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# Partial Normalization: Morocco's Balancing Act

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Israelis passing by the walls of Jerusalem's Old City next to Jaffa gate lit up with the Israeli and Moroccan flags... © EPA



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On 10 December 2020, Morocco became the latest country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to announce that it would partially normalize ties with Israel as part of a deal brokered by the Trump administration. In exchange for resuming some, but not all, ties with Tel Aviv, Rabat benefited from important security and financial deals with the United States and ensured the recognition of the kingdom's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Fleeting criticized by some actors at home and abroad, the deal returned to the spotlight following Israeli attacks on Jerusalem and Gaza in May 2021. These attacks drove thousands of Moroccans to express their solidarity with the Palestinian people through demonstrations and social media campaigns. They also highlighted the divide between MENA states that normalized and those that did not, making it clear that it is now more difficult than usual for them to unify around this issue. Finally, following the attacks, Israel and the United States will watch closely for any signs of retraction from the deal.

As a result, the Moroccan regime is aiming to strike a balance between developing its burgeoning relationship with Israel and maintaining its support for the Palestinian cause. Already, it has repeatedly proclaimed that its position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unchanged. The regime also allowed the country's leading political party to hold talks with a Hamas leader. Finally, it sent aid to Palestine through direct donations as well as through the Bayt Mal Al-Quds Acharif Agency- a financial institution chiefly funded by Morocco which focuses on humanitarian and social work in Jerusalem. At the same time, Moroccan policymakers have expressed that there is a political will to further develop relations with Israel, whose foreign minister is set to visit the kingdom in August. They have also moved forward with their plans to normalize, notably by allowing Israeli liaison office to open on Moroccan soil and Israeli airlines to establish direct flights to Marrakech. This balancing act allows the regime to appease domestic and regional actors without alienating Israel and the United States, all the while increasing its strategic importance on the world stage.

## The anatomy of a deal

Morocco's partial normalization with Israel is widely viewed as a quid pro quo agreement in exchange for several security and financial deals with the United States as well as for the latter's recognition of the kingdom's sovereignty over



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Western Sahara (which the Biden administration reportedly will not reverse, according to media reports citing sources inside the administration). Specifically, the Moroccan regime committed to resuming partial diplomatic ties, establishing direct flights to and from Tel Aviv, opening liaison offices in both countries (like those that existed prior to 2002), and cooperating on the economic and technological fronts. The agreement did not entail the opening of a Moroccan embassy in Israel or full normalization (i.e., establishing full diplomatic relations). Security deals with the United States include a potential \$1 billion arms sale which has since been blocked by Congress pending review, but which the Biden administration will likely uphold according to experts. In addition, the United States pledged \$3 billion in aid to private sector projects in Morocco.

The kingdom may also benefit financially from closer ties with Israel in terms of trade and investment, as well as in key sectors such as technology, water, energy, and agriculture. Partial normalization could also boost Morocco's tourism revenues, which have diminished due to the global pandemic, as it may potentially encourage more Israelis to visit the kingdom. Some expect the yearly number of Israeli tourists to Morocco to rise from around 50,000 to 200,000. Yearly trade may increase by \$ 500 million.

## Domestic reactions

The decision to partially normalize ties with Israel was made by the regime, which decides the country's foreign policy. The elected government was not involved in the decision-making process; in fact, the matter had not been discussed in parliament. Less than two weeks after the deal was announced, an American-Israeli delegation visited Morocco to sign the declaration, codifying their new ties. The event was presided by King Mohammed VI and attended by the foreign minister, a royal adviser, and Prime Minister Saadedine El Othmani of the Justice and Development Party (PJD).

Yet, the PJD, which is currently leading the government, has long rejected any form of normalization with Israel; its youth branch still does so actively. The Prime Minister, who in 1996 had penned an article qualifying normalization as civilizational genocide, had expressed staunch opposition to developing ties with



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Israel as recently as August 2020. Immediately after the deal was announced, the PJD issued a statement in which it re-iterated that its positions “are firm regarding the Zionist occupation and the crimes it commits against the Palestinian people, including murder, displacement and desecrating sanctities.” The party also condemned Israel’s attacks on Jerusalem in May, 2021 and expressed unconditional support for the Palestinian cause. Certain PJD members even demanded the closure of the recently-opened Israeli liaison office in Rabat. Yet, some PJD members did not initially oppose the deal. Former Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane had expressed support for normalization in December 2020 and defended El Othmani’s signing of the accord. However, Benkirane later re-emphasized the PJD’s anti-normalization position in February 2021, claiming that this stance would not change “under pressure.” He also pointed out that normalization was “decided by the State that the king rules and not the Justice and Development Party.”

Outside of the PJD, Nabila Mounib - the General Secretary of the Unified Socialist Party- criticized the quid pro quo nature of the deal in December 2020, arguing that Morocco did not need to normalize in order to legitimate its territorial claim. Abderrahman Benameur- an important socialist figure and a leader of the Socialist Democratic Vanguard Party- demanded the revocation of what he viewed as an “illegitimate agreement,” and participated in an anti-normalization sit-in in March 2021. However, while some political figures expressed their discontent with normalization, others expressed support for the regime’s decision. For example, Nabil Benabdellah- the Secretary-General of the Party of Progress and Socialism- supported the deal in December 2020, arguing that it merely codified existing ties.

At the level of the population, normalization was initially not well received by many. Following the announcement in December 2020, repeated protests broke out in support of the Palestinian cause or in opposition to normalization. This prompted the authorities to ban such gatherings before eventually allowing them to take place after the Israeli attacks in May 2021. On 30 March, despite the ban on protests, Moroccans in Rabat took to the streets in solidarity with Palestinians on Land Day commemoration. Most recently, spontaneous demonstrations took place in 46 Moroccan cities, triggered by Israeli violence in Jerusalem and Gaza. In the capital, Rabat, hundreds of people protested in front of the parliament



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building. Around the same time, larger demonstrations broke out in popular neighborhoods in Casablanca. In Marrakech, a major tourist destination, around 3,000 people participated in manifestations. Overall, many protesters expressed solidarity with Palestinians while some demanded that the regime revoke normalization altogether. Furthermore, even before the kingdom partially normalized with Israel, hundreds of Moroccans participated in anti-normalization protests organized by Moroccan human rights organizations when the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords; some protesters referred to the two Gulf countries as “traitors.”

However, recent public opinion by the Arab Barometer shows that the number of Moroccans favoring normalization has increased significantly. Between March and April 2021, 41 percent of surveyed Moroccans favored Morocco’s deal with the United States and Israel. In comparison, in October 2020, 91 percent of surveyed Moroccans did not favor the normalization deals between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, while 87 percent did not think it would be beneficial for the Arab region that some countries coordinated their foreign policies with Israel. This rise in support may be attributed to the United States’ recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. However, despite an increase in support for normalization, the majority of surveyed Moroccans (59 percent) remains against normalization.

## Reaffirming the role of mediator

Given the views on normalization and Israeli occupation at home and across the region, the Moroccan regime is currently in a delicate position. So far, it has sought to appease the population, maintain its image regionally and at home as a pro-Palestine regime, and make it clear to Israel and the United States that it will not back out of the deal. In maintaining this balancing act, decisionmakers aim to avoid domestic unrest, contain regional criticism, and reap the security and financial benefits of normalization. This may also allow the regime to bolster its image on the world stage as a credible regional actor.

The monarch himself has taken on the first two tasks - domestic and regional appeasement- following the attacks in May. He ordered 40 tons of aid to be



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delivered to the West Bank and Gaza via military aircraft, including medicine, foodstuffs, and blankets- a move hailed by several Palestinian and Jordanian personalities. The king also criticized Israeli violence in Jerusalem and Gaza which he considered “an inadmissible act likely to fuel tensions,” and reiterated the kingdom’s “permanent solidarity” with the Palestinian people whose cause is at the forefront of Morocco’s concerns. This is consistent with state communication from December 2020. Then, the monarch had called President Mahmoud Abbas and reiterated his continued support of a two-state solution and pledged that his regime would use its new position to mediate between Palestinians and Israelis. In fact, in what was likely an attempt at positioning itself as a reliable mediator between Israel, Hamas, and the Palestinian Authority, the regime allowed the PJD to invite Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh to Rabat in mid-June. The monarch also hosted a dinner banquet for Haniyeh, who later hailed Moroccan efforts to support the Palestinian cause.

If Morocco were to genuinely pursue the role of mediator between Israel and Palestine, it would build its image as a credible and neutral actor in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and regain some of the strategic importance it had vis-à-vis the United States between the 1960s and 1990s. Indeed, under the late King Hassan II, Morocco played a role in the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians as well as between Israel and various MENA states- most notably Anwar Sadat’s Egypt in the 1970s. Hassan II sought to facilitate rather than negotiate; and his regime encouraged actors on both sides to establish direct contact and allowed them to meet secretly on Moroccan soil for negotiations. He also helped with the Oslo agreement and the Jordanian peace treaty.

Re-adopting the role of mediator would also line up with the kingdom’s recent foreign policy redirection. Over the last ten years, the regime has been diversifying its alliance base away from its overreliance on Europe, with decisionmakers forging stronger ties with Gulf countries, re-establishing and intensifying its presence in sub-Saharan Africa, and opening up to non-traditional partners such as China. The regime has also keenly pursued the role of mediator in the Libya crisis and has positioned itself as a stability provider in the Sahel. Re-establishing ties with Israel and potentially contributing to peace between Palestinians and Israelis would further bolster Morocco’s position, especially for the United States.



Most importantly, it would help the regime in its goal to further establish itself as an independent actor, a strong partner, and a credible and key stability provider and mediator in the MENA region.

### Outlook: Striking a Middle Ground

Israeli violence in Jerusalem and Gaza has triggered public outcry and fueled protests across the world, including in Morocco. But what has it changed for the kingdom's approach? Not much. The regime is currently in a secure position, and King Mohammed VI is not only in control of the kingdom's foreign policy, but he is also its most important and powerful political actor, revered by the majority of political leaders and backed by strong institutions. Recent pro-Palestine and anti-normalization protests across the country represent only a small threat to the regime; they are not enough to jolt it into changing tracks. And while public opinion data has consistently shown that Moroccans are overwhelmingly pro-Palestine, the Palestinian cause is unlikely to mobilize a large portion of the population (instead, it would likely be socio economic hardship that would trigger such a reaction in the future). This means that the regime will pursue its clear and ambitious foreign policy goals despite minor discontent at home.

Regionally, establishing closer ties with Israel will not substantially hurt the Moroccan regime. It is true that the deal garnered harsh criticism from neighboring Algeria as well as from Iran, and that it makes Morocco the only Maghreb state to have normalized. However, few leaders overtly criticized the decision. Those that did so due to their own tense ties with Israel are not important partners for the kingdom. On the other hand, many of the countries that matter to the regime have welcomed the deal. This is especially true of several Gulf states which provide Morocco with financial support and backing in regional forums. Indeed, the kingdom's opening towards Israel seems to have brought it closer to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which had been hostile towards Moroccan decisionmakers in the recent past due to their friendly relationship with Qatar.

Overall, normalization was a strategic move that has paid off for the regime. King Mohammed VI, who is also the chairman of the Al-Quds Committee, (a committee under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in charge of



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discussing and implementing resolutions related to the Arab-Israeli conflict), will likely aim to strike a middle ground, maintaining a moderate position that will neither escalate tensions at home nor alienate key actors abroad. Deepening ties with Israel, in addition to providing Morocco with US support, will lead to major financial gains. It will also allow the Moroccan regime to bolster its reputation on the international stage and position itself as a stronger regional actor, especially if it succeeds in striking a balance and coming off as neither anti nor pro-Israel.



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