



The detrimental dynamics of delegitimization in intractable conflicts: The Israeli–Palestinian case

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Abstract

Delegitimization of the adversary, among psychological factors, is one of the major detrimental forces to peaceful resolution of any conflict. In the present context of violence between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, it is probably the major obstacle to the realization of the readiness in both societies to make major concessions in the final settlement of the conflict. First, thus, the paper discusses the nature of delegitimization and elaborates its societal functions. Then it describes the mutual delegitimization between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinians, focusing on the context of violent confrontations that broke out following failure of the Camp David summit meeting in the fall of 2000. It presents several consequences based on survey data carried out in both Israeli Jewish and Palestinian societies. Finally, the paper provides few concluding comments.

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1. Introduction

Analysis of the relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, in the context of the Al Aqsa Intifada indicates a sad paradox. On the one hand, in both societies there is an increased tendency for far-reaching compromises in order to resolve the Palestinian–Israeli conflict peacefully. At the same time, the majority of people in both societies attribute extremely negative characteristics to the opponent and has a deep mistrust that jeopardizes possible

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negotiation and conflict solution. In addition, the majority in both societies supported violent acts against the opponent during the Intifada, and this only deepens the negative stereotyping and the mistrust (Bar-Tal & Sharvit, *in press*; Kull, 2003).¹ In fact the described paradox is pivotal to the understanding of the present continuation of violent conformations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians and the stalemate of the peace process.

In trying to understand the present paradoxical situation, it is necessary to look at the dynamics of the intractable conflict in which Palestinians and Israeli Jews are locked. For a period of about 100 years, these societies have contested each other over such goals and interests as social identity, territory, natural resources, self-determination, statehood, holy places, economic gains, personal and collective security, and values (Morris, 2001; Tessler, 1994). These goals with the accompanying acts of violence dictate the nature of the conflict and the possibility of its solution. So does the *psychological repertoire*, which has evolved with time, and plays a determinative role in the conflict dynamics. This psychological repertoire eventually turns out to be a major obstacle to conflict resolution of the conflict and in fact maintains it.

The psychological repertoire consists of such elements as collective memory about the conflict, ethos of conflict, collective emotional orientation and social identity—all of which evolve in the course of intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, 1998a, *in press*; Bar-Tal & Salomon, *in press*; Oren, 2005). We propose that in this repertoire, delegitimization of the adversary, among all the psychological elements, is one of the major detrimental forces to peaceful resolution (Bandura, 1999; Kelman, 1973; Staub, 1999) and therefore its functioning should be elaborated. In the present context of violence between the Palestinians and Israeli Jews, it is probably the major obstacle that prevents the realization of the readiness to make major concessions in the final settlement of the conflict.

The present contribution therefore focuses on delegitimization and we will mainly analyze it within the context of the violent confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli Jews that broke out following failure of the Camp David summit meeting in the fall of 2000. Its consequences are grounded in the present deadlock that fuels the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Thus, first, we will present the concept of delegitimization. Then, we will describe the nature of the mutual Palestinian–Israeli delegitimization and analyze its implications. Finally, we will provide several concluding comments.

2. Concept of delegitimization

2.1. Definition

In general, delegitimization refers to stereotypes² with extremely negative connotations (Bar-Tal, 1989, 1990, 2000) that is used to describe a specific case of group categorization. It is based on extremely negative outgroup characterization and aimed at denying the other group's humanity. Specifically, *delegitimization is defined as categorization of a group or groups into extremely negative social categories that exclude it, or them, from the sphere of human groups that act within the limits of acceptable norms and/or values, since these groups are viewed as violating basic human norms or values*; In this view, delegitimization is a type

¹See also Search for Common Ground (December 10, 2002). The potential for non-violent Intifada. www.sfcg.org/documents/SFCGPoll.pdf.

²Stereotypes are defined as stored beliefs about characteristics of a group of people.

of moral exclusion, which according to Opatow (1990) leads individuals or groups “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as non-entities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently, harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just” (p. 1). This phenomenon occurs mostly in situations of intergroup conflict and ethnocentrism (Bar-Tal, 1990). We will focus only on the former situation.

Delegitimization, as an extreme case of negative stereotyping, does not appear in every intergroup conflict. It tends to emerge especially in very violent conflicts when the contested goals are perceived as far-reaching, unjustified, and endangering the fundamental goals of the group. For example, it appears in intractable conflicts³ (Bar-Tal, 1998a, *in press*; Kriesberg, 1993, 1998). Delegitimization appears under these conditions to fulfill various needs that we will specify below.

The above implies that the conflict context in which delegitimization evolves is stable and salient in its threatening and violent nature, concerns many of the society members, and plays a central role in their lives. Moreover, the two groups engaged in conflict are physically and socially separated, even if they live in the same geographical area, as do Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East. There is usually little social contact between members of the two groups. Most of the information they receive about each other is dominated by conflict-related themes that present the malevolent acts of the other side. In such a context, the persistent use of delegitimization is not surprising.

2.2. *Types of delegitimization*

It was suggested that dehumanization, out-casting, negative trait characterization, political labeling, and group comparison are among the most commonly used contents in delegitimization (Bar-Tal, 1989). *Dehumanization* involves categorizing a group as non-human. This can be done either by using subhuman epithets such as uncivilized savages, primitives, animals, or by using superhuman categories with negative connotations such as demons, monsters, and devils. *Trait characterization* consists of attributing traits that are considered extremely negative and unacceptable in a given society. Traits such as *aggressors*, *idiots*, or *parasites* exemplify this type of delegitimization. *Out-casting* consists of categorizing the adversary into groups that are considered as violators of pivotal social norms. Out-casts include such categories as murderers, thieves, psychopaths, terrorists, or maniacs. The society usually excludes these violators from its system and often even places them in total institutions. Use of *political labels* involves categorization into political groups which are absolutely rejected by the values of the delegitimizing group, for example, Nazis, fascists, communists, Zionists, colonialists, or imperialists. These labels are culturally bound and their use depends on society’s cultural ideology. Finally, delegitimization by *group comparison* occurs when the delegitized group is labeled by a name of a group that traditionally serves as an example of negativity in the delegitimizing group. Uses of such categories as “Vandals” or “Huns” are examples of this type of delegitimization. Each society has, in its cultural repertoire, representations of groups or societies that serve as symbols of malice, evil, brutality, or wickedness.

³Intractable conflicts, in which the parties involved greatly invest material and nonmaterial resources, are characterized as being total, protracted, violent, central, and perceived as being unsolvable and of zero sum nature.

In severe conflicts, the label *enemy*, together with the above categories of delegitimization, is also used which has a very negative meaning and implications (e.g., Frank, 1967; Holt & Silverstein, 1989; Kaplowitz, 1990; Moses, 1990; Rieber, 1991) and therefore in the present analysis it will be seen as having similar functions, implications, and consequences as delegitimizing labels. Social categorization as an “enemy” defines the other group as a severe threat; implies a confrontational and hostile attitude toward the other group (Kelman, 1997; Silverstein & Flamenbaum, 1989), and attribution of very negative characteristics (Szalay & Mir-Djalali, 1991). Keen (1986), who examined how the enemy is portrayed in posters, leaflets, caricatures, comics, photographs, drawings, paintings, and illustrations appearing in books from different countries, suggested that the prototype has the following features: the enemy is a stranger; a faceless, barbarous, greedy, criminal, sadistic, and immoral aggressor. The enemy is often presented in depersonalized abstract terms as a torturer, rapist, desecrator, beast, reptile, insect, germ, death, or devil. All these characteristics imply an intention of delegitimization.

2.3. Functions

Delegitimization fulfills several important functions on the individual and group levels. First, like other stereotypes, delegitimizing categories provide information and explanations about the social world (Stangor & Schaller, 1996; Tajfel, 1981; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). In the context of conflict, delegitimizing stereotypes explain the nature of the conflict: Specifically, why it erupted, why it continues, and why it is violent. Since societies involved in intractable conflicts view their own goals as justified and perceive themselves in a positive light, they attribute all responsibility for the outbreak and continuation of the conflict to the characteristics and nature of the opponent: the enemy. The situation of violent conflict is extremely threatening and accompanied by stress, vulnerability, uncertainty, and fear (Bar-Tal, *in press*; Lieberman, 1964). As such, it raises a need for structure, allowing quick explanation, understanding, and prediction (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Delegitimizing labels fulfill these needs. A black and white approach, without gray shades, enables a fast, parsimonious, unequivocal, and simple grasp of the situation. It provides absolute clarity as to which rival group is to be blamed for the conflict and violence.

Second, in their epistemic function, delegitimizing labels, as well as the label “enemy”, also serve to justify the violence and destruction inflicted on the adversary by the delegitimizing group (Tajfel, 1981). They provide justification for individuals and for the social system as a whole to intentionally harm the rival, and for continuing to institutionalize aggression towards the enemy (Jackman, 2001; Jost & Banaji, 1994). This is an important function that resolves feelings of dissonance, guilt, and shame that may appear, because normally human beings do not willingly harm other human beings. The sanctity of life is perhaps the most respected value in modern societies. Killing or even hurting other human beings is considered the most serious violation of the moral code (Donagan, 1979; Kleinig, 1991). Delegitimization, the denial of the adversary’s humanity and attribution of threatening characteristics, allows such violence. (Bandura, 1999; Kelman, 1973; Staub, 1989).

Third, delegitimizing stereotypes and the “enemy” labeling, have the function of reflecting a shared reality for group members (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). They express the nature of the conflict relations between rival groups and indicate that it is a

violent and severe conflict. In essence, according to Oakes et al. (1994), expressing them is a political act of the group revealing the norms and values to which group members are expected to subscribe. This may be viewed as the expressive function of attitudes and opinions suggested by Katz (1960). In this case, the aim is to express the common perception of reality in the context of the violent conflict. Holding shared views about the rival group reflects a common fate, provides important content for the societal repertoire, and reaffirms identification with the group.

Fourth, delegitimizing labels create a sense of differentiation and superiority (Tajfel, 1978, 1981) to the extent of totally excluding the delegitimized group from the community of groups considered as acting within an acceptable range of norms and values. Since the rival group is delegitimized, the boundaries between the groups are not penetrable. In the situation of a severe conflict, when both sides engage in violence, and often perform immoral acts, feelings of being different (i.e., more moral and humane) are of special importance. In this way, delegitimization provides the contrast which feeds the construction of positive social identity (Bar-On, 1999).

Fifth, delegitimizing labels motivate for action. On the one hand, they indicate to group members that the delegitimizing group should take revenge for the violent acts performed against them and, on the other hand, they imply a need to initiate violent acts to prevent the perceived potential danger and threat. Vengeance is a norm in many societies and may even be considered a moral requirement (Turney-High, 1949). That is, in some societies, members think that in retribution for suffered violence, they have an obligation to physically harm members of the rival group. The delegitimizing labels constantly remind group members of the violence against them and indicate that it may recur. Thus, by implication, their own violent acts may prevent possible harm by the enemy.

Finally, as a sixth function, delegitimizing stereotypes and the label “enemy”, serve as motivator for mobilization. They supply information that implies threat and danger to the group. Therefore, group members are required to take all necessary steps in order to cope successfully with the other group. Withstanding the enemy and averting the danger of delegitimized groups such as “murderers”, “Nazis”, “terrorists” or “psychopaths”, requires full mobilization. In severe and violent conflicts, delegitimizing labels serve as cues to remind the ingroup of the threats and of the mobilizing steps that have therefore to be taken to counter the threatening outgroup.

In sum, delegitimizing labels fulfill essential functions in group coping with the stressful and demanding situation of prolong conflict. Yet, as we will see later, it also may contribute to the conflict continuity and prevent peaceful resolution of it. After presenting the conceptual framework, a short description of the mutual delegitimization between Israeli Jews and Palestinians will be described as example to the complicity and dynamic nature of this phenomenon.

3. Mutual delegitimization between Israeli Jews and Palestinians

The mutual delegitimization between Israeli Jews and Palestinians did not begin recently. It began with shared individual representation, became part of the private and public discourse, and penetrated into cultural and educational products. Mutual delegitimization has been normative practice in both societies (Bar-On, 2000; Bar-Tal, 1988; Kelman, 1999). It appeared in leaders' speeches, media news and analyses, literary books, theatrical plays, films, and even in school textbooks (see in Bar-Tal & Teichman,

2005, the analysis of the Israeli Jewish society). The general processes of dissemination and transmission of delegitimizing labels have been similar in both societies, but the contents of delegitimization have been somewhat different. Delegitimization became institutionalized as it was widely shared by both population and extensively used by Palestinians and Israeli Jews alike. This extensive institutionalized mutual delegitimization continued until 1993 and even beyond, when important segments in both societies tried to advance the peace process. Even then, strong opposition groups on both sides tried to delegitimize the peace process and the leaders who pursued it, and to actively stop it. Palestinian opposition groups carried out deadly terror attacks on Jewish Israeli civilians without major efforts by the Palestinian Authority to stop them, whereas the Israeli government continued the Jewish settlement of Palestinian land and carried out policies severely restricting the daily life of the Palestinians. Eventually the peace process collapsed, the Al Aqsa Intifada began and the mutual (institutionalized) delegitimization reappeared with a vengeance in the public discourse of both the Palestinians and the Israeli Jews.

In describing the delegitimization of each side, first it will be described on the general level, showing the continuity and width of the used delegitimization through the long period of the conflict. Then it will be shown how it was expressed in school textbooks through many years. This part exemplifies the institutionalization of the delegitimization and the way of its dissemination to new generations. This element of institutionalization is of special importance, because the beliefs presented in the school textbooks reach the whole younger generation of a society. Moreover, because of the perceived epistemic authority of school textbooks, they are often considered to express truth and facts. During an intractable conflict, children, adolescents and young adults learn a particular delegitimizing view of the opponent that shapes their beliefs, attitudes and the accompanying emotions. Finally, the description will shift to the present, focusing on the delegitimization that characterizes current Jewish–Palestinian relations and showing changes that occurred since the eruption of the latest violent confrontation, relying on survey polls taken during this period.

3.1. Israeli delegitimization

3.1.1. General description

Jews arriving to Palestine from the early 20th century in waves of Zionist immigrations, initially viewed Arabs residing in the region ethnocentrically being primitive, dirty, stupid, easily agitated, and aggressive. As the conflict evolved and became violent, Arabs were perceived as killers, a blood-thirsty mob, rioters, treacherous, untrustworthy, cowards, cruel, and wicked. Of special interest is the label of “Arabs”, which did not differentiate the population of Palestine from that of other Arab countries. In fact, through decades the great majority of the Jews did not recognize the Palestinian entity as a nation. During the pre-state period, Arab residents of Palestine opposing Jewish immigration and settlement, were viewed as being violent and intransigent by refusing to accept any compromises and being easily agitated by the extremist leaders (see Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Gorny, 1987; Shapira, 1992; Tessler, 1994).

The delegitimization of the Palestinians continued after the establishment of the state of Israel. They continued to be perceived as primitive and violent and their national identity was denied, as well as their right to self-determination. A special effort was made over the decades to delegitimize the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), established in 1964,

which eventually came to express the aspiration of the great majority of the Palestinians. Thus, delegitimization of the PLO was in effect delegitimization of the Palestinians. In the first 10 years of the PLO's existence, literally almost all the Israeli Jews negated the existence of this organization (Tessler, 1994). In 1977, the Israeli Knesset adopted a resolution by a vote of 92–4 stating that “The organization called the PLO aspires, as stated in its covenant, to destroy and exterminate the State of Israel. The murder of women and children, and terrorism, are part of this organization's ideology, which it is implementing in practice”.

After 1974, when the PLO opened a small window for possible conflict resolution, individual Israeli Jews opened a dialogue with PLO representatives. These contacts slowly increased and therefore in 1986 the Knesset decided to prohibit meetings with PLO representatives by legislating the law of “Order for the Prevention of Terror”. The law was changed on January 1993, thus making the Oslo talks and mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO legal.

3.1.2. *Use of school textbooks*

Delegitimization of Arabs can be found already in early Hebrew school textbooks of history and geography. Firer (1985) found that from 1930, as the violent conflict escalated, history school textbooks referred to the Arabs as “robbers, vandals, primitives, and easily agitated” (Firer, 1985, p. 128). Also, the books portrayed Arabs as being ungrateful to the Jews who had come to contribute to the development of the country, while the Arab leaders incited the Arab people against the Jewish settlement. With regard to the Arab population, the books focused on *fellahin* (Arab peasants), who were generally presented as primitive and backward (see also Podeh, 2002). After the establishment of the state of Israel until the early 1970s, the school textbooks continued to present Arabs negatively. Bar-Gal's (1993, 1994) summarized his analysis of Arabs' representations in Israeli geography books by pointing out that throughout many decades they were represented in terms of the following characteristics: “*unenlightened, inferior, fatalistic, unproductive, apathetic, with a need for strong paternalism. ... They are divided, tribal, exotic, people of the backward East, poor, sick, dirty, noisy, colored. Arabs are not progressive; they multiply fast, they are ungrateful, not part of us, non-Jews. They commit arson and murder, they destroy, are easily inflamed, and vengeful*” (Bar-Gal, 1993, p. 189).

Delegitimization of Arabs was also common in the Hebrew readers used in elementary schools. Zohar (1972), analyzing widely used school readers published in the 1950s and 1960s, found that Arab society was represented as primitive, backward and passive. The most frequent representation of Arabs was as the enemy, but neither their national aspirations nor the context of the conflict between two national movements were ever mentioned. The books used the label “enemy” in a depersonalized and undifferentiated way. In general, the textbooks tended to describe the acts of Arabs as hostile, deviant, cruel, immoral and unfair, with the intention to hurt Jews and to annihilate the state of Israel. Within this frame of reference, Arabs were delegitimized by the use of such labels as “robbers”, “wicked ones”, “blood-thirsty mob”, “killers”, “gangs”, or “rioters”.

By late 1970s, these delegitimizing descriptions had almost disappeared from the textbooks, but the negative stereotyping remained (e.g., Bar-Tal & Zoltak, 1989; Firer, 1985). Podeh (2002) pointed out that from the late 1970s, the history textbooks began to acknowledge the existence of Palestinian nationalism, and used less pejorative terminology in their description of the Arabs' violent resistance to Jewish immigration and settlement.

Bar-Tal (1998b), who analyzed the contents of all school textbooks used in all school grades (1–12) for History, Geography, Civic Studies, and Hebrew (readers), which were approved by the Ministry of Education for use in 1994–1995, found sporadic delegitimization of Arabs. Their negative stereotyping was prevalent and positive stereotypes were rare.

The most recent analysis by Podeh (2002) indicates that a major and significant change took place at the end of the 1990s, during the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Some of the published books shed a more balanced light on the Arab–Jewish conflict and were influenced by the new zeitgeist, which allowed more openness, pluralism, and self-criticism (see also Firer & Adwan, 2004). In these books, Arabs were presented “not only as mere spectators or as aggressors but also as victims of the conflict” (Podeh, 2002, pp. 149–150). Many of these books shed a new perspective on the Arab–Jewish conflict and presented the Arabs, in general, and the Palestinians, in particular, in a more complex, multidimensional, and differentiated way. However, the publication of the new books evoked heated debates in Israeli society, including in Israeli parliament, the *Knesset*. In November 2000, the Education Committee of the *Knesset* decided to delay the use of one of the history text books—indicating that part of society and its representatives have difficulty accepting changes in school textbooks that question the delegitimization of the Palestinians. It is possible that this decision reflected a trend of reversal in Israeli society that began with the outbreak of violence in the fall of 2000 (Sharvit & Bar-Tal, in press).

3.2. *Palestinian delegitimization*

3.2.1. *General description*

In many aspects, the Palestinian delegitimization of Jews is a mirror image in terms of its content to the Israeli delegitimization of Palestinians (see Bar-Tal, 1988); in general, Jews were viewed almost from the start of Zionist immigration as colonialists who came to settle Palestinian land and expel the Palestinian population. They were stereotyped as strangers, crusaders, unwanted, and enemies. Also, Jews were attributed with labels such as deceitful, treacherous, thieves, and disloyal and were seen as aggressors and robbers. In addition, they were perceived as colonialists, racists, fascists, and imperialists and they were even compared to the Nazis. The term Zionism itself became a delegitimizing label as it was considered a colonialist ideology. The war of 1948 was viewed as a *Naqba* (disaster) caused by Jewish aggression and expansionism (Hadawi, 1968; Khalidi, 1997; Said, 1979; Sayigh, 1997).

This line of delegitimization continued through decades. The national Covenant of the PLO, approved in 1964, stated in its article 19: “Zionism is a colonialist movement in its inception, aggressive and expansionist in its goals, racist and segregationist in its configuration and fascist in its means and aims”.

Since almost all the Jews in Israel viewed themselves as Zionists, the delegitimizing label was applied to the Jewish entity as a whole. However, after 1974 some change began to take place in the PLO’s policy toward Israel. In the 12th meeting of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) in 1974 a “ten-point” program was drafted, calling for the establishment of the ‘people’s national independent and fighting authority on every part of liberated Palestinian land’. Muslish (1997) and Hassassian (1997) identify this program as a vague acceptance of the two-state solution to the conflict, and hence a first step toward full recognition of Israel. Yet, Muslish (1997) pointed out that the main reason for the

ambiguity of the plan can be found in “the fact that the Palestinians were not yet ready to accept the existence of Israel” (p. 40). Only in November 1988, the PNC meeting in Algiers, adopted two documents—the Political Program and Declaration of Independence—which officially accepted the 1947 UN partition plan, thus recognizing the two-state solution of the conflict. Finally in September 1993, Yasir Arafat, Head of the PLO, and Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel, signed an accord granting mutual recognition between the two parties.

3.2.2. *Use of school textbooks*

Many delegitimizing beliefs concerning Jews appeared in Jordanian and Egyptian textbooks that have been used by Palestinian schools in the West Bank and Gaza Strip for decades since 1948, including the period of Israeli occupation from 1967 onward. They were also distributed by the Palestinian National Authority after its establishment until late 1990s. The books included descriptions of the Jews as disloyal and treacherous, as in the following quote: “Treachery and disloyalty are character traits of the Jews and therefore one should beware of them”.⁴ The Jews in these books were described as enemies and aggressors, whose aim is to destroy and conquer Palestine. For example, a history book for 10th grade describes Zionism as “a political, aggressive, and colonialist movement, which calls for the Judaisation of Palestine by the expulsion of its Arab inhabitants”.⁵

As can be seen from the last citation, the Zionists were characterized as colonialists and even worse than regular western imperialists. According to History book for 12th grade, Zionism differs from imperialism because the former “Believes in the elimination of the original inhabitants” while the latter “has not gone as far as the elimination of original inhabitants”. Also, Zionism is “based on the foundation of false religious and historical rights” while imperialism is “based on foundations of economic interests”.⁶ Zionism was also compared to the Nazi movement; a 12th grade history book, for example, declares that: “The clearest examples of racist belief and racial discrimination in the world are Nazism and Zionism”.⁷

However, from 1994, after the signing of the Oslo accord, the newly created Palestinian Ministry of Education began to introduce a new curriculum. In 1994 it composed a set of textbooks for the first six grades as a supplement to the Jordanian and Egyptian books. In 2000, new textbooks for the elementary schools were written by the Palestinian Ministry of Education. As [Brown \(2003\)](#) and [Nordbruch \(2002\)](#) point out, although these books discuss current problems of the Palestinians and talk about occupation and colonialism, calls for Israel’s destruction were no longer present, nor were references to the Jews and Israelis as an “evil enemy” (see also [Firer & Adwan, 2004](#)).

In sum, we showed the lines of delegitimization that evolved through the years of conflict between the Palestinians and Jews. This delegitimization was institutionalized, as the analysis of the schoolbooks shows, and dominated the psychological repertoire of the members of both societies. Generations of Israeli Jews and Palestinians were reared up on its basis and it deeply penetrated the culture of both nations. During the 1990s, as the

⁴*Islamic Education* for 9th grade, p. 87 quoted in CMIP, 2001.

⁵*Modern Arab History and Contemporary Problems*, Part Two, for 10th grade, p. 49 quoted in CMIP, 2001.

⁶*Modern Arab History* for 12th grade, Part I, p. 123 quoted in CMIP, 2001.

⁷*Modern Arab History* for 12th grade, Part I, p. 123 quoted in CMIP, 2001.

peace process continued, delegitimization was greatly reduced, among various segments of the Palestinian and Israeli societies. It reappeared easily with the eruption of intense violence in the fall of 2000, which involved many society members on both sides (see the analysis of this context in Bar-Tal & Sharvit, *in press*).

Indeed, there is evidence that at the end of 2000, with the eruption of violence between the two sides, mutual delegitimization increased as more individuals in both sides hold negative image of the opponent. In 1997, only 39% of Israeli Jewish respondents described the Palestinians as violent, 42% regarded Palestinians as dishonest. Nevertheless, by the end of 2000, 68% of Israeli Jewish respondents perceived Palestinians as violent and 51% as dishonest.⁸ The delegitimization of the Palestinians by Israelis focused on the label “terrorist” which is a type of outcasting. Already in October 2000, 71% of Israeli Jews thought that Arafat, the father figure of the Palestinian national movement, behaved like a terrorist, in comparison to 2 years earlier when only 41% thought so⁹. Similarly, the Palestinian Authority was presented by the Israeli government as a “terrorist entity”, which initiates and supports terror attacks¹⁰ and 67% of Israeli Jews supported this view¹¹. The negative view of the Palestinians increased even more after the elections in 2006 in which Hamas won and formed the government.

Findings from Palestinian public polls indicate similar patterns. As for negative stereotypes, polls conducted by Jerusalem Media and Communication Center (JMCC) indicate that a large majority of Palestinians in 1997 perceived Israelis as violent (77%) and unfair (62%), but intelligent (71%). At the end of 2000, 94% of the Palestinians perceived the Israelis as violent and 81% as dishonest.¹² Also the sweeping majority (90–98%) perceived Israeli army activities as terror, while only a small minority (13–16%) view own acts of violence as terror.¹³ The ascendance to power of Hamas institutionalized the delegitimization of the Jews because this organization does not recognize the state of Israel.

In trying to understand the present psychological deadlock, we turn now to the discussion of the consequences of the return to mutual delegitimization that characterizes the Israeli–Palestinian relationship after fall 2000.

4. Consequences of delegitimization

The return to mutual delegitimization had a number of implications: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The main emotional consequents were increase of fear and mistrust on both sides. Delegitimizing characteristics not only imply intentions of behavior, but also characterize already performed behaviors. That is, use of labels such as murderers, terrorists, colonialists, or fascists, indicates that the delegitimized group, which is in conflict with the delegitimizing group, has the capacity to harm the opponent. The uses of delegitimizing labels strengthen already aroused threat and fear. Already at the beginning of the violence, in a poll carried in November 2000 by Tami Steinmetz Center,

⁸*Peace Index*: The Peace Index project is conducted by The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel-Aviv University. The data appears in The Tami Steinmetz Center’s web site at www.tau.ac.il/peace.

⁹Peace Index, October 2000.

¹⁰Herald Tribune, March 1, 2001.

¹¹*Maariv*, December 7, 2001.

¹²See <http://www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results.html>.

¹³Israeli Palestinian joint public opinion poll, December 2001. <http://Truman.huji.ac.il/poll-dec-1-2001.htm>.

59% of the Israeli Jews reported feelings of personal threat and 62% felt that Israel's national security was threatened.¹⁴ In June 2001, 67% of Israeli Jews reported being anxious about the future of Israel and 63% reported higher anxiety than in the past regarding their personal security and that of their family.¹⁵ In addition, in 2002 almost all Israeli Jews (92%) reported fear that they or a member of their family might fall victim to a terrorist attack, while in February 2000, this percentage was 79% and in 1999 only 58% (Arian, 2002).

On the Palestinian side, similar findings were observed. The percentage of respondents that reported feeling insecurity about their lives, their children, and their property rose significantly since fall 2000 from 18% in September 2000 to above 70% in 2001.¹⁶ In addition, in June 2002, a majority of respondents (87%) in a survey conducted by the development studies program at Bir-Zeit University reported a feeling of worrisome.¹⁷

Delegitimization also arouses deep mistrust. In 2001, 79.8% of Israeli Jews reported that they did not trust Palestinians, since even if they would sign a peace agreement, they would not honor it.¹⁸ Indeed, in a survey of March 2001, 75% believed that “the Palestinian Authority has no desire whatsoever to attain peace with Israel”.¹⁹ These responses should be compared to beliefs expressed earlier, in 1997, which showed that 53% of Israeli Jews believed that the Palestinian people were truly interested in peace and 52% of the respondents believed that the Palestinian Authority was truly interested in peace.²⁰

As for the Palestinians, polls carried out by the PCPSR from August 1998 until December 1999 showed that most of the respondents (63%) in August 1998 and in June 1999 did not trust the intentions of the Israeli people towards the peace process with the Palestinians.²¹ Later polls carried out by the development studies program at Bir-Zeit University showed similar results: In October 2001, over 91% of the respondents felt that the current Israeli government, led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was not serious about reaching an agreement to end the conflict with the Palestinians (compared with 64% in February 2001).²²

It is not surprising, then, that as violence erupted and delegitimization increased, both sides began to express pessimism about the chances of resolving the conflict. Coordinated surveys conducted during late December 2000 by the JMCC and the Tami Steinmetz Center investigated the level of pessimism and optimism about reaching a peaceful settlement of the conflict. The Palestinian public showed a sharp decrease in the degree of optimism after the eruption of the violence—from 60% in December 1999 to 33% in December 2000. At the same time, the rate of pessimism went up from 37% to 62%. The optimism of the Israeli public had also declined, but more moderately: 54% were optimistic in December 1999 and 48% in December 2000. The rates of pessimism went up from 40% to 48%.

¹⁴Peace Index, November 2000.

¹⁵*Maariv*, June 8, 2001.

¹⁶<http://micro5.mssc.huji.ac.il/~truman>.

¹⁷http://home.birzeit.edu/dsp/DSPNEW/polls/opinion_polls.htm.

¹⁸Peace Index, May 2001.

¹⁹Peace Index, March 2001.

²⁰Peace Index, March, 1997.

²¹<http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/cprspolls/index.html>.

²²http://home.birzeit.edu/dsp/DSPNEW/polls/opinion_polls.htm.

Moreover, the increase in mutual delegitimization had significant consequences that pertain to information processing on both sides. In situations of severe and violent conflict, where delegitimizing stereotypes dislike and negative emotions are common features, information is absorbed in specific ways. Group members tend to make evaluations, interpretations, and attributions that shed negative light on the rival group, in line with their held view. This tendency reflects biased and distorting information processing in which group members change and add elements to construct images that are consistent with their delegitimizing beliefs, negative attitudes, and emotions.

Indeed, **Wolfsfeld and Dajani (2003)**, who examined media coverage by major Israeli and Palestinian newspapers of four violent events during the current *Intifada*²³ found that each side processes information in line with their held negative view of the other, and thus the outcome suggests a clear case of mirroring. Both, Palestinians and Israelis, focused on the violence of the other side, demonized the opponent, viewed the own group as a victim, and emphasized own group solidarity and unity. But, when the own side carried out the violence, they judged it by different criteria: they justified it, adopted a military perspective and presented it as a patriotic act of self-protection.

It is therefore not surprising that similar trends appear in public polls results about the way the public on each side interprets the same events. A great majority of Israeli Jews defines violent acts committed by Palestinians against Israelis as terrorism, but not vice versa those committed by the Israeli government against Palestinians. As a mirror image, a great majority of Palestinians define acts committed by Israelis against them as terrorism, but not so vice versa.²⁴

Finally, the mutual delegitimization provides the basis for expectations and has behavioral consequences. Group members who use delegitimizing labels always expect the rival group to have extremely negative dispositions and bad intentions, and to behave accordingly. Such expectations may bring about the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon. In expecting negative intentions and behavior, the group itself behaves towards the rival group in a negative way instigating hostility and animosity, thus confirming the initial expectations and creating a vicious circle (see the analysis of **Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990; Jussim & Fleming, 1996**).

Indeed, delegitimization leads to the harming of the delegitimized group. The harm is often done to prevent the delegitimized group from carrying out harmful acts and to punish the delegitimized group for harm already done. The Israeli Jewish public (consistently about 70%) began to support violent acts against the Palestinians initiated by its government after the eruption of the Intifada in fall of 2000. In March 2001, 72% of Israeli Jews thought that more military force should be used against the Palestinians.²⁵ Also, 58% supported a policy of increasing military pressure in order to avoid another war and as an alternative to peace talks, while 2 years earlier only 40% supported this option (**Arian, 2002**). Eighty percent supported the use of tanks and fighter planes against the Palestinians, 73% supported use of so-called “closures” and economic sanctions, and 72%

²³The events are: the Palestinian suicide attack on Passover evening at the Park Hotel in Natanya (March 27, 2002), the Palestinian suicide attack at the Pat junction in Jerusalem (June 18, 2002), the Israeli incursion into Jenin (April 6, 2002) and the assassination of Saleh Shehade (July 22, 2002) carried out by the Israeli army in Gaza.

²⁴Israeli Palestinian joint public opinion poll, December 2001. <http://Truman.huji.ac.il/poll-dec-1-2001.htm>.

²⁵Peace Index, March 2001.

supported military invasion of the cities under the control of the Palestinian Authority (Arian, 2002).

The results from Palestinian public polls demonstrate similar trends of support for violent acts against Israelis. Data from polls conducted by JMCC indicates that the support for “military operations against Israeli targets” rose from 34% in May 1997 to 70% in June 2001. Support for suicide attacks against Israelis rose from 24% in May 1997 to 74% in April 2001. By 2002–2003, most respondents (60–72%) still supported such attacks.²⁶

Delegitimization also contributes to the continuity of the conflict because it prevents contact. Marking a group with delegitimizing labels indicates that no contacts should be had with this group. Moreover, delegitimization also can prevent negotiation and political contact, since it is unthinkable to lead political negotiation with a group that is considered delegitimized. Indeed, since the beginning of Al Aqsa Intifada both sides referred to the other side’s leadership as un-illegitimate and the direct Israeli Palestinian negotiation ceased. Accordingly, the percent of Israelis who wanted to continue the peace talks with the Palestinians dropped from 63% in 1999 to 42% in 2001 (Arian, 2002). Among the Palestinians there has been during that time also a decrease in the degree of support for the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations from 56% who supported this process in 1999 to 46% that supported the negotiations in December 2000.²⁷

5. Conclusions

The above analysis suggests that the characteristics, implications, and consequences of delegitimization should be seen as a syndrome that is very influential in situations of intergroup conflict. When delegitimization becomes prevalent, it marks the whole nature of intergroup relations. Delegitimization allows practices like discrimination, exploitation, expulsion, mass killings, and genocide that would otherwise be unthinkable. Without the rationalization provided by delegitimization, many people would have great difficulty to commit such acts (see Bandura, 1999; Kelman, 1973; Staub, 1989).

Delegitimization operates circularly (see Bar-Tal, 1990). Focusing on severe and violent conflicts, of the type in which Israelis and Palestinians are involved, delegitimization, on the one hand, is a result of the particular characteristics of the intractable conflict and especially of the rival violent behaviors. In this capacity, delegitimization provides an efficient, simplistic, and un-ambiguous explanation of the nature of the conflict and its threatening features. This explanation, in turn, leads to group mobilization for coping with the threat and harming the opponent as a preventive or retributitional act. On the other hand, however, the need to justify the violence carried out and the harm inflicted strengthen the delegitimization.

We provided systematic analysis of one example: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In the present violent confrontation with the Palestinians, terror attacks by Palestinians against Israeli Jews substantially increase Israeli delegitimization, fear and hatred of, as well as their readiness to harm, the Palestinian people; in turn harsh Israeli measures increase Palestinians’ hatred and delegitimization of Israeli Jews, as well as Palestinians’ readiness to carry out extremely harmful acts against them. This is a vicious cycle and it is hard both

²⁶<http://www.jmcc.org/publicpoll/results.html>.

²⁷Israeli Palestinian joint public opinion poll, December 2001. <http://Truman.huji.ac.il/poll-dec-1-2001.htm>.

to tell where it begins and to decide where it ends. This situation continues up to the present day as the behaviors of each side serve to validate held psychological repertoire as well as constitute justification for harming the rival. Paradoxically, both sides are expressing readiness for far-reaching compromises regarding the resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. We assume that change of the psychological repertoire held by the Israeli Jews and Palestinians about each other is a necessary condition to achieve this step toward peace (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). Legitimization and personalization of the enemy are crucial processes, without which it is almost impossible to conduct a peace process of any serious kind.

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