

# **The Threat of the Delegitimization of the State of Israel: Case Study of the Management of a Cognitive Campaign**

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The fight over the international legitimacy of the State of Israel has taken place since its establishment, but its characteristics have changed over the years. Unlike campaigns against states and terrorist organizations in which the cognitive component is seen as complementary, the legitimacy campaign occurs, first and foremost, in the cognitive dimension. Even seemingly tangible steps, such as attempts to advance a boycott of Israel, aim, in effect, to erode Israel's public image and its diplomatic standing in the international arena to the point of undermining the legitimacy of its very existence as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Given this, the confrontation over the legitimacy of the State of Israel, with its different components, can also serve as a case study for learning about the cognitive campaign in its broad context and for examining perspectives and modes of operation in the field of influencing cognition.

This article examines the efforts to delegitimize Israel from the perspective of a cognitive campaign. The article begins by describing the roots of the delegitimization phenomenon and presents the framework of the counter campaign. It then presents the impact of the environment on the struggle of narratives within this campaign and concludes with an analysis of the

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unique characteristics of this campaign. The article focuses on the structuring of the campaign's framework, its dynamics, and select characteristics as a cognitive confrontation. As such, the article does not examine in depth the campaign's contents and developments. It does not discuss the question of whether Israel's policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has influenced the delegitimization phenomenon. Our working hypothesis in this respect is that Israel's policy does influence the delegitimization phenomenon, but even if there are substantial changes in this policy, the delegitimization phenomenon will not subside considerably.

### **The Roots of the Phenomenon of Delegitimizing the State of Israel**

The campaign to deny Israel's legitimacy as the nation-state of the Jewish people began before the establishment of the state. The Arab states led this campaign over the years, mainly through diplomatic, political, and economic means, the most prominent example being the Arab boycott. Since 2001, civil society groups, along with various Palestinian organizations, have assumed the leadership of the campaign to delegitimize Israel. These groups are mainly active in the West, with the goal of influencing broad populations and decision makers. Consequently, the public sphere – namely the media and social media – have become the main arena of operation, due to their increasing influence on the decision making processes in different aspects of life.<sup>2</sup>

The first Durban conference, which convened in 2001 in Durban, South Africa, was a notable turning point for the current constellation of the phenomenon of delegitimizing Israel. The conference, attended by over 1,500 civil society organizations, was supposedly dedicated to the struggle against racism and xenophobia in general, but a significant portion of its declarations related to the State of Israel and challenged its legitimacy, all under the auspices of the United Nations. Israel was presented at the conference as a colonialist, occupying state that was instituting an apartheid

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2 For more on the roots of the delegitimization campaign, see Yehuda Ben Meir and Owen Alterman, "The Delegitimization Threat: Roots, Manifestations, and Containment," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2011*, eds. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2011).

regime, violating the rights of the Palestinians, carrying out crimes against humanity, and violating international law.

One of the well-known and leading bodies in the campaign to delegitimize Israel is the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, which was established in 2005 by some 170 organizations that adopted the call to boycott Israel. The BDS movement operates through networks, in a decentralized manner, lacking almost any hierarchy and unified direction. Hundreds of organizations around the world currently operate within its framework, organizing campaigns to boycott Israel, prevent investments in it, and impose sanctions on Israel and on those connected to it. The BDS movement includes a Palestinian umbrella organization called the BDS National Committee (BNC), which includes all the Palestinian organizations that are committed to the boycott of Israel. This organization purports to direct the policy of the boycott and tries to coordinate the various parties involved.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, other organizations involved in the BDS movement also collaborate together.

The pro-Israel camp fighting against delegitimization has also operated through networks in recent years, namely hundreds of civil society groups that operate both globally and in Israel, along with the activity of the Israeli government and its agencies in this field. Creating shared goals and coordinating when there are different ways of operating and so many actors are, of course, an especially complex challenge.

Unlike military campaigns, which are usually bilateral and between two distinct adversaries, the campaign for the legitimacy of Israel is a campaign between the pro-Israel (“blue”) camp and the anti-Israel (“red”) camp for the support of many different target audiences (Figure 1). Along with the pro-Israel camp’s efforts to thwart the actions of the anti-Israel “red” camp, and in addition to its attempts to weaken or undermine it, the pro-Israel camp must also work to reduce the impact of the “red” narrative among the various target audiences and strengthen the exposure, dissemination, and impact of the pro-Israel narrative. The target audiences are not monolithic, and their attitudes toward Israel are influenced by their worldviews, their political and social frameworks, their socioeconomic class, education, culture, and additional characteristics. As a result, the attempt to influence

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3 Palestinian BDS National Committee, <https://bit.ly/2a5UIzG>.

their perspectives, inclinations, and positions requires mapping them and identifying the most effective ways to influence them in the desired direction.

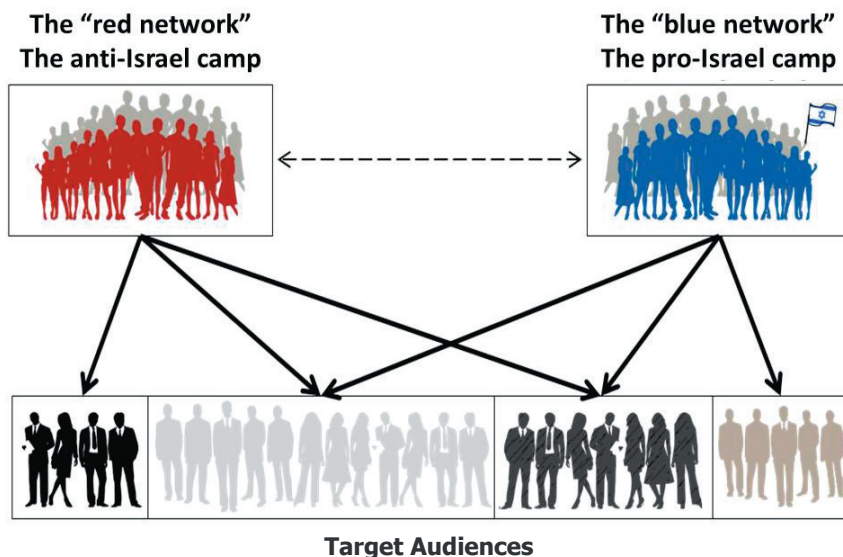


Figure 1: The Campaign for the Legitimacy of Israel

### The Environment of the Delegitimization Campaign: A Struggle over Narratives

In order to understand the environment of the delegitimization campaign and the way cognition is shaped, it is necessary to understand the conceptual-theoretical-ideological realm in which the delegitimization of Israel developed, as well as the zeitgeist. Major historical processes and social forces (such as ideological, social, economic, and cultural trends and movements) have influenced the shaping of cognition, and, in particular, the way Israel is perceived. All of these need to be considered when formulating the response.

The dominant metanarrative<sup>4</sup> today among many liberal and progressive populations in the Western world is hostile not only to the very existence and essence of the State of Israel but also to many foundations of Western culture and the existing world order. After the two World Wars and, even

4 A metanarrative is a large, comprehensive story regarding the source, moral purpose, and objective of humanity, which provides or denies legitimacy in relation to local narratives and actions in the reality of our lives.

more so, after the extent of the Holocaust's horrors became clear, an extensive process began in the West of challenging and reexamining the conceptions that formed the basis of the existing order. In the context of the rupture that occurred, post-modern philosophy developed, combining a number of worldviews, including post-colonialism, post-nationalism, and post-Zionism. In many cases, Israel serves as a scapegoat for post-colonial guilt, which is especially common today in Europe and the United States.

According to this worldview, Israel transformed from oppressed to oppressor. Its "crimes," as those engaged in delegitimization refer to Israel's policies on the Palestinian issue, constitute evidence of the racist-colonialist-imperialist oppressor's exploitation of the indigenous, native other, the "innocent victim." An expression of this worldview, for example, can be seen in the Great March of Return, the organized mass protests in the Gaza Strip taking place along the border with Israel since March 2018. The delegitimization organizations have adopted the Palestinian terminology to describe the events in Gaza, calling them "popular protests," "a peaceful march," "a non-violent march that is not identified with any political party,"<sup>5</sup> as well as a struggle between the Palestinian public marching "in favor of the most basic human rights," and an army "that fired all of the bullets."<sup>6</sup> They do this without referring to Hamas's involvement in organizing the demonstrations and without expressing any criticism of the violence and use of force by Palestinians during them.<sup>7</sup>

The worldviews that are hostile toward Israel and the Western world order enable the existence of the "green-red alliance," which includes Islamist organizations ("green") that are active alongside radical leftist organizations ("red"). This unwritten alliance has led the anti-Israel activity in the West during the past two decades and has succeeded in joining forces with additional groups, especially those that represent minorities and disenfranchised populations and whose main activity is struggling against the existing order, the elites, and the establishment. The attempt to connect

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5 "Jewish Voice for Peace Horrified by Israel's Disproportionate Violent Response to Peaceful Protest," Jewish Voice for Peace, April 6, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Sn2rfc>.

6 "Killed for Protesting: 6 Things to Know about the #Greatreturnmarch," Jewish Voice for Peace, April 5, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2HAuk1V>.

7 "News on Terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict – May 9-15, 2018," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, May 15, 2018 [in Hebrew].

different groups, populations, and agendas into a joint struggle of all who are “victims” against all those depicted as “oppressors” is called intersectionality.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the delegitimization organizations have succeeded in placing the Palestinian issue on the agenda both in the local and global arenas, while creating an “alliance of the oppressed” and connecting their struggle with those advancing the rights of disenfranchised groups. These groups include blacks, LGBTs, migrants, women, environmental activists, human rights activists, labor unions, and more.

The use of intersectionality strengthens the narrative of the struggle for Palestinian rights as a legitimate struggle for the rights of a marginalized and oppressed group, thus recruiting many target audiences for the campaign, while blurring the real goals behind the core activists who have implemented the campaign, of denying the right of the State of Israel to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people and placing the Palestinian issue on the global agenda.<sup>9</sup> In the view of those engaged in the delegitimization of Israel, this is a matter of principle and not an action based on taking advantage of specific opportunities.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Israel and diaspora Jews – who in the past were a model, a source of inspiration, and a natural partner for many minority groups struggling for rights, recognition, and status – now are perceived by the most recent generation as a clear example of “white privilege,” and many groups

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8 Clareta Treger, “We’re Together in One Struggle,” *Alachson*, July 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2jzZJqX> [in Hebrew].

9 For example, the Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC) champions the values of liberty, justice, and equality and declares that its goals are ending the Israeli occupation in the Gaza Strip, Judea, and Samaria (including East Jerusalem) and the Golan Heights; achieving full equal rights for Arab Israelis; and implementing the right of return for all of the Palestinian refugees. The organization does not state its vision of the desired future political reality (one state, two states, and so forth) and ignores the fact that the implication of fully implementing the right of return in the name of the rights of the Palestinians is, seemingly, the denial of the right of Jews for self-determination in the Land of Israel. See <https://bit.ly/2b07lw3>.

10 See, for example, the three-way conversation that took place on February 1, 2018 between the director of the organization JVP (Jewish Voice for Peace) – a Jewish-American organization that supports BDS – with the director of the leading delegitimization organization in the UK (Palestine Solidarity Campaign – PSC) and with Omar Barghouti, one of the founders of the BDS movement. As part of this conversation, the three discussed the importance of intersectionality. The conversation was reported on the Facebook page of JVP. See <https://bit.ly/2MNmBgy>.

consider them responsible for the oppression of disenfranchised groups and for the wrongs committed against them. The ability of the proponents of delegitimization and supporters of BDS to unify these groups for a joint objective and to recruit them for efforts that harm Israel and Jews provides them with a significant source of power. On the other hand, the diversity of agendas, worldviews, populations, and objectives of these supporters is a potential vulnerability in their attempt to present a unified and stable front.

The decline in the power of truth could also explain the factors of influence among the different target audiences and the difficulty that the Israeli establishment has faced in presenting what the Israeli public has experienced. A study published recently by the RAND Corporation, entitled “Truth Decay,” describes this trend and discusses the central characteristics and main factors that have led to it. While the study focuses on the American arena, similar trends can be identified elsewhere. According to the study, the current era is characterized by increasing disagreement in distinguishing between fact and fiction, the blurring of the boundaries between facts and opinions, the growing magnitude of opinions, and the waning confidence in sources and institutions that were once considered credible. The main factors involved are cognitive failures and the way people process information and make decisions; changes in information systems, such the growing importance of social media, which increased the volume of information, the variety of opinions, and the wide distribution of disinformation; and political, socio-demographic, and economic polarization, which increases disagreement.<sup>11</sup>

The internal political polarization in the American arena also influences attitudes toward Israel. A Gallup poll published in 2018 claims that 87 percent of Republicans in the United States identify with Israel, compared to only 49 percent of Democrats.<sup>12</sup> The Pew Research Center claimed even greater polarization between Republicans and Democrats regarding Israel. According to the Pew Research Center, 79 percent of Republicans identify more with Israel than with the Palestinians, compared to only 27 percent of Democrats. The institute’s poll found that the situation is especially severe

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11 Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2018), <https://bit.ly/2D78Wff>.

12 Lydia Saad, “Americans Remain Staunchly in Israel’s Corner,” GALLUP, March 13, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2x46IfX>.



among liberal Democrats, with only 19 percent of them identifying more with Israel, while 35 percent identify more with the Palestinians.<sup>13</sup>

This political polarization in the United States is characterized by a black and white reality, referring to “us and them.” During the past two years in the United States, a significant protest movement against President Donald Trump has emerged, and since Israel is seen as an obvious ally of his administration, the waves of popular and political protest against the President sometimes intensify the delegitimization phenomenon. In this reality of polarization and division in American society, bipartisan support for Israel, which is perhaps the most important anchor of the special relationship between the two countries, is in danger. In addition, many American Jews are experiencing increasing tension between their stringent opposition to President Trump and their basic support for Israel.

Another unique challenge is that of measurement. The combination of physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that relate to stances, worldviews, and feelings makes it difficult to measure how the threat changes over time and the success or failure of the delegitimization efforts on one hand and the efforts of the pro-Israel camp to influence the worldviews and stances of target audiences on the other hand. This is especially true because shaping the cognition of these audiences is a long term process that is influenced by broader variables, which are difficult to isolate and attribute to one effort or another.

### **The Campaign for the Delegitimization of Israel**

The phenomenon of delegitimizing the State of Israel threatens its national security, especially its freedom to make decisions and take actions in a variety of areas. In the modern global era, legitimacy is a necessary condition for a country to take action over time in almost any field or issue. In addition, the delegitimization phenomenon can have far-reaching consequences on the solidarity between Israeli society and Jewish communities around the world. In recent years, it has also had an increasing impact on the sense of security of diaspora Jews. As a result, the campaign that Israel and its supporters are waging against the delegitimization phenomenon aims to consolidate broad

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13 “Republicans and Democrats Grow even Further Apart in Views of Israel, Palestinians,” Pew Research Center, January 23, 2018, <https://pewrsr.ch/2BQ4x1J>.



global recognition and support for the State of Israel, recognition of its right to exist, its uniqueness, its contribution to humanity, its right to defend itself, and its being a society with equal rights and legitimacy within the family of nations. This is all in order to enable the State of Israel, its citizens, and world Jewry to live in peace and security alongside their neighbors and to create the conditions for personal, communal, and national well-being.

The threat of Israel's delegitimization combines cognitive and emotional dimensions with concrete steps in the diplomatic, legal, economic, cultural, academic, and other spheres. This is a multidimensional campaign that takes place in various arenas vis-à-vis diverse target audiences: the political-diplomatic ranks, municipalities, religious communities, the business sector, left wing organizations, human rights organizations, and more. Although the BDS movement has not caused any significant tangible damage to Israel thus far and its successes have mainly focused on individual, marginal achievements, it can be assumed that concrete steps and negative branding, which includes cognitive and emotional dimensions, constantly feed one another, even if the activities and efforts are not fully coordinated. Moreover, fostering negative attitudes toward Israel may cause long term damage to its security as well as to that of Jewish communities around the world. These attitudes may also influence consumer and business decisions, legal decisions, political activity, community preferences, parliamentary elections, and government policy on the local, national, and international levels.

The delegitimization campaign also harnesses events taking place on the operative-tactical level to leverage strategic objectives in order to achieve legitimacy and support. This often occurs by using primary materials, especially in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Materials are made accessible by adapting them to the symbols and value systems of the target audiences around the world and sometimes by distorting them and taking them out of context, as well as by creating associative and emotional – and sometimes irrational – connections between the Israeli-Palestinian context and the symbols, sources of emotion, and actions from other contexts, places, and times. For example, the violent events in the Gaza Strip (“The Great March of Return”), during which tens of thousands of Palestinians demonstrated and dozens of Palestinians were killed, at the same time as the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, has given momentum to the activity of delegitimization organizations. Beyond the very current events,

Israeli decisions and actions and statements by Israeli leaders also sometimes provide fodder for the delegitimization campaign.

The delegitimization campaign focuses on symbols and brands to achieve greater exposure and to raise awareness of delegitimization among the wider public. During the past few years, the boycott movement has conducted a series of campaigns against large, well-known international corporations, charging that their activity in Israel and in the territories assists Israel's occupation and "war crimes" against the Palestinians. It sometimes appears that the connection between the charges and the reality is incidental, as with the boycott campaign against the ice cream company Ben & Jerry's,<sup>14</sup> which eventually led it to contribute to the organization promoting the boycott; or the campaign to encourage Airbnb to stop advertising apartments in the settlements.<sup>15</sup> When the goal is to gain exposure and instill the message, it seems that all means are permitted. Against this backdrop, the boycott movement also focuses on cultural and sporting events that have broad exposure to millions of people around the world. Thus, the pressure placed on international artists to not appear in Israel has succeeded in influencing a few of them, while creating considerable international media attention and increased awareness about the existence of the boycott movement and its messages.

As of today, despite the delegitimization efforts, the majority of the leading elites, governments, and establishment institutions in the West have not substantially changed their relationship with Israel and certainly have not become hostile to its existence. However, the growing gap in the attitude toward Israel between governments, establishment institutions, and the elites on the one hand and public opinion on the other is certainly cause for concern. This concern increases when we add the intergenerational gap between the current elites and the next generation. As mentioned above, the source of these troubling trends is not only an increase in the efforts of those engaged in delegitimization but also primarily the combination of deep social and ideological trends in current politics and agendas both in Israel and abroad. These create serious difficulties in recruiting populations, especially liberals, to support pro-Israel narratives.

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14 "It's Time to Boycott Ben & Jerry's," BNC, May 12, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2U59ACz>.

15 "Airbnb's Decision to Exit Israel's Illegal Settlements: A Partial Victory for Human Rights & Accountability," BNC, November 20, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2EpxN1d>.

Indeed, the threat of delegitimization should be seen as a long and ongoing “war of attrition” that aims at long term strategic objectives. Although these objectives are advanced through short term tactical efforts and achievements, they are cumulative. The most recent achievements of the State of Israel and its supporters, such as advancing legislation in Europe and the United States to undermine the legitimacy of the BDS movement and its freedom of action, have encountered countermeasures, such as the Right to Boycott campaign.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, however, many of the BDS movement’s actions have had a negligible impact, or even have failed following successful countermeasures by the pro-Israel camp.

The rival anti-Israel and pro-Israel networks are learning campaigns and thus are in competition with one another. For example, during 2018, the delegitimization organizations undertook an organized and coordinated effort to gain support from different local councils throughout Europe and the United States. These efforts may have been the result of limited success of the BDS movement in advancing such steps at the governmental level, leading it to try to influence the establishment via local councils, while keeping their activity at the grassroots.

### **The Response of the Pro-Israel Camp**

The complexity of the campaign for the delegitimization of Israel stems from its broad global deployment and its taking place in various areas with mutual connections, while its proponents are organized in a dynamic, non-hierarchical networked structure. Given the nature of the delegitimization campaign and the challenges it creates for Israel’s national security, it should be addressed with an integrated response in Israel and abroad, including reactive and proactive endeavors, defensive, offensive, and preventive efforts, along with attempts to shape the desired reality and advance the objectives of the State of Israel and diaspora Jewry.

A prominent dilemma in formulating a response to the threat of Israel’s delegitimization is the question of the organizational structure, including who is responsible for formulating and implementing the response, the relative advantages of the establishment versus the civil society groups, and the division of responsibilities between them. Many civil society organizations

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16 “Right to Boycott,” BDS, <http://bit.ly/2Ve9HvJ>.

were founded specifically to address the threat of Israel's delegitimization and given their "friction" with those engaged in delegitimization, these organizations have a good understanding of events on the ground, especially in terms of the civil society arena. These organizations are active abroad (and they often have representatives in Israel where they engage in activities) and are well-versed in the cultures, languages, attitudes, and value systems of the target audiences. For this reason, they are able to adapt and mediate the Israeli reality to these target audiences.

The Israeli government also offers many unique capabilities and resources, including a broad perspective of the challenge, response tools, and an understanding of the essence of the threat and its significance to the national security of the State of Israel and diaspora Jewry. The government has at its disposal the ability to direct the efforts and to more efficiently utilize the existing resources, based on being familiar with the organizations and their relative advantages. At the same time, government agencies have many legal and procedural limitations, certainly when it comes to activity focused on the civilian sphere and target audiences abroad. In addition, a significant portion of the members of the pro-Israel camp and many in the target audiences are critical of Israeli government policy and are not willing to act under its auspices or to receive instructions from it. Therefore, the state's presence at the forefront of the campaign does not help; rather, it is a hindrance.

The most effective response thus is a decentralized response, located somewhere in between a diffused and chaotic response in which each organization works entirely independently, and a hierarchical and centralized response led by the government. In our view, the pro-Israel network needs to act according to a shared vision and overall strategy, while maintaining the freedom of operation and independence of the various organizations.

The pro-Israel camp should act as a network. Improving networked functioning is based on a combination of utilizing the capabilities and relative advantages of the different components of the network, strengthening channels of communication, sharing information and knowledge, networked learning and cooperation between the different parts of the network, as well as developing core capabilities to improve the network's functioning and performance. However, this networking does not mean that the organizations should speak "with one voice." Improving the activity of the "blue" camp and

strengthening the connections between its components, while maintaining the diverse opinions and areas of activity, can pull the rug out from under the claims of proponents of delegitimization, who seek to present the Zionist movement as a racist enterprise and Israel as an undemocratic state that seeks to restrict the actions of its critics and limit freedom of expression.

The necessary response must address different elements of the problem. First, activity is needed to inoculate important neutral target audiences and central decision making junctures, in order to prevent them from being “poisoned” and to recruit their support for Israel. Second, the response must be based on strengthening and expanding the circle of supporters and activists within the framework of the pro-Israel camp (a broad coalition policy), based on the understanding that the delegitimization campaign is trying to undermine Israeli solidarity, which is a source of legitimacy and a vital resource in the pro-Israel campaign. These two elements are greatly influenced by Israel’s policies regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and by the question of its image as a state striving toward peace. Finally, as mentioned above, efforts are also needed to thwart the activity of the delegitimization campaign and reduce its ability to influence target audiences.

In this respect, a distinction must be made between Israel’s critics and those who deny Israel’s very legitimacy. This latter camp is generally led by those who support delegitimization and seek to destroy Israel. Alongside them are those who criticize Israel and oppose its policies; however, they are not full partners in the delegitimization ideology; they do not challenge the State of Israel’s right to exist, and they are not necessarily part of the opposing system. The response needs to reduce the circles of support for the delegitimization campaign and create cracks in the solidarity of the anti-Israel camp by exploiting the differences of opinion, perspectives, and values of the various groups within it. It is important to expose the ultimate goals of the delegitimization efforts and the identity of the initiators and activists who support and fund it. As part of the response, it is necessary to distinguish between the proponents of delegitimization who seek to destroy the State of Israel and those who express legitimate criticism of its policies.

The response of the pro-Israel camp needs to be based on a combination of deep knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian reality and the various target audiences as well as the ability to analyze them. Influencing the attitudes of target audiences toward Israel requires a long term ideological campaign

that reconnects the Zionist and Israeli narrative with the ideological and value system of Western society and diaspora Jewry.

## **Conclusion**

The article analyzed the current campaign over the international legitimacy of the State of Israel as a case study of an ongoing cognitive campaign. This campaign involves strategic learning between the two rival network camps, which are working to influence diverse target audiences across the globe and to change their attitudes and positions. One key success in the delegitimization campaign has been harnessing and connecting local stories related to Israel, or developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the value systems and agendas of other cultures and societies around the world. Thus, “our truth” and being convinced internally of the justice of our cause are not enough. Rather, we must understand what forms the basis of Israel’s image and the attitudes toward it around the world and utilize this knowledge when setting the objectives of the campaign and the ways of achieving them.