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# A masterclass in alienating allies

Last week I attended the Herzliya Conference, Israel's most important annual policy event, organized and hosted by the Interdisciplinary Center and chaired by political scientist Alex Mintz. One of this year's recurring themes was the rise of the BDS movement and Israel's growing isolation. There were some calm and rational expositions – for example, by Ehud Barak and Isaac Herzog.

All agreed that the boycott, sanctions and divestment movement is swelling on the fringes, particularly the extreme left, in Europe and the United States. All also agreed that none of the mainstream political parties in the West question Israel's legitimacy, even though they strongly criticize the settlement policy.

This was in stark contrast to speakers from the political right, ranging from new Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself, who, in one of the worst speeches I've heard in a long time, kept lumping all criticism of Israel together as delegitimizing Israel's existence, and arguing that criticism of Israel is a new form of anti-Semitism.

I must admit, I always wonder whether Netanyahu actually believes what he is saying, or whether he thinks that by crying "Delegitimization!" he has found a rhetorical ploy that works on the international stage.

Differentiating between legitimate criticism between friends and delegitimization is crucial in maintaining friendly relations with the West, as former Prime Minister Barak pointed out in a very lucid and incisive speech. He made clear that while Israel's existence is indeed delegitimized in large parts of the Arab World and fringes of the Western left, this is simply not true in mainstream Western countries – and conflating the two is wrong and dangerous.

I can attest to the truth of Barak's statement on the grounds of long experience. I have been fighting BDS, particularly in academia, for many years, whether in Britain or the United States. And the best weapon in this fight has always been to differentiate between legitimate criticism of Israel and attacks that deny Israel's right to exist and apply a double standard.

In doing so I apply a simple standard: The United States has been fiercely criticized both from within and without for its detention camp at Guantanamo, extraordinary rendition and targeted killings. But this does not mean the United States is delegitimized. There is, therefore, a simple criterion for acceptable criticism of Israel: Any criticism that can be applied to the United States can be legitimately applied to Israel, whereas the claim that the very idea of Israel as the sovereign nation-state of the

Jews is illegitimate must be attacked as moral hypocrisy.

Netanyahu and Israel's political right keep violating this distinction between legitimate criticism and delegitimization, and the consequences are devastating.

Six years of Netanyahu rule have been disastrous for Israel's standing in the world. At the heart of this isolation is the prime minister's basic fault: he keeps pontificating that Israel is the West's outpost in the Middle East. Yet what he simply seems incapable of understanding is that the Western world does not judge Israel by Netanyahu's pronouncements and moralizing, but by its actual behavior and statements. And yes, the West judges Israel by a different standard from the rest of the Middle East, precisely because it is seen as belonging to the West.

Samuel Huntington, one of the 20th century's greatest political scientists, has become famous for the term "Clash of Civilizations" (which was actually coined by historian Bernard Lewis), which is often misunderstood. Huntington, a lifelong Democrat, did not advocate such a clash, but predicted that the long-term alliances that structure world politics are based along civilizational lines, and that the major conflicts would run along the fault lines between these civilizations. And civilizations are defined by common values and shared basic worldviews.

Netanyahu cannot have it both ways: He cannot continue his incantation that Israel is the West's representative in the Middle East and then behave in ways that do not behoove Western standards. In particular, he must recognize that the rest of the world is not stupid.

He would do well to listen carefully to what German parliamentarian Johann Wadepful said. He reasserted Chancellor Merkel's statement that Israel's security is one of Germany's reasons of state. But he also said Germany cannot defend Israel on the diplomatic front on its own, and that Israel must give clear answers to a number of questions. Is it committed to the two-state solution? And when Netanyahu insists that Israel must be a Jewish state, does this include full rights for all its citizens?

Netanyahu seems to think he can continue zigzagging on these crucial points. That he can say "The Arabs going to vote in their droves" and "There will be no Palestinian state on my watch" when it suits him politically, only to backtrack when he realizes, belatedly, how phenomenally harmful his utterances are. The Western world applies to him what he applies to the Palestinians: They listen to what he says to his electorate more than what he says for outside consumption. He shouldn't be surprised when he finds himself without friends on the international scene.