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A NEW STAGE IN ISRAELI-MOROCCAN RELATIONS?

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Israeli Foreign Minister Sylvan Shalom's visit to Morocco last week marked a new development in Israeli-Moroccan relations. Shalom, who met with his Moroccan counterpart, Muhammad Ben Aïssa, and with King Muhammad VI, was the first senior Israeli to visit Morocco since diplomatic relations with Israel were severed in October 2000. Israeli officials view the visit as an important diplomatic achievement in the current context of Arab-Israeli relations and have expressed the hope that it will lead to renewed diplomatic relations between the two countries.

On the Moroccan side, the visit signaled the possibility of reviving Morocco's role in Arab-Israeli negotiations but also highlighted bilateral relations. Although Israeli-Moroccan ties stand out in the general context of Arab-Israeli relations, they are not without their own constraints and limitations, which are often overlooked. As the two countries prepare to embark on a new diplomatic course, a closer look at this unique relationship seems very much in order.

Morocco and Israel have always enjoyed a "special" relationship that often outpaced Israel's ties with other Arab actors. Geographically distant from the Arab-Israeli conflict, Morocco had fewer qualms about pursuing ties with Israel. This relationship began with the late King Hassan II's overtures towards the Jewish State, starting in the 1960s. It encompassed security-related cooperation measures and later involved Moroccan mediation efforts between Israel and other Arab parties at critical junctures, such as before Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel in November 1977. Hassan also acted to protect and support the remnants of Morocco's ancient Jewish community. Hassan's initiatives placed him in the vanguard of Arab-Israeli diplomacy. He publicly hosted Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres in Morocco in 1986 and authorized visits of Israelis to Morocco. These measures bolstered his reputation as a moderate, pro-western leader, and were welcomed in Washington and other western capitals. Hassan was nevertheless careful not to deviate from the general Arab consensus in his contacts with Israel. He did not establish open ties with Israel so long as several outstanding Arab-Israeli issues, primarily the Palestinian problem, remained unsettled. Over the years, he expressed unrelenting support for the Palestinian cause and called for a just solution to their plight.

For its part, Israel welcomed Morocco's early diplomatic overtures. The possibility of pursuing ties with a large Arab state was particularly appealing to Israeli leaders. On the domestic level, there was much to gain from any contact with Moroccan officials. Many Israelis of Moroccan origin maintained visceral links to

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their native country, and hundreds of thousands of them supported pursuing ties between Israel and Morocco. These sentiments helped sustain Israeli interest in advancing contacts with Morocco.

The Oslo Accords and the general thaw in Arab-Israeli relations afforded Morocco the opportunity to establish low-level diplomatic relations with Israel in 1994. The two countries maintained diplomatic liaison bureaus in Tel Aviv and Rabat, which oversaw cooperation in various areas. A significant number of Israelis began visiting Morocco and commercial ties were promoted as well. Concurrently, Morocco retained its symbolic role in Arab-Israeli peace talks.

In spite of these developments, Morocco's positions towards Israel remained tenuous and reserved, largely affected by progress on other Arab-Israeli tracks. In addition, Moroccan leaders faced domestic opposition to normalizing ties with Israel. Hassan was largely indifferent to these protests but was forced to acknowledge them indirectly in his decision making. He declined to promote diplomatic relations with Israel and insisted on low-profile normalization.

Hassan's death in 1999 ushered in a new era in Morocco. King Muhammad VI's accession to the throne was accompanied by expectations that the young monarch would tackle Morocco's chronic social and economic problems. These include high unemployment (over 20% in urban areas) and widespread poverty. It was generally accepted that the new king would dedicate most of his energies to domestic affairs. Although he proclaimed his devotion to Morocco's traditional foreign policies and vowed to maintain them, he was less attentive to foreign affairs. The deterioration in Arab-Israeli relations following the outbreak of the Aqsa Intifada in October 2000 distanced Morocco even further from any diplomatic involvement. Morocco followed other Arab countries and severed ties with Israel.

Four years after his accession, Muhammad continues to face serious social and economic challenges. Much remains to be done in the area of political reform, to which the King committed himself at the outset of his reign. Under these circumstances, the King's ability to pursue serious diplomatic measures is uncertain, particularly given the rise of Islamist movements. The Islamist *Parti de la Justice et du Développement* (PJD) now holds 13% of the seats in parliament, and support for the largest Islamist group outside the political system, *al-Adl wal-Ihsane*, remains high. These movements have opposed relations with Israel and will not make it any easier for the king to promote ties with Israel should he choose to do so.

The al-Qaeda terror bombings in Casablanca last May jolted Moroccan officials and forced them to revisit Morocco's limited diplomatic agenda. Morocco recognized the need to improve security measures and cooperation with other countries in combating terror. It was reported that the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency visited Morocco as part of the bombing investigation. Concurrently, Morocco intensified contact with Israeli officials. Foreign Minister Ben Aïssa secretly met his Israeli counterpart in London in June, and subsequent contacts between the two ministers paved the way for last week's visit.

However, Morocco has been cautious in its recent contacts with Israel and is likely to proceed at a measured pace with any decision to restore diplomatic relations. It is doubtful that Morocco will reopen its diplomatic mission in Israel before Egypt and Jordan return their ambassadors to Israel. Morocco reportedly consulted with Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen about initiating a more intensive dialogue with Israel, but while Abu Mazen did not reject the idea, it is unlikely, in the current Israeli-Palestinian climate, that Morocco will speed up its diplomatic minuet with Israel. Even in the aftermath of Shalom's visit, domestic and foreign sensitivities continue to overshadow Morocco's relations with Israel, and it remains unclear whether King Muhammad will move to develop those ties.

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