



PERSPECTIVES

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Did the Latest Israel-Hamas Round of Fighting Increase Criticism of Israel?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The visibility of pro-Palestinian protesters during the recent Israel-Hamas conflict, especially in the US, gave the impression that the delegitimization of Israel has reached new heights. An analysis of Google Trends indicates otherwise.

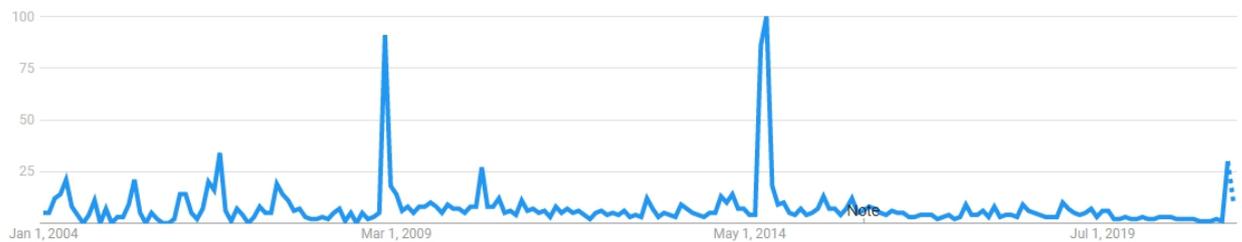
The recent bout of fighting between Israel and Hamas was sparked by Hamas's launching of missiles at Jerusalem, and the conflict that ensued saw Hamas send 4,000 missiles toward Israel with the intention of harming as many civilians as possible. The prominence in the media of pro-Palestinian protesters clamoring to defend Hamas and decry Israel's efforts to defend itself, especially in the US, gave the impression that the delegitimization of Israel has reached new heights.

Google Trends plots web searches on various topics. Data from Google Trends always show that rounds of fighting against Hamas increase censure of Israel, but this time, the level of censure was not nearly as high as it was during the rounds in 2008-9 and 2014.

Take the phrase "boycott Israel" as a rallying cry against the Jewish state. The following graph plots relative worldwide interest in the phrase since 2004. The highest interest occurred in the 2014 round of fighting, meriting a score of 100. The 2008-9 round was a close second, with a score of 90. In sharp contrast, the present bout aroused less than one-third the interest of the 2014 round and just over one-third of the 2008-9 round, perhaps because it was a battle largely fought from the air without the participation of IDF ground forces.

The differences between the last bout and the 2008-9 and 2014 rounds are even greater given the rise in Google searches over the years.

“Boycott Israel”: Worldwide



Source: Google Trends

Equally important is the relative interest in boycotting Israel among various countries. It comes as no surprise that Arab countries, especially Jordan and Lebanon, were at the top of the list, as were other Muslim countries. That tiny Brunei scores highest indicates that only small numbers actually feel like boycotting Israel. In Ireland, which had one of the highest scores (especially relative to its small population), the phrase is matched only by the very high relative popularity of searches for antisemitic search terms like “Heil Hitler” or “Sig Heil.”

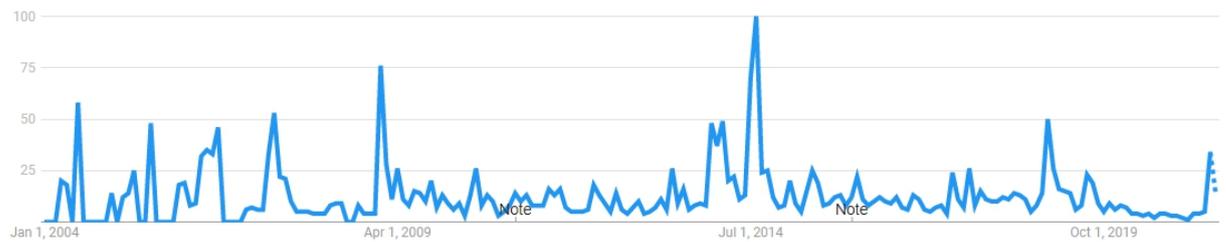
Fortunately for Israel, the absolute score of searches for the term in the US equaled Norway’s at one-third that of Ireland—meaning that in Ireland, there was a whopping 240 times the propensity to search the term than there was in the US. The score for the UK, 19 with a population of over 65 million, was significantly lower than the score for Ireland (26), which has a population less than one-tenth that of Britain. This was true of France as well, which came in at 18.

As in all the previous bouts, interest in the term was short-lived: the dotted line at the end of the curve indicates that the data is still not complete, but the downward trend is obvious.

Given the importance of the US to Israel, was the relative decline in censoring Israel during the recent round of fighting true of the US as well?

As the graph below indicates, the pattern for searches in the US over time is similar to worldwide trends. The high point was 2014, followed by 2008-9. Interest in boycotting Israel during the 2021 round was one-third what it was in 2014. The similarity in the pattern between the aggregated data worldwide and US-specific data is encouraging, and suggests the internal validity of the data.

“Boycott Israel”: United States



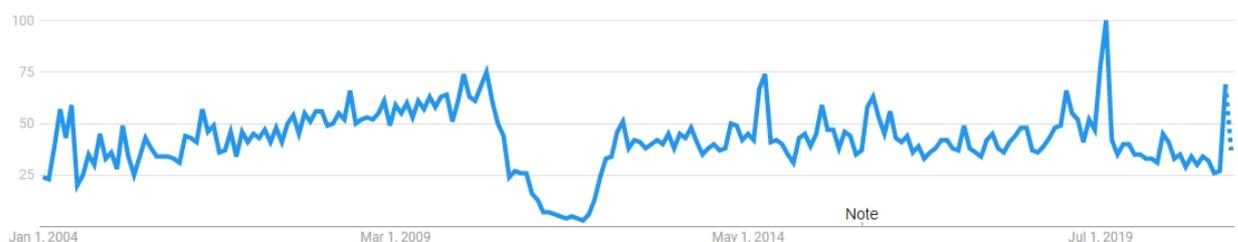
Source: Google Trends

American interest in boycotting Israel is highly correlated to both the coastal/middle states divide and the north/south divide, both of which were closely correlated to Democrat-Republican voting patterns in recent presidential elections. Most of the fiercely Republican states in the Great Plains, such as Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska, do not even register sufficient searches to merit a score. There are 25 states in that category. Most of the searches were made in the East Coast states of New York, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. Heading the list is the District of Columbia, probably because the professional political and security elite was busy monitoring this kind of trend.

Another way of gauging the ebb and flow of anti-Israel sentiment and the effect of rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas is to look at searches concerning the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Whereas the rallying cry “boycott Israel” is in decline over time worldwide, searches for BDS reveal a more even curve. Searches for BDS peaked in 2019, whereas searches for “boycott Israel” peaked in 2014. The good news is that the present bout generated only 65% of the interest of 2019, slightly lower than the level of interest during the 2008-9 bout.

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions: Worldwide



Source: Google Trends

Once again, Israel is fortunate that searches for the BDS movement in the US relative to its population were by far the lowest in the Western countries

compared to 29 in Germany, 15 in France, 28 in Canada, and 18 in the UK. With amazing consistency, there were almost as many searches for the movement in Ireland as in the US though its population is one-fiftieth that of the US. New Zealand, which, like Ireland, is known for its anti-Israel stance (as reflected in relatively large interest in antisemitic terms as well), scored similarly to Ireland with an even smaller population. In the US, searches for BDS also peaked in 2019, with interest in the movement during the recent bout of fighting peaking at only one-third the interest of two years ago.

Google Trends provides an important corrective to the impression created by highly visible anti-Israel protests and the rise in antisemitic attacks in the US, which seem to indicate a surge in pro-Palestinian sentiment there. The attacks do indicate a growing Muslim, especially Arab, population in the US relative to a declining and aging Jewish population in shared urban spaces, rendering Jews more vulnerable.

But the solution is not to cower in the face of such attacks. In the short term, the Jewish population must start defending itself. In the long term, it must increase internal Jewish solidarity and knowledge of Judaism, fight assimilation, and support an increasing birth rate among America's Jewish population. There are plenty of fellow Americans who support them.

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