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Experiences In Coexistence and Anti-Normalization Phenomenological Case Study: Arab Alumni Of The Arava

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Experiences in Coexistence and Anti-Normalization

Phenomenological Case Study: Arab Alumni of the Arava

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PIM 68

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Intercultural Service, Leadership, and Management at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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Abstract

Many Arabs are confronted with the accusation that they are “normalizing with the Zionist enemy” when they participate in people-to-people programs with Israeli Jews. This paper explores the phenomenon of Arab participation in the Arava Institute of Environmental Studies, an academic coexistence program in Israel, and how the participants relate their experiences to the anti-normalization discourse. At the Arava Institute, Palestinian and Jordanians study and live alongside Israelis; Arab participants are often labeled “normalizers” within their society, a term associated with being a traitor or collaborator. From an anti-normalization perspective, people-to-people programs promote a positive public image of Israel and encourage Arabs to accept the occupation of the Palestinian territories as ‘normal.’ Using a phenomenological case study with two Palestinian and two Jordanian alumni of the Arava, the researcher seeks to understand the participants’ attitudes and perceptions of normalization and anti-normalization, their motivation to join this program despite anti-normalization sentiments in their home communities, and what the participants gained from their experience.

Experiences in Coexistence and Anti-Normalization

Phenomenological Case Study: Arab Alumni of the Arava Institute

One day while I was working at the Arava Institute of Environmental Studies – an education program in Israel promoting environmental cooperation in the Middle East – a reporter came to interview several Arab students. One of the students interviewed that day, a Palestinian woman named Waad, was pursuing a master’s degree in wastewater and solid waste management. Waad explained to the reporter that she comes from a small town outside of Bethlehem, and saw the Arava Institute as a great education opportunity. After graduating, she intended to return home and apply her knowledge in the West Bank.

When the article was published in the Jordanian press it was titled “Palestinian Normalizes with the Zionist Enemy.” The article led to editorial comments attacking Waad for her “betrayal” and “collaboration” with the enemy, and was widely circulated on Palestinian and Jordanian news outlets. Some Jordanian editorials called for a boycott of the Arava Institute. Staff members at the Arava Institute were angry, frustrated at the reporter, concerned about how the article would impact Waad’s personal life, and how it might affect Arab attendance for the next semester.

Like other Palestinian, Jordanian, Israeli, and international students, Waad came to the Arava Institute to study regional trans-boundary environmental issues. By encouraging environmental cooperation between peoples, the Arava Institute strives to work toward peace and sustainable development on a regional and global scale. Why was Waad’s involvement with the Arava Institute received with such negativity in the Arab media? How was her desire to

bring environmental expertise back to the West Bank — to improve the lives of her people — portrayed as a betrayal?

During this turn of events, it became clear to me how important it is for outsiders, especially peace activists, to understand the Arab cultural view on “normalization.” Regardless of intention, any Arab who “normalizes” with Israel or Israelis is viewed as a “collaborator” by some parts of Arab society. In order to understand the potential value or short-comings of programs like the Arava Institute, one must examine the socio-political norms from which participants are coming from, and the culture to which they will return. Through the first-hand experiences of four Arab alumni of the Arava Institute, I aim to explore the influence and impact of normalization on Arab participants of this academic coexistence program.

The Arava Institute

It is not common or easy for Palestinian or Jordanian students to study in Israel, yet approximately 180 Palestinians and Jordanians have studied at the Arava Institute since its founding in 1996. The Arab alumni comprise nearly one third of the Institute’s body of 600 alumni. The Arava Institute recognizes that in order to protect the environment and resolve critical environmental problems, peoples must work together. The Institute’s motto is tellingly, “Nature Knows No Borders.” The Arava Institute includes a research department dedicated to a number of environmental concerns from a trans-boundary context, such as the Center of Sustainable Agriculture, the Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation, and the Center for Trans-boundary Water Management.

The Arava Institute aims to have a student body of approximately one third Arab, one third Jewish Israeli, and one third international students. A large percentage of the internationals are North American Jews, while the Arab students are primarily from the West

Bank, Jordan, and East Jerusalem. The student body has ranged from 20 to 45 students per semester. The age of students typically ranges from 18 to 40 years old.

One of the most unique features of the Arava Institute is its location, a small campus housed on Kibbutz Keturah in the Negev Desert of Israel. This remote location surrounded by the calm desert helps students develop a strong community of their own – away from family, home, and city distractions. Many of the permanent staff at the Institute are American born Jews who immigrated to Israel several decades ago to become kibbutz members. Some staff and faculty members prioritize environmental values while others focus on the peace building potential of the Institute.

The Institute’s two-fold mission, to sustainably manage the environment and to promote peace, appeals to students with diverse experiences and opinions. Unlike solely peace-building programs, the Arava Institute attracts students who are looking for educational advancement and might not otherwise participate in a coexistence program. Beyond the different nationalities, there are further layers of diversity within each group of students: traditional, secular, conservative, radical, religious, left, mainstream, nationalistic, etc. Different students face different challenges in coming to the Arava. Some students, particularly Jordanian students, may attend against the will, or without the knowledge, of their friends and family. For many students of all backgrounds it is their first time meeting “the enemy” and engaging in dialogue with “the other.” This interaction between Arabs and Israeli Jews is often labeled as normalizing within Arab society.

Normalization – A term of many meanings

The meaning of the term normalization, or “tatbia” in Arabic, varies according to user and the context. Generally, the term refers to the act of having normal professional, economic,

social and or cultural relations between Arabs and Israelis. In Arab society, normalizing is used to signify “dealing with Israelis” and carries a negative connotation; it implies behaving and acting as though the occupation of Arab lands is normal or acceptable. For Israelis, normalization often has a positive meaning signifying the acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state in the Middle East.

My research focuses on the stigma around social and cultural normalization within Arab society, as opposed to economic or political normalization. I explore the social conditions surrounding the designation of this type of “normalizing” behavior. I am interested in how Arab alumni of the Arava engage in the anti-normalization discourse following their experience at the Institute. This research aims to shed light on the complexity of the normalization debate for Arab participants of coexistence programs so that peace-builders may approach this issue with more awareness and sensitivity.

The historical context and literature review provide a framework towards understanding the anti-normalization discourse and examine the convolutions of the term in regards to peace-building and activism. The research uses a phenomenological case study exploring four Arab students’ experiences with coexistence and anti-normalization to address the following questions:

Research Question:

How do Arab alumni of the Arava Institute relate to the anti-normalization discourse?

Sub-Questions:

What motivates Arab participants to join and stay in this people-to-people program despite anti-normalization attitudes within one’s society?

What do Arab participants take away from their experience in coexistence at the Arava Institute?

What are the Arab participant's attitudes and perceptions of normalization and anti-normalization following their time at the Arava Institute?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Every point in history regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been contested, including when the conflict began. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of national identities, a conflict over a disputed territory and military occupation, steeped in cycles of violence. The brief historical account below outlines a few key events to provide context to what has become the anti-normalization discourse.

In the 19th century, the land that is now Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories was inhabited by a multicultural population – approximately 86% were Muslim, 10% were Christian, and 4% were Jewish. Then, in the late 1880's and 1890's Eastern European Jews began immigrating to Palestine as part of the Zionist movement, the nationalistic belief that Jews have the right to a sovereign Jewish homeland. In the early 1900s, a second wave of 40,000 Jews fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe and settled in Palestine (Shoshuk & Eisenberg, 1984).

In 1918, a short memo from the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, declared that the area of Palestine was a good location for a state for the Jewish people. Jewish immigration increased in the years that followed, leading to rising tensions between the Arab and Jewish communities. In 1920, incited by Arab religious leadership, the Arab community responded with the Nabi Musa riots, leaving 9 dead (both Jewish and Arab) and hundreds injured (Kramer, 2008).

Despite the rising tensions, the Jewish population in Palestine continued to grow. By 1945, following World War II and the Holocaust, the population of Palestine was 33% Jewish. Then in 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution 181, which proposed to partition Palestine into two states; one Arab and one Jewish. The partition plan was accepted by the Jews and rejected by the Arab leadership (Arai, 2009). Responding to the partition and declaration of the State of Israel, the Arab states of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia declared war on Israel. Known both as the Palestinian “Catastrophe” and the Israeli “War of Independence,” the War of 1948 ended with a decisive Israeli victory, creating an estimated 750,000 Palestinian refugees. Some left their homes out of fear, choice, or forced eviction. The dispute over borders and refugees continues to this day.

Following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 the social and political norm for Palestinians and Arab countries was to deny the legitimacy of the state of Israel. Later, in the 1967 war, Israel seized the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and Sinai from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. This “Six Day War” resulted in large numbers of Palestinians coming under Israeli control (Shalom, 2009). It also led to “some two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand Palestinians [who] crossed to the East Bank of the River Jordan, increasing the total number of Palestinian refugees in Jordan to around three-quarters of a million” (King Abdullah II, 2011, p. 19).

Immediately following the Six Day War, the Arab League developed the Khartoum Resolution, a policy position that became known as the Three No’s: “no peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel, no recognition of Israel” (“Khartoum Resolution,” 1967). “In part [the Arab] stand was a response to Israel's unwillingness or inability to consider withdrawal from the

West Bank and Gaza as part of any peace settlement" (Morris, 2001, p. 346). The Arab states and Israel had become entrenched in their own positions.

A few months later in 1967, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 242. The Resolution declares future peace treaties must be based on the following two principles:

Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict.

Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force (UN Security Council, 1967).

In the aftermath of the 1967 War, Israel increasingly established settlements and expanded the building of homes and communities for Jews in the Palestinian territories in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, "which prohibit[s] a conquering power from settling its population on occupied territory" (Shalom, 2009). King Abdullah of Jordan explains the Palestinian's position, that "ending both the construction and expansion of settlements is a necessary prerequisite to successful negotiation. The problem is that the settlements are undermining the viability of a sovereign Palestinian state" (2001, p. 309).

The occupation has led to constant humiliations and deprivations for the Palestinian people, resulting in various forms of Palestinians resistance, both violent and non-violent. In the years following the Six Day War, the Palestinian national-political identity strengthened under the Palestinian Liberation Organization ("PLO") with Yasser Arafat leading the resistance. "At first the PLO took the position that Israel had no right to exist and that only Palestinians were entitled to national rights in Palestine" (Shalom, 2009). The PLO implemented a campaign of

armed struggle to gain international attention to the plight of Palestinians and their desire for a sovereign Palestinian state. However, “by 1976 the PLO had come to accept the international consensus favoring a two-state solution” (Shalom, 2009).

Cooperation between peoples developed during the 1970s between Palestinian radical Marxist groups and Jewish anti-Zionist groups. Several of the Palestinian Marxist groups “accepted normalization not only with the Israeli Communist Party, but also with Israeli peace groups who believed in a two-state solution and who supported the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination” (Salem, 2005, p. 2).

In 1979, Israel and Egypt signed an unprecedented peace agreement in which Egypt became the first Arab country to officially recognize Israel. In the Israeli-Egyptian dialogue that followed, "normalization talks were intended to characterize and crystallize the processes of peace and friendship, European-style, between the two countries. These normalization talks were led by representatives of the two governments, the most prominent of whom dealt with tourism” (Pundak, 2007). However, the term took on more and more negative connotation as Arabs became frustrated that there was no real progress in ending the occupation of Palestinian territories.

The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was based on the usual textbook concept of peace between nations, which means ending the state of war on the one hand and establishing cooperative relationships on the other. The theory holds that real peace among nations can only be achieved with the existence of normal relations between peoples. But the concept quickly proved to be overly ambitious. The remaining Arab-Israel problems continued to impact bilateral relations. It emerged that the psychological barrier that President Anwar Sadat was trying to remove was beyond his control (Salam, 2007).

The concept of ‘normalization’ as ‘peace’ was largely rejected by Egyptian society. Egyptian President Sadat was assassinated about a year after signing the agreement.

The next public recognition by an Arab leader of Israel’s right to exist came from Yasser Arafat in 1993 with the Oslo Accords. Signed by Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin, the Oslo Accords signified mutual recognition between Israeli and Palestinian leadership for the first time. The Oslo Accords attempted to enable the Palestinians to establish self-rule in Gaza and the West Bank, allow Israeli troops to withdraw from the Palestinian territories, and pave the way toward final status negotiations on Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security, and borders (Arai, 2009). Oslo brought hope to the region that peace and a sovereign Palestinian state were in reach.

In the early wake of the Oslo Accords, Jordan and Israel signed a peace agreement in 1994. The treaty included several issues and annexes, one of which was “the normalization of relations” (Mansur, 2007). As political and economic cooperation agreements were signed Israel returned territory near the Rift Valley to Jordan and the two countries exchanged ambassadors (Mansur, 2007).

After decades of conflict and distrust, the two governments viewed economic cooperation as a necessary condition for garnering support for the treaty by Jordanians and, to a lesser extent, Israelis. However, economic cooperation without comprehensive peace did not prove sufficient to create an environment of harmony between the two peoples. Nor has economic cooperation proved significant enough to conclude a people-to-people normalization process (Mansur, 2007).

While the Jordanian government has been willing to work towards political and economic normalization, the Jordanian public has been much less supportive of the peace treaty and any normalization efforts. A 1998 poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan revealed that 80% of Jordanians view Israel as an enemy (Greenwald, 1999). This dissonance between the people and the government on relations with Israel can be seen through the growing anti-normalization movement. Salam (2007) explains, “Boycott committees and ad-hoc groups have been formed to resist normalization with Israel, producing their own regulations of non-cooperation.”

During the Oslo period (1993- 2000), peace activists from Palestinian and Israeli civil society initiated hundreds of cooperative projects together, often referred to as ‘people-to-people.’ However, the political peace process greatly unraveled and became frustrated by a lack of real progress. Roy (2002) explains that Oslo did not lead to improvements in the daily lives for Palestinians, but rather conditions in the Palestinian territories worsened as illegal settlements, checkpoints, and imposed closures all increased. Acts of violence from both sides further derailed the peace process. Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist in 1995. The Second Palestinian Intifada began in 2000 incorporating protests and strikes, as well as suicide bombing attacks. Israel responded militarily, resulting in four times as many Palestinian casualties (“B’tselem-Statistics-Fatalities,” 2011). As negotiations between political leaders collapsed, the relationship between Israeli and Palestinian activists also suffered. Accusations that Oslo was an attempt to normalize the occupation picked up momentum and the criticism carried over to the people-to-people programs as well.

In 2002, the Arab League proposed the Arab Peace Initiative at the Beirut Summit calling for:

full Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territories occupied since 1967, a negotiated settlement of the issue of Palestinian refugees, and the establishment of a sovereign, independent Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital. In return, all twenty-two Arab countries said they would ‘consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region’ (King Abdullah II, 2011, p. xvi).

In addition, the Arab League stated it would “establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace” (p.xvi). Israel, and members of the American administration, did not accept this Arab Peace Initiative.

As the Arab-Israeli conflict continues, the question of normalization remains in several different contexts. The following literature review deals with the anti-normalization discourse in regards to activism; activism within the anti-normalization movement and activism promoting cooperation in peace-building.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peace practitioners, academics, and human rights activists around the world are dedicated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at a grassroots level. Some activists discourage any cooperation with Israel as a means to fight occupation. Other activists advocate Israelis and Palestinians working together against the occupation. These activists receive criticism that their activities are not promoting justice or peace, but rather promoting a normalization of the occupation. This literature review will give a background on the concept of normalization; it focuses on the relationship between the people-to-people approach and the anti-normalization stance

surrounding such cooperation efforts. This literature review provides a context to the issues raised in the interviews of this study.

People-to- People

The people-to-people approach refers to cooperative activities between Israelis and Palestinians to promote peace. People-to-people activities vary in focus, such as the arts, interfaith dialogue, joint-civil resistance, and environmental cooperation. The roots of people-to-people were formed during the peace activism of the 1970's and 1980's; however the term itself only gained popularity after being used in an annex of the Oslo Accords (Herzog & Hai, 2005, p. 12). Oslo brought hope to many Israelis and Palestinians that peace was possible and in sight, laying a foundation for many people-to-people projects to emerge. Hundreds of organizations formed and received funding from both the public and private sectors. While the original term referred to specific projects with donors linked directly to the Oslo Accords, it now includes Israeli-Palestinian civil society interactions more broadly, including those critical of the Oslo process (Herzog & Hai, 2005). Common themes of people-to-people projects include “civil society cooperation; building constituencies for peace from the ground up; conflict resolution; learning the political narrative of the Other; bringing people into creative interaction; and learning from one-another and about each other's culture” (Baskin & Qaq, 2002). Some people-to-people efforts receive praise for providing a space for dialogue and forging friendships between Palestinians and Israelis; others receive criticism for being too impractical, stating a core believe that “conflict is in the mind,” an argument that sounds callously abstract or offensive to many Palestinians experiencing life under occupation.

Peacemaking vs. Normalization

Ghasan Andoni, Director of the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement and founder of the International Solidarity Movement, published an insightful paper analyzing the original People-

to- People program funded by Norway as a provision to the Oslo Accords. It is one of the few papers whose main focus is on the relationship between peacemaking and normalization, and sheds light on this issue within the Palestinian community. Andoni conveys how Palestinian reaction to people-to-people programs has evolved from acceptance and enthusiasm to skepticism and disapproval. The original people to people program, he shares, exposed itself to criticism when it did not adequately respond to Palestinian concerns. Palestinians thereafter began to fear such programs and suspect them of serving the purpose of indoctrinating Israelis and Palestinians with the idea that a continued occupation was normal and acceptable. He stresses that peacemaking is “challenging unjust conditions and attempting to replace them with more human and just conditions through proper education and challenges to oppressive and inhuman measures” (p. 2). However, according to Andoni, the product of normalization is “to defuse the conflict and educate the public to accept injustice as a reality of life” (p. 2). Palestinians must consider this dichotomy when contemplating one’s role in participating in people-to-people projects.

Andoni sees the connection of people-to-people with the Oslo Accords as a “liability” (p. 2) since Oslo “failed to improve the day-to-day living conditions of Palestinians” and rather “implemented procedures that both increased the hardship and intensified fear” (p. 4). For many Palestinians, normalization connotes “recognizing injustice as normal” (p. 6). It leads to the perspective that “the peace camp in Israel is attempting to decorate the ugly face of the Israeli occupation” (p. 7). When people-to-people programs are associated with normalization, resisting people-to-people programs becomes a moral campaign for Palestinians. While Andoni appears partially sympathetic to the plight of well-intentioned people-to-people programs, he emphasizes their shortcomings and disapproves of the underlying motivation of some people-to-people

efforts. To placate and reconcile the concerns of where normalization ends and peacemaking begins, he stresses, “addressing Palestinian rights is a prerequisite for cooperation” (p. 7).

Jordan

Andoni informs readers “no term amongst Arab and Palestinian intellectuals is dealt with in such a sensitive fashion as the term ‘normalization.’ The Arab satellite TV networks are full of debates about normalization, Committees against Normalization are being established, and punitive measures against individuals accused of promoting normalization are taken by some Arab civil society organizations” (2003, p. 6). In Jordan, in 2001, a “List of Shame” was compiled and posted on the internet in an attempt to boycott Jordanians “who work with Israel or Israelis in any context” (Scham & Lucas, 2001, p. 55). For a brief period following Israel’s peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, normalization carried a more neutral tone; however, aggressive actions taken by the Israeli military against Palestinians over the next decade gave rise to anti-normalization sentiments throughout the society (Scham & Lucas, 2001). It is relevant to note that over 50% of the population in Jordan is of Palestinian origin.

In Jordan, the movement against normalization is led by the Islamic Action Front and is fueled by the country’s wide-spread professional associations (Scham & Lucas, 2001).

Professional associations, which developed significant para-political influence during the 1957-1989 period when political parties were banned, are leading the Jordanian fight against normalization with Israel. These associations wield considerable clout, as membership is a prerequisite for practicing that profession. In September 1999, this issue gained worldwide attention when the journalists' association sought to expel three reporters who had participated in a program in Israel. The reporters were eventually let

off after apologizing, but the strong feelings in Jordan against “normalization” with Israel were laid bare (Sham, 2000, p.6).

Although highly discouraged in Jordanian society, there have been quiet breakthroughs in cooperation through academic and scientific research. Sham (2009) writes, “joint research creates a valuable opportunity for contact in a non-political setting embodying mutual respect and joint goals” (p. 2). Most academics in Jordan regard themselves as anti-normalization; however, successful professional and scientific cooperation between academics continues to take place and is considered by many to be a significant peace-building tool (Sham, 2009). “Joint research requires a sustained intellectual commitment and a degree of trust in the other party” (p.13).

Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions

Whereas unions and professional associations lead the anti-normalization movement of Jordan, it currently manifests itself most in Palestine through the activist sphere. The primary movement in Palestine with a prominent anti-normalization stance is the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction Campaign, otherwise known as the BDS. The BDS movement developed in 2005 as a coalition of Palestinian intellectuals, academics, unions and non-governmental organizations campaigned their strategy to end the occupation; a strategy of boycott and divestment initiatives similar to those used against Apartheid South Africa (Barghouti, 2011). The BDS movement has garnered both international support and criticism. A significant aspect of BDS is the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, PACBI. Palestinian and international academics, intellectuals, and entertainers have joined this movement to call for a “comprehensive economic, cultural, and academic boycott of Israel” (“About the Campaign,” 2008). PACBI discourages joint-activities between Palestinians and Israelis, including most

people-to people projects. This has contributed to an atmosphere where if one engages in activities with a people-to-people approach – such as Seeds for Peace, One Voice, or the Arava Institute – he or she will be deemed a normalizer.

Anti-Normalization and Peace-Building

Walid Salem, director of the Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development, explains a variety of stances towards normalization. He reveals nuances in the term anti-normalization and explains:

[Anti-Normalization] does not always mean a rejection of all relations. On the contrary, an anti-normalization position might reject normalcy now, but accept it after the achievement of peace, or it might reject normalcy now, but accept negotiations (on the official level), or dialogue (on the popular level) (p. 1).

In some instances the anti-normalization stance is in response to Israel's policies, in fewer circumstances it is in response to Israel's existence. Salem categorizes four varying anti-normalization positions: 1) an Islamic position stemming from the belief "that Palestine is an Islamic waqf" [property] and that "Israel's existence is not legitimate"; 2) The Marxist position against normalizing Israel through an anti-imperialist lens that "rejects social and cultural consumerism"; 3) Arab nationalists who see Israel as "a threat to Arab unity" and "make a distinction between negotiating with Israel and normalizing with Israel"; and, 4) A mixture of groups with "various religious, national, and Marxist orientations" that "call for a rejection of cultural normalization" (p. 2). Salem emphasizes that the majority of Palestinians who currently oppose normalization are willing to normalize relations once the occupation has ended. This is different from an anti-normalization stance that challenges Israel existing as a Jewish state in the Middle East. This is important to point out as some Israelis may infer that 'anti-normalization'

automatically implies a complete rejection of Israel's existence, when in fact, Salem argues, it does not. Salem supports cooperative efforts in the peace-building field and is less stringent in his use of the word normalizing than Andoni is. Salem promotes cooperation efforts on the grassroots level and does not always attach negative connotation to the word normalization.

Referring to Palestinian and Israeli civil society organizations, he says:

These groups can and must continue normalizing with the groups they choose. For the sake of pluralism and diversity, it is important that each side respect the other's approach to normalization, as well as the differences between the two sides. This is the essence of pluralism and respect for diversity (p. 6).

Salem further suggests that “what is needed now is a formula that enables all the normalization/anti-normalization processes to peacefully coexist, without the use of violence against each other and without accusing the others of treason, collaboration, or extremism” (p. 6).

Literature Review Conclusion

Comparing Andoni and Salem, two prominent Palestinian activists, on their use of “normalization” reveals the complexity of the term and the confusion around it in regards to peace-building. There is an abundance of research on coexistence efforts and encounter programs in Israel. There are numerous articles written from either an anti-normalization or a pro-normalization perspective. However, there is not extensive research on the relationship between anti-normalization attitudes and peace-building efforts. Some organizations may mention it in reports as a side note, but it is rarely the primary focus of a study. My research will contribute to the literature by providing in-depth personal accounts of Arab participants who have experience in the people-to-people approach and the challenge it brings regarding anti-

normalization sentiments, both from society and from within. I am inspired by Walid Salem's statement that we must "make an effort to understand the deeper roots of these positions and to respect them. It is important to exchange views and to learn the positions of others, who may provide new and different ways of thinking about normalization." It is with this message in mind that I conduct my research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following study takes a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of two Palestinian and two Jordanian alumni of the Arava Institute. The purpose of phenomenological research is to gain an accurate understanding of another's experience, to capture in-depth reflections by participants regarding their experience of an identified phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, Rossman and Rallis (1998) explain that phenomenology is "a focus on the essence of lived experience. Those engaged in phenomenological research focus on the meaning of a particular aspect of experience, assuming that through dialogue and reflection the quintessential meaning of the experience will be reviewed." A case study explores a phenomenon through one or more cases within a particular setting. The following phenomenological case study is used to explore the phenomenon of how Arab alumni of a coexistence program relate their experience to the anti-normalization discourse.

The background and research questions of this study were developed through informal interviews, discussions, and observations over the course of an 18 month stay in the Middle East, working at the Arava Institute for three semesters and in travels through Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. During this time I engaged in countless informal discussions regarding normalization with a variety of people. Whether it was over tea in a café in Ramallah or with a friend's visiting father, I constantly raised the subject to gather a wide perspective and increase my

understanding. I spoke with friends, colleagues, and new acquaintances; people who oppose normalization, support it, and more often than not are very confused by it. Although I was occasionally met with some antagonism, most people were generally interested in sharing their view. I also observed how some Arab students at the Arava did not want their picture taken for fear it would end up on the internet or press. I observed how other Arab students responded to this reluctance. I observed events and conversations that made Arab students feel uncomfortable or challenged them. I observed how the word “normalization” was often misused, misunderstood, or misrepresented by those that did not understand it, primarily from the Israeli and North American students. My informal discussions and observations directly influenced which questions I selected to ask during the interviews and how I guided our discussions.

The primary data for this study was collected through formal interviews. I conducted four in-depth, open-ended interviews with four different participants. Interviews were conducted in person and permission was granted to voice record each interview, using a digital voice recorder. The interviews lasted from one hour to one hour and a half. I previously interacted with all four participants prior to the interviews. Previous to the interview I had lived in the same community with two of the participants during their time at the Arava. This interaction built a trust between interviewee and researcher that allowed me to go below the surface on topics that otherwise may have been challenging to delve deeper into. Furthermore, I was able to ask the interviewees to elaborate on circumstances that I had previous knowledge of from living with them in a shared community. I had met the other two participants several times through mutual contacts and felt comfortable that they would be candid with me about this subject.

I analyzed the data from each interview using the same method. I began my analysis by transcribing the interviews verbatim. After transcribing each interview, I re-listened to the entire

interview, using inductive analysis to comment on and analyze the data in the margins as I continued to listen and study the text. I then carefully examined each sentence of the transcript; after each sentence cluster I chose a word or phrase that best suited the theme of the sentence cluster, adding to the themes and categories I initially coded. For each interview, I identified the reoccurring themes and created an outline format in order to categorize the data under the designated concepts. Furthermore, I compared each outline to see what patterns and themes overlapped. I identified themes that surfaced most prominently and themes that were unique to each interviewee. I found eight themes that captured the essence of the experiences the participants relayed to me, categorized under two concepts: coexistence and overcoming anti-normalization. Relating to coexistence, the following themes emerged: dual narrative, humanizing the other, understanding is not agreeing, and knowing the enemy. Related to overcoming anti-normalization the following values emerged as themes: educating others, higher education, idealism, and pragmatism. I use direct quotes from the interviewees to illustrate their perspectives and experiences without grammatical editing to allow the reader to truly hear the interviewees' voice.

Participants

The participants offer diversity in religious and family backgrounds. All participants are in their mid-twenties to early-thirties and were very receptive to being interviewed. Abeer is a Muslim Palestinian female whom I interviewed in a village outside of Ramallah where she was living with her aunt at the time. She studied at the Arava Institute in fall 2009 and spring 2010. Anton, an Arava alumnus from 2008, is a Christian Palestinian male. His interview took place at Ben Gurion University, where he is currently working on his master's thesis on ornithology. Osama is a Muslim male from Amman, Jordan whose parents are Palestinian refugees. His

interview took place in Aqaba, Jordan at the Arava Alumni conference. He studied at the Institute in 2005 and returned several years later as an intern. Elham is a Muslim, Jordanian female from a large Bedioun tribal family. Elham's interview took place in her family's home in a village outside of Amman. She completed her second semester at the Arava in fall 2011.

Limitations

In my quest to gain insight into the anti-normalization discourse from Arab alumni of the Arava several limitations influence this study. While I tried to cover diversity in terms of gender, religious and family backgrounds there are several commonalities between the interviewees-restricting a diversity that consequently could have led to different results. Although I do believe my previous relationship with the interviewees allowed a comfortability and depth to the discussion, that is simply my perception; it is possible that this relationship may have led interviewees to limit or censor some of their responses.

The participants of this study are all still connected to the Institute as alumni in some way. The Institute has many alumni that do not remain connected; they do not participate in alumni events nor are they responsive to being contacted by the alumni department. Whether this disconnect has anything to do with anti-normalization has not been confirmed. However, I suspect for some of the out-of-reach alumni it is a factor and hence would create very different findings if I had included someone that fits this profile.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the mere fact that these individuals would be willing to partake in a people-to-people program means they may not be representative of the majority of the populations from which they come. Less than one percent of Palestinians and Jordanians meet Israelis on encounter programs (Baskin & Qaq, 2002). So, while this study does offer valuable insight into the discourse, it is from a very specific point of view.

Another factor influencing the data is timing. Whether someone is a recent alumnus or an alumnus from the early years of the Institute may play a factor in his or her recollection of events; the amount of distance from the experience inherently influences one's perspective. The political climate or personal events surrounding the time of the interview can also affect emotions and memories for an interviewee.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Experiencing Coexistence: Learning the Other Narrative

As the participants discussed their time at the Arava and what they gained from their experiences the most reoccurring concept linking their stories was 'learning the other narrative.' Related to this concept several themes arose: humanizing the other, understanding is not agreeing, and knowing the enemy. Participants referred to personal transformations when they began humanizing the Israeli for the first time, instead of simply viewing Israelis as the enemy. Participants reiterated that just because they learn the other narrative and are willing to listen to it does not mean they forgo their own narrative and start accepting the other. And lastly, participants felt that knowing the enemy and being familiar with its narrative is a means to support the Palestinian cause rather than remaining ignorant.

Dual Narrative

One major critique of people-to-people programs is that they promote goodwill on an individual level, but do nothing to address structural inequality between Israelis and Palestinians, and thereby promote the status quo. This critique is often applied to programs that bring Palestinian and Israeli youth together for a brief amount of time, such as sports or art camps.

Strong anti-normalization positions, as seen in the BDS movement, have adopted this critique and overwhelmingly apply it to all people-to-people programs.

When questioned about this criticism, each interviewee responded by discussing the benefits of learning the “dual narrative.” They credit the Arava Institute’s PELS program – the mandatory, non-credit peace-building class – for exposing them to the “dual narrative.” PELS serves as a community-building tool and gives the Arab and Jewish students a common language and starting ground to discuss the conflict on both an individual and structural level. Each semester at the Arava students attend a lecture with one Palestinian and one Israeli historian to provide a historical overview of the conflict, as well as discuss current events, from both a Palestinian and Israeli perspective. Students also learn a tremendous amount of each other’s collective narratives from personal stories and sharing. The term “dual narrative” in this context stems from a project conducted by the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (Prime) that brought Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli teachers together to create a joint textbook and teach workshops of the two narratives (Adwan & Bar-On, 2003). A strong example of how the philosophy of “dual narrative” is approached on campus can be seen every spring semester when students must decide as a community how to commemorate (or not commemorate) each other’s respective holidays. Holocaust Memorial Day occurs days before Israeli Independence Day. For some Arab students it is their first time learning about the Holocaust, a collective trauma for the Jewish people. Israeli Independence Day marks a victory for Israelis, yet marks the Catastrophe or al- Nakba, for Palestinians. For some Jewish students it is their first time becoming aware of al-Nakba, the collective trauma for Palestinians that occurred with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This is just one example where students must create space within to recognize and acknowledge a narrative that is closely tied into the identity of the other, while remaining

strong in one's own identity. There is a commitment in the community to create this safe space, and although at times it becomes very tense and difficult, students also say it is the most rewarding.

Anton says:

The most important thing I learned at Arava is understanding the Israeli narrative. People should talk to each other to understand how the others are thinking about this conflict and this what happened with me. Like so many things changed in my mind and in my way of thinking and I'm trying to say this to my friends, to my family, to my community that the Israelis they... they believe in something. It doesn't matter if we believe in the same thing or not. Maybe we believe in something else which is true. We believe in something else, that this land is our land it's not Israeli land. But also Israelis have different point of view. In order to find a solution that gives the Palestinians what they want and gives the Israelis what they want everybody will sacrifice something that we cant ..eh.. nobody will get everything 100%. But without understanding what is the needs of the others, I don't think we can achieve any kind of agreement or a good agreement that could last for long time.

About learning the narratives in PELS, Elham states:

It gave me the chance to experience all the conflict from different angles. It opened my mind to ideas. I never thought of the conflict in that way or this way. It gave me the chance to experience the conflict from different angles.

Osama refers to the "dual narrative" as an important "tool" he received from the peace-building class:

I look at myself as a person that really knows history. I memorize it even by hand what happened in 48, 67 whatever or conflict. When I came to Israel and I have this historian coming to us and telling the same story but so opposite story. You just realize it's not, there isn't a fact anymore. What is a fact? It's irrelevant thing. A fact is something like believing 100% then I think is true but this is something that I perceived from my own perspective, from my own context that I have in mind so there isn't any fact any more. It's people perceiving things differently. So what I learned from the wars, it's not always 100% right so it might be right for me. So when Israelis are right, Palestinians are right. Israelis have a right. Palestinians also have a right.

Learning each other's narrative is linked to the next key concept. Becoming familiar with each other's stories, learning how people have been raised in such different narratives, can lead to humanizing someone once seen solely an enemy.

Humanizing the Other

All the interviewees spoke of their impressions of Israelis before coming to the Arava. For Palestinians, Israelis are the occupiers controlling their mobility and impinging upon their freedom. For Jordanians, Israelis are demonized in the media as the "Zionist entity." The journey to accept a different reality about Israelis is not an easy one, especially when one has witnessed atrocities in one's village or heard about them from refugee parents in Jordan, yet the interviewees were guided by their curiosity in meeting the other.

Abeer comments:

About Israelis...I was thinking you know just soldier, and to see them as a soldiers, and the check points, what they are doing in the intifadas the first and second, and the Gaza war. At the Arava I learn new things that I didn't know about Israelis or Jewish. For

example, how they see the history about the religion, also about the culture. Arava gives me a chance to know the others. Actually we can say this; it's an opportunity... to know other people and their world.

Osama gives an account emphasizing the outcome of humanizing the other. He reflects:

It's the easiest thing in the world just to stay in your side and demonize the other person. It's the easy solution. It's the easiest thing for everybody to look at Muslims and say they are all terrorists. It's not the right thing. It's easiest for any Jordanian or Muslim to look at all Jewish people and say they are all demons or all bad. So when you look at that, that's the easiest, people love to stick to the easiest. It's not that way anymore when you go there [the Arava]. When you find out all this, oh my God, it makes our life so much complicated but then you have the taste of truth. It's not always as black and white. You need to look more into the details. You need to look more into small things that you look around you. It makes my life harder and at the same time, it makes it more, has more meaning. That there is something that you are working for seriously.

Humanizing the other is often a goal, whether explicit or implicit, of people-to-people programs. Often people-to-people programs rely on or incorporate contact theory for this to occur. Contact theory, presented by American social psychologist Gordon Allport, claims that intergroup contact under certain conditions reduces stereotypes and prejudices (Allport, 1958). Extensive research has been done on this theory and its relevance for the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Several peace practitioners and social-psychologists argue that contact theory does not take into account the asymmetrical relationship in a protracted conflict and rather reinforces the status quo (Maoz, Dixon, Abu-Nimer,). Furthermore, the optimal conditions that are required for contact theory to be successful can be overlooked or are too challenging to provide in many well-

intentioned efforts. It is argued that the results can be counterproductive and reinforce negative stereotypes. Or that humanizing the other may take place initially, but not have a long-lasting effect. Maoz (p. 6) summarizes Allport's optimal conditions as:

- (1) equal status of both groups in the contact situation;
- (2) ongoing personal interaction between individuals from both groups;
- (3) cooperation in a situation of mutual dependence, in which of both groups work together toward a common goal; and
- (4) institutional support consensus among the authorities and the relevant institutions about norms that support equality.

Part of Arava's success may lie in its ability to comply with the conditions for contact theory to be successful. Arabs and Jews at the Arava have equal status as students within the Arava community. The interactions on campus include living in the same quarters, eating in the same dining hall, attending classes together, and socializing for a minimum of one academic semester. After students leave the Arava, the Alumni Network encourages and supports joint-projects and continuing relationships. At the Institute, there is the immediate mutual dependence in studying and working on class projects together to earn a good grade, and of course there is the greater goal, the Institute's mission of environmental protection and cooperation. And lastly, the faculty of the Institute create the norms that provides the equal status of each community member when he or she is on campus.

Understanding is Not Agreeing

In response to accusations of betrayal, Arab alumni are careful to point out that learning the other narrative does not mean agreeing with it. With societal pressure on the Arab participants regarding normalization it makes sense for them to emphasize this point. Learning the other narrative must not impinge on one's identity, if it does then people will not listen, they

will simply reject. The context of learning the other narrative must be one that is sensitive to this need on both sides.

Anton reflects:

So many things change my way of thinking about the Israelis. I think the most important thing is that I get to know the story of Israelis about living in this land. Alright now I understand the Israeli narrative about the conflict, I now know different points of view about the conflict, which I did not know about before. Now I understand the way they are thinking about this land and why they chose this land. I understand them it doesn't mean that I do agree with them about what they're saying or about their narrative. But at least it gives me a different way to think about how we can solve this conflict between us as Palestinians and Israelis.

Osama says:

Like I can tell you I do understand why Israelis built the separation wall but that doesn't mean I agree with them. I am 100% against it but I do understand from where it does come. I do understand why a suicide bomber go and bomb himself. I don't agree with him. I disagree 100% but I do understand why does he do that. To understand the frustration and understand the pain, sometimes understand the joy, it makes you connect to a different level and then I can talk to you. We can understand, we can have this common language of feelings between us.

“Understanding is not agreeing” is a concept Ury and Fisher relay in their book “Getting to Yes.” It states:

Understanding is not agreeing. One can at the same time understand perfectly and disagree completely with what the other side is saying. But unless you can convince

them that you do grasp how they see it, you may be unable to explain your viewpoint to them.

Students experience this concept as they often struggle to listen and share with each other. The dual narrative approach encourages acceptance of hearing other's narratives without being forced to agree with them. This is imperative in peace education for people-to-people programs.

Knowing the Enemy to Support Palestinian Rights

Palestinian and international activists resist the occupation through means such as demonstrations, civil resistance, and boycotts. While some activists promote justice and peace through a people-to-people approach the BDS rejects many of these interactions on claims that such programs are a guise to "whitewash Israel's public image." The Academic boycott defines normalization as:

participating in any project, initiative or activity whether locally or internationally, that is designed to bring together-whether directly or indirectly- Palestinian and/or Arab youth with Israelis (whether individuals or institutions) and is not explicitly designed to resist or expose the occupation and all forms of discrimination and oppression inflicted upon the Palestinian people" ("Palestinian Youth United," 2010).

The Arava Institute's stated mission is to promote environmental cooperation. Although issues, including oppression and discrimination, related to the occupation and the greater Arab-Israeli conflict are addressed in PELS and informally between students, the Arava Institute is not explicitly designed to resist the occupation. However, some may argue that promoting this kind of cooperation and learning is in fact resisting the occupation.

Abeer says:

I think when you talk when you have any conflict in the world, the conflict have two

parts: you will have you and your enemy. This is the conflict. So in order to solve this you have to understand the other. Your enemy. You have to know more about him. So if you say that I can't talk with him I can't work with him I can't do many things I don't want to see him you will stay in your place so I think it's very important to know more, to learn in order to change. I think it's very important. For me I think it supports the Palestinians to know.

Anton sees learning the other narrative as something that helps him with the Palestinian struggle:

It support a lot my role within the Palestinian community, by understanding the Israeli narrative about the conflict. Without understanding the enemy you can't achieve anything. You should understand your enemy the Israelis, my enemy. You want to say it in this way, they are occupying my country, they are my enemy. Without understanding the way they are thinking about this conflict, I will never ever be able to achieve my goals, my target which is my country at the end. So to understand the different story about the conflict is very important. Not only for the Palestinians, but for the Israelis. They should understand why you live here, why we call this land our country, our home, our... if they understand this I think we could start to find a way to solve this conflict. I don't think the peace will come just from two good governments.

Elham says:

People are very educated so it doesn't work to be fooled. Palestinians need the tools and understanding, understand their rights understand the Israeli rights and the different narratives they will be able to fight for their rights better. I understand my rights when I learn and understand the others also. Knowledge is tools.

Abeer, Anton, Osama, and Elham all reveal a strong sense of self and individualism. They are all motivated by internal desires more than external pressures. They deal with the backlash of their deemed normalization by staying true to their own values; they feel they are doing something good not only for themselves but for the Palestinian cause as well.

Learning the other narrative is a tool in peace-building, the participants expressed the deep impact it had on them. It gives people a tool to talk about the conflict, where otherwise there may not be a starting ground. The interviewees were not afraid to learn the narrative of the other, as long as their narrative was heard and respected in return. Despite being proud of one's experience and what one has gained from the Arava, it is clear that the term 'normalizer' remains a negative term that one does not want to be identified with.

Overcoming Anti – Normalization

All participants relayed stories and moments on the difficulties of reconciling their choice to study at the Arava Institute to their friends and families. In the beginning, each participant chose to tell some friends and not others. Participants spoke about losing friendships and being called a "mutabeh," a traitor, as well as accusations of being a collaborator and spying for Israel. Participants have various responses to negative feedback surrounding the designation of this type of "normalizing" behavior, including hurt, defensiveness, and indifference. Furthermore, participants have varying degrees of support towards some aspects of the anti-normalization movement. Interviewees reveal the ambiguity of the term and how its definition can be personalized to justify one's own cooperation with the "so-called enemy," as Osama often referred to Israel.

What Abeer, Anton, Osama, and Elham all have in common is overcoming this challenge through strong personal values. The emerging themes come from the interviewees personal

justifications related directly to their values. These values include: educating others, higher education, idealism, and pragmatism. These values are conveyed through the following excerpts coupled with the researcher's analysis. Furthermore, the findings reveal differences towards normalization for Palestinian and Jordanian interviewees.

Educating Others

The Arava Institute encourages students to share their histories both formally and informally. For Palestinian students this often means informing Jewish students about the Nakba, showing documentaries, and sharing what daily life under occupation is like. It is not only meaningful (and at times very difficult) to those who are listening and learning, it also appeases the inner turmoil many Arab students feel in choosing to study in Israel. Arab culture places a high value on loyalty and solidarity, and Arabs who participate in cooperative activities with Israelis must find ways to reassert their Arab identity. One means in which Arab participants at the Arava do this is through educating others about Arab culture, customs, and political perspectives that the Israeli and international students may otherwise not be exposed to.

Abeer expresses the hurt she felt from those that accuse her of normalization, and she offers her rationale for why her studies at the Arava does not constitute normalization. She shares:

Tatbia is to forget our suffering, just to go work and have fun, it is to forget your background, to forget your story, your history, I think this is normalization, to ignore the things which the Israelis did and doing.

In educating others, Abeer connects to her Palestinian identity. She states:

I don't think that my studying at Arava is normalization because it gives me a chance to show the other side for the Palestinians to show maybe also what's happen exactly in

West Bank, and what's happening with the Palestinians, and to know the Palestinian as a human. In Arava I don't feel that I am normalizer. I feel that I am Palestinian there, I am still Palestinian. I am still the one who carry my stories, also the Palestinian stories, I took it to Arava so I don't think it's normalization for me. Although many people think this.

Abeer continues:

Like some of my friends told me that normalizer you are normalizer and you are happy with them and I said that I am not normalizer. It is good opportunity for me to show the others about the Palestinian. To talk. You are here but what you are doing, just say you are suffering and no one hears you so it gives me a chance to tell the others what's happening exactly. To know the others and if you feel that you are doing something for your country and if you feel that I am the normalizer, I am the traitor... you can't judge the people according to this. It's painful because you are not like this, you are doing something better than him and he doesn't doing anything but just talking and judging people as he want. It's really painful for me but I feel it give me the strength to be more stronger.

Elham shares an important example where she had a significant experience in taking upon the role of educating others about the conflict. This example refers to an incident that occurred her first semester in the peace-building class:

I felt that there is a kind of ignoring from each side, especially from the Israelis regarding the Palestinians, either they felt it but because it is hard to feel it they show ignorance and I felt it, and it was strong to me so I want to put them in a real situation and make them feel themselves how is it, how is the situation. So I asked some of my colleagues to grasp

this Israeli colleague's arms and legs so he cannot move - and I should have asked a 5th person to close his mouth. This is how the Palestinian situation is and I want the Israelis to feel it because they've been like brainwashed, masked, blinded not to see the truth and some of them insist in not seeing the truth because it's hard. So I want to help them and overcome this and see things by themselves. I think that I succeeded in this.

Like many Jordanian students, Elham connected to her Arab identity by expressing solidarity for the Palestinian cause. It was very important for Elham to be able to share her political views and have colleagues from different backgrounds sincerely interested in her perspective.

Higher Education

There are a variety of people-to-people programs with different focuses such as sports, art, dialogue, the environment, interfaith, etc. The Arava Institute is unique as a coexistence program in its strong academic focus where participants are able to receive transferable academic credit. Coexistence is not just pursued as a means in itself – often students have a self-interested incentive to cooperate. Many working at the Institute emphasize that the Arava is an academic program with a peace-building component rather than the other way around. This works to the advantage of Palestinian students contemplating the degree of normalization their participation will carry. Anton and Abeer both strongly felt that working towards higher education must be seen as very different than normalization.

Anton expressed the difficulty of returning to his hometown, having friends lose trust in him, and convincing people, including family, that he is not a collaborator. He defends his decision to study at the Arava because it is a means to achieve his goals of higher education. His definition distinguishes what he considers normalization.

Anton says:

Tatbia is to forget, I am not forgetting, I not a mutabeh I am just a student. Tatbia means that to forget the Israelis or Israel is occupying my country, and to live a normal life with these people... in spite of stealing my land, stealing the resources of my country. It's living a normal life with them, with all the conflict, with all the issues that are related to this conflict. But for me I am studying here so I don't call it Tatbia. I call it I am a student, looking to achieve his education in a good university, with a high standard of education.

Both Abeer and Anton value education above the accusation of normalization. They both support aspects of the economic boycott, but not the academic boycott. Anton takes a pragmatic approach and says:

There are things that we have to cooperate with the Israelis about, and there's things that we must not cooperate with the Israelis about. This depends on cost benefit of this kind of normalization or anti-normalization in the land. Things that show Israelis that we don't agree about their occupation of Palestine this is something important. There's things that Palestinians can cooperate with Israelis about for example, to go and study in Israel is something I don't think anybody should have a problem with that at all but not buying products from settlements is something we should do, we must do as Palestinians.

Similarly, Abeer expresses:

It is good to have solidarity in boycotting products that support the settlement in the West Bank, I am with this. But when you talk about knowledge for example we have the Prophet Mohammad he says 'Go in quest of knowledge even unto China.' So, learning and knowledge it's important and it doesn't matter where so it's good... when you talk about academic, you will have benefit, you will be the one who is get useful so why you

have to cut this?

With significantly less educational opportunities than Jordanians, Palestinians are able to rationalize higher education as a value above being associated with normalization. For Abeer and Anton the word “normalization” is clearly negative, yet they are able to personalize the definition to exclude their studying at the Arava. In Jordan however, the definition is less lenient. Palestinians are often forced to interact with Israelis, particularly considering the amount of checkpoints Palestinians must go through to travel from one city to another. Many Palestinians have worked with or work for Israelis out of lack of other options. However, for Jordanians it is a conscious choice to interact with Israelis and is not one of convenience.

Idealism

Osama explains a more clear-cut explanation for normalization in Jordan; having an Israeli stamp in your passport. He says:

There is something called normalization. I think it is interpreted, like, there's a bad connotation for normalization. Normalization is dealing with the enemy. But it's not dealing with the enemy. It's just dealing with any other person. Like I'm dealing with Israel, so I'm dealing with somebody from outside. There's nothing called normalization. You know. But from their perspective normalization is to have good relations with Israelis because you need to boycott everything from them. You shouldn't be talking to them because we are at a state of war. This is a definition to normalization. There's some trips from Jordan, a tourist trip that goes to Jerusalem. They are against that because you are getting an Israeli stamp on your passport. Getting an Israeli stamp on your passport is like approval of the Israeli state and we are against Israeli state. So getting a stamp; this is normalization because you are like approving something. Like

approving an Israel body that they don't believe in. But like for me, like there is no normalization. I have so many Israeli stamps on my passport, I go there so many times and I do believe in the right of the Israelis to live in Israel but at the same time I do believe in the right of the Palestinian.

Osama takes a more idealist approach to justify to himself his friendships and continuous work with Israelis. He often reiterates, "I do this because I believe in it."

He continues:

I need peace, I support peace – I'm a big activist for peace but peace needs more work than I was thinking before." Osama elaborates, "I do believe in dealing with Israelis but I don't believe in some things that they do. It's exactly like dealing with a friend of yours. You accept some things and then don't like some other stuff. I really don't like some of things that Israeli government are doing. They are doing bad things to the Palestinians but that doesn't mean that I'm anti-normalization. That doesn't mean I'm going say well this is a separate matter, no it's whole package deal. You need to deal with the good and the bad.

Osama continues:

Because you believe in what you are doing, because you believe you have the right to do something, you also believe that the Palestinian have the right in the land and also the Israelis have the right - so from a human perspective, from a human point of view, I support everybody's right. So I became such a big activist for Palestinians and at the same time for Israelis.

Osama now promotes peace through environmental cooperation through an NGO he has co-founded. Osama believes in the ripple effect of his peace activism as he recalls several examples

of sharing his Arava experience with other Jordanians to “open their mind to the possibility.” He joyfully recalls moments of introducing his Israeli friends to his “shocked” Jordanian friends and family. This is his way of spreading the message “there are good people on both sides that want peace.”

Pragmatism

Elham takes a very pragmatic approach and is most motivated by the Institute’s focus on the environment. Elham explains that she told her nuclear family that she was going to Israel, but not her extended family, and that she told her “open-minded friends” but not her “close-minded friends.” She repeatedly stressed that she is not concerned with how people who are anti-normalization would treat her only that “I don’t want anyone to give my family a headache from this.” Elham spoke most favorably of the anti-normalization movement. She feels they are important in advocating for Palestinian rights and would not want everyone to be like her.

She says:

But I love to see the people conservative and they are anti-normalization until they solve the Palestinian question because if everyone was like me and build this friendship and realize the people are the same like us and Israelis live the same then Palestinian rights will be vanished and it’s not fair. I’d love for some people to do the same what I did but I love to protect the innocent people’s rights. It’s a responsibility. I’m glad that there are some people that are anti-normalization because I feel it protects Palestinians.”

Elham does not support cooperation in sports or entertainment because she feels it ignores the conflict. She does support environmental cooperation and taking advantage of what she can learn from Israel’s technology and agricultural sector.

She says:

Being in Israel and talking to the Israelis doesn't mean that I forget about the Palestinian or the Arab conflict. I like studying and learning from them: new technologies, new skills and understanding is better than being alone and having something missing. Me personally I'm not this person who doesn't like to learn. I know about the technology and agricultural they have so why not go and learn; but that doesn't mean that I'll forget the conflict or the principles that we have to solve it. I learned a lot about alternative energy sources and renewable energy and I learned about policy towards population, energy and land use policy.

For Elham, cooperating with Israelis must come with the intention of learning useful skills she can apply back home. Like the other interviewees, Elham does not feel she was normalizing the occupation. Rather, each interviewee has emphasized that *tatbia* means to forget the suffering of the Palestinian people (which each interviewee asserts they have not done).

CONCLUSION

Non-Arab peace practitioners often become frustrated when they have trouble recruiting, or retaining, Arab participants in coexistence programs. It's vitally important for such peace practitioners to understand the criticism Arabs face for attending any type of people-to-people program. To attend such a program, even a program which appears to support Arab history and culture, an Arab participant runs the risk of being labeled a "normalizer" or traitor in their home community. According to the anti-normalization movement, as long as the occupation of Palestine continues, "normal" interaction with Israelis, even on a person-to-person level, legitimizes the occupation. The anti-normalization movement has turned cooperating with Israel into a moral question. Within Arab society, there are no public positive associations for working

with Israelis. The anti-normalization movement challenges Arabs professionally, socially, and psychologically if they try to cooperate with Israelis.

Still, facing these challenges, some Arab students still choose to study in Israel. I've examined four Arab students who attended the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, students who are still in contact with the Institute and defend their position to come. The Palestinian subjects of this study are proud of their Palestinian identity and are committed to the cause of their people. The Jordanian subjects identify in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. Abeer, Anton, Osama and Elham offer insights which may help peace practitioners better understand anti-normalization sentiments, and how they can be addressed.

A primary criticism of people-to-people programs in the Arab community is that such programs promote personal affection or goodwill between individuals, but do nothing to address the structural inequality Palestinians face. In order to overcome this criticism, people-to-people programs ought to discuss structural inequality and group narrative, not just personal testimonies.

A successful people-to-people program should explicitly demonstrate to Arab participants that interacting with Israelis is a means of understanding, not forgetting. Instead of trying to depoliticize the program, practitioners should encourage Arab students to see their participation in the program as part of a wider Palestinian struggle for dignity and recognition. Participants of this study convey that “knowing the enemy” and “learning the other narrative” can be a tool for Palestinian resistance.

The Arava Institute model, a long-term academic program, offers several advantages over more short-term coexistence programs, and is more resilient to criticism from the anti-normalization movement. The program offers a valuable and lasting incentive—education. This allows students to view their participation not in light of “behaving as though the occupation is

normal,” but pursuing their own academic potential. Muslim students can take solace in the Prophet’s advice to “Go in quest of knowledge even unto China.”

As a pro-peace activist, the anti-normalization movement challenged me to explore my own role in promoting cooperation between Jews and Arabs. Was I silencing the voice of dissidence? Was I promoting a normalization of the occupation? I realized the activist community can act as a bridge to promote cooperation, but only if they appreciate how challenging, demanding, and draining it is for an Arab participant to overcome anti-normalization sentiments, and that participating in a coexistence program challenges one’s Arab identity.

Recommendations for further research include exploring Israeli critiques of people-to-people programs. The Israeli peace movement and left-wing organizations are increasingly under attack from the Israeli government and mainstream society. Jewish Israelis who participate in such programs face criticism that they are naive, disloyal to Israel, or sympathize with terrorists. It would be interesting to compare the experiences and perspectives of Israeli participants, dealing with the scrutiny of their own society, to those of Arab participants facing accusations of normalization.

In addition, to gain a more comprehensive view of the anti-normalization discourse in regard to people-to-people programs, it is imperative to speak to alumni who have dissociated themselves from their program. Only by hearing why some participants defend their choice to engage in people-to-people, while others become disillusioned with their experience, can we fully understand the influence of the anti-normalization movement.

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Appendix - Questionnaire

What made you decide you wanted to study in Israel?

What did you think about Israelis before you arrived? – please share with me a concrete example of the sources of the impression you have described.

Can you explain to me a bit about your own community and family's point of view regarding normalization, specifically cultural and social normalization?

In your own words, what does normalization mean to you?

What was the biggest challenge for you while studying at the Arava?

Did your perceptions of Israelis or of the conflict change or remain the same during your time there? Please explain.

How did PELS (the peace building class) and the coexistence aspects affect you personally?

A common criticism of coexistence programs is that they promote status quo by not addressing the occupation or promoting enough direct action. How do you feel this criticism does or does not relate to your experience at the Arava?

While you were in Israel and would visit home what were some of the questions your family and friends asked you?

How did this effect your time at the Arava?

Since you left the Arava, what have your discussions been like regarding your experience?

Were you ever called a normalizer or a traitor? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?

Does the word “normalization” mean something different to you now after your experience at the arava?

What are some aspects of anti-normalization you agree with (if any)?

What is the most important thing you have gained from your experience at the Arava?

What was the most disappointing thing from your experience?

Does learning the other perspective help or hinder you at all in supporting the Palestinian struggle ? If so, how?

Is there anything in particular you think the Arava Institute should know about anti-normalization and how it affects students? Any ways the Institute could support Arab students better?