

ISSUE BRIEF **01.27.21**

Islamist Responses to Arab Normalization Agreements with Israel

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INTRODUCTION

In the waning days of the Trump administration, a flurry of normalization agreements with Israel swept through the Middle East and North Africa region. Since September 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco have all taken steps to normalize relations with and, eventually, formally recognize Israel.

The agreements came against the backdrop of an Israeli–Palestinian conflict that has assumed an increasingly religious overtone since the beginning of the 20th century. More so than any actor, Islamist groups across the region began invoking the religious symbolism of Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque during the 1970s.

For many Islamists, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict constitutes a key element of their discourse; the oppressed status of Palestinians represents the “Muslim grievance par excellence.”¹ As the conflict has evolved, the ever-greater levels of Palestinian political marginalization illustrate, for Islamists, the threat that Muslims across the region face from the West and Israel. Likewise, non-Islamist religious actors have increasingly employed religious rhetoric to voice their opposition to Israel and Israeli policies vis-à-vis Palestinians.

The Islamist position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict carries broader implications for regional politics. As populist movements, Islamist groups can link their anti-Americanism to a strong anti-Israel

sentiment, lending greater credence to the idea that democratization can threaten the interests of their respective countries, especially among the secular segments of the society.²

THREE DIFFERENT REACTIONS

Despite near-universal identification with the Palestinian cause and a visceral opposition to Israel, religious and Islamist responses to the normalization agreements have been varied. One reason for this lack of uniformity is that Islamist groups have increasingly taken on governmental roles in recent years; Islamists are no longer relegated to permanent political opposition.³ Faced with potential pushback from regimes or the electorate, Islamists constantly adjust and recalibrate their discourse on a variety of issues, including Israel.

The most vocal critics of normalization agreements in the region have been Islamists and religious actors with poor prospects of winning power or who operate in the shade of illegality. They have little to lose politically, and therefore do not face pressure to mitigate their reactions. These criticisms have typically featured a clear religious component as well. The Al-Wafaq National Islamic Society—a major opposition group deemed illegal by the Bahraini government—argued that the normalization agreement with Israel lacked “legitimacy” because neither the Bahraini government nor Israel are legitimate,



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according to the group. Moreover, it claimed that the agreement represents a “departure from the Islamic, Arab, and national consensus.”⁴ Another major, outlawed Islamic group, Morocco’s al-Adl wal-Ihsan, emerged as the country’s most vocal critic of the agreement between Morocco and Israel. The movement organized large demonstrations to protest the deal⁵ and declared that the agreement represented “a stab in the back to the Palestinian cause.”⁶

The Palestinian cause has been a major issue and rallying cry for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood since the 1930s. Despite its own struggle for survival both in Egypt and throughout the region, the Brotherhood reacted strongly to the recent wave of normalization with Israel. The group portrayed the Emirati agreement with Israel to normalize relations as not only a “betrayal of the Palestinian cause” but also of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa.⁷

The prospect of normalization with Israel drew sharp criticism from the country’s Islamist parties in Sudan following Omar al-Bashir’s ouster from power. The Popular Congress Party decried the secretive nature of the deal, claiming it did not reflect the will of Sudanese citizens. To distinguish between the government and the people’s positions on the issue, the party called on citizens to form “a broad front to resist normalization and maintain our support for the Palestinian people.” Kamal Omar, a leading party official, challenged the transitional Sudanese government’s legal authority to undertake a normalization agreement with Israel.⁸ The National Umma Party threatened to withdraw its support from the government over normalization with “the apartheid and occupation state” of Israel.⁹ Similar to their fellow Islamists, the party stated that the government lacked the legal standing to strike such agreements.¹⁰

By contrast legitimate, recognized religious actors and Islamists who could face political repercussions were more measured in their reactions to the normalization agreements. Some groups underscored the benefits of the agreement; others simply avoided focusing on the

religious significance of the Palestinian issue, instead highlighting solidarity with the Palestinians in their responses. The head of the Emirates Fatwa Council, Abdullah bin Bayyah, chose to downplay the potential long-term implications of the agreement for Palestinians and instead focused on Israel’s delayed annexation of parts of the West Bank. Bin Bayyah praised the normalization agreement “for the supreme good for the nation and its people” and stated that the Council “blesses” the Emirati policy on this issue.¹¹ Likewise, the chair of the UAE General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, Mohammed Matar Salem al-Kaabi, praised the agreement’s contribution to peace and the UAE’s global standing as a peacemaker.¹²

In Morocco, the ruling Party for Justice and Development (PJD) issued a measured response to King Mohammed VI’s decision to normalize relations with Israel and aimed to deflect responsibility from the monarch. Party leader and Prime Minister Saad Eddin el-Othmani expressed strong support for the Palestinian cause despite the normalization by highlighting Mohammed VI’s phone call with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, where he reiterated the idea that Moroccan “support of the Palestinian cause remains unshakeable, and that Morocco places it at the same level of Sahara issue.”¹³ Importantly, el-Othmani’s statement sharply contradicts his earlier position on normalization of relations with Israel; he previously rejected outright the notion of normalization because, he said, it would “embolden” Israel’s violation of Palestinians’ rights.¹⁴ The PJD’s position on the issue also differs significantly from that of the Unity and Reform Movement, the PJD’s affiliated religious movement. Less concerned with the political fallout from its reaction to the normalization agreement, the Unity and Reform Movement characterized the agreement as “deplorable” and rejected “all attempts at normalization and the Zionist infiltration.”¹⁵

Lastly, those Islamists who are in power—and therefore have little concern for the political ramifications of their statements—were similarly critical of the

normalization agreements. What we also observe among these actors is an effort to play up the religious symbolism in the Palestinian issue and secure political gains in the process.

Following normalization agreements made by the UAE and Bahrain, the International Union for Muslim Scholars—an organization known for its Islamist leanings—affirmed its opposition; Secretary-General Ali al-Qaradaghi stated that “normalization with the occupiers of Al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem is forbidden and is considered a treason.”¹⁶ The union’s leader, Ahmad al-Raysuni, justified the opposition to normalization as being against “theft, occupation, and the other crimes committed and being committed by the Zionists and their country in the past eight decades.”¹⁷

Omani grand mufti Ahmad al-Khalili came out strongly against any normalization with Israel in the absence of “liberation” of al-Aqsa and the surrounding areas, which he described as a religious duty for Muslims.¹⁸ Similarly, Kuwaiti Islamists—along with non-Islamist political groups—criticized the UAE-Israel normalization agreement with strong statements.¹⁹

Palestinian religious authorities and Islamist groups did not mince words. Mahmoud al-Habbash, advisor to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the top Palestinian religious authority, declared Emirati Muslims wanting to visit al-Aqsa through the normalization agreement as *personae non gratae* in the Palestinian territories. Muhammad Hussein, Mufti of Jerusalem, forewarned Emiratis that their visit to al-Aqsa was not to be permitted.²⁰

Hamas’ deputy leader in Gaza, Khalil al-Hayya, characterized the UAE-Israel agreement as “a stab in the back of the Palestinians” and criticized Arab governments for their policies while carefully differentiating the attitudes of their citizens toward Palestinians.²¹ Likewise, Hamas political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh called the agreement “a stab in the backs of the Palestinian people” and “a violation of Arab and Islamic consensus.”²²

Hamas similarly conveyed its frustration with the Moroccan-Israeli normalization agreement. PJD leader el-Othmani’s participation in the signing ceremony was considered a particular “let down,” as expressed by Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri. Hamas hoped that el-Othmani “would take an honorable and historic stance” by at least not attending the ceremony.²³

ISLAMIST VS. ANTI-ISLAMIST CONFLICT

The regionwide Islamist vs. anti-Islamist conflict similarly shaped religious responses to normalization policies. While the anti-Islamist camp welcomed the normalization agreements as beneficial, the Islamist bloc firmly opposed the agreements to avoid a change in status quo. The main concern for the Islamist bloc is the potential loss of influence they gained across the region after the Arab Spring protests.

As expected, the most vocal critics of the normalization agreements have been those with the most to lose geopolitically, such as Iran and Turkey. Iranian officials have condemned the agreements not only in terms of their implications for Israel’s standing in the region, but also for their religious consequences. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused the UAE of having “betrayed” the Muslim world.²⁴ The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized Bahrain for being an “accomplice in the crimes committed by the Zionist regime”; the ministry’s statement also depicted the normalization agreement as a threat to the security of the “Muslim world.”²⁵

As an actor that plays to the leadership of the Sunni-Islamist world, Turkey has used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to build regional legitimacy. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan typically signals his commitment to the Palestinian cause by using harsh rhetoric against Israel and the actors that work with Israel, despite the fact that Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel in 1949. In response to the normalization agreement between the UAE and Israel,

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Erdogan threatened to suspend Turkey's ties to the UAE and recall its ambassador.²⁶ The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs also denounced the agreement and the UAE, claiming that the Emirati leadership lacks the "authority" to "negotiate with Israel and make concessions" on behalf of Palestinians. The Emirati policy was thus characterized as a "betrayal" of the Palestinian cause.²⁷ The Lebanese Hezbollah was similarly critical of the UAE-Israel normalization deal. Its leader Hassan Nasrallah described the agreement as a "betrayal of Islam and Arabs" and a boost from some Arab states to President Trump's prospects for reelection.²⁸

IMPLICATIONS

In the aftermath of Hosni Mubarak's ouster from office, the status of the three decades-old Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty constituted one of the major concerns about the ascent of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to power.²⁹ The concerns were justified—the Brotherhood has been one of Israel's most consistent critics and staunchly opposed the peace treaty since its inception. Notably, however, the Brotherhood took no executive or legislative action on the issue when the group was in power between 2011 and 2013. This was no accident. It reflected the Brotherhood's—and, more broadly, Islamist actors'—pragmatism on Israel.

The pragmatism of Islamist actors is also evident in the Erdogan government's recent policy toward Israel. Despite being one of the most vigorous critics of Israel and Israeli policies over the past decade, Turkey is currently exploring opportunities to reestablish relations with Israel. (This is in the wake of the Turkish government's vehement criticism of normalization agreements between Arab states and Israel.) In December 2020, President Erdogan publicly stated his intention to improve relations with Israel,³⁰ and the Israeli government is gauging whether this abrupt shift in the Turkish government's policy toward Israel reflects a genuine commitment to improving bilateral relations.

Despite their unified discourse on the Palestinian issue and in their criticism of Israel, religious and Islamist actors across the region show great variation in their response to the normalization agreements. Islamist actors in particular tend to seriously factor pragmatic and political considerations into their decision-making, with two important implications.

First, despite the façade of a monolithic commitment to Islamist causes such as Palestine, Islamist actors vary remarkably in their political positions, occasionally assuming fundamentally conflicting stances on the same issue. More importantly, they do not support the same political position over time and are highly adept at adjusting their discourse to current political conditions. Islamist reactions to the normalization agreements particularly demonstrate this flexibility.

Second, the Palestinian issue is invariably depicted as an Islamic cause by Islamists across the political spectrum. Failure to display this commitment publicly and to condemn Israel and Israeli policies in the strongest terms possible by Muslims amounts to a lack of faith in the eyes of Islamists. Yet when political interests dictated otherwise, Islamists showed little hesitation in bending their self-proclaimed religious commitment to the Palestinian cause. Islamist actors' commitment to perceived religious causes, therefore, waxes and wanes in light of shifting political conditions. In their varied reactions to normalization with Israel, Islamists have shown the extent to which they are willing to compromise their religious principles.

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Cite as:

Yildirim, A.Kadir. 2021. *Islamist Responses to Arab Normalization Agreements with Israel*. Issue brief no. 01.27.21. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.

<https://doi.org/10.25613/AGTQ-6B43>

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