

The Delegitimization of Peace Advocates in Israeli Society

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Delegitimization of groups and individuals who are part of Israel's peace camp takes place on a daily basis. Those who are delegitimized are civil society and human rights organizations, politicians, public figures, or individuals who support an agreed-upon, long term political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The discourse on peace in Israeli society seems to have reached a stalemate, where the hope for change and for an Israeli-Palestinian co-existence initiative no longer has any place on the public agenda. Israel's Declaration of Independence states that Israel is to be "based on freedom, justice and peace" and will extend its hand "to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness." Despite this, delegitimization of peace camp advocates has increased in Israel, and reached the level of demonization. Like a mirror image of Palestinian society, Israeli society has shifted rightward; a radicalization of positions has led to a rejection of the legitimacy not only of moderate opinions that are identified with the political left wing, but also of those who hold these opinions. This essay examines the delegitimization of peace camp advocates, including the monopolistic appropriation of patriotism in Israel, socio-psychological obstacles to peace, and the role of the media and social networks. It proposes a multi-faceted approach to eradication of the phenomenon, while understanding the inherent difficulty of mobilizing a right wing government for this purpose. The proposal will therefore be based mainly on work that can be done by different civil society organizations.

Keywords: peace, delegitimization, negotiations, civil society, patriotism, social networks

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An ongoing and violent conflict is fertile ground for delegitimization of an enemy, as well as of those who are seen as identifying with the enemy or as favoring compromise and reconciliation with it. The process is typified by a dichotomous division between the good and the bad, a justification of views and action aimed to harm the other side, and the denial of legitimacy to its Israeli supporters while comparing them to the enemy.¹ Delegitimization in a security-political context leads the political arena to an irrational, emotional, polarizing, and inciting discourse, in which one political camp delegitimizes the other.²

Israeli society is characterized by deep rifts between various sectors, based on religion; national, political, ideological, and socioeconomic differences; and ethnicity.³ The greatest political disagreement over the past fifty years has been about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This intra-Israeli dispute has claimed victims. One of them is Emil Grunzweig, a Peace Now activist, who was killed in 1983 by a hand grenade thrown toward peace camp supporters demonstrating near the Prime Minister's residence. His murderer admitted that he had acted out of anger at the "traitors."⁴ Yet it seems that Israeli society's ability and desire to contain political rifts of this kind reached a watershed with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. Convicted murderer Yigal Amir had long planned to thwart the peace process, and five weeks after Rabin signed the interim agreement with the PLO known as the Oslo 2 Accords, shot and killed the Prime Minister. Rabin, more than any other leader before him, symbolized the efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupation by peaceful means. Since his assassination, Israeli society's ability to contain political disagreements in non-violent manners, including both physical and verbal violence, has seemingly plummeted. This ability diminished even further with the rapid development of social networks and the violent and hate-filled discourse on political questions that is common on these networks.

The framing of a world view whereby support for a peace process and political moderation are responsible for the country's ills, together with labeling those who hold this view as haters of Israel, has brought delegitimization to new levels. The objects of this defaming campaign are Israeli advocates of the peace process: human and civil rights organizations, civil society organizations, and liberal and progressive groups that seek, inter alia, to draw the public's attention to the option of a long term political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The election campaign for the 21st

Knesset in April 2019 saw poignant incitements against the Arab citizens of Israel, past and present high ranking officials of the defense and security establishment, and the judicial and law enforcement authorities. Knesset members and ministers as well as media personalities and journalists have described those who advocate peace with the Palestinians as “traitors,” “supporters of terrorism,” and people who must be opposed and condemned.⁵ Previous times saw claims that such rhetoric was not a discourse of incitement, but rather the outcome of the natural political rift between the left wing and the right wing. Yet recently, delegitimization has also been used against members of the right wing who engaged in moderate discourse on peace.⁶ Examples of such delegitimization include the incitement against President Reuven Rivlin and former Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon, who were accused of aligning with the left wing and of treason⁷ when they took a stand regarding the case of an IDF soldier who shot a terrorist who was already neutralized. Joining this was the campaign to label the heads of the Blue and White Party, including three former chiefs of staff, “disguised right wingers,” with their party described as a manipulative movement that by extension would ultimately destroy the State of Israel (“They rely on Arab parties who are accused of conspiring in order to destroy Israel”).⁸

The need to encourage a change in awareness and aim toward removal of the destructive rhetoric from the public discourse also exists vis-à-vis advocates of conflict management – a policy that does not aspire toward a long term solution. The characteristics of the current public discourse reduce the public’s willingness to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so that even those who wish to manage the conflict in the spirit of President Trump’s “deal of the century”⁹ are seen as spineless and “left wingers.”

Over the seventy-one years of its existence, and even in the years before the establishment of the state, Israel has witnessed fluctuations in socio-political courses and trends. The current weight of the right in Israeli society has not been stable over the decades, nor does it reflect all walks of Israeli society and culture. Over the decades different sectors have been challenged and even vilified – often in problematic rhetoric and painful actions. This article does not address those whose opposition to a peace agreement is principled and ideological, nor does the specific issue relate to support for “peace” per se. Rather, the focus is on the delegitimization of the peace camp and those supporting a negotiated long term agreement.

Social Networks and the Media

The rapid development of the social networks has transformed the media landscape. Social media implemented new means to share views and experiences, as well as the ability to disseminate information rapidly and communicate with a broad and diverse community.¹⁰

At the same time, social network users are pegged by their activity on the network and are accordingly exposed to content that matches their own views. This is particularly problematic at politically sensitive times, when users tend to assemble into like-minded communities and take a hostile approach to outsiders. The intensity of the negative messages on the social networks increase at that point, and the messages draw responses that enhance feelings of collective solidarity. The practical, cumulative result of these processes is the delegitimization of anyone who holds a different opinion and approach. Therefore, despite the many advantages of the social networks as a tool for bridge-building and protest, during times that are sensitive politically or in a security-related way, the social networks can nourish fears and strengthen opposing ideologies. Research has shown that activity on social networks increases the levels of paranoia and distrust, and that the network is fertile ground for people who hold opinions that denounce the public discourse to the point of incitement and terror sown among the public.¹¹

The intolerance on the social networks is not limited to members of a nationality, religion, ideology, or specific political party. It is unusual to find a fresh examination of existing ideas or critical thinking on the social networks, partly because they are tools that lend themselves to brevity and superficiality, but mainly due to the lack of exposure to the narrative or the needs of “the other.” The polarizing discourse that is typical of the social networks has led to the dehumanization of groups, organizations, and individuals.¹² Moreover, the delegitimization of advocates of a negotiated peace agreement in Israel is part of a growing global trend on social media. The users who identify, or are identified, as members of a moderate, democratic, progressive, and liberal population are automatically labeled as weak.¹³ Analysis shows that tweets by United States President Donald Trump increase polarization in American society by means of a clear division between “us” and “them,” and the use of sentences containing incitement, along the lines of “They [the Democratic Party] are trying to make us look stupid.”

For their part, the media outlets play a major role in creating the public agenda, as well as in covering the peace process and the efforts to move it forward.¹⁴ Studies show that during the coverage of peace negotiations, the media in Israel tend to give more attention to concessions than to achievements; highlight differences of opinion among the parties over agreements; and present the situation as a zero-sum game while ignoring the processes that are intended to benefit both sides.¹⁵ Coverage of this kind encourages the public to doubt the viability of a peace agreement, and the future benefits of an agreement reached through negotiations are hidden from the public. Israel is portrayed as standing in stark contrast to the Palestinians – as ostensibly making every effort to reach political agreements, fulfilling its part of agreements, and making large overtures toward the Palestinians. Violations of agreements by Israel, failure to keep promises, and violent actions appear on the fringes of the coverage, without being related to the peace process, and with no discussion of their implications.¹⁶

The media outlets usually reflect, strengthen, and preserve the accepted social opinion. During Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, for example, a political resolution appeared on the fringes of the news, while the military option was highlighted.¹⁷ That is only one example of promoting the delegitimization of peace out of a deliberate choice not to place the discourse of a peace agreement and the political option before the public.

Who Is a Patriot?

When a group in society seizes ownership of the definition of patriotism and defines who is a patriot, and even more so, who is not, any expression of criticism against its ideology, policy, or leadership is viewed as unpatriotic and even as treason. The definition “unpatriotic” tags an individual as someone who does not rightfully belong to his nation, and is often used as a synonym for “traitor.”¹⁸ The manipulation of patriotism peaked with McCarthyism, when from 1950 to 1954 Senator Joseph McCarthy led a campaign against citizens who were suspected of supporting communist ideas, based on the claim that such Americans could not be patriots, and were actually spies and traitors.¹⁹ Echoes of the monopolization of patriotism may be seen in contemporary Europe in the behavior of political parties on the far right, specifically in their definition of the right to citizenship. These parties advocate a narrow definition that would deny citizenship to various groups, such as immigrants.²⁰

Some date the loosened restraints regarding the demonization of those who hold moderate views to Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014). After racist posts against “the Arabs” appeared on social media, posts marking leftists as traitors to the country were quick to follow.²¹ The harsh, violent discourse and disagreements quickly spread beyond the boundaries of social media to the physical public space.²² Thus, for example, the artist Orna Banai, who criticized the leadership’s behavior during Operation Protective Edge, was dismissed from her position as a commercial company’s representative.²³

The rhetoric on the social networks was highly vitriolic. The Facebook page of musician Yoav Eliasi, known as “The Shadow,” became highly popular: Eliasi organized a group of right wing activists who attacked leftists violently as they demonstrated in Tel Aviv. When he wrote “all right, my lions, it’s time to throw you some more flesh of a left-wing loser who needs re-education,” including the name and photograph of the intended individual, he was not charged with incitement.²⁴ On the other hand, members of the right wing who expressed opposition to violence were subjected to abuse.

Extremism and racism were rampant in 2014. The violence of the far right organizations against left wing demonstrations was not addressed at all, or was dealt with weakly. For example, civil servants who posted statements on Facebook such as “I am in favor of all the Arabs being killed with the leftists” remained unpunished.²⁵

The “moles” campaign was launched more than a year later, in December 2015. Its purpose was to garner support for the “foreign agent” bill that was submitted by MK Yoav Kisch (Likud).²⁶ The goal of the bill was to prohibit government ministries and the IDF from cooperating with NGOs that engaged in “anti-Israel propaganda” with foreign funding, allow the Registrar of Associations to apply to the court to have them dissolved, and mark NGOs that receive funding from foreign political entities as “moles” of those entities.²⁷ As part of the campaign, statements were made against peace activists and organizations such as “the moles are a variety of terrorists”; “they are traitors; in other countries they would be hanged in the square”; “they are more dangerous than terrorists”; and “Breaking the Silence is a terrorist organization.” The “moles” campaign and the heightened incitement against the New Israel Fund (“the Israel Destruction Fund,” as disparaged by Yair Netanyahu, son of the Prime Minister) are examples of the monopolization of patriotism.

In the more distant past, a right wing government under the leadership of Menachem Begin took similar measures in its campaign against left wing movements and parties. During the 1981 elections, the Labor Alignment Party (Ma'arach) was portrayed as collaborating with the enemy and as planning to withdraw from Judea and Samaria and return the territories to the Palestinians.²⁸ The members of the Labor Alignment Party and the peace organizations were condemned and described as “stabbing the nation in the back” and as a “fifth column.”²⁹

Obstacles to Peace

Obstacles to peace, whether detectable or not, contribute in denying the possibility of reconciliation between enemies. These obstacles are divided into three categories: strategic, structural, and socio-psychological. This essay addresses the socio-psychological obstacles, as they influence the perceptions and interpretations of reality among those involved in the conflict, and more important, they constrict the belief that the conflict can be resolved. Obstacles of this kind become fixed. They make it difficult to change opinions and beliefs about the conflict and peace, reduce the willingness to compromise for the sake of peace and take risks, and promote the misguided view of a profit-and-loss rapport.³⁰

The status of peace in Israeli society has deteriorated. According to the National Security Index of the Institute for National Security Studies, in 1988 the most important value for 33 percent of Israelis was “peace.” Today, only 18 percent see the “state of peace” as the most important value. In a related finding, in 2001, 44 percent of Israelis believed that it was possible to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians, while in 2018, there was a decline of seven percent in the number of people who believed that a peace treaty was possible.³¹

Much of Israeli society tends to classify solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a negative way: loss of territory, troop withdrawals, surrender to terrorism.³² Advocates of a peace agreement encounter distrust, a sense of fear, and emotions that are projected onto them as ostensible representatives of the hostile other. These socio-psychological obstacles encourage delegitimization of peace advocates and prevent

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acceptance of information that could shed a different light on the current situation, the adversary, and the history of the conflict. Even when conflict resolution proposals or alternative explanations for the behavior of the other side are placed on the agenda, they are at best ignored, and at worst rejected with scorn without a thorough discussion.³³

Recent studies show how public opinion could be changed by challenging socio-psychological obstacles. A study in 2013 based on a paradoxical thinking campaign – wanting peace but relying on the continuity of the conflict for various reasons – found that such a campaign was effective in changing the views of those who supported the continuation of the conflict, or were skeptical regarding the possibility of its resolution. A year later, most of the participants in the study changed their views concerning responsibility for the conflict and the compromises that were required for the sake of peace talks.³⁴

The Arik Institute for Reconciliation, Tolerance, and Peace conducted a field study in 2015 on a representative sample population that involved psychological and linguistic manipulation. The purpose of the study was to examine whether participants could be made to question and criticize existing policy, take responsibility for the acts of the group that supported continuing the conflict (if the respondent was a member of that group), and even change their political views. The participants, residents of a small city in the center of the country, most of whom were national religious and collectively voted for right wing parties, were shown the “Conflict Campaign.” The project included paradoxical intervention using billboards, videos, and pamphlets that expressed support for maintaining the conflict. According to the results of the study, the campaign seems to have changed minds. Those who described themselves as right wing were less supportive of an aggressive policy and positions that viewed the conflict as unsolvable, notwithstanding the “intifada of knives” that began precisely when the campaign was held (September 2015).

Practical Preparation

Advocating a peace agreement in Israeli society is a challenging and complex task, considering the intensifying global climate of delegitimization of peace and reconciliation activists and organizations. Yet despite these difficulties, especially the inherent difficulty in mobilizing a right wing government toward this goal, there is room for a multi-pronged approach to eradicate

the negative phenomenon, which is based mainly on measures that can be taken within the framework of civil society.

The social networks can be used to eradicate delegitimization and increase legitimization of a peace agreement and its advocates. They should be used in parallel with other means, while recognizing the power of this platform to serve opposite trends of increasing negative sentiments toward a peace agreement and its advocates.

The social networks are available to serve bottom-up and top-down processes of change. Second, the purpose of this preparation is to tone down the violent discourse on the social networks against a peace agreement and its advocates, and not to impose disproportionate restrictions on free expression. Finally, the assumption is that positive public opinion that supports negotiations, peace, and tolerance is crucial to eradicating delegitimization.³⁵ As a rule, this stage should concentrate mainly (but not only) on civil social organizations, even though integrated official-governmental action and preparation will definitely be needed in the future.

Guiding Peace Advocates about Public Opinion Topics

In order to start the bottom-up process, peace advocates must act on the social networks without associating with any organization and join social media discussions on delegitimization. Therefore, we propose that members of the various organizations that advocate peace camps³⁶ undergo professional training in the influence of discourse. This training can be given by a civil organization with expertise in influence methods on public opinion and strategic consulting, such as Open Global Rights.³⁷

Balancing the Opposing Narrative on the Social Networks

In addition, the peace organizations can publicize information that will balance what has been published and disseminated against the members of the peace camp. The separation among the various peace groups in their actions on the social networks is inevitable due to their different respective goals. Therefore, it is appropriate to establish a pool of “regular responders” to reply to those who incite against peace agreements, to be maintained by the Israel Internet Association (as is done to prevent terrorist activity). This pool will enable the advocates of peace agreements to balance the discourse with the help of “regular responders.”

A System for Reporting Online Delegitimization

Several organizations have proposed monitoring the discourse on the social networks in general, and the discourse on the issue of peace and political agreements in particular (the Israel Democracy Institute's Peace Index, and the Berl Katznelson Foundation's Report on Hate against Government Institutions and Democracy, among others). Most of them address additional topics. We therefore propose establishing an organization that will focus on the specific monitoring of the discourse around peace agreements with the Palestinians. Presenting the violent discourse that advocates delegitimization will make it possible to convey the statistics to the public in general and to the media organizations and government officials in particular in order to show the gravity of the situation, and return, gradually and in a moderate manner, the discourse on peace to the public agenda.

Government Activity to Eradicate Delegitimization

The National Cyber Authority, which monitors and reports offensive content on the social networks, can redefine the concept of "offensive content" to include content that delegitimizes the peace camp. Since this directorate monitors all incitement against the country's citizens and institutions, there is nothing to stand in the way this measure, even in the current political climate.

In addition, there is currently a trend in high schools of teaching diplomacy and international communications, in which pupils learn negotiations management and conflict resolution skills, as well as ways to develop intercultural fitness for political negotiations and agreements. We propose that the Ministry of Education promote and even expand the education projects on political agreements and peace treaties, while supervising the discourse, thus increasing exposure to this subject among the youth.

Conclusion

Some of the suggestions can be implemented immediately, while others require a lengthy process. Of course, it is necessary to convince the decision makers across the political map that this is about eradicating incitement, divisions, and violence in general, and against the peace camp and those who support it in particular. An additional goal is to label peace as a national objective that is linked to Israel's national security, which everyone wants to protect. A more moderate and tolerant society will be able to handle the changes. Currently, the discourse of delegitimization hinders the possibility

of processing the information and recognizing the reality among the citizens. These are modest, starting proposals. If even some of them are put into practice, Israeli society may become accustomed to a more tolerant and erudite discourse with less incitement, in which the word “peace” is not used to identify “traitors,” but rather a legitimate term in public discourse regarding national security and long term strategic vision.

Notes

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