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Image vs. Reality: The Delegitimization of Israel in the Wake of Operation Protective Edge

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We have declared Bradford an Israel-free zone. We don't want any Israeli goods; we don't want any Israeli services; we don't want any Israeli academics coming to the university or college; we don't even want any Israeli tourists to come to Bradford, even if any of them had thought of doing so.

These remarks were made on August 2, 2014 by George Galloway, Member of Parliament (UK) and former star of the British *Big Brother*. The British media and public responded with scorn and derision, and Galloway is being investigated by the local police. At the same time, sentiments of this sort that are sounded increasingly in Europe cannot not be dismissed easily, particularly when politicians compete for authorship of the most racist and anti-Israel statements. Their slurs fall on fertile ground among angry masses, in turn increasing the delegitimization of Israel.

Operation Protective Edge is the third large scale operation that Israel has undertaken since the disengagement from Gaza in 2005 in an effort to strengthen deterrence and restore quiet to the communities in southern Israel and the cities to their north. The images fixed in the minds of millions around the world are the difficult pictures from the fighting in Gaza – in the vast majority of cases, a result of harsh and biased coverage. Only recently, very belatedly, has the presentation of such images become somewhat balanced: Western correspondents departing from Gaza have begun to note the justice of Israeli military actions and Israel's claims that Hamas made cynical use of civilians as human shields and concealed lethal weapons in civilian facilities, religious sites, and private homes. However, while in the short run relative peace and quiet may be obtained, in the long run, for every such round of fighting, Israel pays a much heavier price in public opinion and in erosion of support for its positions in the negotiations with the Palestinians. Consequently, this is not merely a problem of public relations or of limited effectiveness of video clips from the IDF spokesman or the cumulative negative effect of the pictures of the dead and the destruction in Gaza. While the mobilization of official and independent PR figures for the benefit of Israel's image is important, the struggle is not over Israel's image alone, but over the very essence of the Israeli narrative, and hence, Israel's future and security as well.

As the dust of battle settles, the world will turn to more substantial issues, beyond the condemnations, punishment, and sanctions prompted by the military activity itself. And thus, along with reports of familiar anti-Semitism – attacks on Jews, demonstrations, and expressions of hatred against Jews throughout Europe and around the world – the movement to boycott Israel is expanding politically and among the public. Countries such as Britain and Spain are considering whether to continue to export arms to Israel. At the same time, a PR campaign and a boycott threat forced Starbucks, the largest chain of cafes in the world, to issue a clarification stating that it had not made contributions to the Israeli government or the IDF.

In addition, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has started a process that has received broad support among Fatah leaders that is intended to lead to the PA's accession to the Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. This would ostensibly allow the PA to charge that various crimes were committed against the Palestinians and enable it to sue Israeli officials. Indeed, some European Union states had already encouraged the PA to join the ICC if Israel persisted in its settlement policy.

For some time, there have been threats to prosecute Israeli decision makers for alleged war crimes. In 2012, the PA submitted a request to the ICC that was rejected. Now, too, the chances that the move will succeed are slim. While the ICC has 122 members, many countries, including the United States, Russia, and China, have not recognized its jurisdiction. Therefore, the ICC's ability to leave a significant mark and enforce its convictions legally is limited. In addition, the court does not tend to intervene when a state has the ability to undertake, or when it actually does carry out, an objective, independent investigation of the events that are the subject of the lawsuit.

Furthermore, even if the PA decides it seeks to join the ICC, and there is no certainty that it will be permitted to do so, then in that case, all the territory ostensibly under its control – i.e., the Gaza Strip included – and the crimes Hamas has perpetrated there and from there will be subject to the jurisdiction of the court. Yet irrespective of the final result, in a world where international image has considerable weight, being at the center of international attention because of accusations of war crimes causes damage in and of itself, even in the event of the allegations' rejection or outright dismissal. There is a danger here of further escalation in the campaign to delegitimize Israel, even by way of a groundless lawsuit.

The fact that the discourse on delegitimization has increasingly penetrated official and public consciousness and action, together with vigorous diplomatic activity by the PA, could erode Israel's ability to achieve support for its demands to ensure security for its citizens in any future agreement with the Palestinians. Instead of recognition of Israel as an equal party in an ongoing, violent conflict, the attitude toward Israel is likely to be one-sided, based on a distorted double standard and Israel's historic and future rights may be harmed. If Israel wishes to change the negative tone that characterizes the discourse on

delegitimization among the public and decision makers in Western countries and bring about a deep understanding of its fundamental rights and its narrative, it must prepare for this on a national level as quickly as possible.

The campaign against Israel is conducted in four main arenas: political-diplomatic, media, economic, and legal, and the connections between these areas heighten the impact of each independent arena. The government of Israel and private bodies that seek the wellbeing of the country must prepare strategically and make long term, systemic diplomatic and legal efforts to promote the Israeli narrative and end the growing isolation in the respective delegitimization arenas. At the same time, it must block consolidation of the status of the Palestinian state in the international arena and the demarcation of borders if it is not done through negotiations with Israel. The situation must be addressed with multiple systems and dynamic and continuous deployment, given the worrisome and accelerated developments in the campaign to delegitimize Israel in the international arena. In tandem, Israel must initiate a clear plan for graduated progress through partial agreements and independent measures to separate from the Palestinians to create two nation states. Beyond the contribution to Israel's national security, moving in this direction would likely help in the struggle against Israel's delegitimization.

This is not just a war of labels and image. The threats to the legitimacy of the state of Israel are deep, broad, and detailed, and they have already reached more influential figures than a controversial Member of Parliament who is seeking to gain sympathy and votes at Israel's expense. Thus, this is a national mission that requires a senior, full-time minister to strengthen Israel's legitimacy around the world, allocate a suitable budget for this purpose, and direct relevant officials in the media, law, economics, security, intelligence, and foreign relations.

