

Understanding Israel's Strengths and Weaknesses

Remarks for First Global Conference on Dimensions, Repercussions of Israeli Apartheid
and the Means to Combat it

By Ali Abunimah¹

To defeat and dismantle Israeli apartheid we must first understand its strengths and weaknesses. We can then ensure that our own strategies as activists, organizations and political formations maximize our advantages and exploit the adversary's vulnerabilities.

Many of Israel's strengths are obvious:

- Israel has enormous military power and resources that allow it to maintain internal physical control over historic Palestine and fend off almost any external enemy. While Palestinian and Lebanese military resistance organizations can deter Israeli aggression to some extent, such resistance groups do not have the ability and do not seek to go on the offensive against the Israeli regime. Their strategy is defensive. In Gaza, the resistance seeks to make Israeli aggression too costly for Israeli politicians to contemplate. I do not want to underplay the role of legitimate military resistance: it has denied and will continue to deny Israel the total victory it seeks over the Palestinians. That is not insignificant, but there is no major group that is pursuing a strategy of ending Israeli apartheid principally through force of arms.

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- Israel has a large economy that is well integrated into international capitalism. Israel's GDP is currently around \$370 billion – about 50 percent larger than Egypt's, which has more than 10 times Israel's population. And the Israeli economy is about nine times the size of neighboring Jordan's, which has a roughly similar population.
- Israel has built up a large amount of cultural and political capital, especially in the West, where elites have absorbed the Zionist propaganda claim that support for Israel is just and moral compensation for the European Christian genocide of European Jews.
- Related to the above, Israel possesses an extensive and powerful international lobby, made up of openly pro-Israel groups as well as Jewish communal organizations and non-Jewish, especially Christian Zionist, groups. This lobby not only seeks to advance Israel's case in every possible forum, but also to enforce adherence to Israel's narrative by making it costly for political leaders, institutions and individuals to deviate from Israel's narrative.

Given the brief time I have, I am asserting these claims as facts, although each could be debated, and we could also discuss why things are as they are. But that is not my goal today.

When confronted with these realities, a common response is defeatism. I often hear that Israel and its lobby are "too strong," and so one must give up on the struggle or find some accommodation. Along with selfish self-interest, this defeatist logic certainly underlies the ongoing wave of normalization between Arab states and elites, on the one hand, and Zionism, on the other.

And yet, when looking at Israel's strengths we can also see that in them lie its weaknesses.

While Israel retains enormous military power, this can no longer produce desired political results as in the past.

Israel was unable to impose its political will on Lebanon through its 1982 invasion and subsequent two-decade-long occupation and repeated attacks on that country. And over the last decade, successive Israeli attacks on Gaza have not succeeded in imposing a collaborationist leadership there such as exists in occupied Ramallah. At best, from Israel's perspective, habitual slaughter of civilians in the besieged and blockaded Gaza Strip — "mowing the lawn" as Israeli leaders call it — buys a few months or years of what Israel calls "calm" for its citizens.

But each Israeli attack also exacts a price in to Israel's legitimacy around the world.

As activists and political groupings there is little we can do with respect to the military balance (though we must and should continue to push for an arms embargo on Israel). Yet it is precisely in the field of Israel's struggle for legitimacy where Israel is weakest and we possess the most influence.

More than 71 years after the Nakba — the catastrophe of Israel's violent imposition over the ruins of Palestine — Israel is still fighting to prove its legitimacy, its so-called "right to exist" in Zionist parlance.

Not only has Israel failed to secure universal acceptance of that alleged "right," but it is a further loss of legitimacy that Israeli leaders fear most and are fighting to prevent.

Here, the example of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa is instructive.

Despite notable differences, apartheid South Africa remains the closest recent parallel to the situation in historic Palestine, of a settler-colonial community ruling over an Indigenous people by force. Apartheid in South Africa, as you will recall, ended formally in 1994.

During apartheid in South Africa there were huge uprisings. I remember during the late 1980s seeing on TV the images from the uprisings in the townships and seeing the images from the first intifada in Palestine. They looked identical.

There were mass mobilizations including strikes and protests and the response of the apartheid state was enormous violence and massacres. The regime also faced some internal military resistance and sabotage, but most of the military challenge it faced was in Angola, where Cuban military support for the resistance played a crucial role in defeating the Israeli-armed South African military.

However despite the increasing cost to the South African regime, the resistance did not succeed in substantially changing the balance of physical coercive power in South Africa. The white supremacist regime retained until the end its near-monopoly on military and physical force. That balance did not change.

The anti-apartheid movement did not defeat apartheid militarily.

What happened is that the apartheid regime, which had enjoyed considerable support among Europeans and Americans up until at least the 1950s, saw its legitimacy drain away. Up to that point in Britain and in other parts of Europe, there was tremendous sympathy for what was called "the predicament" of whites in Africa, in the context of decolonization.

Once this legitimacy was gone, whites and their collaborators in South Africa lost the will to maintain a system that relied solely on repression and violence and rendered them international pariahs. So they negotiated a way out. It all happened much more quickly and with considerably less violence than even the most optimistic predictions of the time.

This outcome, moreover, could not have been predicted based on what whites said they were willing to accept — until near the end of apartheid, opinion polls showed that whites overwhelmingly *opposed* a one-person, one-vote system.

As our South African comrades remind us often, international solidarity played a critical role.

Enough people in Europe and America were no longer willing to defend a white supremacist regime and forced their governments and corporations to begin to end their complicity with apartheid. There were also geopolitical factors at play: with the end of the Cold War, the South African regime was no longer useful as an anti-communist tool and its European and American allies could more easily dispense with it.

But once the loss of legitimacy was advanced and irreversible, and opposing South African apartheid became the central global moral cause of its day, the apartheid leadership was willing to negotiate the end of political apartheid (though as many critics have pointed out whites retained control of the economy).

This is a situation Israeli leaders are desperate to avoid.

Yet they recognize that loss of legitimacy, not military defeat, is Israel's greatest vulnerability.

This was articulated in 2010 in a report from the Reut Institute, a think tank close to the Israeli government.

Reut concluded that Israel's traditional strategic doctrine — which views threats to the state's existence in primarily military terms, to be met with a military response — was badly out of date.

Rather, it claimed that Israel faced a combined threat from a so-called "Resistance Network" and a "Delegitimization Network."

The Resistance Network is comprised of political and armed groups such as Hamas and Hizballah, which use asymmetrical warfare to challenge Israel.

The "Resistance Network" allegedly aims to cause Israel's political "implosion" — a la South Africa, East Germany or the Soviet Union — rather than bring about military defeat through direct confrontation on the battlefield.

The "Delegitimization Network," according to Reut, is made up of the broad, decentralized and informal movement of peace and justice, human rights, and BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) activists all over the world. Its manifestations include protests against Israeli officials visiting universities, Israeli Apartheid Week, faith-based and trade union-based activism, and efforts to bring Israeli war criminals to justice.

In particular, Reut saw the sharpest loss of legitimacy taking place among the global political left and progressive forces.

No single analysis has had a bigger influence on Israel and its lobby: they adopted the Reut report as their blueprint.

Over the last decade, Israel and its lobby have been spending tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars attempting to shore up Israel's legitimacy and to "delegitimize the delegitimizers."

Israel aims to build support through a massive "Brand Israel" marketing campaign. It hopes to co-opt political and cultural influencers by bringing everyone from food bloggers to police chiefs to community activists on free trips to Israel.

This campaign has been particularly targeted at the Western political left — based on the understanding that public support in Western liberal democracies is critical to maintaining those countries' long-term support for Israel.

The Israeli propoganda campaign tries to portray Israel as feminist, supportive of gay rights and a protector of the environment — strategies called pinkwashing and greenwashing that are often built on racist defamation against Arabs and Muslims, mixed in with lies.

Yet the propoganda is belied by the reality of Israel's horrific violence against Palestinians, its racism against migrants and refugees from African states and its open alliances with the global far-right, including the Trump administration, the Hindu nationalist Modi government in India and anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim ultranationalist parties and governments in Europe, such as Germany's Alternative fur Deutschland and Hungary's anti-Jewish Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

In the meantime, the Palestine solidarity movement has made considerable advances, a fact acknowledged by the Reut Institute itself. In 2017, a leaked analysis prepared by

the Reut Institute and the Anti-Defamation League outlined Israel's failure to stem the "impressive growth" and "significant successes" of the BDS movement.²

The report revealed that pro-Israel groups had increased their spending to combat the Palestine solidarity movement 20-fold over the previous six years. Yet despite these tens of millions of dollars, "results remain elusive."

The loss of support for Israel is evident even in the United States. Confirming long-term trends, a recent poll conducted by the University of Maryland found that 70 percent of respondents oppose laws that target BDS activism as an infringement on the constitutional right to free speech.³

Among the more than 3,000 Americans surveyed, about half had heard about the BDS movement — a remarkably high proportion.

Of those, 26 percent supported BDS. Another 26 percent neither supported or opposed it.

Meanwhile, 47 percent – fewer than half – said they oppose BDS.

About half of Democratic Party voters said they supported BDS and nearly 80 percent of the Democrats who had heard of the movement agreed that BDS "is a legitimate, peaceful way of opposing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories."

Similar trends are visible in Europe and elsewhere. They are causes for celebration but not for complacency.

² "Leaked report highlights Israel lobby's failures," The Electronic Intifada, 28 April 2017 (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/leaked-report-highlights-israel-lobbys-failures>)

³ "Americans overwhelmingly reject anti-BDS laws, poll finds," The Electronic Intifada, 23 October 2019 (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/americans-overwhelmingly-reject-anti-bds-laws-poll-finds>).

As support for Palestinian rights rises, Israel and its allies are resorting to ever greater repression, especially laws and policies that attempt to define BDS and support for Palestinian rights as "anti-Semitism." Simply fending off Israel's attacks absorbs an enormous amount of activist energy and may deter new people from joining our movement.

Yet the overall picture is clear. Israel is losing legitimacy. It is nearing its South Africa moment.

But that moment will remain far off, and Palestinians will face appalling suffering for years to come, if we do not escalate our efforts based on a deliberate and clear-eyed analysis of where we are strong and Israel is weak.