



# The Moroccan-Israeli Relationship: New Horizons and the Prospects of Cooperation in Africa

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August 2024

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## **Executive Summary**

As its remarkable history indicates, the relationship between Morocco and Israel is unlike any other in the region. Even in these troubled times, it holds great potential for growth and positive influence beyond the two countries' borders, especially in Africa. The ties once again came out into the open in 2020, but they have existed, with ups and downs, for over six decades (as detailed in the appendix to this study). What makes the relationship unique is that it rests simultaneously upon strong strategic commonalities, and upon aspects of identity politics in both countries:

1. In the face of radical elements, the two countries came to share their perspectives of the dangers inherent in the power politics of the region. In the past, it was the Soviets and the pan-Arabist nationalists who lent support to the enemies of both Morocco and Israel. Today, it is Iran and its associated totalitarian Islamist forces (as well as the authoritarian Algerian regime, now drawing closer to Tehran) who do so. Recent developments – including growing levels of Algerian hostility, ambitious Iranian meddling in the Sahara and growing Russian subversion in the Sahel – have given rise to closer Moroccan-Israeli security cooperation than ever, even if present circumstances have made it less overt.
2. Morocco, moreover, is also a proud inter-cultural bridge. It is self-defined as such in its 2011 Constitution, which is indeed extraordinary in terms of its broad view of the country's national heritage: Morocco counts the Jewish/ Hebraic tradition as one of the sources of its modern identity. In Israel, meanwhile, the role and contribution of Moroccan Jews has come to be not only recognized but celebrated as a significant and enriching aspect of its national heritage.

Both factors played a role in creating a firm relationship, albeit not free from occasional tensions. The strategic commonality was translated long ago into a pattern of intelligence cooperation and arms supplies, with the latter greatly expanded after formal relations were established in 2020. Meanwhile, even well before the Abraham Accords, the pull of tradition has led to a steady flow of tourism, with tens of thousands of Israelis visiting Morocco every year. Sadly, tourism has remained largely one-sided.

The relationship, which has also been enhanced by trade, investment, and a growing range of economic and developmental projects, was put to the test by the war in Gaza. Over the years, Morocco – as the standing chair of the Al Quds (Jerusalem) Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation – saw itself as a custodian of Muslim rights in Jerusalem, and since the war began, has lent diplomatic support to the general Arab position calling for an end to the war. Morocco has also joined resolutions at the United Nations that Israel views as problematic. Still, in November 2023, Morocco rejected calls to cut off or downgrade relations, and in 2024, went ahead with the acquisition of advanced satellite capabilities from Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI). Rabat's standing in Israel, moreover, facilitated the provision of Moroccan aid to the population of Gaza.

Thus, Morocco's positions on aspects of the Palestinian question do not and need not stand in the way of enhanced security and economic cooperation. Moreover, the door for other forms of strategic cooperation – including joint development projects in Africa – remains open. As Morocco eyes strategic developments to its south – in Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Ivory Coast and ultimately Nigeria, a source of energy supply to Morocco and through it to Europe; as well as the

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growing turbulence in the Sahel – there are reasons to assert that the need for such cooperation has never been as acute as it is now, in the face of dangerous foreign meddling in the continent.

Above and beyond the bilateral dimension, and for the same strategic reasons that sustain it, the two countries are well-positioned to present their potential cooperation in Africa as beneficial to the interests of the United States (an ally of both – in the case of Morocco, going all the way back to 1777!), of Europe, and of "like minded" – i.e., pro-Western nations in the region – and to seek their support in such projects. This could be similar to the model of support and investment created through the Israeli-Jordanian-Emirati triangle. Once revived, the "Negev Forum" could play a supportive role, and so can the Union for the Mediterranean. American backing would be important. But the creative energy and the innovative spirit needs to be generated by ongoing bilateral engagement. A discreet consultative framework (involving the relevant government ministries and agencies, as well as non-governmental players) should be established for this purpose as soon as possible.

### A Unique Relationship

The Moroccan-Israeli relationship is in important respects unique, and holds great promise for both countries, as well as for Africa. True, Israel had established – first "under the table," then overtly – significant partnerships with other countries in the region over the years. Morocco is not alone in receiving Israeli security assistance, which has been rendered to other beleaguered Arab monarchies and regional forces of stability, from the Hashemites to Oman. But the interaction with Morocco has been marked by additional dimensions, specifically in the realm of identity politics – and by the broad potential for common ventures, in terms of complementary economic infrastructure, in Morocco and beyond.

A major factor is the presence in Israel of a large, strongly identified, and proud component of Jews of Moroccan origin, appreciative of the attitudes taken by the Kings of Morocco towards their community over the years. Another has to do with Morocco's perception of itself and its place in the world: The Constitution of 2011 codified the recognition, rare in the region, that the Jews have contributed significantly to the formation of modern Moroccan identity, and its preamble states that Morocco's "Unity, forged by the convergence of its Arab-Islamic, Amazigh and Saharan-Hassani components, has been nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, **Hebraic** and Mediterranean tributaries." Seeking to be a strategic bridge between East and West, North and South, this makes Morocco – despite the present difficulty due to the war in Gaza – open to the prospect of a close relationship with Israel on infrastructure projects of strategic significance, in Morocco and beyond its borders (supporting its role as a stabilizing player in Africa), in addition to ongoing military cooperation.

Israel, in turn, has been able to reciprocate by serving over the years as a supportive voice in Washington for Morocco and its key interests, culminating in formal American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. In this respect, American Jewish organizations, duly impressed by Rabat's position towards Morocco's Jewish heritage, played a significant role.

Thus, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel, sealed in December 2020, came as an affirmation of an already existing strategic and ideational commonality. Israel was deeply interested in the relationship, and the Moroccan state has pursued it for strategic reasons,

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having carefully evaluated the costs and benefits of bringing it into the open. The establishment of official ties was announced in the broader context of the Abraham Accords and supported by the changed American position on Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. These ties, however, are rooted in elements established well before the Trump Administration's initiative – as detailed in the Appendix below.

Israel's decision in July 2023 to follow the United States and recognize Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara removed the last barriers to full diplomatic representation on both sides. The relationship, moreover, has stood the test of the Gaza War. The Kingdom does feel obliged to provide support for the Palestinian cause and to play a role in the humanitarian effort in Gaza: Morocco, due to its standing in Israel, was the first regional player to transport aid through the unprecedented use of Israeli land routes. As the Moroccan Foreign Ministry confirmed, Rabat was able to arrange for 40 tons of supplies to be sent to Gaza via Ben-Gurion Airport, utilizing the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel to facilitate the passage. The bridges built over the past few years can, and should, contribute to restoring peace and stability in the aftermath of the conflict, and the region, benefiting all parties involved. Once conditions allow, the relationship can be significantly expanded, and may serve as a basis for a common strategic and economic effort in Africa, as detailed below.

Thus, the current geopolitical landscape mirrors both the clandestine alliances of the past, and present threats – with Israel and Morocco, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, uniting against Iran's regional ambitions. The Abraham Accords, including the restoration of ties with Morocco, were therefore the result of already established commonalities.

### Military cooperation

To explore the expanding military and security ties between Morocco and Israel, it is crucial to understand the environment in which Morocco's military functions, along with its primary strengths and weaknesses. Following the country's independence in 1956, the military institution may have been occasionally drawn in dangerous directions but became completely subordinate to the monarchy after two unsuccessful coup attempts in the early 1970s. Since then, its allegiance to the palace has remained unquestioned.

Over the past sixty-five years, the military has faced two main opponents on the country's borders: the Algerian army and the Polisario Front. Soon after Algeria gained independence, Morocco and Algeria fought a short border conflict in 1963. This conflict had a significant impact, shaping Algeria's military strategy and positioning Morocco as its primary and most threatening adversary, standing in the way of Algeria's ambitions for hegemony in North Africa. The tensions and rivalry stemming from this conflict still influence both countries' foreign policies and global considerations today. The tension over the Moroccan Sahara is now the most significant aspect of this ongoing rivalry – while it was not the original cause of conflict, support for the Polisario has become the focal point of Algerian hostility, rather than the territorial disputes.

Obviously, Israel is not Morocco's sole provider: Rabat maintains a close and advanced relationship with military institutions in the United States and it has a history of collaboration and compatibility with both U.S. and French armed forces. Morocco has consistently received military support from the United States and benefited from different forms of U.S. military assistance, including Excess Defense

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Articles (EDA) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) initiatives. Since 2017, it has received approximately \$10 million annually through FMF, marking an increase from previous years. FMF funding enables recipient countries to access grants and/or loans for training, services, and the procurement of defense equipment.

However, even though Morocco already has strong military partnerships with the U.S. and the EU, teaming up with Israel brings additional advantages. In 2021, once the Abraham Accords became a reality, Israel and Morocco signed a historic Defense Memorandum of Understanding. The agreement provides a solid framework that formalizes defense relations between the countries and establishes a foundation that will support any future cooperation. It will enable the defense establishments of both countries to benefit from increased cooperation in the fields of intelligence, industrial collaboration, military training and more<sup>1</sup>.

Significantly, Morocco – currently seeking to broaden its independent industrial capacity – gains access to Israeli technology, especially unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which can be the basis for local production that would boost its military capabilities. Drones supplied to Morocco by Israel include various types of long-endurance UAVs for reconnaissance and other missions, including the IAI's Heron, Elbit's Hermes 900, BlueBird Aero Systems' WanderB and ThunderB, serving alongside the French-supplied Harfang.

Moreover, after the reestablishment of relations, in 2021, Morocco made a \$22 million purchase of IAI Harop advanced loitering munitions – so-called "kamikaze" drones. The Harop can fly for up to seven hours with an explosives payload of up to 20 kilograms. Additionally, in 2021, the FAR (Moroccan Armed Forces) acquired five Israeli Skylock Dome counter-drone systems, produced by Avnon, which were first showcased at Abu Dhabi's 2020 International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX)<sup>2</sup>. The growing cooperation in this field also involves Israeli consent for the production of systems in Morocco, as part of the latter's growing bid to build an indigenous aerospace industry.

A few months later, Morocco completed a deal with IAI (Israel Aerospace Industries) to purchase the Barak MX integrated defense system for \$500 million<sup>3</sup>. This system provides aerial protection against missiles and drones and consists of three types of interceptors: Barak-MRAD, Barak-LRAD, and Barak-ER. As Morocco continues to increase its spending on arms, amidst growing regional tensions with Algeria and other challengers, its objectives appear to have expanded to include the development of its own drone manufacturing technology. Again, as part of the military cooperation agreement with Israel, plans were made to construct two UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) factories in Morocco to produce Harop drones. This move towards developing local industries could leverage the country's existing aerospace sector and prove to be a lucrative venture for the military and relevant business interests.

Most significantly, early in July 2024 IAI Chairman Amir Peretz (formerly Israel's Defense Minister and one of the most prominent political leaders of Moroccan origin) went to Morocco to finalize a \$1 billion deal, already agreed in principle several months earlier but kept under wraps, for the provision of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/israel-and-morocco-sign-historic-defense-mou-24-november-2021>

<sup>2</sup> [Moroccan armed forces purchase Skylock Dome counter drone system - Unmanned airspace](#)

<sup>3</sup> [IAI agrees \\$500m missile defense systems deal with Morocco - Globes](#)

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Ofek intelligence satellite. The latter is scheduled to replace, within five years, the French systems currently deployed by Morocco.<sup>4</sup> The importance of such a deal, at this time, cannot be overstated.

Israel can render other forms of assistance of military relevance to Morocco. Despite the pro-Algerian lobby in the U.S. Senate, the U.S. Military spending bill for fiscal year 2023 includes sustained cooperation with Morocco, a signatory of the Abraham Accords and a key player in Washington's efforts to establish an Arab axis against the Iranian threat and its proxies in the region. This trilateral alliance was confirmed by the presence of the Israel Defense Forces at the African Lion exercise in 2022 (for obvious reasons, Israel did not participate in 2024, when the exercise was partly held in Tunisia); the IDF's use of air bases in the Kingdom had a demonstrative effect, which should boost Israeli military equipment exports to Morocco.

The importance of the trilateral aspect – and of the American perception that Moroccan-Israeli cooperation is a strategic asset – has been made manifest in recent months by the reverses suffered by the U.S. and the West in the Sahel region, most notably ejection of the American and French presence in Niger. For Russia (with a growing presence of its mercenaries in the region), China (flexing its powerful economic muscles and enticing African governments into long-term commitments), and Iran (reverting to its traditional method of subversion by proxy), large parts of Africa have become a land of opportunity for potential strategic gains. All three countries see a zero-sum game aimed at further reducing America's footprint. The Moroccan counterstroke – a grand strategy of establishing a leading role in Africa through economic and financial leadership, coordinated projects of investment and development, and where necessary and possible, military and intelligence support for the surviving pro-Western regimes and forces – can be assisted and supported by Israel. It also needs to evolve in close coordination with the U.S. Administration (and with the relevant European powers).

### Economic cooperation

Paradoxically, while security cooperation and arms supplies may well be more controversial, their semi-overt nature creates a buffer against the influence of external events and public dismay; whereas economic cooperation, let alone other people-to-people interactions, are more easily buffeted by the recurrent gusts of angry public and political rhetoric. Still, the broad scope of mutual interests and complementing capabilities ensure the continuity of these cooperative efforts even at times of tension.

### Morocco's economic outlook

The World Bank classifies Morocco as medium-to-low-income economy; it has a GDP of some \$140 billion (roughly 30% the size of Israel's). According to 2020 data from Trading Economics<sup>5</sup>, the country's main exports include electrical and electronic equipment, vehicles, fertilizers, fruits, vegetables, nuts, clothing, and services related to tourism and transportation. Morocco's import list is dominated by fuel, industrial machinery, electrical and electronic equipment, vehicles, and grains.

Morocco is home to an estimated 70% of global reserves of phosphates, a key ingredient in fertilizers, and stood as the second largest producer of phosphates in 2020<sup>6</sup>. The economy significantly relies on

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/r1xry9qpr>

<sup>5</sup> [Morocco Exports by Category \(tradingeconomics.com\)](https://tradingeconomics.com/morocco/exports)

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Geological Survey, "Phosphate Rock" Mineral Commodity Summary, 2021

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state-owned enterprises and public investments. The state holds the majority stake in the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP), the nation's top exporter.

The global trade and tourism slowdown, coupled with domestic business and travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a significant impact on Morocco's economy, and made the need for diversification more acute. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the country's economy painfully contracted by 7% in 2020, marking its first recession in several decades<sup>7</sup>. To mitigate the impact, the government implemented measures such as tax deferrals, direct payments to furloughed employees, and the establishment of an emergency fund for vulnerable households. In addition, some firms were granted deferrals on social security and tax bills in 2020. The central bank also took action by lowering interest rates, pausing loan repayments, and introducing a new credit line to cover the operational expenses of local businesses<sup>8</sup>.

Socioeconomic challenges have led to emigration and intermittent social unrest. From 2010 to 2019, the annual GDP growth fluctuated between 1.0% and 5.2%, which aligns with regional averages but doesn't surpass population growth. As per IMF data, the official unemployment rate in 2020 was 11.9%, with higher rates reported among the youth. Morocco, which heavily depends on imported fossil fuels for its electricity needs, has made efforts to reduce expensive domestic energy subsidies, a move recommended by the World Bank. This may have contributed to the economic dissatisfaction among the populace in recent years and the subsequent electoral backlash against the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) government in 2021<sup>9</sup>. Morocco has engaged in gas exploration offshore – so far, with little to show for it – and has also been investing in renewable energy sources, including extensive solar and wind power infrastructure.

The agricultural industry in Morocco, in any case, still plays a significant role in the nation's economy. According to 2019 World Bank statistics, it employs about 34% of the country's workforce and contributes 11.4% to the GDP. The country primarily cultivates barley, wheat, citrus fruits, grapes, vegetables, olives, and poultry. The performance of the agricultural sector has a substantial impact on overall market growth, as well as on social stability and the effort to curb or reverse internal migration to overcrowded urban centers. In recent years, the government has therefore channeled significant resources to the countryside. From 2008 to 2018, the sector received investments totaling \$15 billion, with public investments accounting for 40% and private investments making up the remaining 60%<sup>10</sup>.

In recent years, industries such as chemicals, automotive parts, computers, electronics, and aerospace have seen significant growth. The increased activity in these sectors could potentially reduce reliance on the agriculture sector in the coming years.

Europe holds a significant position as a trade partner for Morocco. According to the data from Trading Economics, Morocco's exports to Europe amounted to \$18.9 billion in 2020, which constituted 69% of Morocco's total exports. The primary recipients of these exports were Spain and France. The majority

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<sup>7</sup> IMF, World Economic Outlook database, April 2021

<sup>8</sup> See IMF, Policy Responses to COVID-19: Policy Tracker

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, "Reforming Subsidies in Morocco," Economic Premise, No. 134, 2014; Le Monde Arabe, "Maroc: après un bilan maussade, les islamistes du PJD sanctionnés dans les urnes," September 28, 2021

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctech/articles/0,7340,L-3881393,00.html>

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of the exported goods included electrical equipment, transportation equipment, food and agriculture products, along with clothing and textiles.

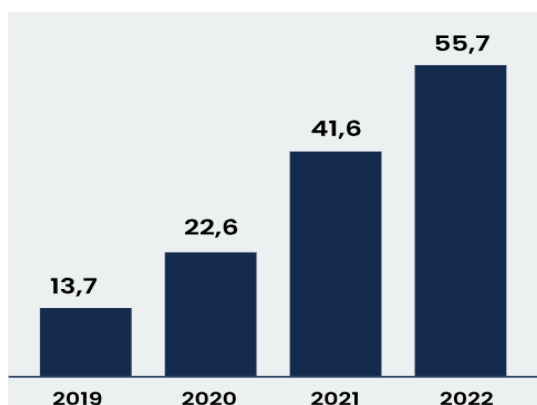
### Moroccan-Israeli Economic Relations

These structural aspects of the Moroccan economy offer Israel (specifically, Israeli entrepreneurs motivated by economic considerations but to some extent also by personal and cultural affinity) specific opportunities for trade and investment. Thus, economic relations between Israel and Morocco have seen a significant surge since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in December 2020. Much more, however, can be done and would likely have been done if not for the impact of the war. Data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics indicates that Israel's exports to Morocco rose from a nearly negligible sum of \$3.9 million in 2019 to a paltry \$30 million in 2021. The Israel Export Institute's projection of annual export potential from Israel to Morocco reaching \$250 million represents less than 0.2% of Israel's total exports, which amounted to \$143 billion in 2021, according to Ministry of Economy data.

Trade between Morocco and Israel did increase again by 32% in 2022, while tourism rose dramatically by 150%, according to the 2022 report from the Abraham Accords Peace Institute. Overall trade (both export and import of goods and services), according to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, grew by 92% to \$55.7 million. Still, Israel's share remains relatively insignificant in the overall trade of Morocco with the rest of the world.

As the report emphasizes, this evolution of trade has been somewhat in favor of Israel, which increased exports to Morocco from \$10.2 million to \$37.9 million between 2020 and 2022. Moroccan exports to Israel have also evolved, but not at the same pace, increasing from \$11 million to \$17.8 million. While the Moroccan trade balance was in surplus with Israel in 2019 (as shown in the graph below), this surplus has turned into a deficit since the reestablishment of relations between the two countries in December 2020. A deficit that has been deepening since, reaching close to 20 million dollars at the end of 2022.

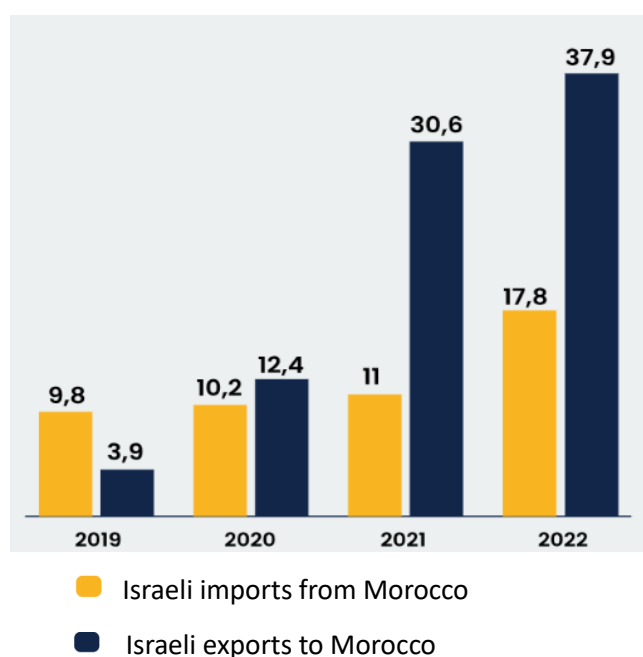
**Figure 1: Total Israel-Morocco trade 2019-2022 (\$)**



Source: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics



Figure 2: Israel-Morocco Import/ Export balance 2019-2022 (\$)



Source: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics

According to the detailed internal statistics for the first seven months of 2022, more than half of the trade between the two countries was in textile and clothing products; over a quarter in products of animal or vegetable origin, and 7% of the exchanges were in machinery, medical equipment and other industrial products (weapons sales and security related transactions are not specified in the report). The scope of the exchanges thus remains quite basic, which the report also notes; “Trade between Israel and Morocco has significantly increased in 2022, although potential not realized in multiple sectors such as energy, agriculture, and industry, which remains huge”<sup>11</sup>.

**Energy** may well become one of the keys to closer cooperation in the future. Morocco has made substantial investments in solar energy projects, aiming to generate 52% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, and play a role in the global shift towards sustainable energy. As solar and green hydrogen technologies advance, Morocco’s power cable connection to Europe is set to become a dependable provider for Europe’s renewable energy requirements.

There is a vast potential for collaboration with Israel in this sector, and 2022 witnessed the signing of some notable agreements. In September, a partnership was formed between the Israel National Energy Consortium (INERC) and Mohammed VI Polytechnic University for energy cooperation. This partnership will conduct joint research in various fields, including rechargeable batteries, recycling, solar energy, the hydrogen economy, and energy storage and transportation.

In November 2022, the Israeli hydrogen company H2Pro and Gaia Energy, a Moroccan renewable energy developer, for the provision of green hydrogen, signed a strategic agreement that constitutes

<sup>11</sup> 2022 Annual Report, Abraham Accords Peace Institute.

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another milestone towards cooperation in this field based on innovative technologies and supportive policies by both governments.

**Water** is another vital and significant field of potential cooperation. Recent difficulties have alerted the Moroccan government to the need to deal with water issues – at home, and in the region – so as to reach its future goals of sustainable growth, and it is taking steps to solve the problems it is facing. Israel, in recent decades, has established itself as the world's leading nation when it comes to **desalination** – turning seawater into usable water for agriculture and consumption; **recycling**, reaching the highest rate of re-use worldwide (nearly 90% of treated wastewater in Israel is used for irrigation – as compared with barely 10% in the U.S.); and improving urban **infrastructure** to reduce water loss.

Israel and Morocco can help each other in all these aspects. For instance, in November, Morocco's national electricity and water company (ONEE) and Israel's national water company (Mekorot) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to build a framework for the development of cooperation between the two institutions in the areas of drinking water and liquid sanitation. The agreement will enable the two companies to work together to promote cooperation in the fields of seawater desalination, performance improvement, water sanitation, digital systems management, R&D, and innovation.

Closely related to water management, **agriculture** is another sector where collaboration has been underway in recent years. The potential is almost unlimited, both for Morocco itself and for joint projects in Africa. For instance, in January 2022, SupPlant, an Israeli company specializing in precision agriculture and 'smart farming', declared its plans to extend its operations to Morocco. In October 2022, the Moroccan National Institute of Agronomy and Israel's highly respected Volcani Center Agricultural Research Organization reached an agreement to strengthen cooperation and share expertise in farming and the application of technology to increase agricultural yields.

**Professional labor** is another point of potential cooperation, given Israel's shortages in certain fields. Based on the Israeli Government's approval (Government Decision 1662, June 23, 2022) of the overall trade and economic cooperation agreement, Israel's Interior Minister initiated a pilot program with the goal of attracting workers from Morocco to contribute to Israel's construction and nursing sectors. Such agreement signifies a step towards strengthening the ties between the two nations and facilitating mutual growth, although its realization has suffered as a result of the war (as well as of cases in which criminal networks abused these arrangements and lured Moroccan workers into pre-paying for placement in Israel that turned out to be fraudulent).

**Healthcare** is also key sector where there is a significant potential for partnership. The Ministry of Health in Morocco took a significant step in this direction when it signed an agreement, in June 2022, with an Israeli corporation, the Ovadia Group, to build several hospitals in Morocco. This agreement was described at the time as a reflection of the commitment, on the part of both countries, to strengthen cooperation between their private sectors, as well as to encourage investment and innovation in various fields, including healthcare. The investment plan envisioned as a first phase the construction of five hospitals, each with the capacity to accommodate 1,000 beds, in different regions of Morocco, including Dakhla (in Morocco's Southern Provinces).

Overall, significant strides have been made, and with the resolution of some remaining challenges, and a return to a more stable climate, economic ties can be expected to reach their full potential. Following the Accords, business-focused organizations like the Moroccan-Israeli Business Council and

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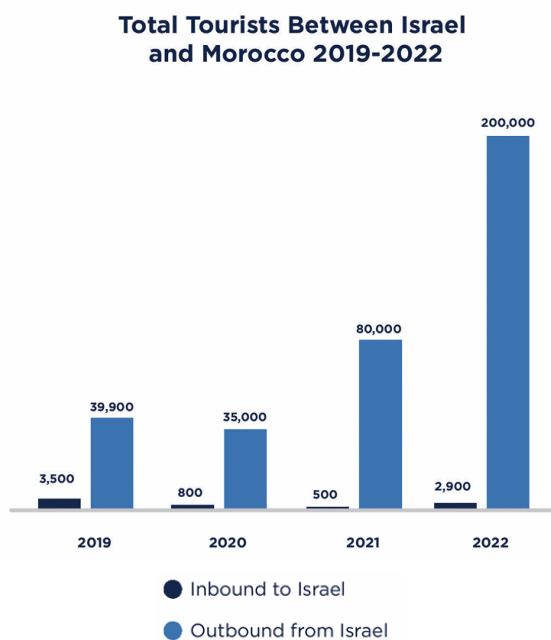
the Moroccan-Israeli Chamber of Industry were set up to strengthen connections. The inaugural Morocco-Israel Business Forum was held in Tel Aviv in March, 2022, and Marrakech hosted the first meeting of the joint CCIMI (Morocco-Israel Chamber of Commerce and Industry) in May the same year: the Israel Manufacturers Association and the Israel Export Institute put together the first-ever business delegation from Israel to Morocco.

Also in the same month, the first “Connect to Innovate” conference, organized by Start-Up Nation Central (SNC) and co-organized by the Moroccan company CPR, took place in Casablanca. The conference welcomed 150 attendees from Israeli and Moroccan delegations, including business leaders, government officials, and diplomatic figures, as well as representatives from 25 Israeli tech companies. They explored mutual opportunities, and 13 memorandums of understanding were signed at the event. In November, a delegation from Morocco’s Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P) visited the Tel-Aviv based Start-up Nation Central to further innovation and startup ecosystems in both countries.

**Tourism** plays a vital role in Morocco's economy. After a decline of 42.4% in 2020 due to COVID-19, the tourism sector rebounded in 2021 with growth of 8.8%. Generating revenue of \$8.9 billion, tourism is one of the primary sources of foreign currency revenues for the Kingdom. Morocco's innovative "Kingdom of Light" campaign aims to further boost these numbers. Benefiting from its strategic location, Morocco attracts travelers from Europe, the Maghreb, and the Middle East. Key destinations in Morocco include Marrakech, Casablanca, Rabat, and Fez, and more adventurous visitors are drawn to the High Atlas and the desert oases.

Since the signature of the Abraham Accords there has been a surge in Israeli tourists visiting Morocco – although a steady stream of Israelis came to the country even before the formal diplomatic breakthrough. The number of Israeli visitors increased from 39,900 in 2019 to over 70,000 in 2022. This remains essentially a one-sided affair: according to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, approximately 2,500 Moroccans visited Israel in 2022. Still, the warming relations between the two countries have led to more direct flights being scheduled between Israel and Morocco. In March 2022, Royal Air Maroc launched its first direct flight from Morocco to Israel, offering connections to Casablanca, and it agreed on a Code Share Agreement with El Al Israel Airlines. In the same month, Morocco's tourism authority partnered with Israeli private carrier Israir to promote Morocco as a tourist destination for Israelis and operate two weekly flights to Marrakech. Earlier, a virtual Morocco-Israel Tourism Investment Summit was held by Moroccan and Israeli tourism authorities. In June 2022, Morocco announced that Israeli citizens could now obtain e-visas to enter the country, eliminating the need for interviews at the Moroccan liaison office in Israel. The Gaza war, however, led to a sharp decline in tourist numbers and it remains to be seen when and to what extent these can be revived.

**Figure 3: Total Tourists between Israel and Morocco 2019-2022 (\$)**



Source: Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics

### Cultural Links and "Soft Power" Aspects

Cultural links can serve as an anchor for economic interaction and uphold the prospect of future resumption of tourism. They can also help in securing the continuation of diplomatic relations, even amid the tensions of the war in Gaza. Moroccan music and folklore performances regularly take place in Israel, not only in the main urban centers: In May 2023, a unique exhibition of Moroccan Jewish heritage – "Dialna" ("Ours") – sponsored by the Moroccan government was held in the town of Hadera; Moroccan performers regularly take part in the Méditerranée Festival in the port city of Ashdod. At the academic level, the King Mohammed VI Polytechnic University in Marrakech and the Technion in Haifa signed a cooperation agreement in 2022 (notably, the Polytechnic is also the first Moroccan academic institute to have a synagogue on its premises).

A non-Jewish Moroccan NGO, which chose the name Mimouna (the traditional celebration of Moroccan Jews after the end of Passover), has been working since 2011 to enhance mutual understanding, including Holocaust education. In January 2021, Mimouna's president, El Mehdi Boudra, signed a cooperation agreement with the U.S. Department of State Office of the Special Envoy to Combat and Monitor Antisemitism. Much of this is now under strain and there have been manifestations of hostility in the Moroccan public domain but the foundational connection remains.

### The Diplomatic Dimension

As already stated, an Israeli diplomatic office existed in Rabat in the 1990s and an intelligence liaison well before that. Nevertheless, the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel within the framework of the Abraham Accords marked a significant milestone in the regional geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa. Signed in December 2020, the Abraham Accords paved the way for normalized relations between Israel and several Arab countries, including Morocco. This

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historic agreement opens opportunities for economic cooperation, technological exchange, and cultural dialogue between the two nations, as well as an overt relationship between their defense establishments.

The formal aspects of the relationship are not free of difficulties. Both Morocco and Israel have yet to elevate their liaison offices to full-fledged embassies. This delay may be attributed to various considerations, including logistical considerations, internal political dynamics, and regional sensitivities. A major factor was Israel's hesitation to fully recognize Moroccan sovereignty in the Western Sahara, which gave rise to Moroccan displeasure. Gradually, key Israeli players came to realize that this situation needed to be resolved.

In May 2023, the Speaker of the Knesset, Amir Ohana – himself of Moroccan origin – paid a first visit of its kind to the Kingdom, and openly expressed recognition of "*Magherbiyyat al-Sahra*," the Moroccan claim to the region. Finally, in July 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formally recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara in a letter to King Mohammed VI. This recognition, authorized by the Cabinet, came almost three years after the bilateral normalization agreement in December 2020. Israel became the second country to recognize *de jure* Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, joining the United States, while several regional and European nations recognize it *de facto*. By acknowledging Morocco's claim over the territory, Israel reinforced its commitment to strengthening ties with Morocco and aligning itself with the broader geopolitical interests of the region.

Significantly, Prime Minister Netanyahu hastened to apologize to the Kingdom after an incident (May 29, 2024) in which, during a television interview, he used – for rhetorical purposes – a map of the region in which the Western Sahara was not depicted as part of Morocco. Netanyahu was clearly made aware that this remains a highly sensitive aspect of the relationship.

Despite the recognition, however, elevation of the Israeli liaison office to embassy level – which would symbolize a deeper level of diplomatic engagement and institutionalize the burgeoning relationship between the two countries – is still being delayed. The ongoing war in Gaza is clearly the main reason, however, certain personal aspects related to the decision to re-instate Ambassador David Govrin despite problematic allegations about his conduct in Rabat may be a contributing factor.

The public atmosphere in Morocco since October 2023, despite expressions of understanding and even support for Israel by some courageous voices, is not conducive to further overt improvements in the relationship. Even before the war broke out, there were signs that the Kingdom is cautious about open manifestations of an Israeli role in Morocco: Following the catastrophic earthquake on September 8, 2023, which left some 3,000 dead, the IDF offer of a rescue mission (as well as offers by several other countries) was turned down, despite the established expertise of Israeli military rescue teams in stricken urban areas, including Turkey in February 2023.

Morocco – which continues to hold the position of Chair of the Al Quds (Jerusalem) Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and as such, is obliged to express support for the Palestinians – has been critical of Israel's conduct of the Gaza War and voted against Israel at the UN General Assembly. Still, even after the war broke out, no action was taken by the Kingdom to degrade relations, and security related and other business transactions continued apace (tourism, however, as already mentioned, plunged, and all direct flights were suspended). This leaves open the hope that ongoing

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efforts to enhance bilateral ties will persist and that the future holds promise for strengthened relations and collaboration between these two nations.

While still committed to support for the two-state solution and the cause of Palestinian sovereignty, Morocco remains eager to leverage the relationship with Israel to indicate its alignment with the U.S.-led axis against Iran, and secure a place for itself in regional discussions (like the Negev Forum), even though its security role would be limited; to diversify its international partnerships and increase its influence with its U.S. and European allies; and, more immediately, to take a stronger stance against Algeria (and, by extension, the Polisario Front) as diplomatic tensions and the threat level keep rising. As detailed below, moreover, the need for both countries to work together in the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa – where troubling developments in recent years have given anti-Western elements an opportunity to do mischief – may well become another major aspect of their partnership in the future.

### The Potential for Joint Action in Africa

Morocco looks upon itself as major player in Africa. Its Free Trade Agreement with African Union countries has greatly enhanced its ability to act as a financial hub – as demonstrated by the African Caucus meeting of Ministers of Finance and Central Bank Governors of all 54 African Union countries in Marrakech in July 2022 – and as a driving force for investment, development, and closer infrastructure links. Rabat's strategic perceptions are mainly focused upon three key vectors:

1. The bilateral relationship with Nigeria, the continent's most populous nation and a key energy supplier. The Nigeria-Morocco pipeline, announced in 2022, with a planned investment of \$25 billion (final investment decisions will be taken in 2025) is supposed to carry gas over some 5,600 km (one third of them in Moroccan territory) and should become one of the keys to African self-sufficiency and economic growth. The Moroccan Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita – whose full title, significantly, is "Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation, and Moroccan Expatriates" – met with his Nigerian counterpart, Yusuf Maitama Tuggar, on June 2, 2024 on the margins of the Korea-Africa Summit in Seoul, asserting the two countries' "historic" bilateral relationship and their common interest in development. For Morocco, this is a key competitive tool as Algeria seeks to consolidate its own position as an energy supplier to Europe.
2. The importance of regional stability in West Africa, and specifically along the route of the pipeline, which would connect along the way Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Senegal and Mauritania. The last two, in particular (as well as Ivory Coast, due to its regional influence) are of importance to Morocco not only because of the route of the pipeline but also due to their strategic relevance in the Saharan conflict.
3. The future of the Sahel, following developments in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso – where Russia in particular, as well as China and Iran, have been meddling in internal affairs and lending support to anti-Western forces. The nightmarish prospect of a swathe of hostile influence across Africa requires urgent action to stabilize and assist the remaining pro-Western forces (such as Chad) and restrain the influence of hostile elements (and the ability of Algeria to "fish in muddy waters").

Based on the common perception of these threats to national security and regional stability – as shared in the context of a close relationship between the intelligence communities and defense

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establishments in both countries –joint action in Africa, first and foremost in the form of significant development assistance to "like-minded" countries and regimes, can and should become one of the pillars of the Israeli-Moroccan relationship. This should also become, as argued above, an important aspect of their mutual contribution to the interests of the U.S. and the West.

As noted, a series of coups and coup attempts across Africa in recent years has weakened or removed pro-Western regimes and given a foothold, in the Sahel region and beyond, to Russian mercenary forces, Chinese economic leverage and Iranian meddling in support of Islamist elements. Countering such influences is a strategic interest for Morocco for several reasons including that revolutionary Islamist totalitarianism backed by foreign forces could become a threat to the legitimacy and stability of the monarchy. Moreover, chaos and starvation in vast areas could lead to migration pressures, with Morocco becoming a penultimate destination for those seeking to find a way to Europe. While Morocco does recognize a certain African role in its heritage and identity, it has no wish to be inundated.

Close intelligence monitoring of events, a discreet bilateral planning framework, and tripartite consultations with Washington (and in some cases, with Paris) must be the point of departure; no two evolving situations in specific countries are the same, and detailed understanding of the local powers in play in each is required. At the same time, the "tool kit" of development support for friendly regimes and governments can be built together in a cooperative effort and positioned to be ready for deployment and delivery where relevant.

This should include, based on the cooperative ventures described above:

1. Joint capacity to promote **agricultural solutions in arid areas** – an Israeli field of expertise (e.g. drip irrigation and the identification of appropriate, hardy crops) – through government-to-business partnerships as well as the work of NGOs and so-called GONGOs ("Governmentally-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations") able to have a relatively rapid impact in drought-stricken areas. The impact of global warming gives an additional impetus to such efforts.
2. In a related effort, work to **enhance water availability** – including creative Israeli and Moroccan technologies for the extraction of water from humid air – some of which are applicable even in highly underdeveloped areas. Close cooperation between water agencies in both countries could generate the capacity to create such projects in needy areas.
3. As already indicated, **health infrastructure in peripheral areas** is a field in which Israeli-Moroccan cooperation has made significant progress, and help can be rendered to nations in Africa – although the timeline and the scope of investment are of a different nature and may require third-party support.

The wartime situation is hardly conducive to an overt Israeli-Moroccan commitment to joint projects in Africa, but there are sufficient channels for the initial work of assessing needs, mapping out relevant tools, approaching potential business partners and allocating resources. Relevant third parties especially the American Administration (including AFRICOM, an element of military continuity of policy amid the polarized twists and turns of U.S. policy) should be made aware of the potential. Once conditions allow, this aspect of the relationship, alongside the military, economic and diplomatic pillars described above, should openly become a powerful contribution to the commonality of interests and values between the two countries.

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Meanwhile, the relevant government ministries (such as the Israeli Ministry of Regional Cooperation and the MFA) and agencies on both sides, bringing in key business leaders and NGOs, can discreetly initiate a consultative process identifying challenges and opportunities, threats and tools of response in the fields outlined above.

## **Appendix**

### **A History of Secret Cooperation Leaves its Mark**

During the 1948 War, which pitted Israel against its Arab neighbors, Morocco was still under French protectorate rule, and thus did not participate. Later, once the Kingdom won its full independence, it chose to forge covert ties with Israel, not least because it felt threatened, as did Israel, by the powerful thrust of Soviet-backed pan-Arab socialist nationalism led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and others like him. Initially these connections were primarily in the realms of security and intelligence, but over time they developed into diplomatic channels that ultimately helped propel some of the most significant regional developments, such as President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, made possible by secret Israeli-Egyptian talks hosted by Morocco.

The historical connection of Moroccan Jews played a pivotal role in developing this special relationship with Israel. When Morocco gained independence from France in 1956, it was home to the largest Jewish community in the Arab world with about 270,000 Moroccan Jews. Formally banned from leaving in 1959, Jews were once again allowed to migrate after the accession of King Hassan II to the throne in 1961, based on a deal struck with the Israeli leadership under the terms of which Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion authorized payment to the Kingdom in return for the permits to leave for Israel. The semi-secret Aliyah of a large portion of Moroccan Jewry to Israel thus strengthened personal ties between Moroccan and Israelis officials. These ties would later become crucial in establishing secret relations between Israel and Morocco. Despite the significant decline in the number of Jews living in Morocco, due to migration, Jews continue to hold significant positions in Moroccan society. Of the approximately 5,000 Jews who still live in Morocco, some have become advisors to the King, helping to facilitate communication between the two countries.

In the early 1960s, Hassan II initiated covert communication with Israel. Specifically, the initial security channel was formed between Isser Harel, then head of Mossad, and General Mohamed Oufkir, the head of the Moroccan intelligence agency. The secret ties with Morocco were further consolidated in 1963; in effect, this connection can be seen as an extension of the peripheral alliance doctrine, which was initiated by Ben-Gurion in the late 1950s. This doctrine aimed to foster friendly relations with non-Arab states on the periphery, such as Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. Since it was driven by a common fear of Nasser's ambitions, it also led by the same logic to a common interest with pro-Western Arab forces, particularly kingdoms threatened by Nasser and other Arab radicals.

These secret dialogues enabled Meir Amit, Harel's successor as Mossad director, to open a regular line of communication with the Kingdom. These connections served among other purposes as a crucial channel for facilitating the migration of Moroccan Jews to Israel. Between 1961 and 1964 Mossad extracted some 97,000 Jews from Morocco during Operation Yachin; this led to Mossad broadening their contacts with Moroccan intelligence leaders and other security entities – and came to involve Israeli help in monitoring the activities of enemies of the Monarchy – who often cooperated with radical external efforts to subvert pro-Western regimes in the region.



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Several factors contributed to the establishment of these covert security ties between Israel and Morocco during this period. These included escalating tensions between Algeria and Morocco, the growing influence of Egypt's Nasser, and the rise of pan-Arab nationalism combined with an aggressive campaign against "reactionary" (i.e. pro-Western traditionalist) forces. Egypt offered refuge to Moroccan opposition figures, which added fuel to Rabat's hostility towards Nasser. These intersecting interests – bound together by a common orientation in the context of the ongoing Cold War – accelerated the clandestine cooperation between Morocco and Israel.

Once open conflict broke out between Morocco and newly independent Algeria, Meir Amit saw a potential for further strategic advantage. On the Moroccan side, General Oufkir, a member of the Amazigh minority by origin, who despised the Arab nationalists and opposed Morocco's membership in the Arab League, was the key figure in extending further the secret ties with Israel.

To solidify these security connections, Oufkir made a covert trip to Israel in 1964 to observe the security measures for the visit of Pope Paul VI. Based on this experience, Oufkir was able to persuade Hassan II that Israel could provide substantial assistance with palace security arrangements at a time of internal unrest and foreign conspiracies to destabilize the Kingdom.

With the King's consent, the Mossad was permitted to establish a firm foothold in Morocco. Israel supplied Rabat with extensive intelligence about Algeria and Egypt and enhanced the capabilities of the Moroccan military by offering support through arms sales and technical aid. Israel, moreover, through Iran (then still a pillar of pro-Western forces in the region), sold French-manufactured AMX 13 tanks to Morocco and trained Moroccan pilots, who at that time were flying the outdated Soviet-made MiG 17. Security collaboration between the two nations was extensive and daring – it required a leap of faith for Israel to sell weapons to an Arab country at that time – and in many ways laid the foundations for deepening the relationship in the future.

### Taking the Next Step

During the 1960s, the interaction between Morocco and Israel was extended beyond military matters to include agriculture and investment. Chaim Herzog, the former head of IDF intelligence and future Israeli President, held discussions with Hassan II about potential investments in the Kingdom by the British Wolfson family. This, in essence, helped established the pattern of Diaspora Jewry, appreciative of the Kingdom's attitude towards its Jewish population, acting in support of Morocco, whether in the economic sphere or in the corridors of power.

Among other issues, Herzog raised the possibility of increasing citrus fruit sales to Israel. The Moroccan agriculture minister, impressed by Israel's sophisticated agriculture system, then met with Moshe Dayan, who was his Israeli counterpart at the time. The fact that Morocco was open to discussing the export of agricultural products to Israel was quite remarkable, considering the Arab League's ongoing boycott of Israel and its refusal to negotiate with the Jewish State in any capacity. This non-security aspect of the relationship significantly contributed to the initiation of proto-normalization.

A minor disruption occurred when Morocco symbolically participated in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Still, King Hassan II did not let this hinder his involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Morocco was not the only Arab nation willing to secretly establish ties with Israel – as already indicated, so did

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Jordan and Oman, among others – but the depth and intensity of these relations is indeed noteworthy. It suggests, to this day, that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – while a desirable goal – need not necessarily be a precondition for normalizing relations.

This partnership, which involved security cooperation, military aid, and economic exchanges, was mutually beneficial. However, to maintain its standing in the Arab World, Morocco kept its ties with Israel covert until the late 1980s, when Rabat no longer had to fear the sort of sanctions Egypt faced (including expulsion from the Arab League) after the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty in 1979. Behind the scenes, however, Morocco's commitment to peace in the region was evident in King Hassan II's facilitation of talks between Israel and Egypt in 1977 and in its tacit support for the 1978 Camp David Accords. At the level of grand strategy, the common interest continued to be fed by the mutual association with pro-Western forces in the region against Arab nationalists (and socialists) backed by Moscow.

### Facing New Enemies Together

The collapse of the Soviet Union, coupled with the defeat of Saddam Hussein at the hands of the U.S.-led coalition forged by President George Bush ("41") – which included several Arab countries – gave rise to new realities in the region that were translated into new aspects of the Israeli-Moroccan relationship. As a member of the Arab Maghreb Union, Morocco attended the launch of the Madrid process, and later participated in the five working groups of the multilateral track. In October 1994 it hosted the first MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Economic Summit in Casablanca, attended, among others by hundreds of Israel businesspeople (somewhat to the dismay of the Egyptian Foreign Minister) and colored by the vision of Israel's Foreign Minister at the time, Shimon Peres, of "a New Middle East".

The two countries announced on September 1, 1994 that they would open liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv (at the time, so did Tunisia, Qatar and Oman). Unfortunately, this was a short-lived breakthrough: Morocco, given its status as the Chair of the **Al Quds (Jerusalem) Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation** remained formally committed to the Palestinian cause, and when violence erupted in 2000 – in what Yasser Arafat chose to call the "Al-Aqsa Intifada" – Morocco closed the offices (as did the other three countries) and the semi-formal relationship went into abeyance.

However, it did not take long for both sides to realize that their interests still required close cooperation, particularly in intelligence and security. The Soviet-backed challenges of the past have receded, but the rise of Iran as a strategic threat once again affirmed Israeli-Moroccan commonality of interests. Iran cut off relations with Morocco in 1981 in retaliation for the offer of asylum to the exiled Shah. Relations with Iran were renewed in the 1990s but cut off again in 2009 by King Mohammed VI when the revolutionary regime in Tehran questioned the legitimacy of a fellow Sunni Arab monarch, the King of Bahrain.

Renewed again in early 2014, relations with Iran were severed once more in 2018, due to intelligence regarding active Iranian support for the Polisario in Western Sahara, and have not been restored since, despite an Iranian call for reconciliation in July 2023. Not surprisingly, this reflected – and enhanced – close cooperation between Israeli intelligence and its Moroccan counterpart. The sharing of perceived threats, and the intensifying dangers to the Kingdom's vital interests posed by a common enemy,

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created the conditions for the Moroccan-Israeli relationship to reach the level of maturity discussed in this study.

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***The research for this article was co-sponsored by the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and the Africa-Israel Institute.***

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