

Europe and the Delegitimization of Israel in 2017

Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Rotem Oreg

The phenomenon of Israel's delegitimization in the international arena has persisted for over a decade, and is primarily propagated by civil society activists who have organized transnationally and across borders to isolate Israel internationally. With the aim of gauging this phenomenon in a limited geographic area and timeframe, the current article asks, "What are the central milestones in the phenomenon of Israel's delegitimization as manifested in Europe in 2017?" The article's central claims are that efforts to delegitimize Israel in Europe characteristically remain in the civil society realm, falling short of penetrating the official European political establishment, and thus, at least to date, have few repercussions on Israel's diplomatic standing in Europe. The analysis of Israel's delegitimization in a limited region and during a limited timeframe cannot be generalized to summarize the scope of the phenomenon elsewhere. The methodology adopted in this paper, however, can be a model for future research of other regions to form a cumulative picture and in turn contribute to a fuller comprehension of the phenomenon. The article begins with background regarding the delegitimization phenomenon, followed by an analysis dwelling on major developments pertaining to Israel's delegitimization and the counter struggle waged against this phenomenon in Europe during 2017. It concludes with a discussion and policy recommendations.

Israel's International Delegitimization

Research shows that delegitimizing rhetoric relating to Israel gained significant momentum at the turn of the century and has been on the rise ever since.¹ Two milestones that appear to have contributed to this phenomenon are the UN Durban Conference (2001), which united hundreds of civil society organizations in a call to boycott Israel; and a formal call in 2005 to isolate Israel internationally, endorsed by over 70 civil society organizations. This latter development formed the basis of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which continues to spearhead the current campaign to delegitimize Israel.

A defining feature of the BDS movement is its founding and support by dedicated civil society activists from all corners of the world, providing the campaign with momentum and popularity and reinforcing its ostensible moral legitimacy. The movement's operational infrastructure is typified by the ability of BDS activists to plug into local contexts in different corners of the world, as demonstrated by the translation of the 2005 BDS call to seven languages and its official endorsement by organizations operating outside the Palestinian realm. This includes organizations based in Arab countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, but also in Western states such as the United States, Canada, Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Sweden.²

Common to delegitimizing activities throughout the world is the core belief that Israel does not have the right to exist in its current format as the homeland of the Jewish people. This paradigm is demonstrated by the three goals at the base of the BDS call, which advocates isolating Israel until the latter ends the "occupation of all Arab lands"³ and dismantles "the Wall"; recognizes the right of "Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality" (already granted by Israeli law); and enables "Palestinian refugees to return to their homes."⁴

After more than a decade of intensive efforts geared toward isolating Israel internationally, the BDS movement has based itself on the margins of civil society in several West European countries.⁵ However, measuring the impact of this phenomenon has proven to be a challenge: assessing the campaign's merit exclusively on the realization of its goals – manifested in concrete indications of Israel's international isolation – clearly encapsulates a very negative scenario that once reached will be difficult to reverse. On the other hand, assessing the campaign's merit based on events conducted



Pro-Palestinian demonstration, Paris, October 10, 2015.

Photo: Matthieu Alexandre / AFP / Getty Images

under its global banner results in heightened focus on small scale activities with minimal to non-existing impact, creating a skewed picture of an over-sized, imminent threat to Israel's international standing.

Avoiding these obstacles, the following section relates to central milestones in Israel's delegitimization in Europe during 2017, as a means of characterizing this phenomenon in a given area and time period. While analyses of delegitimization in a limited region and timeframe cannot be generalized to imply the scope of the phenomenon elsewhere, the methodology adopted below can be applied to other regions in future research to form a cumulative picture, and in turn a wider understanding of the phenomenon.

European-based Efforts to Delegitimize Israel and Counter Initiatives

The following section presents an overview of significant developments that resonated in international discourse during 2017. The choice to include specific developments over others is based on the exposure and subsequent debate of such events, inferred from their coverage in traditional English media outlets.⁶ While this methodology may paint a different picture than the one received by analyzing social media, it is instrumental in identifying

key developments that were more likely to result in wider impact than events that remain largely confined to the virtual world.

Delegitimization

Events in 2017 can be categorized according to three central realms: political, economic, academic, and cultural.

At the time of this writing, public support for the BDS campaign in the official political European establishment was voiced only by Ireland's President Michael Higgins, who applauded BDS leader Omar Barghouti at a conference in Belfast. President Higgins served as the head of Friends of Palestine in the Irish Parliament, and has a record of references to Israel's security barrier as the "apartheid wall."⁷ In Spain, some political establishment representatives support civil society action against Israel, where the second largest opposition party,⁸ Podemos, openly endorses BDS.⁹ In the Netherlands, the general 2017 elections resulted in the first representation in parliament of the DENK party,¹⁰ which has displayed suspicion toward those voicing support for Israel, has a track record of anti-Semitic statements,¹¹ and whose leader refused to shake hands with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in 2016.¹²

In the economic realm, Norway's largest trade union, the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), endorsed BDS principles and, defying a recommendation from its leadership, voted in support of an international boycott of Israel.¹³ In addition, one of Denmark's largest pension funds announced that it will bar investment in four companies that operate in West Bank settlements.¹⁴

In the academic realm, noteworthy developments include Israel Apartheid Week in campuses in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Austria. Three additional benchmarks in the academic world are an open letter signed by 200 legal experts from Britain and 14 other European nations protesting anti-BDS legislature as violations of fundamental human rights;¹⁵ the rejection of the IHRA¹⁶ definition of anti-Semitism by the British Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) under the premise that it "conflates anti-Semitism with criticism of the state of Israel";¹⁷ and academic conferences that adopt delegitimizing rhetoric. Two examples in Ireland include a conference in Cork questioning Israel's legitimate right to exist, and a conference in Dublin relating to the boycott of Israel as a case study of the restrictions on academic freedom.

In the cultural realm, “Palestine Expo,” a two-day anti-Israel event that was branded as a Palestinian cultural event, was held in a government building in London; and systematic efforts hounding European artists to refrain from performing in Israel continued (albeit with little success).¹⁸ Noteworthy is activists’ role in leading to the cancellation of singer Lorde’s trip to Israel.¹⁹ Although Lorde is from New Zealand, and thus outside of the scope of this research, European activists’ involvement in the grassroots efforts to cancel the singer’s show in Israel cannot be ruled out.

Counter Efforts

A prominent actor at the forefront of the struggle against Israel’s delegitimization in Europe in 2017 was the European Parliament, which adopted the IHRA definition that denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination amounts to anti-Semitism.²⁰ Moreover, the European Parliament encouraged EU member states to adopt this definition – publicly commending the UK, Romania, and Austria, which had already fulfilled this policy directive. Subsequently, Germany and Bulgaria adopted the definition, raising the number of European states that endorse the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism to five.²¹

On the level of member states, several high ranking leaders denounced efforts to delegitimize Israel internationally. These include French President Macron’s decision to oust two of his party’s Parliamentary candidates, owing to their stated support for BDS, along with his declaration that “anti-Zionism is a new type of anti-Semitism”;²² the public commitment by Berlin Mayor Michael Muller to work against organizations that promote boycotts of Israel;²³ and a call by the German Christian Democratic Party and Social Democratic Party to denounce BDS as anti-Semitic. For their part, the establishment in Spain published a statement asserting that the “Spanish government has a consistent, official and long-standing position against BDS,”²⁴ and Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende condemned the Norwegian trade union’s decision to boycott Israel.²⁵ Also in Norway, the government noted it will no longer fund NGOs that support boycotts of Israel;²⁶ days after the Danish Foreign Ministry announced it will stop funding over a dozen Palestinian organizations in the wake of an investigation concluding that they channeled state funds to anti-Israel activity.²⁷

Considerable efforts in Israel's defense were also made in the United Kingdom. Theresa May's government prohibited local authorities from introducing changes to trade regulations with allies, thus disabling their opportunity to endorse calls to boycott Israeli goods.²⁸ The Charity Commission²⁹ opened an inquiry regarding student unions that support the grassroots BDS campaign,³⁰ and Universities Minister Jo Johnson issued a letter to UK university leaderships reminding them of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism in advance of Israel Apartheid Week on British campuses, a move that reportedly led to the cancellation of several events and the toning down of others.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A comparison of these initiatives demonstrates that in 2017 European efforts geared toward delegitimizing Israel remained primarily in the civil society realm, with the majority of the European establishment working proactively to block their effect, both in the European Parliament and on the level of national EU member states. As such, it appears that thus far civil society-backed efforts to delegitimize Israel have little impact on Israel's diplomatic standing in Europe.

Nevertheless, the European arm of the global campaign to delegitimize Israel should not be dismissed. As the article demonstrates, this is not because of the campaign's formal achievements, but because of its engagement in a long term struggle and its displayed ability to persist for over a decade; its multi-faceted approach revealed by initiatives launched in the political, economic, academic, and cultural arenas; and the campaign's ability to draw press coverage and hence potentially shape international discourse and influence public opinion. These characteristics, along with the increasing ability of civil society actors who form the campaign's base to participate in diplomatic processes once reserved solely for official state representatives, lend the campaign increasing power and possibilities.

The methodology employed in this research, i.e., zooming in on a demarcated region during a defined timeframe, does not enable generalizing from the paper's assertions beyond Europe or beyond the specific timeframe discussed. Nonetheless, such an approach is vital in comprehending and assessing a phenomenon that boasts the ability to plug-in to an array of local contexts, and is constantly evolving in response to developments on the ground. As such, similar research pinpointing central milestones in the

manifestation of activities pertaining to Israel's delegitimization and their counteraction should be conducted in multiple regions and in an ongoing manner.

In searching for an antidote to European initiatives to delegitimize Israel, on a technical level, Israel should strive not only to preserve the European establishment's support, but to proactively nurture and cultivate it by seeking to upgrade cooperation and refrain from relating to Europe as a monolithic bloc. In this respect, Israel should work strategically, hand-in-hand with Brussels and member states to counter delegitimization efforts targeting Israel, by encouraging additional European states to endorse and enforce the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. Given the achievement of the negative campaign by the mere international deliberation regarding the question of Israel's legitimacy, Israeli establishment and civil society actors should maintain counteractivity in this realm away from the limelight.

On a more substantive level, the Israeli establishment should consider recognizing that the more that civil society anti-Israel activism increases, the more likely it is to eventually become reflected in official European policy. Although articulating a coherent Israeli strategy on how to emerge out of the current Israeli-Palestinian impasse will by no means annul the phenomenon, it will credit Israel with much needed diplomatic points in the long term struggle – in Europe and elsewhere.

Notes

- 1 Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky, "Israel and Apartheid in International Discourse," *Strategic Assessment* 18, no. 3 (2015): 105-16.
- 2 Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky, "AAM and BDS: More of the Same?" in *The Delegitimization Phenomenon: Challenges and Responses*, eds. Einav Yogeve and Gallia Lindenstrauss (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, Memorandum No. 169, September 2017).
- 3 See Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS, July 9, 2005, <https://bdsmovement.net/call>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Shimon Stein and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "The BDS Movement and European Leaders Mixed Trends and Questions about the Future," in *The Delegitimization Phenomenon: Challenges and Responses*.
- 6 Given the limitation of basing our knowledge of delegitimization-related developments on English-based media sources, this research may underplay events in European countries that were not covered in English-speaking press outlets. We nevertheless

- believe that events of particular significance (such as the one described in Norway) are reported on in English sources and thus penetrate global public discourse.
- 7 “Founder of BDS Movement Meets with Irish President,” *i24news*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/150943-170720-founder-of-bds-movement-meets-with-irish-president>.
 - 8 Inmaculada Sanz and Sarah White, “Spain’s Podemos Leader Rules out Portuguese-Style Leftist Alliance,” *Reuters*, June 9, 2017, <https://goo.gl/vcPA3Z>.
 - 9 “BDS Motions Pass in Four Spanish Cities, Fail in Four Others,” *Haaretz*, April 26, 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.716489>.
 - 10 Ayse Betul Bal, “DENK Party in Netherlands Declares Fight against anti-Muslim Tendencies, Far-right,” *Daily Sabah*, October 27, 2017, <https://goo.gl/QSvjTA>.
 - 11 Cnaan Lipshitz, “I was just Accused of being an Israeli Spy in the Dutch Parliament,” *Times of Israel*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/i-was-just-accused-of-being-an-israeli-spy-in-the-dutch-parliament/>.
 - 12 “Dutch Muslim MP Refuses to Shake Netanyahu’s Hand,” *Times of Israel*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/dutch-muslim-mp-refuses-to-shake-netanyahus-hand/>.
 - 13 “Norway’s Biggest Trade Union Angers Israel with Boycott,” *The Local*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.no/20170512/norways-biggest-trade-union-angers-israel-with-boycott>.
 - 14 Max Schindler, “Danish Pension Fund Bans Four Firms over West Bank Settlement Activity,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 13, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Danish-pension-fund-bans-four-firms-over-West-Bank-settlement-activity-507315>.
 - 15 Lizzie Dearden, “Boycotting Israel is ‘Lawful Exercise of Freedom of Expression’ Lawyers Say after British Government’s Ban,” *Independent*, December 9, 2016, <https://goo.gl/ZuZ3MM>.
 - 16 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The definition asserts that the denial of the Jewish people’s right to self-determination – including by claiming that Israel’s existence is a racist endeavor – amounts to anti-Semitism. See http://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/press_release_document_antisemitism.pdf.
 - 17 “British Universities and Colleges Union,” *UCU Congress 2017*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/8802/Business-of-the-Equality-Committee-2017#57>.
 - 18 As noted in the appearances of British artist Rod Stewart and the bands Radiohead and the Pet Shop Boys, all of whom rejected calls to refrain from performing in Israel.
 - 19 Peter Beaumont, “Lorde Cancels Israel Concert after pro-Palestinian Campaign,” December 25, 2017, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/dec/25/lorde-cancels-israel-concert-after-pro-palestinian-campaign>.
 - 20 European Parliament decision: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2017-0243+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>.

- 21 "Germany Endorses Working Definition of Antisemitism," IHRA, September 20, 2017, <http://holocaustremembrance.com/media-room/stories/germany-endorses-working-definition-antisemitism>; "Bulgaria Adopts Working Definition of Antisemitism," IHRA, October 24, 2017, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/media-room/stories/bulgaria-adopts-working-definition-antisemitism>.
- 22 The statement was made in Paris at an event to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Vel D'Hiv roundup, in which over 13,000 French Jews were deported to Nazi concentration camps in 1942. See Benjamin Kentish, "Emmanuel Macron Says anti-Zionism is a New Type of anti-Semitism," *Independent*, July 17, 2017, <https://goo.gl/VoufV2>.
- 23 "Berlin's Mayor Denounces anti-Israel BDS Movement after Outcry," *JNS*, September 8, 2017, <https://goo.gl/dYySSq>.
- 24 Benjamin Weinthal, "Israeli Lawmaker Urges Spain to Stop Funds for BDS NGOs," *Jerusalem Post*, June 28, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/BDS-THREAT/Israeli-lawmaker-urges-spain-to-stop-funds-for-BDS-NGOs-498182>.
- 25 "Norway's Biggest Trade Union Angers Israel with Boycott," *The Local*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.no/20170512/norways-biggest-trade-union-angers-israel-with-boycott>.
- 26 "Norway Said Set to Cut Funding for pro-BDS Palestinian NGOs," *Times of Israel*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/norway-said-set-to-cut-funding-for-pro-bds-palestinian-ngos/>. As noted in the text, at issue here is that Norway will cease this support.
- 27 Itamar Eichner, "Denmark Halts Aid to Palestinian NGOs over Terror Ties," *Ynetnews.com*, December 23, 2017, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5060877,00.html>
- 28 This decision was later rescinded by a High Court ruling that accepted the BDS groups' appeal.
- 29 I.e., the British governmental department responsible for registering and regulating charities.
- 30 The inquiry included research into a number of students group across the UK with the aim of assessing their activities' compatibility with the British government's instructions regarding anti-Semitism.