

## Morocco and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

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**By dint of its position in the Arab and Muslim arena, Morocco is strongly committed to the Palestinian issue and the safeguarding of Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites. Throughout its history, Morocco has served at times as a mediator between Israel and the Arab world and mobilized to help Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking within the framework of the Oslo process. Morocco has adopted a largely neutral foreign policy as a state seeking stability in the Middle East and North Africa and willing to help mediate regional conflicts. These efforts are notable in both the Palestinian arena and in the broader Middle Eastern and North African one. Israel takes a positive view of ties with Morocco, backed by the support of the large Moroccan Jewish diaspora living in Israel. Palestinian views of Morocco's policy are mixed. Along with a positive perception based on recognition of Morocco's commitment to the Palestinian issue, measured criticism is also being heard over its decision to advance normalization with Israel. Attitudes toward the normalization process are complex, including both criticism and support for the move. Morocco cannot set in motion and orchestrate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, but it can help by providing conciliation and mediation and broad legitimacy for a consensual arrangement on Jerusalem's holy sites.**

### **A. Introduction**

Morocco is committed to the Palestinian issue and to protection of Islam's holy sites. Its commitment stems above all from the religious authority of the Moroccan monarch as a scion of the Alawite dynasty and descendant of the Prophet Mohammed's family. Morocco has been an Arab League member since 1958 and has chaired the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Al-Quds Committee for the protection of Islam's holy sites since 1975. This role makes it particularly relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially when the core issue of Jerusalem arises in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.<sup>1</sup>

A deep cultural affinity also ties Morocco to Israelis of Moroccan origin, blending into the landscape of nostalgia and memory that is the backdrop of Israeli society. Tens of

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<sup>1</sup> This role has been described in the resolutions of various Islamic bodies, such as the 37th foreign ministers' summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in May 2010. Article 17 (p. 10) of the protocol states that the summit "Affirms its support for the efforts of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, Chairman of Al-Quds Committee, in supporting the City of al-Quds a-Shareef, in preserving its Arab and Islamic identity and in supporting its steadfastness in confronting the Judaization attempt they are faced with".

thousands of Israelis visit Morocco annually, many of them on heritage tours in search of their roots, and often more than once. The Moroccan language, culture and heritage invoke inspiration and yearning in many Israeli homes. This begs the question of whether Morocco could contribute to advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and how.

This article will examine several aspects of Morocco's potential role. The first is historic, based on the experience of Moroccan involvement during the reigns of King Hassan II and King Mohammed VI. The second, comparative, is based on Morocco's experience in mediating regional conflicts in the Arab world and Africa. And finally, the political-public aspect, based on the attitudes of Israeli, Palestinian and Moroccan decision makers and the general public to Moroccan involvement.

## **B. Morocco's Historic Involvement in the Conflict Under Hassan II and Mohammed VI**

Throughout its history, Morocco has had occasion to help the peace process between Israel and its neighbors due to its relative neutrality, its position as a meeting point between East and West, and the confidence it generates among the sides to the conflict. King Hassan II attributed great importance to Morocco's involvement, which consisted mainly of facilitating communications between rival parties and providing an ideal venue for initial negotiating stages by virtue of Moroccan hospitality and the positive sense of trust generated by such meetings. For example, during Israeli-Egyptian negotiations in the 1970s, Morocco facilitated and hosted the historic meeting between then-Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and Deputy Egyptian Prime Minister Mohammed Hassan al-Tohami. Morocco was also involved in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking efforts, entering the picture at the height of Oslo process and taking on a more significant role following the visit to Rabat by Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres on their back from the signing of the Oslo Accord in Washington. In October 1994, Morocco hosted the Casablanca Conference that declared an end to the Arab boycott of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Morocco has barely played any role in proposing concrete peace plans or initiatives. In this regard, the September 1982 Fez summit was a rare occurrence, with Morocco and Saudi Arabia presenting the so-called "Fez Plan" for a diplomatic arrangement in the Middle East, which Israel eventually rejected.<sup>3</sup> This Moroccan pattern of "enabling mediation", providing an optimal framework for meetings and dialogues, leaves it to the sides to formulate understandings between themselves and has been replicated at other times.

Since the second intifada that broke out in October 2000, Morocco has significantly reduced its involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to this day it continues to display avoidance and extra caution on the issue.<sup>4</sup> King Mohammed VI, who has acceded to the throne a year before, sought to focus initially on domestic issues and cement his rule. One of the biggest challenges he faced was the growing influence of the Islamists in the

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<sup>2</sup> Shmuel Segev, "The Moroccan Connection", 2008 (in Hebrew); "[Rabin and Peres Visit Morocco amid Hope for Diplomatic Ties](#)," *JTA*, 14 September 1993.

<sup>3</sup> The eight-part plan called for Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories, evacuation of settlements, guaranteeing religious freedom, recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination, and more. For the full content of the plan, see the Knesset [web site](#).

<sup>4</sup> Einat Levi, "[Israel and Morocco: Cooperation rooted in heritage](#)," *Mitvim Institute*, September 2018.

Kingdom, as reflected in the 2011 and 2016 election gains of the Justice and Development party. The freeze in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in recent years added to the issue's decline in Moroccan public discourse. The instability in the Middle East since the Arab Spring and realization that the intra-Arab system could not provide a suitable response to Moroccan interests, such as guaranteeing its sovereignty over the Western Sahara, led to a further decline in Moroccan activism within the Arab arena in recent years and a strengthening of its ties with African and other states. This trend distanced it further from matters related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Speeches delivered by King Mohammed VI highlight this trend. Between April 2012 and January 2018, Israel was mentioned in 12 of his 111 official speeches (some 11 percent). Israel was mentioned on average four times in 11 of the speeches, mostly in a negative or neutral context and without any positive mention. The speech Mohammed VI delivered on November 29, 2017 stood out, mentioning Israel 22 times. This special attention derived from Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and against the backdrop of the historic events of November 29 and the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. The monarch expressed concern over the violation of the status quo in Jerusalem and the condition of the Palestinians. He implored Israel to halt construction in the settlements and cease violating international treaties, and even called for international intervention. In the same breath, he invited Israel to return to the negotiating table, expressing support for past peace initiatives such as the Arab Peace Initiative, based on the two-state solution.

In August 2017, following increasingly violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem, Mohammed VI sent a sharp letter to the UN Secretary General critical of Israel's actions in Jerusalem, in general, and at the al-Aqsa Mosque, in particular. The Israeli actions were described as an unacceptable attempt to violate the status quo and determine new facts on the ground. The King urged the international community to take determined steps in order to force Israel to end its provocations, which could, he warned, stir up extremism, tensions and violence throughout the region.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2020, following the renewal of official ties between Israel and Morocco, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke with King Mohammed VI and invited him to visit Israel.<sup>7</sup> Morocco has yet to issue a formal response to the invitation, but various media have reported that the King conditioned a visit on resumption of negotiations with the Palestinians and on permission to meet with the Palestinian Authority (PA) president in Ramallah.<sup>8</sup> Such a visit would be the first by a Moroccan monarch to Israel.

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<sup>5</sup> The focus on African and Western states stems from a perception that they can better address Morocco's key political and economic needs and its Sahara-related interests. For more on this, see Ayelet Levy, "[Morocco: The return to the African Union and its continuing distancing from the Arab League](#)," (Hebrew) *Moshe Dayan Center*, 2017; Aziz El Yaakoubi, "[Disunity, Says Won't Host Summit](#)," *Reuters*, 19 February 2016.

<sup>6</sup> "[OIC Commends Moroccan King's Efforts as Chairman of Al Quds Committee](#)," *The North Africa Post*, 2 August 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Judy Maltz, "[Netanyahu Speaks With Morocco's King Mohammed, Invites Him to Israel](#)," *Haaretz*, 25 December 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Tobias Siegal, "[Netanyahu working to arrange visit by King of Morocco before elections](#)," *The Jerusalem Post*, 26 January, 2021.

### C. The Comparative Aspect: Moroccan Involvement in Regional Conflicts in the Arab World and Africa

Moroccan involvement in mediation efforts to resolve various conflicts in the Arab world and Africa has expanded gradually in recent years, reflecting its foreign policy posture. Its unique features as a meeting point between East and West, moderate Muslim character, relative neutrality and the trust it invokes in the sides have contributed greatly to this orientation. An examination of the nature of Moroccan involvement in conflicts related to Libya, Qatar, Mali and the domestic Palestinian reconciliation process could also shed light on its potential contribution to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and on the advantages and disadvantage of such involvement.

Morocco, which fears a spread of the Libyan conflict into its territory, has been involved in mediation efforts between the sides. It hosted several rounds of talks between the warring sides. The Libyan political agreement constituting a framework for solution of the conflict was signed in 2015 in the Moroccan city of Sahirath, and the sides met in September 2020 in the town of Buznikath to discuss progress on a ceasefire. Morocco chose to remain uninvolved in the crisis that broke out in 2017 between Qatar, on one side, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, on the other, but offered its neutral mediation services. This policy was dubbed in official Moroccan statements as “constructive neutrality” (الحياد البناء)<sup>9</sup> and the king held several talks with the various sides in a bid to facilitate understandings among them.<sup>10</sup> Morocco offered to mediate in the bloody conflict that broke out in Mali in 2020.<sup>11</sup> Algeria’s active mediation in Mali presumably provided an additional incentive for Morocco to strengthen its involvement in the region in order to erode the influence of its rival, Algeria. Morocco was also involved in Fatah-Hamas reconciliation efforts. In July 2012, Khaled Mashal, one of Hamas leaders and then a member of the Palestinian National Council, welcomed Morocco’s mediation in reconciliation efforts between the two Palestinian movements.<sup>12</sup>

These examples reflect Morocco’s attempts to position itself as a responsible, neutral party, seeking to advance regional stability. This policy not only helps it boost its image on the world stage, it also helps it nurture a moderate and stable society at home, based on national values of tolerance and moderation. Its involvement in other regional conflicts could point to Morocco’s willingness in principle to take an interest in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking should such an occasion arise.

### D. The Political-Public Aspect: Attitudes Toward Moroccan Involvement in Advancing Israeli-Palestinian Peace

Morocco’s ability to play a significant role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process depends on the Israeli, Palestinian and Moroccan public and political reality. This is best illustrated by the reactions of decision makers and public opinion to the renewal of relations between Morocco and Israel.

<sup>9</sup> [“Morocco offers to mediate Qatar-GCC crisis,”](#) *Al-Jazeera*, 11 June 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Moroccan foreign policy expert (who asked not to named), 10 March 2021.

<sup>11</sup> [“Ultimate Goal of Moroccan Mediation is None Other Than Stability of Mali and Peace in the Region \(Ambassador\),”](#) *MAP Agence Marocaine de Presse*, 4 October 2020.

<sup>12</sup> [“Fatah, Hamas welcome Moroccan mediation in reconciliation,”](#) *Morocco Today*, 15 July 2012; Moath al-Amoudi, [“Morocco wants to help resolve Palestinians' problems,”](#) *Al-Monitor*, 25 January 2018.

*Israeli perceptions of ties with Morocco*

The resumption of official relations with Israel was greeted in Israel with excitement, prompted as it was by this rare meeting of political and diplomatic interests with aspects of cultural and personal identity. This was reflected in remarks by Israeli National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat after the 22 December 2020 signing of the agreement in Rabat.<sup>13</sup> For many Israelis, Morocco is not simply “another country” in the Middle East. It has been the object of Israeli society’s nostalgic yearnings. The two countries maintain widespread civilian ties based on shared Moroccan values, identity and culture. Some one million Israelis trace their roots to Morocco and preserve their Moroccan identity alongside their Israeli one. Morocco recognizes this group as its second largest diaspora (after France).<sup>14</sup>

Israelis of Moroccan origin could support Moroccan involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, although many tend to vote for right-wing parties that oppose the two-state solution. Moroccan involvement could also manifest itself in exerting pressure on Israel, which would not be as well received, in light of measures that could embarrass Moroccan authorities, such as construction in the settlements, escalation of violence with the Palestinians and a violation of the status quo in Jerusalem.

*Palestinian perceptions of ties with Morocco*

Morocco’s renewal of ties with Israel generated a measured response by the PA, certainly compared to its harsh criticism of Israel’s Avraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain. Personal calls by the Moroccan monarch to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas may have softened its stand. Its attitude could also be attributed to the Moroccan emphasis on the fact that it was not forging new ties with Israel as part of the Abraham Accords but merely resuming previous relations, as well as to the PA’s reluctance to damage its ties with Morocco.<sup>15</sup> However, the renewed ties might have damaged to a certain extent Morocco’s neutral image in the eyes of the Palestinians. Hala Khalil Salem, director of the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, said in an interview that Moroccan diplomacy will not have an easy time restoring its position as a mediator in the conflict. “Morocco lacks the power, influence and tools required to go back to mediating between Palestinians and Israelis. Morocco lacks influence on the Israeli government or the Knesset parties and there is no Moroccan Jewish lobby in Israel that could play this role,” she said.<sup>16</sup>

Discussing the same issue, Dr. Ali Abu Al-Awar, a Palestinian conflict expert and director of the PA’s Israeli media department, actually believes Moroccan involvement could have a positive influence on Israel and Israeli public opinion. “To the extent that Morocco mediates in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Moroccan Jews in Israel would exert political

<sup>13</sup> Judah Ari Gross, “[Israel, Morocco ink deals, agree to reopen mutual liaison offices within weeks.](#)” *Times of Israel*, 22 December, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> According to an official 2016 report by the Moroccan Ministry of Moroccans Residing Abroad.

<sup>15</sup> Daoud Kuttab, “[Why Palestinians found Moroccan normalization easier to take.](#)” *Al-Monitor*, 21 December 2020; Interview with Al-Quds Policy Studies Center Director Hala Salem, 2 March 2021. The Palestinians also appear to have adopted a more cautious strategy in order to balance their ties with the various influential elements in the Middle East, such as strengthening ties with Russia and Syria. Some Palestinians view Russia as better suited to mediate in the conflict due to its relative distance from the arena and ability to exert pressure on Israel. For more on this aspect, see, “[Palestinian Authority Seeks to Warm Relations with Syria and Russia in ‘New Middle East’ - Official.](#)” *Sputnik International*, 27 February 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Hala Salem, director of the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, 2 March 2021.

pressure on the Israeli government and the Knesset for them to support the Moroccan King's efforts to advance peace between the sides," he said.<sup>17</sup>

### *Prevailing views in Morocco on the Palestinian question*

Moroccan public activity regarding the Palestinian issue has increased significantly in recent years. In a May 2018 interview with Al-Monitor, Yahya Alem, a political researcher at the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, explained that "There is unlimited Moroccan support for the Palestinian cause on the popular level, as well as on the level of civil initiatives that focus on confronting the figures and institutions that are pro-normalization with Israel." This is manifested in the invitation of Palestinians to diplomatic events in Morocco, the establishment of a Moroccan culture center in East Jerusalem, academic events, displays of support for the Palestinian struggle, and more.<sup>18</sup> The most emphatic opposition to Moroccan ties with Israel is expressed by the various boycott movements that came into being in 1968 with the establishment of the Moroccan Organization for Support of the Palestinian Struggle, which is active to this day. Additional movements were formed over the years, such as the Moroccan Observatory against Normalization established in January 2013 and considered the main organization leading the opposition to normalization with Israel. These groups raise funds, organize conferences and seminars to raise awareness of the Palestinian struggle, undertake lobbying activities in the Moroccan Parliament and abroad, hold widespread demonstrations of support for the Palestinian struggle and protests and boycotts of cooperation with Israel.<sup>19</sup>

Reactions in Morocco to the official renewal of relation with Israel are complex. Some were highly positive, but they stemmed primarily from the other achievement made possible by the normalization with Israel - US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara.<sup>20</sup> Along with displays of support, significant opposition was voiced. On the diplomatic level, members of the Justice and Development party led by Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El Othmani came in for heated criticism and even accusations of treason.<sup>21</sup> This might explain part of the wave of resignations that hit the party. Renewal of ties with Israel gave rise to cutting questions in the Moroccan political arena, which is preparing for elections in late 2021.<sup>22</sup> In the non-political arena, reaction was also mixed. On the one hand, the agreement prompted a significant awakening that included establishment of organizations dedicated to strengthening ties with Israel and expanding the activities of others,<sup>23</sup> but there was no shortage of protest and opposition.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Ali Abu Al-Awar, a Palestinian conflict expert and director of the PA's Israeli media department, 1 March 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Moath al-Amoudi, "[Morocco wants to help resolve Palestinians' problems](#)," *Al-Monitor*, 25 May 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Additional boycott movements established over the years include the "National Working Group for Palestine in Morocco", founded in 1998 against the backdrop of the Oslo process, BDS Maroc founded in 2005. For more, see Einat Levi, "[Israel and Morocco: Cooperation rooted in heritage](#)," *Mitvim Institute*, September 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Newspaper headlines and radio reports highlighted the recognition of sovereignty whereas the renewal of ties with Israel was buried deep in most news reports.

<sup>21</sup> "[Morocco PM Rejects 'Betrayal' Accusations after Signing Normalization Deal with Israel](#)," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 24 January 2021.

<sup>22</sup> [Driss El Azami Idrissi Demissionne de la presidence du Conseil national du PJD](#)," *Le Desk*, 26 February 2021; Neighboring Algeria also expressed harsh criticism of the move, and a public storm erupted after an Algerian satire mocked the Moroccan King over the renewal of ties with Israel.

<sup>23</sup> This refers to civil society organizations that advance Israel-Morocco ties, an issue previously considered sensitive and thus even outlawed, de facto. For example, a Mimouna organization formed in 2007 by Muslim students signed a memorandum of understanding with the US administration in January 2021 on confronting displays of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and delegitimization of Israel.

The unanswered question is how Moroccan involvement in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, should it develop, influence the public sphere in Morocco. Will the Moroccan public, including various political elements, welcome such a move and view it beneficial for the Palestinians in bringing about resolution of the conflict – or could such a move be perceived as legitimizing Israel and its policies and an additional blow to the Palestinian interest. The answer to this question does not depend on Morocco alone, but also on the Israeli and Palestinian sides, on the involvement of other international actors and on political and social developments. All of these factors cannot be foreseen at this stage but this uncertainty would undoubtedly influence Morocco's considerations in deciding whether it wants to embark on this adventure, and if so, how.

### **E. How Could Morocco Contribute to Advancing Israeli-Palestinian Peace?**

Morocco has not been and will not be the main engine to set in motion the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, nor a key mediator. There are other more powerful international actors with greater resources and more effective leverage that could play a more significant role under certain circumstances in prompting or accompanying the peace process. However, Morocco's politics, geography and identity provide it with an opportunity to assist and support in a wide variety of issues and arenas connected with advancing peace.

Morocco strives to position itself as a neutral state contributing to regional stability. The positive attitude and relative trust it engenders among both Palestinians and Israelis, as well as its historic experience, provide Morocco with an opportunity to assist in mediating between the sides. True, it cannot provide financial or security guarantees for either side, but it could definitely serve as a neutral and convenient meeting venue and as a go-between in conveying messages between the sides.

One of the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which contributed greatly to the failure of past negotiations, are the clashing claims to Jerusalem and its holy sites. The sides tried, and failed, to find creative solutions for the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound. The Jerusalem issue is broader than the national conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and involves many actors. Among these are believers in the three monotheistic faiths, Jordan whose Hashemite rulers are the custodians of the Jerusalem sites holy to Islam, Saudi Arabia that is seeking a prestigious foothold in Jerusalem, as well as Turkey, the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and Morocco, of course which, as mentioned, holds a formal role on Jerusalem on the part of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Any creative solution reached by the sides on Jerusalem would require as broad a legitimization as possible from as many of the actors involved as possible. Morocco has important symbolic standing in this arena and could take the opportunity to legitimize whatever creative solution on which the sides agree. Further on the matter of core issues, the international community sees similarities between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Morocco's claim to sovereignty over Western Sahara, at least concerning international law regarding occupation and sovereignty claims. Morocco is doing all it can, and is likely to continue doing so, to prevent comparison between the two cases, but there is room for study and comparison regarding international attitudes to both these cases.

Morocco's geopolitical location between East and West and Africa and Europe provides it with an additional resource and also creates opportunities to contribute to the peace process. Morocco is a member of African regional organizations and could mobilize the support of African states for the peace process. Morocco is also part of the Mediterranean

Basin, together with Israel and the PA. While Israel's immediate interests in the Mediterranean Basin lie in its partnership with Greece and Cyprus, Morocco could constitute a significant partner for strengthening institutions and cooperation throughout the Mediterranean Basin, at the same time leveraging regional frameworks to advance Israeli-Palestinian cooperation (such as the Union for the Mediterranean, of which Israel and the PA are also members).

Morocco could also contribute to mobilizing support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process among Israelis given the emotional symbolism it holds for many Israelis and their identification with the country of their origin. Morocco's support, and the support of King Mohammed for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations could have a positive impact on the perception of the negotiations by Israelis of Moroccan origin. This impact could increase the more civilian ties between the two states develop within the framework of the renewed ties between the two states and the warming of their relationship.

Should Israelis and Palestinians harness the political will to advance the peace process, both will find a credible, committed and positive ally in Morocco, which offers relevant opportunities and assets and would be positively inclined to help to the best of its ability to ensure the success of the process.