

**Normalization: practical dilemmas**

by Chibli Mallat

Normalization generally concerns states, and is expressed through a gamut of relations that ranges from war to "friendly" diplomatic recognition. As in many other issues, the issue of normalization is different in the Middle East, where it concerns mainly the establishment of relations between civil societies. The so-called cold peace between Egyptians and Israel since Camp David is a case in point, but the gamut of paradoxes is wider and far more complex. As seen from Beirut, the paradox is at a paroxysm: while leading Lebanese political figures did not hesitate at one time to receive military training at the hand of Israeli forces and fight on their side, any contact with Israelis--and even Palestinians living under Israeli control--raises severe eye brows, including the risk of criminal prosecution. In its extreme form, the stigma of normalization (*tatbi'* in Arabic) englobes any form of debate or discussion with an Israeli national.

Some of the paradoxes can be partly understood for the complex history of states and societies concerned. On a recent occasion, Abu Maher Yamani, an old, respected militant of the Palestinian Diaspora expressed it strongly: "I am not prepared," he said, "to speak with someone who might have left his village in Europe to live in my house." One can see the force of the argument. Why should the "expelled" speak with his "expeller"? That particular occasion may be worth noting: in reaction to a collective of courageous Israeli women who came out publicly in support of the trial of current Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and those involved in the Sabra and Shatila massacres, the possibility of a meeting between some of these women and victims of the massacre in Europe or the United States was raised.

One should be prepared to accept that such form of "normalization" is naive, but the issue is real, and the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian victims of Sharon are of different minds as well; some of them welcomed the statement of support by the Israeli women when it was issued in September. Still, a common stand, where they would be seen together with Israeli supporters in the European Parliament or on Capitol Hill, may be too much for them.

For guidance, I have turned to two persons of great moral integrity, whose names are associated with the campaign against normalization across the Arab world, former Lebanese Prime Minister Salim Hoss, and Talal Salman, the editor of *al Safir*. I hope I do not betray or oversimplify their response to this particular dilemma, but their concern is the following: for Talal Salman, is the political dynamism that might result from such a meeting sufficient to take the risk of a dialogue? For Salim Hoss, where does one draw the line when talking with Israelis?

Maybe those who are forced to "talk" with Israeli Jews everyday can break that impasse between their Palestinian cousins in forced exile since 1948 and those in Israel who wish to support them. If such a meeting were to happen under their aegis and with their active participation as guarantors of the worthiness of such a risk, and if they are the ones who prevent dialogue from being sterile, maybe the way forward can be found between those who oppose any contact--other than a violent one--with Israelis, and those who find it worth probing such extraordinary common ground as a joint commitment to bring Ariel Sharon to justice.

Even if this were to take place, the larger scale dilemma remains, which ultimately depends on the formulation of the question. For those against normalization, would speaking with Israelis not mean giving up the last card, that of recognition? For those who support engaging in a robust debate across the barrier, can Palestinians (and Arabs generally) call for a solution where Jews and non-Jews should live with each other if they cannot speak with Israelis in the first place? This is also true for Israeli Jews, should any call for "normalization" become serious. Are they prepared to live with all Palestinians? Or is talking just for the sake of talking?-

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