

The logo for Beehive Middle East Social Media features the word "Beehive" in a stylized font. The "B" is large and red, while the "eehive" is in teal. A blue atomic-style orbit surrounds the "ee". Below "Beehive" is the text "Middle East Social Media" in teal. To the right is the logo for the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC) at Tel Aviv University, which includes a stylized building icon and the university's name.

# Beehive

Middle East Social Media

**Vol. 9, No. 5, May 2021**

**Editor: Giovanni M. Quer**

---

## **Is There a Shift in Lebanese Public Opinion toward Israel?**

**Jonathan Nizar Elkhoury\***

The word “normalization” has become one of the most famous and used words in the Arab world over the last year. Trump’s announcement in August 2020<sup>1</sup> of a historic peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) made the headlines all over the world, mainly on social media platforms. Shortly after, it was announced that Bahrain would join the U.A.E.,<sup>2</sup> becoming the second Gulf country to sign a normalization agreement with Israel. These peace deals, later known as the Abraham Accords, brought back the question that many were asking themselves: will there be more Arab and Muslim countries to sign peace agreements

---

\* Jonathan Nizar Elkhoury, of Lebanese origin, is an Israeli commentator and speaker on Israeli-Arab relations and Arab LGBT affairs.

<sup>1</sup> Anne Gearan and Steve Hendrix, “[Trump Announces Historic Peace Agreement Between Israel and United Arab Emirates](#),” *The Washington Post*, 14 August 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Noa Landau and Reuters, “[Bahrain Normalizes Ties With Israel Weeks After UAE Deal](#),” *Haaretz*, 12 September 2020.

with Israel?<sup>3</sup> Specifically, will Lebanon be the next country to sign a peace agreement with Israel?<sup>4</sup>

The Abraham Accords triggered a debate among Lebanese journalists, politicians, as well as opinion leaders from the cultural world, who supported the possibility of normalization with Israel. How will the public opinion on social media affect a potential agreement with Israel? Is there a change in the public opinion on social media towards Israel or did it remain the same, characterized by hostility? Nadim Koteich, a well-known Lebanese reporter, tweeted on 13 August 2020 that “*Making peace as opposed to making death... It is a matter of choice. They [U.A.E.] are building the future, and we are hardly able to restore and lift the present from under the rubble of speeches, frustrations and hot air. Congratulations to the UAE for the courage to lead*”.<sup>5</sup> With these words, Koteich further ignited the debate that is not new to the Lebanese audience, in light of the previous attempts of signing a peace treaty between the two countries in 1983 and that ended in failure.<sup>6</sup>



The Tweet by [@NadimKoteich](#) cited above (note 5).

---

<sup>3</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, “[Five countries that could be next to make peace with Israel](#),” *Jerusalem Post*, 16 August 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Sina Schweikle, “[Lebanese divided over hopes for wider peace with Israel](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 21 October 2020.

<sup>5</sup> [@NadimKoteich](#), *Twitter*, 13 August 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Government of Israel and Government of Lebanon, “[Agreement between the Government of the State of Israel and the Government of the Republic of Lebanon](#),” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 17 May 1983.

Comments on Koteich's tweet were divided between the will to achieve peace in the region and the total opposition against Israel's right to exist, even calling Koteich a collaborator<sup>7</sup> for recognizing Israel. For example, Anthony Maroun retweeted: "*Let us agree first: The recognition of 'the existence of a country named [hashtag] Israel' is much more hideous than normalization or collaboration with it!*"<sup>8</sup> Other comments were more lenient; Alberto Miguel Fernandez, a retired U.S. diplomat, replied to Koteich: "*A smart, logical move.*"<sup>9</sup>

Koteich's tweet came a week after the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020.<sup>10</sup> Tel Aviv was among the first municipalities to light their city hall buildings with Lebanon's flag in sign of solidarity.<sup>11</sup> This also led to conflicted comments in Lebanon: Nael Numair retweeted the picture from Israel's foreign affairs Twitter account in Arabic stating "*I honest to God thought I'd never see the day Israel is flying the Lebanese flag. And they are offering foreign aid and support to the wounded*" [*sic*],<sup>12</sup> the Twitter user Heba, on the other hand, wrote "*these are the same people who bombed Lebanon in 2006 and still continue to bomb Palestine till this day.*"<sup>13</sup>

Over the last year, many Lebanese officials, reporters, and even singers have declared their will to have peace between Israel and Lebanon; yet, the majority of them also said that first, Lebanon needs to have the upper hand. On 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020, Israel and Lebanon declared that they are heading for negotiations on the maritime border;<sup>14</sup> a day after, the Lebanese journalist Rami Naim, referring to the speech given by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, said during an interview for the Lebanese MTV channel that "*The game has changed in the world. Peace is coming*

---

<sup>7</sup> [@MohanadHassoun](#), *Twitter*, 13 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> [@anthonymaroun](#), *Twitter*, 14 August 2020.

<sup>9</sup> [@AlbertoMiguelF5](#), *Twitter*, 14 August 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Khoury and Noa Landau, "[Massive Beirut Port Blast Kills Over 100, Leaves Thousands Wounded](#)," *Haaretz*, 5 August 2020.

<sup>11</sup> "[After Blast, Tel Aviv City Hall Lights Up as Lebanese Flag in Solidarity](#)," *Times of Israel*, 5 August 2020.

<sup>12</sup> [@Linkz29](#), *Twitter*, 6 August 2020.

<sup>13</sup> [@hebayousef\\_](#), *Twitter*, 5 August 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Udi Evental, "[Stormy Waters: Israel and Lebanon Negotiate Their Maritime Border](#)," *MENA Source*, The Atlantic Council, 20 November 2020.

*no matter what, and the normalization with Israel started with Berri's speech yesterday. I believe that Speaker Berri laid the cornerstone for normalization with the State of Israel.*"<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Claudine Aoun-Roukoz, President Michel Aoun's daughter and special advisor, was asked again in an interview for the Lebanese Al-Jadeed TV station about her previous remarks on this subject a month earlier, to which she re-stated: "*Why should I have an objection?*" and added "*First of all, I am defending the interests of my country, Lebanon*" also recalling that France and Germany are not enemies after WW2.<sup>16</sup> Following Aoun-Roukoz's statement, the Twitter user Mike\_leb tweeted "*Claudine Aoun said that she does not object peace with Israel, as the issue goes unnoticed without [her] being summoned or accused of being an agent [of Israel]. While the Lebanese state conducts border demarcation negotiations with Israel, then why Kinda El Khatib is still detained by the Military Court?*"<sup>17</sup> The Tweet referred to the Lebanese activist Kinda el Khatib who was charged in a Lebanese military court with collaborating with Israel earlier that year.<sup>18</sup> El Khatib's arrest caused an uproar in Lebanon and on social media, with many activists decrying that her arrest was in retaliation for her criticism of Hezbollah.

Cultural figures also joined the debate. The Lebanese singer Elissa, in occasion of the celebration of her 20 year career, gave a long interview to the Lebanese MTV channel, on 12 November 2020, in which she stated: "*I support peace with any country, regardless of the identity of that state. We want to live. We want to enjoy what life we have left... We should not live according to somebody's whims. [How can Israel] be an enemy one day, and the next day we mark our borders with it? No. [Israel being our enemy] is the biggest lie we have been living. I have never believed this lie, but some people have, and they have lived their lives*

---

<sup>15</sup> "[Lebanese Journalist Rami Naim: Peace With Israel Is Coming No Matter What: Normalization Started When Speaker Berri Announced Border Negotiations](#)," *MEMRI TV*, 2 October 2020.

<sup>16</sup> "[Lebanese President's Daughter And Advisor Claudine Aoun Roukoz: I Do Not Object Peace With Israel Once Our Disputes Are Resolved: Did France And Germany Remain Enemies After WWII?](#)" *MEMRI TV*, 25 October 2020.

<sup>17</sup> [@MikeLebb](#), *Twitter*, 28 October 2020.

<sup>18</sup> "[Lebanon arrests activist who Hezbollah supporters accuse of spying for Israel](#)," *Alarabiya*, 22 June 2020.

accordingly.”<sup>19</sup> Yet again activists on Twitter did not stay silent, mainly because her quote was later tweeted by the Israeli Foreign Affairs account in Arabic, saying “All respect to the artist Elissa on the word of truth. The truth is a bitter medicine, which is why not many can take it, but only the bravest.”<sup>20</sup> Fajer Alsaeed, a Kuwaiti screenwriter, producer, and Media Writer, replied: “Every day that passes, I have become more respectful and appreciative of this artist... She freely says her opinion without fear of the audience’s reaction.”<sup>21</sup>



The Tweet by [@AlsaeedFajer](#) cited above (note 21).

Social media have become one of the main platform where people can connect and express their opinions freely, both publicly and privately, via what is known as “direct messages,” and this dramatically contributed to changing people’s mutual

<sup>19</sup> “[Lebanese Singer Elissa: I Support Peace With Any Country; Israel Being Our Enemy Is ‘The Biggest Lie We Have Been Living’](#),” MEMRI TV, 12 November 2020.

<sup>20</sup> [@IsraelArabic](#), Twitter, 22 February 2021.

<sup>21</sup> [@AlsaeedFajer](#), Twitter, 23 February 2021.

perceptions and prejudices. One of the latest examples that made headlines was the collaboration between the Israeli IDF veteran and singer Yair Levi and the Lebanese singer Karin Basili, who published last February a duet performing a prayer song composed by Levi.<sup>22</sup> In a live stream on Instagram, which Basili titled *“It’s time to come together and raise our voices louder than ever before for Lebanon and for peace,”*<sup>23</sup> she recounted that her connection with Levi started after she found his song on social media: *“I sent him a direct message and asked him to translate the song into Arabic,”* she recalls, *“later we heard about the peace agreement between Israel the U.A.E. and Bahrain, then Sudan and Morocco and knew that I was going in the right direction to connect people with each other through singing.”* Basili knew that she would get harsh reactions from the Lebanese side; nevertheless, she decided to persevere in this direction, declaring on an interview for the Alhurra TV channel that she will not return to Lebanon, from the U.S. where she resides, since it’s a crime in Lebanon to connect and do business with Israelis.<sup>24</sup>

A survey that was made in Lebanon to check public attitude toward the negotiations between Israel and Lebanon and the peace agreements between the U.A.E. and Israel, which was published on the “Washington Institute” in December 2020, showed that “two-thirds of Sunnis (70%) and Christians (67%) agree that those talks are ‘a positive development;’ half (51%) of Shia agree, with a mere 19% of all Lebanese expressing ‘strong’ disagreement.” Moreover, “two-thirds of Christians and three-quarters or more of both Sunnis and Shia label the peace deals as at least ‘somewhat’ negative.”<sup>25</sup>

Radical changes have already occurred in the Lebanese public opinion in favor of some sort of agreement with Israel. Social media platforms have their own ways to show positive reactions for Israeli gestures toward Lebanon, such as: the lighting of Tel Aviv city hall with the Lebanese flag; Israel’s offer for aid to Lebanon after

---

<sup>22</sup> Atilla Somfalvi and Liron Nagler-Cohen, [“Israeli and Lebanese musicians unite in healing prayer,”](#) *YNET*, 2 June 2021.

<sup>23</sup> [@cbpurelove5](#), *Instagram*, 31 March 2021.

<sup>24</sup> [“First Common Artistic Work. Lebanese Singer Calls to Address the Hearts of Israelis and Lebanese and to ‘Go Beyond the Past,’”](#) *Alhurra*, 3 February 2021.

<sup>25</sup> David Pollock, [“Lebanon Poll Shows Drop in Hezbollah Support, Even Among Shia: Plurality Back Israel Boundary Talks,”](#) *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute, 1 December 2020.

the Beirut explosion; and the will of the Lebanese people to make connections and collaborations on a personal level with Israelis, such as Basili.

Following the latest round of fights between Israel and Hamas terrorist organization in Gaza, Israel launched “Operation Guardian of the Walls” on 10 May 2021, after Hamas started shooting rockets towards Israel. News hit all over the world and did not skip Lebanon as well. The Lebanese Singer Elissa published an Arab supporting Tweet, following these events on 12 May, *“It is true that this year Eid al-Fitr falls on the blood of precious martyrs in the Holy Land, but we wish and pray that martyrdom blossoms in love and hope for the peace of our Arab countries...”*<sup>26</sup> On the other Hand, the Lebanese reporter and news anchor for Skynews in Arabic, Nadim Koteich, published a video op-ed on 20 May 2021 titled *“The fraction of Peace or the fraction of the weapons?”*<sup>27</sup> arguing that *“The area [Middle East] is between two centers, center of a constant War or a center of constant peace, between the center of weapons and the center of peace. Israel is not Netanyahu, and the Palestinians aren’t Hamas, adding to this [equation] the new language in The United States... and this Language is an opportunity to the U.S.A and the Center of Peace to all leave Gaza [Lebanon as well], for a final initiative for peace.”*

Moreover, Claudine Aoun-Roukoz kept silent during the recent events. Likewise, the Lebanese president General Michel Aoun’s Twitter account was not active on this subject. This might hint to the will of keeping Lebanon out of this international issue, since the country is still negotiating with Israel to settle their disputed maritime borders.

Meanwhile Israeli-Lebanese negotiations are still on track after 5 meetings that were held at the headquarters of the United Nations Interim Force (UNIFIL) in South Lebanon’s Naqoura region.

Undoubtedly, the Abraham Accords substantially supported the Arab public opinion toward Israel, including the Lebanese audience. This is reflected also in the social media, with people increasingly demonstrating courage in expressing their

---

<sup>26</sup> [@elissakh](#), Twitter, 21 May 2021.

<sup>27</sup> [@skynewsarabia](#), Twitter, 20 May 2021, at 6:27-7:02.

positive attitudes toward Israel. While in the U.A.E. and Bahrain the normalization with Israel was a top-down decision, the changing public opinion in Lebanon and the growing calls for normalization with Israel hopefully will lead to a bottom-up transformation at the political level.

© All rights reserved to the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. Materials may be republished for non-commercial use only, with attribution to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.