

Normal Peace?

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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Articles & Testimony

Egypt's National Democratic Party (NDP) conference is fast approaching, but the meeting—which will formally set the stage for political succession—isn't making headlines these days. On October 6, the Los Angeles Times reported on how the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is reacting to sales of an Artificial Virginity Hymen Kit; still other news outlets have focused on the important decision at Al-Azhar to ban the niqab (the full-body veil) in the classroom.

Less covered in the Western media, but perhaps equally consequential, is the ongoing controversy surrounding Hala Mustafa. On October 10, Dr. Mustafa will appear at hearings before the Journalist Syndicate disciplinary committee, where she faces sanctions for meeting with Israeli ambassador to Egypt Shalom Cohen in early September.

Dr. Mustafa is a member of the NDP's elite policy committee, and a scholar at the government-sponsored Al-Ahram Center. Last month, she found herself the target of a Journalist Syndicate investigation for meeting with the Israeli ambassador to Egypt. By meeting with Cohen, she violated draconian union bylaws, which enforce the strict policy of no contact with Israelis underpinning the "anti-normalization" campaign.

In recent decades, the Egyptian professional boycott against Israel—led by Islamist-controlled syndicates—has been an effective tool in preventing a normalization of bilateral relations between the states. While the government of Egypt has made little effort to reverse the trend, it has not seemingly endorsed the boycott—until recently.

The Journalist Syndicate appears to be looking to make an example out of Dr. Mustafa. And she's not getting any help from the government's Al-Ahram Center. Indeed, not only has the Center established its own board of inquiry to investigate Dr. Mustafa, just weeks ago the Center announced it too would "boycott Israelis of all levels."

Perhaps this turn of events shouldn't be surprising given that the center was founded in 1968 as the Center for Zionist and Palestine studies. Nevertheless, it seems odd that Egypt's leading research institution—a state-funded institute closely tied to the regime—would adhere to extra-legal anti-normalization prescriptions advocated by Islamist-led unions. Indeed, the 1978 Camp David (peace) Accords stipulated that after the Israelis withdrew from Sinai, the states would establish "normal relations" including "cultural relations."

While there is little doubt that the Egyptian government is committed to the absence of war with its Israeli neighbor, there remains a staunch opposition to moving toward a peace between the peoples at both the popular and the official levels. In Egypt, this incongruity is rationalized by the Israeli mistreatment of Palestinians, but even when the peace process is making progress—during the heyday of the Oslo Accords (1994-98), for example—Cairo demonstrates little inclination to change the dynamic.

The resistance to normalizing relations with Israel reaches the highest levels in Cairo. To date Hosni Mubarak—who has served as Egypt's president since 1981—has visited Israel only once, and that was to attend the funeral of former Israeli premier Yitzhak Rabin. Still, in 1995, following his return from Israel, he told the Government daily Al Ahram that "I don't consider this a visit."

It remains to be seen what will transpire with Hala Mustafa's case. Syndicate insiders say that the group's board of directors is inclined to freeze her membership for a year, resulting in her removal as editor and chief of Al-Demokratiya. Sadly, based on developments to date, it appears unlikely that Mubarak regime will oppose a Journalist Syndicate dictate or intervene on her behalf.

For the Obama administration—which is trying to convince states like Saudi Arabia to normalize with Israel in hopes of encouraging the Jewish state to take "risks for peace" with the Palestinians—Cairo's disposition is problematic. After all, if even peace partners are unwilling to normalize, convincing states like Saudi Arabia to do so stands little chance of success. In the search for Arab normalization with Israel, Washington would be best advised to take a more modest approach. Egypt, at peace with Israel for nearly 30 years, would seem a reasonable place to start.

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