NORMALIZING THE ABNORMAL:
PSEUDO-NORMALIZATION BETWEEN SUDAN AND ISRAEL

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Sudan and Israel have taken steps to "normalize" their relations after a series of diplomatic efforts. In other words, Sudan has accepted to recognize Israel diplomatically in return to re-establish its relation with the US. As well known, Sudan has been on the US' state sponsors of terrorism list (US SSTL) since 1993. However, the term "normalization" looks like a misnomer in the context of Sudan-Israel relations given the absence of any diplomatic relations between the two countries since Sudan became independent in 1956. It is quite strange to call the process normalization. The term is relative. Who decides the conditions of normality and under which circumstances?

There is a process of normalization in the Middle East and Sudan became the third country normalizing its relation with Israel after the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. However, in this context, normalization refers to recognizing the state of Israel. So, it also means ignoring Israel's crimes against humanity. Normalization with Israel requires the country in question to be too blind to see the Israeli apartheid regime's crimes against Arab Palestinians and African immigrants. Normally, Israel deserves full isolation rather than normalization until it leaves its racist apartheid mentality. For that reason, we prefer naming the new phenomenon in the Middle East as *pseudo-normalization*.

Pseudo-Normalization and its Complications

I prefer calling it this way since it comes out under abnormal circumstances. Firstly, Israel has never been the main priority of Sudan being in a transitional period where high inflation, food scarcity, deep economic crisis, and polarization on society level require urgent solutions. However, Sudan's agenda is full of

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Israel. Secondly, Sudan's decision to recognize Israel comes out of the US pressure and as a condition of removing Sudan's name from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Sudan expert Alex de Waal points out that Donald Trump and Israel have seen obviously a good opportunity in the desperate condition of Sudan.[i] So, it is a decision taken by a transitional government under the US pressure. This actually makes normalization unrealistic.

On the public level, the majority of Sudanese are against the step taken by the transitional government. Although the transitional government in Sudan is legal and legitimate, this sensitive issue requires deep discussion on the society level as Prime Minister of Sudan's transitional government Abdulla Hamdok once said. The step taken by the Sudanese transitional government has the potential to create even more division within the Sudanese society. Some political parties and civil groups have already rejected the deal (Abraham Accord). Many ask whether a transitional body has the mandate to make such an important deal.

On the surface of the Sudanese public consciousness, the abrupt decision contradicts the national memory of Sudanese for two reasons: first, Israel is not just a state; it is a racist and discriminatory state. Israel's crimes against Palestinian Arabs and African immigrants, occupation of Arab land, and ill-treatment to the Holy Masjid of al-Aqsa are all well documented. The struggle to survive against Israel's racist apartheid mentality provided a solid base for all Muslims as well as Arabs. Therefore, this abnormal mentality creates a religious outrage and protest culture in Muslim as well as non-Muslim societies.

Second, Israel had been one of the sponsors of South Sudan rebel groups seeking secession from Sudan. It is a known fact that secret Mossad cells supported and trained rebel groups since the mid-60s. For that reason, the secession of South Sudan in 2011 was generally seen as a Zionist Balkanization project from the Northern perspective. Furthermore, the Israeli air force many times carried out bombing raids on Sudanese soil in 2009, 2012, and 2014.[ii] Today, Sudan is recognizing Israel in return to normalize its relation with the US to gain much-needed loans from international institutions such as IMF and WB. Israel declared sending Sudan $5 million in food aid while USAID announced $81 million of humanitarian assistance.

After the Islamic regime ended in Sudan last year, the transitional body has taken generous steps to secularize the state system. Recognizing Israel is definitely a historic milestone in showing the bold change within Sudan's system. However, this move might easily turn into a psychodrama by wounding Sudanese consciousness on a societal level and creating more divisions amongst the Sudanese public. A report conducted between mid-August and mid-September published by the Israel Ministry of Strategic Affairs found that 81% of Arab social media users commented on "normalization" negatively while only 5% viewed it positively.[iii] The majority Sudanese Muslim population as a stronghold of Islamic culture also carries similarities with Arab countries. Demonstrations have taken place in the streets of Khartoum since the declaration of normalization. Sudan's Popular Congress Party, Sudanese Baath Party, and leader of the National Umma Party, Sadiq al-Mahdi, have all slammed the deal and declared their support to the Palestinian people.[iv] Even Brookings has described pressuring Sudan for normalization as a dangerous game.[v]

Single-sided Step

The US government combining different matters all together has not made any distinction between its bilateral relation with Sudan and its recognition of Israel. President Trump is definitely seeing to write a quick success story in the Middle East before the historic election. To achieve it, the US government utilizes a broader diplomatic push without considering historical and social realities. In unordinary circumstances, Sudan has accepted to pay $335 million to the families of victims of terror attacks taken place in 1998 in Tanzania and Kenya.

In the context of Sudan's involvement in terrorism, we are not dealing with an armed organization such as Boko Haram or Al-Shabab. The Sudanese state, with all its institutions, is blacklisted by the US. For better understanding, we have to look back to the 90s. After the 1989 military coup, the US-Sudan relation was getting very tense, especially after an Islamic regime was formed by Omar al-Bashir and Hasan al-Turabi. The new government in Khartoum rejected siding with the US in the first Gulf War. Moreover, Sudan became a host country for different Islamic movements from Algeria to Afghanistan. Between 1992-1996, the Sudanese government was the host of Osama bin Laden. Sudan's radical foreign policy direction was obviously not Western-oriented. The USAID cut its humanitarian assistance to Sudan and the country was blacklisted by the US after a terror attack on the World Trade Center in 1993. As a result of Western pressure, Sudan expelled Osama bin Laden in 1996 and he moved to Afghanistan to form al-Qaida.

More than 220 people lost their lives as a result of al-Qaida's twin attacks on the American embassies in Nairobi and Darussalam. After the terror attacks, the US military bombed Al-Shifa pharmaceutical company in Khartoum with unproven allegations that the factory stored chemical weapons. As a result of a dangerous game between the Sudan government and the US government, Sudanese people paid heavy prices for years of isolation and economic sanctions. This blind game only resulted in China's domination over Sudan's oil sector and infrastructure projects for years.

If there must be normalization, it needs to begin with a just and honorable agreement. Why don't we hear any apology or see any compensation from the Israeli or the US side? If one side decides and the other party only implements; it won't be a respectful deal. The Abraham Accord does not have any consensus on the society level hence for that reason historical and humanly realities in Sudan are going to shadow it.

Endnotes

i Alex De Waal, "Why Trump wants Sudan to befriend Israel", 08.10.2020, BBC News, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54462322

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iii "Majority of Arabs on social media oppose normalization", 12.10.2020, Anadolu News Agency, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/majority-of-arabs-on-social-media-oppose-normalization/2003705

iv "'Ignition of new war:' Sudan political parties reject Israel deal", 24.10.2020, Aljazeera, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/24/sudans-political-parties-reject-israeli-normalisation-deal

v Payton Knopf & Jeffrey Feltman, "Normalizing Sudan-Israel relations now is a dangerous game", 24.09.2020. Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/09/24/normalizing-sudan-israel-relations-now-is-a-dangerous-game/