



A Moment of Truth for Morocco

April 14, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman** *Newsweek*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Israel; Middle East; North Africa

What a difference a few months can make. Back in December, the Kingdom of Morocco became the fourth Arab nation to join the Abraham Accords when it agreed to begin normalizing relations with Israel. The move was backed by the outgoing Trump administration, which contributed a crucial piece of the puzzle: formal U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the long-contested territory of the Western Sahara. Today, however, the kingdom finds itself on tenterhooks as the Biden administration ponders whether to honor its predecessor's commitments.

Since taking office in late January, the new White House has launched a comprehensive review of a range of Trump-era policies. In the realm of foreign affairs, such reevaluations have already yielded significant changes, including a reversal of the "maximum pressure" approach toward Iran and a more punitive policy vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. And while some things have not changed—for instance, a U.S. commitment to great-power competition with China—the new administration's policy shifts have profoundly unsettled many of America's international partners, Morocco among them.

When I visited the kingdom last week at the invitation of its foreign ministry, it became clear just how much. Officials in Rabat were quick to affirm that the fundamentals of the two-century-old relationship between Morocco and the United States remain sound. Nevertheless, it was clear that the Biden administration's current deliberations have the potential to be highly consequential for the kingdom—for reasons unrelated to Moroccan ties with Israel.

After all, quiet contacts between the two countries have been underway for decades, sustained by vibrant (if unofficial) commerce and the socio-cultural connections of a massive diaspora of Moroccan Jews now living in Israel. These bonds helped to preserve the relationship in an informal fashion until it finally broke out into the open late last year.

Since then, Moroccan-Israeli relations have evolved quickly. Over the past four months, the two countries have exchanged ambassadors (formal diplomatic offices will soon open in Tel Aviv and Rabat) and established working groups on issues such as agriculture and security. Their cabinets have begun to hold weekly consultations. Although dampened so far by the pandemic, hopes remain high that the relationship will further expand to encompass direct flights, stepped-up tourism and meaningful bilateral investment.

Moroccan tribesmen demonstrate in support of their King near a border crossing point between Morocco and Mauritania in Guerguerat located in the Western Sahara, on November 24, 2020, after the intervention of the royal Moroccan armed forces in the area. - Morocco in early November accused the Polisario Front of blocking the key highway for trade with the rest of Africa, and launched a military operation to reopen it.

All this, Moroccan officials say, is part of a broader strategic vision on the part of their monarch, Mohammed VI, to raise the country's global profile and align it with new geopolitical currents in the wider region. For now, the majority of Moroccans see this outreach as a net positive. As one observer explained, roughly 10 percent of the country's population endorses normalization for its own sake, while another 70 percent supports it as an extension of their broader backing for the king.

Yet for Moroccans, normalization with Israel is not a standalone issue. It is intimately linked to the status of the country's most coveted strategic holding: the Western Sahara.

When it occurred last year, U.S. recognition of Morocco's claim represented a long-overdue validation of the half-century of sustained political and economic investments that Rabat has made in what it calls its "southern territories." Nor is the Western Sahara simply a government project; it is nothing short of a national cause for Moroccans, many of whom have relatives who personally participated in the southward march to liberate the territory from Spanish control in the mid-1970s. That reality isn't sufficiently appreciated in Washington, where the Western Sahara has tended to be seen as simply a part of the last administration's political horse-trading in the region.

Also significant are the issue's electoral ramifications. Morocco heads into parliamentary elections later this year, and the Sahara "question" is sure to figure prominently. An endorsement of the kingdom's sovereignty by the Biden administration would be a powerful external validation of the Moroccan government's current geopolitical trajectory, boosting politicians and parties who will ensure that Rabat stays its current course. Conversely, even a partial reversal would provide powerful political ammunition to domestic forces (including Islamist ones) that have long argued against normalization—and, more broadly, against partnership with the West.

All of the above reasons make the choice now confronting the Biden administration a momentous one—both for the kingdom itself, and for the future of its relationship with Washington.

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.