

The Palestinian Authority, the BDS Movement, and Delegitimization

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In December 2013, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas stated that he does not support a boycott of Israel.¹ Two years later, in a speech before the Greek parliament in Athens, Abbas said that he wants a peace agreement that would connect the Palestinian Authority to Israel rather than a fence separating the two peoples.² Despite these declarations indicating that the Palestinian Authority did not share the same orientation as the BDS movement, its actual policy matched, at least partially, the boycott strategy against Israel, both in the use of delegitimization rhetoric and in the call for boycotts of products. For example, Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah signed a cabinet resolution in late March 2016 banning the import of goods made by five Israeli companies into Palestinian markets: Tnuva, Strauss, Tara, Soglowek, and Jafora-Tabori.³ Previous decisions by the Palestinian cabinet also supported a boycott of products. This article examines the use made by the Palestinian Authority of a boycott of products and delegitimization, explains the reasons that have led the Palestinian Authority to adopt these means since 2014, and indicates ways of action likely to help Israel cope with Palestinian use of these sanctions.

The Products Boycott and the Palestinian Authority's Delegitimization Discourse

Since 2014, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Central Committee has consistently supported an expansion of boycotting activity against Israel

and Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria. The Central Committee's decision on this matter in 2015 emphasized the boycott as an element of popular resistance and also advocated support for the BDS campaign.⁴ Mahmoud al-Aloul, head of the Higher National Committee for the Struggle against Israel's Measures,⁵ asserted that the boycott of products is a response to the "economic and financial siege" that Israel imposed on the Palestinian Authority.⁶ At the same time, the findings of various public opinion surveys indicated a wide gap – 35 percent – between support for the idea of a boycott and its implementation among the Palestinian public. The gap is primarily due to a lack of confidence in local produce and the absence of alternative products in the domestic market⁷ and casts doubt on the will of the Palestinian public to persist in an actual boycott. Indeed, according to a Palestinian study published in November 2015, the damage caused by a boycott in the Palestinian territories amounted to only 1 percent of the volume of the goods traded between the Palestinian Authority and Israel.⁸

Since 2015, Abbas has included rhetorical features of the delegitimization discourse in his speeches, condemning Israel, like the statements made by the BDS movement, as a "colonialist" country that conducts a settlement campaign in contravention of international law and builds a "racist" separation fence. He accuses Israel of violating the agreements it has signed and of assisting the violent acts of religious extremists against the holy places of Islam and Christianity. Abbas also condemns Israel for shooting and murdering non-violent Palestinian demonstrators and murdering children in cold blood.⁹ Israel is portrayed in his speeches as an illegitimate and immoral country that consistently violates basic norms, the principles of international law, and agreements that it has signed, thus "obliging" Abbas to threaten to cancel the agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority and Israel. The Palestinian Authority, on the other hand, is presented as a legitimate and moral actor that respects the norms and principles of international law and enjoys wide international support as the representative of Palestinian rights. In his speeches, Abbas accuses Israel of escalating the political dispute into a violent conflict and demands that the international community act against Israel in a variety of ways to force it to change its illegitimate policy.

Decisions by the Palestinian cabinet and Abbas's speeches are consistent with statements by the BDS movement, and the Palestinian Authority allows the movement to operate from its territory. It does not, however, share its worldview: the Palestinian Authority recognizes Israel's right to exist and is

willing to reach compromises with Israel in the framework of a diplomatic process.¹⁰ It can, furthermore, be argued that relations between the Palestinian Authority and the BDS movement are tense; Omar Barghouti, one of the leaders of the BDS campaign, has even called the Palestinian Authority “a subcontractor of Israel.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the Palestinian Authority regards the boycott movement as a tool for exerting pressure on Israel on the one hand and reducing pressure on its home ground on the other. It can, therefore, be argued that Palestinian institutions have endorsed the movement’s campaign and methods of operation and have created a parallel path that uses the promotion of boycotts and delegitimization rhetoric for its own interests and not those of the boycott movement.

Disappointment with the Political Process and Internal Criticism

Abbas and other senior Palestinian figures repeatedly say that they are interested in an agreement with Israel according to the two-state principle. At the same time, they cast doubt on whether the political process will lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state.¹² The feeling on the Palestinian street is also clear: public opinion surveys conducted in March 2016 by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research headed by Dr. Khalil Shikaki found that 74 percent did not believe that a Palestinian state would be created next to Israel in the next five years.¹³ Many of the public and opinion leaders have thus argued that the commitment to negotiate a political settlement is preserving an insufferable situation in the Palestinian arena, characterized by bitter political and ideological polarization between the Palestinian movements, particularly the acrimonious rift between the Palestinian Authority leadership and Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and by an absence of representative institutions.¹⁴

Disappointment with the prolonged political process is reflected, first and foremost, in severe criticism of Mahmoud Abbas: two-thirds of the Palestinian public are calling for his resignation. They accuse him of being unwilling both to give up on the Oslo Accords and to halt the security coordination with Israel. Abbas is subject to direct criticism from Fatah and PLO members because of his commitment to the accords, which are considered “treason” against Palestinian principles.¹⁵ Criticism of the commitment to a settlement with Israel has also led Palestinian think tanks and research institutes to formulate other political directions, including the “turning point” approach.

The “turning point” approach holds that Palestinian discourse should change from a debate about the political process and the building of national institutions to a debate about national liberation and the realization of rights. Advocates of this approach argue that the former discourse is mistaken for two reasons: first, the Palestinian Authority is under occupation, and there is, therefore, no equality between the two sides in negotiations; and second, the occupation is preventing the practical existence of a Palestinian state, and it is, therefore, futile to discuss the building of institutions. Accordingly, Palestinian discourse should redefine the conflict with Israel as an issue of national liberation and focus on realizing the following goals for all Palestinians, wherever they may be: the right to self-determination, the end of the occupation and the settlement movement, the return of refugees to their homes, and full equal rights for Arab citizens of Israel.¹⁶ In order to achieve these goals, the supporters of this approach advocate a nonviolent struggle with several elements: the initiation of boycotts on a local, regional, and international level; the use of sanctions to isolate Israel; and an appeal to international institutions to put Israeli decision makers and officials on trial for their violation of Palestinian rights.¹⁷ In other words, this approach seeks to pressurize Israel into changing its policy by internationalizing the struggle for Palestinian rights. The initiators and supporters of this approach believe it will help the Palestinian struggle by improving tactical positions in any future rounds of talks and, in particular, by achieving a long-term change in the balance of power against Israel.¹⁸

The “turning point” approach is not an official policy and is not binding on Abbas and the Palestinian leadership. Adopting its discourse, however, confers several advantages. First, like the BDS campaign, this approach seeks to realize Palestinian rights in general and not in an agreement based on the two-state principle.¹⁹ In addition, the adoption of a rhetoric that ignores a political settlement, especially a settlement by the Oslo Accords, is likely to portray Abbas as connected to the prevailing opinions among the Palestinian public. Findings have shown that two-thirds of the Palestinian public (the same proportion that supports Abbas’s resignation) currently want to abandon the Oslo Accords, and a similar proportion support halting security cooperation with Israel, even at the price of an Israeli response such as ending Palestinian police activity in Area B, stopping the issuing of passports and travel documents, and imposing similar sanctions on the West Bank as in the Gaza Strip.²⁰

Support for boycott and delegitimization rhetoric is also likely to enable Abbas to rebuff criticism by Omar Barghouti and the leaders of the BDS campaign in the Palestinian territories, who could be considered political alternatives to Abbas. Endorsement of the idea of abandoning a political settlement and of conducting a campaign for equal rights could indicate that the Palestinian Authority, despite its situation, is the only party capable of representing the Palestinians and of conducting a strategy of a struggle based on principles of national unity, revolution, democracy, and representation.²¹ Delegitimization rhetoric and boycotts are relatively simple methods to apply,²² and the use of negative political labels, such as colonialism, racism, and apartheid, and even the threat to abandon the Oslo Accords do not change the actual balance of power with Israel. The Palestinian Authority, therefore, does not have to pay an oppressive price for using this method.

The Palestinian public supports aggressive actions against Israel such as cancellation of agreements, intensification of the legal campaign against it, affiliation with international institutions and organizations, and even a renewal of violence. Abbas is aware of the public's demands but is unwilling to fully comply due to the intolerable consequences for him. Complete compliance with the public's demands – i.e., the cancellation of existing agreements and aggressive unilateral measures – is likely to put the very existence of the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo Accords in doubt, weaken the Palestinian security agencies, which depend on international funds granted to the PA since its establishment, and rule out almost any possibility of a Palestinian state being established through negotiations. It could even result in the collapse or liquidation of the Palestinian Authority. The rhetoric of delegitimization and the promotion of a boycott on the local level alone might therefore pacify, if only slightly, Palestinian public opinion, without taking any real measures, such as a halt in security coordination and a cancellation of agreements, which would undoubtedly damage the PA and its status. Should these measures prove ineffective, however, they are liable to widen the gap in expectations between the PA leadership and popular Palestinian sentiment, increase criticism of Abbas, and aggravate the conflict between Israel and the PA.

Directions of Israel's Response

Some of the Israeli response to the delegitimization rhetoric and the initiation of boycotts should focus on methods of action already in use: maintaining

overall stability in the Palestinian territories and refuting falsehoods that aim to advance Israel's delegitimization. The maintenance of stability relies on the preservation of existing channels for dialogue and for security and economic coordination with the Palestinian leadership and other parties in the Palestinian Authority. These channels create an organized, consensual, and mutually acceptable mechanism for managing the current situation and constitute a means of delivering messages, recognizing differences, and solving specific problems. They are likely to reduce the chances that either of the parties will take more extreme measures that aggravate the tension on the other side. Israel is also maintaining non-diplomatic channels of communications with the Palestinians. For example, there is economic dialogue between the Israeli minister of finance, Moshe Kahlon, and his Palestinian counterpart, Dr. Shukri Bishara, concerning the package of benefits and incentives for strengthening the Palestinian economy and improving the Palestinians' way of life on the basis of a theoretical assumption that economic improvement will reduce the likelihood of escalation between the two sides.²³ The IDF supports this dialogue and therefore favors the continued issue of permits to 120,000 Palestinians to work in Israel and in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, even at times of tension between the two sides.²⁴

Concerning the refutation of false allegations that aim to delegitimize Israel, Israel's goal is to sow doubt in the international community and among the Palestinians about the aggressive assertions against Israel. Refutation is a decentralized activity, usually conducted by non-governmental groups, including research institutes, which uses Palestinian surveys and studies that paint a different picture from that portrayed in Abbas's speeches. For example, a survey by the Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) published in December 2015 found that Israeli operations in the West Bank were surgical and focused, with only a few percent of those questioned having witnessed the demolition of houses: 85 percent of those questioned in the West Bank had never encountered property damage caused by IDF forces, while 90 percent of those questioned in East Jerusalem had never encountered physical violence by IDF forces.²⁵ These figures contradict remarks by Abbas about the excessive and arbitrary harm of the Palestinians at the hands of the IDF. The use of such information sources to disprove false allegations is always subject to limitations such as the reliability of Palestinian public opinion surveys and other information sources, the political positions of the Palestinian researchers and authors of political

documents, and the objectivity of some of the non-governmental groups in Israel that are researching the PA in order to help the government's rebuttal of false claims. The establishment of a system to combat these allegations is a challenge at the content, organizational, managerial, and political levels and requires coordination and cooperation with non-governmental agencies, and sometimes even their guidance.

At the same time, the aforementioned means to combat the false allegations do not change the current atmosphere, in which the conflict between the parties is perceived as a zero-sum game. Therefore, in addition to the means already employed, Israel should give thorough consideration to possible plans for a change in the current situation that will be advantageous to both sides. This would entail recognition of the gaps between their current positions, an understanding of why both sides have for years consistently violated the agreements they signed, an attempt to define key parameters on which to base possible solutions, and the description of possible scenarios corresponding to each of the solutions. Only a reexamination of the Israeli-Palestinian political process from a historical perspective and the solutions designed during that process could help devise possible mechanisms for future solutions, mechanisms that will have to include components to reduce the Palestinian incentive for initiating boycotts due to Israeli policy and for using delegitimization rhetoric against Israel.

Notes

- 1 Ben Dror Yemini and Assaf Gibor, "Abu Mazen Surprises: 'We Do Not Support Boycott of Israel,'" *NRG*, December 19, 2013, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/532/565.html>.
- 2 Mahmoud Abbas, "The President's Remarks to the Greek Parliament," PA Chairman's website, December 22, 2015, <http://president.ps/videos.aspx?id=49>.
- 3 Cabinet resolution No. 17/95/03 in 2016: Preventing the Entry of Goods from Five Israeli Companies into the Palestinian Market, Palestinian Government, March 22, 2016.
- 4 27th PLO Central Committee Conference, "The Steadfastness and Popular Resistance Conference," Ramallah, March 2015.
- 5 This entity, which was apparently founded by the Palestinian Authority, promotes, inter alia, a boycott of Israeli products in the Palestinian territories.
- 6 "New Campaign to Boycott Israeli Products in the West Bank," *I24News*, February 24, 2015.
- 7 A poll conducted by An-Najah National University in November 2015 showed that while 84 percent support the idea of a boycott of goods from Israel, only 49

- percent buy Palestinian goods, and 36 percent buy both Israeli and Palestinian merchandise. For further reading, see “Results of Palestinian Public Opinion Survey No. 51,” Center for Public Opinion Surveys and Statistics, An-Najah University, November 2015, <http://www.miftah.org/arabic/Docs/Reports/2015/Other/PalestinianPublicOpinionPollNo51Ar.pdf>.
- 8 Ashraf Badr, “The BDS Global Boycott Movement: Between Exaggeration and Understatement,” Introduction to *General Policy and Strategic Thinking*, Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies, Masarat, November 2015, pp. 61-83, http://www.masarat.ps/sites/default/files/ktb_lbrnmj_ltdryby_lmwfq_llmtbw.pdf.
 - 9 To hear the speeches (in Arabic), see Mahmoud Abbas, “Remarks by the President to the Human Rights Council in Geneva,” PA Chairman’s website, October 28, 2015; Mahmoud Abbas, “Remarks by the President to the Palestinian People,” PA Chairman’s website, October 14, 2015; Mahmoud Abbas, “Remarks by the President at a Meeting with Arab Media Representatives from Israel,” PA Chairman’s website, February 8, 2016; Mahmoud Abbas, “Remarks by the President at the Fifth Emergency Conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, PA Chairman’s website, March 7, 2016, <http://president.ps/videos.aspx?id=49>.
 - 10 “A Comparison between the Positions of the PA and Fatah and the World View of the BDS Campaign,” *The Role of the Palestinians in the BDS Campaign*, Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, July 29, 2015, pp. 32-33, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20851/H_111_15_225790401.pdf.
 - 11 Gillian Slovo, “An Interview with Omar Barghouti,” *Wasafiri* 29, no. 4 (2014): 36-41.
 - 12 For example, Saeb Erekat said in January 2014: “We do not oppose a two-state solution or the political process. We will achieve our rights.” Similarly, Nabil Shaath said in October 2015: “We are always willing to go back to taking part in the diplomatic process, but such participation must be on the basis of conditions that Israel and the US will not accept.” See Saeb Erekat, “The State of the Negotiations and Their Future,” *Third Annual Conference: Strategies of Resistance*, Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies, Masarat, 2014, pp. 109-14, http://www.masarat.ps/sites/default/files/content_files/massarat_3.pdf. See also Nabil Shaath, “Internationalization and Arabization as a Basis for a New Palestinian Strategy,” *The Palestinian Question and the International Dimension: Opportunities and Strategic Requirements*, Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies – Masarat, October 2015, pp. 151-54.
 - 13 Khalil Shikaki, “Palestinian Public Poll No (59),” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, March 2016, <http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/poll%2059%20%20fulltext%20English.pdf>.

- 14 "National Unity Document: A Draft Proposal," Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies – Masarat, February 2016, p. 2, http://www.masarat.ps/sites/default/files/wthyq_lwhd.pdf.
- 15 The following is part of Abbas's speech at the 27th PLO Central Committee Conference: "The 'treasonous' Oslo (Accords). We are here because of Oslo, but it is (considered) 'treasonous.' We founded the PA because of 'treasonous' Oslo, and we will be a state (thanks to) this 'treason.'" To hear the speech, see Mahmoud Abbas, "The President's Remarks at the 27th PLO Central Committee Conference: The Steadfastness and Popular Resistance Conference," PA Chairman's website, March 2015, <http://president.ps/videos.aspx?id=49&page=2>.
- 16 "Conditions for Success in a Strategic Turnaround," *Turning Point: Redefining the National Project and Devising a Strategy for Achieve its Goals*, Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies – Masarat, December 2014, pp. 31-32, http://www.masarat.ps/sites/default/files/point_inside_7_1.pdf.
- 17 Ibid, pp. 89-90.
- 18 Hani al-Masri, "Remarks by the Preparatory Committee for the Conference," *The Palestinian Question and the International Dimension: Opportunities and Strategic Demands*, pp. 9-12, http://www.masarat.ps/sites/default/files/conference_file/ktb_lmwtmr_lrb_lmwfq_llmtbw.pdf.
- 19 Amal Ahmad, "Reflections on Palestinian Strategy," *al-Shabaka*, February 2016, <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/reflections-on-palestinian-strategy/>.
- 20 Khalil Shikaki, "Palestinian Public Poll No (58)," Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, December 2015, pp. 3-4, <http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/p58%20full%20Arabic.pdf>.
- 21 Omar al-Barghouti, "The Boycott Israel Movement – BDS," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 99 (2014): 20-28, <http://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/mdf-articles/020-028.pdf>.
- 22 Neta Oren and Daniel Bar-Tal, "The Detrimental Dynamics of Delegitimization in Intractable Conflicts: The Israeli-Palestinian Case," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 31, no. 1 (2007): 111-26.
- 23 Nizan Feldman, "Economic Peace: Theory vs. Reality," *Strategic Assessment* 12, no. 3 (2009): 19-28, <http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/FILE1259657930-1.pdf>.
- 24 Ben Caspit, "Will Economic Aid Rebuild Trust Between Israelis, Palestinians?" *al-Monitor*, February 22, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2016/02/economic-peace-moshe-kahlon-shukri-bishara-finance-minister.html>.
- 25 "Young Palestinians and the Public Uprising: An Internet Public Opinion Survey of Young Palestinians (age 16-35)," Ramallah, Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD), December 2015, <http://www.awrad.org/files/server/Online%20youth%20Arabic%20Tables%20online%20dec%202015.pdf>.