



San Francisco as a Delegitimization Hub: Initial Report on the 1st Study Visit

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Introduction

The Reut Institute has been committed to responding to the assault on Israel's legitimacy since the fall of 2008. Our team has worked to catalyze an effective response to this challenge in Jewish communities around the world, as well as in the Government of Israel.

Reut's conclusions are summarized in a trilogy of documents: Building a Political Firewall Against Israel's De-Legitimization ([click here](#)); The Gaza Flotilla – The Collapse of Israel's Political Fire Wall ([click here](#)); and London as a Case Study ([click here](#)). In addition, we published a document on the BDS movement ([click here](#)), which exposed its de-legitimizing character. This paper informed the following YouTube clip produced by StandWithUs ([click here](#)).

This report summarizes **initial** insights and conclusions from an eight-day study visit to the San Francisco Bay Area (SFBA) conducted by our team. The document is based on nearly 40 meetings with individuals from the Jewish community, academia, civil society and media, and who come from across the political spectrum.

We were assisted greatly by the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), to whom we remain deeply thankful.

As with London, Reut identified the SFBA as one of the few global hubs of delegitimization, due to:

- **Anti-Israel activity in the SFBA that stretches, at times, beyond legitimate criticism of Israeli policy** and turns into an explicit or implicit form of assault on Israel's right to exist.
- **The role of the SFBA as a generator and driver of broader trends**, or as a hub of social experiments. As one expert put it: “What won't pass in San Francisco won't pass anywhere else, and what happens in San Francisco doesn't stay in San Francisco.”

Despite some of the findings contained within this document, it is important to note that the majority of the SFBA Jewish community demonstrates consistent support for Israel. Moreover, we found that SFBA Jewish organizations, both within and outside of the establishment, are committed, mobilized, and taking action to confront the assault on Israel's legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the salient difference between the cases of London and the SFBA lies within the Jewish community. While in London delegitimization is being promoted primarily by groups who are not part of the Jewish community (with the exception of no more than a handful of Israelis and Jews), Jewish dynamics in the SFBA are essential to understanding the delegitimization phenomenon.

This is not to say that there are many ‘Jewish delegitimizers’, but that an increasing number of Jews in the SFBA have become ‘agnostic’ towards Israel, and some have been fueling the delegitimization campaign, albeit not intentionally. The ‘agnosticism’ of parts of the Jewish community is primarily the result of internal Jewish dynamics (namely, assimilation and population changes) and is also the result of the social cost that ‘pro-Israel’ supporters are paying in light of the delegitimization campaign.

As ‘visitors for a moment’ we do not presume to take the role of the local community in terms of how to deal with this phenomenon. The value of our work can be categorized in two parts. First, in suggesting **principles** for an operational framework that could be relevant for the local community, the State of Israel and Jewish communal organizations. Second, in shedding light on the unique local make-up of the assault on Israel's legitimacy, and modeling relevant responses and best practices.

Finally, this case study is not relevant solely to the SFBA community. Just as the San Francisco JCRC has incorporated strategies to fight BDS that were "developed by Reut,"¹ and were based on our project in London, we expect SFBA-derived insights to contribute to those who fight the assault on Israel's legitimacy in other places around the world.

The Undermining of Israel’s Legitimacy in the Bay Area

A unique historical background

1. **Non-conformist, progressive culture** – Research shows that San Francisco's citizens are the most politically active and civically engaged, the most politically tolerant in their welcoming of immigrants and appreciation of diversity, and by far the most secular and liberal in their political ideology. These liberal roots trace back to the historically diverse immigration to the SFBA.²
2. **The SFBA Jewish community prospered** – Taking full advantage of the openness and tolerance of diversity before them, the Jewish community thrived. Jewish figures reached the highest levels of local politics, and both civic engagement and Jewish cultural organizations flourished.
3. **Historically, the SFBA Jewish community was less attached to Israel than other communities in North America** – Reform Judaism was the leading denomination and was somewhat detached from the notion of Jewish nationalism. This detachment prevailed until the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel.
4. **However, for the Holocaust-surviving generation, support and love for Israel became a part of Jewish civic duty. In addition to an influx of Jews from throughout the country, the SFBA has experienced a major immigration of Russian-speaking Jews and Israelis whose passion for Israel has had an important impact on the community.**

¹ Julie Bernstein, **Combating Anti-Israel Divestment Resolutions on Campus**, JCRC, 9/2010.

² On the unique San Francisco's political culture, we found very useful the following articles: Rich DeLeon, “Only In San Francisco? The City’s Political Culture in Comparative Perspective,” SPUR Newsletter (November 12, 2002) [URL: <http://www.spur.org/documents/OnlyInSF.pdf>]; Rich DeLeon, Katherine Naff, “Identity Politics & Local Political Culture: Some Comparative Results from the Social Capital Benchmark Survey,” *Urban Affairs Review*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (July 2004).

Fertile ground for contemporary delegitimization dynamics

5. **Israel is the target of a delegitimization campaign, mostly waged from within the SFBA** – In recent years Israel has faced an assault on the very legitimacy of its existence as a Jewish and democratic state. In this regard, the SFBA acts as a 'hub' that drives and amplifies this dynamic.

This assault on Israel is being conducted by a relatively small number of organizations (catalysts) who are motivated by ideological zeal to bring about Israel's destruction, and who reject the very principle of Israel's right to exist. Examples of such organizations based or operating in the SFBA are: the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), the Free Gaza Movement and al-Awda.

In SFBA, as in London, these **true "eliminators" represent only marginal political forces but are increasingly able to mainstream and achieve disproportionate influence.**

The strategy of these forces is to intentionally blur the line between assaulting Israel's legitimacy and criticism over Israeli policy.³ Moreover, a key part of this strategy is a branding campaign that aims to create an association between Israel and the apartheid regime in South Africa (as elaborated upon in [Reut's paper on the BDS Movement](#)).

6. **Israel is losing support within liberal and progressive circles, among them many Jews** – in part, it is a result of frustration with the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate and a perception of a hardline stance on the part of the Israeli government toward negotiations. The smear campaign against Israel has exploited this existing dynamic to create a zeitgeist – a spirit of the time – which is very hostile to Israel (on this dynamic, see Reut's document [The Delegitimization Challenge: Creating a Political Firewall](#)). Within the Jewish community, many liberals feel a tension emerging between the universal values they cherish and their perceived image of Israel.
7. **Growing criticism of liberal Jews over the Jewish establishment** – Liberal Jews often argue that the instinct of some Jewish communal organizations and pro-Israel supporters to justify Israel's actions at all times in light of the delegitimization campaign, is detrimental. This approach alienates those who wish to criticize certain Israeli policies, who upon finding that there is no room for them within the 'pro-Israel' tent seek alternative venues of protest. By purposefully 'blurring the lines,' campaigns such as BDS are able to position themselves as an alternative venue in the arising vacuum.
8. **For a growing number of Jews, Israel has become a "non-issue"** – For them, the connection between Jews and Israel today is seen as less relevant, less important, less of a badge of pride, and certainly less of a duty. For many, Israel is

³ Reut defines delegitimization as the negation of Israel's right to exist or of the right of the Jewish people to self-determination based on philosophical or political arguments. It is important to make the distinction between these phenomenon and criticism over Israeli policy even when harsh.

not part of their identity, and most certainly has no role to play in their day-to-day life. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, Jews **do not** become 'anti-Israel' and instead, they simply do not care one way or another.

9. **These dynamics in the Jewish community serve as fertile ground for those promoting the assault on Israel legitimacy in the SFBA** – The number of individuals who are willing to stand up for Israel is declining while others have been fueling the delegitimization campaign, many times unintentionally, by engaging in acts of delegitimization – namely, actions or campaigns framed by their initiators as a reaction to a specific Israeli policy, which in practice aim to undermine Israel's political and moral foundations. Examples include support for the [BDS Movement](#) and the [2010 Gaza Flotilla](#).

Insights and Principles for Response

10. In this report we focus on the Jewish community dynamics, which represent the unique characteristic of the delegitimization campaign in the SFBA. This is in addition to the operational principles recommended in Reut's previous body of work on the delegitimization challenge.
11. **This is an opportunity to re-group** – The assault on Israel's legitimacy is also an assault on the right of the Jewish people to national self-determination. This critical threat creates an opportunity to reconnect across the dividing lines within the Jewish community, and to re-engage with Israel in new ways.
12. **The response to the assault on Israel's legitimacy starts from within** – A robust response necessitates a community-wide deliberation on the definition of 'delegitimization,' with the aim of narrowing it, and on the meaning of 'pro-Israel,' with the aim of expanding it.
13. **Broaden our tent** – Such community-wide deliberation should also aim to identify those 'within the tent' who are able to engage others who are willing to stand against delegitimization, in order to drive a wedge between the extremists and those who principally support the legitimacy of its existence regardless of policy disagreements.

The diversity of the Jewish people represents our greatest asset in this struggle. Indeed, standing together does not mean uniformity; it means unity. The necessity to harness this diversity within a common framework derives from two main principles:

- **Zionist progressive circles who stand clearly against the assault on Israel's legitimacy should be embraced** – The 'traditional' advocates for Israel need to collaborate with all those groups and individuals who are willing to take a clear position against any assault on Israel's legitimacy, regardless to their criticism on Israeli policies;
- **Red lines should be observed in order to bolster the constructive discourse** on Israel by distancing it from the ideological delegitimization campaign.

The discursive code of conduct should be contextual and addressed through a bottom-up, community-wide deliberation in synagogues, Jewish communal organizations, and other grassroots group.

Through the funding guidelines drafted by a JCRC-JCF Working Group in the SFBA and approved by the JCF Board (Funding Policy for Grantees on Potentially Controversial Israel-Related Programming), **the SFBA has set the standard nationally** as the first American Jewish community to develop guidelines delineating red lines that go hand-in-hand with the broad tent approach ([click here](#)).

Additionally, we regard the Year of Civil Discourse, and within it Project Reconnections, led by the JCRC, as important best practices that could be emulated in other places. We encourage national Jewish communal organizations to participate in similar processes.

14. **Show the human face of Israeli society** – a recent segmentation study and analysis that was co-funded by the Brand Israel Group (BIG) and the Conference of Presidents, suggests that the humanity of the Israeli people is what resonates strongest with most Americans. The study demonstrated that the key is to emphasize the creative, diverse, indomitable, moral and personable nature of the Israeli people.

The best way to expose Israel's human face is by creating platforms that allow first hand encounter with Israelis, by co-sponsoring visits for Israelis capable of delivering the human face of their society and by expanding the existing civic leaders' missions to Israel.

15. **Separate education from advocacy** – The BIG segmentation study suggests that while the vast majority of American Jews are strong supporters of Israel, there is a clear decline in support from the older to the younger generation. Like 70% of Americans, increasing numbers of young Jews become 'swayable' in that their support for Israeli is not 'fixed' or guaranteed.

The 'swayable' majority is more receptive to Israel when presented with personal stories that highlight the complexities, nuances and dilemmas of Israel across a range of issues. This approach is more effective than 'presenting the facts', in the sense that it is more likely to make emotional inroads into the hearts of the general population. Same as reaching out to non-Jews, educating young Jews on the realities and complications of Israel is therefore a better way of strengthening their connection to the Jewish state than advocating on behalf of the Israeli government's policies.

16. **Engage new partners, such as within the large, and as yet untapped, potential of the Israeli and Russian communities** – These communities have begun to make inroads into the mainstream Jewish community, including in the JCRC which has integrated Russian-speaking Jews into its leadership. The framework of the 'broad tent' concept must include efforts to engage these communities, as more has to be done.

17. **Develop the progressive case for Israel** – Israel should strive to regain its support within liberal and progressive circles. In addition to sincere and substantive engagement about Israel's actions, it is crucial to present the democratic and pluralistic nature of Israel and its people. **Rebuilding the progressive case for Israel in the SFBA could turn this area into a global hub of legitimacy for Israel.**
18. **Tikkun Olam** is a Jewish value which serves as a common denominator between Jews in Israel, and Jews around the world, and can be focused on a variety of good deeds. Therefore, Israel and the Jewish communal organizations should combine their efforts in order to engage around the issue of Tikkun Olam with liberal progressive circles.
19. Finally, there are a couple of paradoxes at the core of the relationship between Israel, the Diaspora, and Judaism, which must be addressed in order to reconnect and re-engage Jewish communities with Israel in new ways:
 - **The rigidity of Israel's orthodox establishment alienates further those who could only be engaged through new diverse streams** - Moving away from Judaism often goes hand-in-hand with a decreasing attachment to Israel. Thus, the diversification of Judaism that has taken place, particularly in the past ten years, is essential in face of the high rate of assimilation. However, Israel's Orthodox Rabbinic institutions, whose rigidity has become a subject of growing contention and resentment among American Jewry, is widening the gap with these new faces of Judaism.
 - **While Israel challenges the character of the 'Diaspora Jew', it is becoming more important in American Jewish liberal identity** – Though Zionism dismantled 'the DNA' of Diaspora Jewish community structures, it has today become an engine of renewal for waning Diaspora Jewish identity. For many American Jews, the ten-day Birthright program has become a necessary 'vitamin' to strengthen Jewish identity and decrease assimilation. This model remains robust in spite of growing discomfort towards Israel and increased criticism of the Israeli religious establishment.⁴

List of meetings

In the course of writing this report, we have met with nearly 40 individuals. The Reut Institute extends its gratitude to all these individuals for their time, good will, and contribution. **Nonetheless, this document reflects the position of the Reut Institute.** Indeed, some individuals with whom we met have a different view on certain aspects of our analysis, conclusions, or recommendations. Moreover, we respect those several individuals who preferred not to be acknowledged. The acknowledgment list, in alphabetical order is below:

- **Bernstein, Julie** – Former Director of Campus & Community Programs, Middle East Project, JCRC; Current: Associate Managing Director, JFNA/JCPA Israel Action Network

⁴ Shnuel Rosner, **Shtettle, Bagel, Baseball**, Israel 2011, pp.187-188.

- **Brandt, (Rabbi) James**, CEO of the Jewish Federation of the East Bay
- **Braude, Ruvim** – President, JCRC
- **Carey, Jonathan** Executive Director of BlueStar PR
- **Danker, Mervyn**, AJC San Francisco Regional Director
- **DeLeon, (Prof.) Richard** San Francisco State University Professor of Political Science
- **Dobbs, Stephen** – Former Professor at San Francisco State University, Former Executive Vice-President of the Bernard Osher Foundation
- **Elster, Jeremy** –Keshet Enoshi
- **Finkelstein, Lisa** – Director of the Jewish Community Federation LGBT Alliance
- **Harris, (Dr.) Michael** – StandWithUs/San Francisco Voice for Israel
- **Hefter, Justin** – President of the Stanford Israel Alliance
- **Joelson, (Dr.) Ealon**, President of the Israel Peace Initiative
- **Kahn, (Rabbi), Doug** Executive Director, JCRC
- **Kalish, Rachel Eryn** – Project Facilitator of Project Reconnections and Year of Civil Discourse
- **Kendall, Barry** – Executive Director, Progressive Ideas Network at Demos
- **Kenin, Wendy** Community Engagement Specialist for UpStart
- **Kristal, (Dr.) Lenny**, Chair of the East Bay, JCRC
- **Levin, Sarah** – Director of Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA)
- **Lewis, Jacob** – Co-President of Tikvah: Students for Israel, Berkeley
- **Lurie, (Rabbi) Brian** - President elect of the NIF and co-chairmen of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Affairs
- **Lustig, Gidi** – Vice Consul Consulate General of Israel in San Francisco
- **Maissy, Brian** – Co-President of Tikvah: Students for Israel, Berkeley
- **Meltzer, Faith** - StandWithUs/San Francisco Voice for Israel
- **Naftalin-Kelman, (Rabbi) Adam** – Executive Director of Hillel, Berkeley
- **Naveh, Keren** – Director of External Relations at Project Interchange and former pro-Israel activist at UC Berkeley
- **Naveh, Lili** - Community activist
- **Perl, Joseph**, Israel Peace Initiative
- **Porth, Abby** – Associate Director, JCRC
- **Santis, Yitzhak** – former Director, Middle East Project, JCRC
- **Schickman, Mark** – Former President of the San Francisco Israel Center and JCRC
- **Stern, Noah** - President of the Associated Student of the University of California
- **Tor, Akiva** – Consul General of Israel to for the Pacific Northwest Region
- **Waldman, Gina**, Founder and President of Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA)