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THE ISRAEL-MAGHREB CONNECTION: PAST CONTACTS, FUTURE PROSPECTS

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On 1 September 1994, the establishment of semi-formal — albeit not yet full — diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco was announced in Jerusalem and Rabat. The then Rabin government announced the opening of a liaison office in Rabat, while King Hasan II of Morocco declared his intention to open a similar office in Tel Aviv, culminating three decades of discreet, even clandestine, links between the two countries. Within the next two years, Mauritania and Tunisia followed suit by forming ties with Israel. Of the four Maghrebi (North African) states, only Algeria and Libya have refrained from establishing ties with the Jewish state.

Earliest Contacts

Israeli contacts with Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian nationalists, as well as the Moroccan monarchy, originated in the 1950s, occasionally at the initiative of Israeli government officials and diplomats, including the Mossad, or, more commonly, through third parties: Israeli journalists and intellectuals; representatives of international Jewish organizations — notably the World Jewish Congress (WJC),[1] who did their utmost to "enlighten" Maghrebi leaders about Israeli society and politics; influential Tunisian and Moroccan Jews close to leftist political circles in their countries or the Moroccan monarchy;[2] and European diplomats or political leaders.[3]

Over three decades a number of Israelis contacted North African leaders or, inversely, were contacted by them.[4] Others undertook private initiatives to support Algerian and Tunisian causes during the struggle for independence against the French, at times to the great displeasure of the Israeli government. One such example is the Israel Association in Support of the Algerian Rebellion, founded in 1960.[5]

The persons whom Israel sought to approach before and after national independence in the Maghreb included key leaders who subsequently held ministerial, parliamentary, and labor leadership posts, or who served as leaders of the opposi-

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tion to the central government. In Morocco these included Mahdi Ben Barka, leader of the Istiqlal Party and later of the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP), who, once in voluntary exile in Europe (1960), met with Mossad agents and asked for financial support and weapons to carry out a revolution.[6]

In Tunisia they included Neo Destour Party political leaders such as Habib Bourguiba (Tunisian president, 1957-87), his son Habib Bourguiba, Jr., and Ahmad Mestiri; Salah Ben Youssef (an important opposition leader in the 1950s and early 1960s); Bahi Ladgham (Bourguiba's confidant and former Tunisian premier); and labor leaders Ahmad Ben Salah, Shadli Rahim, and Ahmad Tlili.

In Algeria they included several important leaders of the Front for National Liberation (FLN), as well as of the FLN's provisional government-in-exile (GPRA): Ferhat Abbas, the one-time head of the GPRA; Abdelkader Chanderli, the GPRA's man at the UN; Muhammad Yazid, GPRA Minister of Information stationed in Tunis; Jean Amrouche, a pro-FLN intellectual; and Messali Hadj, the legendary figure of modern Algerian anti-French nationalism since the 1920s whose Algerian National Movement (MNA) rivalled the FLN. Since 1959-60, and perhaps earlier, Israel strove to establish channels of communication with the Moroccan monarchy in the era of King Muhammad V, though real success in this endeavor was achieved after 1961 when Prince Moulay Hasan (King Hasan II) ascended the throne upon Muhammad V's death.

Between the 1956 Sinai Campaign and the Six-Day War

In the period between the 1956 Sinai/Suez War and the June 1967 conflict, there were several motives for Israeli diplomats and the intelligence community to seek contacts with Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians. First and foremost, in the case of Morocco, Israel launched a two-pronged policy: seeking to open a secret channel with the Palace while, simultaneously, maintaining contacts with the opposition to the Palace, mostly leftist leaders, several of whom were exiled. In view of its large Jewish community and the presence of international Jewish organizations in its midst — Alliance Israelite Universelle, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Otzar ha-Torah, Lubavitch, local branches of the World Jewish Congress, the United HIAS Service, and, until the closing of its operations in Fall 1956, the Jewish Agency — Morocco was regarded by Israel as a milieu where Jews had to be protected, and as a reservoir for aliya. Once Morocco became independent in 1956, and for the next five years, the authorities curbed Jewish freedom of movement. The Moroccans launched this unpopular policy partly out of fear of antagonizing President Nasser of Egypt and alienating other pan-Arab forces, not to mention the Arab League, which Morocco, like Tunisia, joined in 1958. As a result, during this period the Mossad formed an illegal aliya underground inside Morocco to smuggle out as many Jews as possible. This arrangement, however, proved perilous and hence a negotiated solution was favored by the Israelis.

Second, Morocco was also vital to Israel for regional purposes. By attempting to establish a pipeline to the Palace and cultivating relations with opposition leaders (lest the monarchy be overthrown, for it was unstable in the years immediately following national independence), Israel had hoped that Morocco, as well as Tunisia and Algeria, would forge discreet ties, thus foiling (or refraining from supporting) Arab League economic and social policy to further isolate Israel in the Arab world. In other words, it was important for Israel to gradually but effectively align itself with North African regimes which may have displayed reluctance to become totally subservient to Nasserism and Middle Eastern pan-Arabism. Israel envisaged for itself the role of influencing and even "helping" these regimes distance themselves from Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad. To realize this goal, Israel was prepared to provide economic and social assistance in the same manner as it was then assisting the newly emerging nations of sub-Saharan Africa.

In the case of Tunisia and Algeria, Israel discreetly sided with the more moderate nationalist forces that had emerged during decolonization against their more extremist counterparts. Consequently, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion supported the leaders of the Algerian GPRA who were inclined to see Israel in a more positive light, among them the Youssef Ben-Khedda/Muhammad Boudiaf camp, as opposed to the more radical forces led by Ahmad Ben Bella, a group inspired by Nasserism which, in the final analysis, won the struggle for Algerian leadership.

Under the premiership of Ben-Gurion and Levi Eshkol, Israel had welcomed Tunisian President Bourguiba's struggle against Nasser and the Arab League, which he reproached for serving as an apparatus destined to accommodate Nasser's imperialistic dreams in the Arab world. Unlike Morocco, which temporarily banned aliya, Bourguiba, much to the disapproval of his closest confidants, not to mention in outright defiance of the Arab League, allowed Jews to leave for Israel via France and permitted the Jewish Agency to maintain operations in Tunis, responsible for organizing their departure. It is not coincidental that the Jewish Agency office offered, among other

things, data to Tunisian officials about Israel's agricultural sector, labor affairs, and life on the moshav and kibbutz. In fact, the challenge posed by Bourguiba to Cairo and the Arab League erupted into open verbal hostility, triggering the exchange of mutually vitriolic accusations between Radio Cairo and Radio Tunis in the late 1950s and early 1960s about "treason against the Arab cause." The Cairo-Tunis conflict culminated with Bourguiba's speech in Jordan and his propaganda tours throughout the Third World in 1965. During this time, Bourguiba sent a tremor throughout the Arab world when he urged Arab leaders to recognize Israel in return for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the spirit of the November 1947 UN Partition Plan. Though his central aim was not to serve Israel's best interests (given the emphasis on the 1947 partition plan) but to discredit Nasser and Soviet-supported pan-Arab regimes, from an Israeli vantage point, at least, Bourguibism emerged as a convenient and potentially positive Arab leadership counterweight to Egyptian Nasserism and Syrian Ba'athism. Ultimately, discreet relations between Jerusalem and Tunis did not appear to crystallize as a consequence of this development, just as ties with Algiers were not implemented subsequent to Ben Bella's accession to power. It should not be ruled out that the meetings held by WJC European and American representatives with Bourguiba and his confidants may have been a contributing factor to his flexibility vis-a-vis Israel.

Israel also needed a Maghrebi connection for intelligence data-gathering. Israel's focus on such needs in past decades prompted the weaving of complex relationships, including diplomatic ties with non-Arab Muslim regimes in Iran and Turkey. Morocco was to become the first Arab nation to develop similar intelligence "arrangements," yet of the kind that fell short of diplomatic relations. While one should not dismiss the possibility that such relations may have developed between Rabat and Jerusalem in the late 1950s, it is likely, based on available evidence, that they only crystallized after 1960.

In 1961, with Hasan II on the throne, secret negotiations took place in Europe between A. Benjelloun, the Palace representative, and Alex Gattmon, the Mossad's man in Morocco in charge of illegal aliya. This led to the resumption of semi-legal aliya under the auspices of Operation Yakhin, in which tens of thousands of Jews emigrated. The negotiations over aliya opened a window of opportunity for other forms of cooperation, namely in the area of mutually beneficial intelligence exchange between Jerusalem and Rabat on "Arab affairs." By mid-1963, Colonel Muhammad Oufkir, Moroccan Minister of the Interior, and Meir Amit, then head of the Mossad, concluded a secret pact providing for the training of Moroccan security services by the Israelis. It became apparent that, while Bourguiba of Tunisia was publicly lambasting Nasser and the United Arab Republic and calling for Palestinian-Israeli peace, his peace crusade was in effect intended to divest the Egyptian dictator of the main weapon that hitherto legitimized Cairo's leadership in the Arab world: the need to struggle against Israel and exploit the plight of the Palestinians. In doing this, Bourguiba's chief aim was to step into Nasser's shoes. Yet the Tunisian leader, as noted, was reluctant to go as far as to seek any sort of Israeli ties, including intelligence cooperation. The Moroccans, on the other hand, no less critical and apprehensive of the Egyptians and Syrians, were nonetheless inclined to meet the challenge of Middle Eastern pan-Arabism and its supporters in their own backyard by discreetly forging secret ties with Israel, and refrained from emulating the bombastic Bourguibist tactics.

Warming Relations in the 1970s and 1980s

During the first half of the 1970s, Moroccan-Israeli relations were upgraded and diversified. Not only did Morocco tolerate various types of activity such as organizing aliya under the aegis of Israeli agents, but the Mossad opened a liaison office which predated the formal liaison office that came into existence in 1994. The original liaison office founded in the 1970s was quite different from the one that functions today. One of its purposes was to organize secret meetings between Israeli political leaders — such as Yitzhak Rabin who visited Morocco in 1976 during his first premiership, and Moshe Dayan who arrived there in 1977 while serving as foreign minister in Menachem Begin's government — and Hasan II and his senior officials. Owing to the activities undertaken by this apparatus, and Hasan II's demarche before the Egyptians, an important meeting took place in September 1977 between Hasan al-Tuhami (Anwar al-Sadat's special envoy and confidant) and Foreign Minister Dayan, where the groundwork was laid for Sadat's peace initiative.

Over time, the clandestine nature of the Israel-Moroccan connection began to give way. Thus, for instance, in July 1986, Shimon Peres, then premier in Israel's national unity government, visited Morocco in a much publicized trip. His meeting with Hasan II at the Ifran Palace caused some consternation in the Arab world, prompting the Syrians to sever diplomatic ties with Rabat. All this was taking place at a time when Bourguiba, still President of Tunisia in November 1987, began to demonstrate greater solidarity with the PLO,

Qadhafi's Libya, and with Israel's other enemies within the Arab world. It was his regime that allowed the PLO in 1982 to establish headquarters in Tunis following its expulsion from Lebanon, leading to a retaliatory military operation by Israel against that organization on Tunisian soil. It was Tunis which agreed to serve temporarily as the headquarters of the Arab League after the Arab world rebuked the Egyptians for reaching a peace settlement with Israel.

The Contribution of Maghrebi Jews to Contacts with Israel

Influential Maghrebi Jews in Tunisia and Morocco play a cardinal role in local politics, an advantage that enabled them to help mold Maghrebi-Israeli connections, or to promote their implementation. Professor René Cassin, the renowned French-Jewish jurist, remarked several decades ago that the road to peace in the Middle East begins in Rabat. At a meeting of international Jewish organizations in Paris, Cassin further remarked in 1970: "It is important to remember that Israel would be interested in receiving new populations, but it is not in her interest that the [Moroccan Jewish diaspora] disappears completely. For once this occurs, and when she will need to benefit [from a Jewish presence in Morocco], in order to establish ties between Israel and Morocco, this will become difficult to accomplish."

Cassin could not have been more accurate in his assessment of the importance of Maghrebi Jewry. In Tunisia, Jewish intellectuals with socialist leanings — among them André Barukh, Albert Bessis (both having served as cabinet ministers during the 1950s), and Eli Cohen-Hadria — served as intermediaries between the Tunisian labor organizations and the Histadrut, were recruited by Israel to act as ambassadors of goodwill in Tunisia to promote the phenomena of kibbutz and moshav, and were prodded by Zionist leaders to "market" Israel in progressive circles. If any contacts were established between Israelis and progressive Tunisian nationalist leaders, it is partly attributable to those Jews who enjoyed favor with the educated elite.

In Morocco, influential Jews were primordially important in weaving Moroccan-Israeli ties. The aforementioned Gattmon-Benjelloun negotiations over aliya may not have been possible without the intercession of Sam Benazeraf and Alfred Cohen. Maître Meyer Toledano and Max Lev of Casablanca, and Professor André Chouraqui (of Algerian origins) were instrumental in forging contacts between Israeli representatives and Morocco's formidable opposition leader, Ben Barka. David Amar, a businessman who enjoyed the support of the Palace, having served for years as chairman of the Moroccan Jewish Federation Council, was close to the Israeli political establishment and utilized his privileged status to foster relations between Jerusalem and Rabat. Robert Asseraf, another important Jewish entrepreneur, was equally instrumental in fortifying ties between Israel and Hasan II.

In recent years, Jewish personalities wielding much influence included André Azoulay (a leading economist), Maxim Azoulay (a retired jurist), and Serge Berdugo (Minister of Tourism in 1993-95). On 1 September 1994, when it became known that a Moroccan liaison office would open in Tel Aviv and an Israeli counterpart would open in Rabat, it was confirmed in Morocco that Maxim Azoulay and André Azoulay were the driving force behind this effort, serving as advisers and troubleshooters to work out some of the details. It also appears that André Azoulay, a close confidant of Hasan II, helped lay the foundations for the Casablanca Middle East Economic Summit that convened in October 1994, in which Israel played a dominant role.

Moreover, following the 13 September 1993 Israeli-Palestinian accord when Hasan II signaled to Jerusalem that he wished to establish formal ties, he appointed Berdugo as Minister of Tourism. Belonging to an established Sephardi family, Berdugo is regarded as one of the most influential tycoons in Morocco. His appointment to this key cabinet post had a great deal to do with Hasan II's desire to attract important entrepreneurial support (including Jews) in Europe and the U.S., as well as to reap some of the benefits of the thriving Israeli tourist industry so as to lure Jewish (and Israeli) tourists to Morocco and jump-start the ailing Moroccan economy.

The Moroccan Liaison Office and the Casablanca Economic Summit

On 2 June 1994, Hasan II convened a special late-night, emergency session of the ruling cabinet. The ministers who arrived at the meeting were surprised to find there Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres together with Uri Savir (then the Foreign Ministry's director-general), Avi Gil (director of the Prime Minister's Office), and David Dadon (then director of the Foreign Ministry's Israel-Arab Department and today the head of the Israel liaison office in Rabat). Hasan II made known his intentions to improve relations between the two nations. Peres called for a Middle Eastern/North African economic summit to be organized in Casablanca and held in the Fall of 1994, direct telephone dialing between the two countries, and liaison offices. During the deliberations, it was evident that most Moroccan cabinet members were reluctant

to support the opening of liaison offices, arguing that the time was not yet ripe for such dramatic measures. Yet when the meeting ended, Hasan II promised Peres that by the end of October 1994, at the very latest, liaison offices would be established. He kept his promise.

On 18 August 1994, General Kadiri, a special emissary of the monarchy, arrived in Israel to discuss with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin the logistics of opening the liaison offices. Kadiri observed that the king was convinced that formalizing ties with Israel would help Morocco's troubled economy and the proposed economic summit in Casablanca could boost Morocco's stature in the Arab world at a time when Rabat did not enjoy the best of relations with key Arab states.

The liaison offices have functioned since Fall 1994 and postal relations between the two nations, severed in 1959, were reestablished. The Casablanca economic summit in October 1994 was symbolic, but not only because the Israelis and leading Moroccan Jews served as a positive stimulant in promoting it. It is ironic that in January 1961, Casablanca was the scene of a major Afro-Arab summit, organized by then King Muhammad V, in which Nasser of Egypt was a leading player. That summit was perhaps the most virulent anti-Israel forum in the early 1960s. The "Casablanca Group" that emerged out of this summit served as a guiding light for Third World enmity toward Israel and a deterrent against Israeli interests in certain important African states. Whereas influential Moroccan Jews were involved in making the Casablanca summit of 1994 successful, the pro-Nasser meeting of 1961, at the height of pan-Arab influence, led to anti-Jewish violence.

Challenges for the Netanyahu Government

In the wake of Netanyahu's inauguration as prime minister, there were manifestations of pessimism in Morocco and Tunisia. The complaints emanating from Tunis and Rabat were that the peace process was at a standstill, the Oslo Accords were in peril, and progress in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations had reached a dead end. Rumors circulated that the Persian Gulf emirates and Tunisia were on the brink of reassessing their various links with Israel. Following his visit to Morocco in late summer 1996, Peres, now the Labor opposition leader, heard from Hasan II that Netanyahu's alleged "No to Jerusalem," "No to a Palestinian state," and "No to a settlement over the Golan Heights," was reminiscent of the 1967 Arab summit in Khartoum. At the time, following their defeat in the June 1967 war, Arab leaders raised their three "noes": "No to a negotiated settlement with Israel," "No to peace," and "No to recognition of Israel." According to Peres, Hasan II complained that, whereas he had opposed the inflexibility of Arab leaders in 1967, he was equally opposed to what he regarded as Israel's similar orientation nearly thirty years later.

It is evident that the grievances raised by Arab leaders against the Netanyahu government were unwarranted and premature. As these lines are written, and notwithstanding his criticism of the way the peace process was handled by the previous government, Netanyahu reached an agreement with Arafat over Hebron, paved the way for future Israeli territorial and security arrangements with the Palestinians, and lined up a responsible leadership to assist him in future negotiations with the Syrians.

There remain potentially critical challenges for the Netanyahu government, and future Israeli governments, concerning the improvement of ties with the Maghreb. First, one should not dismiss the possibility that Rabat could pressure Israel to render assistance to Morocco against the opposition it faces from various Berber separatist forces. The latter pose a threat to national unity in a way the Kurds pose a threat to Iraqi and Turkish national cohesion. In the past, Israel supported the Moroccans in their fight against the Algerian-backed Saharan Polisario liberation movement. Israel may be faced with a serious dilemma in whether or not it ought to be embroiled in the complex web of Moroccan domestic politics. If any Israeli involvement in these problems is revealed, the old accusations are likely to resurface that Israel is taking sides in internal conflicts to stimulate divisions in the Arab world. On the other hand, a decision of non-involvement may lead to accusations by the Palace that Israel could have helped avert instability but instead failed to support a staunch ally.

Second, no less perilous is the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism in Morocco. The accusations leveled against the authorities by radical Moroccan Islamists that the government is either unwilling or unable to grapple with chronic unemployment and the problems of social malaise are causing much anxiety. Here, too, Israel may become involved (or may already be involved) in some sort of indirect support for Hasan II against the Islamists. Should the Islamists enhance their political strength at the expense of the Palace, Morocco's mediating role between Arabs and Israelis could be terminated, and the special relations between the two nations could be endangered or severed. Finally, when Israel and the Palestinians advance in their negotiations on the status of Holy Places in Jerusalem, the current government, like the previous Rabin and Peres governments, will be confronted with

Hasan II's wish to be a partner in this process.

Four parties each claim responsibility for the Holy Places: the PLO, the Saudis, the Jordanians, and the Moroccans. Hasan II is the Chairman of the Commission for the Holy Places of the Arab League. It is unclear if Netanyahu is enthusiastic about the prospect of Morocco becoming directly active in a purely Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian problem, and the issue of accommodating Hasan II is a thorny one.

Like their Moroccan counterparts, the Tunisians are no less eager to foster economic ties with Israel. Though the Tunisian economy today is buoyant, President Zayn Abidine Ben Ali is aware of the benefits Tunisia may reap from such ties, especially in the area of Jewish tourism. Politically, the problem of Islamic fundamentalism is no less endemic in Tunisia than in Morocco. The government's efforts to placate the two main Tunisian Islamist movements — al-Nahda, led by Fazl Baladi and Ben-Aissa al-Madani; and Hizballah, under the leadership of Jamal al-Din Bardi — have failed. The growing tensions between the government and the fundamentalists serve as an incentive for Tunisia to align itself with the moderate regimes of the Arab world, to offer support for the Middle East peace process, and to explore economic cooperation with Israel.

The failure of the Moroccan Islamists to organize large-scale opposition against the Palace, and the meager electoral gains of al-Nahda in the Tunisian parliamentary election of April 1989, not to mention the prevalence of dissension within Tunisia's Islamist forces, are viewed with considerable satisfaction in Jerusalem. The Algerian situation is altogether different. Algeria has not yet taken measures toward opening a liaison office in Israel, due in part to widespread Islamist unrest in the country. Indeed, the stunning electoral gains of the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in the municipal elections of June 1990, their near victory in the national elections of 1992, the assassination, apparently by fundamentalists, of Algerian President Muhammad Boudiaf, who did not rule out contacts with Israel, and the terrorist actions of the radical Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA) in Algeria and France since then, are a source of deep concern to the current Liamine Zeroual government, to moderate Arab regimes, and to Israel. As long as the various legal and illegal Algerian fundamentalist forces enjoy wide political support and are able to pressure the current government not to adopt "unpopular policies," the potential for formal Israeli-Algerian ties is reduced. It is not known at this point if Israel is involved in attempts to stabilize the Zeroual regime against the radical Islamists. Nevertheless, helping the regime in Algiers could become a viable policy option for Israel in return for Algerian approval of opening a liaison office in Tel Aviv.

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Notes

1. WJC representatives involved include Alex Easterman, Joe Golan, André Jabès, Maurice Perlzweig, and Dr. Gerhard Reigner.

2. Influential Tunisian and Moroccan Jews include Meyer Toledano, Max Lev, Robert Asseraf, Alfred Cohen, Dr. Léon Benzaquen, David Amar, Serge Berdugo, André Azoulay, Maxim Azoulay, Albert Bessis, and Elie Cohen-Hadria.

3. Among these European political leaders was Gaston Defferre, a former French senator and mayor of Marseilles.

4. Israelis in contact with North African leaders included Gideon Raphael, Yaakov Karoz, Yaakov Tsur, Alex Gattmon, Yael Vered, Walter Eytan, Reuven Shiloah, Reuven Barkatt, Akiva Levinski, Elkana Galli, Maurice Carr, Israel Neumann, and André Chouraqui.

5. The Israel Association in Support of the Algerian Rebellion was founded by journalists Uri Avneri and Shalom Cohen, as well as Natan Yellin-Mor, a noted political activist.

6. Other Moroccan leaders whom Israel sought to approach included Allal al-Fasi, Muhammad al-Fasi, Abderrahim Bouabid (former cabinet ministers), Si M'barek Bekkai, Ahmad Balafrej, and Abdallah Ibrahim (former cabinet ministers and premiers).

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