



The Israel-Morocco Deal Is a Triumph for Trump—and Biden, Too

December 22, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Newsweek*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Israel; North Africa

For all of its import, the December 10 announcement by the Kingdom of Morocco that it was normalizing ties with Israel can hardly be said to have been a surprise. Contacts between the two countries span decades, and Rabat and Jerusalem have long boasted a vibrant (if informal) partnership built around cultural bonds, trade ties and political alignment. A public affirmation of this extant reality wasn't really a matter of *if*, but of *when*.

Even so, the start of official contacts between the two countries is a major development, and one that strengthens what has emerged as the signal foreign policy achievement of the outgoing Trump administration.

Over the past four years, the White House has worked diligently to advance its vision of a more integrated and economically prosperous Middle East. This plan has borne fruit in what has turned out to be its last year in office. Since this summer, the "normalization" wave nurtured by the current Trump administration has yielded no fewer than four separate agreements between Israel and the Islamic world (with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco), as well as other ententes and diplomatic breakthroughs with Serbia, Kosovo and Bhutan. (Additional such arrangements may still be in the offing in the final weeks of the Trump presidency.) As a result, President Trump will leave office next month having done more to advance regional stability and Israeli-Islamic world relations than all of his predecessors combined.

But the Israel-Morocco deal should also be seen as a boon for the incoming Biden administration, for at least two reasons.

First, it is a timely reminder of a regional context that has profoundly shifted over the past half-decade. The historically fractious Middle East is now more economically integrated and politically moderate than at any time in recent memory. The Biden administration will inherit this benevolent trend, and—with the proper diplomacy—can build on it to further promote regional prosperity and stability in the years ahead.

Second, it positions longtime U.S. ally Morocco to take on a more sizable role in North African security. Morocco's strategic location on the continent, situated near geopolitical hotspots like Mali and Nigeria, makes it a natural candidate for such a function. Yet, for years, the uncertain legal status of the former Spanish territory of the Western Sahara, which the Kingdom has administered since the 1970s, has prevented Morocco from playing a larger role in the security of its neighborhood. Now, however, the U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara that accompanied "normalization" with Israel has paved the way for the Kingdom to take on a more meaningful role in regional policing.

It's a job for which Morocco is well-suited. The country's tolerant, inclusive interpretation of Islam has long stood in contrast to more extreme strains of the religion found elsewhere in the region. And over the past decade, Morocco has become more outspoken and assertive in promoting this worldview, establishing clerical institutions and international partnerships designed to promote the Moroccan "model" throughout Africa—and beyond.

That message is much needed. As a new study from the National Defense University recently noted, violent Islamist activity has surged throughout Africa over the past two years, spiking in particular in places like Somalia, Mozambique, the Lake Chad Basin and the lawless Sahel region situated beneath North Africa. Left unaddressed, this trend threatens to engulf the continent and imperil American interests there.

Through both policy statements and personnel picks, the incoming Biden administration has already signaled that it plans to pursue a more robust Africa policy than did its predecessor. Making Morocco a more prominent part of such an approach simply makes good strategic sense.

Since its announcement earlier this month, the Moroccan-Israeli agreement has garnered its fair share of criticism from detractors who have lamented a shift in the political *status quo* in the Western Sahara, a sidelining of the Palestinians and assorted other alleged shortcomings. These critics, however, miss a crucial point. At the end of the day, the new normalization deal better aligns Rabat with emerging regional trends in the Middle East, and makes it far more useful to Washington.

Ilan Berman is senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C.