

Normalization from Morocco's Perspective: Beyond the Western Sahara-Palestine "Transaction"

By Hicham Alaoui

(Original version published in Le Nouvel Observateur, February, 1st, 2021)

As the Trump administration announced last year, Morocco has become the fifth Arab country to normalize relations with Israel. By Trump's own words, this move came about through a strategic transaction. The US acknowledges Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, and in return Morocco will develop full-fledged commercial, strategic, and diplomatic ties with the Israeli state.

Such mutual recognition has raised intense criticism from many quarters, who see Morocco as exploiting the situation of two stateless peoples. According to this view, Morocco is selling out the Palestinians in exchange for strengthening its position in Western Sahara, whose status remains undetermined by international law.

This convenient geopolitical narrative, however, misinterprets the Moroccan perspective. Morocco does not see the issues of Western Sahara and Palestine as transactable. These are both sad legacies of Western colonialism, but each also retains its own specificities and challenges. The fundamental struggle for Morocco is how to resolve each crisis in the most just way.

The circumstances of Western Sahara are not equivalent to the Palestinian tragedy. Palestinians are not citizens of Israel, whereas Sahrawis are citizens of Morocco, although some reject that status. Israeli annexation of Palestine intends to systematically foreclose future citizenship. It has deprived the Palestinians of autonomy and self-rule in violation of the Oslo agreement, which itself was an initial confidence-building measure on the pathway towards Palestinian statehood. The Moroccan involvement in Western Sahara is different. It provides for citizenship now, and could lead to autonomy and self-rule in the future. This process of resolution shall continue, and can only take root with the deepening of democracy and respect for human rights. One must be cognizant that the US declaration is an important political gesture, but not one that can alter international law. It will be up to the Biden administration to accept, retract, or alter it.

Moroccan openness towards normalization with Israel does not emerge from an historical vacuum. There is a long and rich tradition of dynastic engagement with Judaism and Jewishness that dates to the dawn of the Alaouite monarchy. Our constitution recognizes Morocco's Jewish heritage as part of its national identity. King Mohammed V, the father of Moroccan independence, protected Jews in the kingdom during World War Two. Moroccan Jews who emigrated to Israel after its establishment retained their cultural and religious ties with their Moroccan homeland. It was partly on this basis that King Hassan was the first Arab head of state to meet with Nahum Goldmann, the head of the World Jewish Congress, in 1970.

The Moroccan monarchy thereafter maintained fertile lines of communication with Israel, ranging from informal diplomacy to security cooperation. The latter sometimes led to tragic and sinister episodes, like the Ben Barka affair. Yet rapprochement with Israel was always in the dynastic repertoire. The reality of today therefore situates King Mohammed VI squarely in the tradition of his father and grandfather. It also takes the process of rapprochement one step further. It restores the status quo that held until 2000, in which the two countries had exchanged diplomatic representation. This hence marks the start of a new, sequenced process that does not depend upon short-term bargaining, because it both predates the bargain and seeks to move beyond it. It is neither triumphalist nor exhibitionist. Furthermore, it is not an alliance geared against a third party. For the time being, normalization does not mean full mutual recognition.

Those who know the Moroccan people understand that the Palestinian question has always been an emotional and salient one. Historically, the Moroccan monarchy has backed regional initiatives for Palestine. It overcame Jordanian resistance and Egyptian reluctance at the 1974 Arab League summit in Rabat, which ended with recognizing the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. In 1982, during the Arab League summit in Fez, King Hassan helped endorse the Fahd plan for a comprehensive Arab peace with Israel. He did so by overcoming the refusal front of Libya, Syria, and Algeria, after the front had lost the support of Iraq, which was immersed in war with Iran. He also overcame Jordan's opposition, as it was entertaining a new idea for a Palestinian-Jordanian confederacy with support from the Reagan administration. King Hassan surmounted all this resistance at the behest of Yasir Arafat, who supported the Fahd plan after the PLO's departure from Beirut. This plan notably served as the precursor to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. In 1991, Morocco backed the Madrid peace conference, using the momentum of the Gulf War to facilitate the quest for Palestinian statehood. The Moroccan people today expect their state to continue this longstanding tradition of supporting Palestine. This is reinforced by the fact that King Mohammed VI is the Chairman of the Al-Quds Committee. It is important that all sides and perspectives on these vital issues are able to express themselves freely.

Morocco understands that genuine normalization with Israel cannot be contingent upon a transaction. It should be a process that also respects the rights of the Palestinian people. This idea runs throughout our history.