

Israel: Normalization or Sanctions?

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Israel is not a normal state. Israel is a colonial settler state, built on the ruins of Palestine and the dispossession of its people. This is why, for several decades, the Arab world—and many other countries in Africa and Asia—refused to recognize it and to maintain normal diplomatic, economic and cultural relations with Israel. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, normalization was the main aspiration of the Israeli leaders, i.e., to be accepted by its Arab neighbors as a legitimate state, and to have normal relationship with them. The continuous aggressive policy towards the Arab countries (1956, 1967, 1970, 1975) made it impossible for the pro-American Arab regimes to normalize relations with Israel, even when they expressed their readiness to do so, like Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1955 and later on in 1970 (under the mediation of Nahum Goldman, chairman of the World Jewish Congress).

Egypt President Anwar Sadat was the first Arab leader to break the siege on the state of Israel, and to call for normalization with it. In a dramatic move, he flew to Israel (1977) and addressed the Knesset with an unambiguous offer of normalization between the two states. Sadat's initiative was soon followed by diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel. Sadat's recognition of Israel was perceived by many around the Arab world, as treason, and in October 1981 he was assassinated.

The second major move in terms of normalization was the "mutual recognition" between the PLO and Israel, known as the Washington Declaration of Principles (September 1993). To a large extent, this recognition was even more far-reaching than the Egyptian one, because it was the direct victims of the Zionist colonization who now recognized the state of Israel. It paved the way for further steps of normalization: in 1995, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan recognized the state of Israel and opened an embassy in Tel Aviv, followed by Morocco, Tunisia and some Gulf countries, though without formal diplomatic relations.

The Israeli reaction to this historical development was, however, extremely disappointing for the Arab countries that made the choice of normalization: instead of starting a new page of regional cooperation based of peaceful coexistence with neighboring countries, the various Israeli governments made the choice of systematically violating the signed agreements with the Palestinians, to increase settlement activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, to demonstrate a total lack of good faith in the negotiation process with the Palestinian Authority, and worse even, to launch several military aggressions against Lebanon. Last but not least is the massacre of Gaza in January 2009.

In this sense, ending the anti-normalization campaign was not only a moral mistake but also a political failure: as a colonial-militarist state, Israel understands only pressure, and will stop its aggressive behavior only if obliged to do so. It is as simple as that.

The international campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel can provide an excellent framework to fight normalization with Israel. Its primary advantage is that it concerns governments, corporations and citizens alike, and can be adapted and specified to concrete realities. From cutting diplomatic relations (like Venezuela and Bolivia after the Gaza massacre), to divestment of U.S. Christian churches from Israeli educational institutions, through public boycotts of Carmel and Jaffa Israeli fruits and vegetables; from boycott of Israeli basketball teams (obliging

the competitions to be moved elsewhere or to be played without spectators), to the suspension of the upgrading of the Association Agreement between the EU and Israel, as decided by the European Union Council.

The state of Israel has put itself outside international law, outside the community of civilized countries, and as such must be treated as an outcast state. This has been the case for decades, but today no one can ignore it anymore. Boycotting normal relationships with Israel is a matter of international public health, as was the case toward South Africa before the fall of the apartheid regime. Boycott includes all fields: diplomatic, economic, financial, sports, culture, academic. The accumulated effect of a variety of BDS initiatives will be felt in Israel quicker than what many skeptical individuals are claiming, for Israel is extremely dependent on the world and its citizens sensitive to their public image abroad.

In the framework of the BDS campaign, a question has been raised: “what about organizations and individuals who clearly and openly oppose Israeli colonialism? Should there be exceptions in the boycott policy?” Concerning this issue, one can learn from the South African example: the African National Congress knew how to separate friends and friendly organizations from the rest, but without necessarily making it a stated policy, preferring a pragmatic, case-by-case, approach. One thing for sure: it would be wrong to come to the BDS campaign with the open demand “make a statement taking my organization out of the boycott list.” Let the campaign decide, through its own ways and rhythms, according to the needs of the campaign itself, its unity and internal coherence.

Though there is great importance to building an alliance and cooperation with the progressive Israelis who unconditionally endorse the BDS campaign and unambiguously reject normalization, it is up to the Palestinian (and Arab) national movement and the BDS campaign to decide if and when to publicly announce where the boycott policy will not apply. Having on many occasions been treated differently than other Israeli activists and organizations, I have learnt one important lesson: not everything has to be stated loud and clear, and sometimes constructive ambiguity can help make good politics.

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On Normalization—Continued: Daniel Barenboim in Cairo

Last month, the great conductor Daniel Barenboim was invited for a concert in Cairo. Among his many passports, Barenboim has also an Israeli one, a fact that reopened, in Egypt, the public debate about normalization.

At the Austrian Cultural Center of Cairo, the maestro tried to justify his presence in Egypt: “I don’t represent the Israeli government and I am here as a person who has never hesitated to criticize the Israeli government.”

Despite Barenboim’s rich record in supporting Palestinian rights, his many projects aimed at promoting high-level music in the West Bank and his known friendship with late Edward Said, his performance in Cairo was criticized by many Egyptian intellectuals and presented as an un-direct way to promote normalization with Israel. “I strongly protest against his coming”, wrote the well known writer Yussef el-Qaed, “and don’t tell me that he has a Palestinian passport or that he was a

close friend of Edward Said. I don't want to hear it. Just after the Israeli attack on Gaza, at the beginning of 2009, such a visit is not timely, to say the least."

There were opposite opinions too, like the one expressed by Gamal Ghitany, chief editor of the cultural weekly *Akhbar al-Adab*, who wrote: "This is by no way normalization, and it is a dangerous game to pretend it is. This conductor is a monument. He has always been active for peace and opposed the Israeli aggression in the Middle East. We cannot reject someone only because of his religion. Barenboim is a citizen of the world who has two passports, an Israeli but also a Palestinian one. Personally, I have nothing against him."

Ghitany is suggesting to re-open the political debate on normalization with Israel: "If I meet an Israeli colleague in a conference, do I have to leave the hall or will I confront him and present my point of view?" The rejection of normalization among Arab and Egyptian intellectuals includes the decision not to come to the Palestinian Occupied Territories, and Ghitany doesn't like it: "Honestly, I would like to go to Ramallah and to support, there, the Palestinians. If I don't do it, it is only because I don't want to be under a fire of critics."

Ibrahim Aslan, another Egyptian novelist, supports the idea of an Arab conference on normalization and adds: "I am extremely sad that no one was abler to share with the Palestinians their joy when Jerusalem was chosen as the 2009 capital of Arab culture."

P.S.

* From Michael Warschawski's blog:

<http://www.alternativenews.org/michael-warschawski/1931-normalization-or-sanctions-.html>