



U.S. senior adviser during Donald Trump's presidency Jared Kushner, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, and Israel's national security adviser Meir Ben Shabbat during a ceremony prior to the official visit of a joint Israeli-U.S. delegation take off to Rabat, Morocco, Dec. 22, 2020. Source: [U.S. Embassy Jerusalem](https://www.usembassyjerusalem.gov/).

## A NEW ERA IN ISRAEL-MOROCCO RELATIONS

Ana Salas Cuevas

December 2020 was a key date for Arab-Israeli relations. This same month saw rapprochements between some of the Arab monarchies, such as Morocco, Bahrein or the Arab Emirates with the State of Israel. We will highlight the bilateral relations between Israel and Morocco, emphasizing the U.S. influence on these rapprochements.

To understand this present event, we must look back and analyze the **historical ties** between the Jewish community and Morocco. More than one million Israelis are of Moroccan origin; Morocco maintains a Jewish community whose rights are recognized by the 2011 Constitution. Despite this, the Alawite kingdom has tended to position itself alongside Palestine since 1948. Morocco's civil society has made its position very clear in numerous demonstrations in favor of Palestine. But today this situation has changed. This article will make a brief recapitulation of the cooperative panorama of both countries in political and security terms.

In the field of **political cooperation**, the reign of Hassan II (1961-1999) was characterized by a rapprochement towards the Israeli government. The Moroccan moderate involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict marked the difference with the more radical anti-Jewish views in the rest of the Arab world. This tendency of the Alawite king sought to protect the small but influential Jewish community in Morocco, protecting it from possible acts against it. He has hosted multiple secret visits of Israeli leaders and made use of his connections in the Israeli intelligence to seek an ally against Moroccan dissidents and for support in the Western Sahara issue. In 1993, the conclusion of the Oslo Accords between Israelis and Palestinians provided an occasion for a warm-up in the Morocco-Israeli relations. The understanding between Morocco and Israel has followed a neutral channel of shared interests until the year 2000.

After the death of Hassan II, his son, Mohammed VI maintained his rapprochement with Israel, in secret at first due to the outbreak of violence during the Second Intifada, which led to the de-formalization of Morocco-Israel relations. At the same time, the King's advisor André Azoulay, a Jewish Moroccan, facilitated the economic and political growth of the Alawite kingdom by maintaining contact with Israel.

As for **security cooperation**, Morocco continues to try to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has maintained informal ties since the Oslo Accords. Since the mid-1970s, when Rabat purchased Israeli battle tanks, this collaboration has continued. Later, in 2019, and although the United States remains Morocco's main military supplier, Morocco purchased military radar and communication systems from Israel through third countries.

**Diplomatic relations** between the two countries are largely influenced by the United States. In 2020, they took a radical turn with the signature by Morocco of the Abraham Agreements and the Joint Declaration, which normalized bilateral relations between Rabat and Israel, eliminating the issue of the status of the Palestinians as a stumbling block in their bilateral relations.

In short, they are two countries united by deep historical ties but at odds over the Palestinian issue, whose relations took a fundamental turn last year, were accompanied by the rapprochement of other Arab countries with Israel. Important agreements were reached by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, which pledged to normalize relations with Israel. Morocco and Sudan followed suit weeks later. Following this success, negotiations with Morocco suggested the normalization of the status of Palestinians in these bilateral relations, which was holding back Israel's integration in the region.

The Abraham Agreements were signed on September 15, 2020, in Washington, and were accompanied by other agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, states committed to the normalization of relations with Israel. They required Israel refraining from annexation of additional West Bank territory and envisioned the normalization of relations between the signatory states and Israel, separating them from the Palestinian issue. They were put to the test in May 2021, with the latest round of confrontation in Gaza.

Former Israeli deputy national security advisor Chuck Frelich stressed that the agreements “have created a new framework for relations between Israel and Arab countries, despite the Palestinian issue”, and that “the understanding with Morocco opens a new era, but it does not substantially change a security cooperation that already existed de facto.”

In return for Morocco's signature of the agreement, the United States recognized Moroccan claims and position over the territory of the Western Sahara, whereby “the United States recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the entire territory of Western Sahara and reaffirms its support for Morocco's serious, credible and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the territory of Western Sahara.”

These agreements were followed on December 22 of the same year with a visit to Morocco by a U.S.-Israeli delegation. The visit concluded with a Joint Declaration formalizing the opening of the new era of relations between the Kingdom of Morocco and the State of Israel. Morocco officially recognized Israel, becoming the sixth member of the Arab League normalizing relations with the Jewish state.

By virtue of this historic agreement, the three parties commit to the establishment of full, peaceful, and friendly diplomatic relations to promote peace in the region, enhance regional security and open new opportunities for the rest of the territory, fostering the development of a dynamic and innovative bilateral economic, financial, and commercial cooperation, and making progress in areas such as technology, tourism, energy, telecommunications, and consular services. In other sectors, it was agreed to reopen liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv. As a direct consequence of this new spirit, Morocco and Israel stated their intention to grant authorizations for direct commercial flights between the two countries, in addition to granting overflight rights over their respective airspaces.

One year after the signing of this agreement, in August 2021, the Israeli foreign minister visited Morocco. Yair Lapid was, thus, the first foreign minister to make an official visit to Rabat since 2003. This visit served to formally inaugurate the permanent Israeli office in Rabat and to seal these already agreed diplomatic ties. More noteworthy was the trip of Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, which marked the signing of the first defense, intelligence, and cybersecurity cooperation agreement that Israel has signed with an Arab country.

## Conclusion

Although Morocco and Israel share deep historical ties, their bilateral relations have always been at odds over the Palestinian issue. For Rabat, the signing of the Abraham Accords means a significant departure from previous positions, and brings the bilateral relationship to a whole new level. Following the reestablishment of these relations, Israel and Morocco have resumed political consultations, reopened direct air routes, and signed trade agreements, in addition to the aforementioned unusual defense cooperation agreement.

It is clear that these agreements are a strategic advance on the part of Israel which also benefits the United States, Israel's major ally. As for specific relations with Morocco, a long line of joint work has been opened, starting with the agreement on defense and cybersecurity which marks a before and after in Israel-Morocco bilateral relations.

It should be noted that during this year of relations, although embassies have not yet been inaugurated, liaison offices were quickly reopened in Rabat and Tel Aviv; and the Israeli Foreign and Defense Ministers, Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz, as we have already mentioned, have made several official visits.

Although the agreements themselves are only a mutual international recognition and a manifestation of the will to initiate diplomatic relations, their consequences may change the configuration of the Middle East. These negotiations have generated a more united anti-Iranian front and open the door to a possible rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Finally, we must not overlook the situation of Palestine, which has been marginalized at the negotiating table and has been abandoned by the Gulf monarchies, with the exception of Qatar.

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