and continue to impact attitudes toward the Jewish state.

The exacerbated delegitimization of Israel, the Jewish people and the connection between them, raises an urgent need to increase our understanding of the phenomena, trace its roots and sources, map its various components and expressions, observe its tendencies and point out policy directions that could stem its flow or mitigate its harm. All this should be done in the broader context of looking at the consolidation processes of attitudes toward Israel and the Jewish people and the relationship between Israel and the Jewish people as a whole.

For this reason, the Jewish People Policy Institute has initiated a long-term strategic project on delegitimization phenomena, with the input of leading experts in relevant fields and the use of analytical methods and policy-making tools. The discussion of this topic by a working group as part of JPPI’s 2010 Conference on the Future of the Jewish People is designed to help formulate a conceptual framework for this project. While several other bodies have already conducted studies, held conferences and published

conclusions on the subject, the JPPI project's distinguishing feature is a long-term, comprehensive in-depth research study, which covers the broad span of attitudes toward the Jewish state and the Jewish people along with the relationship between the two. At the moment, we have more empirical impressions and questions, which are presented below, than well-formulated and decisive answers.

Why Is Delegitimization Important?

The State of Israel and the Jewish people as a whole do not exist in a vacuum. Their robustness, strength and thriving rest, among other things, on the acceptance of their legitimacy within their local and international environments. "Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" is not, and must not be regarded as a proactive prescription for the thriving of the Jewish people through a strategy of isolationism that amounts to alienation from their surroundings. As for the State of Israel, it is a small and fragile country, highly exposed to threats and attacks, and largely reliant on its contacts with the outside world and the attitudes of "others" toward it. Its being a legitimate and accepted member of the family of nations opens up for it political, economic and other spaces, enables it to mobilize external factors to help pursue its own interests, thereby creating components of "soft power," which is vital in its own right, but also for building and sustaining Israel's "hard power," such as military force, and its utilization in times of need.

It could therefore be said that the legitimacy of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people is a central tenet in the fundamental doctrine of its national security. It is also at the root of the incumbent government's demand, as expressed in Prime Minister Netanyahu's Bar-Ilan speech (June 2009), that the two-state solution should include Palestinian recognition of Israel's right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people, so that it would be clear that there would be two states for two peoples.

On the practical level, the potential dangers of this phenomenon are deep and far-reaching, and some of them are already being felt to some extent: a decline in Israel's international standing; isolation; diminished ability of Israel (and the Jews) to secure an open and equal platform and attention for the presentation of their case before the world; increasing legitimization for the initiation of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish

moves (including violent acts), and an erosion of Israel's overall long-term deterrence power; economic damages (a BDS [Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions] campaign is already being waged against Israel); academic boycott; demoralization; an eroding sense of identity; harming the relationship between the Diaspora and Israel; legal actions against individuals or collectives, attempts to drag Israel to the International Criminal Court in The Hague or exploiting the Universal Jurisdiction legal principle prevalent in certain countries to file suits against leading Israeli figures – including senior officials such as Minister of Defense Barak and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Livni; along with many other negative consequences. As the trend increases and spreads in important international foci of power (governments, academe, corporations, trade unions, etc.) and becomes mainstream, its destructive power will increase and gain strategic currency.

Many of the perpetrators of the current delegitimization trend are inspired by the example of South Africa under apartheid, which at the end of the day succumbed to the pressures of international delegitimization. Boycotted and ostracized, despite its military and economic might, it could no longer function as a state with an apartheid regime. Perpetrators of the delegitimization of Israel strive to blur the significant and fundamental differences between the official and institutionalized racist policies of apartheid South Africa, and the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict, thus presenting Israel as a racist, rogue country that routinely breaches human and national rights. The term “apartheid” is increasingly applied to Israel, although its meaning is totally incongruous with any description, even the most critical, of Israeli policy vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (former U.S. President Jimmy Carter titled his 2006 book “Palestine: Peace not Apartheid,” and “Israel Apartheid” events are currently popular on campuses around the world). The perpetrators of delegitimization assume, and say so openly, that Israel is not strong enough to endure a delegitimization campaign if the image of a second South Africa, of a “pariah state,” sticks to it. If this happens, Israel will face an existential threat. Are we dealing with a real threat here?

For many years the prevailing conception in Israel tended to underestimate the significance of international attitudes toward it, opting to rely on the premise of “My power and the might of my hand (hath gotten me this wealth)” and the support of the U.S. This conception engendered expressions like “Oom Shmoom” or “It doesn't matter what the Goyim say, what matters is what the Jews do.” But in a multi-polar (some would say non-polar) international system, where the U.S. emphasizes

multilateralism, one must take into consideration that increased delegitimization of Israel in the international arena would also increase the strain on the Israel-U.S. relationship. A public debate is already raging in the U.S. about whether Israel is an asset or a liability for the U.S., and a continuing delegitimization trend would very likely fuel this debate further. Clearly, fissures in the Israel-U.S. relationship only serve to encourage further international attacks on Israel by its detractors.

Challenging the legitimacy of the State of Israel could also project negatively on the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. Presumably, an isolated and reviled State of Israel would not be able to serve even as “light unto the Jews,” not to mention “light unto the nations.” Its deteriorating position may have a negative effect on attitudes toward Jews wherever they are, and Israel’s standing as a focus of identification and attraction for the Jewish people could be eroded.

One of the potentially grave consequences for Israel embodied in the delegitimization trend is the curtailed freedom to use its military power in order to defend the state, its citizens and interests. This is certainly the intention of some of the perpetrators, who have sought to weaken Israel in other ways and failed, and are continuing their war against it in alternative ways. In an era of asymmetric war against non-state actors that employ military and terrorist means and tactics from within a civilian environment and against civilians, Israel is trapped on the horns of the dilemma: in taking effective action against such attacks Israel fuels the engine of delegitimization. This trend is discernible in the decline of international legitimization of large-scale military operations by Israel in the last decade – from the relative acceptance of Operation Defensive Shield through the Second Lebanon War to the much more critical responses to Operation Cast Lead (the Goldstone Report) and the Turkish Flotilla affair. It is no coincidence that the delegitimization issue has become a key Israeli consideration in security assessments in recent years.

What the Debate is About: Defining the Phenomenon, its Origins and Drivers

In characterizing the delegitimization debate one must ask: To what extent is it driven by Israel’s image as a “peace naysayer,” and to what extent is it driven by a desire to negate or revoke Israel’s right to exist and defend itself? Some would argue

that whenever Israel has initiated and conducted a serious peace process and put a proposal on the negotiating table, its military operational space for self-defense has increased, as in Operation Defensive Shield following the collapse of the Camp David process. Others would argue that the trend of delegitimization is, in essence, much deeper than that, as illustrated by Operation Cast Lead and the Goldstone Report, following the unilateral evacuation of the Gaza Strip by Israel and the collapse of the Annapolis process.

It is interesting to note that the current leadership of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu-Mazen) and Salam Fayyad, is deliberately playing these dual notes. On the one hand, it encourages international denunciation of Israel --the Goldstone Report, complaints against Israel lodged in international courts-- as an instrument in its political struggle against Israel. On the other hand, the PA is careful to avoid boycotting products made in Israel proper, limiting itself to boycotting goods produced beyond the Green Line, in order to emphasize, unlike certain elements in the international arena, that its interest is the delegitimization of the occupation only, and not of the State of Israel.

In light of the above, how should the ever so prevalent concept of delegitimization be defined properly? Where exactly is the line separating legitimate negative criticism of Israel and the view that rejects the legitimacy of the existence of Israel as a Jewish state? What constitutes a legitimate critical attitude toward the relationship between the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and what is a non-legitimate attitude? Could there be an attitude critical of the Jewish people that does not fit the definition of delegitimization of the Jewish people?

Undoubtedly, the origins of the phenomenon, the factors affecting its creation and the engines driving its proliferation are numerous and diverse. The motivations of radical Islam are not the same as the motivations of intellectual circles of the European deep left. A mixture of ideological, political, religious and other motives is in operation here: classic anti-Semitism along with anti-Semitism disguised under a modern liberal veil; ignorance along with knowledge that is abused; an immoral image of Israel which bears upon the fundamental justification of its existence, and so forth. The same is true for the diversity of arguments and images used in the campaign, such as the rejection of the Jews' right to their own nation-state based on either the rejection of Judaism as a nation as opposed to a religion, or the negation of a meaningful historical linkage between the Jews and the Land of Israel; the presentation of the Jewish state

as casting a shadow of doubt over the loyalty of Jews to their countries of residence and citizenship; the presentation of the State of Israel as lacking moral grounds – as a state that was founded through the violation of the rights, and the theft of land, of others with greater linkage and rights; as a colonialist state; as an apartheid regime (also in the context of Israeli Arabs); as a state whose conduct poses a threat to peace in the Middle East and the entire world; as the perpetrator of international crimes; as a state which through its conduct contradicts basic tenets of human rights, etc.

Tony Blair, former British prime minister and currently the Quartet's envoy to the Middle East, recently commented that there were two forms of the delegitimization of Israel. The first being the traditional form, of a clear, obvious and open attack on Israel's right to exist, as in the Iranian president's many assaults. The second form, which is more complex, is disguised as criticism of Israel, but actually advocates prejudice in not allowing that Israel has a point of view that should be heard. In Blair's opinion, this latter form is more pernicious and harder to counteract. And he is right. The challenge of addressing delegitimization includes, among other things, identifying those delegitimizers who disguise themselves as credible critics, exposing their motives and mounting appropriate responses to them.

Eventually, a thorough exploration of the phenomenon would necessitate an attempt to estimate the relative weight of its components: the contributions of classic anti-Semitism, of modern anti-Semitism trafficked as liberal-intellectual critique, and of Israel's eroding image as a result of the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Delegitimization is an instrument in the hands of those steeped in an ideological, cultural, religious or other hatred of Israel and/or Jews, as well as tool of the Palestinian-Arab struggle against Israel.

The present challenge is different and graver than the challenge we had known since the inception of the State of Israel, because this is a different world, where conditions are more conducive to, and accommodating for, the rooting and blooming of delegitimization efforts. Today's world is less and less familiar – and consequently less considerate of Israel – with the legacy of the Bible and the horrors of the Holocaust. The international order is no longer uni- or bi-polar. It's a "globalized" world, where Western culture is reassessing the classic institution of the nation-state, not to mention an ethno-religious nation-state, emphasizing instead supra-state, trans-state and non-state actors. It's an Internet world of blogs, Facebook and Twitter, which engenders a network society and new patterns of information generation and message absorption. It's a world of asymmetric warfare, of

a Europe that is increasingly influenced by the Muslim community developing within it and changing its demographic profile. It's a world that stresses human rights in the international discourse, identifies with the plight of the Palestinians and is less tolerant of justifying the violation of their right to self-determination due to Israeli defense needs ("the power of right vs. the power of might"). In such a world, justification of the right of self-determination of a Jewish nation is far from settled fact, and is once again subject to debate. In such a world, certain characteristics of Jewish identity and tradition are being questioned and challenged.

Moreover, in the Middle East there are shifts occurring that may compound the challenges ahead. The Muslim Middle East is in the midst of an epic struggle over its character, between the radical pole led by Iran, which strives to obtain nuclear arms and sponsors terror, and the pragmatic pole (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and others), whose orientation leans toward the U.S. and which supports a peace process with Israel on the basis of a two-state solution. In the "war of ideas" waged between these two poles, attitude toward the Jewish State is an important game piece. The radical pole relentlessly seeks to radicalize this attitude and thwart the possibility of an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Israel has a clear interest in enhancing the pragmatic pole and suppressing the radical pole, which seeks its annihilation and connects ideologically with other purveyors of delegitimization in advocating the one-state, bi-national solution to the conflict, i.e., the end of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people.

One of the questions worthy of elaboration in this context involves the connection, both existing and potential, between various delegitimizers. Is there some kind of connection that links the agents of delegitimization into a network, as argued by some? Some of the existing literature argues the existence of a "red-green alliance," i.e., a practical collaboration between radical Islamic actors and deep-left elements. The emerging picture shows a lack of common strategy, but occasional pragmatic link-ups for anti-Israeli activity, as in the Turkish Flotilla affair. What, then, is the ongoing risk of such factors joining forces, around the deprecation of Israel and the Jewish people, to initiate a wide-ranging, coordinated and effective cooperative effort?

In light of all the above, we are clearly faced with a phenomenon that cannot and must not be taken for granted, let alone ignored. On the contrary, it must be thoroughly assessed in order to deepen our understanding of its dynamics so that we are able to consolidate an effective response to any and all of its manifestations. In order to measure the magnitude of the delegitimization phenomenon and its trends and to formulate

appropriate tools for addressing it in such a multi-faceted arena, and to highlight the dynamics of the interaction and reciprocity of attitudes toward Israel and toward the Jewish people, the phenomenon must be diagnosed according to its various sources and expressions. This should be done through the triangulation of an in-depth historical approach – as the history of attitudes toward the Jewish people spans many hundreds of years – and a horizontal approach – as the phenomenon may take on very different shapes in terms of its origins and characteristics around the globe.

Main Expressions of the Phenomenon of Delegitimization and the Means of Its Proliferation

It is important to attempt a mapping, albeit only impressionistic and empirical at this stage, of the key features of the phenomenon: the leading arguments to justify it; its main actors (states, organizations, individuals); their various motivations and possible intersections of intent, contact and coordination between them; the methods of expressing delegitimization; its translation into action (such as violent acts, economic boycott, political boycott, academic boycott, legal sanctions, propaganda, anti-Semitism, etc.); and the main arenas and tools for the proliferation of the phenomenon (such as the media; academic circles; cyberspace; intellectual discourse, in the spheres of literature, art and culture; political and diplomatic arenas, etc.). Without such mapping, it is impossible to design and consolidate effective differential coping strategies and tools.

As part of the planned project, we intend to map and analyze the current situation using a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approach covering a host of spheres where the phenomenon of delegitimization is made manifest, including:

- The positioning and image of the Jewish people and the State of Israel
- The international media
- The political-strategic sphere
- The security sphere
- The structures of international law
- The economic sphere

- The religious and Islamic spheres
- The intellectual-liberal-cultural-anti-Semitic spheres
- Academe
- The virtual sphere (cyberspace)

Mapping Current Efforts by Communities, Jewish Organizations and Israel for Addressing Delegitimization

How are the Jewish people and the State of Israel currently coping with the phenomenon of delegitimization? There seems to be an awakening of consciousness regarding the severity of the threat and a growing apprehension about its proliferation and escalation, yet there is still a lack of clear strategy and policy direction, and a failure to translate this awareness into action plans. What are the current levels of attention and prioritization in terms of policy and budgets allocated to the issue by the Israeli and Jewish people leadership? Which bodies are running the campaign? What are their operational methods, and is their specialized deployment enough to confront the various forms of delegitimization? What is the quality of coordination between the various bodies? What is the level of contact between Israel and the Diaspora in this respect, and to what extent does each consider the consequences of its own conduct for the other party? To what extent is “all Israel responsible for each other” (כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה) vis-à-vis the threat of delegitimization?

Policy Guidelines and Tools

The discussion of the delegitimization phenomenon is ultimately aimed at generating effective responses by the State of Israel and the Jewish people to its dangers. The intention is to identify preliminary policy directions, including action principles, policy guidelines, policy tools and the required organizational wherewithal – for Israel, the Jewish people, and the combination thereof – tailored to each threat according to its

nature, severity and appropriate response.

The conclusive discussion will necessarily highlight the tension between the two major elements discussed above – the rejection of Israel’s right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people vs. the negation of Israel’s legitimacy as a result of what is perceived and presented as the occupation and colonization of another people and its land. Could the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the final settling of claims curb the international trend of delegitimization, and if so, to what extent? Would the establishment of a nation-state for the Palestinian people secure the legitimacy of a nation-state for the Jewish people? Or would it encourage irredentist tendencies, highlighting the issue of Israeli Arabs as a factor in the delegitimization equation, and the continuation of attempts to further erode Israel’s legitimacy?

The insights and conclusions produced by the discussions at the October 2010 conference will serve as a foundation for promoting the delegitimization study project led by the JPPI, and at the same time their validity would be examined as part of the project, using scanning and mining techniques to review and analyze relevant literature, interviews, external studies, consultative panels, dedicated seminars and conferences, general and expert surveys, and so on.

Among the topics worthy of special attention are possible explanations for the increasing gap between the prevalent narrative and self-image of Israel and the trend toward its delegitimization in the international arena; how to create a framework for an ongoing follow-up of the phenomenon and its trends; the similarities and differences between the delegitimization of Israel and the delegitimization of the Jewish people and between the most efficacious responses to each of them; how to develop the educational foundation, centering on the Zionist education of youth in Israel and abroad, and alternatively – what priority should be attached to education for peace among our neighbors as part of any peace agreements and future relationship with them; what and who may be potential external support circles, possible partnerships, and leading figures within and outside the Jewish world, capable of addressing the phenomenon of delegitimization – in terms of both curbing the processes leading to its escalation and mitigating its damage.

The working group discussions dedicated to the delegitimization of Israel and the Jewish people will obviously overlap with the discussions of the conference’s other working groups – both influencing and being influenced by them – since any discussion of delegitimization significantly touches upon questions of Jewish identity,

Israel-Diaspora relations, European communities, and the Jewish dimension of peace agreements with the Arab world.

In light of all the above, it is important to clarify to ourselves the extent to which, where and how, Israel and the Jewish people can affect the trend of delegitimization and reverse its course; where and when it is appropriate to ignore an attack, respond indirectly or confront it directly – and how? How can a positive image of Israel be cultivated, and what relative weight should be allocated to the improvement of the actual reality in Israel (political, scientific, educational, social and more) and to its Hasbara/public diplomacy efforts? What is the relative weight of the State of Israel, the Diaspora, and the cooperation between them, in such a response? And, considering the gravity of the trend, would it suffice to increase investment, even massively, in existing tools, or is there a need for a paradigm change and the creation of new tools?

Conclusion: Main Issues for Discussion

- What is the delegitimization of Israel, the Jewish people, and the connection between them – where is the line between legitimate and non-legitimate criticism?
- The causes of delegitimization – historical and current global trends and background factors. Exploring the tension between the image of Israel as a “peace naysayer” and the negation of its right to exist;
- Mapping the phenomenon and its trends – main actors, their motivations and the connections between them; their main arguments; arenas of action, modes of expression, proliferation engines, drivers and tools; international resonance and absorption; developing trends;
- Mapping the current deployment and efforts by Jewish communities and organizations and by Israel to address the phenomenon – and their effectiveness;
- Determining the trend’s gravity and threats – bottom lines;
- Principles of the required response – action guidelines, preliminary policy directions, policy tools, required organizational tools and international partnerships – for Israel, the Jewish people and the combination thereof. How can responses to different manifestations of the delegitimization phenomenon be customized to afford them greatest efficacy?

