



Lauder School
of Government,
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Speech by the

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There are two forms of de-legitimation. One is traditional, obvious and from the quarters it emanates, expected. It is easier to deal with. This is attack from those who openly question Israel's right to exist. It is easier to deal with, because it is so clear. When the President of Iran says he wants Israel wiped off the face of the map, we all know where we are. This is not to minimise the threat of course. It remains and is profound. It is just to say that were this the only form of de-legitimation, it wouldn't warrant a conference of analysis; simply a course of action.

The other form is more insidious, harder to spot, harder to anticipate and harder to deal with, because many of those engaging in it, will fiercely deny they are doing so. It is this form that is in danger of growing, and whose impact is potentially highly threatening, in part because it isn't obvious.

I would define it this way: it is a conscious or often unconscious resistance, sometimes bordering on refusal, to accept Israel has a legitimate point of view. Note that I say refusal to accept Israel has a legitimate point of view. I'm not saying refusal to agree with it. People are perfectly entitled to agree or not; but rather an unwillingness to listen to the other side, to acknowledge that Israel has a point, to embrace the notion that this is a complex matter that requires understanding of the other way of looking at it.

The challenge is that this often does not come from ill-intentioned people; but well-intentioned. They would dispute vigorously such a characterisation of their mindset. They would point to the injustice of Palestinian suffering, acts of the Israeli Government or army which are unjustifiable and they would say, rightly, that you cannot say that to criticise Israel is to de-legitimise it. Such minds are often to be found in the west. They will say they advocate a two state solution and they will point to that as proof positive that they accept Israel's existence fully.

The problem is that though this is true in theory, in practice they wear Nelson's eye patch when they lift the telescope of scrutiny to the Israeli case. In a very real sense, they don't see it.

So, for example, on Gaza they won't accept that Israel might have a right to search vessels bringing cargo into Gaza, given that even this year over 100 rockets have been fired from that territory into Israel. Leave aside the multiple investigations relating to the flotilla, upon which there will naturally be heated debate. I mean a refusal to accept that, however handled, no Israeli government could be indifferent to the possibility of weapons and missiles being brought into Gaza.

I often have a conversation about the West Bank which goes like this. Someone says: Israel must lift the occupation. I reply: I agree but it has to be sure that when it does so, there will be security and a Palestinian force capable of preventing terrorism. They say: so you're supporting occupation. I say: I'm not: I'm simply pointing out that if Hamas, with an unchanged position on Israel, were running the West Bank, Israel would have a perfectly legitimate right to be concerned about its security.

A constant conversation I have with some, by no means all, of my European colleagues is to argue to them: don't apply rules to the Government of Israel that you would never dream of applying to your own country. In any of our nations, if there were people firing rockets, committing acts of terrorism and living next door to us, our public opinion would go crazy. And any political leader who took the line that we shouldn't get too excited about it, wouldn't last long as a political leader. This is a democracy. Israel lost 1000 citizens to terrorism in the intifada. That equates in UK population terms to 10,000. I remember the bomb attacks from Republican terrorism in the 1970's. There weren't many arguing for a policy of phlegmatic calm.

So the issue of de-legitimisation is not simply about an overt denial of the State of Israel. It is the application of prejudice in not allowing that Israel has a point of view that should be listened to.

One thing I state repeatedly in interviews about Gaza – despite disagreeing with the previous policy on it – is to say to western media outlets: just at least comprehend why Israel feels as it does. In 2005 it got out of Gaza i.e. ceased occupying it, took over 7000 settlers with it and in return got rockets and terror attacks. Now I know all the counter-arguments about the unilateral nature of the withdrawal, the 2005 Access and Movement agreement and the closure of the crossings. But the fact remains: there is another point of view and you can't describe it as illegitimate.

This is then hugely heightened by the way things are reported. Here the televisual images – whether in Lebanon, Gaza or indeed any field of conflict – in Afghanistan for example, are so shocking that they tend to overwhelm debate about how or why conflict began. Because Israel – like the US or the UK – has superior force and because in such situations the horrible tragedy is that the innocent die – these images arouse anger, sympathy and a disgust that at one level is completely understandable but at another obscures the difficult choices nations like ours face, when they come under attack.

The combination of all of this is curious disjunction of perception. I spend large amounts of time in Israel, and outside of it in different parts of the world. To those outside, Israel is regularly perceived as arrogant, overbearing and aggressive. To Israelis, there is a sense that the world is isolating it unfairly and perversely refusing to see they too have a right to have their voice heard. Hence this conference.

The issue is how to respond. First, there is a clear and vital principle that needs to be established: to criticise is not per se to de-legitimise. The fact is there are plenty of Israeli and Jewish voices that passionately disagree with Israeli policy. I am a friend of Israel and openly avow it. I have plenty of criticisms. De-legitimation is qualitatively different. It can seem the same sometimes. But it isn't. The one is valid. The other is not. Friends of Israel should be the first to make the distinction.

Having done that, however, we should highlight the fact that de-legitimation is happening, and be vigilant and vigorous about identifying and countering the instances of it. This needn't be done stridently. But it should be done insistently. The aim: not to make people agree necessarily with Israel's point of view; but to insist they listen to it and persuade them at least to the position of understanding. Where there is incitement, expose it. Where there is a one-sided account, argue the other side. Always have a voice out there – and not just the politicians – but the voices of the people. And do it systematically and with unity.

Second, Israel should always be a staunch and unremitting advocate and actor for peace. What I mean by this is not that it should simply be for peace; it should advocate it and act to achieve it. Tzipi Livni's and Ehud Olmert's negotiations under the previous Israeli Government and previous US administration, were an immensely important part of showing to the world that whatever else they might say, they had to accept that the Government of Israel was genuinely trying to bring about peace. The re-start of the direct negotiations to be launched next week is important in itself; important because it shows that PM Netanyahu on behalf of the new Government of Israel is an advocate for peace; important because, with a 1 year time frame being indicated, it shows that there is a sincere yearning on the part of the people of Israel to live in an enduring and honourable peace with their Palestinian neighbours. I know some are cynical. I know some say it's all for show. I reject that view. I think if Israel can receive real and effective guarantees about its security, then it is willing and ready to include a negotiation for a viable, independent Palestinian state. This is a brave decision by the PM and the right one.

Third, there will be no successful negotiation unless all the final status issues are on the table. I'm not going to try to negotiate solutions here and now. That is for later. We can think creatively and constructively. Indeed we must do so. But proposals on these issues will be a litmus test of seriousness.

Which brings me to a fourth point. A crucial response to de-legitimation is to deal with the legitimate criticism. What is it? Let me answer based on my experience. It is that we can and should do more and more quickly to improve the daily lives of Palestinians. Now there has been real progress here in the past year. We should deepen it. I am a convinced

persuader for the bottom up approach – I continue to believe that no top-down negotiation will work without it. I also think we have visible empirical evidence to support it: the improvements in Jenin and the opening of the Jalameh crossing to Israeli Arabs; changes to A & M in response to the hugely improved capability of the PA on security; the very successful PIC in Bethlehem that yielded hundreds of millions of dollars of investment; the modus operandi with the new department under DPM Shalom that has resulted in significant gains; and I hope in time a new approach to tourism and to development for Palestinians in Area C.

Such change does not only lead to improvements to Palestinian lives. It also deals with what is the most potent fuel – especially in Arab media – of hatred against Israel. That is the idea that Palestinians suffer not injustice alone; but a form of humiliation. Dignity is a very important concept. Consistent with security, Israel should be constantly looking for ways to compensate for the indignity which inevitably results from the security measures taken and should seek to avoid any unnecessary indignities.

I was pleased and heartened when the Government changed policy on Gaza. The truth is you can justify restrictions in Gaza taken for reasons of security. But with a Gazan population, half of whom is under the age of 18 and 300,000 of whom are under the age of 4, security is the only arguable basis upon which to put such restrictions. Of course Gilad Shalit should be released immediately. His detention is a profound denial of human rights, as is the way he is being treated. But a policy based on threats to Israel's security is the only one its friends can defend.

This leads me to my final point. It is our collective duty – yours and mine – to argue vigorously against the de-legitimisation of Israel. It is also our collective duty to arm ourselves with an argument and a narrative we can defend and with which we can answer the case against Israel, with pride and confidence.

Let me tell you why I am a passionate believer in Israel. This is a democracy. It's Parliament is vibrant. Its politics is, well, not notably restrained, let's say. Its press is free. Its people have rights and they are enforced. I had an argument with a friend about Israel. I said to them: 'ok let's assume you are charged with a crime you didn't commit and the penalty is 20 years in prison. And you're a critic of the Government. Tell me: under which country's legal system, in this region, would you prefer to be tried?' He struggled for a bit and then said: 'that's not the point.' 'But it is' I replied.

Look around the world about what we admire about the Jewish people: their contribution to art, culture, literature, music, business and philanthropy. It's a spirit that is identifiable, open and rather wonderful. Whatever bigotry is, it is the opposite of it. It is a free spirit. On holiday I read the new biography of Einstein. Having in early life taken not much interest in the issue, he became an ardent supporter of Israel. But look at the character of the Israel he supported: like Einstein himself – a free thinker, a rebellious thinker even, but one supremely attuned to the future.

That is the Israel people like me support. So guard it; keep it. I am a religious person myself. But the society I want to live in, is one that treats me no better as a result; makes my view one amongst many; and pursues science, technology and progress with vigour and without prejudice. The best answer to the de-legitimisation of Israel lies in the character of Israel itself and in the openness, fair-mindedness and creativity of ordinary Israelis. That character and those people built the State of Israel. They remain it's guardians. They are why to de-legitimise Israel is not only an affront to Israelis but to all who share the values of a free human spirit.

Thank you.