

Israel-Maghreb Relations: Realities and Possibilities

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Israel's relations with the three core Maghreb states—Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia—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, the state-building enterprises within the three Maghreb entities and the competition between them, and the particular status of their respective Jewish communities. The Madrid-Oslo years were marked by major breakthroughs at the formal, aboveboard level of relations with Morocco and Tunisia, and even witnessed positive developments in the Algerian realm. With the second intifada, these achievements were rolled back. 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—has ensured that Maghreb doors have not been entirely shut to Israel, and created possibilities for expanded links. The degree to which these will come to fruition in the coming months and years depends on a host of factors, not the least of which is progress in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere.

Of course, the nature of each Maghreb state's relations with Israel, or lack thereof, is unique, regarding both historical background and contemporary possibilities. Still, a closer look at the three countries also reveals some common themes.

FROM INDEPENDENCE TO OSLO

Both Morocco and Tunisia were firmly ensconced in the Western camp during the Cold War. In regional terms, this meant that during the 1960s, they were in the conservative Arab camp and generally on the defensive against the radical pan-Arabist current embodied in Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt and the pan-Arab Ba'th Party. Within the Maghreb, this placed them opposite of revolutionary socialist Algeria. Hence, both Rabat and Tunis had numerous parallel interests with Israel and pursued varying degrees of quiet cooperation.

Morocco, in particular, had overlapping interests with Israel. From Jerusalem's perspective, its links with Rabat constituted an 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; on the level of internal and regional security, Israel played an important supportive role for the regime of King Hassan. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Morocco played a facilitating role in the Arab-Israeli peace process, with leading members of the Moroccan Jewish community both in-country and in the Israeli and French Moroccan Jewish Diaspora. Notable in this regard were the hosting of the secret Dayan-Tuhami meeting, which paved the way for Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the shepherding of the 1982 Fez Arab Summit resolutions, and King Hassan's hosting of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres in 1986. In 1993, Hassan would also receive Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and his entourage on their way back from the signing of the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn.

Tunisia under President Habib Bourguiba was openly combative toward Nasser during the 1960s. Its

Jewish community was able to leave the country more easily than Morocco's, and Bourguiba even had the audacity in 1965 to suggest that the Arab world accept the UN's 1947 partition of Palestine plan. By the 1980s, however, with Bourguiba's fading and ultimate removal from power (1987), Tunisia had tacked more strongly toward involvement in Arab affairs (e.g., hosting the PLO and Arab League headquarters), thus bringing its position on Israel more into line with the Arab consensus. 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.

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. Algerian Jews, on the other hand, 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 supporter 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.

MADRID AND OSLO

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc (home of Algeria's traditional patrons), the earthquake of the 1991 Gulf War and—most importantly—Algeria's democratic explosion (1989-1991) followed by the bitter and bloody battle between the military and a violent Islamist insurgency, beginning in 1992, altered the regime's calculations. Its overall world view and particular understanding of its interests were now brought more into line with Algeria's Maghreb neighbors, including issues regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. All three states were symbolically represented at the Madrid Arab-Israeli peace conference in October 1991 by the secretary-general of the Arab Maghreb Union, to which they belonged. The Algerian regime would take some tentative steps to open up a dialogue with Israel, particularly at the end of the 1990s, when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak publicly shook hands with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (at the funeral of Morocco's King Hassan). 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 Islamist current remained strongly identified with the Palestinian cause and hostile to Israel.

Morocco and Tunisia, for their part, established formal low-level diplomatic ties with Israel in 1994-1995, following the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO. The enthusiasm in Israel and hope for expanded links with North African states was palpable. This came to be expressed in October 1994, when Morocco hosted the first MENA economic summit in Casablanca. However, the high-profile gathering is best remembered for Israel demonstrating excessive eagerness to promote economic normalization and thus leaving the impression that it somehow was seeking to dominate the region economically. 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.

THE SECOND INTIFADA AND THE AFTERMATH

Following the outbreak of the second intifada in late September 2000, Morocco and Tunisia closed their diplomatic offices in Tel Aviv and required Israel to do the same in their respective capitals. In doing so, they were demonstrating their adherence to the resolutions of an emergency Arab League summit. Subsequently, there have been those in Morocco who have felt that the young King Muhammad VI, in office for only one year at that time, had acted hastily. Since then, the regime has had no great motivation to change things and upgrade formal relations, notwithstanding Israel's periodic entreaties, occasional high-level meetings between the two countries' officials, and lobbying on behalf of Moroccan interests in Washington. Morocco has been comfortable enough with maintaining the status quo—a partial open door to Israel in the realms of tourism, diplomacy and, presumably security cooperation. In general, Muhammad VI has shown far less inclination than his father to engage in inter-Arab affairs. 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 (whose effect was particularly noticeable during the Gaza War), has brought anti-Israel sentiment into the public sphere to a greater degree than previously. The king's official status as chairman of the Islamic Conference Organization's Jerusalem Committee also makes him potentially vulnerable to Israeli unilateral actions in Jerusalem.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Despite these limitations, there does now appear to be some room for getting Israeli-Maghrebi relations back on a positive track. The possibilities exist in a number of spheres:

Regional Politics

All three Maghreb countries are moderate Arab states, which are apprehensive opponents of the radical, Iranian-led camp, and 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.

The events of the last half-year—the Gaza War, the advent of the Obama administration, the Israeli and Lebanese elections, and of course the Iranian elections—have introduced a new degree of fluidity into the Middle Eastern scene. Most importantly, Iran's bid for regional dominance may have reached its limits, a trend which has been reinforced by the recent Iranian "intifada": Arab Sunni elites, led by Egypt, have begun to push back, with some success; Iran's "bandwagoning" Arab allies—Syria, in particular, but also Qatar, and even Hizballah and Hamas—seem to be in the process of recalibrating the particulars of their relationship with Tehran, and appear to be looking to mend fences with the Arab majority camp. This in turn has expanded the space for creative diplomacy. Maghreb states should be encouraged to support actively the current American diplomatic efforts to break the Arab-Israeli diplomatic logjam through a regional approach, namely by taking positive steps toward Israel—politically as well as economically—as part

of a package of measures undertaken by all the parties. Obviously, the reestablishment of formal diplomatic relations, and their upgrading from the previous low-level status, would send a strong signal to public opinion and neighboring governments alike.

Security Cooperation

Maghreb states' overlapping interests with Israel were publicly manifested in the 2006 agreement of 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, Algerian, Mauritanian, Egyptian, and Jordanian representatives also took part. Morocco is extremely sensitive to manifestations of jihadi Islamism, especially following the May 16, 2003 Casablanca bombings. Israel obviously has what to offer in this regard. Tunisia is similarly sensitive to Islamist radicalism. Algeria, for its part, benefitted greatly from the al-Qa'ida attacks on Western targets, which enabled the country to package itself as an important player in the global "war on terror" by conflating Islamist extremism at home with jihadi Islamism abroad. 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.

Economic Sphere

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. Joint economic ventures and Qualified Industrial Zones of the kind that exist with Egypt and Jordan and provide tariff-free access to the U.S. market should be seriously explored. Israeli tourism to Morocco has been quite consistent and lucrative for Morocco and could be expanded further. Tourism to Tunisia has been more limited, and could be significantly expanded. In both cases, the long-discussed but never implemented inauguration of direct flights between the countries would play a major facilitating role. In addition, both Morocco and Tunisia should be given incentives to work with the Palestinian Authority (PA) to promote economic development in the PA-controlled West Bank and reconstruction in Gaza, if the deadlock there is broken. (It should be noted that the now-destroyed Dahaniyya airport in the Gaza Strip region was built by a Moroccan company.)

Civil Society

Considerable space exists to promote expanded contacts with various elements in Maghrebi civil societies, both directly and via third parties and in multilateral forums. To be sure, there is considerable public sympathy for the Palestinian cause in the region. Yet liberal currents that actively contest the actions of Islamist movements at home and abroad are also quite visible. There is considerable openness to Israelis

in the academic realm, both among those who are in-country and among Maghrebi scholars based in Europe and North America. This openness should be exploited through invitations to scholars to come to Israel to deliver lectures and participate in conferences and dialogues, as well as organizing similar events in third countries. Establishing student exchanges with Morocco and Tunisia, with the help of organizations like Amideast is also a real possibility, as are exchanges with Maghrebi students in Europe. Media exchanges and visits by cultural delegations have taken place in the past and can undoubtedly be reenergized. Maghrebi films are regularly shown at Israeli film festivals; furthering knowledge of each other's film industries, and even the development of cooperative ventures—perhaps with French assistance—should be feasible. Moroccans, Tunisians, and Algerians should also be engaged in multilateral forums dealing with health, women, children, and the environment—forums deemed crucial by Western governments interested in supporting the expansion of civil society in moderate Muslim countries. In another sphere, there is already a history of dialogue in the religious arena promoted by Morocco, which can undoubtedly be promoted further.

One must also mention the existence of the Berber/Amazigh ethno-cultural identity movement, which seeks to refashion Moroccan national identity in a way that would give voice to the Berber underpinnings of society—demographically (40-45 percent of the population), linguistically, culturally, and historically. While the Amazigh movement is in its early stages and cannot be considered to be a mass movement, it nonetheless has growing appeal. It is explicitly anti-Arab nationalist and anti-Hamas. Some activists defiantly identify with Israel, and a few young people have even proclaimed the establishment of an Amazigh-Israeli friendship society. The movement receives some support from the regime, as part of its interest in encouraging a broader liberal current to act as a counterweight to radical Islamism. Developing contacts with Amazigh movement activists must be done in a nuanced way, in order to avoid charges of meddling in Morocco's internal affairs. Kabylean Amazigh activists in Algeria are often more openly confrontational toward the Algerian authorities than their Moroccan counterparts and have expressed interest in developing contacts with Israel. Here, even more so, Israel must tread delicately to avoid becoming a target of regime accusations. Israel should become familiar with the flourishing of modern Amazigh culture in France, and contacts in various cultural realms should be developed.

Overall, there are a number of realms in which Israeli-Maghrebi relations can be expanded, particularly in the coming phase of regional politics. Obviously, progress in Arab-Israeli diplomacy (which may even include supportive gestures by Maghrebi governments) can have a positive, incremental effect on relations, as well as reinforce the willingness of Maghrebi states to line up more forthrightly against Iran's bid for regional hegemony.