



THREE YEARS AND A WAR LATER: ISRAEL-MOROCCO NORMALIZATION AT THE TIME OF THE CONFLICT IN GAZA

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Is the current war in Gaza questioning the process of normalization between Rabat and Tel Aviv, launched by the Abraham accords in December 2020?

Back in 2020, Rabat's decision to open relations with Israel back in 2020 triggered unrest within the Moroccan population, and current events unfolding in the Gaza Strip seem to have only reinforced this position. As such, in the past two months many have wondered whether the war in Gaza might lead Rabat to reconsider its normalization with Israel. To try to answer this question, it is necessary to contextualize the relation between the two countries within a wider historical and geopolitical framework.



1. BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

Three years ago, in December 2020, Morocco and Israel entered a process of normalization of their bilateral relations through the US-sponsored Abraham accords. As such, Morocco became one of the six Arab countries holding diplomatic relations with Israel: beside Egypt and Jordan, also the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan signed the Abraham accords between 2020 and 2021.

This event was at the same time unexpected *and* foreseeable in the wider geopolitical and historical framework. After all, the Abraham accords did not establish relations between Rabat and Tel Aviv from scratch: there were already underlying ties between Morocco and Israel, also stemming from the remarkable number of Jews living in Morocco before the creation of Israel (around 250.000), and from the large community of Moroccan descent (around [800 000](#) individuals in 2018 according to the Moroccan Ministry of Interior) currently living in Israel. While today only around 1.500 Jews live in Morocco, namely in Casablanca, the Moroccan Jewish community still represents the largest one in an Arab country.

Beyond this demographic-religious link, also bilateral intelligence relations predate 2020 - so much so that they are often traced back to the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to Morocco in 1986 (the first mission of an Israeli Head of State in an Arab country since the peace agreement signed with Egypt in 1979).

To tell the truth, relations between Rabat and Tel Aviv had already been normalized in the past, even if for a very short period of time: following the Conference for Economic Development in the MENA region held in Casablanca in 1994, liaison offices were reciprocally opened in the two countries. However, the power transition from King Hassan II to King Mohammed VI and the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada abruptly interrupted this phase.

From the economic point of view, bilateral trade relations, although discrete, also existed, and Israeli tourists used to visit Morocco even before direct flights were operational.



On the other hand, before the conclusion of the Abraham accords, a potential rapprochement between Israel and Morocco was perceived by many, both within the North African country and outside of it, as in contradiction with Morocco's strong pro-Palestinian position. Indeed, Moroccans have always been deeply attached to the Palestinian cause - all the more so since the King is also the Chairman of [Al-Quds Committee](#), an organization which carries out cooperation projects in Jerusalem with the aim of protecting its religious and civilizational heritage and supporting its inhabitants.

In this overall framework, rumors alluding to Morocco as the next country to open relations with Israel after the UAE and Bahrain had been circulating for weeks before the actual announcement, and they had been accompanied by popular protests calling for the country not to follow suit. Anyway, the royal [communiqué](#) which announced the intention to facilitate direct flights as well as the resumption of official bilateral communication and diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel still came as a sort of [surprise](#) - apparently also for the Moroccan Parliament and the Moroccan government, leadership included.

While from the very beginning the Moroccan monarchy claimed that the opening of relations with Israel would not change in any way its support towards the Palestinians, separating the two levels has proved very complex for a relevant part of both the Moroccan population and the political spectrum, which could hardly digest this royal initiative.

After all, until that point, the ruling party, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), had vocally expressed its opposition to the normalization: in August 2020, during a party convention, PJD leader and Moroccan Prime Minister Saad Eddine El-Othmani [rejected](#) the possibility of Morocco being the next country to sign the Abraham accords. Such a situation, which might even seem paradoxical, needs to be explained by mentioning that as per the Moroccan Constitution, foreign policy is a royal prerogative. Nevertheless, the fact that this development occurred in the



framework of the PJD government, which had to basically accept it without reacting, did have an impact on the electoral consensus of the party, which then lost the following elections in September 2021, after ruling the country for nine years. Indeed, according to many, the whole normalization dossier represented a sort of final blow for the party, as the Moroccan electorate felt somehow betrayed - all the more so considering the [Islamist character](#) of the PJD.

Anyway, all reflections on the decision of opening relations with Israel and on the position of actors involved was further complicated by the fact that, in the framework of US President Donald Trump's so-called "transactional foreign policy", Rabat's overture towards Tel Aviv was "rewarded" by the American recognition of Moroccan's sovereignty over the Western Sahara - an issue of paramount importance for the Kingdom, inextricably linked to its national sovereignty and to the indivisibility of the Moroccan nation. As such, obtaining Washington's blessing over the Western Sahara was a game changer for Morocco, its foreign policy and its strength *à l'international*: a "prise de position historique" (historic stance), as per the above-mentioned royal communiqué.

2. A WHOLE NEW PHASE IN MOROCCO-ISRAEL RELATIONS

The deal was followed in Morocco by strong popular protests in support of Palestine and in opposition to the normalization with Tel Aviv. Such demonstrations continued to be periodically organized throughout the following three years, namely at times of escalation between Palestinians and Israelis. In some instances, anti-normalization protests were prohibited by the Moroccan authorities, while the monarchy's response to [those criticizing the normalization](#) was quite severe.

According to the [Arab Barometer Survey](#) conducted between October 2021 and July 2022, only 31% of Moroccans is in favor of the normalization with Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, in all other Arab



countries surveyed, percentages are even lower – a part from Sudan, with 39%. The [2022 Arab Opinion Index](#) conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies reports different results, with Morocco as the country with the strongest popular support for the “diplomatic recognition of Israel”. According to this survey, however, this percentage corresponds to only 20%.

In spite of this, after the conclusion of the Abraham accords, the normalization between Rabat and Israel has moved pretty fast on different levels. From the economic point of view, this rapprochement has generated a multidimensional impact. To begin with, several bilateral trade agreements were signed, with the aim of [increasing annual trade](#) to \$500 million over five years, up to around 130\$ million in 2021. In 2022, bilateral trade volume reached 180\$ million, a 160% increase in comparison with 2020.

Seven months after the deal, during summer 2021, the first [direct flights](#) (from Israeli carriers) were launched; the number of Israeli tourists [grew significantly](#), from about 40.000 in 2019 to more than 200.000 in 2022.

Other relevant dossiers for economic cooperation include water management and water technologies – mainly desalination, a domain extremely interesting for Morocco, which suffers from water shortage –, energy – both [renewables](#) and [oil&gas](#) –, and [agriculture](#) – another domain where Morocco, which suffers from severe droughts and where agriculture represents an important portion of the national economy, could benefit from Israeli innovation.

Security and defense, however, is the area where bilateral cooperation has reached a climax so far – as well as the area mostly under the spotlight. In July 2021, the two countries concluded a cooperation agreement on cyber security; later that year, in November, the parties signed a defense Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which established the basis for increased cooperation [in the fields of intelligence, industrial collaboration, military training, weapons transfer and sale](#) and more. Against this



backdrop, in July 2023 Israel appointed its first military attaché to Morocco.

The intensifying of Israeli-Moroccan cooperation on security and defense has represented an alarm bell for Algeria, where opposition to Israel has always been quite strong (to cite again the above-mentioned surveys, Algeria is the last country in the whole region for popular support to the normalization with Israel, with only 4% in the Arab Barometer Survey and 0% in the 2022 Arab Opinion Index) and which conceives the rapprochement between Rabat and Tel Aviv as a serious threat for its own national security. All the more so if we consider the deep, long-standing bilateral tensions between Algiers and Rabat, where both countries' recent increase in military spending needs to be contextualized. In this framework, the fact that Morocco can access Israeli technologies represents a source of concern for Algeria. This has to do for example with [unmanned aerial vehicles \(UAVs\)](#), but also with spyware: in summer 2021, Morocco was accused of spying on Algerian officials and civil society activists by using the [Israeli spyware Pegasus](#), developed by an Israeli company in cooperation with the Israeli Defense Ministry. Rabat denied all accusations, but this was yet another cause of friction between the two North African countries.

A ZOOM ON MOROCCO-ISRAEL CYBERSECURITY COOPERATION
by Jacopo Franceschini, Co-Founder and coordinator for the cybersecurity area at theSquare

The cybersecurity cooperation between Morocco and Israel, initiated in July 2021, signifies a pivotal evolution in the diplomatic relations between the two countries, particularly within the broader geopolitical context of the MENA region.

The Cybersecurity Agreement

The deal was formalized by Yigal Unna, the Director General of the Israel National Cyber Directorate, alongside his Moroccan counterpart General El Mostafa Rabii, and Moroccan Defense Minister Abdellatif Loudiyi. Signed in Rabat, this agreement symbolizes a deepening of relations following the Abraham accords, and indicates a shared commitment to boost cyber defense capabilities.

The deal covers operational cooperation, joint research and development, and the exchange of information and knowledge. This agreement positions Israel, a prominent actor in cybersecurity, as a pivotal ally in enhancing Morocco's cyber defenses, while acknowledging Morocco's ongoing efforts to upgrade its cybersecurity infrastructure and expertise, and highlighting Israel's supportive role in these initiatives.

Impacts of the Cybersecurity Agreement: A Win-Win Situation

The agreement facilitates significant enhancements in Morocco's cyber warfare capabilities. By adopting Israeli technology and expertise, Morocco elevates its cyber defenses against regional adversaries. Additionally, Israeli surveillance technologies provide Morocco with advanced tools for domestic security.

A further acknowledgment of Israel's increasing economic role as a provider of cyber-related technologies in Morocco is, if confirmed, the [agreement](#) from last summer for a new surveillance satellite. Historically, Morocco has depended on French firms like Thales for satellite and surveillance technology. The turn towards Israeli satellite providers marks a subtle yet profound shift towards a partner with more flexible conditions regarding the ethical use or dual use of cybersecurity tools and technologies.

Conclusion

The cybersecurity cooperation agreement between Morocco and Israel transcends traditional security collaboration. It is emblematic of a new era in North African and Middle Eastern geopolitics, where economic imperatives and technological advancements significantly influence diplomatic relations. As both countries navigate this partnership, the resulting technological exchanges and strategic alignments benefits may prevail on possible diplomatic breakpoints, such the ongoing war in Gaza.



From a diplomatic point of view, in August 2021, in the framework of Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Yair Lapid's visit to Morocco, Israeli [reopened](#) its Rabat liaison office which was closed during the Second Intifada; Rabat also has its [liaison office](#) in Tel Aviv. At first, the opening of Embassies was still not under discussion. However, in July 2023, after Israel had recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and stated its decision to open a consulate in Dakhla, media sources started to mention that the North African country would be "[in the process](#)" of upgrading its liaison office in Tel Aviv into a full Embassy. At the same time, [Israeli embassy in Rabat](#) should be ready by 2024.

Hence, in the first three years since the Abraham accords, bilateral relations have proved to proceed smoothly, and in several different domains - although the rise to power of the far-right in Israel and its approach towards the Palestinian issue has not made such a delicate dossier any simpler for the supporters of the normalization.

3. THE OUTBREAK OF WAR IN GAZA: AND NOW WHAT?

The outbreak of the war in Gaza in October 2023 is seen by many as a game changer in the MENA region (and beyond), for many different reasons. For sure, this conflict will also leave a mark on the progressive rapprochement between Morocco and Israel - even if it is still difficult to say to what extent.

Starting from October 15th in the capital Rabat, Morocco was shaken by strong popular protests in support of Palestine, which took place in all major cities and involved representatives and supporters from different factions and categories, [from Islamists to the left, from unions to associations](#). According to some sources, there were more than 300.000 people in the street in Rabat on October 15th: something [unprecedented](#) since the times of the [major demonstrations against the war in Iraq](#) back in 2003.

Protesters in Morocco are not only solidarizing with Palestinians and advocating for the end of the war, but also calling for cutting



ties with Israel. In other words, they want to interrupt the process of normalization with Tel Aviv officially initiated in 2020.

In this framework, in November the current Secretary General of the PJD, Abdelilah Benkirane (former Prime Minister) openly [claimed](#) that the normalization with Israel was a mistake. Benkirane had also been quite vocal on the normalization some months before - and was thus [reproached](#) by the Royal Court, which reminded him that foreign policy is a prerogative of the King, who implements it "[in light of the immutable values and best interests of the nation, chief among which is the question of territorial integrity](#)" (a quite clear reference to the question of the Western Sahara, which as explained played a relevant role in the process of normalization with Tel Aviv).

The crisis in Gaza has already had some direct effects on Israeli-Moroccan relations: flights from Moroccan airports to Israel have been [suspended](#) due to the deterioration of security conditions in the region, while both Israeli tourists and investors seem to have quickly [left](#) the Kingdom. Another rapid development regards the above mentioned Israeli liaison office in Rabat, which was [evacuated](#) and temporarily closed on October 18th - although the measure was motivated by security reasons and, according to Israeli declarations, does not entail the closing of the office.

As per Morocco's official declarations about the situation in Gaza, Rabat initially adopted a very [cautious](#) approach. On October 8th, in the aftermath of the attacks perpetuated by Hamas in Israel and following the launch of Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip, the Moroccan King [expressed](#) deep concern at the outbreak of military actions and condemned attacks against *all* civilians. Since the beginning of the escalation, the Israeli attack against al-Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza on October 17th was the first instance when Rabat's declarations directly [mentioned](#) Tel Aviv, with the King condemning the attack perpetuated by Israeli forces. Some weeks later, in the framework of an Extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit held in Riyadh, the King's tone towards Israel was quite tough when [referring](#) to "Israel's doggedness in its blatant aggression against



unarmed civilians” and to “the seriousness of Israeli actions and provocations and their disastrous consequences for the security and stability of the region as a whole”¹. As such, the King called for de-escalation and for a ceasefire, so as to create a political framework where to relaunch the two-states solution. So far, however, despite speculations about the future of Morocco-Israel relations in the aftermath of the Gaza war, Moroccan response to the conflict has in no way included any comment about the status of the Kingdom’s relations with Israel.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Bilateral relations with Israel, as explained, represent a very delicate dossier in Morocco, for more than one reason. On one side, there persists a strong opposition within the Moroccan society against holding and enhancing diplomatic relations with Israel. As such, the fact that the normalization agreement was somehow imposed from above under the mandate of a government led by a party which is traditionally opposed to Tel Aviv has highlighted, if need be, the real nature of power relations within the Moroccan polity. On the other hand, the rapprochement with Israel has also had an impact on the standoff between Morocco and Algeria, and has represented one of the reasons behind the recent escalation between the two North-African actors.

Now that a war is being fought in Gaza, in the eyes of Moroccans the tension between Rabat’s recognition and cooperation with Israel on one side and its staunch support towards the Palestinians on the other appears even more evident.

Yet, it does not look like normalization will be revoked: also building on previously underlying ties, extensive steps ahead have been taken since 2020, projects of bilateral cooperation have been launched in several domains, and the Kingdom seems to have much to gain from the cooperation with Tel Aviv, namely from the technological and security & defense point of view. What is more,

¹ Author’s translation from French



Israel's recent recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara has a key meaning for Rabat.

In this framework, what we can probably expect in the current condition is a sort of temporary stand-by or [slow-down](#) in bilateral relations - especially in their most public expressions, such as bilateral visits - until the current situation in Gaza de-escalates. As a matter of example, following the outbreak of the war, Morocco's organization of the upcoming [Negev Forum](#), bringing together the signatory countries of the Abraham accords, seems to have been frozen, together with the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Kingdom. In other words, those initiatives seem to simply have disappeared from the agenda for the moment. Time will tell in what measure they will be back.

In any case, the reaction of the Moroccan population to the normalization with Israel first, and now to the war in Gaza, is an alarm bell that the Monarchy should not ignore.