

# Theorizing state stigmatization: A comparative perspective on South Africa and Israel

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## Abstract

This article deals with state stigmas in the international arena, and addresses the question: why do state-stigmas develop and become sustained in some cases, whereas in other cases they wither away? For parsimonious, analytical purposes we view the process of state stigmatisation through two, interrelated stages: the stigma's development – where transnational civil society activists and the engagement of mainstream international media play an important role; and the stigma's sustenance where these elements are joined by the target state's coping strategy. For theoretical consistency, we limit ourselves to exploring states that are (a) involved in conflicts and (b) aspiring to be part of the Western-led 'club' of states. Through the analysis of press articles and UN documents relating to two vastly different case studies: South Africa (1985–1994) and Israel (2000–2019), we demonstrate that states in conflictual situations have limited manoeuvring space in dealing with their developing stigmas; and that the choice of tools utilized in the implementation of the same coping strategy can lead to different results.

## Keywords

civil society, English school, Israel, soft power, South Africa, state stigma

## Introduction

Since Erving Goffman's definition of a stigma as referring to an 'attribute that is deeply discrediting' and that reduces the bearer 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one',<sup>1</sup> stigma-related research has remained primarily in the domain of psychology and sociology and has been geared towards understanding how people construct

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categories and link them to stereotyped beliefs.<sup>2</sup> More recently, however, stigmatisation has attracted interest from scholars in the fields of political science and international relations (IR) with research primarily focusing on how state stigmas impact norm diffusion and the cohesion of the international order, and how stigmatised states cope with their international status.<sup>3</sup>

To flesh out the phenomenon at hand, we propose that a state-stigma amplifies negative characteristics of the state, reducing it from a legitimate player to a discounted one, and that this is a gradual, accumulative process, conducted with the strategic aim of delegitimizing the state's existence and leading to its submission to fundamental policy change. As such, the full imposition of a state-stigma forces a crucial transformation of how the target state is internationally perceived, ultimately translating into its isolation by prominent powers in the Western-led international society. The onset of such a situation, can be expected to shape the target state's identity and subsequent behaviour. Nevertheless, we do not view stigmatisation as a binary (stigmatised/not-stigmatised) situation. Rather, we propose that state-stigmatizing is a non-linear, non-deterministic process in which states can become stigmatised to differing extents and adopt varying approaches to address this challenge. As such, we ask: why do state-stigmas become developed and sustained in some cases, whereas in other cases they wither away?

In this article we limit ourselves to exploring states that are (a) involved in conflicts and (b) aspire to be part of the Western-led 'club' of states – traditionally led by the United States and the European Union. While the second decade of the twentieth century, particularly its latter half, is characterized by an increasingly multipolar world (governed by the United States, Europe, Russia and China); a polarized Europe, and the weakening of United States relations with traditional allies – the desire of states across the world to be affiliated with the club of liberal, democratic, modern and progressive states is still very much a feature of world politics. Assuming that complying with norms of the dominant world order is central to states' ability to thrive – it follows that states having both abovementioned characteristics are susceptible to stigmatisation processes which seek to expel them from the desired 'club', or alternatively force them to reform their policies so that their affiliation to the desired 'club' remains unharmed.

The focus on conflict, of course does not exclude the formation of state stigmatization processes in other contexts too. Nevertheless, conflictual settings, particularly asymmetrical ones, intensify the competition between rivalling parties over legitimacy and recognition in the international arena.<sup>4</sup> Conflict may thus be viewed as an important contextual factor that contributes to the motivation of rivalling parties to engage in state stigmatizing processes. Seeing as the aspiration to belong to the Western-led 'club' of states does not only entail formal recognition, but also popular approval – the struggle over legitimacy and the ability of conflicting parties to stigmatize their opponents, as well as successfully deal with their own stigmas, contribute towards their ability to thrive on the world stage. Hence, conflict and its framing by the conflicting sides become important factors in determining the development and sustenance of state stigmas. Furthermore, while conflictual settings provide unique leverage to the militarily weaker side to stigmatize the militarily stronger state as a means to balance the hard-power asymmetry, this practice can certainly be part of a comprehensive

soft-power tool kit instrumentalized by strong states to delegitimize their militarily weaker opponents too.

Another reason for our focus on state stigmatization processes in states immersed in conflict is two apparent lacunae in relevant literature: first, conflicts provide a zero-sum situation which incentivises the use of soft-power tools to puncture the militarily stronger rival's legitimacy and credibility, especially in asymmetric power relations. While conflicts may evoke feelings of compassion and solidarity, such emotions are usually aroused by the militarily weaker side, that typically strives to stigmatize the target state accused of violating human rights as a product of being the militarily stronger adversary. Assessing state stigmatisation from this perspective expands the traditional motives cited for state-stigmatizing beyond ontological security concerns and the subsequent need to separate 'us' (the 'good', in-group players) and 'them' (the 'bad', out-group ones). Although states play a role in stigmatizing other states, in this paper we highlight the role of transnational civil society actors in this process – among other reasons, because of their superior credibility to state actors already engaged in conflict with the target state.

Second, seminal literature<sup>5</sup> fleshes out three strategies available for states to cope with their stigmas (namely stigma recognition, counter-stigmatization and stigma rejection). However, two of these strategies (stigma recognition, counter-stigmatization) are effectively irrelevant for target states in conflictual situations from which they seek to emerge victorious, without compromising their ability to belong to the Western-led 'club'. As such the only available coping strategy of stigma rejection remains under-researched and warrants additional explication.

In addressing the research question, we proceed to examine the ongoing development and sustenance of state stigmatization, or lack thereof, in two interrelated stages, which we separate for parsimonious analytical purposes. In the first stage, we focus on the contribution of two external independent actors which we propose play a vital role in contributing towards state-stigmas' development: civil society activists and international mainstream media. The interaction between activists and the media has been extensively researched in literature on transnational advocacy networks,<sup>6</sup> and public diplomacy conducted by states to improve their images with foreign nations,<sup>7</sup> particularly in conflictual settings.<sup>8</sup> However, their contribution to state-stigmatizing processes remains under-theorized.

Furthermore, in assessing classic literature regarding these players' role in shaming processes, we point both to the current relevance of processes coined some thirty years ago, and to areas where the analysis conducted in this article diverges from earlier understandings. Importantly, we do not claim that transnational civil society and the media are the only two factors involved in the development and sustaining of state stigmas – an assertion that warrants testing on multiple case studies. Rather, we point to the prominence of both elements, and then proceed to demonstrate this utilizing two case-studies.

In the second analytical stage, we examine the target-state's agency to counter the developing stigma, centring on the plethora of coping strategies available to stigmatized states. In this section we build on seminal literature<sup>9</sup> asserting the availability of three coping strategies (namely stigma recognition, counter-stigmatization and stigma rejection); illustrate the inapplicability of the stigma recognition and counter-stigmatization strategies to states immersed in conflict with which this article is concerned and expand on the varying results of employing the only available strategy of stigma rejection.

To explicate our theoretical arguments, we analyse two case studies: South Africa before the turn of the century (1985–1994) and Israel since the turn of the century (2000–2019). In choosing these cases, we bear in mind the clear difference between the situations on the ground in each of the conflicts and avoid a judgmental approach to the stigmatizing process itself.

Choosing these two cases, upon the variance they encompass, was guided by two central considerations. The first is the need to add diversity to the case studies explored in seminal theoretical literature coining stigmatization processes to date. As such, the two case studies explored in this article, South Africa and Israel, involve conflicts between different faiths (Christians in the South African case, and Jews and primarily Muslims in the Israeli-Palestinian case); different geographical areas (Africa and the Middle East), and different eras (the analysis of the South African case leading to the dismantling of apartheid focuses on the end of the twentieth century and the analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian case study begins with the turn of the century). The wide variance enables theorizing about different and similar elements that appear in the cases analysed and their role in the stigmatization process of the state entities involved, considering seminal literature coined on other case studies. The second consideration is the need to maintain the source of dispute under one category, that is, a struggle regarding self-determination issues which is naturally a lengthy process enabling variation of tactics employed by adversaries. Simultaneously, adversaries of both conflicts chosen, have engaged – or have been perceived by the international community to have been engaged – in norm-breaking behaviour involving elements of terrorism, occupation, disproportional military force, oppression of another people, or the violation of universal human rights.

This article has two primary contributions to state stigmatizing literature. First, we develop a procedural state-stigmatizing framework, which we test on two case studies that have not been addressed in the literature, to highlight the prominence of three central factors in the development and sustaining of state stigmatizing processes in states immersed in conflictual situations. This creates the infrastructure for testing these elements' role in the development and sustaining of state-stigmas in additional cases. Second, our focus on coping strategies of target states engaged in conflictual situations, introduces new insights regarding two aspects: one is the limited manoeuvring space that such target states have in dealing with their developing stigmas in comparison to states that are not engaged in conflict; another is the leeway encapsulated in the choice of tools utilized in the implementation of the same coping strategy and the different results that this tactical variation yields.

To establish our argument, we begin with a literature review highlighting the role of civil society and mainstream media's engagement in the development of state stigmas as a formative base upon which ongoing stigmatization can be perpetuated and sustained. We proceed by addressing the relationship between stigma sustainability and the target state's coping strategy. Following this theoretical section, we flesh out our methodology and move to empirically explore the two case studies. We end with a discussion that highlights central insights and contributions that surface from the findings.

## **State stigmas and world politics**

Identifying state-stigmatizing processes warrants reference to English School literature that differentiates between an international system and an international society.<sup>10</sup>

An international system commences when two or more states have contact between them and impact each other's decisions, causing them to behave – at least in some measures – as parts of a whole. An international society commences when states identify with common interests and values and regard themselves bound by certain rules and institutions in their dealings with one another (e.g. being subject to limitations in exercising force against one another).<sup>11</sup> Thus, states' desire to belong to international society encapsulates an idea whereby they align their conduct with the norms of states within the same society.

Norms which guide state conduct can be viewed as political instruments<sup>12</sup> in that they involve standards of appropriateness, so that norm-breaking behaviour 'generates disapproval or stigma'.<sup>13</sup> Players that do not abide by norms may thus become targets of a stigmatisation process. This complements the idea of an international society that follows certain norms and to which some states are unfit to belong based on a poor track record with respect to international norms.<sup>14</sup> The perceived gap between the target state's conduct on the one hand, and the normative code advocated by the desired 'club' of states on the other, can be actively harnessed, amplified and perpetuated to develop and sustain state stigmas. We thus highlight three elements which play a crucial role in the development and sustaining of state stigmas: a proactive transnational civil society; international media engagement, and the target state's decision regarding which coping strategy to implement and how. While the first two elements are needed to develop the state stigma, and their endurance contributes towards the stigma's sustenance; the state's coping strategy comes into play only at a later stage after the stigma's internalisation.

### *Proactive transnational civil society*

Even before the turn of the century, seminal literature on transnational civil-society advocacy networks<sup>15</sup> proposed the 'boomerang model' to relate to a situation in which domestic Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) directly seek international allies to pressure their states when links between state and domestic actors are severed. While Keck and Sikkink (1998) caution that the 'boomerang' strategy is politically sensitive and is subject to charges of foreign interference, we highlight the trend evident in the twenty years that have since elapsed, whereby civil society agents play a growing role in processes that were once out-of-bounds for non-state players. Thus, although traditional diplomacy remains the main channel of coordination between states, and even if states are still undisputed in their power to determine international processes, major innovations in Information Communication Technology (ICT), among other things, have legitimised and empowered civil society agents who now play a role in processes that were once reserved for state players only.<sup>16</sup>

As such, transnational civil society is increasingly setting and protecting norms. One example is in cases in which states advocate policies perceived as violating environmental and human rights issues.<sup>17</sup> NGOs have proven effective in exposing environmentally problematic projects; monitoring them; enhancing the ability of states to regulate globally, and influence stakeholders that are sensitive to 'naming and shaming'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, NGOs operate in the vacuum between the individual and the state, and act as conduits for ideas of interest groups in both the domestic and international settings.<sup>19</sup> The UN Human

Rights Council, wherein NGOs are included in conference proceedings and in unofficial sessions is another example.<sup>20</sup> Here, NGO representatives actively participate in informal backdoor diplomacy, receive official state documents and present proposals vis-à-vis human rights issues.<sup>21</sup>

We thus propose that organised civil society efforts become meaningful considering such players' ability to rally an 'audience of normals', that is, 'the group of states that attempt to impose stigma'<sup>22</sup> around a specific idea or plan of action to oust a target state from the desired 'club' of in-group states. Among other means employed towards this end, civil society action can include initiating grassroots campaigns to boycott goods manufactured in the target state; exerting pressure on international artists and culture-icons to refrain from performing in the target state; lobbying professional sporting associations to ban the target state from participating in international sporting events; advocating for the divestment of international corporations from the target state and orchestrating demonstrations, marches and informational off-and-online campaigns designed to taint the target-state's credibility and international image.

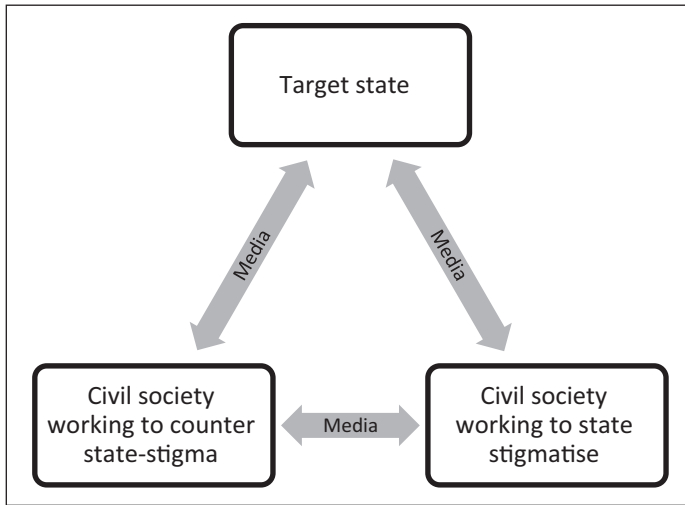
In their five-pronged 'spiral model', Risse, Ropp and Sikkink (1999)<sup>23</sup> outline a chronological path from states' repression of human rights, through pressure by domestic and transnational activist networks; followed by cosmetic changes by the target state, and later a slow process of change in the behaviour of the target state – until in the model's final stages there is a decrease in the target state's human rights violations. While this seminal model recognizes the central role of civil society actors in bringing about change,<sup>24</sup> we diverge from it in two respects.

First, we introduce diversity regarding how target states react to shaming efforts perpetuated by transnational civil society actors. That is, while in some cases civil society pressure may indeed lead to a decrease in human rights violations – paralleled in state-stigmatizing literature by stigma recognition – there are other cases in which the same international shaming may lead to different results, noted in state-stigmatizing literature as counter-stigmatization or stigma-rejection. In the latter two strategies targeted states continue to perpetuate the very 'discrediting attribute' on which they are stigmatized. Second, in relating to state stigmatizing processes we attribute far greater importance to the interplay between civil society activists and the engagement of mainstream media than that placed in the 'spiral model'.

More recent literature on the interaction between civil society players and the media asserts that the former dedicates substantial resources to sustaining a communications team, with employees often having previous experience in journalism, and the ability to communicate issues to broader publics.<sup>25</sup> These professional teams strive to influence mainstream media frames through staging media events, producing multimedia content, issuing press releases and enlisting celebrities as spokespeople, among other tactics. To clarify this point, we turn to media engagement needed to develop, and later sustain, state stigmatisation processes.

### *International media engagement*

Despite controversy regarding the extent to which the media impacts public opinion, its role in informing people about foreign nations becomes clear in considering that most

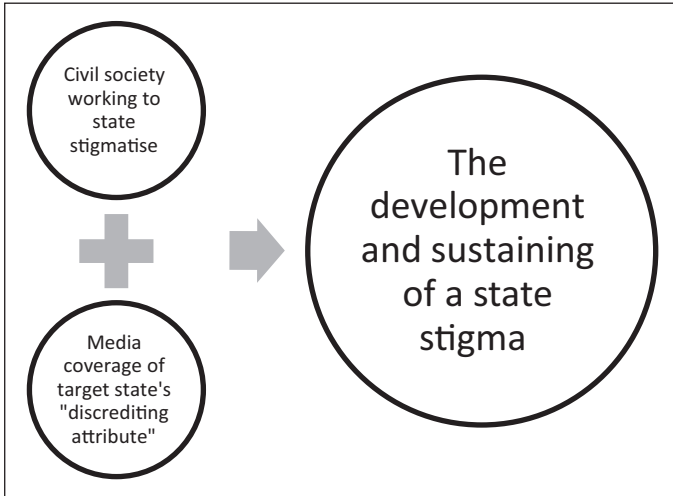


**Figure 1.** The role of the media in state stigmatisation processes.

people consume either television, print media or online newspapers to learn about their environment.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the paradigm that media attention along with public support is a necessary condition for pressuring policymakers and, in turn, affecting policies is widely accepted.<sup>27</sup> In considering the role of the media in state stigmatisation processes, we suggest a multi-track process wherein three parties actively strive to attract media coverage: the target state, civil society actors working to stigmatise the target state, and civil society actors working to counter the state-stigma (Figure 1).

In relating to the likelihood of each of these players to gain media attention, literature concludes that civil society actors are less likely to attract mainstream media coverage, with the most notable pro-government bias pertaining to international (as opposed to domestic) debates.<sup>28</sup> Nowadays, however, professional journalists employed by mainstream media outlets increasingly share their role as information gatekeepers with activists who produce and share their own content via blogs or social media. This content may, in turn, be used in journalists' reports, making citizens co-producers of news.<sup>29</sup> We can, therefore, expect to see variance in the ability of state and non-state actors to utilise the media to promote or to counter state-stigmatisation before and during ICT-backed diplomacy.

Thus, while media engagement is instrumental to amplify perceived gaps between states' conduct and the normative code activists aspire to uphold, it also provides a channel to present the target state's counter-narrative. We thus propose that the engagement of the media – nowadays both traditional and social/digital – in covering the target state's 'discrediting attribute' put forth by civil society activists, plays an indispensable role in developing and sustaining state stigma processes, and in the counter-fight leveraged by the target state or other civil society activists striving to rid the state of its stigma. All this, while keeping in mind literature asserting that in conflictual situations competition over media attention involves not only a contest between the rivalling parties but also



**Figure 2.** The development and sustaining of the state-stigma process.

influence exerted over the media by local governments and the media’s own organisational needs as an independent actor.<sup>30</sup>

In concluding the first analytical stage, while we acknowledge the variance in the ability of non-state actors to penetrate official diplomatic processes and international society’s attention to norm-breaking behaviour in different historical contexts, we argue that a proactive transnational civil society geared towards stigmatizing the target state, along with ongoing media coverage of the target state’s ‘discrediting attribute’ are instrumental to the development and sustaining of state-stigmatizing processes (see Figure 2).

We now turn to the second analytical part of assessing state-stigmas’ sustainability, that is, target states’ coping strategies in response to stigma internalisation, which can be the product of genuine shame or of concern regarding international social standing.<sup>31</sup> Either way, the little available literature on the topic suggests that once stigmas are internalised they govern actors’ social roles and identities so that all subsequent action is a product of this condition.<sup>32</sup> That is, the state has a role in the development of its stigma on two accounts: first, in its policies and behaviour which are perceived by (at least part of) the international community as problematic and unaligned with expected norms; and second, in the way the target-state chooses to respond to its developing stigma.

In four cases collectively illustrated by Adler-Nissen (2014) and Zarakol (2011) as classic cases in which stigmatised states employed the strategy of stigma-recognition,<sup>33</sup> this method of coping was adopted by states defeated in conflict as an essential ‘entry ticket’ to international society. Common to all states that adopt stigma recognition is a subsequent reform in policies and conduct leading to the dissolving of the state stigma. Thus, adopting such an approach necessitates states to admit to their wrong-doing and self-proclaim their mistakes – a highly unlikely strategy for states immersed in conflict from which they seek to emerge victorious.

The two other coping strategies available to stigmatized states are counter-stigmatisation<sup>34</sup> and stigma rejection.<sup>35</sup> In the former strategy, stigmatised states take pride in their stigma, seeking to lead an 'alternative club' of states that defies the norms advocated for by those attempting to impose stigma. However, in cases involving states aspiring to belong to the Western-led 'club', taking pride in the defiance of international norms advocated by the very same 'club' to which importance is related, is of course counter-productive. Hence, this strategy too is irrelevant to states which are the subject matter of this article.

In the strategy of stigma rejection, the stigmatised state accepts the category of deviance, but denies being different from norm abiders. In choosing this strategy the target state negates and argues against the imposed stigma, drawing on the same pool of treasured, ambivalent principles from international law, sovereignty and democracy as 'normal' states do.<sup>36</sup> By rejecting stigma, target states ultimately demonstrate the lack of consensus on how to uphold normative order.

Adler-Nissen (2014) demonstrates stigma-rejection through the Austrian case study – after the admission of Jörg Haider's extreme right-wing party to Austria's government at the turn of the century. This step stirred an internal European debate resulting in the first time in EU history that diplomatic sanctions were imposed on a member state. Eventually, however, sanctions were dropped resulting in specification of the boundaries of European normative order. The Austrian case-study encompasses unique characteristics because Austria was not engaged in a conflict at the time of its stigmatisation and its place in the club of Western, democratic states – even at the height of its stigmatisation – was secure in comparison to other states in Africa or in the Middle East, for example, who similarly aspire to belong to this prestigious club. As such, analysing additional case studies in which stigmatised states employ stigma rejection can contribute to understanding the non-monolithic nature of this coping strategy both in its implementation and outcome.

It appears that stigmatised states operating according to the stigma rejection paradigm employ two policy directives. First, they continue the line of controversial conduct that serves to perpetuate international discourse regarding the perceived gap between their behaviour and standards expected of in-group states. Second, they highlight commonalities with in-group states and actively advocate for what they perceive is their rightful belonging to the desired club of states. Thus, it is likely that the target state's adoption of stigma-rejection perpetuates the debate about its 'discrediting attribute' fuelling its stigmatisation. Notwithstanding, it is also possible that if the strategy of stigma rejection is accompanied by non-traditional diplomacy tactics and sophisticated pushback efforts, the state-stigma will continue to be controversial and fall short of becoming sustained.

In focusing on target states that are the subject matter of this article and minding these states' ability to adapt and switch strategies in reaction to their stigma, it is possible that the strategy of stigma rejection will not lead to the Austria-style situation in which the stigma withered away. To substantiate our arguments, we add two case studies of states that utilized the stigma rejection strategy underlying Adler-Nissen's analysis of the Austrian case: South Africa (1985–1994) and Israel (2000–2019).

As mentioned above, it is the multitude of diverse variables encompassed in the South African and Israeli-Palestinian case studies, along with their commonalities, that led us

to assess them together. In addition to the two basic commonalities that enable us to focus on both case studies, that is, the state entity's involvement in a conflictual situation while simultaneously relating importance to being part of the Western-led 'club' of progressive, democratic states; in both cases the targeted states are accused of violating the norms of in-group states, that are called upon to oust them from their social club. Simultaneously, however, the two case studies differ in the extent to which policies adopted by the state entity diverge from those deemed acceptable to members of the prestigious social 'club'. Whereas the white regime in South Africa established one unified legal system of apartheid, based on racial hierarchy, Israel has avoided this course, and formally grants its Palestinian citizens with rights that enable them to participate in the democratic game. Although, as we shall demonstrate, these differences have not prevented the onset of an initial stigmatizing process targeting Israel, it is certainly possible that they have contributed to blocking the stigma's sustenance. Additionally, the difference in the eras in which the two case studies are analysed enable highlighting the historical and international contexts, particularly with respect to the role of technological developments in the state-stigma's development and the implementation of the coping strategy. Hence, the choice to research both cases is methodologically motivated and the similarity or difference between them is utilized to compare between them to better theorize the stigmatization process, its development and its sustenance.

### **Assessing state stigmatisation**

In both case studies, international English-language media items retrieved from the Lexis Nexis search engine and documents retrieved from the UN Official Document System (ODS) and the UN Dag Hammarskjöld online library were assessed employing content analysis.

Press items provide valuable information on the target state's international standing further to the framing and criticism (and fluctuations therein) employed vis-à-vis the target state's policies and conduct, as well as the existence or absence of transnational civil society players advocating against, or in support of, the target state. UN documents enable tracing procedures which do not necessarily pass the media's reporting threshold, and which are nevertheless instrumental to deducing about the target state's standing in this important body. UN documents included in the analysis are draft resolutions; letters submitted by state representatives to the UN Secretary-General; protocols of discussions in different UN forums (such as the Security Council) and statements submitted to UN bodies (such as the Human Rights Council) by civil society activists on behalf of Non-Government Organisations with consultative status to the UN – in relation to each of the case studies.

In the South African case study, a content analysis of ( $n=81$ ) English newspaper articles published in the decade preceding South Africa's 1994 democratic elections was performed. Seeing as access to media items from the relevant period is less readily available, our media analysis is supplemented with findings from the literature. The analysis of UN documents ( $n=133$ ) is based on the same timeframe. In the Israeli case study, a content analysis was performed on ( $n=137$ ) items published in English-language newspapers between 2000 and 2014, and ( $n=168$ ) UN documents published between 2000 and 2018.

### *The South African case study*

Before apartheid was officially introduced in South Africa in 1948, the state was considered an important international player. By the end of the 1950s, however, UN Resolutions condemning apartheid and criticizing South Africa's failure to respond to UN proposals received unanimous consent, and in the 1960s the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries and African states cut economic ties with South Africa. The West followed, rather than led, the adoption of sanctions: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was unwilling to impose sanctions further to her concern over the perceived spread of communism in South Africa; and in the United States, traditional policy claimed that American interests were best served by tolerating South Africa's white minority rule.<sup>37</sup>

In 1985, bipartisan concessions on partial sanctions against South Africa were reached in opposition to the Reagan Administration's preferred policy, and in 1986 the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (CAAA) passed because of bipartisan support that succeeded in overriding the Presidential veto.<sup>38</sup> As a result, Britain and the Commonwealth, Europe, and Japan all followed the American lead and implemented sanctions on South Africa.<sup>39</sup> In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections and the state's apartheid era ended. International sanctions were dropped, and South Africa was welcomed into the international community.

*The development of the state-stigma.* The institutionalisation of racist apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act,<sup>40</sup> the Lands Act,<sup>41</sup> and the Population Registration Act,<sup>42</sup> exemplify de-facto and de-jure gaps between the normative code of states belonging to the Western-led, progressive democratic 'club', and South Africa's policies at the end of the 1940s. A decade later, in 1959, the transnational, civil-society Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) which worked to abolish apartheid and isolate South Africa was founded.

The AAM was initiated in Britain, primarily by South African exiles. It contributed to the construction of a transnational political culture – composed of networks of groups and organisations – that was a part of a wider process of political globalisation. In line with this, AAM created networks, as well as political action forums that impacted the political cultures of countries across the world.<sup>43</sup>

AAM was home to a spectrum of activists: from those whose participation came to define a large part of their everyday lives, to others who occasionally visited demonstrations, wore political t-shirts or boycotted South African goods in supermarkets. Whatever the degree of individuals' involvement, everyday actions under the AAM umbrella express a relation between individual and collective political action which depend on communication through the media. That is, while boycotting goods is an individual action, it presupposes a collective organisation of the boycott and a collective articulation of its political meaning, which in the case of anti-apartheid was performed by AAM using both established and alternative media channels.<sup>44</sup>

In the mid-1980s, Anti-apartheid activists began staging protests at the South African embassy and consulates in the United States.<sup>45</sup> They launched media-oriented campaigns corresponding to the broadcast media's growing importance during that era and framed their discourse as seeking to liberate South Africa, in its entirety (and not only the oppressed black population), from the system of racial oppression.<sup>46</sup> This credited the

movement with international legitimacy and support. As such, AAM was able to successfully develop new skills in public relations, improve its media strategies, and become involved in merchandise on a scale different from earlier periods.<sup>47</sup>

A content analysis of American and European English newspaper articles<sup>48</sup> published in the decade preceding South Africa's 1994 democratic elections, finds coverage of activities conducted by anti-apartheid activists (e.g. 'the Governor's office filled with State University students, who staged a brief sit-in there . . . carrying signs protesting apartheid')<sup>49</sup>; and illustrates the important platform that the media provided such activists in multiplying anti-apartheid messages. A poignant example is The Guardian's editorial decision to publish, under the 'Notes and Queries' section, a specific question inquiring, 'Is it now morally OK to buy South African fruit?' along with a blunt answer of an Anti-Apartheid activist, 'NO. We urge people to keep up the boycott of South African produce. . . The black majority still do not have the vote and the recent whites-only referendum clearly showed this'.<sup>50</sup>

An analysis of UN documents during the same timeframe<sup>51</sup> retrieved 30 reports dealing with multiple aspects of South Africa's apartheid regime and demonstrating the important role that civil society activists and the media played in the struggle to abolish apartheid.

The role of civil society, for example, is demonstrated in a 1986 report detailing the all-encompassing work of local anti-apartheid civil society activists who advocate for lifting the State of Emergency declared by the South African regime; work against the banning of meetings of black activists; and attempted to free 13,000 people detained by state authorities.<sup>52</sup> Civil society players also served as the prime information source reporting on sanctions' violations – with their work noted as resulting in the implementation of sanctions against South Africa and in committing additional resources towards enforcement.<sup>53</sup> Reports further reveal that 'in almost every country that has imposed sanctions at least one anti-apartheid organisation monitors closely the implementation of the sanctions program of its country's government'.<sup>54</sup>

The media's role can be demonstrated in a 1985 report entitled 'A Special Report of the Committee against Apartheid to inform world public opinion and encourage action in favour of the oppressed people of South Africa' which called for the dissemination of audio-visual materials regarding apartheid. A testimony to the UN's recognition of the media's importance is its decision to sponsor a total of 160 radio programs annually, broadcast in South Africa in English, Sesotho, Xhosa, Setswana and Zulu, dealing with democratic values.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, transnational civil society activists and the international media's engagement in emphasizing South Africa's 'discrediting attribute' are clearly part of a long process in which the state's stigma is perpetually inserted into international public discourse.

*Coping with the state-stigma.* In 1985, the UN Special Committee against Apartheid asserted that South Africa strove to project an image of stability and reform, convincing 'public opinion, particularly in the Western countries, that white-ruled South Africa is a valuable ally of the West and therefore the status quo in South Africa is in the best interest of the Western countries'.<sup>56</sup> The same report sheds additional light on the South African leadership's chosen strategy of dealing with the state's developing stigma, by noting

that Pretoria attempted to capitalise on adverse social and economic conditions in Western countries, such as the rise in unemployment, which resulted in increased racism directed towards immigrants.

Thus, the South African regime – rather than changing policies to narrow the perceived gap between the state's conduct and international norms – strategically utilised global developments to emphasise the commonalities between apartheid South Africa and the West.<sup>57</sup> Additional proof of South Africa's choice to adopt the strategy of appeasing the Western powers is Foreign Minister Pik Botha's 1990 declaration that 'apartheid is a thing of the past'<sup>58</sup> – as early as four years before the first multi-racial elections.

Alongside abovementioned overt efforts to reject the emerging state stigma in the international arena, domestically internal opposition seemed to have been crushed<sup>59</sup> and the South African government continued with its repressive apartheid policies choosing to limit, and in certain instances block, media outlets from reporting internal developments. To illustrate, state authorities banned black leaders heading the anti-apartheid struggle from being interviewed,<sup>60</sup> and ordered restrictions against 'The Sowetan' and 'The Weekly Mail' newspapers as well as a local news sheet published by the opposition Progressive Federal Party.<sup>61</sup>

All the while, UN documents reveal that as the grassroots struggle progressed, cooperation between civil society and the media continued – for example, in the form of preparing the South African public for the state's democratic elections. As such, in educating South Africans about democratic ideals in the build-up towards the first democratic elections, the South African Broadcasting Corporation was expected to cooperate fully with non-governmental organisations, or even 'leave the task wholly to the NGOs'.<sup>62</sup>

These developments illustrate the prominent presence of civil society and mass media attention, which played a role in the development and sustaining of the stigmatizing process. Evidently, South Africa adopted the strategy of stigma rejection, displayed by the state's continued enforcement of controversial apartheid policies on the one hand and the leadership's attempts to demonstrate the state's commonalities with in-group states on the other. However, in rejecting its stigma, South Africa failed to constructively engage with critical media or civil society, nor to develop a sophisticated pushback mechanism in response to persistent activists' work to stigmatise the state, thereby enabling the stigma to become sustained.

### *The Israeli case study*

Israel was established in 1948 further to the approval of UN General Assembly Resolution 181 which called for the partition of British-ruled Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state as a means of resolving national claims over the land. The plan was accepted by Israel and rejected by the Arab world. In 1967 Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. Israel's claims to part of these territories and the question of Palestinians living in the latter three areas, continue to challenge Israel's diplomacy.

In 1993 Israelis and Palestinians embarked on the Oslo process with the aim of negotiating an agreement to end the conflict. The process was stalled for an array of reasons and by 2001 a new round of Israeli-Palestinian violence was underway. In 2005 Israel

pulled out of the Gaza Strip unilaterally, dismantling Israeli settlements.<sup>63</sup> In 2007, Hamas – a designated terrorist organisation by the United States and the European Court of Justice<sup>64</sup> – took over the Gaza Strip and since then Israel and Hamas have been engaged in three deadly rounds of violence.<sup>65</sup> Since then, Israel and the Palestinian Authority have engaged in several negotiation rounds, under American auspices,<sup>66</sup> none of which have succeeded.

*The development of the state-stigma.* In 1975 the alliance between Arab states and the Soviet Union enabled the passing of a UN General Assembly resolution which defined Zionism as a form of racism.<sup>67</sup> Although the resolution was rescinded in 1991, it left a dent in Israel's international image. A decade later, at the 2001 UN Conference in Durban, hundreds of civil society activists united behind an anti-Israel declaration,<sup>68</sup> calling the international community to isolate Israel 'as an apartheid state . . . as in the case of South Africa'.<sup>69</sup> Thirty years after the initial approval of the 'Zionism is Racism' Resolution, in 2005, the transnational BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) campaign dedicated to isolating Israel internationally, was officially launched with a Call endorsed by over 170 pro-Palestinian civil society organisations.<sup>70</sup> The same call has since been translated into nine languages. The presence of a proactive, dynamic civil society dedicated to stigmatizing Israel is thus undisputed.

In assessing Israel's stigma in the international press, a search coupling the words 'Israel' and 'apartheid state' between 1967 and 2000; that is, a 33-year time span from Israel's occupation of Palestinian Territories to the turn of the century, yielded 54 items. A similar search in the following 18 years, (from January 2000 to December 2017), yielded 2,266 such items, that is, more than 50 times the number of articles published in almost half the time. While such a search, absent a content analysis, cannot be interpreted as claiming that media items claim that Israel is an apartheid state, it does suffice to assert that Israel's image has been tainted internationally and that an ongoing debate regarding Israel's democratic character persists.

A content analysis performed on a sample of these media items<sup>71</sup> reveals coverage of abundant civil society action against Israel (e.g. 'Hundreds of pro-Palestinian activists in London blocked Whitehall . . . , shouting 'Free Palestine''<sup>72</sup> in multiple arenas, such as university campuses (e.g. 'A group of academics, . . . had gotten . . . Britain's main higher education union – to adopt a boycott against Israeli universities')<sup>73</sup> and cultural performances (e.g. 'performance by the Jerusalem Quartet . . . a woman stood up to 'sing out' her condemnation of Israeli policy, . . . interruptions by people strategically positioned among the audience').<sup>74</sup> Articles also provide insight as to the broad swath of activists (e.g. 'cardboard signs held by women and children denounced Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon'),<sup>75</sup> and the borderline-violent nature of some of their actions (e.g. 'students who are Jewish or supporters of Israel . . . have received death threats').<sup>76</sup>

These findings demonstrate that a state stigmatizing process against Israel has been initiated and that both civil society activists working against the state, and media items amplifying their messaging, abound and persist.

*Coping with the state-stigma.* In relating to the substance of criticism pointed against Israel in the international arena, an analysis of UN documents since the turn of the

century reveals that Israel rejects international criticism on one of the central points of contention regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that is, the expansion of Israeli settlements in Palestinian Territories. Over the years Israel's argument is that this practice does not pose an obstacle to peace (e.g. 'It is . . . fiction that Israeli construction in Judea and Samaria is an obstacle to peace. When Israel froze construction . . . , it did not get peace. When Israel uprooted every Jewish town . . . in Gaza. . . it did not get peace').<sup>77</sup> This is despite the fact that settlements are repeatedly condemned by Israel's 'audience of normals' in the UN, including the EU ('the European Union deplored . . . Israeli decisions to expand . . . settlements')<sup>78</sup>; Australia ('Australia unambiguously opposes new Israeli settlements. They are illegal')<sup>79</sup>; and the United States ('Like every American Administration for decades, the Obama Administration does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlement activity').<sup>80</sup>

Simultaneously, Israel actively strives to demonstrate its kinship with Western states. For example, in Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu's address to the General Assembly in 2014, he emphasised Israel's common ground with the desired club of Israel's in-group states by grouping Israel's rival (Hamas) together with the enemy of the Western-led international order ('Hamas is ISIS and ISIS is Hamas. And what they share in common, all militant Islamists share in common').<sup>81</sup> On other occasions in the UN, Israel's premier highlighted the state's contribution to the prestigious club of in-group states to which Israel aspires to belong ('Israel. . . provided intelligence that has prevented dozens of major terrorist attacks around the world'), and emphasised that Israel is a welcomed and integral part of international society ('After 70 years, the world is embracing Israel, and Israel is embracing the world').<sup>82</sup>

Thus, Israel's strategy is to argue against the imposed stigma by demonstrating that it draws on the same principles of sovereignty and democracy that 'normal' states do. As such, Israel's response to external attempts to impose a state stigma is in line with the strategy of stigma rejection. Supplementing this strategy, and perhaps minding the importance of soft-power in world politics in the 21st century, Israel tasked a Government Ministry with countering the state's developing stigma.<sup>83</sup>

Another important aspect of the pushback against Israel's emerging stigma – which was clearly absent in the South African case study – is the existence of pro-Israel transnational civil society actively working independently from the Israeli state to counter the negative campaign. In the media realm, pro-Israel civil society organisations strategically operate to counter false or ambiguous information published about Israel, and harness ICT to encourage media consumers to 'communicate with correspondents, anchors and network officials in the electronic media'<sup>84</sup> or to defend Israel from media bias<sup>85</sup> by calling media consumers and potential activists to email information and strategy tips to dedicated grassroots organisations.

In considering the harnessing of ICT to defend Israel, pro-Israel activists utilise online digital platforms to present BDS promoters as anti-Semitic, question their goals, expose their desire to destroy Israel, and present Israel to Western audiences as a democratic country.<sup>86</sup> An example is the ACT.IL initiative: a first of its kind smart-phone app, crowd-sourcing pro-Israel activists worldwide to leverage 'the power of communities to support Israel's image and fight against the demonization of the state'.<sup>87</sup> According to the online platform's website, it aims to organise the pro-Israel community to work efficiently via

social media with the goal of impacting the hearts and minds of global audiences, through outreach to groups that traditionally refrain from consuming information from pro-Israel sources.

The Israeli case study thus illustrates the prominent presence of civil society and mass media attention, which we argue resulted in the development of the stigmatizing process; and the state's chosen strategy of stigma rejection evidenced in Israel's perpetuation of conduct criticised by in-group states (in the example above, of building settlements in the West Bank) along with Israel's unrelenting attempts to demonstrate its commonalities with Western in-group states. In stark opposition to the South African case study, however, Israel's stigma rejection is complemented by a Government Ministry dedicated to fighting Israel's stigmatisation in the international arena and by staunch, independent civil society efforts dedicated towards the same end.

## Conclusions

The empirical findings provided above demonstrate the contribution of transnational civil society actors together with media coverage of states' discrediting attributes, along with the target states' coping strategy, to the development and ultimately sustaining of state-stigmatisation processes in states immersed in conflictual situations. The accumulative findings demonstrate the non-deterministic nature of the social process to which states are subjected in attempts to impose a state stigma. The difference in the two target states' response provides a poignant illustration of how ICT can, and has been, utilised by civil society, working in opposition or in support of the target state, to venture into state territory and take part in either launching or countering a soft-power attack on the target-state – potentially reinforcing its stigma-rejection strategy. As such, our findings suggest that states immersed in conflicts, despite potential norm-breaking behaviour, still have agency vis-à-vis their stigmas' development and likelihood to become sustained.

The differences in the two case studies vis-à-vis the harnessing of ICT by civil society activists presents a fascinating example of a head-to-head struggle of opposing narratives and ideologies between civil society actors who have not been trained or assigned by state agents to conduct struggles on the state's behalf. In other words, while the target state remains the core focus of these battles, it is overtly absent from the 'war of narratives' between civil society actors working to stigmatise the state on one hand and rid the state of its imposed stigma on the other. The empirical evidence thus demonstrates how civil society can serve to balance asymmetries between rivals by dragging militarily mighty states into a more symmetrical 'soft' playing field.

The two case studies also illustrate how the same strategy of stigma rejection is implemented differently and may culminate in different outcomes. That is, the differing tactical steps pursued by stigmatised states battling their stigma using the strategy of stigma rejection impacts their counter-fight's efficiency. Our analysis relates importance to the difference between the two case studies in the target states' deviance from international norms, but also argues that other factors, such as the response strategy play an important role in the ability of different agents to counter the state stigma.

In this respect, even though the historical context was more favourable to South Africa, whose stigma peaked in an era prior to interventionist, responsibility-to-protect, normative international engagement – it was South Africa whose stigma became sustained leading to the state's full isolation. Attempts to impose a state stigma on Israel, conducted in an era of globalisation, intervention and the speedy flow of information, have failed to reach full fruition. This assertion is grounded in developments such as the transfer of a number of embassies – predominantly that of the United States<sup>88</sup> – from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem during 2018; and Israel's 2017 signing of a massive cooperation agreement with the EU.<sup>89</sup> Of note, however, is the latter agreement's territorial provision explicitly excluding grants for Israeli projects beyond the 1967 borders. In fact, while both the United States and European Union appear to have good relations with Israel, the variance in their approach indicates the lack of a unified stance among the 'audience of normals' regarding Israel's 'discrediting attributes'.

Though research conducted from a Constructivist viewpoint, which this article employs, generally perceives states to behave as social players, desiring – much like individuals – to be part of the in-group; it is important to acknowledge that not all states in the international system perceive themselves as being an integral part of the same 'in-group'. Some players, while recognizing the in-group's value and importance, prefer to merely maintain good relations with it so as not to compromise their own unique character. Clearly, the theoretical and practical implications of the stigmatisation process discussed here hinges on the target state's perception of itself as akin to the in-group, and on the importance of affiliation with this in-group to the target state's identity. As such, the abovementioned findings demonstrate how this basic condition can transform military powerful states into vulnerable social agents in the international arena and how the rise of ICT, alongside other globalisation processes, has led to the empowering of civil society players in world politics. These findings are also relevant for theorizing on asymmetrical conflict and global governance.

To gain additional insight into the state stigmatizing process more research is needed on states that fit the prototype of this article, and other states, also in conflictual situations but lacking aspirations to become integrated to the Western-led liberal order (such as Turkey vis-à-vis the Kurdish question; Russia vis-à-vis the Chechen question and China vis-à-vis Tibet). Such research could yield important findings about the vulnerability of states to international stigmatisation and the centrality of coping strategies articulated to rid the state of its unwanted stigma.

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