The Relegitimization of Israel and the Battle for the Mainstream Consensus

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I

The Delegitimization Process and the Boycott: Background and Context

The purpose of delegitimization on the international level is to isolate an intended victim from the community of nations as a prelude to bringing about its downfall or even destruction. This process denies the victim the rights and prerogatives enjoyed by other members in good standing of the international community, particularly the right to make one’s voice heard. The side that initiates a campaign of delegitimization endeavors to obliterate the history, national identity, culture, and rights of the other as a sovereign state, particularly the right of self-defense. The perpetrator seeks to propagate a culture of defeatism within the society of its intended victim and bring about a paralysis of will to defend itself. There should be no misunderstanding: The ultimate goal of delegitimization is neither reconciliation nor peace but politicide.

Modern asymmetrical warfare operates on two tracks: political and military. When a weaker opponent cannot afford the cost of conventional war, it may attempt to achieve its strategic goals by political means. These include deception and subversion. Delegitimization is the central method of a form of asymmetrical warfare known as “people’s war,” which was successfully employed in Algeria and Vietnam. Because its effects are cumulative, the party that initiates prolonged conflict does so over an extended period of time.¹

After the Second Intifada failed to bring about the collapse of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and its allies, notably Iran, resorted to intensive political warfare. Accordingly, they assumed a prominent role in the World Conference against Racism, which took place in Durban from August 31 until
September 8, 2001. More recent examples of this determined campaign of delegitimization and defamation may be found in the malicious accusation that Israel massacred civilians at Jenin in its Defensive Shield campaign (2002); the Goldstone Report (2009), which was published after Operation Cast Lead; the efforts to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza; the Palestinian effort to seek recognition for itself at the UN as a first step toward reversing the international recognition of Israel, forcing it out of that body and taking its place in the community of nations; and, finally, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign.

Ehud Rosen, a senior researcher at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, has drawn attention to the fact that Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Europe have been taking an increasingly active part in the cooperative international effort to delegitimize Israel. For their part, Fatah and senior PA officials have also joined this initiative. Both groups “started to expend more effort on the political/civilian sides of the struggle immediately following Israel’s Gaza Operation in 2008–2009.” In addition, Israeli and foreign activists have donated their advice and expertise. Now that the Muslim Brotherhood is beginning to play a more active role in coordinating and supporting the delegitimization campaign against Israel, of which BDS is a part, the conflict will assume an increasingly religious character. The religious and political message of the Muslim Brotherhood is correlated with its global geopolitical ambitions.

Bismarck used the term “imponderabilia” to describe the non-material considerations that play a part in political affairs. Among these are popularly held principles and ethical considerations. Contrary to the fashion of the present, Bismarck knew that there were factors that were unquantifiable (and to which metrics could not apply). Thus, one must take into account such non-material considerations as the existing environment of ideas, values, and public opinion. Widely-held attitudes can evolve over time, sometimes as a result of cultural ferment. They can also be altered as a result of a well-organized initiative.

Major shifts in the consensus take time. Examples of these changes are the post-war development of a public awareness in the United States that civil rights needed to be extended to African-Americans; that women should be given full equality; that smoking and the ingestion of asbestos dust were harmful; and that pollution could be a danger to the environment and to public health. Examples of medium-term and more specific campaigns were the movement in the US during the late 1960s and early 70s to undermine domestic support for the war in Vietnam and the Soviet campaign against the development of the neutron bomb. A self-help manual for those who seek to effect social change listed five examples of “social movements:” the US Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Nuclear Energy Movement, the Gay and Lesbian movement, the breast cancer movement, and
the globalization movement. In the context of Israeli politics, members of the Left, in collaboration with like-minded Palestinian allies, succeeded in building a temporary public consensus in favor of the Oslo process. The goal of this well-planned and -executed campaign was to create support in Israel for this project by convincing the public that the PLO really wanted peace and would be a serious negotiating partner.

Beyond a change of consensus with regard to Israel, the ability to cause large cultural shifts is a matter of great importance. To bring about such a transformation and ultimately to seize power, some are prepared to tear apart the fabric of modern society and destroy the democratic system. This is why, for example, attacks on Christianity became part of this strategy. Melanie Phillips, in her book *Londonistan*, starkly described the results of these efforts in English society.

Changing an existing consensus or developing a new one is a long-term undertaking that must be distinguished from marketing and branding. To use the expression of Fernand Braudel, this process falls in the category of “slow-moving history.” It can be used both for constructive as well as destructive purposes. It is also reversible. In our efforts to appreciate the process of delegitimization—and relegitimization, for that matter—it is necessary to understand how public attitudes and the policies of governments may be influenced, if not manipulated. Indeed, the impact of this process may be leveraged when international governing bodies, such as the United Nations and its various commissions, decide to intervene proactively.

One of the tools perfected by the Soviets during the postwar era was the use, both overtly and covertly, of disinformation in order to manipulate public opinion. The techniques used were refined from lessons that had been learned in earlier days. The Soviets organized this program in a coherent form and built the administrative apparatus in order to support its large-scale implementation. Soviet policy-makers used disinformation methods as a weapon of political warfare not only against countries but also against individuals. Thus, a discussion of the delegitimization process should include some mention of disinformation and its use. For all intents and purposes, they may effectively overlap or be the same. Ilya Dzhirkvelov, a KGB veteran who defected to the West in the 1980s, stated, “Disinformation is not just a well-presented political lie—which is, incidentally, easy to recognize—but a compilation of facts and events which must not only be difficult to refute but which must result in serious consequences for the opposing side.”

As part of this discussion, one should devote thought to the process of relegitimization, which applies to the example of the Jewish National Home. Prof. Efraim Karsh, in a lecture delivered at the Begin-Sadat Center of Bar-Ilan University (April 22, 2007), stated that Christian sympathy made the Balfour
Declaration possible. He explained, “Although there may have been pressing immediate considerations related to the First World War, Christian sympathy for the Jewish people was the real foundation for the Balfour Declaration, which gave recognition under international law for the project of a Jewish Home. It was more than power politics. There was the commonly held belief in the Jewish tie with Eretz Yisrael [the Land of Israel].”8 Karsh emphasized that “the historic Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel is the real claim to statehood” and asserted that “There is a pressing need to reclaim the historical truth and to rebuild a narrative built on facts, not fiction.”9 For the sake of historical perspective, one may recall Ben-Gurion’s first premise, which, on January 7, 1937, he stated to the Peel Commission: “I say on behalf of the Jews that the Bible is our Mandate, the Bible which was written by us, in our own language, in Hebrew, in this very country. That is our Mandate. It was only recognition of this right which was expressed in the Balfour Declaration.”10

In short, Christian recognition of a valid historical claim provided the legitimacy for the idea of a Jewish National Home. There are two basic elements in this relationship: first, that the Jewish people have a historic tie with the Land of Israel, which forms the basis for its legitimate claim to statehood, and second, that Christian sympathy for the Jewish people formed the real foundation for the Balfour Declaration. On the one hand, there was a valid historical claim, and on the other, the support of friendly public opinion among the elite of the leading power of the time, which affirmed it.

Relegitimization and delegitimization are thus part of the same spectrum. If we examine today’s reality in North America, there is still great Christian support for Israel. It is based on the commonly shared core values of the Christian and Jewish faiths as well as a firm belief in American exceptionalism. When we speak of a broad-based national consensus in favor of the Jewish State, we may understand that the enemies of Israel seek to destroy this consensus in the US and create cultural conditions similar to that of the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, or Norway. The methods of doing so are well known. It seems, however, that there is just one player that does not know how to play the game.

II

“Can’t anybody here play this game?”
Casey Stengel on the 1962 New York Mets baseball team

Several capable scholars have described the reality of delegitimization. In 1984, when the Information Department of the Jewish Agency launched a campaign to bring about the repeal of the “Zionism is Racism” resolution (UNGA
it commissioned several studies. As part of this effort, the late Dr. Ehud Sprinzak, then an associate professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, analyzed the practical meaning of delegitimization. As an example of deliberate delegitimization of a political system from within, Sprinzak referred to the case of the Weimar Republic. The Nazi party “… managed to set in motion a process by which the Weimar Republic was irreversibly delegitimized.” Sprinzak then added, “As for delegitimization fostered from without, the Soviet Union has, in the present century, become the recognized expert.”

He further explained that the distinguishing characteristic of the new defamation campaign against Israel was a process of dehumanization, which denied Israelis and Jews their commonly accepted rights, both collective and individual. He argued that this was part of a new development, and that it would be more accurate to speak of a new antisemitism. This was a much more destructive form of delegitimization that went beyond the level of the usual Cold War polemics, which divided the world into two blocs. There was a new level of gravity in the Arab and Russian effort to brand Israel a racist state, because the two known racist states at the time were Nazi Germany and South Africa.

The other grave development identified by Sprinzak was the attempt to dehumanize the Jewish State. Both processes were harmful: the first because it attempted to remove Israel from the society of cultured nations and the second because it made Israel fair game for all forms of violence, including terror, by designating it a legitimate target that was entitled neither to legal recourse nor the right to self-defense.

Sprinzak’s central thesis was that a “qualitative change ushered in the anti-Zionism of the ’70s, a change arising from the fact that Zionism had ceased being an object of delegitimation and had become an object of dehumanization”[italics in original]. His use of the term “dehumanization” is highly significant, because according to scholarship in the new field of genocide studies, the danger of incitement and dehumanization has been documented and accepted. In a 1996 briefing paper that he originally presented at the State Department, Gregory H. Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, described what he termed “The Eight Stages of Genocide.”

Dehumanization belongs to stage three. Accordingly, there is a potential but real link between the process of dehumanization and actual violence. In the absence of the dimension of conquest and repression, the probability remains low that violence, destruction, or mass murder will occur. The variable, however, is context. A sudden change of mood or circumstances could be all that is necessary for such evil to find material expression and reach its dangerous potential. The desire to cause mass murder may be present, but the means may not be available. However, if there is a conjuncture of will and means, the situation could become genocidal.

At the time in which Sprinzak described this process, the logical meaning of
“dehumanization” and its practical consequences were unimaginable. Now, after Rwanda and the bald threats of Iran, they cannot be discounted. Because this crime is inchoate, many have systematically ignored the dangerous potential of the delegitimization process.

After the passage of UNGA 3379 on November 10, 1975, Sprinzak described the resultant political devastation:

Delegitimization is a process involving ideological and symbolic manipulation. As a result of this process, an accepted political entity, recognized as having a right to exist, is transformed into an unacceptable one without such a right .... When delegitimization is achieved ... the political entity that has been under attack comes to be seen not only as misguided and wrong, but as altogether undeserving of existence .... In sum, a process of delegitimization occurs only when a political entity, previously held to be legitimate, loses that status as a result of a chain of events over time. Only at the end of that process has the entity lost its right to exist.15

He further noted that as part of its loss of status, a delegitimized state is denied the right to speak and be heard:

.... The loss of legitimacy effectively means the loss of the right to speak or debate in certain forums. When a political entity is subjected to widespread delegitimization, whatever its spokesmen may have to say on a given concrete subject, even when no particular principle is at stake, is perceived as irrelevant. They are no longer accepted as partners in legitimate discourse, for they themselves are illegitimate. Their position resembles that of patients in a closed mental institution: once committed by the professional board of review, they are treated as mentally incompetent, no matter how cogently they may express themselves. In social-science terms, the basic paradigm of their thought and action is considered defective, and thus, though they may have perfectly reasonable things to say, no one will listen to them. At best they will be indulged as members of a sub-human species.16

If one goes beyond the terminology and ponders the effective meaning of the political war being waged against Israel and its supporters, one may note that the BDS campaign against Israel has many characteristics identical to those of the delegitimization process. Although the terminology may differ, the content is nearly the same. Nearly two generations after what Sprinzak wrote, Anthony Julius, an esteemed member of the Mishcon de Reya law firm in London, described the meaning of boycotting in his path-breaking study, Trials of the Diaspora. It should
also be noted that the process Julius described is nearly identical in content to that of delegitimization, which slowly undermines certain rights, not the least of which is the right to speak out and be heard:

What happens when people are boycotted? The ordinary courtesies of life are no longer extended to them. They are not acknowledged in the street; their goods are not bought; their services are not employed; invitations they hitherto could rely upon dry up; they find themselves isolated in company. The boycott is an act of violence, although of a paradoxical kind—one of recoil and exclusion rather than assault. The boycotted person is pushed away by the “general horror and common hate.” It is a denial amongst other things, of the boycotted person’s freedom of expression .... To limit or deny self-expression is thus an attack at the root of what it is to be human .... Boycotting is thus an activity especially susceptible to hypocrisy. It implies moral judgments both on the boycotter and boycotted.¹⁷

Although attention has been devoted here to relatively new developments, the role of the classical antisemites, both European and Islamic, should not be overlooked. It is not generally known that in 1955 Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir engaged the unrepentant Nazi Johann von Leers as an antisemitic propagandist, and he was one of the first to deny the Holocaust. Von Leers was a close friend of the Nazi collaborator, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, who brought him to Egypt from Argentina. Not surprisingly, his old buddy secured him a post as political adviser in the Egyptian Information Department.¹⁸ When the ex-Mufti publicly welcomed von Leers in Cairo, he proclaimed, “We thank you for venturing to take up the battle with the powers of darkness that have become incarnate in world Jewry.”¹⁹ In addition to the professional obligations of his day job, von Leers was “active as the contact man for the organization of former members of the SS (ODESSA) in Arab territory.”²⁰ Similarly, Prof. Arnold Toynbee, as reported in the account of his debate with Israel’s ambassador to Canada, Yaakov Herzog (January 31, 1961), compared “from a moral standpoint,” the attitude of Israel to the Arabs in 1947 and 1948 with the Nazi slaughter of six million Jews, and went on to assert that the Jews have no historical right to Israel whatsoever.²¹

When considering classical antisemites, one must also include General Charles de Gaulle. At his infamous press conference of November 27, 1967, he brutally assaulted the Jewish State and the Jewish people. He referred to the Jews as “an elite people, self-assured and domineering.” This well-staged outburst terminated the period of grace Jews had enjoyed during the postwar era. After this event, it became acceptable once again to vent antisemitic views publicly.²² Writing in 1968, the distinguished French political scientist Raymond Aron explained the true nature of the damage de Gaulle had caused:
....The antisemites … had received solemn authorization from the head of state to make themselves heard again and to employ the same language as before the Final Solution.23

.... General de Gaulle has knowingly and deliberately initiated a new phase of Jewish history and perhaps of antisemitism. Everything has once again become possible; everything is beginning over again….24

There can also be no doubt that geopolitical motives also influenced the attitude of French policy-makers. They believed that France’s association with Israel had become too close, and that after the end of the war in Algeria, it would be expedient to follow a more independent policy—to reestablish its “traditional ties” in the Arab world and seek new markets there.25

The Soviet Union likewise endeavored to gain a foothold in the region and advance its geopolitical interests. Thus, the Palestinian campaign of delegitimization it supported should be understood in the context of its Cold War rivalry with the US—the “Main Enemy”—and the West. The Israeli victory in the Six-Day War caught the USSR by surprise, and it faced a crisis. In response, its leadership immediately tried to stigmatize Israel as the aggressor but failed by a vote of 11–4 in the UN Security Council.26 The Soviet Union then unleashed a major anti-Israel (and antisemitic) propaganda campaign, the purpose of which was to falsify the facts and convince the world that Israel was the aggressor. In this effort, they enlisted the accomplished propagandists of the German Democratic Republic, including a solid representation of Nazi media experts. In an exposé, Simon Wiesenthal published the names of those “old comrades,” their job definitions, and their membership numbers in the Nazi party.27 Thus, in the campaign to delegitimize Israel, there was a real continuity of personnel. The USSR, like Egypt, made use of the professional propagandists of the Third Reich.

III

Qui pensiamo in secoli [Here we think in centuries]
A Vatican Motto

In retrospect, it is clear that the passage of UNGA Resolution 3379 on November 10, 1975 (Zionism is Racism) represented the defining moment in the international assault on Israel’s legitimacy and wrought lasting damage.28 Even today the accusation of racism serves as the foundation for the political war against the Jewish State. The program of the Durban Conference, the Boycott Movement, and the call for a third intifada derive directly and indirectly from UNGA 3379. Following its adoption in the UN in 1975, Israel’s political class remained for the
most part complaisantly unresponsive, mainly because this group failed to grasp its importance. Abba Eban described this transformation with great insight:

.... The Arab reaction to defeat [in 1967] was not to assume that the anti-Israel policy had failed, but rather that it had not been sufficiently applied. The hope of early revenge was nourished with virulence by the Palestinian organizations, especially El Fatah. After some eruptions of military action in 1968 and occasional acts of spectacular piracy against airlines, these movements shifted their emphasis to the political domain. Their device was to elevate the concept of “Palestine” to the point at which “Israel” would disappear. As long as the struggle seemed to lie between Israel and the Arab world, sympathy went to Israel .... But when the contest was presented as being not between Israel and the Arabs, but between Israel and the Palestinians, the perspective changed .... Israel was now portrayed as powerful, sated, established, and recognized, while the Palestinians were, by contrast, dispossessed, bitter, dissatisfied, and implacable. The current of world opinion flowed away from the embattled victor toward the defeated aggressor. We found ourselves transformed from David to Goliath overnight. Israel had committed the dark sin of survival....

Many members of the Israeli elite were capable of thinking only in pure military terms and possessed little appreciation for the political dimension of the country’s situation. After the Yom Kippur War (1973), an uneasy awareness emerged that it was possible to win militarily but lose politically. At the same time, with the 1982 incursion into Lebanon, Israeli strategists discovered the hard way that they had to deal with the political fallout from operating within densely populated areas and the ensuing reaction of hostile foreign media. Decades later, Operation Cast Lead presented the identical challenge. Although it was possible to achieve certain well-defined (but not decisive) military goals in Gaza, Israel suffered a serious setback with the Goldstone Report. After world opinion became critical, many who had become complaisant and overconfident sank into a state of fatalistic demoralization and defeatism. For personal as well as cultural reasons, the political class could or would not face up to the type of conflict in which Israel was engaged. It lacked the imagination to adapt to the new situation.

The preeminent Prussian military theoretician, Carl von Clausewitz, stated, “War is merely the continuation of policy by other means.” According to his definition, public diplomacy is clearly another form of war. He added that “.... wars must vary with the nature of their motives and of the situations which give rise to them. The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something
that is alien to its nature.” He stated that evaluating the situation accurately and understanding the motives of the other side was the obligation both of the statesman and the commander. If, for example, either of them misperceived or misrepresented the situation, every decision that followed would be defective. That is why it is necessary to form one’s judgment on the basis of hard facts and where possible on the basis of experience. “Strategy derives the means and ends to be examined exclusively from experience.” Sound strategy is based on the truthful understanding of historical facts. To dismiss the importance of past experience, as has been the case in Israel’s recent history, means effectively to advocate willful blindness and ignorance—a leap in the dark.

Israel has an important fight on its hands. As Clausewitz admonished, the first obligation of the leader, military or civilian, is to recognize the type of war being fought. In this case, it is a political conflict with religious aspects, of which the war of delegitimization is a part. To reverse this process, a serious campaign of re-legitimization is necessary in order to retake lost ground and take new ground. There is a need to change the world consensus of public opinion, which is a major, decades-long project. A campaign of good news about Israel may be suitable for marketing and branding but does not come to grips with the real problem. Such a campaign has commercial rather than political value. Israel may be the world’s “start-up nation.” It has wonderful beaches and a great night-life in Tel Aviv. It is the home of glamorous super-models and demonstrates a fashionably modern attitude toward homosexuals. While this is heartwarming, even a torrent of such “good news” will not move elite public opinion, which is comprised of intellectuals, newspaper and TV editors, professors, teachers, clergymen (and women), writers of textbooks, and policy-makers. This group needs to be engaged, challenged, and convinced.

If we carefully examine the examples mentioned earlier of social movements that influenced public attitudes over the long term, it should be possible to develop a program of concrete steps. The delegitimization process manipulates public attitudes over the long term, and to neutralize it will require a major commitment on a much larger scale than ever before. It is possible to build on the work of several fine NGOs that have accomplished important successes and to learn from the accomplishments of the Chabad movement and of the Birthright project.

It is no longer enough for Israel to proclaim that it seeks peace and defensible borders. Although the subject has been played down, and it is unfashionable to speak in such terms, we are also engaged in a religious war. We must have a message for the world. Our enemies do, and there is no reason to keep silent any longer. Judaism is one of the great religions of the world and has been a civilizing force. We must remind the world, as did Josephus in his time, that Judaism
gave mankind the Sabbath; the idea of equality before law (isonomia); human dignity; refined ideas of charity, repentance, and redemption; and the rejection of infanticide and of cruelty to animals.33

If Israel intends to regain its legitimacy, it must advance its historical claims aggressively and forcefully. The Jewish State cannot permit others to define its identity or distort its past. It is necessary to discredit the fraudulent claims of the other side and expose its lies. Such an effort should include a long-term campaign of re legitimization. Israel must defend its sovereignty and take its rightful place in the community of nations. These are the responsibilities of nationhood.

Notes

A preliminary version of this research was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa on November 4, 2011 in Washington, DC. At that gathering, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME) organized and sponsored a panel devoted to “The Power of Messages and Perception in the Middle East.”

5 Bill Moyer, JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, Steven Soifer, Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements (Gabriola Island, 2001).
8 Delegitimization: Notes of Lectures at BESA, April 22, 2007, Launching of “Project 1948” (text confirmed by Efraim Karsh, July 22, 2011).
9 Ibid.
225.


13 Ibid., 2.


15 Sprinzak, op. cit., pp. 2–3.

16 Ibid., p. 5.


20 This quotation comes from the biographical sketch of von Leers that the Bundesarchiv posted (Bundesarchiv-Findmittelinfo) and is no longer online.


23 Ibid., p. 24.

24 Ibid., p. 25.


31 Ibid., Book I, Chapter I, item 27, p. 88.

32 Ibid., Book II, Chapter II, p. 144.

33 These basic arguments are taken from Flavius Josephus (37 – c. 100), *Against Apion*, c. 98–100 CE.