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Israel and Morocco:
From Clandestine Partnership
to the Abraham Accords

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Abstract

Until recently, Arab countries were resistant to engaging with Israel, be it regarding trade, diplomacy or negotiations. However, there have been some critical exceptions. In opposition to the pan-Arab consensus of boycotting Israel, Morocco established informal ties with the country in the early 1960s. Morocco was also one of the few Arab countries to support the Camp David Accords and refuse to sever ties with Egypt for having signed the peace agreement with Israel, facilitating the talks before Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem. During the 1990s, Morocco was one of the first Arab countries besides Egypt and Jordan to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel. These relations were abruptly severed after the outbreak of the second *intifada* in Israel and the Palestinian territories. However, with the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and three Arab countries, Morocco joined the circle of peace and restored its pre-*intifada* partial diplomatic ties with Israel. The signing of the Abraham Accords signals a major geopolitical shift in the Middle East and one which could eventually be extended to other Arab countries. Given Rabat's history of past interactions with Israel, Morocco, along with the Arab quartet – Egypt, Jordan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia – could eventually play a major role in future Israeli-Palestinian processes under a regional framework.

Introduction

Following the 1948 War of Independence between Israel and its Arab neighbours, there was a diplomatic roadblock as the Arab countries refused to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Instead of a formal agreement, individual Arab states negotiated separate bilateral armistice agreements with Israel. Many continued to refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist

and engaged in a boycott of the Jewish state. In contrast to the Arab consensus, Morocco, which was not independent in 1948 and did not take part in the War of Independence, established clandestine relations with Israel. These relations were mainly confined to the security and diplomatic arenas but eventually would evolve into more formal ties.

I posit that, although the establishment of formal semi-diplomatic ties between Israel and the Arab states are dependent on progress related to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the establishment of informal Israel-Moroccan ties during the 1960s and 1970s was not related to the Palestinian issue. This hypothesis is further substantiated by the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco that had a similar diplomatic context. Alongside the security component of its clandestine bilateral relationship with the Jewish state, Morocco facilitated secret talks between Israel and Egypt shortly before Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem as well as between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) during the Oslo process. Given Morocco's history of ties with Israel and its facilitating role in brokering peace in the Middle East, is it possible that it could eventually play a leading mediating role in future Israeli-Palestinian status negotiations?

This paper will address the establishment of clandestine ties between Israel and Morocco in the early 1960s and will then move on to examining King Hassan II's mediation efforts between Israel and Egypt. The third section will address Morocco's relations with Israel throughout the 1980s. Finally, the establishment of partial diplomatic ties between Israel and Morocco during the Oslo peace process era will be explored.

Morocco and Israel: The Early Years (1963-1976)

Israel's covert relations with Morocco date back to 1963 when the Mossad, its intelligence service, established direct contact with the kingdom. The Morocco-Israel connection could thus be interpreted as an extension of the alliance of the periphery doctrine initiated by David

Ben Gurion in the late 1950s. This doctrine entails establishing cordial relations with non-Arab states in the periphery such as Turkey and Iran as well as Ethiopia.¹ The historic Moroccan Jewish connection was also a critical brokerage factor in helping develop the special relationship with Israel. When Morocco achieved its independence from France in 1956, it had the largest Jewish community in the Arab world, with approximately 270, 000 Moroccan Jews living in the kingdom at this time. The semi-clandestine migration (or *aliyah*) of a large number of Moroccan Jews to Israel further reinforced personal links between Moroccan and Israeli officials.² These connections would later play an important role in the establishment of clandestine ties between Israel and Morocco. Although the Moroccan Jewish community has significantly dwindled as a result of the immigration waves and Arab persecution, it still plays prominent roles in Moroccan society. Out of the approximately 5,000 Jews who remained in Morocco, a few would even become advisers to the king and help facilitate contact between Rabat and Jerusalem.³

When King Hassan II was crowned in 1961, the Moroccan monarch took the decision to distance Rabat from the Soviet Camp and Gamal Abdel Nasser, then President of Egypt. In contrast to his father, the late King Mohamed V, who established a strategic partnership with the United Arab Republic (UAR) and the Soviet Union, King Hassan II pivoted to the US-led western camp and by extension, to Israel. Out of sync with other Arab leaders, Hassan II established secret contacts with Israel in the early 1960s. It was from these clandestine conversations that Meir Amit, head of Mossad, was able to establish a channel of communication with the kingdom. It would use these links as a critical foundation for facilitating the immigration of Moroccan Jews into Israel. Relocations intensified with

¹ Brandon Friedman, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: Preparing for the American Downsizing in the Middle East", in, *The New Normal? Arab States and Normalization with Israel* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2021), p. 7

² Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Israel and Morocco: a Special Relationship", *The Maghreb Review*, 21, no. 1 (1996): 37

³ Ibid

Operation Yachin which saw Mossad establish contact with the heads of Moroccan intelligence and other security apparatuses.⁴ Specifically, the first security channel was established between Isser Harel, then head of Mossad, and the assistant of General Oufkir, the head of the Moroccan intelligence agency. There were several reasons why Israel and Morocco established covert security ties at this time. These included the mounting tensions between Algeria and Morocco and the rising influence of Nasser of Egypt, pan-Arabism and the strengthening of Arab nationalism. Egypt would provide shelter to Moroccan opposition figures, thereby reinforcing Rabat's animosity towards Nasser. All these converging interests gave momentum to undercover Moroccan-Israeli rapprochement.⁵

The replacement of Isser Harel by Major General Meir Amit significantly boosted the blossoming ties. At that time, a conflict erupted between Morocco and the newly independent Algeria which Amit perceived as a potentially strategic opportunity. ⁶ On the Moroccan side, the main architect of the clandestine ties with Israel was General Mohamed Oufkir, a Berber who loathed the Arab elite and who rejected Morocco's membership in the Arab League.⁷ In order to cement these security ties, Oufkir secretly travelled to Israel in 1964 to monitor security arrangements for the Pope's visit to Israel. Following this experience, Oufkir managed to convince Hassan II that Israel could greatly assist with security arrangements in the palace.⁸

With the approval of the king, Mossad were allowed to set up an established presence in Morocco. Israel provided Rabat with a large quantity of intelligence on Algeria and Egypt and upgraded the Moroccan military by providing support in the form of weapon sales and

⁴ Samuel Segev and Yvette Schumacher, "Israel—Morocco Relations from Hassan II to Muhammad VI", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 2, no. 3 (2008): 52

⁵ *Ibid*, p.51

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 52

⁷ Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), p. *

⁸ *Ibid*.

technical assistance. Israel sold French-built AMX 13 tanks to Morocco via Iran, and trained Moroccan pilots, whose most advanced fighter jets at that time was the outdated Soviet built MiG 17.⁹ The level of security cooperation between the two countries was highly developed and very much in line with Ben-Gurion's periphery doctrine, which advocated the establishment of a strategic partnership with countries at odds with Nasser's Egypt, considered as Israel's principal enemy at the time.

However, that special relationship included a controversial event which affected Israel's image abroad. It was alleged that Israel had played a role in the assassination of Mehdi Ben Barka, opponent to the monarch and head of the left-wing National Union of Popular Forces. In 1965, Mehdi Ben Barka was representing a Moroccan exile group in France and General Oufkir requested Israel's assistance in his capture a.¹⁰ The Mossad initially hesitated as they did not want to use their field operatives in a mafia or mercenary style manner. Eventually a compromise was found, and they provided non-lethal assistance, which helped Moroccan agents and French mercenaries capture Ben Barka. The exiled opposition leader was tortured and subsequently executed.¹¹ Mossad's link to the assassination of Ben Barka in Paris damaged Israel's image abroad and strained relations with De Gaulle's France.¹²

The relationship between Morocco and Israel during the 1960s was not confined to the military arena as both countries cooperated on issues pertaining to agriculture. Former IDF intelligence head and future president of Israel, Major General Chaim Herzog, met with Hassan II to talk about potential investment from the British Wolfson family. Moreover, they then met with the king to discuss a potential increase in the sale of citrus fruit to Israel. The

⁹ Samuel Segev and Yvette Shumacher, "Israel-Morocco Relations", p. 53

¹⁰ Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Spies Against Armageddon: Inside Israel's Secret Wars, Updated and Revised Edition* (New York: Levant Books, 2014), p. 89

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Israel and Morocco: a Special Relationship", p. 40

Moroccan agriculture minister was impressed with Israel's advanced agricultural system, and met with Moshe Dayan, then minister of Israeli agriculture.¹³ That Morocco was willing to talk about exporting agricultural products to Israel was indeed extraordinary given that the Arab League was boycotting Israel at the time and unwilling to engage in any form of negotiations with the Jewish state. This non-security related aspect of the relationship played an important role in launching the seeds of proto-normalization.

Despite the rapidly growing ties between Morocco and Israel that took place during the 1960s, relations suffered a minor setback with the token Moroccan military involvement in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Nevertheless, Rabat's military contribution to the war was mainly symbolic and this event did not deter King Hassan from becoming involved in the Arab-Israeli peace process. That an Arab country was willing to establish clandestine ties with Israel while all the Arab states were either in a state of war or no relations at all with Israel, is indeed highly significant and demonstrates that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not necessarily a prerequisite to normalized relations in the region. At that time both Jerusalem and Rabat faced a common threat in the form of Egypt and the newly independent Algeria. Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords as the three countries faced concerning movement emanating from Iran. More specifically, Israel and Saudi Arabia established secret contacts and cooperated on security and intelligence-related issues to deter Iranian bellicose involvement in the region in spite of their differences on the Palestinian issue.

Rabat: The Facilitator between Egypt and Israel (1976-78)

Moroccan-Israeli ties were momentarily suspended in 1973 when Morocco sent troops to the Syrian front during the Yom Kippur War. They were thus construed as part of the enemy and

¹³ Samuel Segev and Yvette Schumacher, "Israel-Morocco Relations", p. 53

not to be trusted. However, Morocco's participation in the Arab coalition was actually quite minimal, being mainly symbolic, and thus did not do much long-lasting damage to its ties with Israel. Indeed in 1976, Morocco became committed to facilitating a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement in spite of the frosty atmosphere. This was demonstrated by Moroccan public statements indicating Rabat's desire to be a mediator for such an agreement. Even more revealing is the fact that the comments often referred to the historical affinity between Arabs and Jews as descendants of Avraham and the grandson of Isaac and Ishmael. Such sentiments could be interpreted as a premonition of the Abraham Accords, or at least a favourable climate.¹⁴ At this time moreover, Hassan II allowed for a permanent Mossad delegation in Morocco – many years prior to the establishment of formal ties with Israel – which facilitated the safe visiting of Israeli leaders to the kingdom.¹⁵

In October 1976, Hassan II secretly hosted Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for talks on the Arab-Israeli peace process and the potential for Morocco to play a facilitating role.¹⁶ In May 1977, Rabin was replaced by the more nationalist Menachem Begin, who was fully committed to the Greater Israel project and vowed not to remove any settlers from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In spite of this, Sadat of Egypt sent a cable message to Hassan, who forwarded it to the then head of Mossad, Yitzhak Hoffi, in which the Egyptian leader expressed his desire to reach a peace agreement with Israel. Hoffi subsequently informed Begin about the new developments and how Morocco was willing to facilitate talks between Israel and Egypt.¹⁷ At the same time, Sadat was also exploring ways to advance talks with Israel as he was frustrated with the Carter administration's attempt to convene a multilateral summit on the peace process that would be co-sponsored by the Soviet Union and have

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Moroccan Relations and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1977–2002", *Israel Affairs*, 10, no. 3 (2004): 44

¹⁶ Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark: Israel's Practice of Quiet Diplomacy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), p. 92

¹⁷ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Moroccan Relations and the Arab-Israeli Conflict", p. 44

radical Arab states such as Syria in attendance. The timing was thus opportune, and the Egyptian president took up Hassan's offer.

The first meeting between Egyptian and Israeli ministers took place in Morocco in September 1977, involving Egypt's Vice Premier Hassan Tuhami and Israel's Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan.¹⁸ In August, Mossad head Hoffi met with Tuhami at the summer retreat of Ifrane, where all the necessary preparations for the latter's meeting with Dayan were made. On 4 September 1977, Dayan made a secret visit to Morocco at the invitation of the King. The purpose of the trip was to consult with Hassan II on his insight regarding the proposed agreement.¹⁹ He would then be joined by Hoffi and Hassan's prime minister, Ahmed Osman. Dayan told Hassan that Israel considered Sadat to be a more trustworthy partner than Syria's leader.²⁰ On 16 September 1977, another secret meeting between Dayan and Tuhami took place in Marakesh, Morocco with Dayan disguised for safety.

Upon his arrival, Dayan was greeted by Dalimi and the Israeli representative in Morocco and taken to the king's guest house. The secret meeting was attended by King Hassan, his prime minister, foreign minister, court minister, Dalimi, Dayan, Tuhami and the Israeli representative in Rabat.²¹ The king, Dayan and Tuhami all concurred on the need to maintain the covertness of the meeting.²² In addition to Tuhami, only two other Egyptians knew that this convention was taking place – President Sadat and Vice President Hosni Mubarak.²³ In fact, the meeting was so secret that even the Americans were not aware of it.²⁴ King Hassan requested Moshe Dayan not to include more people into the confidentiality of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 45

²¹ "Prime Minister Office / 778 Subject: Dayan-Tuhami Meeting on September 16, 1977", *The Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations*, October 18, 1977, <https://www.archives.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/96A6F2DE-2BC2-48FB-923C-5F70D3CA56C4/0/Egypt12a.pdf>

²² Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark*, p. 90

²³ Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 46

²⁴ William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington D.C.: The Brooking Institution, 1986), p. 109

the negotiating channel.²⁵ On his part, Dayan suggested that all agreements reached between Israel and Egypt be kept low profile.²⁶

In the meeting, King Hassan and Tuhami proposed the potential of Israel withdrawing from the occupied territories.²⁷ Indeed, Tuhami made it clear that Sadat would only be willing to conduct direct talks with Begin if the latter committed to a full and complete withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Furthermore, Tuhami raised the Palestinian issue, stating that if a Palestinian enclave connected to Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia was established, Egypt would sign a peace agreement with Israel in exchange.²⁸ The king's stance on the Palestinian issue contrasted sharply with that of the Arab League which was uncompromising on their demands. In stark opposition to the League, Hassan II was sympathetic to Israel's reluctance to withdraw out of concern that the Palestinians might constitute a threat to its security and that of Jordan. He therefore sought to resolve the Palestinian issue within a pan-Arab framework in order to alleviate Israel's apprehensions.^{29,30}

On the issue of security and territorial integrity, the Egyptian vice premier was willing to acquiesce to Israel's request for international guarantees in the Sinai in the form of the deployment of UN peacekeeping and observer forces.³¹ Although Dayan did not commit Israel to a full withdrawal, he nevertheless implied that such a withdrawal might be feasible within the context of a bilateral Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement.³² Elie Podeh, a senior researcher at the Truman Institute, argues that there are two versions of the event: the first is

²⁵ Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough*, p. 46

²⁶ William B. Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 109

²⁷ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco Relations", p. 45

²⁸ Eli Podeh, *Chances for Peace: Missed Opportunities in the Arab-Israel Conflict* (Austin, Texas: Texas University Press, 2015), p. 160

²⁹ "Prime Minister Office / 778 Subject: Dayan-Tuhami Meeting on September 16, 1977", *The Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations*

³⁰ Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough*, p. 46

³¹ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 46

³² Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), p.365

the Egyptian testimony that Dayan promised (or hinted) that Begin would commit to a full Israeli pull-out from Sinai; the second is the Israeli version that Dayan merely stated that he would convey Tuhami's message to Begin.³³ On the issue of normalization, Tuhami suggested that Egypt would establish diplomatic relations with Israel only five years after the signing of a peace treaty. King Hassan criticized Tuhami's inflexibility, stating that the Egyptian vice premier's position on the matter would certainly create additional obstacles.³⁴

With regards to the structure of the talks, Tuhami put forward the idea that Israeli-Egyptian negotiations would conclude under the auspices of King Hassan with a formal agreement being signed in Geneva, Switzerland.³⁵ Furthermore, the Egyptian vice premier favoured going ahead with further secret meetings between himself and Dayan that were scheduled to take place in late September in Morocco, again under Hassan's facilitation.

Very confident in his diplomatic and negotiating abilities, Hassan made a bold proposal to schedule a Begin-Sadat meeting for mid-October. He confided in Tuhami and Dayan that he was confident Sadat and Begin would eventually shake hands, provided that Israel would secretly commit to withdraw from all the territories captured / liberated since 1967.³⁶

Shortly after the conclusion of this round of talks, the Israeli press started to leak details of the secret meeting. Furious about this breach, Hassan II decided to cancel the trilateral meeting between himself, Sadat, and Begin that was scheduled to take place in Morocco.³⁷ As a result, the secret Egyptian-Israeli talks that were facilitated by Hassan came to an abrupt halt, in spite of the potential.

³³ Eli Podeh, *Chances for Peace*, p. 140

³⁴ "Highlights from meeting of September 16, 1977", *Israeli National Archives*

³⁵ Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (London and New York, Routledge, 2003), p. 207

³⁶ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 46

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47

Sadat would eventually make his historic trip to Jerusalem and subsequently sign a bilateral peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Thus, although the long-awaited Moroccan facilitated talk did not actually take place, the discussions leading up to were decisive in for this treaty as it convinced Sadat that Begin was willing to withdraw from all the Sinai Peninsula.³⁸ According to Dayan, the Egyptian leader had been initially reluctant to meet with Begin as he did not believe any tangible results would ensue. However, thanks to King Hassan's mediation efforts, Sadat was willing to open a dialogue with Begin on the condition that Israel agreed to withdraw from all the territories captured in 1967- at least in principle.³⁹ Eventual UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali (then director of the Egyptian foreign ministry), gave a slightly different assessment. Tuhami told Boutros Ghali that indeed the secret meeting paved the way for Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem. However, Boutros Ghali was of a different opinion, believing that the Moroccan influence did not in fact influence his decision to visit Jerusalem.⁴⁰

In spite of this impression, Hassan's facilitation played an important role in helping to convince Sadat that Begin was serious and committed to making the necessary territorial concessions for peace and therefore played a role in Sadat's decision to visit Jerusalem on 19 November 1977, two months after the Dayan-Tuhami secret talks. King Hassan's mediation demonstrates that Morocco can facilitate negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbours and ultimately could play a role in bridging the gaps between Israelis and Palestinians on the core issues of the conflict.

After Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Hassan hosted a second meeting between Dayan and Tuhami, which took place in Marrakesh. In contrast to the previous meeting, Dayan flew

³⁸ Emmanuel Navon, *The Star and the Sceptre: A Diplomatic History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2020), p. 193

³⁹ Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough*, p. 47

⁴⁰ Boutros Boutros Ghali, *Egypt's Road to Jerusalem* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 134.

directly to Morocco. This meeting ⁴¹ was more substantive than the previous one and both sides came prepared with their own portfolios. The Israeli documents presented by Dayan entailed a formal peace treaty between Egypt and Israel that would include full normalization of relations between the two countries. Dayan stipulated that this should be a strictly bilateral treaty and not conditional on other Arab states' approval. He continued to propose that Israel would withdraw from the bulk of the Sinai Peninsula but that the Israeli settlements would remain under Israeli administration and policing. Dayan's proposal also stated that all international airports and airfields in Sinai would fall under Israeli civilian administration under UN supervision.⁴²

Tuhami turned down the Israeli proposal and stated that Sadat would accept nothing short of a complete withdrawal from the Sinai up to the internationally recognized border between Israel and Egypt. Tuhami emphasized that no amendments could be made to the 1967 lines in Sinai. Nevertheless, he did concede that Sadat would be more flexible on security arrangements and would acquiesce to a UN monitoring mechanism to ensure freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran.⁴³ Furthermore, Tuhami stated that Egypt would be willing to support a UN or American peacekeeping contingency in the Sinai that would guarantee freedom of navigation through the Sharm El Sheikh entrance to the Gulf of Eilat. Egypt was also seeking to extend these security arrangements to other Arab states in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.⁴⁴

Regarding the issue of a separate Israel-Egyptian peace, Tuhami and King Hassan were reluctant to support such a bilateral peace treaty at the expense of the Arab states. Dayan did not reject the possibility of extending the circle of peace with other Arab countries but posited that such an option might not be feasible at this time. Unlike with Syria and

⁴¹ Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough*, p. 92

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 94

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 95

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96

Jordan, an agreement with Egypt was a realistic outcome.⁴⁵ Dayan insisted that Egypt should sign a separate peace with Israel and declared that any effort to bring about a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace at this stage would likely be thwarted by the Arab states. Dayan pointed to the Arab states' rejection of Sadat's proposal to hold a multilateral peace conference with the participation of all the Arab states and the PLO. In spite of this, Tuhami suggested limiting the number of participants in the conference, so that high level secret talks between Israel and Egypt could continue unimpeded.⁴⁶ As the negotiations were wrapping up, Dayan met with the king in private and delivered a message from Begin. Begin was eager to meet Hassan II and the king responded that he would be delighted and honoured to meet with the prime minister at any time.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the meeting between Begin and the king never materialized and would have to wait until 1986, when Prime Minister Shimon Peres became the first Israeli leader to visit Morocco.

King Hassan II's courage and dedication to facilitating talks between Israel and Egypt played a significant role in convincing Sadat that Begin was serious in his commitment to making peace with Egypt and to paying the territorial price for it. Morocco's good relations with both parties enabled it to facilitate talks between them and helped break the psychological barrier that existed between Israel and Egypt. This series of events— which is not generally known – demonstrates that relations between Israel and the Arab states can be used as a mediation channel between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to tackle the extremely complex and sensitive issues of the conflict.

Morocco-Israeli Relations and the Peace Process (1986-2000)

⁴⁵ Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark*, p. 90

⁴⁶ Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough*, p. 96

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Having facilitated preliminary discussions between Egypt and Israel in 1977, Morocco remained committed to the mission of peace and became involved in the Israel-Palestinian arena, as demonstrated by Shimon Peres' visit to Rabat in 1986. At the end of 1985, King Hassan stated his openness to meeting with Prime Minister Peres to further the cause of Arab-Israeli peace. In April 1986, Hassan put forward the idea of holding exploratory talks between leaders of Israel and the Arab states. As the Arab states outright rejected Hassan's initiative, the Moroccan king took the historic decision to invite Peres for an official visit.⁴⁸

On 22 July 1986, Shimon Peres became the first Israeli leader to make an official visit to Morocco. The summit took place at the king's palace of Ifrane in lieu of Rabat and lasted two days. It was in part coordinated by an Israeli Labour member of Knesset who married the daughter of King Hassan adviser's, David Amar.⁴⁹ The Israeli delegation led by Peres included his official advisers and a party of Israeli journalists.⁵⁰ The visit was of historic proportions as although secret meetings had previously taken place between Israeli leaders and the king (during his visit, Peres stated that he made two informal visits to Morocco in 1978 and 1981), this was the first official visit of an Israeli leader to Morocco.^{51,52} The reaction of the Arab states regarding Peres' visit to Morocco was extremely negative and Syria severed diplomatic ties with Rabat.⁵³ According to Bruce Maddy Weitzman, a senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Centre, this historic event highlights Morocco's unique position in the arena of Arab-Israeli affairs and reaffirmed Morocco's independent stance in the Arab world.⁵⁴ Indeed, at the Knesset, Peres stated that King Hassan II had signalled that

⁴⁸ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Israel and Morocco: a Special Relationship", p. 42

⁴⁹ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 60

⁵⁰ Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark*, p. 92

⁵¹ "Press Conference with Prime Minister Peres upon his return from Morocco – 24 July 1986", *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, July 24, 1986,

<https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook7/Pages/179%20Press%20Conference%20with%20Prime%20Minister%20Peres%20upo.aspx>

⁵² Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark*, p. 92

⁵³ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 60

⁵⁴ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Israel and Morocco: a Special Relationship", p. 42

the Arab states should terminate the diplomatic boycott of Israel and engage in a dialogue with the Jewish state.⁵⁵

It is important to note however that the meeting highlighted strong differences of opinion on matters concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁵⁶ Indeed, King Hassan remained committed to the principles laid down at the Arab League's Fez Summit of 1982, which entailed a commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state and a reiteration of the PLO's role as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Hassan was disappointed with Peres' stance on the Palestinian issue which he felt was uncompromising. Peres stated that such a move would be intolerable for both Likud and Labour and that the Israeli public at large would most likely strongly oppose such an proposal.⁵⁷ Peres and Hassan kept their channel of communications open and in 1987, Peres wrote a letter to the king proposing that he would send their mutual friend Raphael Edri to Morocco to further discuss the prospect of an international peace conference. Indeed, most of the letter is centred around a potential international conference and the Arab-Israeli peace process and how to extend the Israeli-Egyptian peace precedent to other Arab states in the region.

Peres warned however that proposals for PLO participation in the conference would probably be rejected by King Hussein of Jordan and that the PLO was not ready for negotiations. He instead proposed that Israel, Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan establish a joint agricultural committee.⁵⁸ From that mutually-beneficial and relatively apolitical partnership, could help enable the slow development of additional connections. While he considered

⁵⁵ Laura Zittrain Eisenberg and Neil Caplan, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 88

⁵⁶ "Press Conference with Prime Minister Peres upon his return from Morocco – 24 July 1986", *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

⁵⁷ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 60

⁵⁸ "Foreign Minister Shimon Peres' Correspondence with Foreign Leaders – April 1 – June 5, 1987", *Israeli National Archives*, 6993 / 6

Peres' proposal, it became apparent that Hassan II became more hesitant with regards to moving forward on normalization with Israel.⁵⁹

In 1989, he engaged in lengthy discussions with then Prime Minister Itzhak Shamir, in a vain effort to convince the Israeli premier to recognize the PLO and negotiate with it. Indeed, Hassan attempted to convince Shamir of the necessity of establishing a dialogue between Israel and the PLO.⁶⁰ In response, Shamir rejected the idea of talking to Yasser Arafat or any PLO leader due to not recognizing their authority.

In spite of their diverging views, the Israeli Prime Minister was looking forward to meeting with King Hassan. Such a meeting never materialized given the significant differences between the two leaders regarding the PLO. All was not lost however as talks did take place between the king and the prime minister's emissaries.⁶¹ Despite the *realpolitik* that shaped Moroccan foreign policy when engaging with Israel, the Moroccan monarch had to consider public opinion and the views of the Arab states, who were not yet ready to engage in any form of discussion with Israel. But the fact that the king never expelled the well-established Mossad presence in the kingdom, and kept a channel of communication open with successive Israeli governments, is a clear indication of the central role that Israel was perceived as playing in Moroccan foreign and security affairs.

Amidst this atmosphere, tourism remained an important aspect for the Moroccan-Israeli relationship. By the time the Madrid conference convened on 30 October 1991, there was already a steady increase of Israeli tourism to the country. In fact, several thousands of Israeli-Moroccans visited the kingdom that decade. Tourism remains an important pillar for Israeli-Moroccans as it enables them to visit their ancestral homes and reconnect with their

⁵⁹ Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark*, p. 92

⁶⁰ Efraim Halevy, *Man in the Shadow: Inside the Middle East Crisis with a Man who Led the Mossad* (New York: St. Martin Griffin, 2006), p. 19

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20

roots.⁶² A historic milestone was reached when President George Bush 41 convened the Madrid Peace Conference; for the first time, Israel and the bulk of the Arab states – including Syria, considered the implacable enemy of Israel – were in attendance. Morocco and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states participated in the multilateral forums which tackled less contentious and non-political issues such as water, the environment, refugees, arms control, and economics.⁶³

The real breakthrough regarding Moroccan-Israeli ties occurred in the aftermath of the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP), commonly known as the Oslo Accords. The day after the DOP signing ceremony at the White House in September 1993, Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres made a surprise stop-over visit to Rabat. Israeli officials expected Morocco to announce the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.⁶⁴ Rabin was also looking for King Hassan's advice on the rapprochement between Israel and the Arab world.⁶⁵ Jacques Neriah, Rabin's close adviser and Knesset member, Rafi Edri, flew to Morocco to meet with the king. The meeting took place at the king's palace in Bouzika and lasted an hour and twenty minutes. The Moroccan Foreign Minister Abdullatif Filali and General Kadir were also in attendance. Edri briefed King Hassan on the progress made in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and learned Hassan had met with Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) – considered Arafat's number two – the day prior to Neriah's visit. The king said that Abbas had told him that he was at odds with Arafat's inflexible demand for all checkpoints to be under full Palestinian control, believing that the

⁶² Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 61

⁶³ Ibid., p. 62

⁶⁴ C. Mann, "Rabin and Peres visit Morocco Amid Hope for Diplomatic Ties," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 15, 1993, p. 1

⁶⁵ Ibid.

demand was unrealistic. In his opinion, the Oslo process was mainly an interim step and that Israel's security concerns needed to take priority.⁶⁶

Another milestone was reached in the Arab-Israeli peace process with the signing of the Israel-Jordanian peace treaty on 26 October 1994. Shortly after, King Hassan hosted the MENA economic conference in Casablanca. The summit was held from 30 October to 1 November and was attended by many Arab and Israeli businessmen and centred around economic cooperation and the call for the end of the boycott of Israel.⁶⁷ The summit declaration praised the peace efforts made by Israel and the PLO and called for full regional integration and increased trade between regional countries, including Israel. Another encouraging outcome was the GCC's decision to lift the secondary and tertiary boycotts of Israel.⁶⁸ Owing to the rapidly advancing Arab-Israeli peace process, Morocco and Israel established partial diplomatic relations in the form of liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv.⁶⁹ In parallel, Rabat opened a similar liaison office in Gaza and signed a contract with the Palestinian Authority to build an international airport in the Gaza Strip.⁷⁰ Within the framework of the Madrid multilateral forum, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Israel, and Luxembourg signed an agreement to found an agricultural centre for saltwater agriculture in Gaza. The mere fact that this was drafted and passed is a testament to the effectiveness of the Madrid multilateral negotiation track.⁷¹

In the aftermath of the signings of the DOP and the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty, tourism boomed. Between 1994 and 1996, 20,000 Israelis visited Morocco annually. The

⁶⁶ Jacques Neria, *Entre Rabin et Arafat* (Versailles: V.A. Éditions, 2018), p. 234

⁶⁷ Einat Levi, "Israel and Morocco: Cooperation Rooted in Heritage", *Mitvim*, September 2018, https://mitvim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/Einat_Levi_-_Israel_and_Morocco_-_Cooperation_Rooted_in_Heritage_-_September_2018.pdf

⁶⁸ "Casablanca Declaration-Mideast-NAfrica Economic Summit", *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, June 30, 1998, <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/casablanca%20declaration%20-%20mideast-nafrica%20economic.aspx>

⁶⁹ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 63

⁷⁰ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Israel and Morocco: a Special Relationship", p. 44

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

business sector also benefited from the opening of Morocco to Israel, as demonstrated by increasing visits by Moroccan officials, businessmen and trade delegations.⁷² By 1995, there were tentative plans to inaugurate direct flights between Morocco and Israel in order to further boost tourism.⁷³ Morocco's decision to establish partial diplomatic relations with Israel was mainly motivated by Rabat's desire to bolster trade and tourism between the two countries,⁷⁴ perceived as a cornerstone of Morocco-Israel ties. Given the recently restored relations between the two countries, tourism is likely to increase moving forward, with the hope of eventual and full normalization between the two nations.

In terms of trade, the economic exchanges between the two countries progressed at a slower pace and did not meet the Israeli government's expectations. Official trade between the two countries amounted to \$2 million per annum.⁷⁵ However, the most interesting and little-known aspect of that relationship was in defence, where Rabat and Jerusalem allegedly continue to cooperate until today. In fact, a report from *Yediot Aharonot* dated (?) quotes an anonymous American source stipulating that the Moroccan air force was considering an Israeli modernization of some of its F5E combat aircrafts.⁷⁶

On the core issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict, King Hassan adopted a more pragmatic position than the PLO. In regards to Jerusalem, Hassan stated that it is unrealistic to expect that all East Jerusalem would be ceded to the Palestinians and at best they could expect to get one-third to one-half of the eastern part of the city.⁷⁷ This is a remarkable statement which considers the new realities on the ground: that the Jewish neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem established after 1967 are a *fait accompli* and would most likely remain under Israeli

⁷² Ibid., p. 45

⁷³ Michael M. Laskier, "Israeli-Morocco", p. 65

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 64

⁷⁵ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Israel and Morocco: a Special Relationship", p. 45

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 46

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 44

sovereignty. This is in stark contrast to the traditionally uncompromising and ‘all or nothing’ approach of the Arab League.

Aside from the Palestinian position on Jerusalem, this statement is also a testimony of Morocco’s ability to understand and consider Israel’s point of view. As a result, they were able to adopt a more realistic perspective on final status issues, as opposed to the more dogmatic stance of the Arab League or the Palestinian Authority. Morocco’s unique position is reinforced by the fact that it was designated the chair of the Al Quds Committee for the protection of Islamic holy shrines in Jerusalem by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1975.⁷⁸ The newly restored partial diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco should not incidentally be seen by the Palestinians as a way to bypass bilateral Israeli-Palestinian negotiations; rather, it is a potentially powerful tool for moving the discussion forward.

When King Hassan II passed away on 26 July 1999, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and Foreign Minister David Levy (who is of Moroccan origin) attended his funeral. The large Israeli delegation is a testimony of the strength and importance of the special relationship between the two countries.^{79, 80} Hassan’s successor, the current King Mohamed VI, did not follow his predecessor’s approach and does not appear to consider the Arab-Israeli conflict as a priority. Indeed, abiding by a decision taken by the Arab League, Rabat broke diplomatic relations with Israel after the outbreak of the second *intifada*. On 24 October 2000, Rabat decided to shut down the Israeli liaison bureau in Morocco and recall all its diplomats from Tel Aviv.⁸¹ Official diplomatic relations remained

⁷⁸ Roe Kibrik and Nimrod Goren, “How Morocco relates to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process – opinion” *Jerusalem Post*, May 8, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/how-morocco-relates-to-the-israeli-palestinian-peace-process-opinion-667592>

⁷⁹ Deborah Sontag, “In Honoring Hassan, Israelis Bare Intrigue in Cause of Peace”, *The New York Times*, July 26, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/26/world/in-honoring-hassan-israelis-bare-intrigue-in-cause-of-peace.html>

⁸⁰ Samuel Segev and Yvette Schumacher, “Israel-Morocco Relations”, p. 55

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 56

frozen for twenty years and were eventually restored on 20 November 2020, when American President Donald Trump announced the resumption of partial diplomatic relations between Rabat and Jerusalem.⁸²

Conclusion

Israel's clandestine relations with Morocco could be considered an extension of the alliance of the periphery doctrine originally adopted under David Ben Gurion. These two countries faced common threats and challenges in the form of Nasser's pan-Arabism and the rise of Soviet influence in the region. As such, Morocco and Israel secretly cooperated on issues pertaining to security as they mutually benefited from such a partnership. Israel provided military assistance – in the form of advice, intelligence sharing, and arm sales – to Morocco, and agriculture, trade and tourism was important.

However, until the late-1980s, relations between Israel and Morocco had to be conducted covertly so as not to jeopardize Rabat's position in the Arab world. Had Morocco and Israel established official diplomatic relations in the 1960s, most of the Arab states would have undoubtedly severed diplomatic ties with Rabat, as evidenced by Egypt's expulsion from the Arab League following the signing of the Israeli Egyptian peace treaty (1979). On a diplomatic level, Morocco was one of the first Arab countries committed to supporting peace between Israel and the Arab states, as demonstrated by King Hassan II's interest in facilitating talks between Israel and Egypt in 1977 as well as Morocco's support for the 1978 Camp David Accords. The current geopolitical context bears many similarities with the clandestine partnerships that united Morocco and Israel. Both Israel and the GCC states are facing Iranian intervention in the region and Iran's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons is

⁸² Eli Podeh and Einat Levi, "Israel and Morocco: Major Potential for Warm Peace", *Morocco World News*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2020/12/328978/israel-and-morocco-major-potentialfor-%20warm%20peace>

regarded by Israel and the GCC states as a threat. Following the signing of the JCPOA agreement between Iran and the P5+1, Israel's covert cooperation with some Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, grew tenfold. This cooperation eventually culminated in the Abraham Accords between Israel and four Arab countries, including the restoration of ties with Morocco.

With regards to the Middle East peace process, Morocco – along with other Arab countries such as Egypt, the UAE, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia – could play a key and pivotal role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The fact that Morocco facilitated talks between Egypt and Israel in 1977 demonstrates its skill as a mediator. Given Morocco's role, granted by the OIC, to oversee the Islamic holy shrines in Jerusalem, Rabat could eventually play a role in facilitating negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority on the status of the holy sites in Jerusalem.⁸³ From there is the potential for significant headway in what many feel to be an impossible complex tangle. Morocco has done it before; perhaps it can do it again.

⁸³ Roe Kibrik and Nimrod Goren, "How Morocco Relates to the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process"

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