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American University in Cairo students pack truck of relief supplies headed for Gaza.

MARWAN NAAMANI/AFP

# Solidarity in the Time of Anti-Normalization

**Elliott Colla**

**T**he 1979 Camp David peace treaty may have brought an end to formal hostilities between Egypt and Israel, but their peace is a cold one. Moreover, there has always been a wide gap between how this treaty shapes Egyptian foreign policy and popular Egyptian sentiment toward Israel. Since Camp David, Egyptian academics, artists and professionals have expressed their opposition primarily through a policy of “anti-normalization,” whose logic is simple. While Egyptian citizens cannot erase President Anwar Sadat’s signature from the accord, they can ensure—by refusing to travel to Israel, by blocking the kind of cultural and professional ties expected of neighbors at peace—that

relations between the two countries will remain distinctly abnormal. At its most articulate, anti-normalization insists that until Israel begins to deal fairly with the Palestinians, Egyptians will withhold from Israel the sort of recognition that legitimate states deserve.

Anti-normalization has always been a form of activism in solidarity with the Palestinians. But paradoxically, the boycott strategy has also cut off links between Egyptians and the very Palestinians whose cause they champion, ensuring that most Egyptians have little firsthand access to Palestinian experience and history beyond what they see on Egyptian state TV. Confusing matters somewhat, the banner of anti-normalization is often waved to mobilize opposition to the globalization of Egypt’s economy, much

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of which has no direct tie to the Arab-Israeli conflict. At its least articulate, anti-normalization has served to express a kind of xenophobia.

For most of its history, anti-normalization has put forth a clear set of dissident political principles. But in recent years, it has become more like an inchoate “common sense,” a default setting for the representation of Palestine-Israel in Egyptian popular culture. Given the exaggerated and sometimes ironic quality of contemporary pop culture representations of the Palestinian struggle and Egyptian anti-normalization, it remains difficult to argue that there is an unambiguous message to be found there. Likewise, as anti-normalization has moved into the mainstream, it has become newly useful to the Egyptian regime, which has learned how to manage the discourse in order to contain popular protest. These factors—the now weak and clichéd quality of anti-normalization, the increasing state management—illustrate some of the challenges confronting Egyptian activists as they begin to experiment with new, “post-anti-normalization” forms of solidarity.

## Anti-Normalization and Its Discontents

Egyptian left-nationalists have always criticized the 1979 Camp David peace accords for ceding Egyptian sovereignty over foreign and economic policies and, in so doing, enhancing Israeli and US power in the region. Camp David reoriented Egypt’s foreign policy away from military confrontation and made Egyptian support for a US-sponsored regional “peace process” the condition of continuing US aid. As desirable as demilitarization could have been, leftists say, Camp David means that Egyptian foreign policy cannot stray far from the Washington-Tel Aviv axis. As a reward for having made peace with Israel, Egyptian diplomats not only faced the sanction of Arab countries, but found that the peace treaty gave them little leverage to contest even the most egregious acts of Israeli aggression, such as the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. This leftist critique in Cairo—which became known as anti-normalization—was a faithful echo of wider Arab condemnation of Camp David, especially as it became clear that Israel had no intention of implementing the treaty’s articles which pertained to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

If Camp David rendered Egyptian diplomats impotent to confront Israel, Egyptian intellectuals working in cultural sectors could refuse to cooperate with aspects of the peace accords not directly in the hands of diplomats or politicians: cultural exchange and professional cooperation, or the so-called “normalization of relations” between the two countries.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the late 1970s, literary critics, writers and filmmakers in Egypt—led by the Committee for Defense of National Culture and the journal it produced in the 1980s, *al-Muwagaha* (Confrontation)—sustained a boycott of cultural activities organized by the Israeli and US Embassies in Cairo.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, activists within the professional associations worked to bar exchanges with their Israeli counterparts. Not surprisingly,

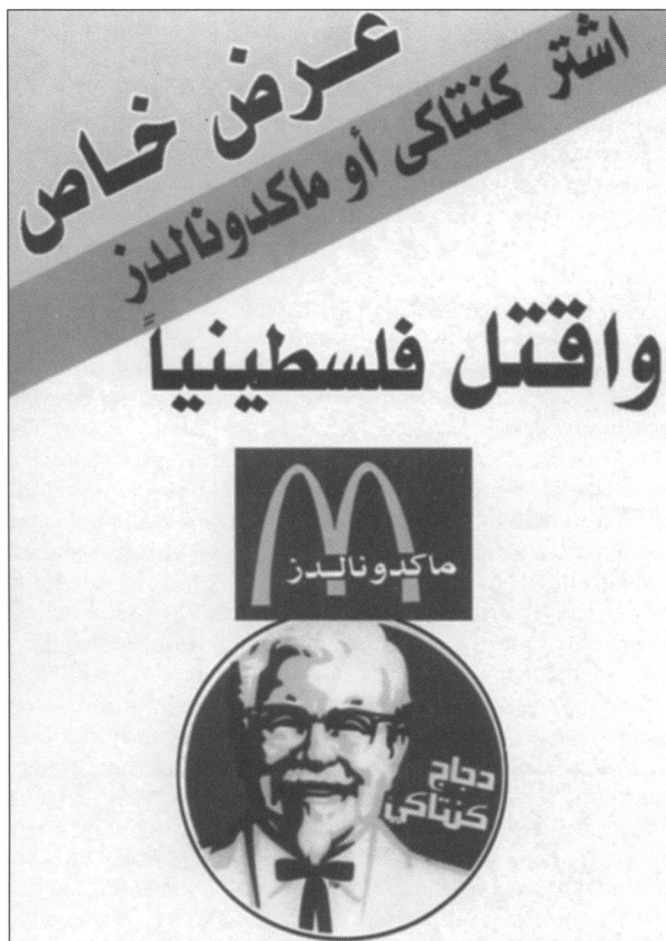
the anti-normalization strategy has been limited mostly to the elite institutions in which these professional and intellectuals move, and to the realm of non-participation. Most of anti-normalization’s successes are counted negatively, in the numbers of Israelis barred from the annual Egyptian Book Fair, film festivals and academic conferences, or in the numbers of invitations to international conferences declined by Egyptians because of Israeli and American funding or participation.

Although Sadat’s rollback of the nationalist economic policies of the 1960s predated Camp David, the Egyptian left soon placed its opposition to the *infitah* (the opening of Egypt to multinational capital) under the banner of anti-normalization as well. This strategy was deliberate and useful, but also confusing. On the one hand, Egyptian intellectuals were able to disguise otherwise risky opposition to Sadat’s domestic initiatives in a moral discourse over which there could be no quarrel: solidarity with Palestinians living under Israeli rule. On the other hand, by widening the scope of anti-normalization activism, Egyptian intellectuals blurred the definition of normalization, and undermined their ability to mobilize effectively against it. The fuzzy definition of what individual and institutional acts constitute “normalization” has been at the heart of countless skirmishes in Cairo, as Egyptian intellectuals have sought to police and punish others whom they accused of being engaged in normalizing activities.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the positions of anti-normalization were inarguably activist and dissident. By the late 1990s, however, these positions had become tolerated by the Egyptian regime, which was sympathetic to, but unable to act upon, the anti-normalizers’ strategy of non-participation and boycott. As Amr Shalakany has pointed out, what was initially a creative activist response to the policies of the state had become calcified:

[From] demonstrations, strikes and critical publications, anti-normalization had transformed by the early 1990s into a discursive phenomenon, expressed primarily in the writings and conference speeches of intellectuals, journalists and politicians.... At their hands, anti-normalization activism is reduced to a series of reflexive positions in which not doing something becomes the epitome of pro-Palestinian solidarity: not traveling to Israel, not inviting Israelis to political, economic or cultural gatherings in Egypt, not talking to Israelis at any such gatherings abroad and finally not talking to any Egyptian who breaks this stance.<sup>3</sup>

The anti-normalization strategy contains other ironies. The boycott of Israelis has also extended to Palestinians—both those with Israeli citizenship and those living under Israeli occupation. Egyptian intellectuals have been reluctant to travel to the Occupied Territories, or to invite Palestinians to cultural events in Egypt, since to accomplish either would necessitate “collaboration” with Israel, in the form of a passport stamp or a visa application. (For others, the decision not to travel has not been a choice: the Egyptian government has always been suspicious about Egyptians seeking visas for Israel and the Palestinian territories.)



Sticker sold in Cairo reads: "Buy KFC and McDonald's, kill a Palestinian."

Because of the boycott, in the last 20 years, Egyptians intellectuals have had little more contact with Palestinian comrades living in the Occupied Territories than they have had with Israelis.

This lack of contact is surely one source of the anti-Jewish rhetoric of Egyptian universities and the press. Of the many works on Zionism and Judaism composed by Egyptian writers, most are purely polemical, many do little to hide their racism and few if any are based on primary source materials. But also, surprisingly few scholarly books on Palestinian history are to be found in Cairo's bookstores. While Azmi Bishara and Edward Said regularly publish columns in the English-language *al-Ahram Weekly*, Palestinian voices appear in Arabic-language Egyptian papers about as often as they do in the *New York Times*. Few if any Palestinian (let alone oppositional Israeli) authors will find their books on sale in Arabic in Egypt.

The anti-normalization strategy has been able to enforce compliance with its terms. Throughout the 1990s, Egyptian intellectuals who attempted to break with the anti-normalization stance—by meeting with the Israeli left or Palestinian citizens of Israel—found themselves publicly attacked. Nine Egyptians traveled to the January 1997 Copenhagen meeting of Jordanians, Palestin-

ians and Israelis. Despite issuing a declaration based in part on UN Resolution 242 and Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state, Egyptian participants found themselves viciously condemned in the Cairo press and disciplined by their professional and political associations. While much of the attack was personal, rather than political, there were others who used the crisis to rethink and develop the anti-normalization strategy along more flexible terms. At the time, the prominent leftist intellectual Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, who both opposed normalization and declined an invitation to Copenhagen, insisted that, under certain conditions, it was desirable to break the boycott to debate with Israeli counterparts:

Despite my opposition to the Copenhagen enterprise, I do not object in principle to meetings between Arab and Israel intellectuals, provided they meet to perform what intellectuals are called upon to do [that is, debate, not negotiate]. In my opinion, such meetings are unavoidable because, once we accept the proposition that peace cannot be condemned in principle, it becomes imperative to distinguish what is legitimate and what is not in the demands put forward by the adversary. State agencies alone are not equipped to undertake this particularly delicate task, which entails dealing with the opponent as a subject, not object, of history. Only open and direct encounters between independent intellectuals on either side of the divide can defeat the temptation to demonize the opponent.<sup>4</sup>

## Recent Escalations

Although demonstrations remain banned under martial law, since September 2000 thousands of Egyptians—professionals, university students, high school students and, for the first time in many decades, elementary school students—have been heading for the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and other major cities. The waves of popular Egyptian protest have largely employed the slogans of anti-normalization: "The first demand of the masses: close the [Israeli] Embassy, and expel the ambassador!" Most explicitly, the demonstrators protest the brutality of the Israeli occupation, but also rail against American, Palestinian Authority and Egyptian complicity. "Hosni Mubarak, Abu Ammar [Yasser Arafat]: how many dollars did you get for selling Jerusalem?" Some slogans have resurrected analogies associated with an older sense of Arab solidarity: "Listen up, Bush, you son of a whore: Jerusalem and Cairo are one and the same!" "One, two: where is the Arab army?"

While the demonstrations have for the moment slowed down, commercial boycotts have begun to pick up steam. The Pharmacists' Syndicate has urged its members to boycott drugs imported from the US, replacing them with local generics whenever possible. The Pilots' Union called upon Egypt Air to suspend all flights between Egypt and Israel. General boycotts have proven more difficult to organize and sustain. A first attempt to boycott American commodities—from Coke to Pepsi, from laundry detergents to tampons—fizzled soon after it started during the early months of the *intifada*. In contrast, a new boycott,

spurred on by Israel's invasion of the West Bank in April 2002, seems to be taking hold. Many Cairo cafés have stopped selling American soft drinks, just as many customers have stopped asking for them. Business at American fast food chains is reportedly down by as much as 40 percent. One Muslim cleric, Yusuf al-Qardawi, issued a *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion) forbidding certain purchases, since "each dollar we pay for a can of Coca-Cola... becomes a bullet in the American-Israeli war machine that is directed at us."<sup>5</sup> Though it is unclear if this boycott possesses long-term staying power, it is clear that foreign companies dread a repetition of the kind of attack that, with rumors of Jewish ownership, helped to drive the British supermarket chain Sainsbury's out of Egypt in 2001.

## New Solidarity

The recent protests and boycotts have mobilized large segments of the working class and professional middle classes, and have reinvented anti-normalization in a more activist, populist mode. Over the last two years, Egypt has witnessed an undeniable shift from mere rhetoric of anti-normalization toward concrete gestures of solidarity with the Palestinians. Feminist groups, human rights centers, labor unions, student groups, mosques, churches and professional associations have lent their organizational strength to gather food and medical aid. Recently formed coalitions—such as the Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) in Cairo and the Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Palestinian People (PCSPP) in Alexandria—draw a wide range of members, from secular opposition parties to the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition to launching attacks on Israel in the press and in street slogans, these groups have also raised considerable amounts of money and attempted to send humanitarian aid across the border. Despite the ban under martial law on collecting donations except by permission from the Ministry of Social Affairs, activists have gathered millions of Egyptian pounds, from the Chamber of Commerce and the tony American University in Cairo and from factories and villages throughout the Delta. Relief convoys have been moving across the Sinai Peninsula toward Gaza with increasing success and regularity.

Individual efforts to join the Palestinians in armed struggle have ended tragically. In the early hours of April 16, 2002, Milad Hemeida, 23, tried to cross into Gaza at the Rafah checkpoint. Israeli snipers, who had been warned by Egyptian border guards, shot Hemeida, who later

died in an Egyptian hospital. Though the authorities initially stifled the story, Hemeida's family contacted the al-Jazeera satellite TV network and the young man is now hailed as Egypt's first "martyr." Following Hemeida's example, dozens of other Egyptian youths—students, workers, peasants, young women, boys as young as 11—have attempted to make the journey into Gaza. Many have died, shot by either Egyptian or Israeli border guards.

## Stereotypes of Struggle

Images of the low-level war in the Occupied Territories have become a regular feature of Egyptian popular culture, but in an often caricatured way. Each night, Egyptian state TV coverage of the day's events presents Palestinians as innocent victims, passive recipients of unilateral Israeli barbarism. The Palestinians who do appear as active agents are usually the leaders of the Palestinian Authority, and especially Yasser Arafat, or perpetrators of armed attacks against Israelis. The everyday resistance offered by Palestinians to occupation and curfews is not the focus.

Recent Egyptian videos, films and advertising also offer little but mercenary stereotypes of Palestinian struggle. For the most part, the commercial purpose of these images undermines their intended dramatic effect. The picture of Muhammad al-Durra, a young boy killed in October 2000 by Israeli gunfire, has appeared in countless music videos and on T-shirts and boxes of Kleenex. Images of raised guns, the Dome of the Rock and Palestinian flags incongruously adorn cassette tapes of pop stars who sing about love. Most famous has been the appearance of Abu Ammar corn snacks, featuring a cartoon of a confused-looking Yasser Arafat. Such images have begun



Cover of Shaaban Abd al-Rahim's newest tape: "Hate Is a Trivial Thing, Israel!"



to appear in the cinema as well. The film *Friends or Business* casually depicts a suicide bombing as if it were a mundane occurrence. Another film from the spring of 2002, *Volcano of Rage*, attempts to tell a heroic story of Palestinian resistance, but never strays far from the realm of pure fantasy. The protagonist, a handsome Palestinian guerrilla, lives in a facile world of pan-Arab good will, dodges the Mossad and converts a young, apolitical Egyptian police officer to the Palestinian cause by seducing his beautiful younger sister.

As earnest as these images and stories are, there is a hyperbolic quality to them that lends itself to parody. Because of this ambiguity, it's not always easy to say what such representations mean in the popular imagination. In the last couple of years, Egyptian pop music tributes to pan-Arabism and Palestine—such as Amr Diab's "Jerusalem" or Walid Tawfiq's "Cry of the Stone"—have been produced and are rebroadcast often, both on the radio and as slick videos. One song, the Live Aid sort of recording called "The Arab Dream," which was produced some months before the *intifada*, quickly became in Egypt an anthem for the Palestinian struggle. The original video, which featured images of the first *intifada* and the Gulf war, was redone with footage of Muhammad al-Durra and others killed during the present uprising. Featuring singers from Egypt and all over the Arab world, the song croons an uplifting, but ultimately vague pan-Arab message:

Generation after generation, we will live on our dream  
And what these generations say today will last our lifetime...  
That's our dream, for all our life  
An embrace that gathers all of us together...

The melodramatic quality of the song and video was not lost on Egyptian audiences, who have long been familiar with the genre. Though popular, the message of "The Arab Dream" was turned on its head in parody. One version, renamed "The Arab Hashish," equates the dream of pan-Arabism with drug use:

Toke after toke ruins our lungs  
And what we smoke today cuts our lives in half  
Perhaps a joint will get us stoned  
Or we'll get sky high with just a bit of hash...

Similarly, there is a cloud of ambiguity that hangs over the most infamous song of the last couple years, Shaaban Abd al-Rahim's "I Hate Israel," released in the fall of 2000, which featured such lines as:

I hate Israel, and will say so if asked  
God willing, I'll be killed for it or thrown in prison...  
I hate Israel, and I hate Ehud Barak  
Because he's got no sense of humor and everyone hates him...

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## The new popular movements prey upon one of the Egyptian state's central weaknesses—its junior partnership with the US.

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Shaaban's new release, "Hate is a Trivial Thing, Israel!," reproduces this rhetoric in uncreative ways, though his rebellious stance has become more contrived. The lead song is followed by others which develop the theme of Palestinian martyrdom. One song, "They've Killed Me, Father!," channels the thoughts of Muhammad al-Durra's father as he witnessed his son killed by Israeli bullets; another is addressed to a daughter, also killed by Israeli brutality. But it remains difficult to say what exactly is signified by the performer who likes to invoke his hashish use and the "vulgar" aura of his former life ironing clothes. Though Shaaban's

music has hit a popular chord in Egypt, few would interpret his lyrics as unambiguously earnest—partly because of his self-image, but also because of his collaboration with the state censor.

### State Management

The new popular movements have not escaped the Egyptian state's notice, especially since they prey upon one of its central weaknesses—its junior partnership with the US in the region. Though clearly oppositional, Palestine solidarity on the street and in song has been useful for the weak, crisis-prone ruling clique. Mass street demonstrations do express popular dissatisfaction with the Egyptian regime, yet the nature of their slogans—always mediated through the discourse of Israel-Palestine—means that the sharpest barbs are deflected. Likewise, the demonstrations undoubtedly strengthen President Hosni Mubarak's hand when he complains to Washington that Israel's actions are making Egypt unstable. The precarious usefulness of this situation rests between the state's ability to contain popular opposition, and something far more elusive, sensitivity in Washington toward popular opinion in Egypt. To turn dissent to its own advantage, the Mubarak regime has relied on a combination of repression and cooptation.

Since its inception, the state has targeted the solidarity movement—harassing activists, disrupting demonstrations with plainclothes provocateurs and arresting leaders. Demonstrations have been prevented from approaching the Israeli Embassy, the US Embassy and the Foreign Ministry, but allowed to attack other landmarks. Some of the largest demonstrations, such as those in early April, repeatedly hit the McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets near Cairo University, which have reportedly since closed.

Attempts to expand the scope of demonstrations, however, have only shown how far the state is willing to go to contain them. In May, during a demonstration to commemorate the fifty-fourth anniversary of the Palestinian *nakba*, protesters arrived in Cairo's main square to find

an army of state security officers who had been deployed the night before. Demonstrators were photographed and escorted, by security agents dressed as civilians, into an area of “permitted protest.” There, they were surrounded and greatly outnumbered by three rows of riot police. Demonstrations in Alexandria and elsewhere were similarly controlled. Many leaders of the May protests were arrested. One of the founders of the EPCSPI, pharmacist Gamal Abd al-Fattah, was arrested on trumped-up drug charges published in the state media. While Abd al-Fattah was released after a massive demonstration at the police station, his business has been irretrievably damaged. Four members of the PCSP in Alexandria were even unluckier: members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, they have been held even longer, accused of “possessing leaflets” inciting “public opinion against the government and friendly states.”<sup>6</sup>

State security officers have sometimes disrupted efforts to collect donations and provide humanitarian aid. The former remains officially banned, while the second is greatly restricted by legislation that has increasingly been limiting the activities of NGOs. At the beginning of the *intifada*, Egyptian officials at Rafah obstructed deliveries of humanitarian aid to Gaza. It has been harder to repress this kind of activism, given its popular and putatively non-political character. While some leaders have been arrested, donations have been collected and aid has been allowed to move. In the spring, no one was surprised when the state intruded further into this popular initiative, dispatching First Lady Suzanne Mubarak to accompany one televised relief convoy to the border.

Nowhere is the strategy of state management more apparent than in the media and popular culture. The once oppositional stance of anti-normalization is now that of Egyptian television news, which is now transmitting broadcasts eastward, in Hebrew. While the host of the press review program, “Editor-in-Chief,” urges the audience to honor the boycott, contestants on the Egyptian version of “Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?” were asked trivia questions about the strife raging in the Occupied Territories. Although pieces critical of the Mubarak regime—its corruption, its torture of political activists—are routinely censored, critical views of Israel and Judaism—some racist, many slanderous—has been allowed to proliferate in both the state and oppositional press.

## Opposition, Management and Ambiguity

State management of solidarity activism and cultural production has not followed an unambiguous strategy, nor has it succeeded in containing them. Perhaps the best example of state equivocation lies in the hit song that made Shaaban famous. Shaaban’s lyricist had originally titled the song, “I Don’t Like Israel,” but the state censor, Madkour Thabet, convinced him to change it to “I Hate Israel” in order to better reflect “the state of people’s feelings.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Shaaban was reportedly encouraged to balance attacks on Israeli leaders by adding praise for the Mubarak regime. The song thus includes lines like:

I love Hosni Mubarak because his heart is so big  
He weighs every step he takes with his conscience...  
I love Amr Moussa, his thinking is judicious...  
I love Yasser Arafat, he’s the dearest one to me...

The cartoonish quality of Shaaban’s panegyrics begs the question: does anyone believe he means what he says? Perhaps he does mean to convey his love for Mubarak’s regime, or perhaps he’s joking, as he was when he sang in another wildly popular song about giving up cigarettes and carousing. Despite, or perhaps because of, his hyperbolic praise of the Mubarak regime, no one would argue that his music voices an official position. In fact, Shaaban remains barred from state radio and television on grounds of his “vulgarity.” As the chair of the parliamentary media committee put it, “Shaaban does not represent any artistic or cultural value. In addition, his weird attire, which is far from good taste, affects our youth who are influenced by what they see on television.”<sup>8</sup> Other officials and artists have been even less polite in their attempts to curtail Shaaban’s popularity.

Shaaban is excluded from state media, and his tapes circulate widely in popular quarters—but does this make him an oppositional figure? Again, the answer seems ambiguous. The influential literary journal *Akhbar al-Adab* debated whether to compare Shaaban to Sheikh Imam, whose populist songs encouraged an earlier generation of leftist activists: “There is another culture that we don’t know anything about, and that is the culture of the lower classes... It is a culture marginalized by resentment and arrogance from the cultural elite.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, by no stretch of the imagination could one argue that Shaaban himself adheres to any anti-normalization or solidarity line. As he makes clear in interviews, the motivation for his song has to do with business, not politics: “I’m really happy that our politicians feel it’s so important to talk about a simple man like me. These people say that I’m a rough man. But who cares? Every time they talk about me, I sell more records.”<sup>10</sup> In 2001, he was hired by McDonald’s to sing a jingle about their new McFalafel sandwiches, “If you eat one bite, you can’t stop before finishing the whole roll.”<sup>11</sup> What happened next was good for both the singer and the state: Shaaban was fired after the American Jewish Committee pressured the company to drop him. ■

## Endnotes

1 For a critical overview of these agreements, see Muhsin ‘Awad and Sayyid al-Bahrawi, “Arba’ sanawat ‘ala al-tatbi’ al-thaqafi bayn Misr wa Isra’il,” *al-Muwagaha* 1 (June 1983). For an informative account of the anti-normalization movement’s history in Egypt, see *al-Abram Weekly*, February 24–March 1, 2000.

2 See Barbara Harlow, “*Mismar Goba*: The Arab Challenge to Cultural Dependency,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87/1 (Winter 1988).

3 Amr Shalakany, “Solidarity as Inaction: Anti-Normalization from Camp David to the Current *Intifada*” (forthcoming).

4 *Al-Abram Weekly*, February 13–19, 1997.

5 Quoted in Amira Howeid, “The Buzzword Makes a Comeback,” <http://www.cairolive.com/newcairolive/dardasha/boycott.html>

6 *Al-Abram Weekly*, May 23–29, 2002.

7 Andrew Hammond, “When Israel Talks, Cairo Listens,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, September 1, 2001.

8 Quoted in *Christian Science Monitor*, January 18, 2002.

9 Quoted in Hammond, *op cit*.

10 Quoted in *Christian Science Monitor*, January 18, 2002.

11 Associated Press, June 16, 2001.