



BDS demonstration, London, April 2017. Photo: Phliafrenzy (CC BY 4.0)

From Delegitimizing to Harming a Reputation: What Should Israel Do?

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An overview of the past decade shows that aside from a few sparks, the delegitimization campaign and the attempt to boycott Israel did not succeed in igniting serious operational damage—economic or other. This is in part thanks to proactive and systematic activity by the State of Israel and civil society organizations against the various boycott attempts. However, in-depth examination reveals a more significant process for Israel, whereby residual damage from the cognitive measures in the delegitimization campaign leads to ongoing harm to Israel's reputation. Over time there could be lasting negative effects, namely, injured soft power and impaired strategic leeway, and together these pose a danger to Israel's national security. The government's overall response must be channeled into a large-scale, organized cognitive campaign. Experience in waging the campaign against delegitimization teaches that it is necessary to establish a governmental authority that operates independently and over the long term, receives significant funding of no less than 500 million NIS a year, and includes about 100 staff members.

Keywords: delegitimization, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, cognition, BDS, national security, diplomacy, soft power, civil society, NGOs

The Cognitive Locomotive of the Delegitimization Train

The campaign to delegitimize Israel as the national home of the Jewish people is not new. It has existed since the founding of the State of Israel, with many instances even before the state's establishment. However, special attention should be channeled to the current and renewed configuration of the campaign, which has been underway especially since 2001, with the Durban Conference and the intensification of the second intifada.

The delegitimization campaign is waged as an integrated, coordinated campaign. Areas of activity sometimes appear independent but in practice operate together, with deep official and unofficial involvement of the Palestinian Authority. Among the main areas of activity of the delegitimization campaign are the political, legal, municipal, economic, academic, and cultural realms. In these frameworks, various political measures are taken in international organizations, attempts are made to impose economic, academic, and cultural boycotts, and legal steps are taken at international tribunals. All these realms rely on another prominent dimension that is a kind of amplifier to enhance the resonance of the various actions—the cognitive realm.

Several insights have emerged from the confrontation in recent years by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy against the delegitimization campaign regarding the character, method, and means used in the cognitive realm. We are witnessing a network of delegitimization elements working together from different locations under a message, a shared narrative, and joint cognitive campaigns. A significant portion of the campaigns are underway in various languages and often simultaneously, and are regularly shared among the members of this network. Delegitimization elements make increased use of various kinds of mass media, both traditional and new; focus prominently on social media and on instant messaging apps; and adapt the messages to

relevant target audiences so that they speak to the values, culture, and background of these audiences.

A schematic description of the delegitimization campaign over the past two decades should also include the role of civil society, which includes a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dispersed globally. Two central insights led to the establishment of the civilian branch to promote the campaign to delegitimize Israel. One, the initiators of the campaign, a mix of pro-Palestinian figures, understood after the second intifada that civil society organizations have an enhanced role in influencing decision makers around the world, and thus should work to strengthen the Palestinian presence significantly in this realm. Two, there was an understanding that the human rights discourse (as well as fundraising from countries and organizations engaged in this discourse) must be led by elements that are not tainted by terrorism or other illegitimate activity such as expressions of antisemitism, violation of LGBT rights, the rights of women, and so on.

Thus, the leadership of the civilian branch of the delegitimization campaign was assigned primarily to a new entity that was established under a new face: the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. However, the new face is just that—a facade, as the movement was put together by a coalition of known veteran Palestinian organizations, some of which are connected to terrorist activity. The new entity was established on the basis of engagement with defined target audiences in a progressive and Western human rights discourse, all under a clear intention of becoming a civilian, non-governmental conduit toward liberal audiences in the West.

In effect, the main declared purpose of the BDS movement is to induce liberal communities to pressure governments, international bodies, and brands to impose boycotts and sanctions on Israel due to what the movement claims is its treatment of the Palestinians. It rejects the

existence of Israel as a Jewish state, prioritizes the cognitive realm, and constantly makes efforts to instill a negative view of Israel. It makes frequent use of biased and radical language under the guise of universal rights discourse. One of the methods identified with the movement's activists is to organize events that create media buzz such as confrontations and provocations. The reason for the radicalization of the discourse and behavior is the need to create conditions for negative media coverage of Israel, to serve as a basis for political, economic, legal, academic, and cultural delegitimization activity.

The activity in the cognitive realm can be divided into two types:

The “always-on” campaign is waged on a daily basis, using all possible pieces of information related to Israel—mainly news items—and converting them into negative descriptions of the state. The always-on campaign is broad and relates to topics such as ongoing security activity, government decisions, and political meetings, along with more concrete aspects such as coping with COVID-19, violence in the Arab community, and elections in Israel.

Ad hoc campaigns serve as a cognitive amplifier for concrete measures taken against Israel. These include content campaigns that aim to pressure a specific body to take a decision against Israel, such as municipalities, governments, companies, academic bodies, cultural personalities, and international organizations and tribunals; along with periodic campaigns that are carried out when a concerted effort is needed to attack Israel surrounding various events (key dates in the Palestinian calendar, in the Israeli calendar, dates marking universal values, international events with significant media potential, conferences by international organizations), as well as breaking events such as a military operation in Gaza.

Despite the differences in how the two kinds of campaigns are managed, both make use of similar cognitive narratives and shared denigrating messages. For example, there is

coordinated use of the term “apartheid” by delegitimization and boycott organizations. For two decades, widespread practical use has been made of this term: these organizations adapt its definition for the purposes of the campaign against Israel and empty it of its legitimate content while ignoring facts and figures that do not support their claim.

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The Campaign against Delegitimization

Several government decisions since 2010 defined the national response to the challenge of delegitimization. They outlined the need to wage a comprehensive campaign, the principles of this campaign, the resources for it, and the responsibility of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy to lead the campaign to deal with delegitimization and BDS. The primary political statement that was applied as a directive in waging the campaign was sharp and clear: to move from defense to offense.

As a result, a designated task force was established, with a single overarching goal: countering delegitimization and BDS through a combination of research and proactive and cognitive activity. This model of task force was a first of its kind in the government service, yet in 2019 earned the Outstanding Staff Award, granted by the Civil Service Commissioner.

Within the framework of the task force, three basic infrastructures were established: a global knowledge center for the phenomenon of delegitimization and the BDS campaign; a civil society network composed of hundreds of pro-Israel organizations throughout the world; and a proactive cognitive framework working among target audiences relevant to

the campaign. These infrastructures served the activity of the campaign in the following areas:

- a. **Stopping delegitimization actions:** As its core principle the task force was aimed at the need to stop the activity against Israel, both ongoing and surrounding key events and dates. One example among many was the activity that preceded the Eurovision contest in 2019 in Israel. At that time the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy thwarted the activity of BDS elements who made use of fake social media accounts in order to impair holding the contest in Israel. The Ministry exposed attempts to use fake accounts, bots, and inauthentic activity on social media to create artificial public pressure on artists to cancel their participation in that year's Eurovision.
- b. **Discontinuing the funding of delegitimization organizations:** Studies by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs showed that for years, delegitimization and BDS elements raised funds from state sources, philanthropic foundations, and crowdfunding campaigns. By presenting an ethical facade and using human rights discourse, tens of millions of dollars were raised each year for activities against Israel. Organizations related to terrorism and others engaged in antisemitic discourse received extensive funding, some of it even from countries friendly to Israel. For example, in 2019 about five million euros of European Union funding for organizations promoting BDS was exposed. Following the various studies, political dialogue and other activities led to the cessation of funding for organizations; the issue of monetary channels (bank accounts, crowdfunding channels) and their legitimacy was also addressed: over 50 bank accounts and crowdfunding channels of delegitimization and BDS organizations were closed.
- c. **Launching a proactive cognitive infrastructure:** The activity of the task force to expose the reputation of delegitimization and BDS elements yielded facts and figures

on these elements' connections with recognized terrorist organizations, along with behavior of an antisemitic nature. The reputation that was exposed contrasted with the image that the movement tried to cultivate of a non-violent, non-antisemitic group advocating human rights.

Organizations' ties with declared terrorist organizations: a comprehensive study along with an international campaign in five languages, *Terrorists in Suits*, exposed over 100 connections of BDS organizations with declared Palestinian terrorist organizations: Hamas, the Popular Front, and Islamic Jihad. Another report that included a case study on the issue of European funding for an organization suspected of having connections with terrorism was published in April 2020.

Exposure of conduct of an antisemitic nature: A factual report, along with the international campaign *Behind the Mask*, presented antisemitic aspects of the BDS campaign and included over 80 examples of the use of antisemitic expressions by leaders and organizations from the BDS movement. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry revealed another report that presented dozens of antisemitic expressions on social media, including statements by delegitimization organizations depicting Israel and the Jews as responsible for spreading COVID-19.

- d. **Backing the pro-Israel network:** Despite the relatively large number of pro-Israel organizations, their persistent commitment to the fight against delegitimization, and their impressive response to expressions of old and new antisemitism, strategic analysis suggested that their efforts were incoherent. This was in contrast with the activity of delegitimization elements, acting as a network, with global coordination of activity and content. Therefore, a substantial need was identified to strengthen the activity of organizations in the areas in which there

was a strategic gap, along with creating the organizational platform for bringing organizations together into professional networks with defined specializations. To this end, three global professional networks were established, functioning as a platform for joint international activity and the sharing of knowledge and experience:

- i. GC4I—a veteran global network of the leaders of pro-Israel organizations that began its activity about a decade ago
- ii. DigiTell—a network of bloggers and social media influencers
- iii. LNI—a network of international jurists and legal organizations

2021: Cracks in the Delegitimization Campaign, and the Residual Damage to Israel

An examination of the achievements during 2019–2021 of the noisy side of the delegitimization campaign, the BDS movement, paints a faint picture. To a large extent, May 2019 marked the breaking point of the movement—the civil society branch of the campaign. In the months beforehand, organization leaders' ties to terrorism were exposed, the flagship campaign to impair the Eurovision contest in Israel was thwarted, and leading financial companies decided to close dozens of bank accounts and crowdfunding of these organizations. That month the German Bundestag even declared the movement to have antisemitic characteristics. This gave further important expression to a series of decisions and laws promoted by friendly countries against the discriminatory activity of the BDS movement. The statements and the clear policy led by the leaders of the United States, the UK, France, Germany, Canada, and other countries prompted serious attention among government figures in these and other countries, toward stopping both funding and activity.

Since 2019, the BDS movement has not succeeded in inflicting its intended economic, academic, and cultural damage on the State of

Israel, except for a few sparks that did not ignite substantial fires. Parts of the delegitimization network are now dealing with a dual reputation problem: the gradual understanding among influencers of the connection with Palestinian terrorist elements, and the accusation by leading Western figures that it is a movement with antisemitic characteristics.

The world's struggle with COVID-19 over the past two years has become another hurdle that has deepened the emerging cracks in the movement. Organizations that were used to holding public events such as demonstrations, conferences, and meetings were forced to move to online activity, in an attempt to create media prominence in a period in which news attention is focused on the events of the pandemic and its consequences.

The cracks deepened further in the second half of 2020, when the Abraham Accords and normalization agreements were signed with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. This process drove an ideological wedge into the very idea of boycotting and rejecting the existence of Israel. A year and a half later, these agreements still constitute a core issue that the delegitimization organizations must face, as the existence of a normalization process that includes aspects of trade, tourism, and culture between Israel and Arab countries makes it difficult for the organizations to enlist target audiences in activity against Israel.

Defying the general trend described is the decision in 2021 to open an investigation against Israel at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. This is an unusual event in terms of delegitimization, which occurred in the wake of a pressure campaign waged by the Palestinian Authority along with various delegitimization organizations.

It is a welcome development that most of the efforts by the delegitimization and BDS campaigns to damage Israel have been rebuffed. A look back at the State of Israel's struggle with this challenge shows that the lion's share has targeted concrete, immediate activity that

could have harmed Israel's citizens and its assets. The political system was called on to address the radical concrete uproar that arose, and its activity focused on this. Nevertheless, a further in-depth look suggests the need to direct attention to aggregate and residual damage from the waging of the delegitimization campaign, especially in cognitive realms.

Delegitimization elements engage in efforts to establish a negative perception of Israel. They wage a continuous cognitive war, and, as described in the "always-on" campaign, use all possible pieces of information connected to Israel and convert them into negative descriptions of Israel. This compounds the negative ad hoc campaigns to support adopting resolutions against Israel in civilian and governmental forums, institutions, companies, and more. A negative campaign against a country that is waged over a long time at high intensity and in various realms certainly has an impact that cannot be ignored.

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The Principles of the Negative Campaign against Israel

Negative campaigns are most familiar from election campaigns in which candidates sling mud at one another, but they also take place extensively in other content areas. They occur in business struggles in which companies compete with rivals in takeover struggles, or in pressure groups trying publicly to harm the reputation of a governmental or business entity due to a decision or policy that it enacts.

Negative campaigns are also present on the state level, usually in a hidden and concealed manner. For example, they pervade the influence activity by one country against a rival or competitor country, in order to weaken elements of the national resilience of

its population; and in the activity of a country toward a third country or more, in order to create negative momentum toward a rival or competitor country (country A influences country C regarding its rival, country B).

There are three basic pillars of a negative campaign:

- a. Intentionally distributing negative information about the entity—person, organization, or state
- b. Adapting the negative messages so that they oppose the values of the group that the campaign targets
- c. Attempting to tarnish the public image of the attacked entity (public image can be defined as reputation, estimation, image, or prevailing view)

Examining the principles of the negative campaign with respect to the cognitive efforts surrounding the campaign to delegitimize Israel is instructive.

a. Intentionally Distributing Negative Information

An extensive network of civil society organizations from the Palestinian Authority and from countries around the world works in coordinated and deliberate manner to distribute negative information about Israel. A significant portion of the activity takes place in the digital arena, with an emphasis on social media. The coordinated activity makes use of predetermined messages, adopts shared narratives, and works "glocally"—a global campaign with local adaptation to cultural, political, and value-based characteristics.

The distributed information relies on monitoring events in and outside Israel and providing a biased and sometimes false interpretation of them in order to present Israel in a negative light, as morally lacking, and as an entity that does not respect universal principles. Sometimes the distributed negative information is not related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and does not relate to the core of the issue, but

is channeled there in a creative manner in order to taint Israel's reputation.

b. Adapting the negative messages to Oppose the Values of the Targeted Group

The lion's share of the cognitive campaign against Israel takes place vis-à-vis audiences with universal values, usually with an ultra-liberal worldview. There is coordinated use by the vast majority of delegitimization and BDS elements of the misleading pair of words—"Israel" and "apartheid"—in order to mobilize these groups to take action. The use of this verbal duo is a kind of binding standard for organizations working against Israel in various countries. It helps to develop discourse, perception, and a basic worldview among liberal groups that oppose the existence of Israel as a legitimate country, using well-known principles from the fields of media and psychology for programming a language.

c. Tarnishing the Public Image

The leaders of the delegitimization campaign do not conceal their intention. They state their purpose of harming Israel's image, its international portrait, and its branding. To them, denigrating Israel or harming its public image serves as a tool to create dual pressure: inside Israel—on its citizens; and outside to the world—on decision makers and influences from various fields.

The results of this kind of negative campaign, coordinated and managed over time by many actors and with the political assistance of the Palestinian Authority, bring about an incremental process of denigrating Israel and harming its reputation in a variety of fields. The negative campaign has a life of its own, and is not necessarily dependent on the success of the specific measure that it aims to promote or support. Thus, even when a legal, diplomatic, economic, cultural, or other measure against Israel fails, it entails the risk of further erosion of Israel's reputation.

Harming a country's reputation does not only stop with its public image or branding

perception. A country's reputation has significant economic, diplomatic, academic, cultural, and certainly security value. Over time, the erosion of Israel's reputation by its adversaries, who make every effort to present it in a negative light, could undermine Israel's soft power, its non-military assets, and its ability to maneuver in various international fields. In the long run, it is also necessary to examine what the implications of the erosion of its reputation are for aspects of Israel's national security—particularly when the support of international public opinion is needed, and in turn, the support of national leaders for military activity.

More specifically, over time a kind of blind spot is created, with the attention dedicated to delegitimization and boycott events, and less toward the cumulative process of a tarnished reputation. The point is not that Israel should not deal with significant and exceptional delegitimization events and expressions, such as with regard to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. On the contrary, Israel should continue to take action against these, but greater attention should be dedicated to the cumulative damage and less to concrete delegitimization attempts.

Fighting the Negative Campaign

Efforts should focus on fighting the negative campaign against Israel for several reasons:

- a. Over time, the impact of the negative campaign is greater than the consequences of concrete delegitimization or boycott events.
- b. The negative campaign is not about to die down. Given the political-military situation in the Middle East and due to the involvement of additional actors at the helm of the campaign, such as Iran, Hamas, and Turkey, the negative campaign will continue and increase.
- c. The governmental response that exists today is insufficient for coping with the challenge of the harm to Israel's reputation, for two main reasons: the decentralization of the

State of Israel's cognitive, public diplomacy, and influence frameworks among various governmental bodies does not enable focused, effective, and long-term activity; and the cessation of the national task force for countering delegitimization, which had succeeded in stopping a significant portion of the cognitive activities on the part of delegitimization actors. The government decision in July 2021 to close the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy caused this area of activity to be transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Recommendations: Campaign 2.0— for Israel's Reputation

Coping properly with a negative campaign against Israel over time requires a version update with respect to the activity that has taken place so far in the struggle against delegitimization. The potential damage of an expansion of the negative campaign, and the currently insufficient response, requires updating policy and action for building the necessary infrastructure to reduce possible significant damage in the future.

Launching a change requires a clear political directive to take focused action on the issue, similar to the directive given by the political leadership and previous government decisions on the struggle against delegitimization. These constituted a clear state platform for building the basic infrastructure and formulating the areas of activity defined in the counter-campaign. Similarly, the version update must include new conceptualizations and cognitive methods that correspond with the values of a universal-digital world; an updated long-term strategy; and implementation with senior political backing and adequate resources.

The State of Israel must wage a large-scale cognitive campaign to create a positive discourse with diverse, segmented target audiences around the world. This requires ongoing proactive activity that relies on an orderly strategy, expert personnel infrastructure, and interreligious and cross-cultural partnerships, with a prominent focus on the digital realm.

Waging a large-scale cognitive campaign: The existence of a unique and focused mission conducted as an orderly campaign requires a management body. Focus, professionalism, quick response, creativity, operational capability, information processing capability, and knowledge management are among the qualities needed for waging a large-scale cognitive campaign. The experience accumulated from waging the campaign to counter delegitimization shows that the task force model has similar characteristics to what is needed in this campaign.

Creating a positive discourse with diverse, segmented target audiences: Along with engaging in a constant positive discourse with various population groups, it is necessary to focus on three main target audiences:

- a. Liberal Judaism: Recent studies indicate the distancing of American Jews from Israel, especially among young people and liberals, and increased criticism of Israel's policies. Based on this, Jewish organizations with a radical leftist agenda have become close allies in the delegitimization campaign and of BDS organizations. In turn, the latter make use of this distancing and frequently develop public and digital partnerships and joint campaigns with these Jewish organizations. Therefore, it is necessary to deepen existing joint activity with liberal Jewish organizations, activity that enables a liberal discourse, including a renewed discourse with Jewish organizations that express constructive criticism of Israel's policy. This activity should expand beyond the younger generation, which is the current focus of governmental projects.

- b. Arab audiences: The importance of the Abraham Accords for creating a renewed discourse with Arab audiences throughout the Middle East and in general cannot be overstated, even while delegitimization elements continue to wage a vocal campaign against the agreements. Two integrated axes of operation should be examined in this context: cognitive activity, by conveying the message of normalization to audiences of Arab influencers and forming partnerships with Arab civil society; and active operation, by continuing to expose the activities of radical elements that are trying to sabotage the fruits of normalization.
- c. Influencers and young people: Over the past two decades there has been a sharp change when it comes to engaging in discourse and influencing cognition. User-generated content in the digital realm has for a while now been used as a preferred replacement for the traditional media. It is necessary to engage in discourse with those leading the discourse. These are influencers who mobilize a very large group of followers to a value-based and image-oriented action; a considerable portion of them are young people with an especially prominent presence on various social media platforms.

Conducting ongoing proactive activity: A response to the negative campaign will require action in two parallel spheres: constant efforts over time, on a daily basis, in accordance with goals and objectives that derive from the strategic plan (“always-on”); along with proactive periodic activity in which it is necessary to continue to take action against those trying to harm Israel by stopping activity, stopping funding, and exposing problematic reputations.

Formulating an up-to-date, long-term strategy: This requires establishing a diverse planning team composed of experts from various fields—the media, advertising and branding, intelligence, technology, management, culture, and psychology. Inter alia, the team should

address: the extensive technological changes affecting how to engage in the discourse, and methods of influence due to the centrality of digital media; the leading universal values in the global discourse; the ongoing activity of the rival campaign; and existing and potential new partnerships for Israel. It is also necessary to examine new, up-to-date conceptualizations, such as influence (as a results-based index) instead of public diplomacy (as a performance index).

Building a team of experts: The success of the task force depends on the quality and capabilities of its manpower. As part of the government decision, it is necessary to provide directives to the responsible authorities, including the Civil Service Commission, to recruit excellent position-holders, while employing them in the framework of an expert model.

Forging religious and cultural partnerships: Today, civil society plays an important role in decision-making processes in many countries. Furthermore, civil society organizations that work as a network of organizations can influence processes and public discourse. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen their activity through joint activity platforms, periodic meetings, and roundtable events—while providing information, knowledge, and resources, and developing a shared strategy. In tandem, it is necessary to encourage independent non-governmental partnerships in civil society, by situating Israeli organizations and individuals as leaders of the discourse with their counterparts around the world. In the sphere of religious organizations, it is necessary to renew and strengthen ties with evangelical Christian communities and others; and to take advantage of the regional normalization to advance a new civilian-religious discourse with Muslim communities.

Focusing on the digital realm: During the past decade, information and knowledge consumption habits have undergone far-reaching changes due to technological developments. As a result, the digital realm

has become a dominant channel of influence in shaping perception. Possessing quick response capability, developing viral content, creating interesting and accessible content, and enlisting audiences to take action while engaging in discourse require allocating most of the resources of the proposed cognitive campaign to the digital realm. Proper strategic planning will require future attention to additional evolutionary changes that could occur in the coming years in the digital realm that would make it even more central than it is today.

To wage a large-scale cognitive campaign, the political leadership must work to create an independent authority that will operate according to the model of a cognitive task force. Past experience in establishing national cognitive frameworks teaches us that the existence of an independent authority is essential, both due to the multiplicity of governmental actors in the fields of cognition and public diplomacy and due to the need to implement a multi-year strategic plan whose success depends in part on its ability to survive despite future political shocks. The implementation of this plan also depends on that authority not engaging in the State of Israel's ongoing daily international public relations, but rather operating in the strategic sphere and in the long term.

Experience also teaches us that operating diverse international cognitive frameworks in various languages as part of broad partnerships, certainly in digital realms, requires significant funding, no less than half a billion NIS per year, and the allocation of about 100 staff members as part of the authority. Despite the high budgetary cost, it should be seen as a mandatory and necessary investment in the future, certainly with regard to the realm of risk to Israel's reputation and its potential consequences.

Conclusion

The experience acquired by the State of Israel in its struggle against delegitimization efforts and boycotts could be used in the continued struggle against the ongoing negative campaign waged against it. It should be expected that the negative campaign will continue and even increase, led by state actors and a broad civil society network.

The aspirations and intentions of the elements of delegitimization and boycotts to cause Israel severe damage have not succeeded. Most of them failed while leaving residual damage. Therefore, as with previous government decisions on systematic coping with the challenge of delegitimization, it is now necessary to transition to cope systemically with the residual damage of delegitimization: the harm to Israel's reputation. Based on the experience accumulated, it is necessary to define new policy guidelines, and to allocate senior state attention, significant resources, and skilled human resources to a cognitive task force that will operate within the model of an independent authority.

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