

**Apolitical Normalization: A New Approach to Jews in Arab States**

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**The regimes in Egypt and the Gulf states are trying to earn an image of tolerance toward Judaism. The trend is evident in declarations by Muslim clerics, television productions during Ramadan, and the renovation and construction of synagogues. These expressions of tolerance reflect an instrumentalist approach by the regimes, joining deep social processes that support promotion of the values of openness and multiculturalism. Despite the dualism in Egypt and the Gulf states of a positive attitude toward Judaism alongside belligerence toward Israel, the discourse of tolerance contributes to strengthening the concept of the Jews as belonging to the regional fabric, and in the future it may even help warm relations between the peoples and countries of the region and Israel. Israel, for its part, would do well to avoid politicizing the significant tolerance processes in order not to harm their public legitimization and delay their advancement.**

Following a thorough renovation, the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria was reopened in January 2020. The Egyptian Minister of Archaeology, Khaled al-Anani, participated in the dedication ceremony alongside senior Egyptian officials, foreign ambassadors, and heads of the Jewish community. Representatives of the Israeli embassy were not invited to the event, but they did participate in the celebratory service held at the synagogue the following month. Also in January, the US embassy in Cairo announced financing for the renovation of the al-Basatin Jewish cemetery in Cairo. In parallel, there were announcements in the Egyptian press regarding initiatives to establish a museum of Egyptian Jewish history. These initiatives are welcomed by the Egyptian regime, and involve associations representing Egyptian Jewry, including Drop of Milk operating in Cairo and Nebi Daniel in France.

There have been similar trends in the Gulf states as well. In Abu Dhabi, the Abrahamic Family House will open in 2022, and will include a mosque, a church, and a synagogue. In Dubai, a synagogue and a Jewish community center have been active for some time, mainly serving foreign businesspeople. Since late 2018, the synagogue has operated openly, although under certain limitations for security purposes and so as not to invite criticism from conservative Muslim entities. Last month, with government approval, the center launched a Twitter account that includes information on religious books and

kosher food. The United Arab Emirates has followed Bahrain (where there is a small Jewish community with roots in Iraq), which marks Jewish holidays and festivals, and even once appointed a female Jewish ambassador to Washington. In addition, in April-May 2020, the Saudi MBC network broadcast the Umm-Haroun series, which portrays the difficulties of the minority Jewish community in Kuwait prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. The series, which was filmed in the Gulf, is one of several series aired in prime time during Ramadan; it sparked criticism in some quarters of the producers and the regimes behind them, due to an ostensible attempt to legitimize normalization with Israel.

This “Jewish connection” is not new. Leaders, ambassadors, and other representatives of Egypt and the Gulf and Maghreb states have maintained contacts for many years with Jewish-American religious leaders and Jewish organizations. In Egypt, the president and senior government officials have met in recent years with Ronald Lauder, the chairman of the World Jewish Congress, and with members of Jewish organizations in the US and Canada. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met in 2018 with representatives of the American Jewish community. In February 2020, Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee met with King Salman. The kingdom also received a visit by a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations – the first official visit by a Jewish organization since 1993. The visit included meetings with senior officials and with Secretary General of the Muslim World League Muhammad bin Issa, who is close to bin Salman and who previously served as justice minister. He is the most senior Islamic personality to visit Auschwitz at the head of a delegation (January 2020). In 2017, Issa gave an interview to *Maariv*, and in 2019, he visited the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and published an article in the *Washington Post* in which he condemned Nazi crimes.

In view of the corona crisis, Issa called on all religions to join together in the struggle against the virus, and in an interview with the Saudi *Arab News*, he called the Jews “brothers” whom “we love [...] and respect,” while emphasizing the need to separate religion from politics. The Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, established following the meeting between the Pope and Egypt's Sheikh al-Azhar in February 2019 in Abu Dhabi, operates under the auspices of the United Arab Emirates and called on members of all religions to hold a day of prayer on May 14 to stop the plague. A Hebrew text of the call was published on the official social media pages of the al-Azhar Institute.

### **Religious Tolerance as Domestic and Foreign Policy**

The openness of Egypt and the Gulf states toward Judaism mirrors some similarities in their domestic and foreign policies. First is the objective of an image of religious tolerance in global public opinion. Egypt clarified that the renovation of the synagogue in

Alexandria conveys the message that the government in Cairo does not distinguish between Muslim, Christian, and Jewish sites. The location of the synagogue next to a church and a mosque was noted as a symbol of Egypt as a meeting-place of religions and a symbol of co-existence. The United Arab Emirates wants to brand its regime similarly (2019 was declared the Year of Tolerance) and strengthen the country's image as a center of freedom of religion, pluralism, and multiculturalism. This trend was manifested in particular by the establishment of a government ministry of tolerance, and the first visit by a Pope to the Arabian peninsula.

Second, emphasizing tolerance toward Judaism reflects the assessment in both Egypt and the Gulf states regarding the high level of influence of the Jewish lobby in Washington, and the desire to earn credit with the US administration. In the background is the drive by these countries to strengthen their soft power and to gain global support – political, diplomatic, military, and financial – in their ideological and military struggles against extremism and terrorism.

Third, religious tolerance could help push back arguments about antisemitism, soften the negative impressions in the liberal West created by the authoritarian practices adopted in the domestic sphere, and score positive points in government, public, and business groups.

Fourth, the Gulf states and Egypt are working to encourage the tourism industry as a means of attracting foreign capital. The positive branding that comes with opening synagogues is intended to attract global tourism in general, and Jewish tourism in particular.

Fifth, Egypt and the Gulf states want to cultivate an internal ethos of moderation. Since the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt has worked to integrate religious tolerance into its identity. The regime emphasizes a commitment to guarantee freedom of worship of all citizens and protect houses of worship, with an emphasis on churches belonging to the Coptic minority, which suffered murderous terrorist attacks and generally supports the regime. In the Gulf states, there is a clear attempt to promote what has been defined as “moderate Islam,” which includes increased openness – not just toward Judaism but also and mainly toward Christianity.

Alongside these similarities are differences between the respective attitudes toward Judaism. Until the middle of the last century, Egypt had a Jewish community of about 80,000 people, which left a deep positive impression and an authentic sense of nostalgia that is reviving nowadays. In the Gulf states, however, there is no modern Jewish heritage that can be built upon. While Egypt's financial resources are limited and the allocation of

such resources toward renovating Jewish heritage sites incurs public criticism, the Gulf states enjoy much more financial flexibility.

### **Significance and Recommendations**

Renovation and construction of synagogues are not considered in Egypt or in the Gulf states as expressions of normalization with Israel. The discourse on religious tolerance distinguishes between Judaism and Israel, and between Jews described as patriotic citizens and the Zionist movement. Therefore, Israeli representatives have so far not been invited to dedication ceremonies for Jewish institutions, and the legitimization of Judaism does not blunt criticism of Israel on the Palestinian issue or the widespread rejection of Israel's historic right to the Land of Israel.

Moreover, the official discourse in Arab countries on the Jewish issue is ambivalent, and it is difficult to assess the extent that trickles down to the broader public. Alongside the many tolerant messages are belligerent and even antisemitic messages in the press, textbooks, television programs, and movies. Demonic portrayals of Jews as striving to take over the world sometimes appear in the Egyptian and Gulf press – though less frequently than in the past – as well as allegations of “the Jewish origin” of the father of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna. During the Ramadan period, al-Nihaya (“The End”) series predicting the destruction of Israel was broadcast in Egypt. In Saudi Arabia, despite the warming of secret relations with Israel, an analysis published in February 2020 by the Impact-se Center showed that textbooks still contain antisemitic characteristics.

Even though the tolerance toward Judaism does not directly touch on Israel and does not include recognition of its historical-religious attachment to its territory, it does have a positive indirect impact on the “legitimization of the Jewish state” in a number of ways. First, it strengthens Israel's position as the continuation of the Jewish historical presence in the Arab sphere, while weakening its image as a foreign and external entity. Second, it encourages narratives of joint Muslim, Christian, and Jewish life as a natural and desired situation, in contrary to the Islamist concept that views Jews as eternal enemies. Third, it cultivates human and inclusive relations toward the Jewish “other,” instead of demonization and a zero-sum game that may block progress toward an Arab-Israeli compromise.

For its part, Israel must warmly welcome displays of tolerance toward Jews and Judaism, encourage interreligious dialogue, support civil initiatives to revive Jewish heritage in Arab countries, and promote tolerance between members of the monotheistic religions in Israel, particularly in Jerusalem. In addition, Israel must continue cultivating common strategic interests with Egypt and the Gulf states – public ties with Israel will make it

easier for them to adopt tolerant attitudes toward Judaism as well. At the same time, Israel would do well to leave the religious sphere to civil organizations and avoid the politicization of religion. Egypt and the Gulf states prefer normalization with Judaism to normalization with Israel, since it does not expose them to significant internal public criticism. However, under the appropriate political circumstances, tolerance toward Judaism may also help promote warmer relations between the countries and their peoples.