



What Is the Campaign to Delegitimize Israel?

Since the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 and the UN Conference Against Racism in 2001, there has been an expansion and intensification of a well-funded, organized worldwide campaign to delegitimize Israel. It questions Israel's right to defend itself and challenges the very notion of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. Increasingly, attacks against Israeli policy carry a false approval of international law (known as "lawfare"), in which misinformation is used to accuse Israel of violating universally accepted conventions and norms. Such attacks are then used as a basis for justifying international isolation and attaching pariah status to Israel outside the family of nations.

While the engine currently driving the campaign is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, recently peaking in the aftermath of the Goldstone report on Operation Cast Lead and after the May 2010 flotilla incident, attacks against Israel go well beyond criticism of Israel's policies. Double standards are used, exclusively singling out Israel for criticism, while Israel is demonized through comparisons to Nazism and apartheid South Africa.

Through a global network headquartered in Brussels, London, Madrid, Paris, the San Francisco Bay Area and Toronto, the campaign has gained traction through use of the Internet and social media, and the ability to blur the difference between criticism of Israel and fundamental delegitimization. It has attempted to penetrate mainline Protestant churches, college campuses, labor unions, cultural elites, corporations and targeted states and municipalities.

Within this framework, anti-Israel activists have honed in on the use of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) as a tactic to isolate Israel, having been galvanized by the July 2004 joint statement by The Palestinian Campaign for the Cultural Boycott of Israel calling on the international community "to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the Apartheid era."

Campaigns have been launched demanding the "divestment" of university, municipal, church, union and other investment portfolios from Israeli companies and from companies that do business with Israel, as well as the boycott of Israeli products, professionals, academic interactions and artistic performances (in Israel and abroad) as

a punitive measure against Israel for its policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Common to most BDS calls are distortions and outright fabrications of facts and a false assertion that the proffered action somehow will improve the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Despite the best efforts of activists and some minor gains among church groups and trade unions, the divestment and boycott campaign has largely failed to have more than a public relations impact, particularly in the U.S. To date, campaigns have failed to bring its primary targeted institutions to divest from Israel or to keep U.S. companies from doing business with Israel.

These campaigns do, however, garner publicity and could have a lasting impact on public perceptions of Israel. Increasingly, BDS campaigns have become an effective way for anti-Israel activists to attract attention to their message, particularly on college campuses, where BDS initiatives draw students, faculty, campus organizations and administrations into what generally becomes a highly politicized and publicized debate. Media attention is as important to BDS activists as the actual adoption of their initiatives; simply injecting delegitimization issues within important forums is regarded as a victory.

Israeli leaders have defined the delegitimization campaign as an existential danger. Unless it is effectively countered, it threatens to change the culture of political discussion and makes it harder for people of goodwill to publicly support Israel. If support for Israel begins to be seen as de facto racism, this could even provide fertile ground for the continued growth of anti-Semitism.

Prepared by the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation using information provided by and excerpts from:

The Anti-Defamation League;

"Resolution Against Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions Movement" passed by the Delegate Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, November 9, 2009;

"Resolution on Campaign to Delegitimize Israel through Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement" adopted at the 2010 Plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, February 2010;

"Building a Political Firewall Against Israel's Delegitimization Conceptual Framework," The Reut Institute, March 2010.

Examples of Efforts to Delegitimize Israel provided by The Jewish Federations of North America

Campus/Academia

Anti-Israel divestment initiatives on campus have proliferated, leading to, among other things, creation of an oppressive atmosphere for Jewish students. A divestment proposal presented to the UC Berkeley student senate was defeated, but it received international media attention. An example of the distortions used by divestment proponents is the spurious claims of divestment ‘victories’ at Hampshire College and Harvard University, neither of which were grounded in reality. Israeli diplomats making campus appearances have been treated with disrespect and subjected to hate speech. In one notable instance at UC Irvine, Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren was continuously interrupted by eleven students, claiming he was “propagating murder.” Boycotts directed at Israeli academics have been largely unsuccessful, due to strong opposition from North American scholars and university presidents. In Western Europe, however, a robust campaign to boycott Israeli academics has met with sporadic success. Additionally, anti-Israel activists succeeded in coercing the Palestinian Al-Quds University to sever its ties with Hebrew University.

Churches

In 2010, the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly considered a one-sided Middle East Study Committee (MESC) report, which made highly selective use of sacred texts, historical events and current realities. The report was a one-sided diatribe against Israel and an insult to the Jewish community. After months of intensive outreach to national and community-based Presbyterian leaders, the PC (USA) General Assembly ended up adopting a resolution, which while still far from ideal, represented a more thoughtful approach to Middle East peacemaking, and calling for authentic balance in the study of and teaching about the complexities of these issues. Nevertheless, virulent anti-Israel initiatives continue to gain traction in several denominations, including the publication of such anti-Israel screeds as the Kairos document. Internationally, the World Council of Churches and the Anglican and Methodist Churches in England have embraced BDS.

Corporate

In July 2010, the vociferously anti-Israel Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) collected 12,000 signatures demanding that TIAA-CREF divest from Israeli companies. Before the CREF shareholders meeting, the company issued a statement expressing its opposition to divestment, but activists did succeed in securing a private meeting with CREF executives. JVP is committed to applying pressure on companies, such as TIAA-CREF, to divest from companies which do business with Israel’s security authorities. Other efforts have been waged against retailers that sell Israeli products manufactured across the ‘green line,’ such as Ahava beauty products. Thus far, the latter initiative has been successfully defeated with “buycott” campaigns.

Cultural

The delegitimization campaign in performing arts and other cultural arenas has grown significantly since the 2009 Toronto Film Festival, which activists protested for its inclusion of ten Israeli films based on the theme of Tel Aviv's centennial celebration. A number of prominent performers, such as Elvis Costello and the Pixies, rescinded scheduled performances in Israel, in some cases citing the flotilla incident as their prime justification. Protests have accompanied Israeli performances overseas, such as the Israel Ballet. Israeli athletes and teams have found themselves excluded from several national tournaments.

Labor Unions

Both on principle and as a result of decades of relationships with the Jewish community, the 16-million-strong U.S. labor movement as a whole has been steadfast in its solidarity with Israel. While many U.S. union leaders have gone on record in opposition to BDS, in the last few years, a number of unions and trade union federations in such countries as Ireland, Norway, the UK, South Africa and Canada have passed resolutions very critical of Israel, its actions in Gaza, and most recently, the Gaza flotilla affair. They have made explicit calls for boycotting Israel, or boycotting products from the West Bank, and have tried to introduce BDS resolutions at international trade union conferences. There are growing attempts to insert BDS into the U.S. labor agenda, and to pass resolutions critical of Israel at local, regional and national labor bodies, as well as within specific unions. Most notably, in June 2010, anti-Israel activists organized a picket line at an Oakland, CA dock, which successfully delayed the unloading of an Israeli ship. The organizers of the demonstration secured the endorsement of the San Francisco and Alameda County Labor Councils as well as a local of the International Longshore Warehouse Union, whose members refused to cross the picket line. The historic support shown by the labor movement for Israel in both word and deed must be reinforced through increased interaction with the organized Jewish community – it cannot be taken for granted.