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Fighting the Boycott: BDS and the Media

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The Israeli establishment recently described the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement as a strategic threat. The movement, which calls to ostracize Israel from the international community, operates in the economic, cultural, and academic spheres, and indirectly in the security and political realms. Although researchers, civil society organizations, and Jewish communities abroad have long flagged the movement's perilous potential, only recently has the topic penetrated Israel's public discourse.

The underlying ideology for boycotting Israel surfaced in a declaration ratified at the UN World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001, calling to isolate Israel given its alleged apartheid policies. In 2005, more than 170 civil society organizations (united under the BDS banner) called to boycott Israel until it complies with international law and principles of universal human rights. Since the turn of the century, there has been a concomitant significant increase in negative attributions to Israel in the international media. For example, an international media search combining the terms "Israel" and "apartheid state" showed some 50 articles in the years between 1967 and 2000, and 1741 articles in the years between 2001 and July 2015.

The BDS campaign to boycott Israel, which nurtures this trend, failed to attract the Israeli media's attention (with the exception of coverage by the daily *Haaretz*). This changed, however, in June 2015 when central importance and large scale coverage was repeatedly dedicated to this issue.

That same month, Israeli media attention to the BDS movement covered a number of aspects. In the economic realm, significant attention was given to the statement made by the head of the Global Orange Company that if he could, he would terminate the company's business activity in Israel. In terms of culture, the media widely related to the potential FIFA vote, which could have resulted in Israel's suspension from the organization; and to the rejection by the Louvre in Paris to confirm a booking placed by an Israeli group (although a subsequent fictitious request to book the same dates by a group from Abu Dhabi was approved). In the academic realm, there were multiple reports

of student groups working in support of the BDS campaign on hundreds of US campuses, including Princeton, the University of Michigan, and Cornell. In addition, the Israeli media noted reports of 520 acts of anti-Semitism on university campuses across the US, as well as the vote by the United Kingdom National Union of Students (NUS) in favor of boycotting Israel.

The Israeli media outlet that appears to have directed most attention to the BDS movement is the daily *Yediot Ahronot*. On June 1, 2015, the newspaper launched its campaign aimed at raising public awareness regarding the perils of the global BDS movement, by announcing it would publish a series of articles documenting the fight against international sanctions. Prominent space was given to the topic in the daily's news pages, supplements, op-eds, analyses, and commentaries. All coverage of BDS-related issues was accompanied by a logo featuring the words "Fighting the Boycott" alongside the visual of a white Star of David against a background that gradually morphed from blue to black. Examples of giant captions that appeared during the month include: "True Alarm," "Emergency," "Double-Edged Sword," "The Academic Alarm," "The Threat to the Right to Exist," and "The Burning Front." Issues not directly related to the boycott were also published under the "Fighting the Boycott" logo. The headline "We Will Never Join the Boycott against Israel," for example, appeared above a financial supplement article, citing the president of the transportation division of a Canadian corporation vying to build the Tel Aviv subway.

As for the scope of coverage, in June alone *Yediot Ahronot* published some 80 items dealing with the BDS movement. By comparison, in March, April, and May, the newspaper published an average of one such item a month. In addition, the issue received television coverage, both in regular items covering BDS-related developments and in in-depth feature stories.

The extensive media coverage has a range of implications. On the one hand, it is claimed that the coverage was exaggerated; that it sowed panic, and failed to reflect reality. According to this approach, the in-depth coverage actually serves the interests of BDS supporters, seeing as the headlines describe extreme scenarios that are unlikely to materialize. This approach also emphasizes that BDS attempts to boycott Israel have resulted in few and marginal successes. For example, the many anti-Israel resolutions at universities around the world (including that of the NUS in the UK, to which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally responded) are not binding and to date no such resolution has officially been adopted by an academic institution; Israel's trade relations with the West appear to remain unaffected; the CEO of Orange retracted his statement; and even the Louvre apologized for what it termed was a computer glitch, noting the museum does not have a policy of boycotting Israel. Furthermore, on the

cultural plane, the vote to oust Israel from FIFA was never held and Israel remains a full member of the organization.

On the other hand, it appears that the intensive media coverage plays an important role in identifying and highlighting the phenomenon, thereby contributing to a much needed political and public debate on the challenge posed by the BDS movement and its local but cumulative successes. For example, there have been reports of losses to businesses selling Israeli products, and these reports have encouraged a refusal to trade with Israeli companies and even to close of a number of Israeli businesses abroad. In addition, there appears to be a linkage between the anti-Israel campus campaigns and the declining support for Israel among Jewish students – as exemplified by surveys in recent years – compared to the rate of support Israel receives from the older generation. Moreover, the anti-Israel campaigns are increasingly supported by the moderate, liberal left, encouraging the perception that Israel is a colonialist pariah state that ought to be opposed. The various components and manifestations of the anti-Israel campaign thus presumably play a role in enhancing negative global public opinion regarding Israel; encouraging deliberations questioning Israel's character as a Jewish state, and to some extent, in increasing manifestations of anti-Semitism in the West in recent years.

Even if the media coverage of the campaign to boycott Israel is excessive, it can serve an important function in flagging this phenomenon and warning against its potential threats. In fact, in a move that is presumably not disconnected from the extensive coverage of the anti-Israel campaign spearheaded by BDS, PM Netanyahu recently promised the transfer of some 100 million shekels to the fight against the boycott, and appointed a senior government minister to handle BDS-related issues. In addition, the Knesset plenum held an emergency session on the topic; the deputy foreign minister is reported to be strategizing a comprehensive program to combat international boycott initiatives; a promise was made to create dozens of new positions dealing directly with the issue; an emergency meeting was called by President Rivlin to discuss the challenges in the academic field, and the designated minister dealing with BDS has already held a number of meetings with civil society professionals researching and dealing with the phenomenon.

During July 2015 media attention to BDS significantly decreased, as other developments captured the headlines, including the nuclear agreement with Iran. It is important that Israel's declining status in the international arena remain on the national public agenda, particularly further to the centrality of this issue to Israel's national security.

The advantages of the broad coverage of BDS-related activities thus appear to outweigh the shortcomings, as demarcating the issue clarifies the challenge facing Israel and underscores the need to deal with it professionally and institutionally. This, in turn,

enables the harnessing of the much-needed resources in order to appropriately address the threat. The lack of a comprehensive time-sensitive counter effort to the BDS campaign can have far-reaching repercussions for the State of Israel, its citizens, and Jewish communities worldwide.

