

OPINION

Morocco-Israel Peace Deal Is Encouraging, But US Recognition of Moroccan Sovereignty In Western Sahara Is Sparking Controversy

Here is the inside story on why President Trump made the right move with Morocco

by Jack Rusenko | December 17, 2020



Moroccan King Mohammed VI sharing an Iftar meal with Jared Kushner (Photo: Moroccan Royal Palace)

As an American who spent about two decades living in Morocco and was involved there in one way or another for almost 40 years, I was overjoyed when I heard of the Israel-Morocco peace deal with the accompanying US-Morocco agreements exactly one week ago.

Yet I have been disturbed by the negative press I have read concerning the US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty of the Western Sahara. Allow me to share some historical perspective both on the peace deal and on the controversy of the Sahara issue.

Morocco's Protection of Jews

The peace agreement with Israel was a very welcome development but not a surprise given Morocco's long and largely favorable history with Israel.

Two examples come to mind where Morocco treated Jews more favorably than did European countries.

The first is that many Jews were welcomed to Morocco during the Spanish inquisition. While Jews were being tragically killed and brutalized in Catholic Spain, they were graciously given refuge in Muslim Morocco.

The second example occurred during World War II. When the Nazis were sending Jews from many European countries to their death in concentration camps, Morocco protected its Jewish population. When the Nazis demanded to know where the Jews of Morocco were, King Mohamed V famously replied: "We have no Jews, we only have Moroccans."

To be sure, a number of Jews were interned, but quickly released after the war. I have never heard of any who were killed in Nazi concentration camps.

The extent to which Jews have been accepted in Morocco was brought home to me one day when I visited a shop in Marrakech that sold old coins. I was surprised to see some old Moroccan Riyals (local currency) that had the star of David on them in recognition of the Jewish community in Morocco. This demonstrated to me that for many centuries, Jews have been considered a natural part of Morocco.

Since the early 1960's, several hundred thousand Moroccan Jews have immigrated to Israel. Today, Moroccans make up one of the largest Israeli immigrant communities. This highlights the long interaction between the two countries.

Morocco's Warming Ties With Israel Over The Years

During the 1990's, Israel had a diplomatic mission in Rabat, Morocco's capital, and I remember being astonished to see the Israeli flag flying in an Arab country each time I drove by it.

This close interaction was made clear to me during a conversation with the Casablanca Police Commissioner just after the 1994 MENA Economic Summit. He was still in shock from the arrival of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to the summit. When the Israeli leader's plane arrived, Rabin's security detail exited first. The Commissioner told me, "We expected 'normal' Israeli security agents, but they greeted us and spoke in perfect Moroccan Arabic as if they had been born and raised their whole lives in Casablanca!"



Morocco's King Hassan (C) speaks with PLO Leader Yasser Arafat (L) and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres during a meeting held at King's Palace in Rabat, Morocco, May 27, 1995 (Photo: Reuters)

King Hassan II was known for being a master of working behind the scenes to promote peace with Israel. I remember being in Casablanca in September of 1993 when the Oslo Peace Accord was signed in Washington between Israel and the Palestinians. King Hassan wasn't at the White House ceremony, but he played a key role. Yasser Arafat flew to Washington on a Moroccan plane provided to him by King Hassan. Rabin then left the meetings in Washington and flew directly to Morocco to publicly thank King Hassan for his contribution.

Why, then, should we be surprised that Morocco is now formally normalizing relations with the State of Israel?

The Conflict Over The Western Sahara

An aspect of the recent peace deal that has been misunderstood by many involves the US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty in the Western Sahara, a conflict few know much about.

The Western Sahara is a massive desert region, very sparsely populated with just a few hundred thousand inhabitants. Spain controlled the area since the late 1800's. I visited there a number of years ago and found a large patch of sand with a few small cities.

Having grown up in Pittsburgh, I am used to snowplows, but this was my first experience seeing such machines to regularly plow sand — not snow — off the roads.

Upon gaining independence in 1956, Morocco claimed the Spanish Sahara as Moroccan territory. It was also claimed by Mauritania, who later dropped its claim.

Fast forward to 1975. Franco in Spain was at the end stages of Parkinson's disease and Juan Carlos was in control. In a shrewd political move, King Hassan organized possibly the largest "sit-in" ever. Several hundred thousand Moroccan civilians from all over the country marched into the Spanish Sahara to claim it as Moroccan territory on November 6, 1975. This day is still celebrated annually in Morocco as the Green March (Massira El Khadra) day.

Although Spain didn't resist Morocco's claims, some local inhabitants did. They were and have been supported by Algeria as well as by the Soviets/Russians.

This Conflict Is A Cold War Relic

My experience over the years in Morocco has convinced me that the "Sahara" issue is largely a relic of the Cold War.

Morocco has been, and continues to be, one of the strongest American allies in the region. Moroccan King Mohamed Ben Abdullah (also known as Mohamed III) recognized the new American nation in a decree dated December 1777. The USA and Morocco have had a strong relationship ever since.

By sharp contrast, Algeria was firmly in the Soviet camp. Soviet engineers rebuilt Algerian infrastructure after the war with France and Soviet advisors trained the Algerian military. The group seeking independence in the Sahara is known as the "Polisario," and their support is from Algeria and Soviet/Russian countries. Algeria and Morocco fought a war over the Sahara from 1975 to 1991, at which time a truce was established. After the conflict started, some of the inhabitants integrated into Morocco while others sided with the Polisario and ended up in a large refugee camp in the middle of the Algerian desert known as Tindouf.

"MINURSO" was created as a UN peacekeeping force in the aftermath of that war, and still exists today as one of the oldest UN peacekeeping missions. When I visited Laayoune, the UN headquarters was totally surrounded by Moroccan flags spaced about 10 feet apart, so it was certainly clear what Morocco thought of their presence.

The UN goal has been to have a fair referendum so the people can express their desire on a form of government.

My question is: How can one impartially and equitably determine the will of a very small number of nomadic people?

In the last 35 years, UN Secretaries General have appointed about 10 different Special Envoys, including James Baker and Dennis Ross. Several plans for resolving the conflict have been submitted, but none have succeeded.

Early on Morocco tried to “fix” the referendum, but the question still exists if one can equitably conduct a referendum given the parameters. It seems that a good number of UN envoys have concluded that this is likely not possible.

The Way Forward

About 15 years ago, Morocco proposed a limited autonomy option, which seemed to me to meet the reasonable demands of self-determination.

As an American, I am familiar with this concept as the US has similar relationships with about a half dozen islands and territories which are administered by the Office of Insular Affairs at the Department of the Interior. Guam, the US Virgin Islands, and American Samoa are examples. People there are American citizens, but have a good measure of autonomy and representation.

The Moroccan proposal was a similar arrangement. However, in the end Morocco’s limited autonomy proposal failed to carry the day as the Polisario did not accept it.

I have had discussions with a number of American Ambassadors in Morocco with whom I agreed on this issue and who couldn’t quite understand the American reluctance to more strongly support Morocco in this area. I ask myself, why would the US choose to support a Russian satellite regime over its longest ally in the region?

Full autonomy and a democratic system is the goal, but it is it realistic to expect this from a regime that sends its children from Tindouf to Cuba for schooling?

The conflict has been a huge economic drain on the Moroccan economy for decades. It seems clear to me that it has long been the most important foreign policy issue for Morocco for as long as I can remember.

Trump’s Timely Decision

I don’t see the Trump administration’s recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty as a reversal as much as a recognition of the current realities which have changed over the decades.

The President made the right call.

It will be interesting to see how this decision changes realities on the ground.

One solution that I believe is long overdue is to start with autonomy in the camps at Tindouf. Moroccans have offered them refuge on their side of the border and offered to send buses for those wishing to come there. The Polisario has said they are free to go wherever they like but has denied access to the buses for this proposal. It seems clear to me that they want the people to stay in Tindouf as their presence there is the main political capital of the Polisario. I understand that there are no walls around Tindouf that lock people in. But of course, it is not practical to go wherever one likes when one would need to walk on foot several hundred miles across the Sahara desert to reach the nearest Algerian town. It’s a bit like trying to escape from Alcatraz – nobody ever succeeded.

Following the decision by the US, the United Arab Emirates has followed suit and recognized Morocco's sovereignty in the Western Sahara.

Will other nations now join in?

I hope so.

I believe Moroccan sovereignty, with local autonomy, will be a good thing for the people living in the Sahara region, and hope that it leads to an end to this conflict that has lasted much too long.

This peace deal is a win for Israelis, Moroccans and Americans. I pray it is a win for those living in the Western Sahara, as well.

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