Both Old and New:
The Delegitimization Campaign in
Historical Perspective

Kobi Michael

Introduction

This article seeks to examine and explain the challenge of the current delegitimization campaign (with BDS as its central and prominent characteristic) by comparing it to similar challenges Israel has faced in the past. While delegitimization in its current form is more complex and well-developed than previous challenges, the underlying rationale is similar and involves three levels: Israel's right to exist as a nation-state, Israel's right to self-defense, and Israel's right to explain its actions. On the first level, Israel's opponents make great efforts to deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people by presenting it as a colonialist project born from the original injustice done to the native Palestinian population. The second level includes the efforts of Israel's opponents to deny its right to defend itself against terrorism by condemning its responses as disproportionate, contrary to international law, and in blatant violation of basic Palestinian human rights. Finally, the third level constitutes the efforts made to deny Israel's right to explain its actions either by boycotting and removing Israel from international forums or by assisting the media whose coverage of Israel is biased for various reasons and prefers not to emphasize or at times even present the Israeli position.

In response to the question why Israel is the only country in the world that is forced to deal with delegitimization of its very existence, there are

many answers. These include the immense power of the Islamic bloc, which has an automatic majority in most important international forums and must also be heeded by Western countries due to political and economic considerations. In addition, there is the anti-Semitism that is entrenched among many populations around the world alongside the excessive weight given to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the efforts of the Palestinian leadership to leverage the unilateral strategy of internationalization[1] through the delegitimization, incitement, and demonization of Israel. We cannot, of course, ignore the influence of Israeli policy on the Palestinian issue and Israeli conduct in the international arena, but while these are influential factors, they are not the cause of the phenomenon.

The challenge of delegitimization in its current form has been evident since the formation of Netanyahu's second government in March 2009. At this point it became clear that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process would be frozen due to the enormous gaps between the two sides and the Palestinian leadership's unwillingness to enter into renewed negotiations with the Netanyahu government, having obtained an impressive set of achievements during negotiations with the Olmert government. (The Israeli proposal for an agreement that was presented to the Palestinians by Prime Minister Olmert was the most far-reaching offer ever made by any Israeli leadership.) Attempts to address the delegitimization campaign made at the end of 2009 by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, headed by Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon, ran into the opposition and skepticism of other government ministries, especially the Foreign Ministry. This opposition was the result of disagreement regarding both the actual existence of a delegitimization campaign and the powers and resources necessary for dealing with it. The turning point in the State of Israel's official stance toward delegitimization came in the wake of two traumatic events: the severe and biased report by Judge Goldstone on Operation Cast Lead published in September 2009 and the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010.[2]

The Palestinians exploited both these events in order to reinforce the delegitimization campaign as part of its new strategy of internationalizing the conflict, and the Israeli government was confronted with a rising wave of delegitimization attacks. Only then, despite the fact that the BDS movement was established by Omar Barghouti in 2005 and held its first conference in Ramallah in 2007, did the government internalize it as a real strategic threat. The BDS movement was led by the BNC (BDS National Committee), an

umbrella organization that united 170 Palestinian organizations and was responsible for expanding activities, recruiting supporters, and organizing delegitimization initiatives.

As part of the new effort to address the challenge, an impressive knowledge infrastructure was developed by national bodies and NGOs (the Reut Institute being a prominent example[3]) about the nature of delegitimization, the involved parties, its rationale, and the implications. But despite the allocation of resources, the greater level of coordination between national bodies, and, particularly, the increased awareness among the national leadership and civil society, large gaps remained between the relevance and the quality of the response and the scope of the delegitimization campaign around the world.

Once it had gained institutional attention, it became clear to the establishment – with the assistance of NGOs and research institutes – that the delegitimization camp was expanding to include unnatural coalitions, such as between radical Islamic movements and the extremely liberal human rights organizations (the so-called red-green alliance). This spread of the wave of delegitimization of Israel, in its wider sense, lent encouragement to BDS activists and provided ideological backing for their initiatives and activities, which aim to deny the political and conceptual model of Zionism and the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. BDS activists also direct their efforts toward the cause of the Arab citizens of Israel and call for the "right of return" for Palestinian refugees, defining Israel as a colonialist and imperialist apartheid state that suppresses the rights of the Palestinians. In their view, it is necessary to boycott Israeli academia, culture, and economy, because these all serve the country and enable the ongoing maltreatment of the Palestinians. The implication of this, even if not declared as such, is a call for the dismantling of the State of Israel in its current form.

Different Characteristics and Their Causes

Despite the similarity between the opposition to Israel in the early decades of its existence and the current phenomenon of delegitimization, it is important to note a number of significant differences. These differences can be categorized accordingly: structural changes in the international system, changes in the zeitgeist and the strengthening of non-state actors, developments in the Middle East, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the development of the virtual world and social media. All these changes have a major impact on the way that Israel's opponents attempt to bring about delegitimization.

One element has remained the same, however, throughout the years: the weakness of the Israeli response to the phenomenon. On the other hand, it is important to mention that in the last two years we have identified more governmental efforts to shape a coherent and proactive strategy and increasing investment of resources and coordinated efforts with Israeli and non-Israeli actors and organizations.

Structural Changes in the International System

In the first few decades after its establishment, the campaign to delegitimize the State of Israel was seen as part of the Arab and Muslim world's political, economic, and military struggle, backed by the non-aligned bloc and the Soviet Union. Their struggle was seen as part of a wider campaign in a bipolar world divided between the bloc led by the United States and the bloc led by the Soviet Union. The Western bloc did not play an active part in the attempt to delegitimize Israel, and very few non-state entities, of which there were far fewer in those years, were involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The West basically backed Israel, and despite crises, such as the crisis in Israel-France relations, Israel was not exposed in those years to significant expressions of delegitimization from the Western world.

Changes in the Zeitgeist and the Strengthening of Non-State Players

However, the break-up of the Soviet Union led to a change in the world order and the spread of globalization, which allowed for the development of new ideas and a new spirit of the times. In this new world, Israel no longer enjoyed the automatic support of the West, particularly within international bodies such as the UN and the International Criminal Court, which became more important and influential in the post-Cold War era. These bodies, which claimed to institutionalize international relations according to principles of international law and justice, managed in many cases to replace the traditional regulatory mechanisms of the bipolar world. However, they too have fallen prey to over-politicization and have been cynically exploited by various parties, including advocates of delegitimization and the Palestinian Authority. The latter use these tribunals to push Israel into a corner, seat it on the defendant's bench, discredit it in the eyes of the international community, and thus advance the establishment of a Palestinian state without the need to negotiate or reach agreements with Israel.

New countries have been established, and countries that lived for many years in the repressive shadow of the Soviet Union have changed and become democracies. The demands of national and ethnic groups for recognition of their right to self-determination have become an integral part of the new human rights discourse. This reality, along with the international community's objection toward apartheid in South Africa, has made it far easier for the advocates of delegitimization to present the Palestinian issue as a clear example of the violation of the right to self-determination and of racist oppression. In the eyes of many in the international community, Israel is seen to be following in the footsteps of South Africa and oppressing the Palestinians just as the racist white minority there oppressed the blacks. The human rights discourse and the aversion to the apartheid regime have turned the Palestinian issue into a contemporary example of terrible injustice with Israel as its perpetrator.

Today's delegitimization efforts occur in a multipolar world which is undergoing globalization and in which NGOs have far greater influence. These efforts are led by organizations rather than international blocs and are not part of the power and hegemony struggles of the new powers.

Structural changes in the international system have led to the strengthening of non-state actors in the form of NGOs, especially human rights organizations. The early decades of opposition to Israel's existence were characterized by policies dictated by countries and international blocs that operated within official international frameworks, initiated actions based on economic and political power, and aimed to bring about the weakening and ultimate collapse of the State of Israel as part of an Arab and Muslim effort led by an elected and legitimate body. In recent years, however, the delegitimization campaign is being led by social and political activists, organizations, and often somewhat strange alliances between organizations (such as the red-green alliance mentioned above). In contrast to a campaign led by organized and institutional representative bodies (such as the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), the current campaign is led by bodies that are unofficial, non-state, non-representative (i.e., neither elected nor appointed), and not necessarily institutional. Likewise, one of the most prominent characteristics of the current campaign is the role of social media and the interactions between actors representing different agendas that have come together for the sake of this campaign and are using the attempt to

delegitimize the State of Israel to advance their other agendas, to recruit supporters and resources, and to emphasize their presence and their activities.

The growing status and influence of NGOs is most evident within the Palestinian Authority. From the day of its establishment, civil organizations, primarily human rights organizations, emerged and became a real industry and source of income for political activists and bureaucrats who benefit from a flood of donations and generous international aid. Some of these NGOs do complement institutional functions managed by the Palestinian Authority. However, the majority, having encountered enormous difficulties in dealing with the Palestinian Authority, the struggle against corruption, and the systematic violations of human rights and freedom of expression, have found a more comfortable area of activity, namely, the struggle against Israel and the occupation. In this struggle, they have found many partners in the form of international organizations and foreign NGOs. Many of these are human rights organizations and include radical left-wing organizations that are traditionally hostile toward Israel.

The free access that these organizations have to Palestinian territory and Israel's function as a convenient punching bag in the name of human rights have reinforced their influence on international media and on various communities in their countries of origin. Over the years, many alliances and collaborations have been established between these organizations and Palestinian organizations, and in some cases also with Israeli organizations. The basis for this cooperation is their shared condemnation of Israel, the occupation, and the violation of Palestinian rights.

Certain Israeli organizations have chosen to use the international arena to criticize the country in general and the IDF in particular, thus turning themselves into "useful idiots" for those organizations that act against Israel. Their work, which in most cases is done with the intention of repairing injustices committed by the State of Israel and Israeli society and influencing government policy and Israeli public discourse, has become a weapon in the hands of the BDS movement and other advocates of delegitimization. Instead of being seen as an expression of the vitality of Israeli democracy, these organizations are seen to strengthen and lend credibility to Israel's image as an apartheid state and a fascist, colonialist, and oppressive entity. Similar cynicism can be found in the use that the advocates of delegitimization make of certain opinion pieces in the Israeli press, first and foremost *Haaretz*. Severely critical articles and harsh headlines, some of which are provocatively

worded, have helped justify the claims of anti-Israel organizations, without requiring them to distinguish between criticism of policy or an event and the broader, more comprehensive picture.

The competition over resources and attention – when there are too many entities working in the same field – has forced the organizations to radicalize their messages and to prove their activity; the more resources received, the greater the proof needed. Linda Polman successfully described the scope of this vicious cycle among NGOs active in war and crisis zones in her book *The Crisis Caravan*.[4] These organizations' preferred areas of activity are international forums such as the UN Human Rights Council, UN-sponsored international conferences such as the various Durban conferences, and other international tribunals. Palestinian attempts to strengthen their strategy of internationalization have reinforced the delegitimization efforts and vice versa.

While the Palestinian leadership has focused its energies on the international arena, especially international tribunals, it has also spared no effort in civil society, making good use of the media, social media, and delegitimization networks. The Palestinian Authority has led steps to boycott Israeli products in Palestinian territory. These efforts were consistent with the BDS campaign and served the same rationale.

Delegitimization activists have expanded their networks and penetrated various fields of civil society, including academia, cultural affairs, the media, and the economy. This has resulted in more sanctions and economic, cultural, and academic boycotts against the State of Israel. Delegitimization, which in its traditional format was mainly political (excluding the economic boycott until the 1980s that derived from the Arab oil-producing countries) and institutional, has become a central strategy implemented via social networks. As such, its strength is growing and is already causing real damage, with the potential for such great harm that the State of Israel can no longer ignore its existence and its influence in the international arena. Since most of these international arenas are characterized by an inherent bias against Israel, they have become a convenient and vocal area of activity that has amplified Israel's delegitimization under the guise of reports critical of Israeli policy and thus motivated and incentivized additional advocates of delegitimization.

To these processes we must also add the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa. The dismantling of the South African political model was seen by many as the international community's success in imposing its norms by delegitimization and sanctions (although there are still those

who attribute the change in South Africa more to internal processes than to external pressure). The result was a total transformation of South Africa's power structure: the laws denying the black majority their political rights were abolished, and political control subsequently passed from the white minority to the black majority. The story of South Africa became a source of inspiration for human rights groups and political movements representing minorities and laid the foundations for the "convenient" comparison to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This inspiration turned South Africa into a leading light of the struggle against racism. The first Durban conference convened in 2001 and was ostensibly dedicated to the fight against racism, racial prejudice, and xenophobia. However, it turned into a platform to delegitimize Israel, connecting for the first time – and under the auspices of an international institution (the UN) – between countries, organizations, and political activists who overtly expressed their aim, namely, for Israel to disappear in the same way that the white government in South Africa had disappeared. Among the decisions of the Durban conference was the statement that Zionism is racism and that Israel was born in sin.

One of the reasons for the "success" of the Durban conference was the fading of the memory of the Holocaust. The younger generations in Europe no longer feel any responsibility or moral obligation for the sins of previous generations. The Holocaust, previously seen as the worst crime in human history and the justification for the existence of a national home for the Jewish people (beyond the more general historical justifications and the right to self-determination), has become, in certain cases, an object of comparison with Israel's actions toward the Palestinians. These comparisons have not yet become widely accepted, but they are gaining ground in the minds of many who are not, and have no wish to become, particularly knowledgeable about the horrors of the Holocaust. If the previous generations' memory of the Holocaust made it more difficult for anti-Semitism and open delegitimization to rear their ugly heads, the dimming of this memory has enabled fascist, neo-Nazi, and anti-Semitic organizations and activists to make anti-Semitic discourse and actions more open and legitimate. Indeed, in recent years, we have witnessed a worrying rise in the scope of anti-Semitic activity in Europe.[5] Likewise, in the United States, the division within the Jewish community, the distancing of some of the community's younger generation from Israel and Judaism, and the rise in the rates of assimilation have weakened the

opposition to the delegitimization campaign, mainly in the academic and intellectual realm.

Developments in the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Since the outbreak of the wave of revolutions in the Middle East, there has been a significant decline in the standing of the Palestinian issue on the regional agenda. The organizing rationale of the regional system has been undermined, and it eroded during the six years of Arab upheaval. The collapse of the system is apparent in the disappearance of some state entities and the disintegration and weakening of others alongside the strengthening of terrorist organizations and non-state players, organized on an ethnic or regional basis. The result is a bloodbath of civil wars and internal conflicts that drag in external players such as Iran, Russia, the United States, and other Western countries, as well as Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which seek to form Sunni coalitions as a counterweight to the Shia and Salafist jihadi axis. The international community appears powerless and is struggling to mobilize both the players and the efforts to stabilize the region. Since there is a real difficulty, to the point of unfeasibility, of reinstating the previous order and reestablishing the nation-states that have collapsed, a new regional order is required. In order to realize this new order, new coalitions must be formed, but the regional and world powers are having great difficulty agreeing on the nature of the new order and are thus failing even to cooperate on bringing the bloodbaths to an end.

In the first decades of the State of Israel and in fact up to the first intifada, which broke out in December 1987, and the Madrid Conference in 1991, the Palestinian issue was seen as part of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. Since Israel was subject to the reality of war with the Arab world (even after signing the peace agreement with Egypt in 1979), the Palestinian issue was seen as secondary to the wider regional issue. During most of these years the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was defined by the United States as a terrorist organization, and unusual instances (such as PLO leader Yasir Arafat being invited to speak in front of the UN General Assembly in 1974) notwithstanding, the Western world respected Israel's reluctance to recognize the PLO, which remained faithful to the dream of Greater Palestine in the spirit of the Palestinian Charter.

The turning point came with Palestinian Declaration of Independence in 1988 and climaxed with the Madrid Conference and the beginning of the

Oslo process, which accelerated the rehabilitation of the PLO and focused international attention on the Palestinian issue. The crises that accompanied the Oslo process and, particularly, the second intifada (which broke out in 2000), the efforts to promote the Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East starting in 2002, the American support for the Sharon government after Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria (2005), and the broad international support for the Olmert government's position on the Palestinian issue all marginalized the newly configured delegitimization efforts. They gained momentum when the peace process stalled after the formation of the second Netanyahu government in March 2009, and especially, after the *Mavi Marmara* incident and the growing momentum of the Palestinian leadership's internationalization strategy.

The greatest fear of the Palestinian leadership is that the ongoing chaos in the Arab world will deflect international interest from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and push the Palestinian issue off the international agenda. The Palestinians have thus attempted to promote their internationalization strategy and to delegitimize Israel via international tribunals and the developing network of delegitimization activists in the Western world (primarily Western Europe and North America). The Palestinian effort has succeeded somewhat due to the misconception of many in the international community who identify the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the main source of regional instability and the central cause for the public hostility in Arab countries toward Western countries seen as supporters of Israel. This is reflected, for example, in the foreign policy of various Western countries and in the claims that the current stalemate prevents the formation of any agreements or alliances against the Islamic State. If, it is claimed, Israel would accept the Saudi peace proposal, it would be easier for the Western nations to form a coalition to fight the Islamic State. In addition, the European Union and European countries, led by France, are trying to advance initiatives for settling the conflict from a belief that this will strengthen their standing in the Arab world and among the large Muslim communities in European countries. There are even those who have connected the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the unrest among immigrant communities in Western Europe; the Swedish Foreign Minister connected it with the wave of jihadist terrorism in Europe. All these trends reinforce misperceptions regarding the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its influence on the shaky regional order. They exploit Israeli policies that are unacceptable to the international community (especially

the expansion of the settlements) in order to strengthen the delegitimization campaign against Israel.

Furthermore, the radicalization of the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular, previously disguised by Wahhabi Islam, has become more evident since the establishment of al-Qaeda, the September 11 attacks on American soil, and the more recent establishment of the Islamic State. Wahhabi clerics, under the state patronage of Saudi Arabia, have acted to accelerate processes of Islamization and radicalization throughout the Muslim world and among Muslim communities in the Western world by establishing *madrassas* (religious schools), training religious leaders, and disseminating ideas through the funding and establishment of endowments at Western academic institutions. These ideas have spread and encouraged the development of communities that separate themselves from civil society in Western countries, religious leaders who challenge the native societies and countries of their communities, and frustrated, angry, and unintegrated young people (most of them lacking the skills necessary for integration) who have translated their frustration into violence and terrorism either in their own countries or by volunteering for jihadist terrorist organizations in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Islamic radicalization, especially in Western Europe, has led to attacks on Jews and also become a basis for recruiting activists and resources for BDS and the delegitimization movement. This religious radicalization has added another element to the ideological foundations of the advocates of delegitimization and has intensified, albeit paradoxically, the essentially Christian anti-Semitism that has been enlisted in the delegitimization efforts.

The Development of the Virtual World and Social Media

One of the most significant technological developments of the twenty-first century is the internet, where social networks shape a virtual reality that corresponds to actual reality. These networks make it possible to generate and distribute ideas at lightning speed, to recruit activists, and to organize and manage activity that influences a wide range of communities. In the world of social networks, the importance of geography is diminished, and it is possible with relatively limited resources to have a significant impact by disseminating ideas, creating and shaping discourse, and running network-based activity. Network-based activity consists of numerous dispersed networks, each acting in its own sector but coordinated and connected in

a way that not only allows for the sharing of ideas, understandings, and experiences but also enables the reinforcement of the effect of activities. In today's network-based world, delegitimization activities in Sydney can resonate in London, San Francisco, and Ramallah. In order to participate in an activity in Sydney, there is no need to actually be there; one can be virtually present while sitting at a computer screen in Ramallah. This network-based activity enables the replication of practices, the exchange of ideas and messages, and, in particular, the creation of virtual coalitions that drive local activities.

The Israeli Response

For several years the State of Israel failed to effectively tackle the challenge. However, in recent years, there have been growing efforts to shape a coherent and proactive strategy, and in many cases, the state has succeeded in establishing cooperation with many other actors and conducting overt and covert operations. While Israel has improved its comprehensive strategy, which is backed by political determination and the allocation of appropriate resources, there is still a need to consolidate agreements between the different government ministries and to create a system that integrates government ministries, NGOs, Jewish communities worldwide, and other allies in the international community.

A comprehensive strategic response requires a broad coalition of partners and their synchronization in order to carry out four types of endeavors:

a. Responsive: responding to delegitimization initiatives that could not be prevented or disrupted in advance.
b. Preventive: preventing and disrupting delegitimization initiatives in advance, e.g., by acting against the activists, their funding, their circulation of their message. It is crucial to undermine the credibility of the hard core, expose their extreme agenda, and preempt their plans by investing in appropriate intelligence capabilities and improving cooperation with organizations on campuses and in other places.
c. Infrastructural: influencing the thinking of different communities in advance in an attempt to block the influence of delegitimization and "immunize" against it. It is important to create personal connections and host delegations in Israel in order to present the complexity of the situation firsthand. There is also a need for academic activities to counteract the quantities of anti-Israel material, such as publicizing studies, influencing

curriculums, developing courses and research programs, and supporting pro-Israel researchers and lecturers.

d. Constructive: exposing different target audiences to Israel's contributions to the Middle East and the world in order to counteract the image of apartheid, racism, and colonialism: for example, creating a network of Israeli organizations and entrepreneurs who work in humanitarian projects around the world assisting underprivileged populations with water, food, and medical technologies. It is important to integrate Israeli entities into the activities of international organizations in areas such as human rights, labor rights, and environmental protection.

In the absence of a strategy that includes both offensive and defensive components and a determined, proactive, and energetic national leadership whose policy is committed to the vision of two nation-states living side by side in peace and cooperation, Israel may find itself in a seriously inferior position with regard to a threat that is becoming increasingly dangerous.

Notes

1   The internationalization strategy adopted by the Palestinians since 2009 (after the establishment of the Netanyahu government) expresses the Palestinian preference for bringing about the creation of a Palestinian state not by negotiation with Israel but by imposition via the international community. The basic premise of this strategy is that by denouncing Israel and presenting it as recalcitrant, as an occupier, and as a violator of international law, the Palestinians can recruit the international community to impose the establishment of the Palestinian state on Israel under conditions more favorable to the Palestinians than those that would be required in the framework of negotiations with Israel.

2   The full detailed version of the report from September 2009 can be found at http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1281016. On April 1, 2011, Judge Goldstone retracted some of the conclusions of the report in an article published in the *Washington Post*: see Richard Goldstone, "Reconsidering the Goldstone Report on Israel and War Crimes," https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC_story.html. It is doubtful whether this was enough to undo the damage caused by the original report published two years earlier.

3   "The Gaza Flotilla: How Israel's Diplomatic Firewall Collapsed," Reut Institute, August 15, 2010, http://reut-institute.org/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=3894.

4   Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

5   "ADL Global 100 – An Index of Anti-Semitism," http://global100.adl.org/public/ADL-Global-100-Executive-Summary2015.pdf.