Policy Paper

Delegitimization & anti-Semitism in the Time of Corona: A Guide for the Perplexed Pro-Israel Network

The Essence

The coronavirus pandemic is expected to change the map of threats and challenges facing the Jewish People. The pro-Israel network tasked with responding to delegitimization efforts against Israel is required to reassess the nature of the arena, along with the tools and capabilities at its disposal. With Jewish communities focusing their energy and resources on addressing basic needs, delegitimization challenges fall low on the list of pressing concerns. In this new setting, the pro-Israel network finds itself perplexed by its sudden irrelevance and concerned that many organizations won't survive the economic downturn.

On the surface, anti-Israel groups are not suffering. On the eve of the coronavirus breakout, BDS campaigns were gaining steady momentum marked by a number of unprecedented successes. Anti-Zionist organizations promoting delegitimization are also seemingly more resilient to economic downturns based on their reliance on volunteer activities over payrolls. **But a deeper look reveals an opportunity for the pro-Israel network to use current geostrategic global shifts to reframe the rules of the game in a way that impedes anti-Zionist organizations' continued ability to harness progressive circles around anti-Israel positions and activities.**

The coronavirus has also brought with it a rejuvinated and widespread wave of "classic" anti-Semitism, often from radical right-wing and Islamic groups. This surge includes more blatant expressions of racism, violence and a plethora of conspiracy theories. At the same time, classic anti-Semitism is more easily acknowledged and condemned within western political and social discourse than delegitimization. Moreover, while Jewish communities have occasionally failed to present a united front against delegitimization campaigns, it is far less challenging to rally support against classic anti-Semitism. A rise in internal Jewish solidarity during and after the crisis will also help in this effort.

The extent of a backlash campaign born out of an Israeli decision to annex parts of the West Bank remains a significant unknown. In the event of annexation, the pro-Israel network's ability to distinguish between "legitimate" criticism of Israel's policy and delegitimization will again be tested. Certain pro-Israel organizations tend to classify almost every form of external criticism as delegitimization. This has only pushed western liberal circles closer towards anti-Israel positions, including boycott initiatives.

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Differentiating between delegitimization and classic anti-Semitsm is not just an impractical theoretical task. Despite obvious overlap, the political and social origins of these phenomena, their characteristics, and their potential to penetrate the mainstream is distinct. Further, each requires their own relevant response toolkit and capabilities. While classic anti-Semitism and delegitimization may come from the same family tree, separate ministries and organizations within the Israeli government and the Jewish establishment worldwide deal with each. As such, a reshuffling of threats facing Israel and the Jewish world could create internal structural tensions resulting in unnecessary ego-driven and organizational power struggles.

The prospect of an emerging new world order creates an opportunity for the network to reshape the rules of the game against delegitimization. The pro-Israel network can take advantage of the shifting world order by leading an intellectual effort that reconfigures the way Israel is perceived on the international stage. This can be done through creating a new language around Israel; focusing on strengthening community cohesion; generating legitimacy surplus through Tikkun Olam initiatives and engagement of community relations organizations; and promoting anti-boycott legislative initiatives.

This moment presents an extraordinary opportunity to examine and strengthen the resilience of Jewish communities during and after this crisis. Strengthening community resilience will help communities respond to the coronavirus. At the same time, it will prepare the Jewish community in the likely scenario of a major Middle East war, especially given the potential for conflict between Israel and Iran and its proxies.

This paper calls for the Government of Israel to recognize its moral commitment to the pro-Israel network, and engage in its maintenance and rehabilitation.

This document is intended to serve as a framework for discussion and a series of virtual meetings for the pro-Israel network worldwide. It is part of a broader campaign, "Seminar 2.0," which Reut is leading with the aim to mobilize the collective learning of the State of Israel and the Jewish People, leading to their "Grand Pivot" – the fundamental change of institutions, structures and pattern of conduct in order to address its dramatic implications.

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Background

1. **Delegitimization is promoted by a relatively small number of anti‑Zionist organizations who have managed to generate a "long tail" of progressive support.** By hiding their anti-Zionist ideological agenda through the use of human rights language to negatively brand Israel, radical left and fundamentalist Islamic organizations have managed to garner support from progressive circles and occasionally harness them unwittingly to "acts of delegitimization," with the notable example of BDS.

2. **The boycott campaign thrives in the era of globalization.** The contemporary embrace of universalism has worked in favor of the anti-Israeli agenda. For example, ever since the Ferguson riots in the US (2014), anti-Israel organizations have become an integral part of the "intersectionality" coalition as a result of an imagined global solidarity of the oppressed, marking the acceptance and growth of the boycott movement, particularly among black and LGBTQ activitist circles.

3. **Despite its many achievements, the pro‑Israel network does not always have the upper hand.** In Reut's seminal work "Political Firewall" (2010), we have embraced the notion that "It takes a network to fight a network." Indeed, pro-Israel organizations' adaption of the "network approach" has greatly improved its ability to mobilize and brought about significant achievements in the last decade. Yet, Anti-Zionist organizations are still compromising Israel's position, particularly within progressive circles.
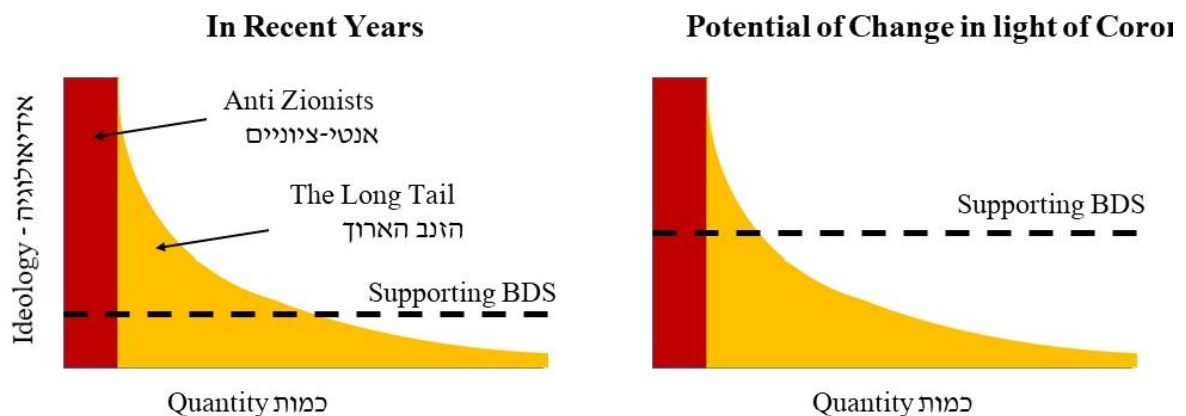
The Map of Threats is Changing

Docking the 'long tail' of delegitimization

4. **On the eve of Corona's breakout, BDS campaigns around the world were gaining steady momentum marked by a number of unprecedented successes** (of which we will not be citing so as to not give the campaign free exposure). Moreover, anti-Zionist grassroots initiatives are seemingly less vulnerable than pro-Israel groups to the unfolding economic crisis as their activities rely more heavily on volunteer activists, making them less dependent on payrolls and bureaucracy.

5. **However, we believe that the dynamic which allowed anti‑Zionist organizations to previously gain momentum will shift** in a way that provides Israel and the pro-Israel network with an opportunity to boost both its defensive and offensive capabilities during and after corona:

   ❖ **Decreasing attention of delegitimization campaigns: If a tree falls in the forest and nobody's around to hear it, does it make a sound?** The coronavirus has diverted potential media attention away from the recent boycott movement's gains. In previous documents (see here), the Reut Group showed that the logic of the boycott campaign is to negatively brand Israel, and thus, the tactical goal of boycott efforts is to gain media exposure. As such, **a failed attempt to boycott Israel that receives mainstream media exposure is better for anti-Israel groups than a successful effort that doesn't receive exposure**.

   ❖ **Social distancing halted anti‑Israel grassroots campaigns which take place on campuses and within labor unions.** Moving the anti-Israel campaign online, including generating the first completely virtual "Israel Apartheid Week", has not produced the same impact and media attention thus far.

6. **Geostrategic shifts may make it more difficult for the delegitimization campaign to prosper in the long term -**

   ❖ **Globalization trends are evolving.** While it is still too early to assess the global impact of the Corona pandemic, there is potential that universal norms and individualistic worldviews championed by globalization trends will be challenged by an increasing focus on national, local and communal challenges. The ability of the relatively small number of anti-Zionist organizations to garner the support of broad progressice circles for "acts of delegitimization" (such as boycotting Israel) based on an imagined global solidarity, would be compromised in such a reality.

   ❖ **The boycott campaign is a phenomenon that was born and remains active mainly in Europe, which continues to lose its global foothold.** With the impact of the UK's departure from the EU still being felt, the combination of an older population and open borders makes Europe particularly vulnerable to the virus. With Europe's expected weakening, the weight of European anti-Zionist activity on the global anti-israel global movement may also decrease. Moreover, in European countries anti-Zionist activities may lose the attention of bodies and organizations that make up the 'long tail' of their activities.

   ❖ **America's decreasing interest in world affairs -** Both Democratic and Republican circles are questioning the country's role as a "global cop" and increasingly call to focus on inward challenges. The severe impact of corona on the US economy and the fall in oil prices are undermining America's financial system and may strengthen the 'America First' mentality in the long term.

Graph: Docking the Longtail of BDS

- **Graph on the left:** The reality today is that most BDS supporters are not necessarily driven out of anti-Israel ideological zeal, though the leaders of the movement are.
- **Graph on the Right:** Smart approach by the pro-Israel network during times of Corona, has a much greater potential to drive a wedge between the anti-Israel ideological core and libers and progressive that make up the long tail.

A Spike in Traditional anti-Semitism

7. **As in past pandemics, corona has brought with it a wave of conspiracy theories linking Jews with the virus.** Far right and fundamental Islamic groups promote a more blatant and direct sort of anti-Semitism than left-wing anti-Zionist groups. According to the Anti-Defamation League, common anti-Semitic tropes still being dispersed are primarily around blood libel, Holocaust denial, themes around Jews, money and greed, dual-loyalty, the claim that Jews are responsible for the original sin of killing Jesus and anti-Zionism (Though anti-Zionism is more prevalent among radical left circles and linked to the delegitimization campaign).

8. **Classic anti-Semitism is flourishing online** - while the delegitimization campaign does not seem to be as impactful in its online form, classic anti-Semitism is flourishing in a time of social distancing. Expressions of online hatred against Jews have risen dramatically during corona, and anti-Semitic trolls, e.g., are breaking into Zoom calls by Israeli and Jewish entities.

9. **Ultra-Orthodox in focus** - Given high infection rates among the ultra-Orthodox population, this community is experiencing a wave of hatred and external anti-Semitism (while also facing an internal hate campaign). The closed and detached nature of the ultra-Orthodox community makes this community particularly susceptible to traditional anti-Semitism that relies on distinctly Jewish stereotypes and imagery.

10. **Sinophobia (anti-Chinese sentiment) may blow back against the Jewish community.** Alongside the increased wave of anti-Semitism during corona is an aggressive hate campaign being waged against the East Asian, and specifically, Chinese community. For example in Europe, 5G towers and infrastructure created in China have been burned down and vandalized due to conspiracy theories that they are the source of the coronavirus. Thus, while Sinofobia may divert the attention of potential haters from the Jewish community, it is likely to quickly turn into xenophobia and anti-Semitsm.

Increasing Jewish Solidarity?

11. **Pre-Corona, Jewish solidarity and consensus in some communities stood at an all-time low, particularly around the delegitimization campaign.** Anti-Zionist campaigns have not received the full opposition of the Jewish community in recent years, increasingly framing it as an exclusively 'Israel problem.' There are also those progressive Jews who may feel uncomfortable with the boycott campaign but prefer to remain silent based on their increasing ambivalence towards Israel along with Israel's strained place within progressive circles. As such, anti-Zionist campaigns have increasingly challenged the cohesion of the Jewish community.

12. **An increased Jewish solidarity? History shows that the Jewish community tends to show more solidarity in the face of havoc and physical threats facing the community.** The current crisis may encourage the Jewish community to work more cohesively, contain issues which previously divided it, and ultimately, show greater solidarity with the State of Israel. Such a developments would strengthen the pro-Israel network's activity based on greater internal consensus.

Fragile Middle East Dynamics

13. **The Middle East arena is characterized by chronic instability and frequent military outbreaks, which impact the delegitimization campaign and international discourse on Israel** - Since the Second Lebanon War, every major Israeli military clash has been

accompanied by an intense delegitimization campaign. While corona may be diverting the international community's attention away from the Middle East at the moment, widespread flare-ups in the region could provoke a wave of delegitimization efforts.

The Palestinians: a fragile truce with the looming question of annexation

14. **Between calm and conspiracy theories -** The required coordination between the Palestinian Authority and Israel during corona has lowered tension between the two sides. However, senior officials in the PA and even the Palestinian Prime Minister have been blaming Israel for deliberately spreading the virus. So far, these conspiracy theories have neither flamed tensions on the ground nor sparked a wide international echo, but a widespread outbreak in Gaza or the West Bank could change that.

15. **Hamas promotes a prisoner exchange deal, while blaming Israel for a corona outbreak in Gaza.** Although Israel transferred hundreds of corona test kits to Gaza, Hamas blames Israel for not allowing it to properly deal with the virus.

16. **A partial annexation of the West Bank may rekindle a wave of delegitimization** - Israel's possible annexation of parts of the West Bank could ignite backlash in the Palestinian territories and re-energize the boycott campaign. In such a scenario, the pro-Israel network will again face the test it has failed to pass several times in the past: to create a distinction between legitimate criticism of the move and actions which undermine the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Adopting a narrow definition of delegitimization is crucial to respond effectively to the challenge as it allows the pro-Israel network to focus on the Jewish people and the State of Israel's actual enemies rather than the wide range of Israeli policy critics. The pro-Israel network's broad definition of what is delegitimization, and its harsh rejection of outward critiques of Israeli policy, has narrowed the pro-Israel's network of available allies. This ultimately plays to Israel's adversaries.

Heading towards the first 'World War' with Iran?

17. **Although the outbreak of corona in the Middle East seemed to initially lower tension between Iran and Israel, the potential for a flare-up still exists** - Iran continues to build its strategic nuclear capabilities and support pro-Iranian militias across the Middle East. Lately it seems that Israel has intensified its activity against Iranian efforts in Syria and tension has increased with Hezbollah.

18. **The next war with Iran and its proxies will have a global dimension and the pro-Israel network will play a central role in it.**

   ❖ **Characteristics of the next war will create fertile ground for an expansive delegitimization campaign** - The next war with Iran and its proxies may be postponed, but the pro-Israel network should prepare for it. The next war could be very long, accompanied by thousands of missiles being fired into the Israeli homefront, hitting crowded population centers and causing civilian casualties on both sides.

   ❖ **Network Vs. Network, Diaspora Vs. Diaspora** - Iran's geostrategic vision and outlook is global. It views Israeli embassies and Jewish communities around the world as "posts" of Israel. A possible war with Iran could have an unprecedented effect on Jewish communities around the world. Furthermore, Iran uses Iranian and Shia diaspora communities in various parts of the world to advance its interests. In the next war the mobilization of the pro-Iranian network outside the Middle East can be expected on a diplomatic, economic and political level.

Policy Options: The Great Pivot of the Pro‑Israel Network

19. **Maximizing the Online Presence** - The period of social distancing has moved the struggle against delegitimization and anti-Semitism online. One notable example is the Anti-Defamation League's recent #FightingHateFromHome campaign. Anti-Zionist entities are in the process of upgrading their digital literacy. The materials going online from both sides will remain after the crisis, and the online arena will continue to be crucial in the aftermath of the crisis.

20. **The possible new world order that will come out of corona in regards to how society, economics and politics function, creates an opportunity to reconstruct the discourse on Israel, and change the rules of the game:**

    - **Intellectual effort** - This crisis creates an opportunity to reframe the way Israel is perceived by many western intellectuals. Anti-Israel groups take advantage of pro-Israel organizations' tendency to underestimate the importance of the intellectual field. The concept of intersectionality, as an example, was created within academia in the context of the intersecting feminist and black struggle for equality, but soon turned into an organizing principle that brought about on-the-ground collaborations, support, and solidarity among disadvantaged and minority groups in the United States. In recent years, this concept has been used to boost anti-Zionist campaigns within intersectional social circles.

    - **New Language Creates Reality** - Now is the time to refresh the 'Jewish Concepts Dictionary' along with how the Jewish community maps and conceptualizes threats facing it. These efforts will help the pro-Israel network be more effective in its mission. For example, the term "Jewish solidarity network" may need to be used instead of the "pro-Israel network" to avoid an ongoing debate regarding who is or isn't "pro-Israel." This would also allow for a refocusing around the essence of the issue.

    - **Professionalizing the network** by developing standardization mechanisms, encouraging specialization within organizations, developing a new knowledge, and building up technological abilities.

    - **Creating a legitimacy surplus through joint Tikkun Olam projects** - Corona's impact has significantly increased the need for humanitarian aid throughout the world. Jewish communities' Tikkun Olam projects can serve as an ideal infrastructure for global rehabilitation efforts, putting the Jewish world and Israel at the forefront of this effort.

21. **Bolstering community relations organizations that work to build relationships with other communities and strengthen communal cohesion.** Jewish communities face a dual internal and external challenge. There is a clear need to establish relationships and alliances with other groups. At the same time, Jewish communal organizations must develop greater cohesion between themselves.

22. **Prepare for the next campaign:**

    - **Structural adaptation to rising traditional anti‑Semitism** - The pro-Israel network's organizations were built to fight delegitimization. These organizations also ought to be able to respond to rising traditional anti-Semitism. This requires a process of adaptation and the development of relevant tools and capabilities. Moreover, although anti-Semitism and delegitimization are "cousins," the Israeli government and pro-Israel

organizations handle these overlapping issues via different organizations and ministries. In order to respond effectively to both challenges while not creating unnecessary structural tensions, ego wars and "territory disputes" must be avoided.

❖ **Preparedness for a major war against Iran and its proxies**- the pro-Israel network must prepare for a possible war with Iran in the coming years by building up its models of resilience. The resilience of the pro-Israel network is determined through its ability to overcome crises and mobilize resources and allies in its mission to protect Israel's legitimacy. It must do this all while maintaining the trust of the Jewish establishment and Israeli government, and generating Jewish solidarity.

23. **Finally, this paper ends with a call for the Government of Israel to recognize its moral commitment as the nation state of the Jewish People, and assist Jewish communities worldwide to sustain their resilience and prosperity.** Especially, out of both the value of Arvut Hadadit and of gratitude to the commitment of the pro-Israel network to Israel, the government should engage in the maintenance and rehabilitation of the network.

The End.