

Arabs Taking Risks for Peace: Stories from the Frontlines of People-to-People Contact with Israelis

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Courageous Arab civic actors discuss the enormous hurdles they have faced in engaging with Israelis and supporting broader social and legislative normalization.

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On October 2, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Ismail Sayyid Ahmad, Sukina Meshekhis, Ahdeya Ahmed Al-Sayed, Mohamed Al-Hammadi, and Joseph Braude. Ahmad is a Sudanese journalist and civic activist who has engaged in national dialogue projects to promote reconciliation in his country. Meshekhis is a Saudi television broadcaster and prominent women's rights activist in the Gulf. Sayed is president of the Bahraini Journalists Association. Hammadi is editor-in-chief of the Emirati daily Al-Roeya and chair of the board of directors for the UAE Journalists Association. Braude is author of the 2019 Washington Institute study [Reclamation: A Cultural Policy for Arab-Israeli Partnership \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/reclamation-a-cultural-policy-for-arab-israeli-partnership\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/reclamation-a-cultural-policy-for-arab-israeli-partnership); he joined the discussion to describe the work of the Arab Council for Regional Integration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ISMAIL SAYYID AHMAD

For seventy-two years, the region has experienced continuous violence and conflict. At this point, the leaders and their people realize that the way to resolve this conflict is through dialogue and engagement.

The issue of peace with Israel, and peace in general, is a prevalent topic within Sudanese society. The country is preparing to unify its national government and engage with the international community after a period of isolation due to internal conflict. For once, the desire for peace with Israel is being vocalized by members of the population, not just governments. In Sudan, young people in particular strive to repeal the boycott of Israel for the sake of national development and regional cooperation. Despite the complexity of the country's current political situation, the people are eager to develop civil relations and partnership with Israel.

Public demands for peace are also evident in the creation of the Sudanese-Israeli Friendship Association, a new group developed in partnership with the Arab Council for Regional Integration. Organizations like the Arab Council are working on bringing people together from different races, nationalities, and religious beliefs.

SUKINA MESHEKHIS

Individuals who publicly support the normalization agreement have met with different forms of persecution. These include accusations of treachery, social ostracism, aggression in the workplace, and, in some countries, even imprisonment.

Although Saudi Arabia has not officially taken a step toward peace talks with Israel, there is increasing support among the Saudi population for peace. At the same time, many citizens fear that although Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman has expressed a commitment to reformist and peace-oriented policies, elements of resistance to peace persist within the state and its institutions. Therefore, those who believe in the potential for peace may be intimidated by the social and political obstacles they may face if they speak up.

The international community must foster the process of building peace between peoples. Civil peacemakers must be afforded protection and

international solidarity along the way.

People-to-people relations across national borders and boundaries are crucial to peace in the Middle East. Launching a national and regional discourse supporting peace can embolden civic actors and citizens to engage in the process.

AHDEYA AHMED AL-SAYED

Journalists who expressed their support for the Bahraini and Emirati normalization deals with Israel have experienced various types of intimidation, including aggression by fellow reporters and journalism syndicates across the region. Some journalists have even received threats from terrorist entities due to their position on the issue.

The safety of such journalists remains of utmost concern—those who fear any punishment for speaking out in support of normalization need the international community's help. One instance exemplifying international solidarity is the legislation introduced by U.S. Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Rob Portman (R-OH) to protect civil actors in the Middle East by reporting cases of judicial and extrajudicial retribution by Arab governments. More broadly, international organizations must encourage cooperation between Arab and Israeli civic actors, and push for governments to build legislative frameworks that can protect these actors from hate speech, threats, and other intimidation tactics.

MOHAMED AL-HAMMADI

The principle of peace in the Middle East is multifaceted. The majority of people desire regional and global peace in general, but peace with the state of Israel is a more complex issue. Individuals in the Arab world who encourage or engage in peace talks with Israel are ostracized and labeled as traitors, and normalization still holds a severe stigma within Arab society. To protect civic actors, legislative reform that addresses anti-normalization laws in Arab countries is needed.

Since the Emirati normalization deal was announced, media figures in the region have called for removing the UAE Journalists Association from the Federation of Arab Journalist Associations. The UAE is now being held to a double standard: Lebanon has initiated talks with Israeli officials, and Turkey maintains diplomatic relations with them, yet neither of those governments has been subjected to the same pressures as the UAE.

Regarding the Palestinians, government and civic actors in the UAE, including journalists, have encouraged a two-pronged approach of engaging in peace talks with Israel while still advancing Palestinian rights. Israel must validate this approach by keeping its promise of freezing annexation plans.

In August, the UAE made the crucial decision to abolish its Israel boycott law, formally known as Federal Law Number 15 of 1972. Despite this breakthrough, however, government efforts alone will not be enough to achieve long-lasting regional peace. The peacemaking failures of the past couple decades highlighted the fact that new peace agreements must be centered around relations between peoples. Still, questions remain about how this new form of peace will be achieved.

JOSEPH BRAUDE

In November 2019, thirty-two civic actors from fifteen Arab countries formed the Arab Council for Regional Integration to repudiate the boycott of Israel and promote people-to-people relations. The council opposes the longstanding status of mutual isolation between Arabs and Israelis for three key reasons. First, the boycott has prevented Arabs from reaping the benefits of partnerships with Israelis in a range of sectors. Second, the boycott has prevented Arabs region-wide from building bridges between Israelis and Palestinians through engagement. Third, the boycott's tools of incitement and blame-deflection, while initially targeting Israel, became a template for internecine conflict within Arab countries, fracturing their societies even further. Overcoming these problems and advancing peace between peoples is a challenging task that requires tremendous, well-organized efforts to increase dialogue, diplomacy, and capacity-building for civil peacemakers.

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