



# Morocco And The Normalization Question

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Will they or won't they? Since the start of the "normalization" wave this summer, speculation has abounded as to whether other regional nations would follow the lead of the UAE and Bahrain (and now Sudan) and establish full diplomatic relations with Israel. President Trump has expressed confidence that quite a few countries will do so in coming weeks.

The Kingdom of Morocco ranks prominently on the list of prospective peace partners. At first blush, the North African nation seems like a natural candidate for "normalization" with Israel. The two countries share major civilizational links – some 10 percent of Israel's population of 9.1 million is estimated to be of Moroccan descent, and many travel back to the Kingdom regularly. Moreover, the Moroccan government has established a vibrant political dialogue with the Jewish state in recent decades, albeit unofficially. As part of that alignment, Morocco has taken a leading role in promoting education about the Holocaust in the Arab World, and trade between the two countries has flourished.

Yet the Kingdom's calculus is complicated by a number of considerations.

The first is the Palestinian issue. All politics are ultimately local, and the "Palestinian question" is one that has enormous resonance on the Moroccan street. Indeed, despite the Kingdom's warm (though quiet) relations with Israel, domestic sentiment in the country skews heavily in support of the Palestinians. A poll of Arab public opinion released this summer by the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies found that fully 70% of Moroccans surveyed had strong feelings of support for the Palestinian cause. The strength of that sentiment – especially at a time when there is growing distance between some Arab states and the Palestinians – makes the issue impossible for Rabat to ignore.

Morocco's room for maneuver is further constrained by its role as head of the Al-Quds (Jerusalem) committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a position that makes Rabat the de facto standard bearer for Palestinian rights on the international scene. Under those conditions, the Kingdom simply cannot be seen as unilaterally abandoning the Palestinian cause.

Another consideration preoccupying officials in Rabat is the current state of American politics. The normalization "wave" of recent months has been identified closely with the Trump administration, which has made it a cornerstone of its Mideast policy. As seen from the region, however, such proximity could become a double-edged sword – especially in light of the substantially different approach to the Middle East that has been articulated by president-elect Joe Biden. Officials in Rabat are therefore treading carefully, and seem disinclined to take any steps that might tie them too closely to the outgoing White House in the eyes of the incoming administration.

Even so, the case for eventual normalization between the two nations remains compelling.

Economically, the dividends of deeper alignment are apparent. Israel, with less than a quarter of Morocco's population, has an economy more than three times its size. Over the past decade, the Jewish state has distinguished itself as a "start up nation" par excellence and a world-class incubator of technological innovation. If relations between the two countries normalize, the benefits of this economic dynamism will accrue to the Kingdom, for which lowering unemployment and improving economic opportunity represent pressing domestic priorities. Israel, meanwhile, will gain greater access – and legitimacy – in African markets via its partnership with the Kingdom, who's monarch has in recent years adopted a "southern strategy" designed to increase the country's influence on the continent.

Strategically, meanwhile, normalization could lead to progress on the Kingdom's cardinal domestic policy issue: sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Since the 1960s, when the former Spanish territory reverted to its control, the Kingdom has invested many billions of dollars in its development. More than a dozen years ago, it also put forth a proposal for advanced regional autonomy designed to better integrate and empower the area's local Sahrawi population. But the Kingdom's efforts have been stymied by rival Algeria and the leftist Polisario movement, both of whom benefit from fostering irridentist tendencies in the region. The result has been a "frozen conflict" that has, over the years, grown to dominate the Kingdom's domestic priorities and foreign policy agenda.

Breaking the logjam over its "southern territories" has long been an overriding priority for Rabat. To date, however, the area's unsettled legal status has thwarted the kind of meaningful development that is brought about by broad international investment. This is something that normalization with Israel could begin to change – if the move is coupled with a commitment from the United States to recognize Moroccan sovereignty there and encourage American companies to invest in the area. The real issue in this regard is one of sequencing; Morocco's unique political situation demands that U.S. guarantees regarding the Sahara come ahead of any movement toward normalization on Rabat's part.

That's something hasn't happened yet. But it still might in the last months of the Trump administration. Or the issue could be taken up by a Biden White House eager to build upon its predecessor's Mideast peacemaking.

If it is, the Moroccan Crown is liable to find that the underlying logic for a public entente with Israel, although complicated, is compelling.

*Ilan Berman is senior vice-president at the American Foreign Policy Council, a Washington, DC-based think-tank.*