

The Conflicting Moroccan Responses to Normalization with Israel

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Brief Analysis

Moroccan responses to normalization with Israel are split along two opposing narratives, although popular resistance to normalization is unlikely to cause any real change.

Only a few months before the announcement of the normalization of diplomatic ties between Morocco and Israel, the Islamist Prime Minister of Morocco, Saad Eddine El Othmani, had categorically ruled out the possibility. He likewise indicated that his position was the unanimous position of the state, the government, and the Moroccan people, stressing Morocco's immutable foundational convictions over the Palestinians' right to establish a viable state within a two-state solution. Indeed, for some Moroccans, the Palestinian cause is probably only second to the country's principle national cause, the Moroccan Sahara. In what sounded like an electoral campaign speech to the youth section of the PJD last August, El Othmani stated that the rights of the Palestinians and the status of Jerusalem are red lines for Morocco. Based on the Moroccan government's declared position on the resumption of ties with Israel, and given its reserved stance towards the "deal of the century," along with its open opposition to Israel's settlement policies, it seemed at the time that the normalization was strictly out of the question.

As such, the subsequent reversal of this position seemed like an unexpected turn of events for many observers. The diplomatic move has unsurprisingly split the country's opinions and triggered a wide variety of public responses among political parties and civil society, ranging from warm welcome to accusations of treason—framed by the hashtag #Normalization is Treason. The concurrent U.S. recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara bundled as a package with normalization with Israel simultaneously amplified the patriotic narrative (#Morocco First) among many Moroccans, especially after the Algerian regime and media launched an unprecedented critical campaign against the "ugly deal." In response, the defenders of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians leveled a great amount of criticism against the apparently contradictory stance of the government and the PJD.

The normalization of diplomatic ties between Rabat and Tel Aviv now exists within the binary paradigm of Moroccan

political narratives, typified by the hashtags # Morocco First and # Normalization is Treason. The pro-normalization view takes a pragmatic stance that aspires to protect territorial integrity and gain enormous economic benefits. However, it has struggled to square these narratives with the traditional line of the defense of the Palestinian rights and anti-normalization. Yet in some ways, this narrative also draws on the changing features of Moroccan identity; in a survey opinion the author conducted in 2010, 90% of the Moroccan youth aged between 16 and 30 defined themselves as Moroccans, as opposed to 65% who defined themselves as Arabs. The shift from the Arab-nationalist narrative that dominated public political discourse in the 1950s-70s to a panegyric nationalist narrative that is enhanced by the Sahara question seems to partially account for many Moroccans' "Morocco First" orientation.

Pro-normalization: Recalling Moroccan Jewish heritage

Those who extolled the Moroccan regime's well-studied decision to normalize the relations with Israel would argue that the Moroccan position *vis à vis* the Palestinian cause is not incongruent, and that the priority of the Moroccan Sahara is by no means meant to be at the expense of the Palestinian people's legitimate rights. Political analysts such as Cherkaoui Al-Roudani suggest that the resumption of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel should be construed instead as a necessary step towards developments in favor of Palestinian statehood and stability in the entire Middle East, especially given the important and distinguished relations Rabat has in the region. Most of the advocates of normalization simultaneously stress a Moroccan pro-Palestinian narrative by pointing out to the king's call with Mahmoud Abbas, in which the former assured the latter that the position of Morocco will remain unchanged regarding the Palestinian cause, which the king placed at the same level of importance with the issue of the Moroccan Sahara.

Others have evoked the unique historical, cultural, personal, and spiritual ties Morocco has with Israel. The presence of a considerable Moroccan Jewish community in Israel and the 2011 constitution's recognition of the Jewish component of the Moroccan identity are strong elements of rapprochement between Morocco and Israel; they constitute an ideal model for productive relations, interfaith dialogue, and peaceful coexistence between the Arab Muslims and Jews in the region at a moment of turbulences and conflict on a global scale. Morocco's loss of many of its Jewish citizens since 1948 has created a Moroccan Jewish community inside Israel, whom king Hassan II called the ambassadors of Morocco.

The potential of this moniker being realized is increasingly notable given the role Moroccan Jews currently enjoy in the Israeli political landscape. Karim Boukhari (2021) notes that just less than a third of the May 2020 cabinet of the Israeli prime minister had Moroccan ancestry. Significantly, the Moroccan Jews of Israel continue to hold strong spiritual, cultural, and 'national(ist)' ties with their country of origin. Morocco has likewise capitalized on the presentation of Jewish heritage as Moroccan heritage, commended by Paloma El Baz as "the only country in the world, apart from Israel, where Jewish family law is legally binding as a national law for Jews in contemporary times." André Levy (2003) likewise stresses the notable role of Jewish pilgrimages and hagiographic practices which, instead of inflaming religious tensions between the Muslim and Jews, help "maintain the rapport between the two groups." Likewise, "traces" of Jewish presence remain throughout Morocco even in areas where no Jewish communities still exist, leading academics like Aomar Boom to call for an engagement with such "memories of absence," drawing specifically on minority experiences in Morocco as a counter to orientalist and colonial narratives. In a powerful reference to the unique and rich significance of being a Moroccan Jew, André Azoulay, advisor to King Mohamed VI, states, "I feel more than 2,000 years old. As a Jew here I belong to a community that arrived long before Islam. I have complete legitimacy in this country... Until the Palestinian is afforded identity and dignity, my Jewishness is weakened. . . I am an adviser to the Commander of the Faithful who is a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. . . There is no other Arab or Moslem country where you have a Jewish person in such a

responsibility. It's not by accident and has nothing to do with [me as a] person, just a continuation of a long tradition.”

Pro-normalization Moroccans have also placed emphasis on the state's and the king's projects regarding the rehabilitation and preservation of the Jewish material and immaterial heritage in Morocco, including the 2012 rehabilitation of Jewish historical sites. Major Moroccan radio and television channels have devoted an unprecedented number of programs to “*tamaghrabeit*” (Moroccanness), celebrating coexistence between the Muslims and the Jews in Morocco, inviting prominent national and diaspora Jewish and non-Jewish figures to bring Jewish culture to the fore as an indispensable component of Moroccan cultural identity. It should be stressed that over a hundred saints were venerated by both Muslims and Jews in Morocco, indicating a strong spiritual interfaith interaction between the two communities.

Some advocates of normalization also invoke King Mohammed V's unforgettable statement about Moroccan Jews at the crucial moment when the Vichy regime attempted to round up and imprison Jews in concentration camps: “There are no Jews in Morocco. There are only Moroccan subjects.” This moment continues to serve as a model of a matchless tolerance and peaceful presence of Jews in a Muslim land.

Anti-normalization: Calling for Palestinian Rights

On the other end of the spectrum, human rights activists, a few political figures, civil society, and voices on social media have slammed the decision to reestablish relations with Israel in return for the U.S. recognition of Morocco's territorial sovereignty over the Sahara, calling the move unethical. Ahmed Ouïhman—head of the Moroccan Observatory against Normalization—has voiced one of the most radical positions against normalization. For him, the question of the Sahara does not require recognition from Zionists, arguing that Moroccan sovereignty there is instead a historical, social and cultural reality. He has indicated that justifying normalization with the Sahara issue is unacceptable and articulates the state's submission to blackmailing.

In addition, Ouïhman warns against the dangerous consequences of normalization over the Maghreb and the region. For him, normalization is a disaster; it paves the way for Zionist expansionism in the Maghreb and for the destabilization of Morocco by inflaming internal divisions and confrontations. He denounces what he calls “electronic flies” on social networks hired to promote the process of normalization. Other activists and friends of Palestine dismissed normalization as taking sides with divisive and devastating forces led by the United States and Zionists. The Coordinator of the Committee of Solidarity with the Palestinian People in Casablanca, Abdelmadjid Radi, dismissed normalization with the Zionist entity as a dark moment in the history of Morocco that undermines the Moroccans' traditions of solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Educational unions have also criticized recent efforts to create cultural dialogue between Morocco and Israel. These efforts include several agreements between educational institutions. The Region of Béni Mellal-Khénifra, the Regional Academy of Education and Training and the Essaouira-Mogador Association sealed a convention of partnership with Israeli institutions on March 20 in Béni Mellal. Likewise, André Azoulay, advisor to King Mohamed VI and president-founder of the Essaouira-Mogador Association concluded an agreement of partnership between his association, the Center for Research on Hebrew Law in Morocco and the Regional Academy of Education and Training to promote Moroccan cultural diversity.

In response, some educational unions expressed their categorical rejection of any form of normalization with Israel. The unions assert that educational normalization is one of the most dangerous forms of normalization and argue that it will disseminate a pro-Israeli ideology that would eventually substitute the conventional pro-Palestinian emphasis on the legitimate rights of an occupied land. They have also warned against the promotion of the

attractive values of tolerance and cultural diversity to conceal Israel's colonial reality and the denial of the rights of the Palestinians.

Furthermore, the trend of normalization among some Arab states prompted anti-normalization and pro-Palestinian activists from 20 countries to set up the Supreme Commission for Coordinating Anti-Zionism and Resistance to Normalization. They elected Ahmed Ouïhman as coordinator for the organization.

Ouïhmane's stance on the normalization goes well with the Algerian prime minister's and media's denouncement of the normalization with Israel. Without any well-grounded evidence, Algerian Prime Minister Djerrad dismissed the move as an attempt on the part of the southern neighbor to destabilize Algeria and cause instability in the region, stressing that his country is the target of these events. He called upon Algerians to show more vigilance and solidarity to face down the challenges and threats to national security. Some analysts see such allegations as an attempt to distract from the country's internal economic, political, and social problems. For some activists in the popular *Hirak* movement, the Algerian government's bellicose declarations are yet another vain attempt to discredit not only Morocco but also the peaceful popular uprising of the Algerian people for democratic change, further adding to the conflicting national narratives that have shaped the dialogue around Morocco-Israel normalization.

The PJD's Struggle to Respond

The PJD and the prime minister find themselves in an unenviable position following normalization. The decision put into question the party's long-anchored political rejection of all forms of normalization with Israel and drew a shower of accusations of ideological incoherence and political ambiguity, especially as the party's youth sector and its religious wing (the Unity and Reform Movement) continue to reject the move. Social media activists slammed the PJD's position on normalization with Israel, arguing that it justifies its occupation of Palestine and its crimes against the Palestinian people. Analysts have also projected that this position could have a negative effect on the party's political ambitions during the prospective elections later this year. Yet former Prime Minister and PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane showed solidarity with El Othmani, rejecting any calls to have him resign as prime minister and secretary general of the party. For Abdelilah Benkirane, the party has to keep in line with the strategic and territorial choices of the state.

Faced with scathing criticism from PJD activists, El Othmani highlighted that his party can by no means clash or collide with the state's choices following the king's supreme instructions, attacking his "brothers" who submitted their resignation or froze their membership. He remarked that the party's internal tensions will be exploited by their political opponents and might lead to the split of the center. In contrast, Nabila Mounib, Secretary-General of the United Socialist Party, warned against the whole issue of normalization, dismissing it as treason. She stressed that she has no confidence in Trump, indicating that Moroccans alone will guarantee the preservation of the Moroccaness of the Sahara.

Looking Ahead

Despite the vocal arguments of both sides, the likely reality is that most young Moroccans will focus on other major issues above the question of normalization. The Arab Spring that shook the Arab region has shifted the interests and attention of the masses more firmly to their own problems, including employment, education, dignity, democracy, human rights, women's rights, and combatting poverty and corruption. Notable sites of protest—including the Tahrir Square, Rab'a Square, and the Taghyir Square—have replaced charismatic figures in the MENA region. In the absence of leftist or Islamist charismatic figures who once drove political and social discourse in the past, it is very unlikely that anti-normalization in Morocco will become a grassroots popular movement.

COVID-19 likely also has had an impact on the recent turn of events; it is hard to imagine that sections of political parties, religious movements, and pro-Palestinian NGOs would call for marches in Rabat to mobilize people to contest the normalization. Such marches would also be potentially unattractive to huge masses considering the involvement of the very sensitive national cause, the Moroccan Sahara. Parties and movements would find it hard to call for marches given these circumstances.

With a popular anti-normalization movement unlikely to arise, Morocco now has an opportunity. It is a sort of neutral actor in the Arab-Israeli conflict, given that it is located thousands of kilometers away from the real site of conflict. Along with the presence of the large Moroccan Jewish community in Israel, Morocco could build on its current decision and work towards serving as a mediator to play some role in reaching a fair, lasting, and comprehensive solution between Arabs and Israelis. ❖

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