

## **Israel's Exceptionalism: Normalizing the Abnormal, PACBI, 31 October 2011**

In the Palestinian and Arab struggle against Israeli colonization, occupation and apartheid, the “normalization” of Israel is a concept that has generated controversy because it is often misunderstood or because there are disagreements on its parameters. This is despite the near consensus among Palestinians and people in the Arab region on rejecting the treatment of Israel as a “normal” state with which business as usual can be conducted. Here, we discuss the definition of normalization that the great majority of Palestinian civil society, as represented in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, has adopted since November 2007, and elaborate on the nuances that it takes on in different contexts.

It is helpful to think of normalization as a “colonization of the mind,” whereby the oppressed subject comes to believe that the oppressor’s reality is the only “normal” reality that must be subscribed to, and that the oppression is a fact of life that must be coped with. Those who engage in normalization either ignore this oppression, or accept it as the status quo that can be lived with. In an attempt to whitewash its violations of international law and human rights, Israel attempts to re-brand [1] itself, or present itself as normal -- even “enlightened” -- through an intricate array of relations and activities encompassing hi-tech, cultural, legal, LGBT and other realms.

A key principle that underlines the term normalization is that it is entirely based on political, rather than racial, considerations and is therefore in perfect harmony with the BDS movement’s rejection of all forms of racism and racial discrimination. Countering normalization is a means to resist oppression, its mechanisms and structures. As such, it is categorically unrelated to or conditioned upon the identity of the oppressor.

We break down normalization into three categories that correspond to differences pertaining to the varied contexts of Israel’s colonial oppression and apartheid. It is important to consider these minimum definitions as the basis for solidarity and action.

### 1) Normalization in the context of the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the Arab world

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) has defined normalization specifically in a Palestinian and Arab context “as the participation in any project, initiative or activity, in Palestine or internationally, that aims (implicitly or explicitly) to bring together Palestinians (and/or Arabs) and Israelis (people or institutions) without placing as its goal resistance to and exposure of the Israeli occupation and all forms of discrimination and oppression against the Palestinian people.” [2] This is the definition endorsed by the BDS National Committee (BNC).

For Palestinians in the occupied West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza, any project with Israelis that is not based on a resistance framework serves to normalize relations. We define this resistance framework as one that is based on recognition of the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people and on the commitment to resist, in diverse ways, all forms of oppression against Palestinians, including but not limited to, ending the occupation, establishing full and equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and promoting and advocating for the right of return for Palestinian refugees – this may aptly be called a posture of “co-resistance” [3]. Doing otherwise allows for everyday, ordinary relations to exist alongside and independent of the continuous crimes being committed by Israel against the Palestinian people. This feeds complacency and gives the false and harmful impression of normalcy in a patently abnormal situation of colonial oppression.

Projects, initiatives and activities that do not begin from a position of shared principles to resist Israel’s oppression invariably allow for an approach to dealing with Israel as if its violations can be deferred, and as if coexistence (as opposed to “co-resistance”) can precede, or lead to, the end of oppression. In the process, Palestinians, regardless of intentions, end up serving as a fig-leaf [4] for Israelis who are able to benefit from a “business-as-usual” environment, perhaps even allowing

Israelis to feel their conscience is cleared for having engaged Palestinians they are usually accused of oppressing and discriminating against.

The peoples of the Arab world, with their diverse national, religious and cultural backgrounds and identities, whose future is more tangibly tied to the future of Palestinians than the larger international community, not least because of continued Israeli political, economic and military threats on their countries, and the still-prevalent and strong kinship with the Palestinians, face similar issues with regards to normalization. So long as Israel's oppression continues, any engagement with Israelis (individuals or institutions) that is not within the resistance framework outlined above, serves to underline the normality of Israeli occupation, colonialism and apartheid in the lives of people in the Arab world. It is, therefore, imperative that people in the Arab world shun all relations with Israelis, unless based on co-resistance. This is not a call to refrain from understanding Israelis, their society and polity. It is a call to condition any such knowledge and any such contact on the principles of resistance until the time when comprehensive Palestinian and other Arab rights are met.

BDS activists may always go above and beyond our basic minimum requirements if they identify subcategories within those we have identified. In Lebanon or Egypt, for instance, boycott campaigners may go beyond the PACBI/BNC definition of normalization given their position in the Arab world, whereas those in Jordan, say, may have different considerations.

## 2) Normalization in the context of the Palestinian citizens of Israel

Palestinian citizens of Israel – those Palestinians who remained steadfast on their land after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 despite repeated efforts to expel them and subject them to military law, institutionalized discrimination, or apartheid [4] – face an entirely different set of considerations. They may be confronted with two forms of normalization. The first, which we may call coercive everyday relations, are those relations that a colonized people, and those living under apartheid, are forced to take part in if they are to survive, conduct their everyday lives and make a living within the established oppressive structures. For the Palestinian citizens of Israel, as taxpayers, such coercive everyday relations include daily employment in Israeli places of work and the use of public services and institutions such as schools, universities and hospitals. Such coercive relations are not unique to Israel and were present in other colonial and apartheid contexts such as India and South Africa, respectively. Palestinian citizens of Israel cannot be rationally asked to cut such ties, at least not yet.

The second form of normalization is that in which Palestinian citizens of Israel do not have to engage as a requirement of survival. Such normalization might include participation in international forums as representatives of Israel (such as in the Eurovision song competition) or in Israeli events directed at an international audience. The key to understanding this form of normalization is to consider that when Palestinians engage in such activities without placing them within the same resistance framework mentioned above, they contribute, even if inadvertently, to a deceptive appearance of tolerance, democracy, and normal life in Israel for an international audience who may not know better. Israelis, and the Israeli establishment, may in turn use this against international BDS proponents and those struggling against Israeli injustices by accusing them of being “holier” than Palestinians. In these instances, Palestinians promote relations with mainstream Israeli institutions beyond what constitutes the mere need for survival. The absence of vigilance in this matter has the effect of telling the Palestinian public that they can live with and accept apartheid, should engage Israelis on their own terms, and forgo any act of resistance. This is the type of normalization that many Palestinian citizens of Israel, along with PACBI, are increasingly coming to identify and confront.

## 3) Normalization in the International Context

In the international arena, normalization does not operate all that differently and follows the same logic. While the BDS movement targets complicit Israeli institutions, in the case of normalization

there are other nuances to consider. Generally, international supporters of BDS are asked to refrain from participating in any event that morally or politically equates the oppressor and oppressed, and presents the relationship between Palestinians and Israelis as symmetrical [5]. Such an event should be boycotted because it normalizes Israel's colonial domination over Palestinians and ignores the power structures and relations embedded in the oppression.

### Dialogue

In all these contexts, “dialogue” and engagement are often presented as alternatives to boycott. Dialogue, if it occurs outside the resistance framework that we have outlined, becomes dialogue for the sake of dialogue, which is a form of normalization that hinders the struggle to end injustice. Dialogue, “healing,” and “reconciliation” processes that do not aim to end oppression, regardless of the intentions behind them, serve to privilege oppressive co-existence at the cost of co-resistance, for they presume the possibility of coexistence before the realization of justice. The example of South Africa elucidates this point perfectly, where reconciliation, dialogue and forgiveness came after the end of apartheid, not before, regardless of the legitimate questions raised regarding the still existing conditions of what some have called “economic apartheid.”

### Two Examples of Normalization Efforts: OneVoice and IPCRI

While many, if not most, normalization projects are sponsored and funded by international organizations and governments, many of these projects are operated by Palestinian and Israeli partners, often with generous international funding. The political, often Israel-centered, framing of the “partnership” is one of the most problematic aspects of these joint projects and institutions. PACBI's analysis of OneVoice [6], a joint Palestinian-Israeli youth-oriented organization with chapters in North America and extensions in Europe, exposed OneVoice as one more project that brings Palestinians and Israelis together, not to jointly struggle against Israel's colonial and apartheid policies, but rather to provide a limited program of action under the slogan of an end to the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state, while cementing Israeli apartheid and ignoring the rights of Palestinian refugees, who compose the majority of the Palestinian people. PACBI concluded that, in essence, OneVoice and similar programs serve to normalize oppression and injustice. The fact that OneVoice treats the “nationalisms” and “patriotisms” of the two “sides” as if on par with one another and equally valid is a telling indicator. It is worth noting that virtually the entire political spectrum of Palestinian youth and student organizations and unions in the occupied Palestinian territory have unambiguously condemned normalization projects, such as OneVoice. [7]

A similar organization, though with a different target audience, is the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), which describes itself as “the only joint Israeli-Palestinian public policy think-tank in the world dedicated to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of 'two states for two peoples'”. IPCRI “recognizes the rights of the Jewish people and the Palestinian people to fulfill their national interests within the framework of achieving national self-determination within their own states and by establishing peaceful relations between two democratic states living side-by-side.” [8] It thus advocates an apartheid state in Israel that disenfranchises the indigenous Palestinian citizens and ignores the UN-sanctioned right of return of the Palestinian refugees.

Like OneVoice, IPCRI adopts the ubiquitous “conflict paradigm” while ignoring the domination and oppression that characterize the relationship of the Israeli state with the Palestinian people. IPCRI conveniently neglects a discussion of the roots of this “conflict,” what it is about, and which “side” is paying the price. Like OneVoice, it glosses over the historic record and the establishment of a settler-colonial regime in Palestine following the expulsion of most of the indigenous people of the land. The defining moment in the history of “the conflict” is therefore not acknowledged. The history of continued Israeli colonial expansion and the dispossession and forcible displacement of Palestinians is conveniently ignored, as well. Through IPCRI's omissions, the organization denies

the resistance framework we have outlined above and brings Palestinians and Israelis into a relation privileging co-existence over co-resistance. Palestinians are asked to adopt an Israeli vision of a peaceful resolution and not one that recognizes their comprehensive rights, as defined by the UN.

Another disturbing, but again entirely predictable, aspect of the work of IPCRI is the active involvement in its projects of Israeli personalities and personnel implicated in Israeli violations of the Palestinian people's rights and grave breaches of international law. IPCRI's Strategic Thinking and Analysis Team (STAT), includes, in addition to Palestinian officials, former Israeli diplomats, former Israeli army brigadier generals, Mossad personnel and senior staff of the Israeli National Security Council, many of them reasonably suspected of committing war crimes. [9]

It is no surprise, therefore, that the desire to end the "conflict," and the desire to realize "a lasting peace," both of which are slogans of these and similar normalization efforts, has nothing to do with obtaining justice for Palestinians. In fact, the term "justice" has no place on the agenda of most of these organizations; neither can one find clear reference to international law as the ultimate arbiter, leaving Palestinians at the mercy of the far more powerful Israeli state.

An Israeli writer's description of the so-called Peres Center for Peace, a leading normalization and colonial institution, may also well describe the underlying agenda of IPCRI and almost all normalization organizations:

In the activity of the Peres Center for Peace there is no evident effort being made to change the political and socioeconomic status quo in the occupied territories, but just the opposite: Efforts are being made to train the Palestinian population to accept its inferiority and prepare it to survive under the arbitrary constraints imposed by Israel, to guarantee the ethnic superiority of the Jews. With patronizing colonialism, the center presents an olive grower who is discovering the advantages of cooperative marketing; a pediatrician who is receiving professional training in Israeli hospitals; and a Palestinian importer who is learning the secrets of transporting merchandise via Israeli ports, which are famous for their efficiency; and of course soccer competitions and joint orchestras of Israelis and Palestinians, which paint a false picture of coexistence. [10]

The normalization of Israel – normalizing the abnormal – is a malicious and subversive process that works to cover up injustice and colonize the most intimate parts of the oppressed: their mind. To engage in or with organizations that serve this purpose is, therefore, one of the prime targets of boycott, and an act that BDS supporters must confront together.

## PACBI

[1] <http://www.forward.com/articles/2070/>

[2] Translated from Arabic: <http://www.pacbi.org/atemplate.php?id=100>

[3] <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1673>

[4] <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1645>

[5] <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1108>

[6] <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1436>

[7] <http://pacbi.org/atemplate.php?id=163> (Arabic)

[8] [http://www.ipcri.org/IPCRI/About\\_Us.html](http://www.ipcri.org/IPCRI/About_Us.html)

[9] <http://www.ipcri.org/IPCRI/R-Projects.html>

[10] Meron Benvenisti, A monument to a lost time and lost hopes, Haaretz, 30 October 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/a-monument-to-a-lost-time-and-lost-hopes-1.256342>

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