

The limits and potentials of Israel-Maghreb relations

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Israel's relations with Maghreb states have been shaped by a combination of factors: the region's French colonial legacy and distance from the historical cross-currents of Arab nationalism and from the Arab-Israeli conflict, geopolitical exigencies, North African state-building projects, intra-Maghreb rivalries, and the particular status of their respective Jewish communities. The Madrid-Oslo years were marked by major breakthroughs on the formal, aboveboard level of relations with Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania, witnessed tentative positive developments in the Algerian realm, and even included an admittedly odd episode of a visiting Libyan delegation to Jerusalem. The process went into reverse in fall 2000, with the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada. Subsequent conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza, and most recently the Turkish flotilla episode, have further inflamed public opinion in North Africa against Israel. However, the existence of continued parallel interests, and the emergence of new ones in recent years – the common need to combat radical Islamist movements and the expansion of Iranian influence, and to maintain and further develop close economic and political ties with the West – have ensured that Maghreb doors have not been entirely shut to Israel. In addition, the growing visibility of the Amazigh movement in North Africa has added a new dimension to the picture. Ultimately, the degree to which Israel-Maghreb relations will develop in a positive direction depends primarily on developments in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, as well as the evolution of

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political and social currents within the Maghreb states. Both Morocco and Tunisia were firmly ensconced in the Western and Arab conservative camps during the Cold War, placing them on the defensive against the radical pan-Arabist current embodied by Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, the pan-Arab Ba'ath Party and opposite revolutionary socialist Algeria. Hence, both Rabat and Tunis had numerous parallel interests with Israel and pursued varying degrees of quiet cooperation. From Jerusalem's perspective, its links with Rabat constituted an Arab extension of its "periphery" policy, the cultivation of non-Arab actors on the Middle East periphery to counterbalance the pressure of radical, hostile Arab states. For Morocco, ensuring its positive image in the West necessitated cooperation with Israel in the early 1960s to allow for the orderly flow of Moroccan Jews out of the country and to Israel (in the early 1950s, on the eve of independence, they numbered close to 300,000); on the level of internal and regional security, Israel played an important supportive role for the regime of King Hassan II. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Morocco performed a facilitating role in the Arab-Israeli peace process, which often involved leading members of the Moroccan Jewish community, both in-country and in the Israeli and French Moroccan Jewish Diaspora. Morocco's more active role in Arab-Israeli affairs during these years was highlighted when the country hosted the secret Dayan-Tuhami talks in 1977 that paved the way for Sadat's visit to Jerusalem two months later, Hassan's hosting of a number of Arab conferences – one of which produced the 1982 Fez Arab

Peace Plan – and the resulting 1986 visit by Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres to promote the diplomatic process.

Under President Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia was openly combative towards Nasser. Its Jewish community, which numbered just over 100,000 at the dawn of independence in 1956, was able to leave the country more easily than Morocco's, and in 1965 Bourguiba even had the audacity to suggest – to a Palestinian refugee audience, no less – that the Arab world accept the UN's 1947 plan for the partition of Palestine. By the 1980s however, with Bourguiba's fading and ultimate removal from power in 1987 by Prime Minister and regime strongman Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia had tacked more strongly towards involvement in Arab affairs (e.g., hosting the PLO after its expulsion from Beirut in 1982, and Arab League headquarters following Egypt's suspension from the organization in 1979), thus bringing its position on Israel more into line with the Arab consensus articulated at the Fez Arab summit conference in 1982. In addition, nothing much would be left of the Jewish community after 1967, and unlike Morocco, the Tunisian authorities would not nurture a favorable image/myth of Jewish-Arab comity in the past, although some Tunisians would remain nostalgic for their Jewish neighbors.

Algeria, on the other hand, wholeheartedly embraced the "Palestine Revolution" after 1967, viewing the Fatah-led PLO as being kindred spirits to their own "war of liberation" against French colonialism from 1954 to 1962. The Algerian Jewish community on the other hand, numbering 140,000 persons on the eve of France's withdrawal, were viewed as having been inalterably on the side of the French during the war for independence, a fact "confirmed" by their mass departure in 1961-1962 along with the bulk of the European settler community. Algiers in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a preferred destination for hijackers of Western and Israeli airlines and supporters of Palestinian guerrilla organizations. The regime's legitimating formula and its bitter struggle with Morocco over the Western Sahara ensured that Algeria would be firmly located in the radical Arab camp, and in opposition to the Sadat initiative.

The regional and international sea changes at the end of

the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s opened the door to a renewed Arab-Israeli peace process in which Maghreb states participated. The five countries of the recently established Arab Maghreb Union (encompassing Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania) were symbolically represented at the 1991 Madrid peace conference by the AMU's Secretary-General. Morocco and Tunisia established formal low-level diplomatic ties with Israel in 1994-1995, following the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO. Indeed, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin stopped over in Morocco on the way back from the PLO-Israeli signing ceremony in Washington to brief King Hassan II, indicating the degree to which Israeli-Moroccan relations had now been legitimized. Consequently, Morocco hosted with great fanfare the first MENA economic summit in Casablanca in October 1994. Unlike the Moroccans, the Tunisians were quite reluctant to establish formal diplomatic links and did so only at the prodding of the Americans. Tunisia refused to host the 5th MENA economic summit in 1999, further indicating its desire to downplay formal links with Israel and maintain an extremely low profile on the entire matter.

The Algerian regime would take some tentative steps to open up a dialogue with Israel following its defeat of the armed Islamist insurgency during the 1990s. One notable public occurrence in that regard was Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak publicly shaking hands with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika at the funeral of Morocco's King Hassan II in July 1999.

Concurrently, an officially sanctioned delegation of Algerian journalists even visited Israel, causing considerable controversy at home. The Algerian position on the Arab-Israeli conflict was now essentially in line with the Arab consensus favoring a diplomatic solution. Still, a broad portion of both the Algerian elite and Algeria's surviving Islamist current remained strongly identified with the Palestinian cause and hostile to Israel.

Mauritania, for its part, established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999, with strong US encouragement. Indeed, the joint announcement was made in Washington by the three countries' foreign ministers. The extension of Israeli-Maghrebi links during the Oslo years was also expressed in a number of multilateral frameworks. In 1994, NATO launched the "Mediterranean

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Dialogue” to promote better relations and regional security between NATO and the pro-Western countries of the southern Mediterranean littoral: these included Israel, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania (by virtue of its AMU membership), Egypt, Jordan (technically not a Mediterranean country but an important actor in the Arab-Israeli peace process); Algeria formally joined the framework in 2000. Concurrently, in 1995, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Israel were included in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process), geared towards enhancing regional and bilateral cooperation in the economic, political and cultural fields.

Following the outbreak of the second intifada in late September 2000, Morocco and Tunisia adhered to an Arab League summit resolution mandating that formal diplomatic ties be cut with Israel. Since then, neither country has felt motivated to restore relations, notwithstanding Israel’s periodic entreaties, occasional high-level meetings between officials from both countries, and Israel’s lobbying on behalf of Moroccan interests in Washington, particularly on the issue of the Western Sahara and on development aid. Morocco has been comfortable enough with maintaining the status quo, i.e. a partially open door to Israel in the realms of tourism, diplomacy, and presumably security cooperation. In general, King Muhammad VI has shown far less inclination than his father to engage in inter-Arab affairs, thus distancing himself from Arab-Israeli diplomacy as well. In addition, the combination of the country’s ongoing political liberalization, which has made space for an Islamist political current, and the extension of the pan-Arab media to Morocco and Tunisia (whose effect was particularly noticeable during the Gaza War), has brought anti-Israel sentiment into the public sphere to a greater degree than before. The king’s official status as chairman of the Islamic Conference Organization’s “Jerusalem Committee”, which is charged

with safeguarding the Islamic character of the city, also makes him potentially vulnerable to Israeli unilateral actions in Jerusalem.

The current state of Tunisian-Israeli relations is roughly similar: occasional high-level diplomatic meetings and the beginning of organized Israeli tourism to Tunisia, which has already drawn criticism from what little political opposition is allowed.

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Mauritania, for its part, froze ties with Israel following the December 2008 Gaza war, which generated protest demonstrations among the public, and completely cut its links to Israel at the beginning of 2010. This shift was mainly an outgrowth of the political changes in that country during the last decade which have resulted in a widening of political space and, not coincidentally, a strengthened Islamist current. Iranian officials quickly sought to step into the breach: Iran’s foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, in the first such visit to Nouakchott in 27 years, promised to provide the necessary funding and expertise to operate the Israeli-established hospital there. Similarly, Qaddafi had offered aid in the past as an incentive to break off relations.

Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia all worry about radical Islamist activity among their citizens at home and those living in Europe. Morocco’s sensitivity regarding Iran’s expanding reach was manifested by its decision in March 2009 to break off diplomatic ties with Tehran, following Iranian statements deemed threatening to a fellow monarchy, Bahrain, coming against the background of Moroccan concern about Shi’i

proselytizing efforts in the kingdom.

Maghreb states’ overlapping interests with Israel were publicly manifested in the 2006 decision by Algeria, Morocco, and Israel to join NATO counterterrorism patrols in the Mediterranean, dubbed “Operation Active Endeavor”. The agreement was announced in Rabat at the end of the first NATO meeting ever held in an Arab country, a meeting in which Israeli, Tunisian, Moroccan, Alge-



rian, Mauritanian, Egyptian, and Jordanian representatives also took part. The renewal of Islamist violence in Algeria under the rebranded “al-Qa’ida of the Islamic Maghreb” further deepens the overlapping of Algerian, Western, and Israeli interests in the security field and the possibilities for cooperation. Progress on solving the long-running Algerian-Moroccan dispute over the Western Sahara (in which Israel is identified by Algiers as supportive of Morocco) would make it easier to advance Algerian-Israeli ties.

Economically, direct bilateral trade has been limited. Israel has provided some agricultural development assistance to Morocco, and the potential in this area, as well as in fields such as water management, solar technology and IT is considerable. Israeli tourism to Morocco has been quite consistent and lucrative for Morocco.

The Barcelona Process is generally viewed as not having produced significant progress, although it was relaunched at the 2008 Paris summit for the Mediterranean. Maghreb and other Arab states have been quick to blame setbacks in the Arab-Israeli peace process for their failure to consummate the Euromed space envisaged under the Barcelona Process.

The active Islamist currents in Morocco and Algeria, as well as those with a more secular Arab nationalist orientation, are vocally supportive of the Palestinian cause and hostile to Israel. Morocco is currently witnessing an initiative by these groups to legally ban all forms of “normalization” with Israel. Moroccan Islamists in particular have been vocally critical of the Berber/Amazigh ethno-cultural identity movement on many grounds, including its failure to show sufficient “solidarity” with the Palestinians. More recently, there has been considerable furor over the reported remarks by a Rabat imam that the Amazigh movement was essentially a wedge by which Zionism was seeking to penetrate the Maghreb.

Indeed, the Amazigh movement has long been a target for Arab nationalist and Islamist accusations of serving

Western imperialism, thanks to its rejection of the Arab-Islamic historical and civilizational narrative and its affinity to the universalist paradigm espoused in Western intellectual circles. The movement’s general discourse is critical of Arab nationalist and Islamist groups for not concentrating on the Maghreb’s “real problems”, and some members of the movement have also developed a quietly amenable view towards Jews and Judaism, an unwillingness to line up reflexively alongside the Arab world in its struggles against the State of Israel, and

even a measure of admiration for the Zionist movement’s successful revival of a national language and assertion of ethno-national rights in the face of an antagonistic Arab world. Some of its militants openly empathize with Israel. In earlier decades, Amazigh movement circles were extremely reticent to even mention anything to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict or their belief in their Jewish “roots”. But in recent years, they have begun to be blunder. This was starkly manifested in November 2009 with the participation of a Moroccan Amazigh delegation in a weeklong seminar in Jerusalem at Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and Museum, and ongoing efforts by small groups of militants to establish Jewish-Amazigh friendship associations. These initiatives draw on a particular reading of North African history that includes deeply rooted origin myths regarding Jewish-Berber ties and are intimately connected to the contemporary Amazigh movement’s political agenda.

The mostly verbal confrontations between Amazigh and Arab nationalist and Islamist activists are part of the larger developments in Algeria and Morocco in which competing Amazigh and Islamist discourses entered into the public sphere, an outgrowth of the newly liberalizing policies of North African states seeking to better manage and re-legitimize their rule. Overall, any improvement to the current status quo of Israel’s relations with Maghreb states will depend on significant progress in Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

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