

Normalization and Israel

by Michael Curtis



In this year of the pandemic which impacts our daily lives, two unexpected events took place on December 12, 2020 symbolizing the year of peace. In Washington D.C. Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer held a virtual Hanukkah lighting ceremony with Bahrain's Ambassador to the U.S., Abdulla Rashid bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, and the UAE Ambassador to the U.S., Yousef al Otaiba, to celebrate the third day of Hanukkah by lighting the festival candles together. Simultaneously, the Jewish community in the UAE lit their Hanukkah candles. The flares may have been small in size but the psychological flame of the events is large and intensifying.

Meanwhile, in a second event on the same day, in New Delhi, India, representatives of the state of Israel and the Kingdom of Bhutan signed an agreement establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries, following years of secret

contacts. Bhutan is a landlocked country, about twice the size of Israel, located in the eastern Himalayas, bordered by China and India. Mostly Buddhist with a Hindu minority, and with a population of about 800,000, not related to Middle East affairs, the population is famous for its gross national happiness index, a substitute for GDP, a measure of the progress of the country, which is now a constitutional monarchy, having replaced an absolute monarchical system. The two countries agreed to work together in areas of water management, agriculture, healthcare and Covid-19, and other areas.

The agreement with Bhutan comes days after the agreement between Israel and Morocco. On December 10, 2020 those two countries agreed to normalize relations between them. They will not presently establish embassies or consulates, but will reopen liaison offices in Tel Aviv and in Rabat that had been closed in 2000, as a result of the Intifada that broke out that year. Morocco agreed to Israeli overflights of its air space and to commercial flights from Tel Aviv.

The deal with Morocco was announced in a twitter by President Donald Trump who also stated regarding an unrelated issue that the U.S. would recognize Morocco sovereignty over Western Sahara, a fiercely contested region. Part of the rationale for Trump's decision was, in an unusual argument, that it was recompense for Morocco's recognition of the new state, the U.S. in 1777, allegedly the first country to do so, and so it was fitting that the U.S. recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. However, the U.S. entered into a tricky problem, that of Western Sahara that was a former Spanish colony until 1975, after which it has been disputed territory. Western Sahara is a non-self-governing territory, between Southern Morocco and Mauritania, with a population over 350,000, and is a region that may have oil deposits and mineral reserves. Regarded as Africa's last colony, the region was given up by Spain in 1976, since when it has been a

disputed area and subject to guerilla warfare. A minority part of the region is controlled by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and the Polisario Front, the independence movement backed by Algeria and Iran, while most of it is occupied and administered by Morocco. The United Nations holds that the Sahrawis have a right to self-determination, but the White House holds however that an independent Sahrawi state is not a realistic option.

A more realistic option is the Abraham Accords, the joint statement between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, UAE, and the U.S., signed on August 2020, that marked the first normalization of relations between Israel and an Arab country since those with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. It is leading to a historic breakthrough in advancing peace in the Middle East. After the original agreement, the process, named after Abraham, the prophet of both Judaism and Islam, has led to normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries: Bahrain on September 15, 2020 in the White House, Sudan on October 23, 2020, an event that led the U.S. to remove Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, Morocco on December 10, and Bhutan on December 12, 2020.

These arrangements reflect a number of factors: the changing geopolitics of the Middle East; the increasing belief in the importance of dialogue and understanding of others point of view; the cooperation in a large number of areas, including biotech, healthcare, defense, intelligence capabilities, cyber surveillance, military hardware and economic benefits, fear of Iran and increasingly of Turkey, and perhaps most significantly the reduction though not end of Arab concern for the Palestinians. The Arab and other countries entering into normalization arrangements have no border or territorial dispute with Israel. Their priority, as with all nations, is self-interest but some remain aware, both rhetorically and politically, of the Palestinian cause, and are reluctant and ambivalent at the moment to enter into normalization

relations. It is noticeable and discouraging that when the Israeli Knesset on October 15, 2020 approved the normalization deal with the UAE, all the Arab members voted against it.

This reluctance and ambivalence is perhaps best illustrated by present utterance of prominent officials of Saudi Arabia. On one hand, the former Saudi intelligence chief, Turki al-Faisal, has stated that "you cannot treat an open wound (regarding the Palestinians) with palliatives and painkillers," and foreign minister Faisal bin Farhan has said "we think Israel will take its place in the region. But we do need the Palestinians to get their state." On the other hand, Bandar bin Sultan, the former ambassador to the U.S. in October 2020 accused the Palestinian leadership of squandering decades of opportunities to make peace with Israel. For him the Palestinian cause is a just cause but its advocates are failures: "They are aligning themselves with Iran and Turkey, foes of Saudi Arabia."

Morocco has been less ambivalent than Saudi Arabia. Its arrangement between Israel and Morocco is a formidable breakthrough for peace and stability, and official action following unofficial economic, military, cultural and intelligence ties for some years. The history of Jews in Morocco goes back more than 3,000 years, and the area became a refuge when Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 15th century. Though there was considerable discrimination and cruelty over the centuries, in 1948 there were more than 250,000 Jews in the country, the largest Jewish community in the Muslim world. After the creation of the state of Israel, Jews began leaving Morocco in 1948. About had 110,000 had left before emigration was stopped in 1956. However, in 1961 a remarkable operation named *Operation Mural* organized by David Littman led to illegal emigration of 530 Jewish children to Israel and this was followed by a large emigration, about 100,000, between 1962-64. Today there about 2000 Jews in the country. Though the figures are questionable, there may now be

about three quarters of a million Israelis of Moroccan descent, and estimates are that 50,000 Israelis travel to Morocco every year.

For some years Morocco had established low level diplomatic relations with Israel which were suspended in 2002 because of the Intifada that had begun. Both King Mohammed VI, and his late father Hassan II, maintained pragmatic and friendly relations with Israel. The significance of the new deal, helped by Trump, is that it brought these relations out of the shadows into the sunlight. Morocco is an influential country, with 36 million citizens, which already cut ties in 2018 with Iran which via Hezbollah funded the Polisario Front. It may begin to change the views of countries like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia that remain on the fence.

Morocco is also unusual in the Muslim world in having a Jewish museum. This in Casablanca that opened in 1997, is the only Jewish museum in the Muslim world. Among other features, it shows the cultural links between Jews and Berbers. The country also has a number of Jewish heritage sites including one in Marrakech.

After Morocco and Bhutan there is increasing likelihood of other states, such as Oman and Qatar, entering in normalization arrangements with Israel. A signal comes from the de-facto ruler of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed, MBZ, educated at the British military school Sandhurst, who believes in the importance of dialogue and the need to understand the point of view of others. Oman has had unofficial trade relations with Israel for a number of years. Following contacts between the two countries, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Oman in October 2018 and met the former leader Sultan Qaboos to discuss peace initiatives.

It is encouraging that states, still reluctant to take the official step of normalization with Israel, are nevertheless

involved in economic, trade, and sports relations. At the moment, there are 14 countries that do not accept the Israeli passport, but after the flurry of positive arrangements in 2020 the number is likely to decrease. Saudi Arabia is said to have played a role in the normalization deal, Morocco-Israel. It is likely that none of the 2020 deals would have taken place without Saudi approval. A meeting has already occurred between Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in November 2020 in the city of Neom. Spring may be a little late in Saudi Arabia but it is time for the country to come out of the shadows and into the sunlight.