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Visit to Jerusalem Under Occupation: Support for Steadfastness or Normalization?

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Visit to Jerusalem Under Occupation: Support for Steadfastness or Normalization?

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Introduction

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas used the platform of the First International Conference for the Defense of Jerusalem, held in Doha in February of this year, to appeal to both Christians and Muslims of the Arab world, inviting them to visit and pray in the Israeli-occupied city. Abbas argued that such a move would constitute a form of resistance, breaking the isolation of Jerusalem's Palestinian population and bolstering their steadfastness. In Abbas' words, visits by Arabs to Jerusalem "would contribute to the protection and consolidation of the city's identity and heritage, which is being threatened with eradication; it would remind the occupier that the cause of Jerusalem is the cause of every Arab, every Muslim and every Christian."

Abbas quoted a number of excerpts from the body of *hadith*, or prophetic narrations, attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, in which visits to al-Aqsa Mosque are encouraged. He also pointed out that when the Prophet declared that "the ultimate pilgrimage can only be to three mosques: the Kaaba (in Mecca), this Mosque of mine (in Medina), and al-Aqsa Mosque," Jerusalem was under Byzantine control. In addition, the Palestinian president recalled that even when Jerusalem was under the control of the Frankish invaders, known as the Crusaders, not a single Muslim cleric issued a *fatwa* (or religious judgment) forbidding pilgrimages to the city.

Shortly after Abbas' remarks in Doha, the mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Sufi Sheikh al-Habib al-Jafri of Yemen, and a number of Jordanian officials announced religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem. With the exception of al-Jafri, none of these prominent pilgrims who took the initiative to visit Jerusalem had previously been known for opposition to "normalization" of Arab-Israeli relations: for at the end of the day, they are part of a dynamic diplomacy that has been active for decades, backed by the concluded Arab-Israeli peace agreements. Notably, the visits of both al-Jafri and Jordan's intelligence chief, Hussein al-Majali, were under Israeli supervision and control, with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) not even being aware of them.¹

Abbas' comments have sparked a discussion in Palestinian and broader Arab circles about the legitimacy and utility or otherwise of visits to the Palestinian territories and pilgrimages to Jerusalem in the context of Israeli occupation. Muslim clerics on the

¹ Jihan Mustafa, "Habib al-Jaffri's post-Jerusalem dilemma," *Mareb Press*, April 11, 2012, <http://marebpress.net/articles.php?id=15035>.

Palestinian Authority's payroll, including Religious Endowments Minister Mahmoud al-Habbash, and the Chief Justice of the Islamic Court, Yousef Ideiss, were supportive of Abbas' suggestions. Most Palestinian and wider Arab political forces, however, were opposed to them, arguing that acceptance would be akin to an open affirmation of the normalization of Arab-Israeli ties; a number of fatwas issued by Muslim clerics in Palestine and other Arab countries have served to highlight the same point. Of course, it was Abbas' use of religion to justify his proclamation which led to the religious form of the opposition to his move: only religious arguments can be used to refute the statements made by Abbas, cloaked as they were in religious garb.

This paper will address the historical context that led to the general Arab sentiment opposed to normalization, and seek to better define the meaning of this sentiment. With this in mind, this paper will examine the true contents of Abbas' statement, in which he sought to describe pilgrimages to Jerusalem as a facet of the "struggle" to bolster the steadfastness of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, this paper will seek to clarify exactly what the Israeli occupiers allow when it comes to the influx of Arabs and Arab support for the Occupied Palestinian Territories: given the history of Arab attempts to take the peaceful route and normalize relations with the Zionists, what impact will an accusation of "normalizing" have on the future of the Palestinian cause and the struggle against the Israelis?

The Historical Context of Normalization

On the Concept of Normalization²

In the absence of a conflict or fundamental disagreement between peoples, relations between states and cultures can revert to a normal status: the emergence of economic,

² This study will focus exclusively on the question regarding normalization of Arab-Israeli diplomatic relations, and leave aside considerations of Palestinians living in historical Palestine, who are compelled to function within Israeli institutions. In general, this group of Palestinians lives in a context that is dictated to them by the Israelis' state machinery. The degree of severity of this Israeli intrusion does indeed vary for the different groups: Palestinians living on the West Bank, on the Gaza Strip, and those Palestinians who are putative Israeli citizens. Those known as "Palestinian-Israelis" are technically citizens of the Israeli state, and thus their entire lives are yoked to Israeli institutions, and the demand of political rights in that context, while never actually requiring adherence to political Zionism. A Palestinian-Israeli, therefore, has more freedom to maintain his or her Palestinian-Arab identity, even while operating within Israeli institutions, than a Jerusalemite Palestinian. While the latter is (generally) in possession of a Jerusalem residency card, this only represents residency, yet the same Jerusalemite Palestinian is not as reliant on dealings with Israeli institutions; this difference is even greater with the Palestinians of the West Bank. Of course, none of this explains the normalization of Arab-Israeli diplomatic relations since none of the Arab states are compelled to have dealings with the Israelis the way individual Palestinians are.

cultural, and diplomatic ties, alongside others, becomes possible. An elementary reading of international studies as a discipline would thus define "normalization" as "a change from a state of war or a fundamental disagreement between two states into a situation where they can have normal relations". In other words, normalization would mean overcoming the obstacles which had hitherto stood in the way of normal relations between two given states, through the resolution of the problems which caused the conflict between them, ignoring those problems or the acquiescence of one side to the other's demands.

Normalization can thus be used to describe not just "normal" relations between two countries, but also the acceptance by one country of the terms set by another, stronger state (i.e., to accept what the stronger party considers to be "normal" based on its own interest criteria). The agreements arrived at between countries previously in conflict serve to reflect what the foundations of "normalization" are to be, and what it means for states to enjoy "normal relations" between them. Such agreements are thus prone to reflect the balance of power that exists between any two states, and to reflect the willingness of the parties to a conflict to overcome the factors that caused it and other outstanding issues. Based on the above, normalization cannot then be taken to be a fixed concept, but rather one which is dynamic and changes in response to the relations between the parties to a conflict, and the interactions between them, either on the state or individual level. This paper does not seek to arrive at a value-laden definition of normalization, or to pass a value judgment on the concept; rather, it simply aims to define it as the absence of any conflict or complication standing in the way of normal, agreed-upon relations between two sides.

It is possible to discern discrepancies in determining the factors that lead to "normal" relations between states, particularly for those that had previously enjoyed normal relations and then passed through a period of war before agreeing to peace accords, or other situations in which the cause of conflict had to do with the occupation of a people or a country. The "normal" relations between, say, France and Algeria, following the liberation of the latter from French occupation, are qualitatively different from those between France and Germany in the wake of wars fought between those two sovereign states. Palestine stands in contrast to both of these cases, as the Israeli state was founded on the dispossession of the indigenous people of Palestine. With regard to this latest case, the positions of the Arab people and the Arab states have, for a long time, exceeded the definition of a simple conflict; many refused to recognize the very

legitimacy of the Zionist entity with which they were in conflict. In fact, such obduracy continues to be a feature of Arab public opinion, even after a number of Arab states, on the official level, dropped the policy of non-recognition. It is the nature of the conflict, as well as the nature of the two sides normalizing, that define "normality"; it is a subjective definition, changing from one situation to the next.

The political positions on the act of normalization with Israel, therefore, influence the very concept of normalization, in the sense that it is seen as a negative concept, or even as a negative value, by a majority of the public. Thus, the normalization process does not lead to justice, which would in turn resolve the causes of the conflict. In such a situation, the act of normalization would lead not to a remedying of the injustice, but to a denial of rights within the Palestinian case. It could be said, then, that the act of normalization of relations with a regime which is unjust and has usurped the rights of others, without addressing the oppression and dealing with its results, serves to entrench the injustice and legitimize the oppressor.

Normalization does not occur spontaneously; instead, it is the result of deliberate policy measures and steps, organized for the attainment of an aim, as normalization is not acceptable by default since only interventions can serve to further its aims. In this way, normalization is based on a series of political actions that are collectively known as the "process of normalization," a process which seeks to make previously abnormal situations "normal". To apply the foregoing to the Arab-Israeli conflict, normalization means the transformation of the Israeli state from a "settler-colonial entity" and "occupier," a foreign presence in the region, into a legitimized body with a natural place among the other states in the region, all for the sake of "peace," or what is described as the "peace process". In this way, the concept of "normalization" has gained a bad reputation, and has been loaded with negative value, setting the benchmark for "bad" in the Arabic political lexicon.

Normalization is an intricate process, an analysis of which requires an examination of all of its aspects. Normalization goes beyond the mere pragmatic acclimatization and acceptance of the unavoidable reality of the existence of the Israeli state: the sentimental aspects of the normalization process are very significant. Pragmatic acceptance of the Israelis by the Arabs might be enough for the Israeli right, which views normalization simply as the capitulation of the Arabs in the face of Israeli force. The Zionist left, on the other hand, insists on a form of peace in which the Arabs

acknowledge the historical and moral legitimacy of the Israeli state as part of a mutual recognition between two sides with equal rights in historical Palestine.

Normalization in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

While there may be a number of ways to understand and analyze the nature and historical roots of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the central reality which defines it continues to be the Palestinian cause; the conflict presents a moral, existential threat to the Arab nation, to the security of the Arab homeland. The effect of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been the restriction of any normal relations between the Israeli state and most Arab countries; on the grounds that the Israelis were occupying Palestinian territory, citizens of Arab countries were prevented by law from forming any type of relations with the Israelis, and this extended to visits – whether religious or otherwise – to the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The etymology of *tatbee*, the Arabic word for “normalization,” extends back much further than the Camp David Accords of September 17, 1978 between Egypt and Israel. In fact, the process of normalization, dates back to the beginning of the Palestinian Nakba, to May 15, 1948, whence Arab statesmen began to propose “solutions” to the Palestinian plight, as if it were a problem in need of a solution and nothing else, not a cause of justice in which rights needed to be addressed. International circles have tended to view the Palestinian cause through the prism of crisis management, thus presenting the view that the Palestinian issue can be resolved by ending the state of war and establishing economic and technical cooperation between the Israelis and their Arab neighbors. The United States was an early sponsor and broker of initiatives aimed at promoting cooperative, regional integration through such projects as part of its efforts to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. Notable among such efforts was the Johnston Plan, announced in the mid-1950s and named after Ambassador Eric Johnston, US President Eisenhower’s envoy to the region, which had sought to negotiate water-sharing agreements for the Jordan River.

Later, the Camp David Accords would refer to the idea of normalization, using the following words to describe how relations between parties to the agreement should operate: “Signatories shall establish among themselves relationships normal to states at peace with one another. To this end, they should undertake to abide by all the provisions of the U.N. Charter. Steps to be taken in this respect include:

- a. full recognition;
- b. abolishing economic boycotts;
- c. guaranteeing that under their jurisdiction the citizens of the other parties shall enjoy the protection of the due process of law.”³

Thus, the Camp David Accords not only effected the neutralization of Egypt with regard to the military and political conflicts with Israel, but also turned the idea of normalization into a strategic goal for Israel, on the political, economic, and cultural levels. This was particularly true as the accords included within them an inherent incompleteness, which made a number of other complementary agreements necessary. With the Egyptian regime complying with the gist of the Israeli view of things, a total of nine auxiliary agreements were added to the Camp David Accords, lending legal and institutional credibility, sponsored by the Egyptian state, to the spirit of the agreements. Armed with the gains achieved in the Camp David Accords, the Israelis worked for the success of the “peace experiment” with Egypt, which they regarded as the steam-engine which drove the Arab states forward into conflict with Israel up until the signing of the agreements, the ambition being to reproduce the same experience with all of the other Arab states.

While Israel had clear, certain strategic aims in mind when agreeing to the accords, no similar certainty could be found on the Egyptian side beyond the return of the Sinai Peninsula and the cessation of hostilities; there was to be an end to warfare without a resolution of the conflict. It was only later that the Camp David Accords would come to form a main plank of Egypt’s foreign relations, and of Egyptian-American relations, but this came at the expense of the Egyptian role as a leading pan-Arab force and in Africa. Likewise, any Egyptian strategic role in finding a solution to the Palestinian question has been limited since Camp David to being a mediator. As a result, the Egyptian state lost all semblances of effectiveness and influence after the Camp David Accords, instead serving a merely functional role for the Israeli side, with Egypt reduced to exerting pressure on the Palestinian leadership to agree to Israeli conditions and stipulations. These would serve to ensure that any nascent Palestinian entity also would serve a

³ See the Arabic text of the agreement at the Palestinian Centre for Archiving and Information, http://www.malaf.info/?page=show_details&Id=112&table=ar_documents&CatId=5. Also see the English text available from the Carter Library, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/campdavid/accords.phtml>.

functional role for the Israelis, keeping the peace and policing Palestinian society, with as little cost as possible to the Israeli occupiers, creating a kind of occupation by stealth.

The Camp David Accords paved the way for myriad forms of normalization, in ways not explicitly declared within the agreements themselves. The Egyptian economy's reliance on American economic and financial aid, an essential source of national income for Egypt, and the absence of any strategic planning to find substitutes for this source of funding, gave the Israelis, along with the US, the opportunity to impose diktats and directives on the Egyptian side, which had not been included in the accords. These included such things as the modification of Egyptian educational curricula to promote more openness toward the Israelis, and prospective Israeli ambitions for access to Nile River water.

The avarice of the Egyptian political and economic elites, and their concern for their own interests at the expense of Egypt's national ones, facilitated such Israeli machinations. Perhaps most notable on this front was the 2005 Egyptian gas export agreement, a prime example of how the Egyptian people's economic and natural resources were squandered by the previous regime on account of its servility to the Israelis, not to mention the self-concerned Egyptian businessmen who stood to gain from supporting these kinds of ventures. They quickly found that by supporting initiatives of normalization with the Israelis, they could abuse the Egyptian people's common wealth to line their own pockets.

Under the terms of the agreement, which was to remain in force for 20 years, the Israelis were provided with an annual supply of 1.7 billion cubic meters of Egyptian natural gas, at a cost that ranged between USD 0.70 and USD 1.50 per dekatherm when market rates during the same period reached up to USD 2.65. This below-market price for Egyptian gas shored up Israel's public finances so much that it could afford tax exemptions, while Egyptian citizens were forced to deal with both a countrywide shortage of portable gas cylinders and an ever-increasing price for the same.⁴ In this sense, the Camp David Accords, which on the surface sought to put in place "normal relations," became instead a slippery slope for intervention in Egypt's internal and economic affairs, in its educational curricula and its cultural sphere, where the Israelis

⁴ Nabil al-Sahli, "Egyptian natural gas and normalization with the Israelis," *al-Jazeera Net*, June 6, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.net/analysis/pages/0796fcae-3112-4289-88da-c4e7df9fea3c>.

sought to replace the image of their state as an “enemy” with one of a normal neighbor. This was a long-standing Israeli ambition. For the Zionists, cultural normalization was the “heart of the peace process”; it was an effort to reduce the deep-rooted enmity for it among the Arab peoples, an enmity found in each and every Arab country, regardless of the nature of the ruling regime. Such a victory in the cultural sphere would be a more precious goal, as far as many Israeli intellectuals are concerned, than the cessation of violence or disarmament, the establishment of demilitarized zones, or similar such guarantees.

In the immediate aftermath of their conclusion, the Camp David Accords became a lightning rod for the popular opposition movements within Egypt, and wider Egyptian civil society. Student groups, labor unions, feminist organizations, and human rights organizations in Egypt foiled all attempts to build normal relations with their Israeli counterparts, disavowing any contact with them. This same model of boycotting – with a few notable exceptions outside the scope of this paper – was followed by civil society organizations in Jordan after making peace with Israel in 1994.

Arab and Israeli Attitudes to Normalization

In general, the word “normalization” carries a negative connotation throughout all countries of the Arab homeland. The very word is burdened by a weight of negative associations, significances, and images, a fact for which a number of possible explanations stand. It may be due to the simple fact that it would mean the Arabs giving in to the existence of an Israeli state, or that it would entail the end of the conflict before a just solution to the Palestinian cause is reached. It might also be due to the surreptitious way in which some Arab states exploit normalization with the Israelis in a bid to improve their standing with the global powers, and at the expense of the Palestinian cause.

There is a near-consensus among Egyptian political parties and movements – like those from the other Arab countries – on the need to adopt this negative value definition of normalization with the Israelis; it also resonates with the principles of both Muslim and Christian religious authorities opposed to normalization with the Israelis, including pilgrimages to Jerusalem. The chief of the International League of Muslim Clerics, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, explicitly stated in a *fatwa* that pilgrimages to Jerusalem were prohibited so long as it was under occupation, a pronouncement that closely

matched the prohibitions made by the late patriarch of Egypt's Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda, and the exiled Melkite Catholic Archbishop of Jerusalem, Hilarion Cappucin, which urged Christians not to visit Jerusalem while it remained under Israeli occupation.⁵

Diplomatically, Arab states have their own individual perspectives toward normalization with the Zionist entity. Some, including Syria, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon (at least officially),⁶ have an official policy that rejects any form of relations with the Israelis. The same applies to a number of non-Arab member-states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, such as Malaysia, which, as a result of the Israelis' treatment of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, continue to hold out against any type of diplomatic, political, or economic cooperation with Israel.

On the other hand, a number of Arab states have signed peace agreements with the Israelis, agreements that have resulted in economic cooperation with the Zionist state. Jordan and Egypt have both signed such bilateral peace agreements, and pacts that have led to the so-called Qualifying Industrial Zones, making use of Israeli expertise, as well as Jordanian and Egyptian labor, allowing for the export of the goods to the US market.⁷ Other Arab states prefer to conduct relations with the Israelis in a setting of tight secrecy, in a bid to avoid popular unrest.

Proponents of normalization differ among themselves with regard to both its functional role and ultimate aim, especially in the Arab-Israeli case of normalization. The ambitions the Israelis believe will be achieved by normalization are clear and well defined; in contrast, there are no clearly set goals for the Arab states to attain through normalization, and they differ from one country to the next. In general, the common theme binding all of the Arab states' agendas together revolves around a single, yet somewhat obscured aim: one related to the regimes' ties with the United States, but

⁵ Mohsen Awad, Mamdouh Salem, and Ahmad Obaid, *Combatting Normalization: 30 Years of Confrontation*, 1st Edition (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2007), p. 299.

⁶ Here "official" is used to distinguish it from the informal relations between the Israelis and particular political factions within Lebanon, some of which would later come to power. These relations were crowned with what is known as the May 17 Agreement.

⁷ On the agreements stipulating the Qualifying Industrial Zones, see <http://aljazeera.net/specialfiles/pages/f5b5a169-09b8-4680-bec8-18836217f429>.

having nothing to do with their relations with their own peoples, with the Arab people at large, or with issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict itself.

The Israeli vision of normalization is tied to wider regional developments in a way that helps define their geopolitical aims and serves to bolster their geostrategic standing vis-à-vis the Arab countries. The primary Israeli aim is, therefore, to be accepted not only by Arab states, but also by Arab societies. Israel would like those societies to accept its presence as legitimate, without their having to arrive at a just solution to the Palestinian plight. In fact, Israeli aims are not limited to this, but also include Israel's becoming a geopolitical actor on the regional stage, in a way that would grant it the "legitimacy" to re-draw the region's balances of power in favor of their own "national security".

The evidence for this is borne out by the way in which the Israelis have taken for themselves the liberty of defining the standards for normalization, and imposed them on the Arab states: they have developed the fundamental concept of normalization with reference to their own interests, as well as present and future aims. Initially, normalization was defined as the mere recognition of an Israeli state. Later, during the 2001-2006 rule of Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon after the Palestinian *intifada*, it became the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. Henceforth, the Netanyahu government has adopted this latter criterion as the fundamental pre-condition for any negotiations with the Palestinian side.

The situation has deteriorated to the point where "normalization" now means the provision of security services to the occupation by Arab regimes, such as what happened during the 2008-2009 Israeli aggression against Gaza, when the previous regime under Mubarak conspired against Palestinian resistance and worked to support the siege of Gaza, helping to deprive residents of the rudiments of life. Moreover, in the case of Egyptian natural gas exports, Egypt began selling the country's natural gas resources to its neighbor at a price lower than that offered to its own citizens under Mubarak's regime, which represents one of the numerous causes of the Egyptian revolution.

Looking back at the above arguments, it can be said that "normalization" in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict is defined by the acceptance of the Arab states of Israel as a "natural" or "normal" part of the state of affairs in the region, no different from the other states that are part of the region. In cases where such a situation prevails, an

unbalanced reality comes into being: the odds are tilted in favor of Israeli national security, in deference to the principle of “might makes right,” and to the diktats of the United States. This is even done with total disregard for the national interests of the Arab state in question.

A number of factors have contributed to this Israeli intransigence on the issue of normalization, including:

1. The Israelis’ lack of confidence in existing peace agreements, and their insistence that these be implemented in the form of economic, political, and cultural relations.
2. Israeli awareness that the agreements referred to above are unpopular among Arab populations, and that they reflect only the directives of a coterie of regimes whose political legitimacy is lacking due to a number of factors, and does not represent the popular wishes of the Arab peoples, who continue to view Israel as the “greatest threat” to collective Arab national security⁸. In addition, the Israeli insistence that normalization be bolstered through language, culture, and norms, such that the Arab peoples will become acclimatized to accept Israel as a normal state in the region.
3. The conviction held by many of the important forces and influential individuals within the Israeli establishment, such as President Shimon Peres, who look to reap the economic benefits that might accrue from the peace process and normalization. This opinion holds that normalization will bring about benefits for a stratum of Arabs who will then also have a vested interest in the preservation of peace, and who can be relied on to abandon their previous demands for the sake of advantages acquired through the process of normalization. Notably, this last situation is part of the “Israel 2020” project. By describing the “hoped for” peace the Israelis seek to establish, it sheds light on those factors that motivate them to conclude such agreements with the Arabs. In this peace the Israelis desire, certain Arabs will gain economic benefits in exchange for recognition of the Israeli state and its right to rule over Jerusalem; there would also be no

⁸ See the Arab Opinion Index Report, conducted by the ACRPS, which highlights the fact that 73 percent of Arabs who responded to the survey – conducted in a set of countries which cover 85 percent of the world’s Arab population – regard Israel as the single most threat to collective Arab security. Available at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/a520ed46-4b5d-4b37-adb6-3e9a0cc9d975>.

further mention of settlements, final borders, or resolution of the refugee problem.⁹

Abbas' Invitation: The Real and the Imagined

What was new about Abbas' invitation to Arabs to visit Jerusalem, issued on February 25, during a conference in Doha, was that he infused his political message with religious and historical justifications for pilgrimages to Jerusalem despite its remaining under Israeli occupation.

Abbas' justifications were divided into two sections: the first fell into the category of political language steeped in the discourse of struggle and sought to justify the break with pre-existing Arab public opinion on the grounds that an inflow of citizens of Arab states into Jerusalem would break the siege on the Palestinians of the city, serving to combat efforts at Judaization. This, said Abbas, would serve to bolster Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation. The second set of justifications was an attempt to address the religious component of Arab public opinion, and the religious prohibition against any kind of direct relations with the Israelis, including, of course, personal visits or pilgrimages to areas they control. However, (setting aside, if only rhetorically, the argument that visits to Jerusalem would serve to legitimize the occupation as no Arab visits to the city are possible without the prior coordination and approval of the Israelis), it remains unproven how the influx of Arab citizens to Jerusalem would achieve the goals which Abbas set out.

On this second front, Abbas made reference to narrations included within Islamic history and the Prophetic *sunnah*. As he pointed out, the Prophet Mohammed had not placed any preconditions on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and even when the city was under the control of the Crusaders, there was no Islamic judgment forbidding pilgrimages there. This foray of a secular politician into the religious realm was a way to pre-empt any potential criticism from religious authorities.

⁹Mazor Adam, "'Israel 2020' master plan for Israel in the 21st century," *Samel Neaman Institute*, ftp://ftp.sni.technion.ac.il/Israel2020/Israel%202020_Taktzir.pdf.

Of course, it remains true that the occupying power retains the ability to prevent visits as and when it pleases; at the end of the day, the occupiers hold all the cards. The Israeli occupation has already worked to prevent even Palestinians residing on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from visiting Jerusalem,^{**} and even withdraws residency rights (the well-known “Blue ID cards”) from Jerusalemite Palestinians when it sees fit, preventing them from returning to their homes and visiting their families. Israeli measures to expel Jerusalemite Palestinians have extended even to members of the Palestinian Legislative Council – the PNA’s parliament – with whom it disagreed politically. In addition, the Israeli occupation forces have prevented Western nationals who want to express solidarity with the Palestinians from crossing the borders they control, despite these individuals’ being citizens of states with which the Israelis enjoy very good relations, where there is no question of “normalization” being under threat. Perhaps the most notable recent example of this was the effort to curtail the “Welcome to Palestine” movement during April 2012, which saw the Israelis detain arriving activists at Ben Gurion Airport, prevent them from visiting the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and deport them to their home countries.¹⁰

It is clear, then, that the Israelis may permit visits which promote the aims of normalization, but will never allow for a politically motivated “influx” of Arabs, or even Muslim or Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, if such a movement aimed to change the reality of Israeli control and occupation of the city. In other words, Israel might allow such religiously motivated movements of people visiting Jerusalem only for purely religious reasons, such as worship at the Aqsa Mosque or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; in fact, they may even be supportive of such visits, given that they could be seen as religious, touristic initiatives aiming to bolster the credibility of Israeli claims to being the sovereign power with rights over the city. The Israelis see the question from a very simple perspective: who has sovereignty over Jerusalem?

This was given clear voice by the statements of the Israeli mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, who spoke of his wish to have the city become a destination for religious tourism by members of the three Abrahamic faiths – the aim being to increase ten-fold the number of tourists arriving in the city, up to 10 million people annually. Barkat

^{**} Since 1967, the Israelis have implemented an arbitrary system to designate individual Palestinian families as legal residents of the West Bank, Jerusalem, or Gaza.

¹⁰ “Israel gears up for ‘flytilla,’” *United Press International*, April 10, 2012, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2012/04/10/Israel-gears-up-for-flytilla/UPI-49791334058557.

referred to the Israeli strategy “to maintain the openness and international element of the city of Jerusalem where Muslims manage their sites, Christians manage their sites and Jews manage their own sites”.¹¹ As part of the same statement, however, Barkat made clear that the Israeli state would be the only permitted sovereign power in the city, stressing that Jerusalem would continue to be “the unified capital of Israel”; the Israelis are not concerned with whoever visits Jerusalem for their own religious motives, so long as they maintain a monopoly on the modern concept of national sovereignty over the city.

Religious tourism of the type touted by Abbas would serve the interests of the extant state apparatus known as Israel, a state that regards “unified Jerusalem” as its capital. Such tourism would be of at least equal value to the Israeli economy compared to any possible – and dubious – profit it could make for the Jerusalemite Palestinians. At the end of the day, Abbas’ invitation was a mere invitation for greater numbers of Muslim and Arab religious tourists to go to Israeli-controlled territories.

The more pressing need is for support that would allow the Arab residents of Jerusalem to protect their properties and develop the institutions serving them, both of which would help them make use of any influx of visitors – particularly those from non-Arab countries. As the situation stands, the fragility of Arab economic and social conditions in Jerusalem means that they are not even able to make the most of the flow of tourists that already exists.

Regardless of whether or not such visits would reflect a certain “solidarity” with the Palestinians to begin with, there are indications of considerable Israeli enthusiasm for the visits of officials from Arab states, particularly those who have not signed any official peace agreements with Israel. What the Israelis stand to gain from such visits would be the destruction of the psychological barrier to visits to Israeli-controlled territories. This could be a first step, allowing those Arab leaders who would like to normalize relations with Israel, but have thus far refrained to placate Arab public opinion, to begin to do so under the guise of supporting Jerusalemite Palestinians as no one questions the motives of officials who want to pray in Jerusalem. Repeated visits could serve to provide acceptable cover for dealing with the Israeli occupiers on matters

¹¹ <http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=hsJPK0PIJpH&b=689705&ct=9005187>.

related to tourism and trade, dealings which could later be expanded to wider realms of cooperation.

It has been apparent, at least since the visit of then-Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem in 1977, a visit which precipitated the Camp David Accords, that the normalization of Arab-Israeli relations would not contribute to any improvement in Israel's treatment of Palestinians; quite the contrary since normalization has led to a harshening of conditions for Palestinians living under Israeli control. Normalization, for the Israelis, is a vehicle for the isolation of the Palestinians as a people and a cause. Instead of the Palestinian cause being a joint Arab concern, it becomes restricted to the Palestinians alone.

Sadat himself had intended that an Egyptian-Israeli treaty would serve as a prelude to a peace agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis, one which would eventually lead to a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders: in other words, an agreement in which East Jerusalem served as the Palestinian capital. Instead, the Egyptian-Israeli agreement led to the isolation of Egypt from events surrounding the Palestinian cause, and allowed the Israelis room sufficient to maneuver to enact the Jerusalem Law of 1980, which declared the ancient city to be the "complete and united" capital of Israel. The law further gave priority to what it termed "development plans," which allowed for increased exclusively Jewish settlement in predominantly Palestinian East Jerusalem: the limit of 22 percent as a proportion of the population became the legally mandated limit set for the Palestinian population of the city. Settlement activity in areas the Israelis defined as the "West Bank" grew at a faster pace after that. It was after the Camp David Accords, too, that the Israelis waged, in 1982, their first war against the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, free of any serious Arab intervention (with the exception of Syrian forces). Individual peace treaties between Arab states and Israel paved the way for single-track war against the Palestinians, which later turned into a war against the Lebanese resistance.

The Camp David Accords' influence extended beyond the Arab countries, reaching the broader Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its approach to the Palestinian cause, witnessing, in 1984, the beginning of Israeli-Indian military cooperation, cooperation which later focused on air force technology, reconnaissance planes, cyber-warfare

capabilities, and early-warning systems. In this way, Indian-Israeli relations moved from diplomatic formality to full-scale economic and military cooperation.¹²

This pattern of cooperation was repeated and expanded outward after the Oslo Accords establishing the PNA, when the Palestinian leadership made the grave strategic error of lobbying members of the NAM to start normalizing their own relations with the Israeli state, citing the argument that cooperation with NAM members and the Israelis would lead to peace and a Palestinian state. As a result of these poorly planned maneuvers, blessed by the Palestinians' own national leadership, the Palestinian cause lost a great deal of support on the international stage. The path of the Oslo Accords led to nothing but self-perpetuating negotiations and greater Israeli settlement activity on the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. As part of a 2001 amendment to Israel's Law of Jerusalem adopted by the Knesset in 1980, the "integrity" of Jerusalem and its status as an "eternal" capital of the Jewish people became, alongside the protection of the settlements, an Israeli pre-condition for negotiations with the Palestinians. In the revised law, the municipal boundaries of the ancient city were to be defined by the Israeli government decree of June 28, 1967, thus bringing within city limits more areas overwhelmingly populated by Palestinians. Furthermore, the amendment made it illegal for any Israeli government to transfer any of the Israeli authorities' "responsibilities" over the city to any foreign political authority, thus prohibiting Palestinian self-rule in Jerusalem, never mind allowing for a part of the city to become the capital of a Palestinian state.

A comprehensive review of the activities of the PNA, since its inception in 1994, shows that its political legitimacy, mode of operation, duties and responsibilities, and even the structure of its civilian authority are based on the idea of normalization with Israel. In fact, Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation and joint ventures are a precondition for the securing of foreign investment and financing of the PNA's infrastructure. This resulted in the expansion of trade relations between the two sides. There is now an army of Palestinians who fill roles as trade representatives for Israeli products and

¹² Ahed al-Muqayyad, "The Reality of Indian-Israeli Relations," PNA Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mofa.ps/new/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=454&catid=33&Itemid=1.

firms, and a total of 18 joint industrial areas work to ensure that the PNA is completely and inextricably beholden to the Israelis.¹³

This reality has foiled any and all attempts by grassroots movements to boycott the occupier, or to try and produce a new political reality, which would allow for a stronger position to help combat constant Israeli pressures to extract ever-greater concessions from the Palestinians. In this way, the ill-conceived actions and initiatives of the Palestinian leadership laid the groundwork for depriving Palestinians of the ability to take the initiative and contribute to their national decision-making process. By seeming to promote Palestinian-Israeli normalization to an extent that many other countries had hitherto avoided on ethical grounds, these measures have also deprived the Palestinian people of international support and solidarity.

Abbas' comparison of the Israeli occupation of Palestine to the Byzantine era, or even the Crusades, suggests a type of intentional historical myopia and ambiguity. It was a deliberate attempt to confuse two historical eras with completely different standards and concepts and try to treat them as though they were the same. There could have been no concept of national sovereignty, borders, and colonialism before the dawn of the modern era and the formation of nation-states. It would, therefore, be incorrect to judge the pre-modern past with these concepts in mind. It is also obvious that the confusion of these two eras was, in this case, intentional, and sought to cloak a political maneuver in religious garb. In this era, a visit to Jerusalem would mean obtaining an Israeli visa, the first step in a chain that would begin with diplomatic relations to resolve the issues of individual pilgrims and later come to be a bridgehead for full-fledged diplomatic relations.¹⁴

Conclusion

It is thus clear that Abbas' call for Arabs to visit Jerusalem while it remains under occupation does not provide clear benefits for the Palestinians; he favored style over substance and prospective gains. This call will not – as a result of the occupation of the

¹³ Nicholas Nasser, "A Reference to Normalization with the Occupying State," *al-Arab Online*, June 9, 2012, <http://www.alarabonline.org/index.asp?fname=%5C2012%5C06%5C06-09%5C821.htm&dismode=cx&ts=9-6-2012%206:23:33>.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that what drove the Crusaders out of Jerusalem had little to do with the steadfast resistance of the Arab or Muslim residents of Jerusalem, nor the visits of pilgrims to the city; in fact, there was no need for a strategy of steadfast resistance then.

city by the Israelis who control it and exert sovereignty over it – be sufficient to provide the Jerusalemite Palestinians with any benefits of note.

Abbas' invitation prepares the groundwork for the breaking of an Arab psychological barrier to normalization, granting the Israeli state a degree of legitimacy, and allowing it to become a "natural" entity in the region. This would first request a visa from the Israeli authorities, and then the stamping of Arab passports with Israeli stamps. It would see Arabs visiting al-Aqsa Mosque as part of visits to Israel, all of which would ultimately end in full recognition of Israel: the end result might be a situation where Arab-Israeli visits will, when prohibited, become part of the Palestinian struggle.

Finally, Abbas' invitation is merely a ploy to escape the dilemma facing the current Palestinian leadership: talks with the Israelis have failed, and the present leadership is unwilling to consider alternatives. Instead of developing a concrete Palestinian strategy to deal with the issue of Jerusalem, Abbas' invitation is only a quasi-attempt at solving the problem. It is as if Abbas has resorted to this ruse to try to define for the other Arab states how they should serve the Palestinian cause. This comes at a time, however, when the Arab revolutions are providing the Arabs with a real opportunity to present a more far-reaching strategy for dealing with the issue of Jerusalem, one which is more in tune with Arab public sentiment.