

Israel's International Standing: Between Delegitimization, Criticism, and Israeli Responsibility

Pnina Sharvit Baruch

October 2026

Colonel (Res.) Adv. Pnina Sharvit Baruch is a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). She served as head of the International Law Department of the Military Advocate General (MAG) Unit and was responsible for providing legal advice to senior officials in the IDF and the government on issues relating, among others, to the laws of armed conflict and international law aspects of IDF activities. She was a legal advisor in negotiations with the Palestinians. She also served as a lecturer on international law at Tel Aviv University. She is the Chair of the Executive Board of Forum Dvora – Women in Foreign Policy and National Security and Vice President of the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists (IJL). She holds an LL.B. degree and an LL.M. degree, both magna cum laude, from Tel Aviv University.

Executive Summary

International legitimacy is not merely a matter of image or public diplomacy ('hasbara'). It is a crucial strategic asset that impacts freedom of military and political action, international partnerships, the economy, and Israel's long-term ability to advance its objectives. Today, Israel's international standing has reached a particularly low point. The relatively broad support Israel enjoyed immediately following the events of October 7, 2023, has rapidly eroded, and it now faces harsh public and diplomatic criticism, international legal proceedings, growing strain on its political and defense ties, and increasing distance, even from some of its supporters.

However, the discourse within Israel regarding this crisis often tends to treat the world as a single, monolithic bloc. This gives rise to the familiar claim that "it doesn't matter what Israel does"—it will be condemned for its actions regardless, and therefore there is little point in attaching significant weight to the international cost of its policies. This paper proposes replacing this perception with a more differentiated mapping of the international arena. A distinction must be drawn between a hostile core that seeks to undermine the legitimacy of Israel's very existence; ideological critics over whom Israel has limited influence; audiences, governments, and institutions that are not hostile to Israel but have grown distant from it; and Israel's supporters, whose continued backing—and particularly their willingness to voice it publicly—can no longer be taken for granted. Israel's ability to influence each of these groups varies, and therefore its policy toward each of them should differ as well.

This distinction also prevents two simplistic conclusions. On the one hand, Israel should not be assigned full responsibility for the crisis. For years, it has faced a campaign that includes antisemitism and anti-Zionism, the activities of enemies and hostile organizations, bias within certain international institutions, and systematic efforts at delegitimization. On the other hand, this does not mean that Israel's own conduct is inconsequential. The scale of casualties and destruction in the Gaza Strip and the ongoing humanitarian crisis, the reality in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), including violence by Jewish extremists against Palestinians and measures perceived as seeking to displace them, extreme and racist statements by public officials, and the absence of a credible political horizon or an Israeli diplomatic initiative—all weigh heavily on attitudes toward Israel among audiences whose views are not predetermined. It is precisely with them that Israel retains real room for maneuver.

This points to the appropriate policy response. Restoring Israel's international standing cannot be reduced to a public diplomacy campaign, but neither does it require Israel to relinquish vital security interests. It calls for a policy shift across three levels: systematically incorporating considerations of international legitimacy into decision-making processes; building professional, factual, and legal capabilities to address allegations, institutional biases, and campaigns against Israel; and adopting differentiated policies toward different audiences—resolutely confronting hostile actors, engaging substantively with those who can be influenced, and actively strengthening Israel's supporters. The objective is not to persuade Israel's sworn enemies, nor is it to rapidly restore the previous status quo. The realistic objective is to halt the drift away from Israel, bring non-hostile audiences back toward a balanced and more favorable position on Israel and expand and reinforce the pro-Israel camp—specifically its willingness to support Israel publicly. The core question is not whether the world is "against us" or "with us," but rather where Israel can still exert influence and what it must change to translate that influence into a tangible improvement in its international standing.

Preamble

Israel's international standing has fallen to an especially low point. Since the outbreak of the Swords of Iron War, international attitudes toward Israel deteriorated rapidly, and continued to worsen as the war went on—from relatively broad support for its right to defend itself following the October 7 massacre, to being perceived in large parts of the world as a violent, unrestrained state and, at times, even as a rogue state.

International legitimacy, reflected in the willingness of states, institutions, and audiences to cooperate with a country, recognize its right to defend its interests, and grant it room to maneuver, is a strategic asset. Therefore, the international arena is not secondary, but rather an integral part of the broader effort through which a state, and in this case Israel, advances its interests and national security. This asset directly impacts the scope of freedom of military action, the supply of weapons, and defense ties. International legitimacy also affects a country's economy and standard of living, as well as research, academia, and culture, and, in Israel's case, the security of Jews and Israelis worldwide and how they are perceived and treated.

A familiar claim in Israel holds that “the world is against us” and that Israel will be condemned regardless of what it does. This paper challenges this premise. Israel does not bear full responsibility for the hostility it faces, which is driven in part by antisemitism, anti-Zionism, hostile actors, and institutional bias. Yet much of its international standing is shaped by actors whose positions are not predetermined and are influenced by Israel's policies and conduct.

The key question, therefore, is which actors and audiences Israel can still influence, and how. Answering it requires understanding the claims against Israel and the mechanisms through which these claims are reinforced and disseminated. This paper focuses primarily on the Western arena, where a central part of the struggle over Israel's legitimacy is taking place. It then maps the principal actors and audiences according to the depth of their hostility toward or support for Israel and the extent to which Israel can influence their positions. This distinction provides the basis for the policy recommendations that follow.

Part A: The Depth of the Crisis

On the eve of October 7, 2023, Israel possessed significant strategic assets, including strong ties with the United States, peace and normalization agreements in the region, prospects for further normalization, and extensive international cooperation in technology, science, defense, and intelligence.

Even before the war, however, cracks were evident. For years, hostile actors waged campaigns aimed at portraying Israel as an illegitimate state. At the same time, Israel's continued control over the Palestinians in the absence of a clear political horizon, and the domestic struggle over the judicial system, damaged its democratic and liberal image and made such campaigns more difficult to counter.

The October 7 massacre initially created a significant window of legitimacy for Israeli action. Many countries and key actors in the international community recognized Israel's right to defend itself, were appalled by Hamas's brutality, and expressed support for Israel and for the need to secure the release of the hostages. However, this window was short-lived. As the war in the Gaza Strip intensified and dragged on, and as the scale of destruction and casualties grew and the humanitarian crisis there deepened, support for Israel gave way to sharp criticism and grave accusations against it. Following the cessation of intense fighting, with the entry into force of the ceasefire in October 2025, Israel received less attention on the global stage, but the hostility toward it remained.

For its part, Hamas conducted the war in Gaza from the outset as a battle for legitimacy as well. It did so by operating from within the civilian population and civilian structures, using civilians as human shields, and disguising its operatives as civilians, thereby contributing to harrowing images from the battlefield while portraying Israel as solely responsible for the humanitarian crisis. At the same time, Hamas framed its narrative in the language of human rights and appealed to Western audiences by presenting itself as a victim fighting for liberation from an occupying power. These messages were amplified by established anti-Israel networks and actors worldwide. This, however, is only part of the explanation. The reality on the ground, and Israel's own conduct, also played a central role in widening the circles of criticism and hostility.

As of the summer of 2026, the erosion of Israel's standing is evident in several arenas. In the international legal arena, proceedings against Israel are underway before the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, and national courts. In the diplomatic arena, pressure from European countries is mounting, efforts to advance regional normalization have become increasingly difficult, and friendly governments face greater difficulty sustaining unequivocal support for Israel. There has also been a growing tendency among groups that previously supported Israel, including many within the Democratic Party in the United States and even segments of Jewish communities, to distance themselves from Israel. Criticizing Israel increasingly carries social and political currency in the public sphere, while supporting it comes at a cost. The result is that even many of Israel's supporters practice self-censorship and refrain from expressing their support publicly.

Israel's standing has also eroded sharply in public opinion, particularly among younger people and within the liberal camp. In the United States, for example, the Pew Research Center [found](#) that in 2026, 60% of the public held a negative view of Israel, compared to 42% in 2022, and among Democrats and those leaning Democratic, the figure reached 80%.¹ Globally, Pew [found](#) a median of 67% negative views toward Israel across 36 countries surveyed.² The data illustrate that the crisis is not merely diplomatic or institutional, but also public and societal.

Nevertheless, Israel's current international standing should not be characterized as a complete collapse or as total isolation. Israel continues to possess significant military, economic, technological, and diplomatic assets, as well as shared interests with countries in the region and the West, particularly vis-à-vis Iran and terrorist organizations. Yet Israel is undergoing a dangerous erosion of its international standing. The longer this process continues, the more it will constrain Israel's strategic room for maneuver and impair its ability to achieve its security and diplomatic objectives.

Part B: Main Claims Against Israel

The criticism directed at Israel encompasses a broad range of political, moral, and legal claims. Some concern specific policies and actions, while others portray Israel more broadly as a state that systematically violates international law, disregards fundamental rights, and commits grave international crimes. These accusations are accompanied by a broader contention that Israel presents itself as a Western democracy while failing, in practice, to abide by the rules and norms expected of Western democracies.

1. The Occupation and Treatment of the Palestinians

A central component of the criticism directed at Israel concerns its treatment of the Palestinians. The most extreme position portrays Israel as a colonialist entity founded on Palestinian dispossession and lacking a right to exist. Although this view has gained ground since October 7, it remains largely confined to strongly anti-Israel and radical progressive circles.

Most critics focus on Israel's ongoing control over the Palestinians beyond the Green Line, the expansion of settlements, and measures perceived as constituting de facto annexation of the West Bank. These reinforce the perception of Israel as seeking to perpetuate its control over the Palestinians while denying them national rights, thereby violating both their right to self-determination and their individual human rights. They also fuel the allegation of apartheid, which in the past was associated primarily with more extreme critics but has now gained wider currency in critical discourse. This narrative resonates with groups around the world that identify with struggles against oppression and contributes to broad support for the Palestinians among much of the Muslim and Arab public, as well as among liberal circles.

One factor that is particularly damaging to Israel's image is violence by Jews against Palestinians in the West Bank, which is perceived internationally as occurring with the backing of the state, or at least in the absence of adequate enforcement on its part. This escalating phenomenon reinforces Israel's image as an aggressive and racist state.

2. The Use of Force

Israel is perceived as a belligerent state that resorts to force before exhausting diplomatic options and responds to threats with excessive, disproportionate force. This perception is particularly associated with the Palestinian arena: the disparity between Israel's military strength and the weakness of the Palestinian population makes it difficult for Israel to be viewed as the defending party rather than the aggressor, even when its actions are taken in response to tangible threats to its citizens and territory, and even following the events of October 7.

The campaign waged by the United States and Israel against Iran beginning in February 2026 served, in the eyes of Israel's critics, as further evidence that Israel is eager for war, while also enabling them to portray it as having dragged the United States into an unnecessary war and as a destabilizing force in the region.

3. The Manner of the Use of Force

Allegations that Israel has violated the laws of war have been raised in previous rounds of fighting, but during the Swords of Iron War, their scope and severity reached a new peak. Israel is accused of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, including allegations of ethnic cleansing, and even genocide. The allegations include deliberate or disproportionate attacks on civilians, widespread and unjustified destruction of civilian infrastructure, attacks on protected persons and facilities, insufficient precautions, and failure to adequately distinguish between Hamas and the civilian population.

The gravest of these accusations is the claim that Israel is committing genocide.³ Although its legal basis is weak and Israel has strong factual and legal arguments against it, the allegation has gained considerable traction in public and international discourse, placing Israel alongside regimes perceived as illegitimate and even fueling comparisons with the Nazi regime.

4. Inhumane Treatment of Palestinians

Beyond allegations regarding the use of force, Israel is accused of inhumane treatment of Palestinians. A central allegation throughout the war was that Israel was deliberately starving the population in Gaza and denying it access to basic humanitarian necessities. Israel made considerable efforts to facilitate the entry of aid, while also pointing to Hamas's responsibility, the looting of aid, failures by international organizations, and logistical difficulties. These arguments, however, had limited impact in the face of the harsh reality in Gaza, including mass displacement, food scarcity, severe sanitary conditions, and inadequate access to medical care. Israel was perceived as bearing primary responsibility for this suffering and, in any event, as failing to do enough to alleviate the dire conditions.

Israel's own conduct also reinforced the starvation allegation. Public statements by Israeli officials at times created the impression that limiting humanitarian aid was an objective in itself, while the decision to halt the entry of aid between March and May 2025, intended to exert pressure on Hamas, further strengthened this perception. Combined with reports by the UN and other organizations and distressing images from Gaza, the allegation of deliberate starvation became one of the most damaging claims against Israel and a significant factor in the deterioration of its international standing.

Additional claims were raised regarding the abuse of Palestinian detainees and their detention in inhumane conditions. One of the prominent cases in this context was the "Force 100 [affair](#)" at the Sde Teiman detention facility, which created the impression that serious suspicions of abuse of a detainee had not been fully and unequivocally addressed through the legal process.⁴ Worse still, the acts of which members of the force were suspected received backing from political figures and government officials and from broad segments of the Israeli public. When abuse of detainees receives public support, it becomes difficult to convince critics that Israel is not knowingly and deliberately committing such acts or other crimes.

Moreover, it is not only the Israeli state that is perceived as responsible for "crimes" against the Palestinians. The broader Israeli public is also increasingly perceived as sharing responsibility because of its widespread support for the war, the direct involvement of large segments of the public in the fighting through military and reserve service, and statements and attitudes viewed abroad as reflecting dehumanization of Palestinians or indifference to their suffering.

Part C: Substantiating and Disseminating the Claims

The claims against Israel gain credibility and are amplified through a network of institutions and intermediaries, including courts, UN mechanisms, human rights organizations, academia, public figures, the media, and social media. These provide the claims with a factual and legal basis, conceptual framing, and broad reach, often in ways marked by bias, lack of context, or the amplification of contested allegations.

1. Judicial Proceedings

Israel is facing proceedings before the two main international judicial forums, as well as before national courts worldwide, brought against it directly or indirectly.

A. The International Court of Justice in The Hague (ICJ)

One of the most significant developments within the campaign against Israel is the [proceeding](#) before the International Court of Justice under the Genocide Convention, initiated by South Africa as early as December 2023—less than three months after the October 7 attack, at a time when Israel was still in the initial stages of its military response.⁵ The case is still ongoing and no final judgment has been issued, but its very existence reinforces the perception that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians.

In addition, on July 19, 2024, the Court [issued](#) an advisory opinion, at the request of the UN General Assembly, finding that Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful.⁶ On October 22, 2025, the Court [issued](#) another advisory opinion, focusing mainly on Israel's obligations regarding humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip.⁷

B. The International Criminal Court in The Hague (ICC)

The allegations against Israel have received further reinforcement from the International Criminal Court. In November 2024, arrest warrants were [issued](#) by the Court's judges against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then-Defense Minister Yoav Gallant for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity,⁸ thereby placing Israeli leaders alongside figures associated globally with serious international crimes.

C. Proceedings Before National Courts

Anti-Israel organizations have also sought to initiate legal proceedings in national courts against IDF soldiers and senior Israeli officials.⁹ Such proceedings reinforce the notion that Israelis in general are implicated in war crimes and should face arrest. Additionally, proceedings have been brought before courts worldwide against governments and private entities, seeking to halt the sale of military equipment to Israel.¹⁰

2. The UN and Human Rights Organizations

The UN is one of the principal arenas in which claims against Israel are institutionalized and validated, through both political resolutions and a range of human rights mechanisms that devote exceptional attention to Israel.¹¹ Israel is also subject to extensive scrutiny by civil society human rights organizations, whose reports often portray it as routinely violating international law and Palestinian rights, while giving insufficient weight to security considerations or Hamas's responsibility.

UNRWA plays a central role in shaping the international perception of the situation in Gaza. Israel has pointed to links between UNRWA personnel and Hamas and to shortcomings in UN reporting.¹² Some of Israel's concerns have also been raised by UN and other international reviews.¹³ Nevertheless, when Israel presents data or accounts that differ from those detailed in UN reports, its claims often carry little weight in international discourse, even when the data it presents are better substantiated.¹⁴

Reports by the UN and human rights organizations lend the claims against Israel an appearance of professional, neutral, and legal credibility, and serve as powerful source material for criticism of Israel, particularly among liberal audiences for whom respect for the law is a fundamental value. An allegation appearing in a UN report quickly becomes the basis for media, academic, legal, and diplomatic campaigns. A common pattern is to combine factual and legal claims, which are not entirely unfounded, with additional claims marked by malice, racism, and demonization of Israel. This combination makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between legitimate criticism and defamation or delegitimization.

3. The International Media

Images from the Gaza Strip during the war and in its aftermath are among the factors that have had the greatest impact on the deterioration of Israel's international standing. Explanations regarding the complexities of combat and operational constraints cannot compete with images of wounded or starving children. Such images have an immediate emotional impact and cast Israel as the stronger party confronting a weaker enemy while inflicting immense civilian suffering that is almost inevitably perceived as excessive and unjustified.

This is compounded by media coverage that often presents events without context or in a one-sided or biased manner.¹⁵ Thus, for example, reports emerging from Gaza, including from sources linked to Hamas, are presented as facts, while Israeli explanations and data are framed as Israeli claims. This creates an asymmetry: data from Gaza serve as the baseline for discussion, while Israeli data are treated as the subjective position of an interested party.

4. Academia

Academia is a critical arena in the struggle over legitimacy, as it shapes concepts and interpretive frameworks through which reality is perceived. In parts of Western academia, particularly within the social sciences and humanities, attitudes toward Israel are influenced by critical and post-colonial theories that frame it through concepts such as settler-colonialism and apartheid. Thus, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is presented not as a complex, multidimensional national conflict, but as a moral struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed. This carries long-term significance because university campuses shape the next generation of government officials, journalists, legal professionals, diplomats, and scholars.

5. Social Trends

Attitudes toward Israel are increasingly shaped not only by political judgments but also by broader social trends. This is particularly evident among younger audiences, for whom one's stance toward Israel can function as a marker of identity and belonging. In certain progressive spaces, opposition to Israel has become associated with enlightenment and social justice. Social media amplifies these dynamics. Under these circumstances, expressing support for Israel can carry a social cost. A further challenge is that factual complexity is difficult to convey in the prevailing discourse that is often superficial and dichotomous and saturated with slogans, whereas explaining Israel's positions requires presenting a multidimensional picture.

Part D: Mapping Actors and Audiences and Israel's Ability to Influence Them

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, Israel is at a significant disadvantage in the struggle over international legitimacy, facing a broad array of actors, institutions, and narratives working against it. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that Israel's conduct has no bearing on its international standing. To understand where Israel retains meaningful influence, one must map the various actors in the international arena and their attitudes toward Israel. There is, of course, also a large—and presumably the largest—group of people with no particular interest in the subject. They are less relevant, however, to a discussion focused on those who affect Israel's international standing.

The following mapping is not intended as a rigid or exhaustive classification of all actors in the international arena, since in practice there are areas of overlap and movement between the groups. Rather, it seeks to distinguish among different types of audiences according to three principal variables: the depth of their hostility toward or support for Israel; the extent of their active involvement in campaigns against or in support of Israel; and the degree to which Israel is capable of influencing their positions.

1. The Hostile Core and the Drivers of the Campaign

The first circle consists of actors that are hostile to Israel and actively work to deny its existence, and at times even promote its destruction, whether physically or by rejecting its right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people. This group includes Israel's direct enemies and their supporters, radical Islamist actors, antisemitic elements from both the right and the left, and key activists in the BDS movement that promotes boycotts and sanctions against Israel. The principal drivers of the campaign against Israel are found in this group.

No change in Israeli conduct is expected to alter the position of these actors, and they will oppose Israel regardless of what it does. A systematic effort is therefore required to confront them, aimed at exposing their motives and sources of funding, weakening their influence, and isolating them from broader audiences.

2. Actors with an Anti-Israel Ideology

The second circle includes actors who are not necessarily actively or systematically involved in the campaign against Israel, but who embrace an ideological framework that undermines the legitimacy of its existence as the nation-state of the Jewish people. They view Israel as a colonialist, racist state, one that maintains an apartheid regime and commits genocide. For them, Zionism is itself a pejorative term. This outlook can be found among some actors in academia, UN human rights mechanisms, human rights organizations, left-wing parties, the media, labor unions, and civil society organizations. They are joined by younger audiences who embrace a dichotomous worldview that interprets political conflicts primarily through relations of power and victimhood.

Israel has very limited ability to influence members of this circle. In the case of those who hold deeply rooted ideological views, it is difficult to assume that Israel's conduct will change their fundamental worldview. As for those whose engagement is driven more by prevailing political currents than by deeply rooted ideology, the intensity of that engagement may diminish over time. With this group, the objective is not to turn them into supporters of Israel, but rather to reduce their mobilization against it, undermine their confidence in a one-dimensional framing of the conflict, and distance them from the hostile core. In any event, it must be recognized that the negative perceptions of Israel that have taken root will be difficult to dislodge.

3. Middle-Ground Audiences Not Predisposed to Hostility

The third circle consists of actors who do not hold a pre-existing anti-Israel stance, ranging from government officials and influential figures to ordinary citizens. These are diverse audiences whose common denominator is that they do not dispute Israel's right to exist and oppose terrorism directed against it. However, as the war in the Gaza Strip dragged on, they were exposed to a growing stream of images of destruction, displacement, starvation, and wounded children, alongside extreme statements by Israeli figures and the Israeli government's failure to present a political horizon. As a result, sympathy for the Palestinians grew and attitudes toward Israel became increasingly negative. They did not necessarily become ideologically anti-Israel, but they grew more distant from Israel because its actions, as they perceived them, conflicted with their moral and political values.

This group also includes actors who are not necessarily troubled by the moral dimensions of Israel's conduct but view it as a globally destabilizing force. This view has gained ground, for example, among certain Republicans in the United States who [accuse](#) Israel of dragging the United States into the campaign that began against Iran in February 2026, which in their view was contrary to American interests.¹⁶

In addition, the group encompasses politicians and decision-makers in various countries who recognize that their country's interest lies in maintaining good relations with Israel, yet are unwilling to pay a personal political price for a position that might be interpreted as support for Israel. Public pressure pushes them away from Israel, both directly and indirectly, to the point of adopting public positions critical of Israel.

Israel's conduct matters greatly to how it is perceived by the actors in this group. Despite the severe erosion of Israel's image among them, this shift in attitudes is not irreversible. Moreover, those who criticize the Israeli government on substantive grounds and are willing to engage with it seriously are, in fact, among Israel's most important allies in the struggle for legitimacy against the hostile core and those aligned with it.

Israel should engage substantively and respectfully with criticism raised by actors in this group. Some of their criticism stems from mistaken perceptions of the facts or the law, while some of it is justified on the merits. In the former case, Israel should respond substantively; in the latter, it should correct its conduct. The notion that responding to criticism is a sign of weakness, tantamount to being defensive or apologetic, is fundamentally misguided. Failure to present Israel's position is perceived as evidence that Israel has no good answers to the allegations against it and risks pushing these audiences toward its hostile critics. Taking responsibility or apologizing, when warranted, may in fact help defuse criticism.

4. Israel's Supporters – An Eroding and Cautious Group

The fourth circle consists of Israel's supporters. This group, too, encompasses a range of views, but its members share a recognition of Israel's right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people, support for the Zionist vision, and an understanding of the need to confront actors that threaten Israel, including Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah. Some fully support the ideological positions of the Israeli right, while others hold views closer to those of Israel's political center and left. In either case, they regard themselves as supporters of the State of Israel and recognize the importance of ensuring its secure existence.

It should be emphasized: supporting Israel does not require supporting every decision made by any Israeli government. Those who support Israel but criticize the government's policies, its conduct of the war, its treatment of the Palestinians, or harm to democratic institutions, do not thereby cease to be supporters of Israel. At times, this criticism stems precisely from deep concern for Israel's future, its security, its democratic character, and its ability to maintain its place among the family of democratic nations. Therefore, it is important to demonstrate openness and understanding toward criticism coming from supporters of Israel, at home and abroad.

Equally important, the ability of Israel's supporters to criticize the policies of its government is not a weakness in the struggle for legitimacy, but rather one of the assets Israel retains in countering the claim that it has ceased to be a liberal democracy.

In recent years, and all the more so since the outbreak of the Swords of Iron War, it has become increasingly difficult to be a public supporter of Israel. In many spheres—academia, media, culture, civil society organizations, professional communities, and social media—supporting Israel carries a price. It is liable to draw accusations of supporting war crimes, apartheid, or genocide; public criticism; social or professional ostracism; and at times also a genuine threat to personal safety or employment. As a result, even those who continue to support Israel in principle sometimes refrain from expressing that support publicly.

This is compounded by a more fundamental difficulty: some supporters of Israel, who identify with the pain of October 7 and recognize the security threats against it and the need to fight its enemies, find it hard to justify or explain certain aspects of its conduct.

The troubling result of this dynamic is twofold: some supporters are distancing themselves from Israel, while others continue to support it but are increasingly reluctant to express that support publicly. From Israel's perspective, such silence represents a strategic loss, as it deprives Israel of political, media, and institutional backing in times of crisis.

Of all the groups discussed, Israel has the greatest capacity to influence this one. Its conduct affects these actors directly. Israel can and should reinforce their connection to it, make it easier for them to explain their support for Israel, and restore their confidence to speak out publicly.

Part E: What Can and Should Be Done

The Israeli government's conduct throughout the war has, in effect, amounted to an abandonment of considerations of international legitimacy, apparently on the premise that giving them greater weight would come at the expense of important security and diplomatic interests. But taking such considerations seriously does not require subordinating those interests to legitimacy concerns. At times, an action may indeed be justified even at the price of damage to Israel's legitimacy. Conversely, not every action justifies the international cost it entails; when that cost outweighs the benefit, the action should be avoided. Moreover, taking legitimacy considerations into account in advance does not necessarily mean forgoing a planned action. It may instead require planning and carrying it out in a manner designed to minimize the damage to Israel's international standing, without compromising the pursuit of Israel's interests.

Even the best possible conduct will not prevent criticism, and hostile and ideological critics will continue to attack Israel regardless. Nevertheless, better policies and conduct can reduce both the intensity of the criticism and the range of those joining it. When dealing with non-hostile critics, Israel's ability to justify its policies and actions is particularly important. Above all, Israel should seek to avoid actions that are highly problematic and difficult to justify.

The guiding principle must be a fundamental shift in Israel's attitude toward the international arena: no longer viewing the world as a single hostile monolith, and no longer treating all criticism uniformly as an expression of antisemitism or delegitimization. What is required is a shift to a differentiated policy: resolutely confronting the hostile core and the drivers of delegitimization; engaging substantively with critics who are not hostile; correcting Israel's conduct when criticism is justified; and actively strengthening Israel's supporters. This is not merely a matter of public diplomacy, but of substantive policy in an arena that constitutes a central component of Israel's national security.

The following are several key recommendations for measures that should be taken to begin the process of restoring Israel's international standing. Some concern Israel's conduct itself (recommendations 1–6), while others focus on strengthening the infrastructure needed for the struggle over legitimacy (recommendations 7–10).

Israel's Conduct

1. Respecting the Laws and Values of Warfare

Israel should clearly reaffirm its commitment to acting in accordance with the law and the values governing the conduct of warfare, which has distinguished it from its enemies over the years. It is indeed difficult to explain to audiences outside Israel the challenges involved in fighting Hamas, Hezbollah, and Israel's other enemies, but Israeli actions are easier to defend in the international arena when a genuine effort has been made to abide by the rules. Contrary to what is sometimes argued, respect for the law does not mean abandoning security considerations or placing civilians and soldiers at risk. Rather, it is a key condition for preserving international legitimacy.

2. Conduct in the Gaza Strip

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip remains a significant factor affecting Israel's international standing even after the intensive phase of the fighting has ended. Israel should support measures that will enable the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, without relinquishing its interests, in line with President Trump's twenty-point [plan](#).¹⁷ Israel should ensure adequate and sustained humanitarian access and take measures to minimize civilian suffering. It should refrain from presenting humanitarian aid as a concession to Hamas or as surrender to international pressure, but rather as part of a deliberate Israeli policy: the war is against Hamas, not against the civilian population.

3. Conduct in the West Bank

Israel is paying a high price in the international arena due to its conduct in the West Bank, and that policy requires fundamental recalibration.

First and foremost, violence by Jews toward Palestinians must be addressed decisively. This issue is troubling even to actors who generally support Israel, while there is no satisfactory explanation for what appears to be a loss of control by the security authorities over the phenomenon. Israel should also take allegations of other unjustified violations of Palestinians' human rights seriously, including those concerning the seizure of private Palestinian property, and ensure that such claims are properly examined and addressed where warranted.

4. Presenting a Diplomatic Horizon

Israel's failure to present a political horizon is causing strategic damage. Israel is perceived as rejecting peace and seeking war, while the Palestinians are perceived as victims of ongoing oppression. This framing tends to overlook the responsibility of Palestinian actors for the continuation of the conflict, including their rejection of compromises, support for terrorism, the weakness of the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas's control of the Gaza Strip.

In broad circles, there is an expectation that Israel accept a two-state solution. However, even a more limited initiative could be beneficial, provided that it explicitly includes and reflects Israel's recognition that Palestinian aspirations must also be addressed. A diplomatic initiative does not require Israel to relinquish its security interests, but rather to present a clear and concrete political framework that incorporates Israel's security needs and national interests. Presenting such a framework could shift the international debate and require the Palestinian leadership to respond to the Israeli initiative. In this sense, a diplomatic initiative is not merely a means to advance a future settlement, but also a strategic tool in the struggle for international legitimacy.

Furthermore, if Israel presents a credible diplomatic horizon, questions of borders, settlements, and the future of Israeli control can once again be treated as issues to be resolved through negotiations, rather than being seen as evidence of an intention to make permanent control over the Palestinians irreversible.

Beyond the Palestinian arena, Israel should also advance diplomatic initiatives vis-à-vis Lebanon and Syria, without compromising its security interests. A clear stand must be taken against calls emanating from within the Israeli public and political system to take permanent control over territories in these countries.

5. Statements and Rhetoric

Throughout the war, the Israeli government issued very few clear statements affirming Israel's commitment to the laws of war and the moral principles governing the conduct of warfare. Conversely, problematic statements have been made by public officials, including calls for the "erasure of Gaza," assertions that "there are no uninvolved civilians in Gaza," suggestions to encourage emigration from Gaza, or racist references to Arabs in general. These damaging statements have generally not been repudiated by the prime minister or other senior officials and have been portrayed around the world as reflecting deliberate Israeli policy. It must be remembered that statements made in Hebrew in the Israeli media to the Israeli public do not remain within Israel or in Hebrew: they are translated, quoted, and incorporated into reports, legal proceedings, and campaigns against Israel. Even when they do not reflect IDF policy, they are perceived as evidence of intent, policy, or prevailing attitudes, and the damage they cause is tangible.

A responsible government must ensure that figures perceived as speaking with authority, including spokespersons at the political and military levels, refrain from making such statements, and instead convey consistent messages regarding Israel's commitment to law, the rule of law, democratic values, and the pursuit of diplomatic solutions.

6. Strengthening the Rule of Law

Israel needs to re-establish itself as a state that is committed to the rule of law and to acting lawfully and ethically. An independent judicial system, credible investigations, and effective law enforcement are not merely domestic matters. They are a core component of defending Israel in the international arena. In particular, professional and credible investigations are essential for the application of the principle of complementarity before the International Criminal Court and may also help counter efforts to advance proceedings against Israelis in specific countries. Under this principle, the ICC steps in only when the relevant state is unwilling or genuinely unable to investigate or prosecute the alleged conduct itself.

Against this background, the apparent limited extent of publicly known investigations and accountability regarding suspected war crimes and human rights violations, whether committed by civilians or members of the security forces, is a significant concern. It can create the impression that such conduct reflects deliberate policy or, at best, that it is tolerated or insufficiently addressed. This is compounded by statements from officials expressing support for individuals suspected of such misconduct, as occurred in connection with the Sde Teiman affair.

Specific allegations of unlawful conduct should therefore be thoroughly investigated and any ongoing investigations brought to a conclusion. Such processes are important in their own right and also contribute to Israel's international legitimacy. Where failures or violations are identified, appropriate measures should be taken and systemic lessons drawn to prevent their recurrence. Criminal prosecution, however, should not be treated as the default response to alleged unlawful conduct arising from battlefield actions; such prosecutions are the exception rather than the rule, even by international standards.¹⁸

Strengthening the Infrastructure for the Struggle Over Legitimacy

7. Establishing a Credible Factual and Legal Infrastructure

Israel has failed to convey to the world, including to its supporters, the reality of the war, the tangible threat posed by Hamas, the vast scale of the organization's military infrastructure, and the difficulty of distinguishing between civilians and combatants in territories under its control. Providing an organized factual and legal response to substantive criticism requires three complementary steps:

First, Israel should publish clear responses to allegations of war crimes and other unlawful acts. The lack of a clear response reinforces the impression that Israel has no genuine interest in investigating these allegations. The fact that the investigations that have received public attention and resulted in action have largely concerned incidents involving foreign nationals reinforces the impression that Israel does not have a similar interest in investigating harm to local civilians.

Second, Israel should undertake targeted efforts to expose distortions, failures, and errors in reports by the UN and human rights organizations, as well as in media coverage. There is no need to refute every allegation, but a convincing presentation of several clear-cut cases can help undermine uncritical trust in these sources. Wherever possible, rebuttals should also draw on external and independent sources, because official Israeli and IDF data are unfortunately regarded in some arenas as inherently unreliable.

Third, Israel must publish a comprehensive, public, and professional report on the Swords of Iron War that presents its factual and legal position regarding the principal allegations against it, as was done after previous rounds of fighting. Even if the report has only limited influence on the general public, it is essential for legal professionals, scholars, journalists, diplomats, and supporters of Israel, and may also influence future publications concerning Israel. It is also important from a historical perspective. In its absence, the professional and academic record that is taking shape rests to a considerable degree on critical and biased reports.

8. Proactive Engagement in Key Arenas

There is no question that Israel is at a severe disadvantage in academia, the cultural sphere, and UN and human rights organizations. Nevertheless, these arenas should not be abandoned. Israel can and should point to bias, imbalance, and professional failures. At the same time, a systematic diplomatic and legal response is required: working with researchers, legal professionals, journalists, students, Jewish communities, and policy actors; producing in-depth analyses; correcting errors; providing context; and presenting the complexity of the Israeli story, without ignoring the price paid by the Palestinian side over the years. Israel should strengthen the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by restoring its resources, authority, and professional capacity.

Disregarding the UN or disengaging from countries and actors that voice criticism of Israel, is not a sound strategy. Israel's absence leaves these arenas almost entirely in the hands of its critics. Moreover, when Israel itself curtails ties with organizations and countries, it effectively contributes to its own isolation.

9. Appealing to Emotion

When addressing the broader public, which draws its information from mainstream media and social media, detailed legal and factual explanations are less effective. The prevailing sentiment today is one of sympathy for Palestinians, who are perceived as weak and suffering, and hostility toward Israel, which is perceived as powerful and overbearing. Therefore, there is a need to invest in messaging that appeals also to emotion, including by illustrating the threat and the sense of vulnerability experienced by Israeli citizens and IDF soldiers. This should be accompanied by a genuine expression of empathy for the suffering of the Palestinian population. A message appealing to the world to understand the Israeli reality will be more persuasive if it demonstrates that Israel, too, recognizes the price being paid by Palestinian civilians.

This requires a professional, audience-specific campaign grounded in expertise in communications, public perception, and social media. Reliance on the IDF Spokesperson and retired generals is not effective in this context.

10. Strengthening Israel's Supporters

Israel should adopt an active policy aimed at preserving and strengthening its base of support, first and foremost among members of Jewish communities around the world, and at reinforcing its ties with these groups. Israel should rebuild and deepen its relationships with Jewish communities across the denominational spectrum. In particular, policies that alienate Reform Jews weaken an important base of support for Israel.

Israel must also assist Jewish communities worldwide in confronting rising antisemitism, while listening to the relevant communities and taking their views and sensitivities into account. Moreover, at a time when publicly supporting Israel often comes at a cost, Israel should stand behind those who choose to voice such views, including by actively helping them when they face consequences for doing so, for example, by providing carefully tailored assistance, where appropriate, in pursuing legal or institutional remedies against those who harm an individual's academic or professional standing because of that individual's support for Israel.

Conclusion

The claim that “it does not matter what Israel does” reflects understandable frustration in the face of the bias, hypocrisy, antisemitism, and delegitimization that Israel has confronted for years. However, as a basis for policy, it is dangerous. It turns Israel into a passive actor in an arena in which it still has the ability to exert influence. It absolves decision-makers of responsibility for the international costs of their actions and statements, and it gives up on engaging precisely those audiences and countries that are not inherently hostile to Israel but are increasingly distancing themselves from it. One of the principal achievements of the campaign against Israel is not necessarily turning its supporters into enemies, but turning them into silent supporters.

Israel cannot control everything that is said about it around the world, persuade its avowed enemies, or completely prevent bias, falsehoods, antisemitism, and delegitimization. But it can mitigate the damage, preserve alliances, strengthen its moral credibility in general and its legal credibility in particular, make it more difficult to frame its actions in demonizing terms, and prevent further deterioration in its standing among audiences that can still be reached. The realistic objective is not to restore Israel within a short period of time to the standing it enjoyed before the war in the Gaza Strip, but rather to limit the movement of middle-ground audiences into the hostile camp; bring those who have moved in that direction back toward a more balanced and potentially more favorable position on Israel; expand the circle of Israel’s supporters as much as possible; and restore their confidence to speak publicly in support of Israel.

To achieve this, the international arena must be treated not as a public diplomacy problem, but as a central arena of national security. The question is not whether the world is “against us” or “with us.” The question is which parts of the world can still be influenced, and what Israel is doing to bring them closer.

- 1 Laura Silver, Negative views of Israel, Netanyahu continue to rise among Americans – especially young people, Pew Research Center, April 7, 2026 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/07/negative-views-of-israel-netanyahu-continue-to-rise-among-americans-especially-young-people>
- 2 Laura Silver and Laura Clancy, Most people across 36 countries have negative views of Israel and little confidence in Netanyahu, Pew Research Center, June 4, 2026 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/06/04/most-people-across-36-countries-have-negative-views-of-israel-and-little-confidence-in-netanyahu/>
- 3 The crime of genocide was established in international law following World War II against the backdrop of the Holocaust of the Jewish people, to reflect the unique gravity of acts intended to destroy a group as such. An allegation of genocide is the most severe accusation that can be made against a state.
- 4 The Military Advocate General ordered the dismissal of the indictment in the “Sde Teiman” affair, IDF Website, March 12, 2026, <https://www.idf.il/%D7%9B%D7%AA%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%A2%D7%93%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%9D/2026/%D7%94%D7%97%D7%9C%D7%98%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%A9%D7%93%D7%94-%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%9F/>
- 5 The Court did not rule that Israel had committed genocide, but it also did not dismiss the case at the outset, and instead issued provisional measures requiring Israel, inter alia, to take all measures within its power to prevent the commission of acts within the scope of the Convention. For the Court’s website regarding the proceeding: <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>
- 6 <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/186>. The Court concluded that Israel’s policies and practices violate the law of occupation, the Palestinians’ right to self-determination, and the prohibition on the acquisition of territory by force. Among the policies and practices the Court found to be unlawful were Israel’s settlement policy, forcible displacement of Palestinians, and its systematic failure to prevent or punish settler violence. Most of the Court’s conclusions were adopted by large majorities, including with the support of judges from the United States and other Western countries.
- 7 <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/196>. The Court held that Israel, as an occupying power, is required to ensure that the basic needs of the Palestinian population are met and, where the population is inadequately supplied, to permit and facilitate humanitarian relief, including relief provided by the UN and UNRWA. The Court emphasized UNRWA’s central role in providing humanitarian assistance in Gaza.
- 8 <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges> The Court found reasonable grounds to believe that Netanyahu and Gallant bore responsibility, among other things, for the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and inhumane acts. It is also possible that applications for arrest warrants against additional Israeli figures have been submitted without public disclosure. It should be noted that arrest warrants were also sought for senior Hamas leaders, all of whom were subsequently killed, bringing the proceedings against them to an end.
- 9 A primary actor in efforts to advance proceedings against IDF soldiers abroad is the Hind Rajab Foundation, a Belgian organization that has filed complaints against dozens of soldiers in various countries, at times relying on documentation the soldiers themselves uploaded to social media; in some cases, complaints led to the opening of investigations, or questioning of soldiers. See Mathilda Heller, “Dozens of complaints, zero prosecutions: Hind Rajab fails to prosecute IDF soldiers analysis,” The Jerusalem Post, Aug 19, 2026. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-906032>

- ¹⁰ Proceedings aimed at halting the supply of weaponry or military components to Israel have been conducted in several countries. Among others: in the Netherlands, the Hague Court of Appeal ordered in February 2024 the cessation of F-35 parts exports to Israel; in the UK, a legal challenge was brought against the exclusion of F-35 components from the suspension of certain export licenses, which was ultimately unsuccessful in 2025; in Denmark, human rights organizations filed a lawsuit against the state to stop arms and F-35 component exports to Israel; and in Italy, a lawsuit was filed in 2025 against the state and defense company Leonardo seeking to have contracts for the supply of military equipment to Israel declared null.
- ¹¹ For evidence of the exceptional institutional focus on Israel, see Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1 of 2007, which established a separate standing agenda item (Item 7), devoted to “Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories,” while other country situations are addressed under the general Item 4 - UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 5/1, “Institution-building of the United Nations Human Rights Council,” 18 June 2007, A/HRC/RES/5/1 <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-181346>.

See also UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s statement of December 8, 2006, expressing concern over the Council’s “disproportionate focus on violations by Israel.” [https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/former-secretary-general/press-events/2006-12-08/secretary-generals-address-mark-international-human-rights-day-\(followed-qa\)](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/former-secretary-general/press-events/2006-12-08/secretary-generals-address-mark-international-human-rights-day-(followed-qa)).

For additional data and analysis, see the UN Watch database: <https://unwatch.org/database/about/>

- ¹² For Israel’s allegations concerning links between UNRWA personnel and Hamas and the use of UNRWA facilities by Hamas, see State of Israel, “The Connection Between UNRWA and Hamas,” April 28, 2025: <https://www.govextra.gov.il/media/d21mw2f3/the-connection-between-unrwa-and-hamas-280425.pdf>;

and Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Israel demands immediate action against UNRWA’s systemic infiltration by Hamas,” May 12, 2025: <https://embassies.gov.il/ungeneva/en/news/12-05-2025>.

See also Humanitarian aid - Israel’s Humanitarian Assistance Efforts, Israel MFA: https://israelihl.mfa.gov.il/ihl/humanitarian_aid

- ¹³ For examples of concerns raised independently of Israel regarding UNRWA and international assessments concerning Gaza, see, inter alia, UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), “Investigation into allegations concerning UNRWA staff,” August 5, 2024, which found that evidence regarding nine UNRWA employees indicated that they may have been involved in the October 7 attacks: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/notes-correspondents/2024-08-05/note-correspondents-the-un-office-of-internal-oversight-services-%28oios%29-investigation-of-the-un-relief-and-works-agency-for-palestine-refugees-the-near-east>.

See also Independent Review Group, Independent Review of Mechanisms and Procedures to Ensure Adherence by UNRWA to the Humanitarian Principle of Neutrality (Colonna Report), April 20, 2024: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4044686>

For concerns regarding the reliability of assessments concerning hunger and famine in Gaza, see IPC Famine Review Committee, Review of the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) IPC-Compatible Analysis for the Northern Governorates of the Gaza Strip, June 2024, which concluded that the available evidence did not support a finding that famine was occurring at that time and identified significant evidentiary uncertainties: https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Gaza_June2024.pdf

- ¹⁴ For a critical analysis of UN reports on the scope of aid and hunger in Gaza, and the claim that they relied on partial data and presented a misleading picture of Israel's responsibility for the humanitarian situation, see Tammy Caner, "The Misleading Reports of the UN Over Famine in Gaza," INSS, July 24, 2024, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/un-hunger-reports/>
- ¹⁵ In some media outlets, concerns about political alignment are reinforced by ownership or funding structures. Al Jazeera, for example, describes itself as an independent news organization but acknowledges that it is funded in part by the Qatari government. See Al Jazeera, "About Us," <https://www.aljazeera.com/about-us>. Academic studies have examined the relationship between the network's coverage and Qatari foreign-policy interests. See Karim Pourhamzavi & Philip Pherguson, "Al Jazeera and Qatari Foreign Policy: A Critical Approach," *Journal of Media Critiques* 1 (2015), 11–23, <https://researchers.mq.edu.au/en/publications/al-jazeera-and-qatari-foreign-policy-a-critical-approach/>. Regarding major Western media outlets, reports and studies have also alleged serious failures, distortions, and problematic coverage patterns.
- See, inter alia, The Asserson Report – The Israel-Hamas war and the BBC, <https://asserson.co.uk/assersonreport/>; BBC Coverage of the Israel-Hamas war: A comprehensive analysis of BBC News output of the first eleven months of the conflict, compiled and edited by former BBC Director of Television Danny Cohen and endorsed by the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council, and the Community Security Trust, <https://bod.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/BBC-Israel-Hamas-War-coverage-report.pdf>; and Eytan Gilboa & Lilac Sigan, "The New York Times coverage of the Israel-Hamas War: Errors, Omissions, and Poor Editorial Supervision," *Israel Affairs* 30(5) (2024), 939–957, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13537121.2024.2394292.comprehensive-plan-end-the-gaza>
- ¹⁶ David Bauder, Meg Kinnard and Ali Swenson, Cracks appear in Trump's MAGA base as leading figures criticize the Iran war, AP, March 4, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-maga-media-trump-carlson-megyn-kelly-cb283ae306f172cea02f25ddc44dd56f>
- ¹⁷ The American Presidency Project, White House Press Release - President Donald J. Trump's Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict, September 29, 2025, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/white-house-press-release-president-donald-j-trumps-comprehensive-plan-end-the-gaza>
- ¹⁸ See Carolin Wuerzner, "Mission Impossible? Bringing Charges for the Crime of Attacking Civilians or Civilian Objects before International Criminal Tribunals," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 90, No. 872 (2008), pp. 907–930, noting that "few cases in international (and national) criminal law include charges for attacks against civilians or civilian objects," and discussing the particular legal and evidentiary difficulties involved in establishing individual criminal responsibility for targeting decisions, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/mission-impossible-bringing-charges-crime-attacking-civilians-or-civilian-objects>.
- See also Roei Ariav, "Hardly the Tadić of Targeting: Missed Opportunities in the ICTY's Gotovina Judgments," *Israel Law Review*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2015), pp. 329–355, observing that legal issues arising from "complex, intense combat situations have only rarely been adjudicated," <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021223715000138>.



המכון למחקרי ביטחון לאומי

THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES



אוניברסיטת תל אביב
TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY