

# The Role of the Western Sahara in the Moroccan-Israeli Peace Accord

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (January 2021)

The recent Israeli-Moroccan Peace Agreement struck like a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky (in spite of previous successes under President Trump in peace agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrein and Sudan) but was long predicted as in the cards as a result of a coincidence of interests between the two states and the almost total disappearance of what had been the Spanish colonial empire in North Africa. [Writing](#) in *New English Review* in April 2012, I reminded readers that “*Politics makes strange bedfellows.*” At that time, Morocco was offering the resumption of full diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for a strong lobbying effort with the American President and Congress in favor of Rabat’s Western Sahara policies (and quite possibly, eventually over the so called “plazas” (see map), the “autonomous provinces” of Ceuta and Melilla, two postage stamp size cities and their hinterlands occupied for more than four hundred years by Spain and completely surrounded by Moroccan territory.

As early as September, 2003, the Israeli press revealed that relations between the two countries indeed were thawing. That month, Morocco’s King Mohamed VI even received Israel’s Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom at one of his vacation palaces for political talks. Israeli diplomats reportedly tried to influence the American government to accept Morocco’s plan and make the disputed territory, an “autonomous Moroccan

province". In this complicated chess game, the plazas, Gibraltar, and the Western Sahara are all important chips.

The present king, Mohammed VI (who learned the Koran by heart as a child), like his father, is a pro-Western moderate and had maintained low level ties with Israel until forced to halt all commercial, commercial and tourist and activity by the pressure of the Arab League.

In 1948, more than 260,000 Jews lived in Morocco, making it the Arab state with the largest Jewish population in the Near and Middle East. It has contributed the largest number of *olim* (Jewish immigrants to post-1948 Israel) from a Muslim majority country and from many aspects also have posed the greatest challenge to the veteran and predominantly Ashkenazi society of the State of Israel.

It also represented one of the oldest and most traditional Mizrahi Diasporas and one that was extremely diverse in its composition from sophisticated, literate, multilingual, educated professionals in Casablanca, Tetuan, Tangier and Rabat to skilled artisans and merchants in Fez and Safi to farmers and peddlers in the Atlas mountains. It is believed that a Jewish population existed in Morocco prior to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D; It may well be that a significant proportion of the earliest Jews in Morocco were Berbers who converted to Judaism, some of whom later entered Spain prior to or following the Muslim conquest of the Iberian peninsula in 711-715 AD.

From 1912 to 1956, France and Spain ruled over their respective "protectorates" in Morocco. Under their influence, Jews were treated by the European powers until the advent of World War II as valuable subjects rather than as the proscribed *dhimmis* (protected class of inhabitants paying a special tax under Islam known as the *jizya* and occasionally subjected to humiliating ordinances). The dual French and Spanish rule extended its influence among the Jews to

language, foods, family names and education.

By and large, the older generation of Moroccan Jews living today in Israel do not have bitter memories or hostile sentiments regarding the land of their birth and quite a few have returned to visit the graves of their ancestors. In 1940, the Nazi-controlled Vichy government issued antisemitic decrees that prohibited Jews from fulfilling any public functions. Sultan Mohammed V refused to apply these racist laws and, as a sign of defiance, insisted on inviting all the rabbis of Morocco to his 1941 coronation anniversary celebrations. For this reason, many Moroccan Jews generally held the King and his royal house during much of the 20th century in high regard although in reality, the king was a figurehead and had to follow subsequent anti-Jewish directives from the pro-German Vichy government.

A low point in relations was reached with the participation of Moroccan troops in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 when the country was ruled by King Hassan II. It was keenly felt as a stab in the back by Israelis and Moroccan Jews. The exact number of soldiers sent by the kingdom remains unknown to this day. According to the account of Al Ahram, an Egyptian newspaper, 11,000 Moroccan soldiers were sent although other reports by veterans put the figure at 6,000 and 170 killed.

### **New Moroccan Constitution Proclaims Commitment to Pluralism**

Many observers have commented on the positive and unique character of the new constitution in Morocco adopted in a referendum on July 1, 2011 by a 98.5% vote that proclaims Morocco...*A sovereign Moslem State, committed to the ideals of openness, moderation, tolerance and dialogue to foster mutual understanding among all civilizations ; and...A Nation whose unity is based on the fully endorsed diversity of its constituents : Arabic, Amazigh, Hassani, Sub-Saharan, African, Andalusian, Jewish (hébraïque) and Mediterranean components"*

No other "Arab" state has granted such an official recognition of respecting diversity. The question has often been asked how much of this is pure window dressing and how much reality. The commitment to honor the language of the Berber minority (at least 40%) of the total population was recently granted in a modified form for Tamazight as a language of instruction in the elementary public schools, but it still does not have "official status". In 2006 a Moroccan Berber organization, Constitutionnalisation et l'Officialisation de Tamazight (CNCCOT), demanded that the government accept Tamazight as an official language, adopt a new more secular and democratic constitution, and respect freedom of expression. Tamazight is being taught now in lower grades but is not an "official language."

Jews of Moroccan descent in Israel have been encouraged by the king's policy of having a trusted Jewish advisor, André Azoulay, who previously worked closely with the king's father, Hassan II, and also presides over the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures, based in Alexandria, Egypt. Azoulay is also President of the Executive Committee of the Foundation for the Three Cultures and the Three Religions, based in Seville, Spain.

Less than 3,000 Jews remain in Morocco, a mere 1% of what was the total in 1948. The vast majority of Moroccan Jews emigrated to Israel, France, the United States Canada and Argentina in the from the 1950s, a decision that in retrospect was a wise one that avoided much tension and a potential catastrophe. Nevertheless, many have also longed to visit their former homes, birthplaces and the tombs and burial places of their ancestors.

Time and time again, The Jews of Morocco experienced contradictory behavior from their Muslim rulers and the great majority of their neighbors ranging from respect and gratitude to open contempt and utter disdain. In 1146, southern Spain was inundated by a fanatical ultra-puritanical Muslim sect

from Morocco that destroyed many of the beautiful palaces and artifacts constructed under the benevolent rule of the early caliphs (three of whom were named Abd ar-Rahman, successively numbered I, II and III) when the Muslims were still a small minority in Spain. Like their Berber predecessors, the Almoravids, the Almohads demanded the forced conversion of all Christians and Jews. Most Jews fled northward toward the Christian ruled kingdoms under enlightened rulers, especially Alfonso X ("the wise") centered in Toledo. A new "golden age" for Jews began there and lasted until the vicious pogroms of 1391.

With the passage of time, the rulers of Fez who enjoyed a profitable trade across the Sahara and with Spain and the Eastern Mediterranean moderated their views and tolerated the entry of Jews. The famous Jewish quarter (*mellah*) of Fez became one of the most renowned centers of Jewish craftsmen and merchants in the Near East until it was partly burned down in 1912 when Muslim demonstrators rioted against the French occupiers.

The influx of Jews expelled from Spain (Sephardim) into Morocco aroused uneasiness both among the Muslims afraid of inflated prices and among the Jews already settled there. The Sephardi refugees surpassed the older Jewish Moroccans in education, commerce, and intellectual achievement and made many contributions to the stability of Alaouite monarchy.

A French traveler, I. Chenier gave a detailed account in 1787 of the dual life of many Moroccan Jews, eminently useful to the court and foreign trade but scorned, disdained and frequently humiliated by the Muslim masses (Chénier, *"Recherches Historiques sur les Maures et Histoire de l'Empire de Maroc,"* ii. 351, Paris, 1787)

## **Rivalry of France and Spain in Moroccan Affairs**

With the intervention of France and Spain in Moroccan

affairs in the 19th century, the Jews frequently became the victims of Muslim violence. War with France in 1844 and Spain in 1859 resulted in the plundering of many Jewish homes and brought new misery and ill treatment. These actions provoked outrage in Britain. By 1864, Sir Moses Montefiore, a prominent Jewish philanthropist, financier, and banker knighted by Queen Victoria, supported by the British government, went to Morocco following appeals to him by Moroccan Jews and demanded the liberation of wrongly imprisoned Jews and in a letter to the sultan, petitioned *"to give the most positive orders that Jews and Christians, dwelling in all parts of Your Majesty's dominions, shall be perfectly protected, and that no person shall molest them in any manner whatsoever in anything which concerns their safety and tranquility; and that they may be placed in the enjoyment of the same advantages as all other subjects of Your Majesty."*

Montefiore was successful in both attempts and the prisoners freed followed by an edict on February 15, 1864, granting equal rights. This resulted in the passage of an equal rights edict on February 15, 1864. The edict was confirmed by Mohammed IV's son and successor, Moulay Hasan on his accession to the throne in 1873 and again on September 18, 1880, after the Conference of Madrid, designed to regulate affairs in Morocco.

Why would Morocco's rulers be willing to adopt such more tolerant measures? They were not imposed, but a product of skillful diplomacy by which superior British sea power could demonstrate its potential intervention from the nearby bastion of Gibraltar to protect Moroccan interests from further incursions by the much more threatening advances of Spain and France.

### **Morocco's Political Objectives Since Gaining Independence**

When Morocco obtained full independence in 1956, Jews occupied several important political positions in the new

government, including three Members of Parliament and one Minister (Posts and Telegraphs). The government prohibited Jewish emigration to Israel from 1956 to 1963 but it was obvious that their future in an independent Morocco tied to the Arab League was bleak. By 1967, only 60,000 Jews remained in Morocco

The Six Day War of June 1967 resulted in Arab-Jewish tensions worldwide including Morocco and by 1971, the Jewish population was only 35,000. Eventually, the State of Israel became home to almost one million Jews of Moroccan descent, around 15% of the nation's total population

### **The Complicated Chess Game**

Spain's attempts in the 19th Century to become an imperial power, after the loss of its South American and Caribbean colonies, focused on expansion and influence in Morocco and West Africa. Ceuta and Melilla were important staging grounds for further penetration into Morocco, the Spanish Sahara, and Equatorial Guinea. Eventually, Spain gained control of its own protectorate in Morocco. From the Moroccan point of view, its demands to acquire the plazas of Ceuta and Melilla are part of its struggle for liberation against colonialism. They don't accept the Spanish arguments about historical presence (they have been occupied by Spain longer than the British have occupied Gibraltar), or sovereignty, or even the right of self-determination.

Spain's campaign to "decolonize" Gibraltar from British rule was submitted to the UN in December 1967. In spite of all the changes in technology and transportation in the past century, Gibraltar retains a strategic importance. The straight separating Spain from Africa is only 8.6 miles wide at Gibraltar and while the port is not of great economic importance, the naval base has safeguarded the link between the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Suez Canal. It acts as a guardian for international shipping, especially oil tankers

supplying Western Europe and Britain with oil from the Persian Gulf. The Spanish claim to Gibraltar was the sole issue on which the governments of General Franco and the losing Republican side in the civil war fully agreed.

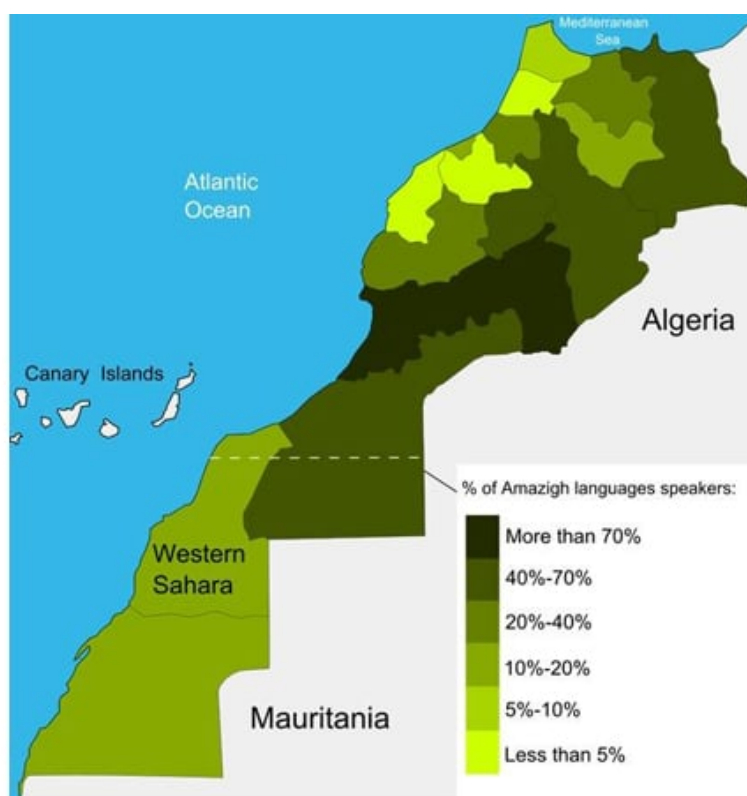
During the reign of King Hassan II (1929-1999), Morocco recuperated the Spanish-controlled area of Ifni (see map) in 1969, and seized two thirds of Spanish Sahara through the “Green March” in November, 1975, a strategic mass demonstration, coordinated by the Morocco to force Spain to hand over the disputed province of Spanish Sahara to Morocco. The demonstration of some 350,000 Moroccans advanced several kilometers into the Western Sahara territory, escorted by nearly 20,000 troops, Morocco later gained control over most of the former Spanish Sahara. The African union and a total of 81 governments considered the territory a sovereign, albeit occupied, state. They demand recognition of an independent Western Sahara, styled the “Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic” (SADR).

This issue put Moroccan foreign policy into a long dispute with the radical Islamic states and Algeria. Relations deteriorated sharply due to the Western Sahara affair, as well as Moroccan claims on Algerian territory, which unleashed the brief 1963 “Sand War.” Morocco had been walking a tightrope under the present King Mohammed VI, anxious to assume undisputed control over the former Spanish possessions in Africa and assert its credentials as a proud Muslim nation by recovering the plazas of Ceuta and Melilla. Israel whereas the issue of Palestine was never anywhere near so important.

The announcement by King Mohammed VI that Morocco would establish diplomatic relations with Israel was significant at the highest levels. It meant that the Arab country with the oldest Jewish community in Israel – as well as the largest Jewish diaspora in the Middle East opted for political and economic ties with the Jewish state.



Had Donald Trump been reelected, it is quite likely that the Saudis, most concerned about the prospect of aggression and religious antagonism with Shi'ite Iran, would have also made a full peace agreement with Israel.



*Languages in Morocco*



Borders of Colonial Regimes. Ifni and Cape Juby are now part of Western Sahara region incorporated into Morocco. Tangier, a former international city is now part of Morocco. Ceuta and Melilla remain as part of Spain. After absorption of the Western Sahara, Morocco nearly doubled its size.

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