

## Exposing 'legitimate' criticism

By Gerald Steinberg, April 15, 2013

For 65 years, Israel has been the target of an intense political and ideological attack, in parallel to the shooting war, with the objective of isolating and delegitimising the Jewish state. In its current version, the main weapons include exploitation of labels such as "apartheid" and "racist". The battle tactics are copied from the South African anti-apartheid movement, and include BDS (boycotts, divestment and sanctions) campaigns, media blitzes that distort Israeli realities beyond recognition, and false accusations of "war crimes", such as the now-discredited Goldstone report.

The demonisation of Israel, in which context and history are erased, has gained support among humanitarian, human rights groups and in the media.

Entertainers such as Roger Waters have been recruited to join the boycott, giving it publicity. Among some powerful Christian groups, expressions of sympathy for "Palestinian suffering" at the hands of Israel emphasise theological antisemitic themes and images.

On campus, "Israel Apartheid Weeks" and a steady flow of speakers have spilled over into physical attacks against Jewish students and organisations.

Israel's allies have now entered the fight

At first, the Israeli government, as well as Zionist groups, was slow to recognise the threat and devise an effective response. Ten years ago, there were only a handful of high-profile columnists and pundits making the case for Israel, to use Alan Dershowitz's term. But fighting demonisation is now a high priority, and there are dozens of such writers. Many more are active on the digital battlefields. For the first time, Israel and its allies are on the field and putting up a fight.

In the process, the emphasis has gradually shifted from defensive to offensive, particularly by unmasking the unethical activities of those who claim a moral mandate. On campus, Israeli academics and top diplomats are active in challenging the crude propaganda. At the UN, the blatant double standards of the Human Rights Council stand exposed, in the contrast between automatic condemnations of Israel and minimal responses on Syria.

Officials of groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are belatedly being held to account, and displays of bias that were once overlooked now draw negative publicity, tarnishing their impact.

The efforts of BDS activists to export their successes in Europe to the US have failed, and surveys reflect positive overall images of Israel among students. Divestment resolutions quietly manoeuvred through student political groups have later been rescinded following detailed discussions. In North America, there is widespread recognition that BDS and other forms of demonisation cross the line between legitimate criticism and displays of antisemitism.

In Europe, while "apartheid" myths are entrenched, there's a slow decline in willingness to channel millions from government bodies to the "civil society" campaign groups. The pressure from responsible ministers and MPs to review the process is increasing.

Recently, the funders of Miftah, a Palestinian NGO headed by PLO spokesperson Hanan Ashrawi, were forced on the defensive following the publication of an article invoking the blood libel. Such negative publicity could help end funding for demonisers.

The Anglican church has needed to repeatedly justify the Synod vote to endorse the anti-Israel group, the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, while the new Archbishop of Canterbury has distanced himself from that decision. And, while an employment tribunal ruled against Ronnie Fraser in his lawsuit charging the UCU with discrimination triggered by opposition to its anti-Israel agenda, the judgment's absurdity in the face of the evidence and critiques of the decision are significant. Each example shows that involvement in the political war against Israel is no longer cost-free.

After 65 years, the political war to delegitimise Israel and the Jewish right to sovereign equality continues. But in this war, as in the military dimension, there are signs of progress. Most importantly, victory depends on repeatedly exposing the immoral behaviour of those who single out Israel, using the pretence of "legitimate criticism".

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