

Is Normalizing Ties with Israel the Price for standing up to Iran?



Jordanian protesters hold slogans reading in Arabic, "no to normalisation with the Zionist enemy (L)", "gas, enemy, occupation (C)" during a protest in Amman against a deal to buy Israeli natural gas, on October 7, 2016. Photo AFP

The term 'normalization' became part of the political lexicon of the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) after [Egypt](#) concluded the historic [peace deal with Israel](#) in 1979, ending decades of military conflict and ushering in a new era of faltering peace-making between [Israel](#) and its Arab neighbours. Nearly two decades later, [Jordan](#) and the Palestinians followed suit.

Yet the term [normalization](#) (tatbee in Arabic) has become almost synonymous with betrayal or treason because of widespread opposition to the peace treaties in Egypt and Jordan.

There are two main reasons for this. First, the peace agreements were concluded by the political

leaders and had little or no popular support. Secondly, continued **Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territories** undermined support for peace with Israel. This was further exacerbated by subsequent Israeli wars in **Lebanon** and the **Gaza Strip**. All these events have strengthened the anti-normalization front in Arab politics. Hardliners who remain fundamentally opposed to the existence of Israel are not hard to find in Egypt, Jordan and beyond. In other words, hostility to normalizing ties with Israel in the Middle East has many takers but at the same time is diminishing, primarily among Saudi and other Gulf leaders, as a perceived common threat, **Iran**, has materialized.

For those against peace with Israel, fighting normalization has become something of a rearguard action, an attempt to achieve by other means what they could not achieve with war. Groups opposed to normalization continue to guard the blanket **boycott of Israel** that has been in place since the country's creation. For example, they refuse to have any dealings with Israelis directly or indirectly. They refuse to attend events that host Israelis or be associated in any way with any conferences/festivals organized by Israel.

Those who break that boycott, so-called normalizers, do so at a great risk to their reputation. The late Egyptian playwright **Ali Salem** was ostracized by the cultural and artistic elite for visiting Israel and for expressing support for normalizing ties with that country.

Most recently, an award-winning Lebanese film, *The Insult*, was banned from a Palestinian festival not because of any controversial content but because the director, **Ziad Doueiri**, was deemed to have crossed a red line: he had shot a previous film, *The Attack*, in Israel, which is regarded as a form of normalization.

Since Egypt and Jordan signed peace agreements with Israel, anti-normalization committees have sprung up, replacing the now almost forgotten **Arab League committee** set up decades ago to **enforce** a blanket boycott of Israel. It monitors compliance with the boycott of any company or corporation that does business with Israel or has pro-Israeli owners. In reality, those who break the boycott suffer only the ignominy of naming and shaming, with little or no material consequences. (

In countries where being anti-Israel has been the defining feature of politics (in fact the benchmark of patriotism) for decades, being called a normalizer has become one of the worst political slurs one can use to tarnish the reputation of a public figure.



Israeli swimmers pose for a souvenir picture at the 10th FINA World Swimming Championships (25m) at the Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Sports Complex in Dubai on December 14, 2010. Photo AFP

Reports that the Saudis have met Israeli officials in secret have surfaced every now and then in the media for years. Yet never so persistently as in the past year or so, since the two countries have been brought closer by their common fear of Iran's regional ambition. So much so that Arab media outlets hostile to Saudi Arabia have reported that the crown prince himself, **Mohammed bin Salman**, had visited Israel in secret – something the Saudis categorically deny.

Although almost all observers speak of a convergence of interests between Israel and Saudi Arabia regarding Iran, Arab officials never publicly acknowledge that. They even continue to trade 'normalizer' accusations with each other whenever convenient. In the current dispute between **Qatar** and its Gulf neighbours, for example, it is quite common to hear media from either side of the political divide accusing the other side, either directly or indirectly, of being a normalizer.

As Tehran seeks to extend its influence in the Middle East by promoting and supporting non-state actors, such as Lebanon's Shiite **Hezbollah** movement, the Palestinian militant groups **Hamas** and Islamic Jihad or the **Yemeni Houthi rebels**, the convergence between the Gulf security concerns and those of Israel are becoming more evident. The stakes were raised on 4 November 2017, when Houthi rebels fired an Iranian-made ballistic missile toward the international airport in the Saudi capital Riyadh. The Saudis **intercepted** the missile and no damage was reported. However, the political fallout has continued to reverberate across the region.

Foremost among the consequences is a growing sense that the Saudis, along with the **United Arab Emirates** and **Bahrain**, are now pursuing de facto normalization with Israel by means of closer security and political coordination to contain the growing Iranian threat. But while the Arabs have remained tight-lipped on the matter, the Israelis have been speaking about it **publicly**.

Some have even suggested that the Saudis have been prodding Israel to wage war in order to **eliminate** one of the most effective Iranian proxy militias, namely the Lebanese Hezbollah.

If Israel were to succeed, it could significantly weaken the Iranians' stranglehold on the region and may even undermine Tehran's influence in **war-torn Syria**. And if normalizing ties with Israel is the price for achieving that, it is a price worth paying, as far as the Gulf Arabs are concerned.
