# Challenging States: Boycott Diplomacy of P2P Networks

# Abstract

One aftershock of the social-global digital transformation has been the emergence of boycott diplomacy of peer-to-peer (P2P) networks. This unstudied prototype uses unique transnational advocacy interaction, making the international relations between states and non-state actors more complex, adding new diplomatic dimensions, opportunities, and challenges. However, literature from the two main theoretical scholarships of “diplomacy” and “soft power” struggle to deal with this new phenomenon. This article opens two significant theoretical debates to address the gap between practice and theory: (1) Can the soft power theory of the 1990s, formulated in the context of states, explain P2P boycotting used by non-state networks? (2) What does P2P boycotting teach us about the changing field of diplomatic studies? The article examines the confluence of these theoretical debates using the unique test case of Israel and the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS), a movement to form a prototype of boycott diplomacy using an unconventional P2P network with a unique way of interacting for soft power. It will also update the teaching and research of IR by demonstrating for students and scholars the new digital diplomacy reality of foreign affairs and the growing need for soft power.

Keywords: Boycott diplomacy, peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, global legitimacy, soft power, digital diplomacy, diplomatic studies

**Introduction**

Recent developments in social information communication technology have accelerated the appearance of nonstate global actors, forcing modern-day diplomats to quickly update their protocols to interact with entirely new types of “diplomatic actors” (Castells 1996; Keohane and Nye 1998, 88; Hague and Loader 2005, 36). Celebrities, global citizens, diaspora advocators, and digital network boycotters are now found in our diplomatic arena alongside nation-states (Weiss, Seyle, and Coolidge 2003, 5; Börzel 2000, 1–3; Krahmann 2008, 198–99; McLeish and Feakes 2008, 5–12). This more diverse and informal diplomatic arena challenges traditional diplomats to adapt to a new environment that introduces both opportunities and threats. The increasing complexity has re-kindled the question raised by British foreign minister Lord Palmerston’s reaction to receiving the first telegram in the 1860s: Is this is the (“real”) end of diplomacy? (Leguey-Feilleux 2009, 1–3; Farrow 2018; Schulz 2019, 878–903; Saddiki 2006). Facing unconventional diplomatic interactions and actors, state diplomats find it more difficult to achieve their goals and desired impact. Foreign ministries have to collaborate with actors who until recently had no part in the world of diplomacy.

This article examines global interactions between an unconventional actor, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, and a sovereign nation-state, Israel, and shows how BDS uses a peer-to-peer (P2P) network model to challenge Israel’s alliances and its diplomatic, economic, and cultural global standing (Attias 2012; Van de Craen and Bátora 2006; Cull 2010; Fitzpatrick 2012, 433–37; Huijgh 2011, 64).

# Debating “soft power” to understand “boycott diplomacy”

## The delay in the diplomatic research field to catch, identify, and categorize new actors and interactions occurs in every generation, as new technology creates new abilities to communicate globally. The practical application of these technologies then requires guidance, as research tries to catch up and update current theoretical frames.

## Mainstream international relations (IR) theories have traditionally guided understanding a range of relationships between countries and other international actors—from “war” to “peace”. In modern diplomacy, according to the theories of realism and idealism, when states want to fight, they wage wars, and when they want to make peace, they turn to diplomacy based on classical protocols, agreements, and international law enforcement. But the new reality of the digital age has complicated this dichotomy in IR and diplomacy, making these relationships less clear.[[1]](#footnote-1) Today’s political actors are no longer limited to nation-states and nonstate actors.

## The scholarly typology of “nongovernmental organizations in world politics” and “global governance” was developed in the first decade of the millennium, before the social media revolution (Ahmed and Potter 2006; Willetts 2010; Wong 2012; Lewis 2014; Riddell and Robinson 1995; Berger 2003). The rise of the information age and the emergence of social media has raised many critical questions about the new actors in the global arena: What do nongovernmental organizations do (Werker & Ahmed 2008)? What is their influence on international society (Clark 1995)? And how can we best define nongovernmental organizations (Martens 2002)? These questions are still relevant and we must re-examine them while looking at the changing nature of diplomacy today. Technology affects the evolution of diplomacy[[2]](#footnote-2) by bringing the individual back and enables the penetration of new private actors and cross-cultural global entrepreneurs into the digital IR playground (Abdelhaey 2019; Bexell, Tallberg and Uhlin 2010).

# Boycott diplomacy through the lens of soft power

The term "boycott" is difficult to define, but it becomes even more complex when linked to "diplomacy" and "networks.” The fundamental key guiding foreign policymakers to improve state diplomacy and its international standing over the last 60 years has been “soft power”—that is, the systematic use of nonviolence to achieve strategic goals. There is consensus that soft power can compromise a state (Nye 2004, 5–6; Roselle, Miskimmon and O’loughlin 2014, 70–84; Rose 2019, 1573–90; Feklyunina 2016, 773–96; Grix and Kramareva 2017, 461–75), but the field of diplomatic studies needs to be updated regarding the unique ways to gain soft power in the age of social networks. Under current debate, for example, is whether the soft power paradigm is relevant or capable of explaining the vast digital breakthroughs (Fan 2008; Nye 2021; Manor and Golan 2020). The increase of new unclassified interactions and actors has blurred the conceptual and theoretical distinction between hard and soft IR interactions.

~~Leading paradigms in diplomatic studies, such as~~ Public diplomacy can thus no longer fully contain the complex reality of current diplomacy-making. This growing gap between theory and practice—mainly around a “mixed” soft and hard diplomatic tool known as “boycott diplomacy”—has raised crucial questions for both scholars and practitioners, for example: What happens if a civilian nongovernmental entity boycotts a state? What tools can a state use to counter a boycott by a non-state entty? Should diplomatic boycotting be considered a new form of soft power? What diplomatic institution can deal with such a challenge?

This next generation in the age of social media seeks “digital soft power” to gain “virtual power” and to establish a desired positive presence far beyond actors’ physical borders (Harris 2013; Surowiec and Kania-Lundholm 2017; Li and Feng 2021; Kampf, Manor and Segev 2015). Social digital media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram have become crucial tools to this end. As information is increasingly digitized, space and time are shrinking and global social movements are getting stronger (Ahmad, White and Bennis 2018), giving nongovernmental actors an important advantage over states. Preliminary indications of P2P networks were noted in Nye’s theory of soft power—as “power shifting” mainly from the “West to the East” and from the state to nonstate (Nye 2010).

Today, this movement has moved from nonstate actors to ~~civil society—or, put simply,~~ to the people of the world. The social media revolution brought “ordinary citizens” (Attias 2012) into the game of P2P diplomacy, urging attention to the shift of power from the governmental sphere to the global citizen digital sphere. These changes bring new research directions that further test soft power theory and its suitability for today’s global diplomatic interactions.

# Why transnational boycotts threaten states’ global legitimacy

In a powerfully communicated and mutually dependent digital sphere, the need for “global legitimacy” has become a crucial desired “coin” (Colleoni 2013; Poell 2020; Wajner 2019b). The term “legitimacy” was not used in the core research object of the concept of soft power in the 1990s. Nye saw it as only a “part of the soft power spectrum” and focused instead on the “attraction” component (Fan 2008; Hall 2010; Keating and Kaczmarska 2019; Grix and Lee 2013; Nye 2021). Recently, scholars have increasingly seen legitimacy as the crucial “glue that links authority and power” (Bernstein 2011, 20). We can find a number of typologies of IR legitimacies, such as “democratic legitimacy” (Rosanvallon 2011); “political legitimacy” and “global governance legitimacy” (Bernstein 2011); and “the legitimacy of strategic alliances” (Dacin, Oliver, and Roy 2007). Habermas had already introduced the “institutional legitimacy of authority,” meaning that actors’ acceptance of a rule or institution depends upon whether the portrayed authority “possesses legitimacy” (Habermas 1973, 97). Another core term is “international community legitimacy,” based on the diffusion of “international” and “community” (Simma and Paulus 1998). This also creates “global communities” (Seabrooke 2007; Bernstein 2011, 27; Clark 2007), a concept that illustrates the importance of the “social structure” in the equation of “global legitimacy.” The idea of “global communities” was developed later into “global governance institutions legitimacy,” which covers a diversity of powerful nonstate actors[[3]](#footnote-3) that compete over the global legitimacy power (Prakash and Hart 1999; Nye and Donahue 2000; McGrew and Held 2002; Buchanan and Keohane 2006).

The digital revolution that shocked the IR arena created new global interactions that eventually led to P2P social human networks bringing “the public” into the competitive sphere of worldwide legitimacy. The profound change in public actors’ involvement in ranking and influencing global legitimacy shifted from no relations (at all) between governments and the public to a needed “favorable relation” and then to “adversarial relations” (Zaharna and Uysal 2016, 110), referred to by some as “citizens’ judgments” (Etter er al. 2018).

# The scholarly trial of "digital diplomacy"

One of the primary attempts to help governments, diplomats, and scholars of diplomacy to understand the new unconventional global digital interactions that involve human networks is known as “digital diplomacy,” portrayed initially as a “new and easy way for states to influence people” (Bjola and Pamment 2018; Tsvetkova 2020; Bjola 2017; Bjola and Manor 2018). Its construction coincided with the rise of social media giants such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in the mid-2000s. Digital diplomacy was based on the assumption that new technological tools would allow foreign ministries, governments, and politicians to produce better diplomacy by providing a new and easy way to influence people (Katz, Barris, and Jain 2013).

However, instead of focusing on the “social instructional change,” most digital diplomacy research quickly turned to the old government perspective.[[4]](#footnote-4) Instead of analyzing the critical changes in the interactions, tools, actors, and “ordinary people” in the diplomatic arena, research focused on how states can now increase their influence on the hearts and minds of people. Many practitioners and researchers see the public and ordinary citizens of the digital world as one monotonous and united voice of a “one face and one voice” perspective (Tuch 1990, 3).[[5]](#footnote-5) As Ayhan (2018, 68) showed, “Out of 160 leading articles on public diplomacy. . . 94 articles defined PD in state-centric terms without any reference to nonstate actor activities.”

Most studies on the new digital diplomatic interactions have focused on governments’ technological hope without delving into the effects on the nature of its actors or on how these actors communicate.[[6]](#footnote-6) Beyond new technological capabilities, social media has generated a missing ideological and philosophical question on how digital citizens and social media conglomerates (as Twitter and Facebook) see their will to collaborate with states and politicians (Bjola and Pamment 2018). The more social media technology improved, the more information was brought in; but diplomats’ ability to filter and catch up with new interactions such as peer-to-peer networks decreased (Albright 2017, 87–89; Beckett, 2017; Bharali and Goswami 2017, 118–24).

All of this posed an obstacle to theory-building. At the same time, the theoretical gap has been reflected in the practical world, making digital diplomacy much less effective and even weakening the positive influence of state diplomats and challenging their relevance in today’s diplomatic communications (Peters 2018; Kragh and Åsberg 2017).[[7]](#footnote-7)

# Searching for a theory for “diplomatic boycotting”

When IR scholars debate boycott diplomacy, they find it difficult to find a joint base in this field of research. Analysis of the phenomenon of boycotting in its global diplomatic international context remains very limited (Black and Peacock 2013). Most published studies have focused on the connection between “sports” and “boycotts” in the context of international competitive games, instead of on boycotts as a diplomatic tool operating in the real-world political arena.

One of the most ambitious attempts to examine the phenomenon of boycott diplomacy was made in the 1980s (Jordan 1984). Similar to theoretical work on soft power and public diplomacy, the research was conducted in the context of the United States. It mainly sought to question the complex relationship between the United States and transnational and influential intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) such as UNESCO and the United Nations. In the 1980s, the phenomenon was already seen in emerging diplomatic movement by nonstate actors to create worldwide boycotts and reduce the legitimacy of countries. In their conclusions, the researchers proposed establishing a dedicated government organization that could fight against international boycotts of international (but not state) government actors.

Most studies on boycott diplomacy connected “sporting boycotts” to the public diplomacy paradigm, mainly around the sport-cultural component. These attempts show a limited effort, focusing on the softer worlds of sports and culture and less on more complex issues. Famous past case studies have mainly centered on the sports boycotts of the 1936 Berlin and 1980 Moscow Olympic games (Kanin 1980; Goldberg 2000; Schleifer and Tamir 2018); the economic boycotts the United States waged against Argentina during the 1940s (Feiler 1998; De Crespigny 1960) and the Arab world waged against Israel in 1940 (Nordkvelle 1990; Spector 2004); and cultural boycotts, including‏ Japan’s 1924 Hollywood boycott (Itatsu 2008; Mangaliso 1999) and against South Africa (Siegfried 2017). Other research connected the world of international boycotts with medical matters (the polio vaccine) (Kaufmann and Feldbaum 2009). The term “boycott diplomacy” emerged in recent years, mainly around the global rise of China in terms of soft power and international influence—a topic examined by a variety of studies (McKee 1986; Wong 2001; Bland, Hancock and Harris 2017; Price and Dayan 2009, 425; Kanin 1980; Qingmin 2013).

Given the theoretical shortcomings in the research, therefore, it seems appropriate to examine diplomatic interactions involving international boycotts as a separate field. This is especially true considering the rise of nonstate, nongovernmental, and even “public” actors and the capability of social media to empower them. One assumption about international boycotts is that their main objective is to hurt the legitimacy of the targeted actor (Lauterpacht 1933; Spector 2004; Eaton 2018). Therefore, Nye’s (1990) soft power theory—based on the notion of a state’s positive “power of attraction”—is an appropriate framework for analyzing the boycotting phenomenon. However, the research remains unclear regarding other, more multidimensional types of global boycotting by unconventional, nonstate actors. The ambiguity increases as more scholars agree that the ability to gain this privilege is not in the hands of the state; as Fan’s (2008) article title underlines, “Soft Power: Power of Attraction or Confusion?” As these examples and recent nation branding research have illustrated, a state’s global image is increasingly important. Therefore, global boycotting, which can harm a state’s image, needs to be thoroughly examined (Fan 2006; Dinnie 2015; Gudjonsson 2005; Kaneva 2011; Volcic and Andrejevic 2011).

Situating international boycotting within the existing typologies of diplomatic interactions[[8]](#footnote-8): while it is a nonviolent tool used to gain soft power, it strays far from the classic diplomatic protocol. As an aggressive type of diplomatic communication that resembles a coercive sanction, it can have similar effects to those of hard-power enforcement tactics. And if we add the rising phenomenon of P2P networks to the theoretical challenge of diplomatic boycotting, ~~it become even more complicated.~~

**From nongovernmental organizations to peer-to-peer networks (P2P)**

A noteable theoretical construction has developed regarding unclassified non-governmental diplomatic interactions, gathered by IR and diplomatic studies scholars under the name of “Transnational Advocacy Networks” (TAN). This scholarship came out in the 1990s, shortly after the appearance of multiple nongovernmental organizations, as a trial to develop a framework that explains the rise of non-state advocacy networks. These networks shape global agenda-setting by pressuring and forcing their values through various techniques. Research described a critical evolutionary turning point as “moving from advocacy to confrontation” (Elistrup and Bonfaroff, 2014), pinpointing the new goal of global environmental activism to actual forcing and “setting the advocacy” by deeds and not only by words or through media campaigns (Carpenter, 2007). An example of one of the famous “networks of activists” (Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K., 1998) was “Activists Beyond Borders”, which targeted not only states but also international nongovernmental organizations. Many scholars distinguish this type of entity from nongovernmental organizations by marking them as “new civic actors” (Fowler, 2011, 42) or “civic society diplomacy (CSD)” (Anton, 2022).

**Social power and P2P networks**

Since the arrival of the age of digital social information, more and more global social activist networks have started up. They have used social media technologies to pressure states to change policies through global-civic campaigns, which have penetrated the world agenda order. This vast phenomenon brought existing thinkers back to the 1956 theory of “social power”, but this time through the modern lens of the digital revolution (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Cheng, Wang & Murdie, 2021). The social power theory illustrates that interactions of groups can be deduced from “interpersonal relations”, which are also impacted by the “structure” of the relationship (French, 1956, 181). Hence, we can expect more digital transitions and abilities to arise in the IR structure, enabling more “social power”—primarily civilian, nonstate social network actors.

The latest prototype development is known as the "peer-to-peer" concept (Figure 1), which began to emerge at the end of the 1990s with the arrival of the Information Age. The onset of the digital mass media revolution has made it possible for millions of people worldwide to communicate in real time (Castells 1996; Robinson 1999). P2P networks have been referred to as “international civil society solidarity networks” and “anti-corporate globalization activists” (Juris 2005, 189). A later study stated, “The combination of endless social media platforms has created the phenomenon of so-called ‘peer-to-peer (P2P) diplomacy” (Attias 2012, 473).

The first social networks announced the beginning of a virtual global community of citizens that rallied around crucial issues and significant global events (Fitzpatrick 2012; Zaharna 2007). Although capabilities were primitive, the networks laid the perceptual and technological foundations for the digital social revolution. Most importantly, networking began to replace the traditional model of diplomatic communication, which took place only between governments (agencies and organizations), with a model involving ordinary citizens individuals outside of the state apparatus (Attias 2012; Cull 2013). The influence of these global digital citizens on the international system grew and fundamentally changed how countries and people interact. Today, governments and the public can access each other directly.[[9]](#footnote-9) At the same time, social and cultural changes advanced the new media and the ideology associated with it: namely, values such as openness and equality, ordinary citizens’ rights, and the desire for freedom of information and self-expression. These ideas might be described as part of a global citizenship (Williams 2003; Falk 1993, 20; Schattle 2008).[[10]](#footnote-10)

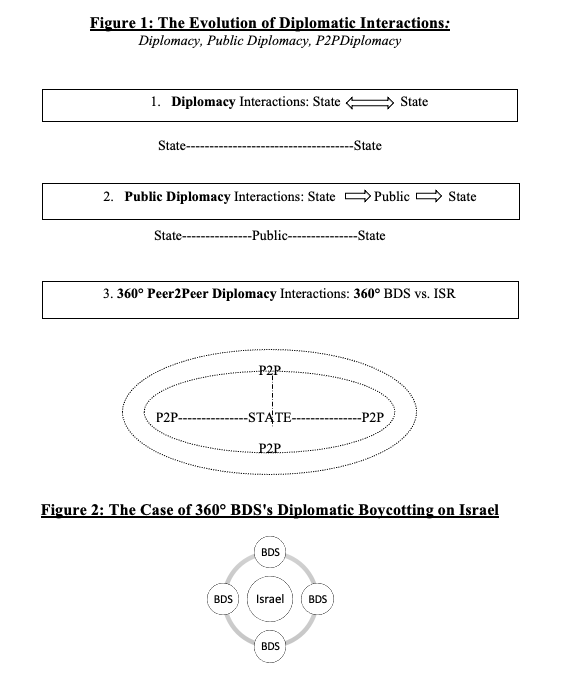
# The case study of Israel and the BDS movement

The BDS movement—a transnational digital civic network —and the state of Israel have been engaged in a vicious circle of diplomatic boycott interactions since 2001. BDS has boycotted Israel’s global standing and legitimacy in the political, cultural, and financial aspects, while Israel is a unique case study on critical soft power deficit.

Very few studies have examined soft power clashes between a movement made by global human networks like BDS and a state like Israel. The BDS movement, which is not operated by a central headquarters, can thus bypass heads of states and nongovernmental organizations, following a pattern that corresponds perfectly with Nye’s (2011, 2) “up to down” power shift prediction: “A great shift . . . which is power diffusion away from states to nonstate actors.” Other scholars argue that while BDS has not resorted to physical violence by forcing Israel to act against its will, it uses a brand of hard power that has been labelled illegal or anti-Semitic (Diker 2015; Greendorfer 2017; Traum 2018; Hirsh 2012).

The case of Israel and BDS demonstrates that a state with insufficient soft power, whose support in the international community is consistently low, might be an easy target for a global boycott (Wajner 2019a). Through a soft power lens, the purpose of global boycotting is to “lower the global standing” (Brown et al. 1987; Segev, Elad and Blondheim 2013; Friedman 2012; Martin 2007; Sohn 2012) of the attacked actor and “narrow its diplomatic maneuverability.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Alternatively, global boycotting can undermine an actor’s political support in international courts for example, causing them to vote against it. Boycotting might also hurt a state economically in various ways: by deterring tourists, discouraging foreign investment, and diminishing the academic prestige of its higher education institutions (Nordkvelle 1990; Rose and Rose 2008; Gould 2013; Benatar 1990). Any state’s diplomatic lifeblood lies in its power to positively influence the content and dissemination of information reaching the world. If an unconventional P2P actor boycotts these efforts in a multidimensional way, this soft power might be decreased (Zaharna 2014; 2007, 217–21).

Israel and BDS provide an apt and interesting case study. Israel is a state in constant hard-power armed conflict, routinely accused of wrongdoing by prestigious global organizations whose legitimacy is repeatedly challenged. The BDS movement is a nonstate actor, a global civilian nongovernmental entity devoted to delegitimizing Israel in “360 degrees,” as described in Figure 1 and Figure 2:

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BDS has made pioneering use of cutting-edge technological and philosophical developments since 2010 for its P2P diplomacy, also referred to as “civil network diplomacy” (Snow 2006). P2P diplomacy has grown out of the desire of ordinary people, who view themselves as citizens of a global society, to intervene in and influence the world's agenda. They do so by (1) improving the access of individuals to the resources they need to be effective activists; (2) supporting the democratization of local, national, and multinational political institutions; and (3) encouraging social movements and organizations to curb the abuses of centralized power (Metzl 2001; Manulak 2019; Lord 2010).

From the point of view of soft power theories (insert citations), Israel provides a fascinating case study. Since declaring statehood in 1948, Israel has been seeking soft power. Even after its 72 years of existence, however, two critical soft power components of Israel­—its world status and its global legitimacy—continue to be challenged. The insecurity of its place among the family of nations is evidenced by the fact that its capital is not fully recognized, its borders are not fully agreed upon, and hundreds of organizations around the world regard it as a leper state. Israel’s soft power problem has not gone away since its establishment, and the need for diplomatic capabilities remains crucial despite the gains it has made.

Hence, a nation like Israel can surely use soft power to promote its narrative and improve its status in world politics. But in a soft power index of countries from around the world, Israel was ranked among the lowest in 2016, 27 out of 30,[[12]](#footnote-12) and in 2020 it was ranked 25 out 60.[[13]](#footnote-13) In contrast, and remarkably for such a small country, Israel’s perceived hard power is ranked very high: in 2018, it was ranked eighth in the world, alongside giants like Russia, China, and the United States (Nye 2011, 2). Still, Israel’s top decision makers recognize that the country cannot rely on its hard power alone and that the threat of civil organizations has added significantly to Israel’s soft power deficit.

According to BDS, a letter signed by “452 civil society groups worldwide” launched a global and digital campaign “calling on the UN to assume its responsibility for investigating and eradicating Israeli apartheid, as it did with apartheid in Southern Africa.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Using soft tools and exploiting its nongovernmental status, BDS can, for example, damage how Israel is covered in the media, deter foreign tourists and foreign investors, discourage participants from attending its cultural events, and wage boycotts.

BDS’ global efforts involve deploying soft power tools only, and not hard power attacks. However, they still seek to inflict the kind of damage otherwise associated with hard power, mainly economic but even military—such as pushing Israel to withdraw from disputed lands. The boycott organizations also aim to divide Israeli society from within by mounting a bloc of international and internal pressure that could lead to domestic political instability. Israel’s position in the world and its international legitimacy are clearly BDS’s targets. Though there is no consensus in the literature, soft power can be defined as the power of a state to persuade others of, for example, its righteousness, or to influence them to act in ways that benefit its interests but without resorting to violence or economic sanctions. It can potentially strengthen a state’s diplomatic maneuvering room and its global standing. Therefore, because Israel’s strategic depth is narrow, it cannot rely only on its military force.[[15]](#footnote-15)

# Israel’s limited soft power and legitimacy

Various public diplomacy studies on Israel’s global image by scholars and practitioners have shown that between 1948 and 1967, Israel was gaining soft power (Avraham 2009a, 2009b; Shenhav, Sheafer and Gabayn 2010, 146; Gilboa 2006; Levin 2014, 96). Israel’s Six Day War victory swept Western democracies around the world. The symbolic aspect of the unification of Jerusalem was covered sympathetically in Western media, and Israel clearly had the upper hand in the contest between Israel’s narrative and the Arabs’. While Israel’s message conveyed that it was ready for real peace, at the Arab Summit Conference in Khartoum in September of 1967, the Arabs flatly rejected any such idea in what is referred to as the three no’s: no to recognition; no to negotiation; no to peace ("Khartoum Resolution" 1967). The Arab League’s diplomatic failure deepened the understanding of and support for Israel and depicted the Arab world as the aggressors. After the 1967 victory, Israel was viewed as a reliable military power both by its neighbors and by the entire world.[[16]](#footnote-16)

By the outbreak of the first and second intifadas, however, Israel’s world image and reputation was already shifting. The fragile status quo was becoming increasingly permanent, the number of Jewish settlements in the so-called occupied territories was growing, and Palestinians continued to oppose them and the fact that Israel maintained its military control of the region. The democratic West’s perception of the conflict also changed. Some scholars, practitioners, and global organizations have gone so far as to say that between 2001 and 2020, world opinion turned against Israel completely.

According to the soft power concept, certain internal aspects of the state—cultural quality and the degree of trust in the nations’ leaders, for example—can also affect soft power ranking. Significant political mega-events reinforced a new perception in the international community. These included the right-wing victory in the 1977 Israeli elections, the assassination of the Oslo Accords symbol, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and the rise to power of parties opposing the peace process. Israel, it came to be believed, would hold onto the territories, and its reasons were not driven strictly by security concerns. In terms of soft power, the “David and Goliath"” roles had been reversed, with Israel now perceived as the menacing Goliath (see, for example, Kozer 2010; Shai 2018; Lukens-Bull and Woodward 2009). Boycotts against Israel are not new, but today they are deployed by sophisticated and unique civic society organizations capable of cooperating and coordinating their activities against Israel on various levels around the world (Alejo 2020). The most recent notable wave of boycotts resumed after the 2001 Durban Conference, a significant portion of whose agenda was devoted to delegitimizing the state of Israel and Zionism. A year later, the BDS movement was born, and three years later, its offshoot, “Israeli Apartheid Week.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

In 2005, a global coalition of Palestinian civil-society organizations—which included activists, academics, intellectuals, and trade unions—called for the boycotting of, divestment from, and sanctions against the state of Israel.[[18]](#footnote-18) In response, a partnership of over 170 Palestinian solidarity organizations, mostly from the West (Alejo 2020), volunteered to represent the Palestinian people from the occupied territories in Gaza and the West Bank. BDS escalated its activities even further soon after the end of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza in 2008. Moreover, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel injected new life into the older solidarity-based movements supporting the Palestinian liberation narrative.

This use of narratives in geopolitical discourse by foreign policies grew rapidly in the age of social media. Research shows that the European Union, the United States, Israel, and Iran are only a few examples of states that use storytelling as a strategy to build their power of legitimacy and attraction (Hedling 2020; Pamment, 2014, 2016; Vahidi, 2020). However, the storytelling can be also used to harm another actor’s story. BDS uses the narrative of the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM)*.* Inspired by AAM, BDS urges action to pressure Israel to comply with international law. BDS is now a vibrant global movement made up of unions, academic associations, churches, and grassroots movements.

However, BDS is unique on some other themes. An examination of the typologies of diplomatic boycotting reveals that many diplomatic studies scholars[[19]](#footnote-19) define diplomatic interaction by the capabilities of the actors and not by their official status (Jun Ayhan 2018; Attias 2012; Sharp 1999, 51, 55; Jönsson 2008, 34; Scholte 2008, 55–56; Kelley 2010, 288; Hocking et al. 2012, 38, 52; Henrikson 2013, 120; Kelley 2014; Henders and Young 2016)—which means that BDS is a diplomatic actor. Scholars focusing on critical evolutionary development, such as Jun Ayhan (2018) and Kelley (2010), argue that nonstate actors came to be categorized as nonstate diplomatic actors (NDAs), and that the interactions they produce “lead to disruption of traditional diplomacy” and eventually create a “way to new diplomacy.” Other scholars have stated that while NDAs do not have the official status to represent, they have meaningful diplomatic capabilities and enough legitimate representation sources to make them powerful diplomatic actors, “disrupting the state monopoly on diplomacy” (Jun Ayhan 2018, 69; Carpenter, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Among the various diplomatic interactions seen in the IR eco-system over the last two decades, a unique diplomatic struggle is played out between two notable players: the BDS movement and Israel. The former is a world-sprawling social movement, a sort of a hybrid P2P network that uses an unconventional diplomatic tool to boycott the latter, a state-actor with a chronic soft power deficit. The case of BDS and the state of Israel demonstrates the changing nature of diplomacy and its lifeblood—global interactions. Current diplomatic tools no longer fit neatly into the dichotomic categories of soft and hard power derived from the current theoretical framework.

Hence, exploring the unconventional and unclassified transforming faces of diplomacy reveals new diplomatic interactions, actors (P2P networks), and methods to gain or degrade soft power for diplomats. While soft power was offered initially to replace any intimidation or coercive act to promote international attraction, the BDS uniquely uses soft power to fuel worldwide support for a global diplomatic boycotting to decrease Israel’s soft power and simultaneously raise the soft power of its competitor actor. This scenario makes it an excellent foundation for research toward indicating other “unusual” cases and for modernizing Nye’s fundamental paradigm of soft power.

The challenge to define the BDS increases when the distinction between “soft” and “hard” blurs: as Nye (2021) notes, “Another interesting criticism was that soft power is not so soft and can include elements of coercion” (7). The BDS has preliminary soft power goals against Israel, which include disrupting Israel’s world alliances and friendships and culturally isolating the nation. Hence, BDS does not fit the paradigmatic definition of a state actor; it can and does create diplomatic content that is disseminated around the world, hurting and challenging Israel’s legitimacy. But it is not obligated to any diplomatic or ethical codes or diplomatic protocol— which Israel, a state actor, is, of course, bound to. Indeed, BDS is perceived and represents itself as a global civilian entity, and as such, it is not held responsible for its activities in the same way that its opponent is.

This article shows the great importance of examining new international interactions in a digital social world. The field of diplomatic studies is saturated with old-fashioned theoretical patterns of public diplomacy—or its digital form, digital diplomacy—which observe the world’s citizens through a Cold-War prism. This delay between practice and theory highlights the current paradigm’s inability to offer theoretical and working frames for scholars and diplomats to research and improve the international interactions of their countries with various IR actors.

Since 1990, soft power theory has aimed to catch any nonviolent interactions, and it succeeded partly in forecasting the transfer of power from the government to the public. But as this BDS case study shows, this shift continued from the public to social civilian networks. This unconventional global civilian “creature” in international relations is a powerful organization of human digital networks that operates with no diplomatic protocols to achieve a profitable diplomatic gain. The theoretical limitations of soft power are no surprise, as it was coined before the social media revolution and from a state-governmental perspective. There has been a transition from the public sphere to civic-digital literature. This shift from state to public and civilian has proven, in the case of Israel, to be an interesting case study of a player that has craved soft power since its inception (with minimal success) and that also needs to deal with such organizations and gain “global public support” that may herald interaction and new players in the foreseeable future. I also raise the relevant question of the dichotomous distinction between hard and soft, which seems, in the hybrid age, to be an illusion.

The better the understanding of interactions in today’s international diplomatic arena, the more diverse ways there will be for the players to communicate. As Figure 1 shows, the unique model of BDS can reduce the soft power of its competing country (Israel) while at the same time producing soft power for itself or strengthening the soft power of the players it represents. In a social digital age, diplomats must contend with floods of unverified information created by transnational networks made up of ordinary people while they themselves must adhere to higher standards of accuracy that follow official governmental protocols. The vast amounts of information produced by various entities and consumed by billions of people and institutions cannot be fully validated. This gives nonstate unofficial public diplomats—such as nongovernmental organizations and especially peer-to-peer networks—an advantage in spreading information.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thanks to the new comminication tools of social media and social networks, more scholars are calling for analysis of big data around every actor in IR. In fact, some IR scholars view this research direction as the most promising for building a broader theoretical framework to analyze our new digital and social world—where every civilian voice matters (Hopf 1998; Checkel 1998).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Newer technologies will appear, and international interactions are expected to evolve. Unless we deepen research on this, the gap between theory and practice might get wider. For countries that suffer from crises of soft power or legitimacy, this gap might be stretched by a new challenging player: a worldwide human-digital network equipped with the non-soft power tool of international multidimensional boycotting.

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**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Note on the contributor**

Dr. Shay Attias is a senior research fellow for Diplomatic Studies and International Communications at the Bar-Ilan University who coined the notion of “peer-peer-diplomacy network.” His pioneering research describes the latest developments in diplomatic practice and research, wherein civilians, by virtue of social media, are both consumers of government information and producers of information with the potential to bypass existing official government bodies. Dr. Attias's Ph.D. Dissertation (Awarded with distinction, International Relations, Bar-Ilan University) was dedicated to exploring the changing nature of diplomacy as reflected in US public diplomacy during the global war on terror. His academic education and background include Harvard, USC's Annenberg School of Communication, and St. Antony's College at the University of Oxford. As a former Senior Public Diplomat, Dr. Attias founded the first Agency for Public Diplomacy at the Prime Minister's Office of Israel. He carries vast practical experience in diplomacy, security, and global communication management. Today, he is a professor at various Israeli top universities, where he teaches diplomatic studies and international communications. In 2022, Dr. Attias won the prestigious grant of the EU's Erasmus program for Soft Power and Hybrid Warfare Studies.

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1. For more dichotomous theoretical distinguishments of "war" and "peace," see Buchan 2002, 407–28; Van de Haar 2010; Ceadel 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As technology creates new forms of global interactions, it also creates new forms of actors in the new order of “normative global governance” (Stephen 2017; Scholte 2021; Zürn 2018, 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These include the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund; (IMF), the United Nations (UN), and the International Criminal Court (ICC). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, they look at how “it multiplies and amplifies the number of voices and interests involved in international policy-making, complicating international decision-making and reducing the exclusive control of states in the process” and how “it accelerates and frees the dissemination of information, accurate or not, about any issue or event which can impact on its consequences and handling” (Westcott 2008, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As a result, "governments like to speak with one voice” and “public diplomacy coordination within states has the potential to become a bone of contention between different departmental interests" and not only serve the states (Melissen 2011, 115). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here are few more examples of digital diplomacy studies focused on governments rather than on citizens: “How Obama can brand America after 9\11” (Hanson 2012); “How Australia can only by “providing an accessible and high-quality forum for discussion” change the way people see it (Hanson 2012, 2), "Are we there yet: Have MFAs realized the potential of digital diplomacy?" (Manor, 2016*).*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James Derian's (1987) conceptual categories of "diplomacy, anti-diplomacy, and neo-diplomacy" explained the new modern diplomatic activities that go beyond old diplomatic theory (see Tan 2005, 327). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example: "economic diplomacy," "media diplomacy," and "new public diplomacy." For “modern diplomacy" see Cooper et al. 2013; Melissen 2005a. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See more in "The Evolution of Governmental Communication" model (Attias 2012, (Fig 1) 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. They are also associated with "cosmopolitism" and the shift away from nation-centric citizenship (see Carter 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See for example, Israel’s legal battles in the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague: Auerbach 2004; Adler 2012; Bianchi 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Global Soft Power Index: The World's Most Comprehensive Research Study on Perceptions of Nation Brands,” Brand Finance, <https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Global Soft Power Index 2020*, Brand Finance, <https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/download/brand-finance-global-soft-power-index-2020.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. "Applied anti-Semitism"; Hirsh, "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) and Antisemitism".

    itary, economy, politics\diplomacy and (the unusual) spirit"- Netanyahu, *The Four Powers of Israel*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Karsh (2001, 616; 2002, 25) described the “1967 Six Day War, which dealt militant Pan Arabism a mortal blow and disabused many in the Arab world of their hopes to destroy the State of Israel”; Hinnebusch (2017, 608) stated, "For Israeli elites, it was an opportunity to end Israel’s strategic vulnerability by acquiring more defensible borders and force its acceptance in the region.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See more at: http://apartheidweek.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The BDS states, "In the spirit of international solidarity, moral consistency, and resistance to injustice and oppression to implement this [the coalition’s] call until Israel meets its obligation to recognise the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by: (1) ending its occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands and dismantling the wall; (2) recognising the fundamental rights of the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and (3) respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194. ”The 2005 BDS National Committee. For more information, see also http://www.pacbi.org/ and http://www.bdsmovement.net/. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This “anti-diplomatic” situation emphasizes the importance in diplomatic studies of social constructivism in the IR context (Hoffmann 2010; Guzzini 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For the democratization of diplomacy by public diplomacy, see Henrikson 2006; Melissen 2011, 2; Wang 2007; Huijgh 2016; Scott-Smith and Mos 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)