

Morocco's Normalization with Israel: The Party for Justice and Development (PJD)'s Reaction

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In December 2020, following the Abraham Accords framework mediated by the United States, Morocco agreed to restore its official diplomatic ties with Israel after a 20-year break, and, in return, the Trump Administration recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the long-disputed territory of Western Sahara. The initial steps to normalize Israeli-Moroccan ties followed quickly on the heels of the official announcements. On January 25, Israel's liaison office reopened in Rabat while Morocco's diplomatic representation in Tel Aviv is expected to follow later this month, after the arrival to Israel of the Head of Morocco's diplomatic mission Abderrahim Beyyoud in February.¹ While the process for implementing the peace agreement between the two countries continues, with economic, cultural, and social collaborations, the Party for Justice and Development (PJD), the Moroccan Islamist ruling party, has faced criticism for its acquiescence to the Palace's decision. By aligning itself with King Mohammed VI's decision to normalize with Israel, the PJD has shown that it is more interested in preserving its good relations with the Palace and winning the King's support for its domestic agenda of socio-economic reforms, than in taking a hard line on Palestine. During the PJD-led government of Abdelillah Benkirane (2012-2016), successful socio-economic reforms led to its attaining an additional 18 parliamentary seats in the October 2016 elections, reinforcing its position as the largest party in parliament. In muting its criticism of the normalization process, PJD is preserving its position in the political arena and focusing on its socio-economic agenda, which it sees as the key to its success. However, in doing so, the PJD risks alienating a portion of its constituency, which may view its silence in defense of Palestine as a form of ideological betrayal.

¹ ["Israel opens diplomatic missions in Morocco,"](#) *Israel Hayom*, January 27, 2021; ["Morocco, Israeli liaison offices to start receiving guests soon,"](#) *The North Africa Post*, February 10, 2021.

The Palestinian cause has historically been a top priority for the PJD, which considers it a religious, ideological, and political issue that should not be abandoned. The PJD is the most influential Moroccan Islamist party, and it has led Moroccan governing coalitions since 2011. The current leader of the PJD, Prime Minister Saadeddine Othmani, reiterated his party's support for the Palestinians at the September 2020 U.N. General Assembly: "There can be no just or lasting peace unless the Palestinian people can exercise their legitimate right to establish an independent and viable state with Jerusalem as its capital."² Normalizing relations with Israel has long been a controversial issue for the PJD. It has historically opposed normalization with Israel; in August 2013, together with other parties, the PJD submitted a bill that would have banned any relations between Morocco and Israel. This bill ultimately did not pass into legislation, but it did give the PJD a chance to demonstrate to its constituents that its politicians had not "sold out" to Western interests, even as decision makers advanced a policy that allowed Morocco to leave the door open to the possibility of normalizing its relations with Israel.³

The fact that Morocco and Israel resumed their open diplomatic ties in December 2020 without resolving the Palestinian cause was viewed by many Moroccan Islamists as a betrayal. Formal ties had been established in fall 1994, just over year after the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords. They were broken off by King Mohammed VI following the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, in line with an Arab League summit resolution. Some Moroccan Islamists reacted sharply to the reopening of diplomatic ties with Israel. The Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR), a branch of the PJD, described the regime's move as "deplorable" and denounced "the Zionist occupation of Palestine." The officially banned Islamist "Justice and Charity Movement," characterized the agreement between Morocco and Israel as a "stab in the back" of the Palestinians.⁴ The PJD itself reaffirmed its "firm stand against the Zionist Occupation," although in a more nuanced way.⁵

On the other hand, Prime Minister Othmani was more conciliatory in his public statements. In contrast to what he had said a few months earlier, when he had rejected any normalization with Israel because it would have "emboldened it [Israel] going further in breaching the rights of the Palestinian people,"⁶ this time Othmani's

² "[Morocco: No peace without recognition of Palestinian rights](#)," *Memo Middle East Monitor*, September 28, 2020.

³ Vish Sakthivel, "[Morocco Plays with Anti-Normalization](#)," Policywatch #2182, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), December 13, 2013.

⁴ Diego Urteaga, "[Moroccan Islamist parties reject normalisation with Israel](#)," *Atalayar*, December 13, 2020.

⁵ "[Morocco Islamist groups reject normalising ties with Israel](#)," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2020.

⁶ "[Morocco rejects normalization with Israel ahead of Kushner's visit](#)," PressTV.com, August 24, 2020.

comments were more reserved. An article in the *Middle East Eye* explained that Othmani's statements were a calculated political move that demonstrated his pragmatism rather than an ideological change.⁷ As Morocco's prime minister, it would have been difficult for Othmani to publicly oppose the King's decision. This is particularly true regarding a decision that resulted in Morocco obtaining a long-sought foreign policy goal: recognition by the U.S. of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Outside of Morocco, such as a number of parties and movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, openly criticized Othmani, interpreting his conciliatory behavior as appeasement: in their view, Othmani was supporting the Royal Palace policy at the expense of the PJD's principles.⁸

Regardless of whether Othmani's behavior signaled an ideological shift or not, the PJD, the strongest bloc in the House of Representatives with 125 out of 395 deputies, was unwilling to oppose the King's decision, disillusioning its electorate and raising questions about the Islamist party's commitment to the Palestinian cause. One of the reasons that may have prevented the PJD from expressing stronger opposition to the decision is the relatively weak position of their representatives in the political system. The current 12 party coalition government effectively dilutes the PJD's influence, limiting its ability to change the underlying dynamics of Moroccan politics. Under Benkirane, the PJD enjoyed greater power within a narrower governing coalition. However, in 2017 the King maneuvered to prevent Benkirane from forming a second coalition, and eventually compelled his replacement with the more submissive Othmani, and the establishment of a broader coalition. This weakened the PJD's weight within the government and reduced its ability to capitalize on electoral victories and reform successes.⁹

The monarchy has preserved its authority by preventing the emergence of a dominant political party, maintaining a balance among political parties and further dividing an already fragmented political elite. The monarchy still keeps a tight grip on the political system and can tarnish the PJD's reformist credentials by calibrating and controlling its reform efforts. This constrained political environment prevents any party from openly challenging the King, and forces the PJD to prioritize gaining the Palace's trust over openly confronting it. Opposing the King's move to normalize relations with Israel would likely have meant the PJD would have to sacrifice its place

⁷ Khalil al-Anani, "[Morocco's Islamist backing for Israel normalisation is a game changer](#)," *Middle East Eye*, January 19, 2021.

⁸ "[Muslim Brotherhood groups in several countries denounce "betrayal" of Morocco's PJD](#)," *Qods International News Agency*, December 25, 2020.

⁹ Intissar Fakir, "[Morocco's Islamist Party: Redefining Politics Under Pressure](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 28, 2017.

in the government. Othmani's support for the Palace's decision reflects his pragmatic intention to remain at the helm of the government, where he hopes the PJD will be able to implement its socio-economic reform program. The success of socio-economic reforms during Benkirane's government (2012-2016)¹⁰ was an important part of the PJD's electoral success, legitimacy, and popularity. Indeed, during that period, the populace perceived the party as capable of governing because it was able to deliver on its constituencies expectations. Among other things, the PJD provided different incentives to small and medium-sized businesses, supported the most vulnerable people through cash transfers, provided a health insurance program to the most needy, supported education programs, and did its best to fight corruption.¹¹ The social welfare program, in particular, increased government support to the poor and contributed to the PJD's image as a "people's party."¹²

The party's reaction to normalization with Israel has highlighted the party's divisions, as demonstrated by the dissonance between Othmani's conciliatory behavior and the more vocal opposition from several PJD members. Benkirane, the former PJD secretary general recently announced he was freezing his membership in the PJD. According to the president of the Moroccan Observatory for Anti-Normalization with Israel, Ahmed Wihman, this step was a result of normalizing ties with Israel.¹³ For other members of the PJD, especially the youth, its pragmatic relations with the monarchy is creating problems, as they feel that a cooperative approach will ultimately be detrimental to both the PJD's credibility and to the democratic process. A prominent voice in this respect was Muhammad Amkraz, the Minister of Employment, and the head of Justice and Development Youth Party. He expressed his surprise at the country's decision and clearly distanced his faction's position from that of the Prime Minister, saying that the Youth "see the Palestinian issue as all Moroccans: a matter of injustice and the usurpation of land and rights from its legitimate owners."¹⁴

The PJD leader's support for the King's decision has ensured the party's political survival and could enable it to advance its socio-economic agenda. The PJD can in fact

¹⁰ For more information on the Moroccan socio-economic reform during the Benkirane government, see: "[2012-2016 Moroccan Governmental Report](#) [in Arabic]," August 2016.

¹¹ Amina Drhimuer, "[The Party of Justice and Development's Pragmatic Politics](#)," in "PJD, Islam, and Governance in Post-2011 Morocco," edited by A. Kadir Yildirim, Center for the Middle East, Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, May 31, 2018.

¹² David Goeury, "[Le pouvoir est-il enfin dans les mains des villes?](#)" *Espaces Temps*, December 5, 2014.

¹³ "[Did Morocco's Justice and Development Party sell Palestine for Western Sahara?](#)," *International Quran News Agency*, March 16, 2021.

¹⁴ "[Morocco's Amekraz accused of putting the country's interests second](#)," Middle East Online (MEO), December 14, 2020.

still count on a very heterogeneous constituency which transcends class, geographical, and ideological divisions. The gradual de-emphasis of religious discourse, as well as the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, have helped the PJD to gain the support of a more secular electorate and of a wealthy business class, respectively.¹⁵ The latter may be particularly responsive to the narrative of the economic and strategic advantages of the U.S.'s recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, even if the Palestinian cause may be adversely affected. The territory enjoys a strategic location directly on the Atlantic Ocean and possesses considerable resources, particularly phosphates, a key and finite ingredient for synthetic fertilizer, a core resource in global food production. The Western Sahara is also believed to have significant offshore oil and gas reserves. International recognition of its control over these waters could allow Morocco to resume the development of offshore oil and gas activities and eventually become a potential supplier to the European market.¹⁶ If the PJD is able to portray the strategic and economic advantages of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara to its own advantage, it might help the PJD increase its popularity with certain constituencies. However, Moroccans still feel a great deal of distrust towards their elected institutions and are unhappy about the economic situation and the prevalence of corruption. As long as socio-economic reforms do not take place, directly reaching the most vulnerable and poor Moroccans, it will be difficult for the PJD to maintain strong connections to its constituencies. In any case, it doesn't appear that the PJD's compromise on the Palestine issue will make or break it in the next election scheduled for September 2021. Despite the resignation of various members from the PJD, it is still likely to remain the largest party in parliament after the next elections.

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¹⁵ Amina Drhimuer, "[The Party of Justice and Development's Pragmatic Politics](#)," in "PJD, Islam, and Governance in Post-2011 Morocco," edited by A. Kadir Yildirim, Center for the Middle East, Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, May 31, 2018.

¹⁶ Tiziana della Ragione, "[Rabat raises the stakes on Western Sahara](#)," *Limes*, January 26, 2021.