

The BDS Wars: Some Signs of Success for the New Year



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The past year was not particularly good for Israel in terms of the demonization and boycott campaigns, but it was not as bad as expected, and there were some successful counterattacks against the demonizers. In the shadow of last summer's Gaza war, the BDS and lawfare movements prepared another major push, based on more false claims of Israeli "war crimes".

William Schabas, who has a lengthy record of anti-Israel campaigning, was appointed to lead this attack in the United Nations Human Rights Commission. As Richard Goldstone did a few years earlier, Schabas enlisted the anti-Israel NGO network (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, B'tselem, Breaking the Silence and many more), to issue reports and press their agendas in the media, the UN and before the International Criminal Court.

But in February, Schabas suddenly resigned after information surfaced showing that in applying for the UN position, he had omitted a stint as a paid consultant for the PLO. Embarrassed by the attempt to hide the obvious conflict of interest, Schabas' resignation tainted the entire framework. When the UN report on the 2014 Gaza war was belatedly published in June, it came as an anticlimax, and the damage to Israel was relatively limited. As a result, although the ICC prosecutor opened a preliminary investigation this year, this step is not, by itself, very damaging.

In parallel, the BDS movement to demonize Israel claimed some additional successes, but these were largely for media consumption. For example, although the French president of Orange International foolishly told journalists in Egypt that his company was ending its relationship with the Israeli company for political reasons, in fact, this was entirely false. Overall, the same people that have been marching in Europe demanding boycotts of Israeli products continued to march, but they did not gain a significant number of new followers or have major breakthroughs in 5775. Indeed, for many Israeli start-ups and high tech firms, this was a banner year.

Similarly, on university campuses, particularly in the US and Canada, while BDS won some symbolic votes, watchdog groups reported that overall, the impact of hate campaigns against Israel did not grow. In a number of cases, effective pro-Israel student groups including Stand With Us scored major successes in defeating the boycott calls. Students and faculty members who, in the past, stayed quiet or were too intimidated to speak out, have joined in condemning BDS. Some who are critical of specific Israeli government policies on settlements have come to realize that the BDS threat is much wider, and that its leaders seek to eliminate Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people.

In other areas as well, the counter-attack against BDS gained strength in the past year. In the Israeli government, and particularly in the Foreign Ministry, headed by Deputy Minister Hotovely, the resources and coordination needed to fight and defeat BDS were increased significantly. Other ministries with related agendas also gave a higher priority to efforts to defeat the political and economic warfare. Ambassadors

and officials from the European governments and the EU were called in and strongly criticized for providing taxpayer funds for NGOs that are at the head of irresponsible and often anti-Semitic BDS campaigns.

Indeed, as diplomats and political leaders from the donor countries were confronted with evidence that the funds that they provide for promoting “peace” and “human rights” are used for demonization and hate, some of the frameworks were changed significantly. Under the “Partnership for Peace Program”, the European Union did not renew grants for NGOs that promote BDS and lawfare, including for violent activities, marking the most significant change in over 15 years. A number of European embassies in Israel also reduced or ended grants for anti-peace NGOs. While there are still tens of millions of Euros and Pounds and Krona going to BDS, the trend is down, for the first time.

The year ended with the Matisyahu incident in Spain that began as a defeat and was turned into an important victory over the demonizers. The American Jewish singer was targeted by “BDS bullies” and told that he must sign a statement against Israel in order to appear at a music festival. Matisyahu refused, and this response launched a wide public campaign condemning the BDS movement. The organizers apologized, and in defiance of BDS, Matisyahu sang songs about Jerusalem.

While it would be premature to say that the war to defeat BDS and lawfare has turned in Israel’s favor, there are certainly some signs of optimism on this battleground as we go towards 5776.