



## **Progressive Issue Brief**

# **“Anti-Normalization:” A Threat to Cooperative Work for Peace and Justice**

Prepared as part of TTN’s Boston & New England Initiative for Progressive Academic Engagement with Israel and Palestine

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## INTRODUCTION

Opposition to “normalization” of relationships with Israeli Jews is a central credo of the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement.

Within that movement, the influential Palestinian Campaign for the Cultural and Academic Boycott of Israel (PACBI) has defined acceptable and unacceptable Arab-Jewish initiatives in Israel, Palestine and elsewhere. [PACBI](#) calls for boycotting projects “designed to bring together Palestinians/Arabs and Israeli Jews 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.”<sup>1</sup>

To avoid PACBI’s blacklist, joint projects must be devoted to “co-resistance” rather than “co-existence.” Participants must also endorse, in advance, the struggle for the “rights” endorsed by the BDS movement, including the Palestinian right of return.

In other words, Jews and Arabs need to accept and support everything PACBI believes in before they can start talking to each other and working together. This approach is very counterproductive and diminishes, rather than increases, the chances of ending Israel’s occupation and creating a Palestinian state.

Normalization has long been problematic for many Palestinians under occupation, Palestinian refugees and much of the Arab world. Critiques from Westerners must be done judiciously, with an understanding that some of Israel’s policies and actions help to create the deep-seated resentment and anger that builds support for anti-normalization.

That said, progressive activists in the West who desire to help both Palestinians and Israelis should listen to the call from other Arabs in Israel and Palestine, as well as their Jewish partners, who strongly object to anti-normalization and who need our help as they work together for a better future for both peoples.

## DISTORTING THE NATURE OF PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE ACTIVITIES

Anti-normalization supporters object to a broad range of “people-to-people” initiatives in Israel and Palestine, dismissing them as feel-good programs that have no political impact and sustain the status quo. Joel Braunold and Huda Abuarquob, two leaders of the Alliance for Middle East Peace — an umbrella group of civil society activists in Israel and Palestine — reject this view, [arguing](#):

In their effort to delegitimize coexistence programming, anti-normalization activists lampoon people-to-people activities as Israelis and Palestinians coming together to eat hummus then go home. This is an utterly false representation of the people-to-people movement today. Look at the thousands engaged by Parents Circle or Combatants for Peace, the farmers whose crops have not wasted thanks to Olive Oil Without Borders or the communities receiving fresh water owing to the work of EcoPeace. These are just a sample of thousands of people whose lives have been changed through joint programs.

Change is painfully slow and real progress does not come fast enough for those who suffer the brunt of the occupation, but these joint programs are the best hope of fundamentally changing the worldviews of those who have been fighting for generations.<sup>2</sup>

A [joint statement](#) by Scholars for Israel and Palestine (SIP) and the Alliance for Academic Freedom (AAF)—both academic affiliates of The Third Narrative—notes that anti-normalization also “separates Palestinians and their supporters from those Israeli and Diaspora Jews who themselves seek to end Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, PACBI’s narrow definition of palatable Israeli-Palestinian interaction hampers very serious, positive political work in Israel and the occupied territories. One of its [targets](#), the Israel Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), is an anti-settlement and anti-occupation think tank run by Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. [Another](#) is OneVoice, a movement of young Israelis and Palestinians who mobilize support for two states and against settlement expansion.<sup>4</sup>

Only a tiny number of Israeli Jews could pass PACBI’s rigid ideological litmus test. Excluding the rest from joint activities with Arabs hinders those who are trying to build a large scale, non-violent opposition movement, one that demands an end to the occupation, an end to violence by both sides and a viable Palestinian state.

## OBJECTIONS TO LISTENING TO “THE OTHER”

On May 28, 2015, Jews and Arabs gathered for the annual “Jerusalem Hug” event. They wanted to walk hand in hand around the Old City to promote peace in Jerusalem. They believed in talking to one another, interacting and building trust. Their event was disrupted by Palestinian activists who said they felt compelled to “discipline the normalizers.”<sup>5</sup>

In response to [this altercation](#), Ghaith al-Omari, a former peace negotiator for the Palestinian Authority, wrote:

[It] demonstrates the dangers of lingering and one-dimensional assumptions among Palestinians and Israelis, many of whom have chosen to isolate themselves in hopes of living in a simpler, more comfortable, yet fictitious world. In this alternate reality, the views of the other have no validity, their respective narratives exist unchallenged, and any discussion on Palestinian-Israeli issues quickly devolves into a futile competition of narratives and arguments. These kinds of zero-sum conversations only perpetuate the conflict and weaken the chance for a solution.<sup>6</sup>

To some advocates of anti-normalization, even listening to what they call “the Zionist narrative” should be forbidden. For example, [Samah Sabawi](#) criticizes normalization projects that include Arab-Jewish dialogue by asserting:

They try hard to convince you that both people just have two different narratives, reducing the facts to fiction and the reality to storytelling, insisting that if we hear both narratives then we’ll come to agree that the truth lies somewhere out there, in an abstract world, perhaps in a third version that is yet to be told.<sup>7</sup>

But there **is** a third version, and it can be found in the essays and debates of The Third Narrative initiative. We believe the truth about this conflict lies in a grey area to which supporters of both sides rarely venture. Getting to that grey area and accepting that decent people on both sides have widely different versions of “the facts” is not only a valuable activity for those outside of Israel and Palestine; it is an essential process for Jews and Arabs in the region who must find a way to share the same narrow piece of land.

Cutting off conversation also cuts off an opportunity to persuade the Israeli people about the merits of the Palestinian cause. As the SIP-AAF statement points out, anti-normalization “deprives Palestinians of channels to highlight, to Israelis, the injuries and injustices of their lives under Israeli military rule.”<sup>8</sup>

Edward Said, whom no one could accuse of trying to “normalize” the occupation, once wrote, “Complete anti-normalization is not an effective weapon for the powerless: its symbolic value is low, and its actual effect is passive and negative...I believe we must try to penetrate the Israeli consciousness with everything at our disposal. Speaking or writing to Israeli audiences breaks *their* taboo against *us*.”<sup>9</sup>

## ANTI-NORMALIZATION ON CAMPUS

BDS activists outside of Israel and Palestine have also adapted “anti-normalization.” On North American campuses, some BDS groups have [shunned dialogue](#) with pro-Israel groups.<sup>10</sup> [Efforts by pro-Israel organizations](#) to censor pro-BDS professors are the flip side of the same coin.<sup>11</sup> These practices, along with the rancor that often characterizes public discussions of the conflict, inhibit the free exchange of ideas and have adverse political consequences, as described by Ken Stern and Cary Nelson in “[War on Campus](#)”:

We sympathize with the students who say they are being forced to “choose sides,” when they insist they want to be both pro-Israel AND pro-Palestinian, but there is little space for them on campus. These students have a capacity for empathy....They see the humanity and suffering of Israelis and Palestinians alike. They reject the hatred that defines each people as mere roadblocks to the other’s aspirations. ...And they think backward from the goal (peace and national self-expression for both peoples in their own lands), and focus on how to get there, rather than on how to be extreme advocates for one side or the other.<sup>12</sup>

Carving out a space for such students—as well as faculty and others in the academic community—is important for those who want to build on-campus coalitions for peace, justice and human rights in Israel and Palestine.

## COMBINING TWO STRATEGIES

Those who oppose normalization seem to believe there is a contradiction between supporting activities that are meant to build co-existence and strenuously opposing Israeli policies. We couldn’t disagree more strongly, and we think that both strategies should be pursued simultaneously.

The Third Narrative has prepared a guide, “Progressive Action for Human Rights, Peace & Reconciliation in Israel and Palestine,” that features a broad range of civil society groups that foster cooperative work between

Jews and Arabs in Israel and Palestine. These organizations deserve help with a host of different projects, not vilification. As Braunold and Abuarquob put it:

(I) If we are to see any progress in the areas of peace, coexistence, security, freedom, justice and rights, it will be on a basis that Palestinians and Israelis have a shared future. We need space to run programs that bring Israelis and Palestinians together to explore these values as one, without fear or intimidation. Jews and Arabs are either destined or doomed to share the land together. Let us work for the former to avoid the latter.<sup>13</sup>

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### About The Third Narrative

The Third Narrative is an educational initiative that supports Israelis and Palestinians who are working to end the occupation, create a two-state solution and stop discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel. We believe that the truth about Israel and Palestine is rarely black and white; it resides in a gray area to which advocates on either side rarely venture. That is where we try to go, with original materials that address the common claims of both the anti-Israel far left and the pro-settlement far right. The Third Narrative is an initiative of Ameinu, a North American progressive Zionist organization that supports social justice in Israel, the Palestinian territories, the US and Canada. See <http://www.thirdnarrative.org>.

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<sup>1</sup> Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott Of Israel, "PACBI Guidelines for the International Cultural Boycott of Israel (Revised July 2014), (<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1047>).

<sup>2</sup> Joel Braunold and Huda Abuarquob, "A Bigger Threat Than BDS: Anti-normalization," *Haaretz*, July 2, 2015 (<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/the-jewish-thinker/.premium-1.664018>).

<sup>3</sup> Scholars for Israel and Palestine and Alliance for Academic Freedom, "Progressive Scholars Oppose BDS's Anti-Normalization Campaign," *The Third Narrative*, March 15, 2015 (<http://thirdnarrative.org/israel-palestine-articles/anti-normalization-prevents-peace-sustains-the-occupation-undermines-academic-freedom-and-harms-students>).

<sup>4</sup> Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott Of Israel, "Israel's Exceptionalism: Normalizing the Abnormal" (<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1749>).

<sup>5</sup> Ghaith al-Omari, "Ills of Anti-normalization," June 19, 2015, *The Third Narrative* (<http://thirdnarrative.org/israel-palestine-articles/ills-of-anti-normalization/>).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, al-Omari.

<sup>7</sup> Samah Sabawi, "Colonization of the Mind: Normalize This!," Excerpts from a speech at Sydney University during Apartheid Week, 2012, *Palestine Chronicle* (<http://thirdnarrative.org/israel-palestine-articles/ills-of-anti-normalization/>).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Scholars for Israel and Palestine and Alliance for Academic Freedom.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, "Music At the Limits: Three Decades of Essays and Articles on Music," (Bloomsbury, 2000) p. 298.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Wellesley Fires Hillel Leaders Even as Anti-Israel Activism Rises," *Forward*, November 21, 2014 (<http://forward.com/news/israel/209671/wellesley-fires-hillel-leaders-even-as-anti-israel/>).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Paul Berger, "Jewish Professors Hit Back Against Pro-Israel Campus Blacklist," *Forward*, October 1, 2014 (<http://forward.com/news/israel/206628/jewish-professors-hit-back-against-pro-israel-camp/>).

<sup>12</sup> Ken Stern and Cary Nelson, "War on Campus," *Jewish Journal*, January 23, 2015

(<http://forward.com/news/israel/206628/jewish-professors-hit-back-against-pro-israel-camp/>).

<sup>13</sup> Braunold and Abuarquob, op.cit.