

ANTI-NORMALIZATION

“Anti-Normalization” Prevents Peace, Sustains the Occupation, Undermines Academic Freedom, and Harms Students

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One feature of the international campaign of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel has been a troubling tendency to reject all forms of dialogue, cooperation, or engagement between Israelis and Palestinians — and between their respective supporters, including college students and faculty. Such contacts are sweepingly condemned as contributing to “normalization” of oppression and injustice, even in cases where all participants agree that the current situation of Israeli occupation and Palestinian dispossession should not be regarded or accepted as “normal.” Scholars for Israel and Palestine and the Alliance for Academic Freedom jointly stand in complete opposition to this dangerous campaign. It harms both Palestinians and Israelis and creates a hostile environment on our university campuses that is contrary to the values of academic freedom, dialogue, and the development of mutual empathy, understanding, and recognition.

Under the heading of “normalization,” the relevant BDS [guidelines](#) condemn projects “designed to bring together Palestinians/Arabs and Israelis so they can present their respective narratives or perspectives, or to work toward reconciliation, ‘overcoming barriers’, etc., without addressing the root causes of injustice and the requirements of justice.” Meeting this criterion of “addressing the root causes” requires that Israeli participants declare in advance that they accept the BDS program in full and that the agenda of the event or project is active “co-resistance” rather than “co-existence.” In effect, unless Israelis and their supporters begin by accepting Israel’s fundamental illegitimacy and the need for ultimate elimination of the Jewish character of Israel, one should not even engage in dialogue with them.

The reach of this so-called “anti-normalization” agenda has been broad. Instances include [attacks](#) on the West-East Divan Orchestra established jointly by Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim and an outcry against Professor Mohammed Dajani of Al Quds University in East Jerusalem for taking a group of Palestinian students [to visit Auschwitz](#) as part of a joint program that also included a visit by Israeli students to the Dheisheh refugee camp — an outcry that [led to his resignation](#).

In North American colleges and universities there are efforts to prevent a wide range of educational and scholarly activities aimed at promoting dialogue, respectful debate, intellectual cooperation, and mutual engagement — not only between Israelis and others, but more generally between people with differing views about the intertwined Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts. On some campuses, Jewish students who fail to meet BDS litmus tests have been effectively shunned by pro-Palestinian groups and told that even to meet for discussion is “normalizing.” It is unacceptable for one group of students to stigmatize another group of students and disqualify them as legitimate participants in conversation in this way. And an ideological ban like this prevents much-needed discussion of controversial political issues, violates the principles of open intellectual exchange, and undermines the common learning enterprise for which educational institutions exist.

We of Scholars for Israel and Palestine and the Alliance for Academic Freedom are committed to a different approach. We are convinced that in order to achieve a just and durable peace, it is not only possible but essential to be simultaneously pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, and pro-peace. Thus, we are committed to sustaining a democratic Jewish state of Israel and to promoting the establishment of a sustainable, independent, democratic state of Palestine.

Accordingly, we condemn Israel’s ever-deepening occupation of Palestinian lands and all Israeli policies that seek to make this occupation permanent and irreversible. We condemn Israel’s ongoing violations of both individual and collective rights of the Palestinian people, including injuries to their personal security, restrictions on their economic freedoms, and denial of their political self-determination. We also condemn attacks on Israelis and all policies by Palestinians and others in the Arab world that reject or undermine the possibilities for peace and that seek to isolate and demonize Israel and Israelis.

In this spirit, we believe that the “anti-normalization” campaign is profoundly misguided, harmful, and counter-productive even from a pro-Palestinian perspective. Of course, deeply rooted political conflicts can never be resolved purely by dialogue and mutual understanding, and power asymmetries must always be acknowledged. But they must never be an excuse for demonization, dehumanization, or marginalization of others. Even antagonists need to understand and recognize each other if they hope to make peace eventually. “Anti-normalization” rhetoric and practice can only promote intensified polarization, mutual distrust, and permanent conflict. The same holds true for Israelis and supporters of Israel who have been unwilling to engage seriously with Palestinians and their supporters or with good-faith critics of Israeli policies.

Current BDS “anti-normalization” efforts are not really a new tactic, but are only the latest phase of a long-term approach spanning many decades. Ever since Israel’s founding, widespread and often intense opposition to “normalization” has been pursued, unevenly but persistently, by governments, organizations, and portions of civil society across the Arab world. From the start, the fundamental underlying motivation was a refusal to accept Israel’s existence and legitimacy. There are many good reasons to repudiate these efforts to indiscriminately isolate and demonize Israelis and supporters of Israel and to reject any engagement with them. But for those who consider themselves supporters of Palestinian rights and aspirations, one reason by itself should be decisive: If the goal is to achieve justice and self-determination for the Palestinian people, this has proved to be a failed and deeply counter-productive strategy.

Indeed, Edward Said, a steadfast voice for the Palestinian cause, criticized Arab anti-“normalization” politics over a decade ago on precisely these grounds: “The ban on normalization lacks coherence since its reason for being, Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people, hasn’t been alleviated by the campaign.... Complete anti-normalization is not an effective weapon for the powerless: its symbolic value is low, and its actual effect is passive and negative. That is why I believe we must try to penetrate the Israeli consciousness with everything at our disposal. Speaking or writing to Israeli audiences breaks their taboo. Zionism has tried to exclude non-Jews and we, by our unselective boycott of even the name Israel, have helped rather than hindered this.”

Today, an “anti-normalization” strategy that closes off discourse with all Israelis and supporters of Israel continues to be misguided, harmful, and self-defeating. This approach:

Separates Palestinians and their supporters from those Israeli and Diaspora Jews who themselves seek to end Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands;

Deprives Palestinians of channels to highlight, to Israelis, the injuries and injustices of their lives under Israeli military rule;

Prevents Palestinians from building common cause with those who share their views and aspirations;

Provokes recriminations within Palestinian society, where political leaders and community activists accuse each other of acts of treason merely for advocating the Palestinian cause to Israelis and supporters of Israel and seeking allies among them;

Undermines the forces in Israeli society and among supporters of Israel seeking an end to the occupation and the establishment of an independent state of Palestine

Discourages cooperation with organizations and activities working to build up the kinds of mutual recognition, awareness, and understanding necessary for achieving genuine peace;

Promotes elements of ideological rigidity and exclusion in the movement for Palestinian rights that work against freedoms of thought and expression dear to democrats of all persuasions;

Threatens the principles of academic freedom and open intellectual exchange, stigmatizes and excludes groups of students on unfair and divisive grounds, and undercuts the process of learning and scholarship in colleges and universities.

We call upon Palestinians and their supporters throughout the world to reject these forms of “anti-normalization.” We call upon them to join forces with all those – including Israelis and Diaspora Jews – who seek an end to Israel’s occupation and the achievement of Palestinian national self-determination in the context of a just, secure, and durable peace.

Endorsed by **Scholars for Israel & Palestine (SIP)** and **Alliance for Academic Freedom (AAF)**

