COMMENTARY | POLITICS

Arab Normalization and the Palestinian Struggle for Liberation

By: Yara Hawari · October, 2022

Introduction

The term "normalization" emerged following the signing of the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, which stated that the "signatories shall establish among themselves relationships normal to states at peace with one another." Previously, relations with the Israeli regime were more colloquially referred to as *khiyanah* (betrayal or treachery). In response to the term "normalization," Palestinians and Arabs began using "anti-normalization" to describe the refusal to deal with the Israeli regime as a normal entity.[1]

While the shallow discourse of peace-building that emerged from the 1993 Oslo Accords initially overshadowed anti-normalization efforts, in 2007, Palestinian civil society renewed its consensus on the subject through the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The movement set forth clear guidelines for Palestinians and Arabs that stress the importance of refusing to acknowledge the Israeli regime as an entity entitled to normal relations with those it oppresses, as well as their neighbors. This includes the refusal to take part in projects or events that bring together Palestinians/Arabs and Israelis, where the Israeli party does not recognize Palestinians' fundamental rights under international law, and in a

manner that is not aligned with the spirit of co-resistance. Palestinians called on Arabs to adhere to these guidelines in response to the Israeli regime's persistent efforts to normalize its settler-colonial presence across the region, noting their shared history and struggle against the Zionist project.

Despite this renewed demand from Palestinian civil society, Arab regimes' policies toward normalizing relations with the Israeli regime have shifted at an alarming pace. This was epitomized by the 2020 Abraham Accords, which, rather than bring about peace and stability to the region as claimed by its proponents, brought together authoritarian governments to sign weapons deals and further intelligence sharing.

Yet, Arab regimes' normalization of the Zionist project is not a new phenomenon, and neither is opposition to it. Normalization has been a feature of regional geopolitics for a century. Thus, this commentary outlines the historical and contemporary normalization maneuvers across the region; it then draws a distinction between Arab regimes and the Arab people, who have continually opposed normalization. It concludes by describing the implications of normalization policies for Palestinian liberation and the future of the region.

A History of Normalization

In the decade after the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine, Arab leaders engaged in secret negotiations with the Israeli regime. Most prominent among them was Morocco, which secretly fostered relations with the regime's security services, the Mossad, under King Hassan II in the 1960s. This included allowing the Mossad to open a small office in Rabat.

Such cooperation peaked at the 1965 Arab League Summit in Casablanca, where the Mossad was reportedly involved in helping the Moroccan secret services bug

the hotel rooms and conference halls of the Arab leaders in attendance. The Israeli secret services also trained their Moroccan counterparts in anti-insurgent tactics to use against the Polisario — the Western Sahara liberation movement. King Hassan II would later host secret meetings between the Mossad and Egyptian officials, which eventually led to the first official normalization deal between an Arab state, Egypt, and the Israeli regime.

After three decades of hostility, Egypt signed a treaty with the Israeli regime in 1979. In return, the Israeli regime withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula, which it had occupied since 1967. Fourteen years later, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli regime signed the Oslo Accords, opening the door for further regional normalization. Indeed, the Palestinian leadership's recognition of the Israeli regime as an outcome of the accords signaled that it was no longer a taboo to do so.

Not long after Oslo, Jordan normalized relations with the Israeli regime in the 1994 Wadi Araba Treaty. The agreement officially ended the state of war between the two nations, establishing full diplomatic relations and cementing the position of the border crossings between them. In return, Jordan received substantial military and economic aid from the West, and cemented its position as a key US ally in the region.

In 1996, Qatar became the first Gulf state to de facto recognize the Israeli regime by establishing trade relations. At the 1997 Middle East and North Africa Economic Summit in Doha, the Qataris hosted the Israeli trade minister — a move that outraged the Saudi Arabian regime at the time. The relationship deteriorated, however, following the Israeli regime's assault on Gaza in 2008, and Qatar subsequently ceased all formal ties. In 2010, the Israeli regime rejected a Qatari initiative to re-establish relations as part of an agreement to allow Qatar to send aid to Gaza. However, informal relations between the two regimes have continued, as has a modest amount of trade.

While it would take other regimes longer to formally normalize with the Israeli regime, covert relations and cooperation around security and intelligence were rife following the Oslo Accords. Concerns over the possibility of domestic unrest were a driving factor, even more so once the uprisings across North Africa and the Arab World began in 2011. Former US President Barack Obama's initial and shallow support for the uprisings worried autocratic Gulf states, particularly when the US began pressuring them to pursue democratic reforms. His administration's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran forged an even closer bond between Israel and the UAE, both of which felt betrayed. Indeed, anti-Iranian sentiment and the rise of a new generation of (unelected) leadership committed to advancing ties with the West and breaking from the legacy of Arab nationalism, has brought many Gulf states in closer alignment with the Israeli regime.

So, too, has the prospect of shared surveillance technologies. A recent investigation into Israeli spyware Pegasus by the New York Times revealed that Israeli officials offered the program to the UAE as a "truce offering" in 2013. The offering was intended to compensate for an incident three years prior, in which Mossad agents assassinated a Hamas official in Dubai without informing the Emirati government of the operation. The spyware came at the right moment, when the UAE was actively suppressing political opposition in its attempt to curb a domestic uprising.

In September 2020, the UAE and Bahrain became the third and fourth Arab states to formally establish diplomatic relations with the Israeli regime via the Trump administration's Abraham Accords. The agreements were hailed as historic peace treaties by much of the mainstream media, despite the fact that the two countries had never been at war with the Israeli regime. Nevertheless, the media were correct in asserting the deals' historic significance due to their brazen nature.

Shortly after the accords were finalized, the UAE signed a $23.37 billion arms deal with the US, which included F-35 fighter jets and Reaper drone systems. Former US

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed to have authorized the sale in keeping with the spirit of the Abraham Accords. Netanyahu initially voiced his opposition to the weapons sale out of fear that it might challenge the Israeli regime's qualitative military edge in the region, but later reversed his position.

While Saudi Arabia was not officially part of the Abraham Accords, it supported this policy shift. Indeed, had it opposed the accords, they would not have happened. Saudi Arabia's relationship with the Israeli regime has likewise seen some significant developments in 2022. After years of negotiations and intervention from the Biden administration, the Israeli regime consented to a 2017 arrangement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which saw the transfer of authority over the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir from the former country to the latter. Israel leveraged the need for its approval, which was required due to parameters outlined in the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, to compel Saudi Arabia to permit Israeli planes to fly through its airspace. On its part, the Egyptian regime has agreed to move the multilateral observer force from the islands to positions in the Sinai Peninsula.

In an official announcement, the Saudis did not mention the Israeli regime by name, but rather stated that they would, "open the kingdom's airspace for all air carriers that meet the requirements of the authority for overflying." This reflects Saudi Arabia's continued withholding from official normalization with the Israeli regime. Indeed, in July 2022, the Saudi Arabian foreign ministry reiterated its official line that normalization will come with the implementation of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for the establishment of two states along 1967 borders, the withdrawal of the Israeli regime from lands it occupied in 1967, and securing East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Yet, while the Arab League remains officially wedded to the Arab Peace Initiative, it is clear from all the maneuvers above that Palestinian statehood and the Palestinian struggle for liberation have been abandoned at the state level.

Separating the Regimes from the People

Nonetheless, these normalization deals do not reflect popular sentiment. Indeed, since the beginning of the Zionist project in Palestine, people across the region have consistently and unwaveringly opposed it. Even before 1948, Arab solidarity with Palestinians was evident, and during the 1948 war itself, thousands of volunteers from across the region joined the Arab Liberation Army in defense of Palestine. Other volunteer forces also made their way to Palestine, including from Iraq, whose sacrifice is honored to this day in a memorial just outside the Palestinian city of Jenin.

Years later, following the signing of the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, the Arab League voted to suspend and sanction Egypt. Diplomats were recalled and Egyptian officials complained of a political isolation campaign. Still, the sanctions were not ruinous, and Egypt's membership was fully reinstated in 1989. The betrayal felt by the Arab street, however, was much longer lasting. There were demonstrations across the region calling the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, a traitor for breaking with Arab consensus. Egyptians themselves also voiced their opposition to normalization, especially following the Israeli regime's invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Arab opposition to normalization remains strong to this day. A survey conducted between 2019-2020 by the Arab Center for Research and Policy reveals that, across the region, Arab peoples continue to be in opposition to diplomatic normalization with Israel. In Kuwait, Qatar, and Morocco, opposition to normalization stands at 88%, while in Saudi Arabia, only 6% are in favor of it. In fact, lawmakers and civil society organizations in Algeria, Tunisia, and Kuwait have been pushing to criminalize any form of normalization with the Israeli regime, and Iraq passed such a law in May 2022.

Notably, the UAE and Bahrain were not included in the 2019-2020 survey because it proved too difficult to ask questions of such a politically sensitive nature. Indeed, the UAE government has been particularly keen on silencing and punishing opposition to normalization, going so far as to send WhatsApp messages warning people that opposing the policy was forbidden. Prominent Emirati poet, Dhabiya Khamis Al-Muhairi, was banned from leaving the UAE after publicly announcing her opposition to normalization with the Israeli regime. As a result, opposition to normalization has mostly come from Emiratis in exile.

Similarly, Bahrain passed a law preventing government employees from opposing the government's normalization policy. Yet, just before the ratification of the Abraham Accords, dozens of grassroots and civil society groups in Bahrain published a collective statement rejecting the move and reiterating support for the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Among them were various leftist groups, unions, and professional associations. The Gulf Coalition Against Normalization was also established in 2019, bringing together activists from Gulf countries who are committed to Palestinian liberation.

There are likewise hundreds of individual rejections of normalization, where athletes and cultural figures from across the region refuse to take part in events with Israeli participants or funding. For example, Algerian judoka Fethi Nourine withdrew from the 2021 Tokyo Olympics to protest playing against an Israeli opponent. Nourine was suspended for ten years by the International Judo Federation as a result.

Normalization and the Future of the Region

Arab regime normalization with the Zionist project and the Israeli regime is not new. Indeed, the 2020 Abraham Accords were not a great surprise to Palestinians. Even so, they did usher in a new kind of brazen normalization that deepens diplomatic, military, and security coordination with the Israeli regime while

flaunting it publicly. The normalizing cultural events, publicity stunts, and social media campaigns between Emiratis and Israelis demonstrate this shift, which differs greatly from the forms of normalization established as a result of the 1979 Egyptian and 1994 Jordanian peace agreements.

Indeed, both of these regimes continue to downplay normalization as simply a matter of ending the state of war with a bordering entity — a point particularly important for Jordan, which hosts a large Palestinian refugee population. The potential for popular mobilization around the Palestinian cause to have a spillover effect, generating wider scrutiny of Egyptian and Jordanian leadership and calls for change, likewise compels the respective regimes to keep their normalization agreements discreet, and reflects the fragility of their holds on power. Thus, the trend is arguably that a state's ability to normalize so brazenly and publicly with the Israeli regime runs in tandem with the strength and stability of the authoritarianism to which its people are subjected.

This is precisely what makes these latest normalization maneuvers so worrying: the coming together of regional autocratic regimes to agree on allyship based on weapons deals, surveillance technology exchanges, and security coordination ushers in a frightening future for the peoples of the region. Opposing these normalization deals is thus not only about the struggle for Palestinian liberation, but also the struggle for a better and freer future for the people of the region.

Indeed, the struggle for Palestinian liberation must go hand in hand with the struggle for liberation for all Arab people under despotic regimes. Challenging and bringing about an end to these oppressive regimes must occur across borders because, ultimately, recognizing our shared struggle against shared foes is the only way we may actualize a future radically different from the one that is currently being written for us.

1. *To read this piece in French and Spanish, please click here and here, respectively. Al-Shabaka is*

grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

Al-Shabaka materials may be circulated with due attribution to Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. The opinion of individual members of Al-Shabaka's policy network do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization as a whole.