

The Gaza War and Israel-Morocco Relations: The Common Interests Need Bolstering

Morr Link | No. 1793 | November 28, 2023

The war in the Gaza Strip impacts relations between Israel and Morocco in several contradictory ways. On the one hand, the conflict has not harmed their shared political, security, or economic interests. Nor has it undermined the reality that both countries are part of a regional axis intent on promoting regional stability based on economic cooperation and development. On the other hand, the royal palace in Rabat faces significant domestic and regional pressure to do more for the Palestinian cause and even to reassess its relations with Israel. The Moroccan regime, like others in the region, balances between maintaining its traditional neutrality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and containing mass public demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinians. While shared bilateral interests underpin Israel-Morocco relations, these alone cannot fully overcome the negative impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and the same is true of Israel's relations with the Arab world in general.

The war in Gaza has cast a shadow over Israel's relations with the Arab world, including Morocco. In the weeks since the outbreak of the war, Israeli officials from the liaison office in Rabat have been evacuated, direct flights between the two countries have stopped, and the Israeli National Security Council issued a travel warning due to concerns about potential terror attacks against Israeli nationals on Moroccan soil. On the other hand, the war has not disrupted – and in some cases has even underscored – either the common political, security, and economic interests that the two countries share, or the fact that both countries are part of a regional axis that includes Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. These states pursue a common goal of fostering regional stability based on economic cooperation and development.

Domestic and Regional Pressure

In the regional context, support for the Palestinian cause, often more symbolic than substantive, serves as a benchmark for pan-Arab solidarity. Against this backdrop, any condemnation of Hamas or statements that could be interpreted as supportive of Israel attract intense public criticism. Consequently, despite

shared interests, the war in Gaza has placed significant regional pressure on Morocco to take a firmer stance in support of the Palestinians and even to reassess its relations with Israel. The royal palace, for its part, is cautious not to appear as favoring Israel or abandoning the Palestinians, as such a perception could isolate it from the broader Arab consensus and incite domestic backlash.

Domestically, the war has triggered dozens of [demonstrations in support of the Palestinians](#), including outside the parliament in Rabat. These demonstrations, drawing participants from across the political spectrum, featured calls to “stop the genocide” allegedly committed by Israel in the Gaza Strip and to sever ties with Jerusalem. At the same time, there was a notable exception: a week after Hamas’s brutal October 7 attack, a [small demonstration](#) in Rabat advocated for ending the war and promoting coexistence between Israel and the Palestinians. That, however, was a unique event in the Arab world, reflecting the predominantly pro-Palestinian stance of Moroccan public opinion. Indeed, the normalization of ties between Israel and Morocco enjoys only [limited support among the Moroccan people](#).

Support for the Palestinians and criticism of Israel-Morocco relations have also echoed within the Moroccan political system. Unsurprisingly, the secretary-general of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) – which, like Hamas, shares ideological roots with the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt – [lauded](#) the October 7 terror attack as “heroic.” On November 12, the PJD [reiterated its call](#) for the government to sever ties with Israel and to expel its envoys, given the “tremendous suffering of the Palestinian people in its struggle against the Nazi and racist policies of the [Zionist] enemy.” The palace did not respond to these comments, unlike its strong objection in March 2023 to PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane’s criticism of normalization with Israel. These remarks by members of the opposition in parliament aim to capitalize on the widespread support for the Palestinian issue in Morocco, particularly during periods of escalation, in order to regain public support after the PJD loss lost in the parliamentary elections two years ago.

Common Interests

Israel and Morocco share a host of common interests that currently sustain the relations. Politically, both are key allies of the United States, which sponsored the agreement to renew diplomatic ties in December 2020. After decades of diplomatic lobbying, the United States, under President Donald Trump, [recognized](#) Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, a longstanding priority in Moroccan foreign policy, as part of the Abraham Accords. In July 2023, Israel likewise

[recognized](#) Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, aiming to bolster ties and pave the way towards the opening of embassies in both countries, although this goal now appears more distant than ever.

On the security front, Israel and Morocco share a commitment to obstruct Iranian influence in the Middle East and North Africa and counter Islamic terrorism and radicalization. Like many other Arab countries, Morocco is concerned about Iran's efforts to undermine regional stability using proxies. At a time when Israeli attention is naturally focused on Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Morocco is particularly wary of another Iranian-backed organization: the Polisario Front, a separatist military-political organization that claims Western Sahara. Some six months ago, the organization threatened to carry out terror attacks in Western Sahara, and in late October, launched a missile attack resulting in one fatality and three injuries. The organization claimed responsibility for the attack and [announced](#) a new stage in its struggle against the "Moroccan occupation" of Western Sahara. Morocco accuses Algeria and Iran of supporting the Polisario Front and [severed](#) relations with Iran in 2018 over the issue.

Another shared interest between Israel and Morocco is the fight against Islamic terrorism and radicalization. Following the 2003 terror attacks in Casablanca, carried out by a Moroccan Salafi organization linked with al-Qaeda, Morocco prioritized combating Islamic terrorism and radicalization. Since then, Rabat has become a key ally for both the United States and the European Union in addressing terrorism in North Africa.

Throughout the years, shared security interests have led to discreet collaboration between Israel and Morocco, including Israeli assistance in establishing the Moroccan intelligence agency and constructing a separation barrier in Western Sahara. Following the reinstatement of diplomatic relations, the cooperation has become overt. There have been reciprocal visits by high-ranking military officials, signing of agreements in security and cyber sectors, and substantial deals have been struck, including the sale of drones and air defense systems - marking a significant step in the open military and strategic partnership between the two countries.

Striking a Balance

Morocco, similar to other regimes in the region, is attempting to balance its interests in maintaining relations with Israel and the ever-increasing public and political criticism that these relations attract. This balancing act was evident in the recent Arab-Islamic summit held in Saudi Arabia earlier this month. [Reports](#) suggest that Morocco was among the countries opposing a proposal to include in

the closing statement a call to freeze all economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Israel and to prevent the United States from using Middle East bases to transport military aid to Israel.

The Moroccan regime's strategy thus far has been to maintain its traditionally neutral position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moroccan Officials, including King Mohammed VI and Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, have [condemned](#) attacks on civilians on both sides and called for a cessation of hostilities, while also issuing [harsher criticism](#) of Israel. Notably, Morocco refrained from condemning Hamas, unlike the UAE and [Bahrain](#), both of which strongly denounced the October 7 terror attack and the subsequent Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip. Nonetheless, Morocco continues to reiterate its commitment to the two-state solution and has not taken drastic measures, such as recalling its ambassador.

Simultaneously, the palace has permitted numerous large-scale demonstrations in support of the Palestinians, marking a shift from previous policy, when [authorities dispersed](#) anti-normalization protests on more than one occasion. Freedom of protest is [strictly limited](#) in Morocco and demonstrations that do not align with the interests of the regime are not usually approved. For example, the regime recently [banned](#) demonstrations against French President Emmanuel Macron for his support of Israel. Allowing these protests now appears to be a strategic move, providing an outlet for public frustration and anger on issues other than sensitive domestic concerns like the cost of living or the government's response to the recent earthquake.

Policy Recommendations

Recent Arab responses have challenged the notion that Israel can advance its ties with Arab countries irrespective of the status of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The history of Israel-Morocco relations corroborates this, suggesting that progress toward resolving the conflict, or at least achieving a security lull, tends to bolster relations, while periods of escalation often set them back. Following decades of clandestine relations between the two countries, relations between Israel and Morocco became public after the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993. The day after the signing ceremony, on their way back from Washington, the Israeli delegation headed by then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin made a [public visit](#) to Rabat, meeting with King Hussein II. The Abraham Accords coincided with a period of relative calm (according to [United Nations figures](#), 30 Palestinians were killed in 2020, the lowest number since 2008). Conversely, the collapse of the Camp David

conference in 2000 and the outbreak of the second intifada prompted Morocco to sever ties with Israel and close its liaison office in Tel Aviv.

Although the foundation of Israel-Morocco ties lies in their common interests, these alone are insufficient to cultivate these relations. Accordingly, it is imperative that Israel acknowledge the significant impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on its relations with Morocco and the Arab world at large. In order to expand the circle of normalization and strengthen its relations with the Arab world, Israel must demonstrate readiness to engage in a political process with the Palestinians. This should ideally occur within an international and Arab framework, underscoring Israel's commitment to peace, notwithstanding the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen