

Palestinian leadership silent over Morocco, Israel deal to normalize relations

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:26

AMMAN: Mainstream Palestinian leaders on Friday remained silent over news that Morocco had become the latest Arab nation to agree to normalize relations with Israel.

Opposition factions such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) were quick to criticize Morocco's pledge to set aside hostilities toward Israel "in the near future."

Under the US-brokered deal, announced by American President Donald Trump, the US will recognize Morocco's long-standing claim to the Western Sahara region, rejecting calls by the territory's Saharawi people for independence.

The Moroccan royal court issued an official statement on Thursday reporting that King Mohammed VI had called Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to give him reassurances that Rabat's position on the Palestinian cause, in supporting a two-state solution, remained unchanged.

However, there has been no official Palestinian leadership response to the monarch's call or Morocco's decision to join the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan in this year agreeing to normalize relations with Israel.

The official Palestinian news agency WAFA and main daily newspapers Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam did not cover King Mohammed's phone call.

Ali Jarbawi, a political science professor at Birzeit University, told Arab News that the Palestinians were keeping quiet on the issue in a bid to avoid repeating previous errors. "The Palestinian leadership doesn't want to repeat the mistakes it had when the UAE and Bahrain normalized relations," he said.

Former Palestinian minister, Ziad Abu Zayyad, told Arab News that Morocco had always kept a good relationship with Moroccan Jews who immigrated to Israel.

"Morocco has had all the time a de facto relationship with Israel including visits of Israeli MKs (members of the Knesset) and ministers mostly from Moroccan origin." But he noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had been "exaggerating" when describing the recent development as a breakthrough.

The Moroccan royal court statement said: "His Majesty (King Mohammed) stressed that Morocco always puts the Palestinian issue at the same level as the issue of the Sahara, and that Morocco's work to consolidate its Moroccaness will never be, neither today nor in the future, at the expense of the Palestinian people's struggle for their legitimate rights."

"The king of Morocco has a special status, and he has distinguished relations with the Jewish community of Moroccan origin, including hundreds of thousands of Moroccan Jews in Israel."

About 2,500 Jews are currently citizens of Morocco which had a Jewish minister of tourism, Andre Azoulay.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad issued scathing attacks over Morocco's agreement with Israel.

"Normalization by Morocco with the Israeli occupation is a betrayal of Jerusalem and of Palestine. We trust that the Moroccan people will utterly refuse this normalization," Islamic Jihad said.

The PFLP, which has strong relations with the Polisario Front, also criticized the normalization plans. The Polisario Front is an Algerian-backed independence movement that holds a fifth of Western Sahara and has campaigned for a vote on self-determination through decades of war and deadlock.

Former Palestinian Labor Minister Ghassan Khatib told Arab News that the Moroccan decision was short-sighted and would harm Arab interests. "This has a negative effect on the regional Arab system and hurts Palestinians because it rewards the Israeli occupier which violates international law."

He said that US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara was allowing "Israeli continued control over Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories."

Some analysts believe that official normalization of relations could tamper down an anti-peace with Palestinians trend in the Israeli Jewish Moroccan community, which numbers 460,000.

But Jarbawi said: "These are two totally different issues. Jewish Moroccans have always had a good relationship with Morocco and therefore I don't think this will make a big difference."

Abu Zayyad pointed out that Rabat's decision must be seen in context. "We should see this in their normal size. And I can say that nothing dramatic happened."

Morocco's late King Hassan II often tried to be a behind-the-scenes catalyst in the Arab-Israeli peace process. In July 1986, he hosted Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres in an effort to stimulate progress and two months later the monarch met with a delegation of Jews of Moroccan origin, including an Israeli Knesset member.

In 1993, after signing an agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin paid a formal visit to Morocco.



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UAE holds talks with Israel on expanding energy sector cooperation
Leaders react to Morocco-Israel agreement to establish ties

[Russia, SDF to set up joint military posts in strategic Syrian town](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:23

ANKARA: Russia and the Syrian government have agreed with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to establish three joint military observation posts in the town of Ain Issa.

The posts, which will be deployed in the strategically important town linking Aleppo to Al-Hasakah, will monitor the cease-fire and violations of Turkish-governed zones in the region.

Ain Issa is currently under the control of the SDF and is located on the M4

highway that connects northeastern Syria to the western part of the country.

The town has come under regular attack, most recently by Ankara-backed rebel groups against Syrian Kurdish YPG militia positions. In October, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned of a possible new operation into the region.

However, Navvar Saban, a military analyst from the Istanbul-based Omran Center for Strategic Studies, did not anticipate a new Turkish offensive on the scale of its October push to clear SDF fighters away from the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn, both near Ain Issa.

"This agreement on establishing observation posts is just a public relations activity and nothing will change. It will just reduce the intensity of the tensions at that front but will not end them in the long run because the SDF has been violating the cease-fire agreement by digging tunnels, which Turkey and Ankara-backed groups were destroying," he told Arab News.

Turkey considers the SDF as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Kyle Orton, a UK-based independent researcher on Syria, told Arab News: "Ain Issa does not affect any of the broader dynamics in Syria, it is just the kind of trouble one would expect along the line of contact between two forces as mutually hostile as Turkey and the PKK.

"The PKK's Rojava statelet in Syria has always been significantly dependent on the (Syrian President Bashar) Assad and Iran system and as the US draws down or threatens to, the PKK has little choice but to lean ever-more into this other option."

Russia has reportedly asked the SDF to surrender Ain Issa to the Assad regime, but that proposal was rejected by the Syrian Kurds.

"For Russia, having the Assad regime directly take Ain Issa would have allowed them to make progress on restoring Assad's writ across the whole country, an important part of the effort to rehabilitate the regime internationally by presenting its victory as a *fait accompli*, and simultaneously to gain goodwill from Turkey by claiming to have removed the PKK from territory," Orton said.

He pointed out that the present option worked too. "The Turks are much less concerned about Russia being the custodian of the PKK rather than the US partnering with the PKK, which is seen as something much more threatening."

Orton added that the developments in Ain Issa would not threaten the Russo-Turkish understanding over Syria, manifested in the Astana process.

Halid Abdurrahman, a researcher and analyst on the Middle East and North Africa, told Arab News that control over Ain Issa was of strategic importance for gaining the control of the key M4 highway.

"Turkey wanted to establish a military base in Ain Issa's Saida village in

order to increase its supremacy in the region, but the Russians didn't lean toward this offer. Then, Turkish army and Ankara-backed rebel groups began attacking YPG targets intermittently," he said.

He noted that if Turkey blocked the passage of Ain Issa, it would be able to cut supply lines between the towns of Kobane and Manbij towns, while interrupting their contacts with the Jazira canton – something that would facilitate any potential Turkish military operation into the region in the future.

"However, Russia is uneasy with Turkey's moves about Ain Issa, and would rather prefer giving the town to the Syrian regime forces in order to prevent any military move to the region by Ankara. Establishing observation posts with SDF and following an active military strategy with Syrian Kurds is just a short-term strategy to extend this challenge over time," Abdurrahman said.

Russia and YPG militia have reportedly conducted some informal joint drills and recently held technical meetings about regional challenges.

"Turkey and Russia have not been on good terms with each other for a while. They have a tense relationship about their moves in Idlib, while Russia's joint operations with Kurdish-led SDF would not please Ankara apparently," Abdurrahman added.



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Leaders react to Morocco-Israel agreement to resume ties

Thu, 2020-12-10 23:45

CAIRO: Regional leaders welcomed Morocco's decision to establish diplomatic ties and communications with Israel.

The move makes Morocco the fourth country in the Arab region to establish ties with Israel in recent months in a deal brokered by the US.

The UAE, which announced in August it would normalize relations with Israel welcomed Morocco's decision.

"This step, a sovereign move, contributes to strengthening our common quest for stability, prosperity, and just and lasting peace in the region," Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed wrote on Twitter.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi hailed the agreement saying its an important step to achieve stability.

"I have followed with great attention the significant advance between Morocco and Israel in terms of the normalization of their relations under the auspices of the US," El-Sisi said. "I believe this is an important step to achieve more stability and cooperation in our region."

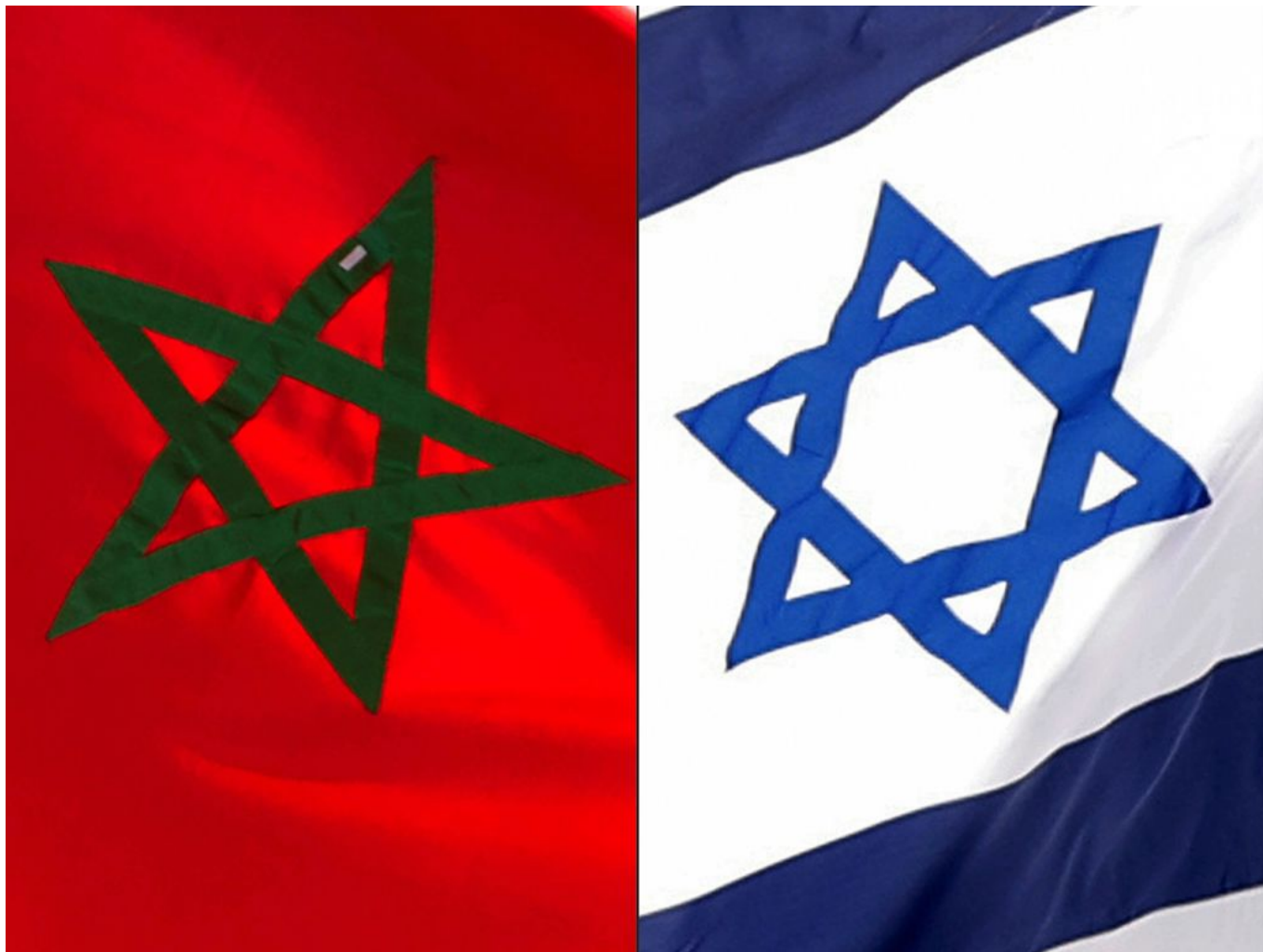
Egypt, along with Jordan, were the only Arab countries to have relations with Israel until the UAE announcement earlier this year. The Emirates was followed by Bahrain and Sudan, and now Morocco.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the deal between Israel and Morocco was a "historic peace between us."

Netanyahu said it would lead to direct flights between Morocco and Israel and that the fourth US-brokered deal between Israel and an Arab country in recent months would be a "very warm peace."

In a televised address, he said: "I've always believed that this historic peace would come. I've always worked for it."

Thanking Trump, he added: "I want to thank, too, the king of Morocco, King Mohammed the Sixth, for taking this historic decision to bring a historic peace between us."



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Israel, Morocco agree to normalize relations in latest US-brokered deal
UAE opens consulate in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara

[Egyptian security delegation in Gaza to hold talks with Hamas](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-10 22:40

CAIRO: An Egyptian security delegation has arrived in the Gaza Strip to hold talks with the leadership of Hamas about developments in the territory and the truce understanding with Israel.

Palestinian sources said a delegation from the Egyptian intelligence service arrived in Gaza through the Beit Hanoun checkpoint, which is under the control of Israel, on a visit that would last for several hours.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said the visit of the Egyptian security delegation was in the context of continuous communications between Hamas and Cairo to discuss many issues, the most important of which is arranging the Palestinian house to achieve reconciliation with Fatah.

"We are interested in achieving reconciliation, and we welcome the Egyptian effort in this issue and we are working to make it a success," Qassem said.

"The Egyptian delegation is discussing the file of lifting the siege on the Gaza Strip and confirming understanding with those occupying it in light of the disavowal of their implementation, in addition to discussing bilateral relations between Egypt and Hamas," he said.

"We welcome any international or regional visit that would help lift the siege on Gaza and take over the difficult humanitarian conditions that the residents of the Strip are experiencing due to the ongoing Israeli blockade for 14 years," he said.

"Everyone is required, whether at the international or regional level, to move toward pressuring the occupation to stop the siege on Gaza, which has worsened in an unprecedented way in light of the spread of the coronavirus."

Sources said that the issue of the Palestinian reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas was at the top of discussions between the two sides. They said that the Egyptian security delegation also discussed current relations between Hamas and Israel, especially with Israel disavowing its pledges to bring in Palestinian merchants and workers and establish projects to employ youths. This was in addition to discussing the prisoner exchange issue, especially as Hamas had stipulated that Israel release all prisoners of the Shalit prisoner exchange deal who were rearrested by Israel.

Egypt is intensifying its efforts to end the Palestinian division between the Fatah and Hamas movements, and it is also seeking calm between the occupation authorities and the Palestinian movements to defuse the escalation and tension between the two sides.

The last visit of the Egyptian security delegation to the Gaza Strip was on Sept. 10, during which the delegation discussed with Hamas the indirect understandings about the occupation and some common issues between the two parties.

On Aug. 31, Hamas announced that an understanding to contain escalation had been reached with Israel in the Gaza Strip after three weeks of tension.

Egypt is brokering an indirect cease-fire understanding between the Palestinian factions in Gaza and Israel, and also to introduce facilities for the Israeli blockade imposed on the Strip since mid-2007.

Recently intensive talks have taken place between Hamas and Fatah in Cairo

headed by Fatah Movement Secretary-General Jibril Rajoub and by Hamas Deputy Head of the Political Bureau Salah Al-Arouri. However, after the Palestinian Authority resumed security coordination with Israel, it led to a communication crisis.

The health crisis in Gaza in recent days due to COVID-19 has led to an increase in contact between mediators, Hamas and Israel.



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relations in latest US-brokered deal

Thu, 2020-12-10 19:25

WASHINGTON: Israel and Morocco agreed on Thursday to normalize relations in a deal brokered with US help, making Morocco the fourth Arab country to set aside hostilities with Israel in the past four months.

As part of the agreement, US President Donald Trump changed longstanding US policy and recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

The Western Sahara is a desert region where a decades-old territorial dispute has pitted Morocco against the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a breakaway movement that seeks to establish an independent state in the territory.

Trump sealed the agreement in a phone call with Morocco's King Mohammed VI on Thursday, the White House said.

"Another HISTORIC breakthrough today! Our two GREAT friends Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations – a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East!"

Trump tweeted. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed President Donald Trump's announcement of a normalisation deal between Israel and Morocco as an "historic peace between us". Netanyahu said it would lead to direct flights between Morocco and Israel and that the fourth U.S.-brokered deal between Israel and an Arab country in recent months would be a "very warm peace".

In a televised address, he said: "I've always believed that this historic peace would come. I've always worked for it."

Thanking Trump, he added: "I want to thank, too, the king of Morocco, King Mohammed the Sixth, for taking this historic decision to bring an historic peace between us."

Another HISTORIC breakthrough today! Our two GREAT friends Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations – a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [December 10, 2020](#)

Morocco is the fourth country since August to strike a deal aimed at normalizing relations with Israel. The others were the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

Much of the momentum behind the deal-making has been to present a united front against Iran and roll back its regional influence.

Palestinians have been critical of the normalization deals, saying Arab countries have set back the cause of peace by abandoning a longstanding demand that Israel give up land for a Palestinian state before it can receive recognition.

With Trump due to leave office on Jan. 20, the Morocco deal could be among the last his team, led by White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and US envoy Avi Berkowitz, will negotiate before giving way to President-elect Joe Biden's incoming administration.

Under the agreement, Morocco will establish full diplomatic relations and resume official contacts with Israel, grant overflights and also direct flights to and from Israel for all Israelis.

"They are going to reopen their liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv immediately with the intention to open embassies. And they are going to promote economic cooperation between Israeli and Moroccan companies," Kushner told Reuters.

Trump's agreement to change US policy toward the Western Sahara was the linchpin for getting Morocco's agreement and a major shift away from a mostly neutral stance.

In Rabat, Morocco's royal court said Washington will open a consulate in Western Sahara as part of Morocco's deal with Israel.

A White House proclamation said the United States believes that an independent Sahrawi State is "not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution."

"We urge the parties to engage in discussions without delay, using Morocco's autonomy plan as the only framework to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution," it said.

Washington had supported a 1991 ceasefire between Morocco and the Western Sahara's Polisario Front independence movement that called for a referendum to resolve the issue. Last month, after a border incident, the Polisario pulled out of that deal and announced a return to armed struggle.



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