

Morocco Plays with Anti-Normalization

by [Vish Sakthivel \(/experts/vish-sakthivel\)](#)

Dec 13, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Vish Sakthivel \(/experts/vish-sakthivel\)](#)

Vish Sakthivel was a 2013-14 Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

A Moroccan parliamentary proposal that would ban normalization with Israel has progressed further than expected but is unlikely to pass.

Last weekend, the Moroccan parliament put forth a bill to outlaw "normalization" with Israel. If passed, it would ban trade and criminalize official or business interactions between the two countries, banish Israeli firms from Morocco, and bar individuals with Israeli passports from entering the kingdom. Further restrictions would cover culture, politics, sports, and the economy, with violations punishable by fines and up to two years in prison.

Although Morocco projects itself as a moderate bridge between East and West, including between Israelis and Palestinians, its domestic politics have long shown a streak of opposition to the "maverick" slant of royal policies toward Israel. Yet the latest anti-normalization bill is unusual in that it was originally sponsored by a broad coalition that included two parties in the governing bloc -- the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) and the leftist Party for Progress and Socialism (PPS) -- along with monarchist factions such as the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), generally recognized as the party of the "king's men." At present, parliamentary support for the bill appears to be waning and final approval is highly unlikely. Yet the fact that it progressed as far as it did with the support of parties so close to the throne raises questions about the initiative's motivations.

A HISTORY OF DECLINING RELATIONS

Morocco and Israel do not have official diplomatic relations, but cooperation between them dates to the Nasser era, when they were weathering the pan-Arabism that threatened them both. This led to a politically pragmatic relationship during the reign of King Hassan II, one tinged with shared respect and nostalgia for Moroccan Jewry. Israel seemed to view Morocco as its key to Arab hearts, while Rabat likely saw Israel as the key to Washington's. High-level engagement is decades old as well. In 1976, Hassan II secretly hosted Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was curious about Morocco's ability to relaunch Egyptian-Israeli dialogue. A year later, Rabat hosted clandestine talks between Israeli foreign minister Moshe Dayan and Egyptian national security advisor Hassan

Tohamy, setting the stage for President Anwar Sadat's landmark visit to Israel. The king maintained public support for Sadat until Arab consensus lined up against the Egyptian leader after the Camp David Accords and compelled Rabat to fall in line.

A decade and a half later, the Oslo Accords made it possible for Israeli-Moroccan relations to come out of the shadows. In 1994, the king eagerly hosted Arab and Israeli leaders and business elites in Casablanca with the goal of forging a partnership to develop the economies of the Middle East and North Africa. The conference ended with the "Casablanca declaration," in which Hassan II and Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres declared the "end" of the Arab boycott of Israel. The two countries opened liaison offices shortly thereafter.

Yet the king's death in 1999 and the Palestinian uprising in 2000 put bilateral relations in deep freeze. Politically, it was much more difficult to sustain open ties in an era of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and King Muhammad VI was much less keen to play the matchmaker/peacemaker role in which his father reveled. Even so, the realpolitik dynamic has not been entirely lost with the new king, who has occasionally hosted prominent Israelis from across the political spectrum and taken favorable measures such as expelling the Iranian ambassador in 2009 (though the latter move was made for domestic political reasons, not to benefit Israel). At the same time, he has become more active as head of the al-Quds Committee, created in 1975 by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now "Cooperation") to champion the Palestinian cause and provide Islamic-related assistance to Arabs in Jerusalem. That wearing the al-Quds mantle would help the king counter the pro-Palestinian populism employed by Islamists was not lost on the Moroccan political class.

Against this backdrop, the current anti-normalization bill appears to be a manifestation of the populism-meets-foreign-policy that has characterized Morocco's ebbing relationship with Israel over the years. In essence, Rabat wants it both ways -- for Washington to view it as a discreet friend of Israel, and for the Moroccan street to view it as a stalwart champion of Arabism. Proposing a bill but not letting it pass may be a way of achieving both goals.

PROSPECTS FOR THE BILL

It is no surprise that the Islamist PJD would support a bill to cut ties with Israel -- among other things, it allows them to show they can take bold actions without the palace -- but the rationale behind initial endorsements from the royalist PAM and Istiqlal Party are more uncertain. The fact that Fouad Ali el-Himma -- PAM's founder and one of the king's closest confidants -- was among the original signatories suggests that the measure had Muhammad VI's personal imprimatur. And Ilyas al-Omari, a close friend of Himma and a PAM strongman, has attempted to be the champion of the Palestinian issue for some time.

The bill may represent a Hassan II-style balancing tactic: that is, including parties in the process of managing quiet support for Israel while maintaining Rabat's leadership of the al-Quds Committee and other pan-Arab credentials. Put another way, the anti-Israel legislation gives party politicians a chance to show constituents that they have not been "sold" to Western interests even as decisionmakers proceed with the foreign policy best suited for Morocco's international strategy. While Moroccans have deep sympathy for the plight of Palestinians, the government and the elite are highly unlikely to risk the investment benefits derived from Moroccan Jewish expatriates, the kingdom's universally acclaimed status as a tourist destination, and the political advantages of its limited engagement with Israel in order to prove their pro-Palestinian bona fides.

Indeed, PAM has already withdrawn support for the bill, which will likely lose momentum to the large number of parliamentarians who have refused to join the coalition. The National Rally of Independents (RNI) -- a centrist, monarchist party that holds the majority of cabinet positions -- is against the legislation and seeks to maintain the current relationship with Israel. As a result, the bill will probably die in parliament before even reaching the king's desk. Although the king has ultimate veto power and would earn international praise for exercising it in this case, a

veto would not go over well domestically. The challenge for the Moroccan elite is to ensure that the bill fails before then, without angering constituents who regard the issue as a test of the king's commitment to Arab and Islamic ideals. It remains to be seen who will be the scapegoat if the bill does not pass, but past patterns indicate that whoever takes the bullet will earn considerable royal favor.

For its part, Washington has so far maintained appropriate public silence on the matter. If the bill is in fact destined to die a quiet death, then a premature U.S. warning might give it renewed life at precisely the wrong time.

Nevertheless, many are concerned about Morocco using its relationship with Israel as a tool for domestic political intrigue. While the powers-that-be are confident that they can turn the anti-normalization spigot on and off at will, that may not always be the case.

Vish Sakthivel is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. She would like to thank research assistant Jeremy Brinster for his contribution to this article. ❖

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