

Assessing the Arab League's Call for a Freeze on Normalization

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Brief Analysis

Last Sunday, the small Gulf state of Qatar, host to the next Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Economic Conference in November, rebuffed an attempt by Syria to postpone the event, despite the March 31st Arab League Council resolution calling for the suspension of political, economic, and cultural normalization with Israel. The non-binding Arab League resolution, echoed in other regional fora such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of the Islamic Conference's Islamabad meeting, specifically recommends that Arab states with nascent relations with Israel close bilateral interest offices and missions, suspend participation in the already stalled multilateral talks, and reactivate the primary economic boycott of Israel.

So far, the recommendation that Arab states maintaining low-level diplomatic relations with the Jewish state (i.e., Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Qatar and Oman) close both Israeli offices in their capitals and Arab offices in Tel Aviv has not been heeded, although several states have taken steps to weaken diplomatic ties. (Though the wording of the resolution is unclear, Egypt, Jordan and the PLO consider themselves formally exempt, having signed peace accords with Israel.) Nonetheless, hostility towards normalization has flourished, with the resolution succeeding in discouraging Arab-Israeli business, academic and media contacts and helping to weaken those constituencies on both sides of the Arab-Israel divide interested in a true end to conflict.

Normalization Opponents: Syria has claimed credit for the Arab League decision, particularly the suspension of multilateral track negotiations with Israel, hailing it as a victory for Syria's hardline approach. At the Cairo meeting, Syrian Foreign Minister Shara reportedly confronted the delegations of states not enthusiastic about freezing normalization and threatened them with suspension of their Arab League membership if they did not comply; Syria has blamed "U.S. pressures" for the failure to generate enough support in the Arab world to hold another League summit. More significantly, Syria has played a major role in exerting pressure on Oman, Qatar and Jordan to suspend normalization activities with Israel. However, Syria has not succeeded so far in its efforts to elicit Arab-world support for reactivating the Damascus-based boycott office, whose activities have been suspended for four years. Ironically, Syria has denied reports that Damascus has suspended the contacts it maintains with Israel via the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group (ILMG), the only existing venue in which Israelis and Syrians currently meet face-to-face.

Arab States at Peace: Sadly Egypt, the first Arab state to break the consensus straightjacket and pursue peace with

Israel, is among the states at the forefront of efforts to halt normalization. The goal of Egypt's strategy has been to limit the potential for any Israeli relations in the region that bypass Cairo. Egyptian presidential advisor Osama al-Baz, in an interview last month with the London-based Al-Sharq al-Awsat, articulated the goal of the anti-normalization approach as the withdrawal of recognition of Israeli legitimacy so that "the Israeli citizen will be bound to feel deep in his heart a lack of security and stability." At the Arab League meeting, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Musa pledged to boycott all multilateral talks with Israel, to reduce Egypt's mission staff in Tel Aviv, and to embark on a gradual freezing of the activities of its embassy in Israel, halting all future cooperative projects and trade. This rhetoric has translated into action, as in Egypt's announcement earlier this month of its intention to boycott the steering committee of the November MENA summit in Qatar. Moreover, an Egyptian foreign ministry-appointed committee recently concluded that Egyptians wishing to visit Israel must receive permission from Egyptian security.

> Despite its unhappiness with Israeli government policies, Jordan has pursued a policy of engagement rather than rejection of normalization. Whereas Egypt's Foreign Minister Musa has said that Egypt's embassy in Israel can serve to deliver messages to Israel on Arab positions, Jordan has suggested that its embassy can conduct a dialogue with Israel. Jordan has resisted criticisms from the Arab world, such as those coming from Damascus, to subordinate its peace agreement with Israel to an anti-normalization consensus. After Jordanian officials postponed a ministerial meeting on a joint Jordanian-Israeli airport project just after the Arab League decision, King Hussein pressed ahead and affirmed that the airport negotiations would be held. (They convened several weeks later.) Jordan also resisted as interference in its internal affairs an effort last month by the rabidly anti-normalization Higher Council of the Arab Engineers' Union to base itself in Amman, in order to thwart the kingdom's ties with Israel.

Arabia and the Gulf: The Gulf has become the source for some of the loudest opposition to normalization in the Arab world. Israel is no longer referred to by name in some local press, with terms such as "Zionist enemy" once again a regular moniker. Indeed, an editorial in the daily al-Riyadh, suggested recently that "the Arabs will not lose anything if the peace process stops for a decade or two." Having suspended participation in multilateral track negotiations with Israel, some countries have raised the ante for a return to the negotiating table well beyond the Palestinian track; for example, Muscat's ambassador in Egypt, Abdallah Hamad al-Busa'idi, recently claimed that Oman would not return to the multilateral talks until Israel "reverses all the violations in the occupied Arab territories, southern Lebanon, and the Syrian Golan."

And indeed, some limited actions to halt normalization have been taken. Even before the Arab League decision, Oman, which led Gulf states in forging economic ties with Israel, had taken the lead in weakening those relations. In January, Muscat recalled the head of its six-month-old trade mission in Tel Aviv without explanation and on March 23, announced it was freezing relations. Since the Arab League decision, two Israeli diplomats—one appointed to join Israel's office in Muscat—were denied Omani visas, and Israeli businesspeople were banned from the Comex 97 computer fair in Muscat (an event attended by a half-dozen Israeli companies last year). Still, the Israeli office in Muscat remains open and planning for the regional desalinization center in Oman continues apace. Nor has nearby Qatar, which had also announced earlier a freeze in relations with Israel, closed Israel's trade mission in Doha, though Qatar has delayed opening an office in Tel Aviv.

North Africa: Israeli offices in Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia remain open, although in Tunis and Rabat high-level political contacts have been severed in recent months and there is little enthusiasm for enhancing cultural ties. The three Arab states have so far maintained their offices in Tel Aviv. The particularly warm relationship that had developed between Morocco and Israel appears to be growing cold. The Jerusalem Committee meeting chaired by Morocco's King Hassan II in late March called upon Arab states to "reconsider" relations with Israel, and Moroccan officials are contemplating closing the Rabat-based Secretariat established in 1994 to oversee MENA economic

summits and help implement decisions on trade and investment. Still, King Hassan has since pursued bilateral negotiations for a cooperative arrangement between Royal Air Maroc and El Al.

The New Middle East? The Arab League's anti-normalization resolution represents the most critical and decisive joint Arab effort against Israel since the start of the Madrid peace process. It symbolizes a shift in the fault line within Arab politics away from the post-Madrid cleavage, positing peace-makers against rejectionists, back towards a more deeply rooted lowest-common-denominator consensus positing the Arab world versus Israel. Such a shift runs the risk of driving public opinion in both Israel and the Arab world away from moderation at a time when the search for "middle ground" is proving increasingly elusive. And as should be readily apparent, systematic efforts to isolate Israel or de-legitimize the current Israeli government as a way to induce concessions are far more likely to produce the opposite effect, further diminishing the prospect for a resolution to the current impasse in the peace process.

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