

Israel-Morocco Cooperation in 2019: Warming from the Bottom Up

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A. Introduction

A 2018 [paper](#) entitled “Israel and Morocco: Cooperation Rooted in Heritage”, written within the framework of the Mitvim Institute’s project on the unfulfilled potential of Israel’s relations with key Arab states, described the wide-ranging cooperation between Israel and Morocco. This cooperation is based on two main pillars. One is the Jewish-Moroccan connection dating back over 2,000 years, which enables cultural links based on mutual Moroccan values and principles. The other is security and intelligence cooperation between the states going back to the 1950s, which continues to this day. The combination of the two generates mutual trust and deep connection between the two people. Nonetheless, since the failure of the Camp David summit and breakout of the second *intifada* in October 2000, Israel and Morocco do not have official diplomatic relations. However, cooperation between them, and especially the warm ties between their people, continues to deepen, although in a limited scope given the stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

This article examines the current Israel-Morocco cooperation and its development through 2019. It briefly describes developments in diplomatic, security, economic and civilian arenas in order to find common ground and identify trends. Naturally, the paper will not elaborate much on the security-intelligence aspect of the cooperation, despite its centrality, due to its classified nature.

B. Details of the Cooperation

The Diplomatic Arena

The diplomatic developments during the preparations of the Trump plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace and ahead of its unveiling (in January 2020) affected Morocco, too, as well as the prospects of upgrading its relations with Israel. Morocco participated in the June 2019 Bahrain workshop at which the economic aspects of the Trump plan were presented, but was only represented by [mid-level](#) officials. Such was the case with most other Arab states invited to the event and that essentially wanted only to fulfil one’s obligation. Morocco [was also identified](#) as one of key states in the region which both the US and Israel were interested to promote a non-belligerence agreement with. However, in this case just as before, Morocco remained reserved and cautious as usual.

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In January 2019, ahead of the April Knesset elections, [media reports](#) emerged that Netanyahu was planning a visit to Morocco, but the Moroccan government [denied](#) them. Such a visit would have been a significant diplomatic achievement for Netanyahu, and Morocco would have been perceived as helping him achieve it. This, in turn, would have generated harsh domestic and foreign criticism of Morocco. Eventually, Netanyahu did not visit Morocco but the possibility of such a visit was raised once again in December 2019. Netanyahu met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Portugal, who was on his way to meet the Moroccan King in Rabat. According to Israeli media reports, the agenda of Pompeo's Rabat meeting was supposed to include issues such as the Iranian threat and promotion of official ties with Israel. Pompeo ended up cutting short his Morocco visit and the meeting with the King was cancelled at the last minute. To this day, nothing has been reported about the reason for the change in plans and whether a warming of Morocco-Israel relations was indeed on the agenda. The only reaction was [a denial by senior American officials](#), who even accused the Israeli media of publishing a leak prompted by domestic Israeli interests and nothing more.

The Economic Arena

Economic cooperation between Israel and Morocco continued through unofficial and intermediary channels (such as international corporations). The cooperation in agriculture, however limited in scope, is of great importance given this sector's centrality to the Moroccan economy. Cooperation in this field includes Israeli entrepreneurs who set up private farms in Morocco, serve as advisers to local farmers or export advanced farm equipment to Morocco. Morocco continued to export foodstuff and processed goods to Israel, such as sardines, olives, Argan oil and couscous.

Tourism remained the most prominent area of economic cooperation, with the number of Israeli tourists to Morocco ranging from 30,000 to 45,000 annually. In 2019, the FIT – Frequent Independent Traveler to Morocco also began to develop. If, in the past, Israeli tourists traveled to Morocco mostly via organized groups, these days many Israelis choose to visit Morocco independently. This alternative option is suited to those reluctant to join organized tours and wishing to visit at their own pace. It encourages direct contact with Moroccan society and culture and is very popular among those with Moroccan roots. In addition, against the backdrop of constantly rising numbers of Israeli tourists in Morocco, several reports have indicated over the past year that the national carrier El Al and the Flying Carpet tourism company intend to launch [direct flights](#) between Israel and Morocco. The veracity of these reports about direct flights between these two countries that do not maintain diplomatic relations is doubtful, given their provenance in the airline industry and media, and that they have not been substantiated by officials or led to the signing of agreements.

The situation of Moroccan tourism to Israel remains fairly grim, with only [some 3,000](#) Moroccans visiting Israel in 2019, as was the case in 2017 and 2018. The meager number of Moroccan tourists to Israel also stems from a series of bureaucratic and economic obstacles they face. The procedure they have to undergo is complicated, complex, expensive and often requires several trips abroad to arrange a visa to Israel.

The Civic and Cultural Arena

Civic relations between Moroccans and Israelis remained warm and even deepened despite the lack of official ties between the states. These relations are based first and foremost on

mutual values, identity and a common Moroccan culture. Consistent and persistent cooperation takes place in fields such as Moroccan Jewish heritage, music, cinema, art, sports, education and research. This section will briefly review the outstanding events, among many, of 2019.

The myriad civic ties are made possible in two realms. One is the physical, which includes Morocco, Israel and the Moroccan diaspora around the world. Jews and Muslims of Moroccan origin meet and collaborate thanks to the high degree of mobility, which makes the world smaller than ever. The tourism industry contributes to these interactions, enabling constant traffic between Israel and Morocco, whether in groups or by independent travelers. Along with the physical space, a parallel, virtual space encourages new contacts, maintains existing ones, and enables discourse and greater visibility. Groups and communities active on social media link the Moroccan Diaspora through a sense of shared longing. One example is the [virtual documentation communities](#) working to document and preserve the Moroccan-Jewish heritage of towns and villages in Morocco. The [Jews of the Demnat community](#) are particularly active in this respect, with former town residents visiting twice in the recent year, meeting with local officials, collaborating to restore the Jewish cemetery and plan an international conference that will focus on the Jewish heritage of Demnat and will take place in Demnat itself. The use of the virtual space enables to reunite the community that has spread throughout the world and was somewhat forgotten, allowing it to move from a blurry nostalgic sentiment to communal accountability and actual joint action.

The Jewish community that remains in Morocco leads a full and rich cultural life and constitutes one of the foundations of the civic ties between Morocco and Israel. Despite the perpetually declining number of Jews (only some 2,500), several events took place within the Jewish community that indicate some sort of a reawakening. In April 2019, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto was appointed dean of the rabbinical courts in Morocco, an appointment considered tantamount to that of a chief rabbi. The same month, the King of Morocco [instructed](#) that elections will be held in the Jewish community institutions. Such elections have not been held for 50 years and they are supposed to address the problem of centralization of Jewish community institutions and to awaken it. In addition, events of a Jewish nature were acknowledged in 2019 by widespread media coverage and the presence of high-ranking officials. In December 2019, for example, Chabad organized a resplendent Hanukkah candle lighting ceremony in Casablanca with the participation of over 700 guests. The special event was widely covered, including by the state broadcaster 2M. That same month, the president of the Jewish communities of Fez, Oujda and Sefrou Dr. Armand Guigui passed away. His funeral was broadcasted live on television and attended by many Moroccan officials who came to pay their last respects.

An additional interfaith event occurred in March 2019 during the historic Morocco visit of Pope Francis. The King and the Pope met at the palace in Rabat and together signed the ["Al-Quds Appeal"](#) for the protection of Jerusalem's multi-religious character, saying the city's sacred sites must be accessible to worshippers of all faiths. The visit was intended to boost the status of King Mohammed VI as a moderate alternative to Islamist leadership and at the same time to convey a message of reconciliation to Europe's Christian and Muslim residents. However, this important call for religious tolerance was not conducted in the presence of a Jewish representative.

In the field of cinema, two key events recently made headlines. The first occurred at the September 2019 Haifa International Film Festival, which included three Moroccan movies: "Razzia" by director Nabil Ayouch, "Sofia" by director Meryem Ben M'barek, and "Apatrid" by director Narjiss Nejjar. About a week before the festival, the anti-Israel boycott movement began issuing [protests](#) against the films' participation in the event. As a result, the screening of "Apatrid" was cancelled, but the two other films were screened before packed audiences. A creative response to the protest was found for "Razzia" by preceding its screening with a short film on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In November 2019, the film "In Your Eyes I see My Country" by director Kamal Hachkar was screened in a festive premiere at the International Marrakesh Film Festival. The film documents the voyage from Jerusalem to Morocco of Neta Elkayam and Amit Hai Cohen, two young Israeli musicians searching for their roots. The movie was successful in generating a discourse about the uprooting of Morocco Jews, their nostalgia for their homeland and the influence of the uprooting on Moroccan Muslims. The movie was widely reviewed by Moroccan media, which described it as a work that enriches the hues of Moroccan culture and recognizes its Jewish part. Along with the positive reviews, the boycott movement and its supporters criticized the screening as an expression of cultural normalization with Israel, but it was minor. At the end of the day, the cinema still serves as an encounter space for interfaith and cultural discourse between Israelis and Moroccans focused on their common Moroccan values and identities.

Israeli and Moroccan musicians and artists have performed together at events and festivals in Morocco, Israel and around the world. In October 2019, for example, at the 16th Andalusian Atlantic Festival in Essaouira, Jewish and Muslim artists and musicians performed together. The [opening session of the festival](#) was conducted in four languages among which there was also Hebrew, due to the growing number of Hebrew speaking attendants. Two weeks later, in November 2019, Les Femmes De T'touan, a Moroccan women's ensemble, appeared at the [Festival Mediterranee](#) in the Israeli town of Ashdod as part of the Judeo-Arab events. The women were even interviewed on "Café Gibraltar", a radio program broadcast on Kan, Israel's public radio and TV show. Shortly after, in December 2019, [the Israeli Andalusian Orchestra of Ashdod performed in Casablanca](#) at the Andalussiat Festival, despite protesters' calls to cancel their performance. Unlike Israeli musicians who perform independently in Morocco and do not represent the State of Israel, the Andalusian Orchestra of Ashdod was recognized in 2017 as a national Israeli orchestra along with the Andalusian Orchestra.

In November 2019, a performance by a famous Moroccan Andalusian singer Marouane Hajji at the Jerusalem Oud Festival was cancelled due to Israeli-Palestinian fighting following the assassination of Islamic Jihad commander Abu al-Atta in Gaza. Reports in Morocco of the planned performance generated criticism of the singer's decision to perform in Jerusalem while Israel was attacking Gaza. Eventually, the performance was cancelled, and Hajji even denied the intention to perform in Israel.

Unlike other states in the region, such as Tunisia and Algeria, Morocco chose to accept the conditions set by international sports federations allowing Israeli athletes to compete under the Israeli flag and in their national uniforms. In return, Morocco gets to host international competitions and sports events, and enjoys the resulting benefits, such as international recognition, tourism revenues and promoting its image as a host country. Following this development, in March 2019, 10 Israeli judokas took part in the Grand Prix Judo Tournament in Marrakesh. Competing with Israeli national symbols, Timna Nelson-Levy and Gefen Primo won a bronze medal and the Israeli flags were flown during the awards ceremony.

C. Summary

Currently, progress in official relations between Israel and Morocco is not feasible, mostly due to the ongoing impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and political uncertainty in Israel. Nonetheless, 2019 saw an increase in diplomatic and media discourse about such a future option and about US willingness to help move it forward. Morocco's reserved and cautious response to the US initiatives (including the Trump plan) indicates that it does not want to be depicted as deserting the American effort but is also well aware of its limitations and implications for itself.

Alongside the limited diplomatic cooperation between Israel and Morocco, the cultural, civic and diasporic ties continue to stand out in their depth and range. These ties are based on joint Moroccan culture, identity and values and are made possible thanks to the Jewish connection, ongoing Israeli tourism to Morocco and dialogue in virtual platforms. Nonetheless, in light of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its vicissitudes, these ties remain limited in terms of their possible expansion. Significant progress between Israel and the Palestinians would facilitate official relations between the two states and help fulfill the potential of ties in all fields. In the 1990s, due to the progress of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Israel and Morocco opened liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv, and such a development could happen again. It is important to recall that while Morocco is ruled by a king, his decisions reflect to a large extent the common Moroccan public opinion on most agenda issues. The Moroccan public supports the establishment of a Palestinian state and finds it hard to welcome open diplomatic ties with Israel. Resumption of the peace process would make it easier to remove this obstacle and enable Israel and Morocco to advance an official and institutional infrastructure for their cooperation.