The De-legitimization of Israel: Threats, Challenges and Responses

Last Tuesday the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy held a symposium on the important issue of De-legitimization of Israel, that involved figures such as IDC founding president Professor Uriel Reichman, the head of the opposition, MK Tzipi Livni, Yuli Edelstein, Minister for Public Diplomacy and the Diaspora and Mr. Tony Blair, former prime minister of the UK and official envoy of the Quartet to the Middle East.

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On November 10th, 1975, with seventy-two votes in favor, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 3379. “The General assembly ... Determines that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination”. Recalling previous UN statements and resolutions which compared Zionism to the South African apartheid and other racist regimes, on that day the General Assembly drained out of the Jewish State the blood of legitimacy it had injected twenty-eight years before with Resolution 142, also known as the “Partition Plan”. The Resolution was later revoked in 1991, as Israel's prerequisite to the Madrid peace conference; but a sense of conditionality concerning Israel had already been injected into the world's public opinion, a sense which, according to many, persists until the present day. “Because the State was created by an act of the UN, meaning by the international community- says Professor Galia Golan, of the Lauder School of Government, there is apparently a sense among some abroad that the international community can therefore undo its decision. ‘Yet, of course, this would indeed not be a legitimate act, nor is it one I think likely’.

Prof. Uriel Reichman, President of IDC Herzliya speaking at the conference

For a fairly long time now, but especially in recent years, there is the feeling among the Israeli public opinion, that Israel is being subjected to a de-legitimization effort by some groups, at home and abroad. Such an effort, which is usually attributed to far-left or far-right groups and to Arab nationalist and Islamist movements, was the subject of a high-level symposium last week at IDC. The symposium involved figures like IDC founding president Professor Uriel Reichman, the head of the opposition MK Tzipi Livni, Yuli- Yoel Edelstein, Minister for Public Diplomacy and the Diaspora, Mr. Tony Blair, former prime minister of the UK and official envoy of the Quartet to the Middle East. Among other academic figures, Professor Shlomo Avineri and Professor Amnon Rubinstein, respectively from the Hebrew University and IDC, both Israel Prize
laureates; Mr. Gidi Grinstein, president of the Reut Institute, Rabbi Dr. Daniel Hartman, president of the Hartman Institute, jurist Irit Kahan and Dr. Noam Lemelshtrich Latar, dean of the Sammy Ofer School of Communications at IDC. Moreover, ambassadors from several countries and moderators were present, all accounting for a seven hour long and deep-plunging symposium.

In a packed auditorium, with people in excess witnessing the conference from a screen in a “closed circle” room, IDC’s founding president’s introduction points out some of the most common accusations against Israel, namely being a colonialist country or an apartheid state, and thunderous applause welcome his confutations: “Israel and the Jewish people consider these accusations vain, null and void”. Furthermore, Reichman lists the public diplomacy activities different IDC schools are currently involved with: Sammy Ofer School’s hasbara-bloggers, Lauder School’s Argov Fellowship and the MICS Young Journalists program, Radzyner School’s focus on International Law and Terror. “On the other hand, says Reichman, we have a program like the Center for European Studies’ one, in collaboration with Jerusalem Al-Quds University and the Royal Institute of Science in Amman, which extends a hand to the Palestinians and to the Arab World”. Which is to say, we have our part to do in opposing those who want to take away Israel’s legitimacy.

Tens of cameras witnessed Mr. Tony Blair, who since the end of his prime ministerial mandate in 2007 has been serving as the Quartet’s official envoy to the Middle East, as he steps on the podium. Blair, introduced by Professor Alex Mintz as “a true friend of Israel”, jokes about the fact that, as in ever former British Colony, also in Israel people still blame the United Kingdom for current problems. He then proceeds exposing his view on de-legitimization, which, according to him, can appear in two forms. There is blatant denial of Israel’s right to exist, a traditional anti-Zionist attack, well represented by Iranian president Ahmadinejad, and relatively easy to deal with. Yet recently a more subtle form of de-legitimization has emerged in Europe: denying Israel’s right to a point of view. “Some European leaders apply to Israel rules that they would never dream of applying to their own countries. When the United Kingdom was under attack by the IRA, not many advocated inactivity”. Blair however thinks that Israel should also advocate for peace in order to gain legitimacy. It should address legitimate criticism, and make sure that human rights, such as the compensation for goods expropriated for security reasons. In this context, the Quartet Envoy is expecting a serious commitment from both sides in the soon-to-start bilateral talks between Netanyahu and Abbas. Blair also pronounces himself against the siege on Gaza and for the release of Gilad Shalit. “Israel should show its best side to the world. I believe passionately in Israel, because of its democratic political system and its free-mindedness, creativity and openness to innovation. The Jewish
people have given a great contribution to the world in every field. What Israel has created in sixty years is a remarkable example for the rest of the world" - he concludes.

Minister of Public Diplomacy, Yuli Edelstein, being in charge of hasbara on behalf of the Government, is well aware of the problems involved with de-legitimization. Nonetheless, he expresses a view which reveals itself not to be shared by most of the panelists. Quoting a well-known speech by Martin Luther King, Edelstein affirms that anti-Zionism is just a new form of anti-Semitism. Then he proceeds exposing his argument: “There is a very nice thesis saying that, if we will change our policies, the world will suddenly love us. There is only one problem with this thesis: it has never been proved”. “The logic behind Camp David 2000” - he goes on - “was that either the Palestinians will accept our offer or at least the world will see our good intentions and will know who is good and who is evil. Well, neither of the options has worked out”.

The students of Asper Fellows program

The head of the opposition Tzipi Livni, defines the importance of the problem this way: “De-legitimization is both a theoretical and a concrete, physical threat”, she says, in close relation with Professor Reichman’s introduction. “If the International Community binds Israel’s hands behind its back, even its entire, excellent army cannot help it. This is what de-legitimization does. Therefore dealing with it is an actual security issue”. Moreover, she adds what is probably her most important point: “We can’t just blame others by saying that the whole world is against us. Policy measures should be taken on our side. Public relations are not a substitute for public policy, as the Flotilla case has shown”.

Two general positions on the issue hence start to be discernable: One, supported by MK Edelstein, fundamentally blaming the rest of the world of anti-Israel bias, and proposing effective public diplomacy as the solution. The other, supported by most of the other panelists, associating hasbara with an inescapable policy change.

Professor Shlomo Avineri views on the topic are as follows: “If anti-Semitism has really been always present, how come until 1967 most countries in the world were supporting Israel? Anti Zionism as we see it today is mostly a phenomenon regarding the last fifteen years”. “Forty years after the Six-Days War – he further explains – we have developed our own narrative about the Conflict. But around the world people under the age of sixty have never seen a world where Israel is not ‘the strong’, the occupier. The world gets mostly ‘bad pictures’ from Israel, which shed a bad light on the country as much as the Abu Grahib pictures did on the United States. But, as it is the case for the States, the worst thing is not the image: it is the very fact that these things are being done”. The possible solution, sais Avineri is exactly to create the “good pictures” by changing the policies. “An example is the image of Israeli medics
helping Lebanese wounded during the 1982 war”.

Professor Golan, who witnessed the conference, says she can associate her view with that of Avineri: “The problem is not public relations. The issue is policies, the acts and decisions of the government of Israel, the occupation, rule over others. And it is not just a matter of what the outside world “sees”: maybe they are not seeing the whole picture, but rather, the fact of the occupation, the checkpoints, and so forth. All this is leading to serious criticism, feeds anti-Semitism, and increasingly thickens the lines of those who question the legitimacy of the State of Israel". Professors Golan and Avineri can thus be seen as representing a third view on de-legitimization. The issue is there, and it can be solved with policy change, but ultimately the most serious problem is not with international public opinion, but with our own conscience. “There are anti-Semites out there, - says Golan - and there is often one-sided or disproportionate criticism of Israel, but that does not absolve us from understanding that Israeli policy today is a problem for many honest people who believe in the rule of law, the preservation of human rights and who oppose occupation”.

In contrast with Edelstein’s view, Professor Amnon Rubinstein thinks that not everyone who denies Israel’s right to exist is necessarily anti-Semitic. The problem, in Rubinstein’s opinion is that people see the details of the conflict from afar and through a magnifying lens, which shows emotional details of events like operation Cast Lead or the Flotilla issue, but fails to show the big picture. Like Avineri, also Rubinstein remembers the days of international massive support for Israel. “But these days- he says- can be renewed. Rabin is a good example: he had the support of thousands of people around the world”. Our good days can be back, if we will to go back in their direction. Only through finding again the Democratic and secular Jewish roots of the State as prefigured in Herzl’s novel “Altneuland”, only by ensuring the enjoyment of full human, political and group rights to all the citizens we can deprive those who de-legitimize the State of Israel of their weapons.

The conference goes on with Mr Gidi Grinstein, founder of the Reut Institute, exposing his point of view. The main point is the people who de-legitimize Israel, just like terrorists, constitute a de-centralized network of specific people in specific places with specific goals. And, as goes the basic formula of counter terrorism, “it takes a network to beat a network”. The full study of the Reut institute is available on the website www.reut-institute.org

Rabbi Daniel Hartman, Irit Kahan and Dr. Noam Lemelschtrich Latar further discuss ideas for a renewal of legitimacy, such as an involvement of Jews abroad into a new Zionist narrative and their engagement into Israeli public diplomacy policies (Hartman), and an immediate resort to local tribunals and inquiry committees in order to prevent another Goldstone report to be promoted by international organizations, at Israel’s expenses (Kahan). Lemelschtrich Latar explained how those who are responsible for it are multiplying their efforts for hasbara (including IDC communications students); yet confusing and problematic governmental policies are making their work much harder.

At the end of the symposium, many answers have been given, many
questions remain open. In the next months we will wait for the developments: how will Israel deal with de-legitimization? Will the Government change its policies in order to meet the expectation of the international community? Or will it simply expand the ministry of Public Diplomacy’s budget?