

# The Dangers of Arab Normalization with Israel

Dana El Kurd

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Arab Center Washington DC  
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The controversy surrounding Arab normalization with Israel is constantly in the news. Examples pop up often, such as the Kuwaiti official visiting the Occupied Territories, Emirati forces coordinating with their Israeli counterparts, and the Doha Film Institute funding an Israeli director. In the past, prior to the creation of the Palestinian Authority, there was little debate as to what constituted normalization. But now, with the ambiguity of the control of Palestinian territories as well as the mixed messages from Palestinians themselves, the issue of normalization needs to be reassessed and redefined.

As this following analysis demonstrates, normalization with Israel is a shortsighted policy on the part of governments, organizations, and individuals. Such a policy poses a risk to both the Palestinian cause and the Arab world's stability. It also gives the green light to American policymakers to pursue a suboptimal and unsustainable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **Arguments for Normalization: Direct and Indirect**

Normalization can be defined as pursuing policies (at the level of governments) or actions (at the level of individuals and groups) that treat Israel and the Israeli people as a normal part of the Middle East, ignoring the role of the Israeli state and Israeli citizens in the ethnic cleansing and displacement of Palestinians. Normalization would seek to move forward with connections to Israel and Israelis without

holding them accountable for ongoing crimes against the Palestinian people.

Arguments in favor of normalization can be categorized into two categories: those by direct normalizers, and those by indirect normalizers. The direct normalizers are those who argue that Arab governments should actively pursue normalization with the state of Israel for strategic reasons. The indirect normalizers are those who argue that while they do not support Israel and its policies, visiting the Palestinian territories does not constitute normalization.

#### *Direct Argument*

The argument that Arab governments should actively pursue normalization rests on the assumption that there are shared strategic concerns between Israel and the Arab states. Specifically, the specter of Iran is often brought up as the key common threat between them. Iran's involvement in the domestic affairs of Iraq, Syria, and other Arab states, as well as its historical animosity to monarchies in the Gulf, give the impression that there may be shared interests between Israel and the Arab governments on this issue.

However, while Iran's foreign policy has in fact entailed excessive and destabilizing involvement in the domestic affairs of many Arab states, the idea that Iran poses the largest threat to the Arab world is debatable at best. Principally, it ignores the historical legacy of Israel's involvement in the region since it was established in 1948 at the expense of the Palestinians. Israel has been a belligerent force,

attacking eight different Arab countries in its short history; in alphabetical order, they are Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. This argument also does not take into account the effect Israel has had on the over-militarization of surrounding states and the impact this has had on their political development. Given Israel's role in the region's history, it is quite the stretch to assume that the Israeli state would ever be interested in the stability or development of its Arab neighbors. In fact, Israel's strategy has always been to retain a qualitative military advantage over its neighbors, which has had the effect of making those states ineffective in maintaining internal stability.

And, despite all the fear mongering, Arab publics still do not perceive Iran as the largest threat to the region; indeed, Israel ranks higher on their threat index. The Arab Opinion Index (conducted by the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies) shows that the biggest threat to the region in Arab eyes remains Israel. Moreover, the same survey shows that since 2011, over 84 percent of Arab publics reject their home countries' diplomatic recognition of Israel.

If Arab governments were to pursue normalization now, as they are faced with a growing number of threats, the consequences could be severe in terms of internal unrest. Such a policy would anger large parts of the Arab public as well as provide legitimizing evidence for radical groups in the region, which often make the claim that they alone are the true representatives of Arab/Muslim causes. It is

also likely that normalization with Israel would serve to isolate Arab governments further and weaken their soft power and legitimacy in the region. In many ways, such normalization is likely to cede more ground to Iran than any strategic advantage Israeli cooperation could provide.

### *The Indirect Argument*

The indirect argument is more benign. Many who make the indirect argument believe that going to the West Bank or Gaza, especially at the behest of Palestinians themselves, does not constitute normalization. As long as the Palestinian Authority is involved in some capacity, there are many who rationalize visits to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and/or Israel as legitimate (one example is retired Saudi General Anwar Eshki's highly publicized visit in summer 2016).

This, however, is a false pretext. The reality is that there is no Palestinian state with autonomous borders. In 1995, the Oslo II Agreements were signed between the PLO and the Israeli state. These agreements outlined the areas under Palestinian, Israeli, and joint control, with the idea that the zones of joint or Israeli control would only exist temporarily until the Palestinian Authority (PA) achieved statehood by 1999. Thus the territories were split into Areas A, B, and C: Area A is under full PA civil and security control; Area B is under PA civil control and Israeli security control; and Area C is under full Israeli civil and security control. However, not only was the Palestinian Authority denied statehood by the 1999

deadline, but the areas under some or full Israeli control (Areas B and C) have been expanding exponentially with increased settlement activity. In Area A, supposedly under PA control, Palestinians often face incursions and raids by the Israeli army. And in Area B, Palestinians struggle with land confiscations and expanded settlements as well.

Moreover, the borders of the Palestinian territories are completely controlled by the Israeli occupation. If entering the West Bank from any of the border crossings on the Jordanian side, visitors are faced with Israeli—not Palestinian—border control officers. The same can be said of travel within the Palestinian territories; moving from city to city just within the West Bank puts travelers under the authority of Israeli officers at checkpoints, both temporary and permanent. In reality, therefore, there is no zone of full Palestinian sovereignty. The simple fact is that when Arabs visit the territories, they are subjecting themselves to Israeli oversight and approval.

Oftentimes, those who want to visit Palestine claim that they are visiting at the behest of Palestinians in order to “support” the statehood project specifically, or that they are visiting to see the Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques and maintain a “Muslim presence” there. These are not convincing arguments. First, tolerating visits to the territories under the guise of “solidarity” opens up the path for more dangerous transgressions. Those visitors who have no ties to Palestinian ID’s or passports are not obligated to stay in the territories. They have freedom of movement, which Palestinians do

not enjoy, and can easily go into “Israel proper.” And then where does this end? What differentiates Jerusalem from Nazareth or Haifa? The logic behind visiting one part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories will eventually transfer itself to visiting Israel within the Green Line. But, opening up the space for Arabs to come to the territories will allow much more dangerous precedents to be set, and we cannot be sure of the intentions of all those who visit under the guise of solidarity.

There are also practical effects of such solidarity. Maintaining a Muslim presence is often the excuse for religious visits to Jerusalem, and it is the excuse Kuwaiti visitors provided for their recent decisions. But how are Palestinians helped if a Kuwaiti recites the noon prayer in the Aqsa mosque? Materially and logistically speaking, what is the tangible effect? The reality is that there is none. Attendance at the Aqsa has been declining, but not because there is a lack of Muslims within Palestine. It is because of a targeted policy on the part of the Israeli government to choke off the Old City of Jerusalem. Other Arabs or non-Arab Muslims who visit Jerusalem are not doing anything to solve this problem or address these policies. They are in fact legitimizing Israeli control over Muslim spaces, which has had an exacerbating effect on levels of violence and conflict as a result.

### **Conditions under the Palestinian Authority**

Even setting aside the fact that visiting the Palestinian territories means ceding to Israeli authority, visiting the Palestinian territories in

support of the Palestinian Authority is also a questionable endeavor. Palestinians on the ground are increasingly voicing their concerns over the PA's representation and governance. Not only were parliamentary elections in 2006 overturned, but Mahmoud Abbas remains in power as the president, exceeding his term limit.

Furthermore, despite the PA's quasi-state status, it has the capacity to engage in repression quite effectively (with the help of the Israeli occupation forces). Many Palestinians have complained that the PA is increasingly operating as a "police state." Not only is the police to citizen ratio incredibly high, but the PA has also expanded its purview over online comments and activism, as well as academics and students. Moreover, human rights organizations have documented that those who are imprisoned by the PA are subjected to beatings and other violent measures. Journalists, opposition groups, and researchers have all been targeted by the PA, often with coordination and information from the Israeli government. Thus, mere criticism of the PA has become dangerous for Palestinians in the territories. Coupled with the fact that almost every family relies on the PA in some way for their livelihood, this dynamic means that dissent is effectively silenced.

In many ways, the repressive capacity of the PA has influenced Palestinian societal dynamics. Specifically, research shows that the authoritarian nature of the PA has had a polarizing effect on Palestinian society. In such a polarized context, it becomes more difficult for Palestinians to cooperate with each other

across political lines, thus inhibiting their ability to resist the occupation in a unified manner as they have done in the past. Analysis of Palestinian collective action over time indeed shows increasing fragmentation as well as incremental ineffectiveness. Therefore, even the argument that visitors are merely supporting the Palestinian cause of statehood is flawed; they only serve to legitimize an increasingly illegitimate statehood project—in addition to normalizing relations with Israel.

### **Alternatives to Normalization**

If Arabs and world Muslims are concerned about the "Muslim presence" in areas of religious significance, they could help by pursuing a number of strategies like supporting campaigns to keep Jerusalemites in their homes or funding renovations to these religious sites. Their physical presence is irrelevant; in fact, it only serves to erode the cause they are claiming to help. Organizations such as Taawon, Burj Luq Luq Social Center Society, or the Dalia Association— among a number of other programs designed to assist Palestinians in their struggle against displacement—provide funds for Jerusalem revitalization programs which directly help keep Jerusalemite families in their homes in the face of Israeli aggression and settlement threats. For those who want to stand with Palestinians, donating to and assisting such organizations is the place to start.

As for those who make the direct argument in favor of normalization, taking a quick look at the current instability in the region today, Israel's historical record on relations with

“allied” Arab states, as well as Arab public opinion should quickly dissuade those who may believe some strategic advantage could come of this policy. The reality is that normalizing with Israel would only exacerbate the threats the region faces today: civil unrest, radicalization, and growing Iranian influence.

## Conclusion

Arab governments who choose normalization with Israel risk being shortsighted since they invite blowback from both regional adversaries and their own people. While it is evident that many Palestinians are understandably tired of their isolation and yearn to make links and interact with their Arab brothers and sisters, this could be a slippery slope. Such a policy does not take into consideration the long-term consequences of allowing those with potentially nefarious intentions to engage with Israelis and Israeli institutions. Whether intended or not, such engagement is de facto acknowledgement of Israel’s policies and ideological underpinnings.

Neither is normalization a far-sighted practice when it comes to the role of the Palestinian Authority. Except for those known for clear political positions and anti-Zionist credentials, a policy of normalization breaks the mental barrier among Arabs against engaging with an

occupied territory while the occupier remains. Arguably, this may eventually break the mental barrier of dealing with the occupier itself, despite the threat to Palestinian national rights.

Finally, normalization is likely to give the United States an excuse for proposing a less than acceptable peace initiative to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. American officials may see normalization as full acceptance of Israel by Arab governments, at the expense of Palestinians. Especially given the exacerbated anti-Palestinian stance of the current American administration, Arab normalization at this time would smooth the path for American policymakers in their pursuit of a solution amenable only to the Israeli side. Arab governments only have their rejection of normalization left as a bargaining chip; if they normalize, it would signal their complete abandonment of the Palestinian issue despite the fact that “three quarters of the Arab people continue to believe the Palestinian cause is one which concerns all Arabs.” This would put Palestinians in an even weaker negotiating position, and lead either to further Israeli intransigence and belligerence, or an unacceptable and unsustainable resolution to the conflict. Thus, normalization only serves to escalate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which bodes poorly for all parties involved.

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