

Israel-Morocco Relations: Opportunities to Advance Cooperation

Workshop Summary

August 2018

On 18 July 2018, the Mitvim Institute held a workshop on Israel-Morocco relations, based on research by Einat Levi, which was conducted as part of Mitvim's project of the unfulfilled potential of Israel's relations with Arab countries. The workshop focused on opportunities to advance cooperation between Israel and Morocco, and on related challenges that need to be addressed. Civil society activists, scholars and experts, diplomats, and businesspeople participated in the workshop. The workshop included a presentation by Einat Levi, an introduction to various civil society initiatives involving Israelis and Moroccans, and a debate among participants. This document summarizes the workshop, but does not necessarily reflect an agreement between all its participants.

A. Presentation Summary: Israel and Morocco Relations, Einat Levi

Morocco is a politically and socially complex country. Despite having successfully emerged from the Arab Spring events, Moroccan civil society is leading numerous protests, as Morocco is currently dominated by the Islamist Justice and Development Party, which opposes any ties with Israel. Morocco avoids official contacts with Israel as long as there is no significant progress with the Palestinians. There are currently no diplomatic relations between the two countries. Morocco has been making great efforts in recent years to advance its relations with the international community, particularly with Western and African countries. In contrast, with regard to the inter-Arab regional system, Morocco has stepped back, realizing that this system is incapable of meeting its economic development needs and failing to advance Moroccan interests in the Sahara region. However, Morocco maintains friendly relations with the Gulf states, first and foremost with Saudi Arabia.

Historically, Morocco has had a friendly, albeit unofficial, relationship with Israel. This friendship began to develop in the late 1950s and during the 1960s, around security cooperation and the need to regulate Jewish immigration from Morocco to Israel. In the 1970s and 1980s, Morocco played a significant role as an intermediary in the Israeli-Egyptian peace process and even attempted to promote a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when it proposed a Moroccan-Saudi peace plan in the early 1980s. In the 1990s, the Oslo process enabled Israeli-Moroccan relations to become official, and the two countries inaugurated liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv. The so-called honeymoon between the two countries lasted until the outbreak of the second intifada in October 2000, which led to the suspension of official relations. Today, the relations between the two countries are mostly overt, besides certain areas, including civic activities, in which it is still being conducted under the radar. First of all, the relations between the two countries are based on "diaspora relations", in light of the fact that Israel is considered by the Moroccan Ministry of Diaspora as the second largest Moroccan diaspora in the world.

There are several prominent areas in which the two countries cooperate:

- 1. Political cooperation** takes place between the two countries, despite the absence of official diplomatic relations, mainly under the umbrella of international organizations and forums such as the UN and the EU. Examples for such cooperation are the International Climate Conference held in Marrakech in November 2016, and the convening of the Mediterranean countries in the Moroccan parliament in Rabat in October 2017. However, such forums may also encourage tensions between the countries, as happened in the ECOWAS summit (Economic Community of West African States) in June 2017, when Morocco canceled its participation when it became clear that Prime Minister Netanyahu was supposed to be the guest of honor at the conference.
- 2. Agricultural cooperation** includes the import of agricultural commodities (such as olives and sardines) from Morocco to Israel, and the export of knowledge and technological equipment from Israel to Morocco. Although it is considered relatively small, the agricultural sector in Morocco is important in terms of its contribution to the Moroccan GNP (15 percent) and its contribution to the employment market (about 44 percent).
- 3. Cooperation in tourism** has been developing gradually since the 1980s. Today, some 45,000 tourists from Israel visit Morocco annually, and about 3,200 Moroccan tourists visit Israel. The huge difference in tourist number is mainly due to the complex process of granting Israeli visas to Moroccan tourists.
- 4. Civic cooperation** is reflected in efforts to preserve the heritage of the Moroccan Jewry, through the exchange of delegations, music, cinema, and art, education and research, sports, and more. This collaboration is based on the Jewish-Moroccan bond and the long-standing Jewish heritage in Morocco. The movement of people between Israel and Morocco, which is more significant compared to other Arab countries and which is extensively covered in the media, creates a "routinization effect" that makes the very contact and visits a matter of life routine.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a barrier that affects the ability of the countries to fulfill the potential of cooperation between them. In the past, Morocco has taken an active role in trying to act as a bridge between Israel and the Palestinians. However, in the recent years since Mohammed VI ascended to the throne, Morocco has been taking caution and mostly avoiding any involvement in this. Israel is hardly mentioned in the King's speeches, unless it is necessary. Currently, there are a number of movements in Morocco that oppose any type of connection with Israel, the most important of which is the "Moroccan Observer Movement Against Normalization". These movements do not succeed in preventing cooperation between the two countries, but they limit its scope and deter those who are interested in collaborating.

There are several courses of action that can promote cooperation between Israel and Morocco: (1) Promoting cultural diplomacy channels based on shared values and identity; (2) Choosing the "right" Moroccan partner for the "right" goal, which requires getting to know Morocco's social and political complexity; (3) Formation of cross-sectoral work teams, while representing the political, civic, and private sectors, which will focus on the opportunities inherent in Israel-Morocco relations and the ways to develop them; (4) Integrating various target populations in the evolving contacts with Morocco, including Jews of Moroccan origin living in Israel and abroad, and Arab citizens of Israel; (5) Cultivating the "routinization effect"

by encouraging steady human movement between the two countries while covering it in the media and in social networks in order to create visibility; (6) Developing channels of digital diplomacy to deepen the connection between the peoples, for example through the use of social networks and online courses.

B. Discussion Summary

The participants in the discussion referred to the points raised by Einat Levi, and positively noted her detailed and comprehensive research. Additional insights were suggested and provided complementary information on the relations in their current form and one the future relations between Israelis and Moroccans:

- 1. Growing interest for Morocco within Israel** - In the 1970s, only a few people in Israel showed interest in Morocco; today this number is much higher. There have been social and public struggles in Israel for greater engagement with Morocco, some of which bore fruit. Agricultural delegations started as private initiatives of Moroccan-born farmers in Israel in the 1990s. They traveled back to Morocco and taught farmers in the Atlas Mountains the secrets of modern agriculture. They traveled to Morocco every year in order to teach the farmers while noting that this was their way of giving back for the 500 years in which "they were fed in Morocco". The second and third generation of the Moroccan Diaspora in Israel, similar to other immigrant societies, show a growing interest in their heritage. They show interest, want to learn, and travel to Morocco for tourism purposes and to embark on their journey to explore their family roots. This growing interest affects the Israeli education system as well, which increases its involvement in the heritage of Jews that immigrated from Arab countries.
- 2. The complexity of Moroccan society** - The participants reiterated the need for a comprehensive and profound recognition of the Moroccan society as a condition for establishing positive relations and cooperation. Moroccan society includes multiple identity groups and tensions - between Arabs and the Amazigh ethnic group, between the north and the south, between the urban and the rural, between secularists and Islamists, between rich and poor, and between young and old. Since the Arab Spring, religion has become increasingly present in the Moroccan public sphere and attracts mainly the poor. Participants observed that if the social complexity in Morocco is not considered and acknowledged, the attempts to weave ties may become a double-edged sword and may create tensions. Israel should wisely choose its partners, and find the appropriate framing for any type of relations while considering the social structure and the social dynamics within Morocco.
- 3. Mutual perceptions and lack of knowledge** - While Israel's perception of the Arab world is fundamentally negative, this perception is more positive when it comes to Morocco and Moroccans. In Morocco, the relations with Israel are perceived more positively in comparison with other Arab countries. However, both in Israel and Morocco the picture is not only positive (as it is not only negative with regard to the relations with the other Arab countries). Participants noted that it was often the rich and educated Moroccans who held more negative views of Israel, while the majority of the population had little interest in Israel or the Palestinian issue. The fact of past official relations between Israel and Morocco is not present in the collective memory of Israel in Morocco, and does not play any role in the current climate. Traditionally, the Moroccan education system did not include any content on Jews and Judaism. Many Moroccan citizens have

little knowledge of Jews, and most of them have never met Jews and often they do not even distinguish between Israelis and Jews in general. The Moroccan media adopts the Palestinian narrative and it often portrays a negative image of Israel (even though the media regularly covers Israel-related issues). In addition, more than 40 percent of the Moroccan population is under the age of 30, and young people do not have the collective memory of the largest Jewish community that existed in Morocco, apart from the stories they heard from older generations. This memory will fade away completely in future, and therefore it is better to find stronger foundations for building the relationship between the countries. Nevertheless, it is recommended to continue cultivating the memory of the good relations between Jews and Muslims among the young generation in Morocco.

4. **On or Underneath the Table?** - Participants noted that the Moroccan political culture is partially based on a distinction between what is publicly revealed and what is happening under the table. They emphasized that in fact there has been no significant change over the years in terms of the quality and intensity of the ties between Israel and Morocco. Rather, what changed is the extent to which Morocco was ready or willing to put cooperation with Israel 'on the table'. The Moroccans should decide what is appropriate and right for them. Israelis who want to cooperate with Morocco should accept these sensitivities and be aware of them. There is more openness toward Israel when cooperating under the table. For example, Israeli songs are played in cultural events taking place in the public sphere in Morocco, though the Israeli affiliation is not mentioned publicly. In addition, the discussion raised specific examples attesting to the readiness of Moroccan officials to host Israelis, and meet, share, and provide information when it is done under the radar. However, there is a barrier when trying to move to more overt relationships.
5. **Judaism vs. Zionism** - Some participants emphasized that the appropriation of Judaism and Moroccan Jews by Morocco is inherently an anti-Zionist action. They argued that by saying the Moroccan Jews are first and foremost Moroccans, Morocco ignores the Zionist-Israeli effort to control and appropriate Jewish history. However, some argued that the successful Jewish-Muslim relations in Morocco could serve as a model for other countries in the Middle East, including Israel. This is reflected in the willingness of young Moroccans to listen and learn about the Moroccan Jews living in Israel and the fact that Moroccans in Morocco even know about streets names and places in Israeli cities named after Moroccan Kings.
6. **The American connection** - Participants pointed to the importance of the American involvement in the relations between Israel and Morocco, which is also reflected in Einat Levi's research. The Jewish lobby in the US, especially due to its close relations with the Administration, is a major reason for Morocco to perceive its relations with the Jews as highly important. Morocco lobbied Congress in the past with the help of the Moroccan Jewish community in Washington to prevent the Western Sahara topic from being on the Congressional agenda. Furthermore, there are voices in Morocco that claim the Moroccan Jewish community in Washington can be trusted more than the Moroccan diaspora in European countries.
7. **Relationships between marginal groups** - Many of the relations between Israelis, Jews, and Moroccans are based on connections between marginal stakeholders in both countries, or between marginal stakeholders in Morocco and Israel or Jews who are perceived as being on the margins of the Middle East or of their own societies. Although

this concept allows the connection between the two groups, one must be careful both from the point of view of public perception and politically, so that such connections will not hinder the prospects of other connections.

- 8. The Conflict in the Sahara as a mean to cooperation** - Israeli support for Morocco's stance in the conflict over the Sahara, and an active Israeli and Jewish lobby within African countries, the US administration, the UN, and Europe, could be a considerable advantage for Israel in Morocco. If Morocco sees Israel as its partner in this matter, perhaps Israel would get the credit for advancing Moroccan interests. However, consideration should be given to the usefulness and ramifications of this Israeli involvement, beyond a possible short-term political gain.
- 9. After all, the connections continue and new projects are emerging** - In the city of Essaouira, a new Jewish museum funded by the king is going to be inaugurated, which will also include a center for the studies of Jewish-Muslim relations. It will be possible to receive research grants and to live there. The museum will be named after Prof. Haim Zafrani, who was born in the city and is considered one of the important researchers of Jewish culture in North Africa. The purpose of the museum is to expose the local population to Judaism, and to convey a message of religious coexistence. In addition, Israelis continue to visit Morocco to take part in a variety of festivals throughout the year. Agricultural projects continue to develop, led by private entrepreneurs without special bureaucratic difficulties. In addition, in the last two years, Israeli students are interning with civil society organizations in Morocco on the topic of community development.
- 10. Steps for the future** - Many participants noted that the current international circumstances and state-of-mind towards the Middle East is an hour of grace for Israel, which should be seized to promote relations with Morocco. It was emphasized that although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the main concern of the Moroccans, it is limiting cooperation, and that a breakthrough in the peace process is expected to lead to a significant improvement in the relations with Morocco, as was the case in the 1990s. The relations need to be advanced step by step, to help create an easier track for issuing visas for Muslim Moroccans who want to visit Israel, and for Israelis interested in visiting Morocco. It is also possible and desirable to invest efforts in increasing knowledge and understanding in Morocco for Israel and Judaism, and to improve the Israeli image in Morocco.