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Anti-Normalization Laws: A Powerful Weapon in the Fight Against Peace

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Nadim Koteich is a renowned UAE-based political analyst and satirist who hosts *Tonight with Nadim*, a daily news and commentary show on the pan-Arab channel Sky News Arabia.



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Majd Harb, an attorney and legal activist residing in Beirut, has courageously sued Hezbollah in Lebanese courts, accusing the party of money laundering, customs law evasion, and other criminal offenses.



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Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow at The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



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Joseph Braude is president of the Center for Peace Communications.



Brief Analysis

A panel of experts discuss Hezbollah's efforts to neutralize the Abraham Accords by threatening and prosecuting Lebanese citizens who interact with Israelis, including expatriates living or working in Gulf countries.

On June 22, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Majd Harb, Nadim Koteich, and Hanin Ghaddar, moderated by Joseph Braude. Harb is a Beirut attorney and legal activist who has courageously sued Hezbollah in Lebanese courts. Koteich is a renowned Emirati-based political analyst and satirist who hosts the *Sky News Arabia* show *Tonight with Nadim*. Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow in the Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics and former managing editor of *Now Lebanon*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Majd Harb

Lebanon's anti-normalization mandates are not based on a single law, but rather on three connected sets of laws: the Lebanese criminal code, the 1955 Boycott Law, and the Code of Military Justice. In general, these laws stipulate that any type of contact between Lebanese and Israeli citizens is prohibited; punishment can range from a few months in prison to death. Because each statute is couched in vague language, court decisions regarding violations are often arbitrary, and most any contact with an Israeli can be construed as espionage or treason.

Another problem is that the Boycott Law was enacted decades before the emergence of our present globalized and interconnected world. Today, a single text message or social media interaction can break the letter of the law.

Enforcement efforts also fail to take a person's motives into account. Recently, a young Lebanese activist was convicted of high treason simply for giving an interview to an Israeli journalist—the same treatment that would be afforded to an Israeli agent. As written, the current restrictions put every Lebanese citizen who goes on the Internet or travels abroad at continuous risk. Even the government negotiators who have been [discussing maritime border issues](#) with their Israeli counterparts are technically breaking the law.

Despite these problems, the goal should not be to repeal the laws. They need to remain on the books because the two countries are still in a state of war, and there are cases in which these laws have been used to prosecute actual Israeli spies. Rather, the goal should be to clarify the restrictions in a manner that protects the Lebanese people and enables

them to determine exactly what constitutes a violation. As things stand, the statutes are often used for the wrong reasons, such as silencing political opponents and activists. Lebanese living abroad should raise awareness of this arbitrary enforcement, since they have more freedom to act on this issue than their countrymen back home.

Nadim Koteich

The many Lebanese expatriates who live in nations that have normalized relations with Israel are at significant risk of being prosecuted under their home country's anti-normalization laws. This includes the 300,000 Lebanese who reside in the United Arab Emirates.

Through the Abraham Accords, the UAE and Israel are deepening their integration in multiple sectors, not just diplomatic relations. Many Lebanese occupy high positions in companies that operate in the Emirates, and they now face the prospect of legal problems if their job requires them to interact with Israelis who visit the UAE. Lebanese courts have tried citizens abroad in absentia, which can have negative repercussions on their life back home. Meanwhile, Emirati law prohibits discriminating against someone based on nationality or religion, including Israelis. Lebanese in the UAE are therefore stuck between these opposing laws.

There is little the Emirati government can do to encourage change on this issue, since it does not want to be seen as interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs. Pan-Arab media networks are unlikely to help either, in part because they view anti-normalization laws as too marginal of an issue to cover. Therefore, the Lebanese diaspora must be the ones to raise awareness and generate momentum for change, as they are the ones most affected by the laws outside Lebanon. U.S. and European officials may also be willing to pressure Beirut on changing or clarifying the laws.

Those who enforce such laws do so not only to score political points, but also to impose their definitions of what nationalism is and who Lebanon's enemies are. This approach makes it impossible for the nation to debate whether Israel is in fact a worse enemy than, say, Iran and Syria. Lebanon has many problems with Israel that have practical solutions; in contrast, Tehran and Damascus are directly changing the fabric of Lebanon and in some cases trying to swallow it up.

Hanin Ghaddar

Instead of protecting Lebanon's national security, the anti-normalization laws have become a political tool for character assassination and efforts to discredit those opposed to the governing elite, especially opponents of Hezbollah. Simply being accused of acting as an Israeli agent or sympathizing with normalization can have severe consequences for one's career, life, and social circle. Such character assassination can even lead to real assassination. For example, these laws were repeatedly used to discredit and threaten the prominent writer, activist, and Hezbollah critic Lokman Slim; in February, he was murdered.

This problem could also affect the upcoming parliamentary election cycle. Civil society figures and political activists who oppose the political elite know that once they become serious candidates, they will be at risk of smear campaigns and physical threats under the pretext of violating these laws.

To protect the Lebanese people from anti-normalization abuses, discussing the issue in public forums is a good start. Many in the international community are either unaware that such laws exist or do not realize the severity of the danger posed to the Lebanese population. Greater accountability is also necessary so that people like Lokman Slim cannot be murdered with impunity. In the current environment, local investigations will not lead to any meaningful action against those who falsely accuse, threaten, or kill activists, so international actors need to investigate these crimes.

Moreover, the United States, EU, and UN all have leverage they can use to push for changing the laws. For example, Lebanese military tribunals currently have jurisdiction over anti-normalization enforcement because the statutes in

question are notionally related to national security. To avoid the prospect of more civilians being tried by the military, Washington should use the leverage it has gained through [assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces](#) as a way to spur the necessary legal changes.

This summary was prepared by Alex Shanahan. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖



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