Combating BDS with a push of the button

The Act.II app creates a virtual situation room of pro-Israel experts

By Noa Amouyal

The condemnation of Israel as a cruel apartheid state is common in social media today. It is so loud and so unanimous that it often feels like there is nothing one can do to combat it.

During Israel's last two conflicts against Hamas in the Gaza Strip - Operations Protective Edge (2014) and Pillar of Defense (2012) - the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya realized that this loud voice speaking lies against Israel could be just as threatening as the rockets being fired against it.

Former IDC student body chairman Yarden Ben Yosef and his colleagues created Act.II, a wide-ranging grassroots campaign app that lets individuals combat BDS in the palm of their hand.

"Act.II is the place where all pro-Israel advocates, communities and organizations meet to work together to fight back against the demonization and delegitimization of the Jewish state," the app's description in the iTunes store reads.

But Act.II is more than just an app. It is a campaign that taps into the collective knowledge of IDC students who together speak 35 languages, hail from 86 countries and have connections to the pro-Israel community all over the world.

"When you work together, with the same goals and values, you can be incredibly powerful in the social media landscape," Ben Yosef explained.

In this virtual situation room of experts, they detect instances where Israel is being assailed online and they program the app to find missions that can be carried out with a push of a button.

Ben Yosef gives an example of an Australian business that refused to serve Israelis. As retaliation, the app instructed its users to criticize the firm in Facebook, bringing its rating down from 4.6 out of 5 to a dismal 1.4.

"We can send a clear, direct message this way. Blatant anti-Israel sentiment is not acceptable," he said.

Act.II is not, however, operating alone. Fighting delegitimization is a global effort that is strongly supported by the Strategic Affairs Ministry headed by Gilad Erdan. Working with the government, Ben Yosef believes, is a strategic way to combat Israel's much debated image problem.

"Our goal of changing Israel's image is the responsibility of its citizens, not just the government. Our power is in the collective and working together. We will only change things if we work alongside the government," he said.

Shoham Nicolet, co-founder and CEO of IAC, is eagerly anticipating what Act.II can do once it's in the public's hands.

"We saw the impact and the results of the app in no time [during its initial limited distribution]. We see how many posts are promoting hate and antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment, even before app was [officially] launched. I can only imagine what will happen when it's open to the public," he said.

While it may be difficult to get Israelis to agree on much, a platform like Act.II offers world Jewry an opportunity to fight for one thing the majority can rally behind: Israel.

"Israel is torn between many disagreements and splits in society. But when it comes to the existence of the state and when the legitimacy of the State of Israel is under attack, it's clear that everybody should be involved and defend the country," Prof. Uriel Reichman, president and founder of the IDC, said.

"It's not just criticizing settlements, but it's a very sophisticated attack against the Jewish state. Some of the activities are a sad reminder of Nazi Germany in its [portrayal of basic characteristics of Jews]," he said, pointing to many posts that rely on classic antisemitic motifs of Jews with hooked noses and blood on their hands to convey their message.

Reichman said the Act.II project is a powerful representation of everything the IDC stands for: exemplary research and hi-tech prowess, the fact that its student body is a (mostly) international one, and being proud advocates of the State of Israel.

Herzliya, where the IDC is based, is a primarily left-wing city. But for Ben Yosef and Reichman, combating BDS is not a partisan issue.

"They want to make the Jewish state a pariah state of the civilized world. Everyone in my view should protest against it," Reichman said.

"There's no place more natural, in my view, to combat BDS than the IDC, and there is no better partner than the IAC to build the bridge between Israel and the Jewish world," Ben Yosef added. "This isn't about Right, Left. It's about being Israeli and doing what's best for Israel. Our enemies don't care what party we belong to."

Erdan launched the comprehensive 4IL campaign during New York City's annual Celebrate Israel Parade on June 4.