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Evolving consensus around Moroccan-Israeli normalisation: a political space analysis

L'évolution du consensus autour de la normalisation maroco-israélienne : une analyse de l'espace politique

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Résumés

English Français

Morocco's accession to the Abraham Accords in December 2020 represented a shift in the country's long-standing diplomatic position regarding the Palestinian cause. Remarkably, this shift challenged the accepted political consensus on this issue, forcing a repositioning of actors and opening possible spaces for counter-narratives. In doing so, it also provoked wide social mobilizations, which included the transversal participation of broad sectors of Morocco's society. This contribution looks at the consequences of the shifting consensus on Palestine through the analytical framework of political spaces, understood as arenas of conflict and cooperation for the negotiation of consensus. The paper argues that this rupture of the accepted consensus created a new cleavage in Morocco's society. On one hand, most political parties accepted this turning point in Morocco's diplomatic position, echoing the diplomatic and economic benefits resulting from this change. On the other, this decision revitalized the advocates for the Palestinian cause, mainly gathered around the "National Front in Support of Palestine and Against Normalization". Ultimately, this paper offers insights on the way in which state and society shape political consensus, as well as on the ways in which they interact and compete to impose their narrative.



l'évolution du consensus autour de la question palestinienne à travers le cadre analytique des espaces politiques, compris comme des arènes de conflit et de coopération au sein desquelles se négocie un consensus. L'article soutient que cette rupture du consensus a créé un nouveau clivage dans la société marocaine. D'une part, la plupart des partis politiques ont accepté ce tournant dans la position diplomatique du Maroc, se faisant l'écho des avantages diplomatiques et économiques résultant de ce changement. D'autre part, cette décision a revitalisé les défenseurs de la cause palestinienne, principalement rassemblés autour du « Front national de soutien à la Palestine et contre la normalisation ». *In fine*, cet article offre un aperçu de la manière dont l'État et la société façonnent le consensus politique, ainsi que de la manière dont ils interagissent et rivalisent pour imposer leur récit.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Maroc, consensus, conflit israélo-palestinien, normalisation, opposition

Keywords: Morocco, consensus, Israel-Palestine conflict, normalization, opposition

Géographie : Maroc

Texte intégral

1 The Morocco-Israeli normalisation arguably represents one of the marking events of Morocco's recent political history. Officialised by Morocco's accession to the Abraham Accords in December 2020, the normalisation foresees the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries, setting the ground for enhanced investment and cooperation opportunities in a broad array of sectors. Even if Morocco's monarchy has historically maintained a moderate and open position towards Israel (Abadi 2000), the normalisation formalises Morocco's stance towards Israel and paves the way to exponentially increase the cooperation between the two countries. Beyond the impact of this decision on both the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, this unprecedented step also had broad consequences on Moroccan politics.

2 Officially, this decision was celebrated as a success for both diplomatic and economic reasons. It is no secret that the normalisation with Israel comes in exchange for the US' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty on the Western Sahara. This is explicitly highlighted by the Joint Declaration signed by the three countries, hence becoming an integral part of this agreement.¹ As fostering international recognition of Morocco's control over the Western Sahara is one of the key foreign policy priorities of Mohammed VI (Fernández-Molina 2016, 20), US' formal recognition was cause for celebration at home. However, the decision also caused a new wave of protests that reaffirmed Moroccans' enduring solidarity towards Palestinians.² Although the palace always maintained a formally supportive stance towards the Palestinian cause, citizens and civil society have denounced that a normalised relationship with Israel indirectly legitimises the military occupation of Palestinian land – fundamentally jeopardising the rights of Palestinians.³ Yet, pro-Palestinians mobilisations failed to reach past levels. As Fakir (2022) explains, this may be attributed to both the 'bundle deal' nature of the normalisation agreement, which binds the recognition of Morocco's claim over the Western Sahara with the normalisation, as well as to the prompt crackdown on attempts to seize public space by pro-Palestinian activists.

Palestinian cause. In turn, such a challenge prompts a (re-)positioning of actors: some stakeholders may accept this change, realigning themselves with the palace's hegemonic position, while others may contest it – potentially opening the space for counter-hegemonic narratives. We will unravel these dynamics through the framework of political spaces, broadly defined as arenas of conflict and cooperation for the negotiation of consensus (Beswick 2010). A political space analysis focuses on the interaction between actors around the development, consolidation and, eventually, challenge of a hegemonic consensus. In this framework, the next section of this paper provides an overview of the ways in which the new consensus around Morocco-Israeli relations is consolidated, while the following will review the ways in which it is being challenged. A final section draws some conclusions from these interactions.

Developing and consolidating a new hegemonic consensus

- 4 As introduced above, the palace generally maintained a moderated and often open position towards Israel. As Abadi (2000) illustrates, Hassan II contacts with Israeli officials started prior to his coronation, and they grew ever since. This attitude was a by-product of both domestic and external constraints. From a foreign policy perspective, the monarchy saw Israel as a key ally to consolidate its revendication on the Western Sahara. Beyond its perceived influence on US foreign policy, Israel supported Morocco in its struggle against the Polisario Front in the Western Sahara since the mid-1970, including both intelligence cooperation and military assistance (Abadi 2000: 39).
- 5 Despite containing external criticism and backlash, Hassan II's position towards Israel was thoroughly opposed at home. The uninterrupted contact with Israeli officials, and the growing cooperation that ensued, were the main cause for concern. Such opposition persisted in spite of the fact that Hassan II managed to avoid Islamic fundamentalist influence on its foreign policy (hence keeping anti-Israeli sentiments at bay), and that his cooperation was somehow responsive to the situation of Palestinians (Abadi 2000: 49–50). For instance, liaison offices opened in Rabat and Tel Aviv in 1995 following the optimism of the Oslo Accords; subsequently, they were closed in 2000 at the wake of the Second Intifada (Laskier 2004). Even if the quality of the Morocco-Israeli official relationship peaked with the opening of liaison offices, Warshel (2021: 123) notes that “unofficial ties that followed 2000 constituted a repeat of that which had existed in the interim between the 1948 and 1973 wars”.
- 6 As Mohammed VI became monarch and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict endured, the impression was that Morocco was more concerned with domestic issues – especially so with the surge of Islamic radicalism (Laskier 2004:71). Furthermore, the inclusion of opposition parties in government coalitions was expected to impact Mohammed VI's opportunities to dictate autonomously Morocco's policy on the Palestinian issue (Laskier 2004:72). However, Mohammed VI foreign policy unfolded in continuity with the past. Not only foreign policy remained an reserved domain (*domain réservé*) for the monarchy, but Mohammed VI saw it as instrumental to achieve domestic goals – with the recognition of Morocco's control over the Western Sahara as its central objective (Fernández-Molina 2016: 20–21).

Western Sahara is presented first, followed by a brief call to preserve Al-Quds' 'special status' that precedes the announcement of the main measures of the normalisation.⁴ Different analyses have pointed out the apparent 'bet' of the palace, which assumed that Moroccans' commitment towards the Western Sahara would triumph over their opposition to the upgrading their relationship with Israel (Abderrahmane 2020; Abouzzohour 2020; Fakir 2022).

8 From this point, the new consensus is consolidated relying on a two-fold argument. First, the palace reaffirms, as done before, that the rapprochement does not alter its position concerning the Palestinian cause. The "ongoing commitment" to the Palestinian issue is both included in the statement and embodied in a call between Mohammed VI and President of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas. This call was an opportunity for Mohammed VI to reiterate that "Morocco always places the Palestinian issue in the rank of the Moroccan Sahara issue, and that Morocco's work to consolidate its Moroccanness will never be, neither today nor in the future, at the expense of the Palestinian people's struggle for their legitimate rights."⁵ This statement also followed previous efforts, such as the "Al-Quds Call" between Mohamed VI and Pope Francis in 2019, to promote and preserve Muslims' access to the city of Jerusalem – threatened by Israel's annexation of the city in the framework of the US peace deal. This initiative not only aimed at reinforcing Morocco's commitment with the Palestinian cause, it aimed at underpinning Mohamed VI's religious legitimacy and its responsibility over Muslims abroad (Tomé-Alonso and Garcia de Paredes 2020). On the other hand, the State stressed both cultural and economic benefits to justify reaching a new phase in the cooperation with Israel. On top of recalling the Moroccan-Jewish heritage as the cultural foundation of the normalisation (Rddad 2021), the ambitious promises of economic development were also presented as a key incentive. These include a bilateral agreement between the Moroccan and Israeli's employers and businesses and an expansion of bilateral trade from 130 to 500 million dollars per year.⁶ In a context of economic duress, profoundly impacted by both Covid-19 and the conflict in Ukraine, perspectives of economic gains are particularly welcomed by the population. Furthermore, the high-levels visits of Israeli officials in Morocco also prove the growing cooperation in the security and military sectors.⁷ Israel's support to Morocco's claims over the Western Sahara was consolidated in July 2023, when it announced its official recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the territory, finally fulfilling the tri-partite agreement reached at the end of 2020.⁸ The rumours on the possibility of Israel opening an embassy in Dakhla are complemented by the symbolic decision of hosting the next Negev Forum in this city (Chtatou 2023).

9 The contradiction between Morocco's official solidarity with Palestinians and the cooperation with Israel is evident. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalates,⁹ Morocco's continued cooperation becomes harder to justify. Yet, while Abadi reminds that under Hassan II political parties were vocal supporters of Palestinian rights and often compel him to limit cooperation with Israel and appear critical (2000:41), the situation in 2020 drastically changed. Political parties mainly closed ranks with the palace: Nabil Benandallah (PPS), Aziz Akhnouch (RNI) and Driss Lachgar (USFP) all applauded the diplomatic turn, while leaders from the Istiqlal Party in Laâyoune organized rallies to support the three-party agreement.¹⁰ Except the RNI, all these parties had been involved in the formulation of a draft law to criminalise attempts to normalise relations with Israel in 2013.¹¹ Yet, legislative action has not followed-up. Moroccan MPs may share very heated speeches against Israel's actions, as they did during the 2021 clashes in Gaza, but formal opposition to the normalisation has lacked, portraying the parliamentary parties' to the new hegemonic consensus.¹²

denying the possibility of normalisation, he was talking as head of the PJD party and not as Head of Government.¹⁴ The implication of El Othmani was understood as an attempt to reduce opposition to this process (Desrues 2021). In addition, the normalisation substantially contributed to further alienate PJD's voters, ultimately leading to its 2021 electoral debacle (Masbah 2021). The forming of a three-party government coalition close to the Palace further contributed to reduce the institutional space for disagreement. Holding an extraordinary congress after the signing of the agreement, the PJD took two days to issue a statement to clarify its position, while trying to appease the internal unrest generated by the signing (Desrues and Kirhlani 2022)). There, the PJD welcomed the US recognition of Western Sahara and underlined both the King's commitment to the Palestinian cause and the PJD's traditional rejection of Israeli occupation – avoiding even to mention the normalisation with Israel.¹⁵

11 The signature of the normalisation agreement is a clear example of the control of the palace over foreign policy, where it remains the main institution with decision-making capacity (Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso 2019: 8). As the agreement establishes a new consensus, its consolidation happens as actors (re-)align with the position of the palace. The fact that all government parties stopped their efforts to change institutional agreements with Israel exemplifies such repositioning of actors. A primal element in the building of a State's narrative has been the country's territorial integrity and its gains on the *Moroccan Sahara* cause. As promising economic perspectives sweetened the deal, constant shows of solidarity for Palestinians nurtured the image of an unchanged position. The extreme mediatization of Moroccan football players holding the Palestinian flag figures amongst the most prominent examples of this. As noted by Belcastro, "it is highly unlikely that the players' behaviour (repeated in every match) was not at least tacitly accepted by Moroccan authorities" (2022: 3). The regime banked on the players' show of support to Palestinians, while minimising pressure to change its position towards Israel.

12 Even if the palace seems to have successfully steered the political establishment towards the new consensus on Morocco's relationship with Israel, critical voices persist. The following section explores the way in which actors countering this narrative also have been repositioning to counter the palace's hegemonic claim.

Countering the hegemony: same actors, new challenges?

13 Despite State's far-reaching strategy to establish a new hegemonic consensus on Moroccan-Israeli relations, this paper argues that this shift also presented new opportunities to generate opposition to the new consensus. First, the decision was not accepted by all Moroccans. On the contrary, this policy shift clashed with Morocco's popular opinion towards the Palestinian cause and the Abraham Accords. Arab Barometer and Arab Opinion polls have been adamant about where the Moroccan public stands: only between 4% and 9% of the population supporting normalization with Israel in October 2020, while 70% of the population considering it a transnational cause of solidarity.¹⁶ Moreover, some independent journalists also questioned this new consensus. Notably, the group "Moroccan journalists against the normalization of Zionist occupation" condemned, among others, the opening of an Israeli media channel in Morocco.¹⁷ Likewise, the movement Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) and the Moroccan Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (MACBI) have launched several calls condemning normalization,

of embezzlement and sexual misconduct further reinforced the calls to end the normalisation.²⁰

14 However, the creation of the “Moroccan Front for Supporting Palestine and Against Normalization” (hereinafter, National Front) represents a crucial evolution of the political spaces to counter the new hegemonic consensus. The National Front is a broad cross-ideological movement to protest against the State’s decision that combines a dozen political and human rights associations. These include the AMDH, Islamist association Justice and Spirituality, and the BDS movement, as well as the trade union CDT and left-wing parties – such as the PSU, PADS, the National Ittihad Congress, and Democratic Way. On one hand, the relevance of the National Front relates to its composition. As a transversal issue, the normalisation allowed the National Front to foster collaboration between traditional opposition and semi-opposition actors – which rarely work together. Moreover, it prompted the collaboration of institutional actors (which hold a small presence in the Parliament) and non-institutional actors from civil society, further broadening the space for action of this opposition movement. The inclusion of Islamist association Justice and Spirituality is paradigmatic. While excluded from the Moroccan Social Front due to its lack of democratic commitment²¹, Justice and Spirituality plays a pivotal role in the organization of this movement, where it is considered to share a common agenda with the rest of actors involved.

15 On the other hand, the normalisation also allowed the opposition coalesced in the National Front to reframe its contestation on domestic issues. Whereas demonstrations for the Palestinian cause traditionally aimed at international dynamics and revindications, the central role played by the State in the normalisation allowed the National Front to engage national politics too. Concretely, the domestic nature of these claims opens the possibility of confronting a realm traditionally reserved to the Palace (Casani 2022). State’s role in the promotion of the normalisation also reinforced a cleavage that separates pro-Palace actors and the opposition. The fact that the PJD’s alleged attempt to join the National Front was rejected due to its involvement in the signing of the agreement further corroborates this point.²² Moreover, the evolution of practices to express dissent to the normalisation, as well as the ones to reassert State’s control, reflect the generation of new political spaces. Covid-19 restrictions to public space played an important role in the prohibition of contestation activities and substantially affected the Nation Front actions.²³ This has forced the National Front to look beyond street protest and engage in digital spaces. Alternative means of expression included media campaigns, a call to boycott after the opening of direct flights between Morocco and Israel, or the organisation of a mock trial against the Abraham accords. On top of limiting access to public spaces, state’s control dynamics also relied on the delegitimization of dissenting actors’ claims. The best example of this is the diplomatic visit of Hamas politician Ismail Haniyeh to Morocco in June 2021, when he could not meet with Justice and Spirituality due to the ‘official nature’ of his visit.²⁴

16 A last example of the attempts to provide a counter-hegemonic narrative is provided by the PJD, which has become increasingly critical towards Israel after the 2021 elections. Following the return to parliamentary opposition and the re-election of former prime minister Abdelillah Benkirane as leader of the party, tensions with the Palace escalated when the PJD issued a statement openly criticising the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ “defence” of Israel at African and European meetings.²⁵ The communication came after the announcement of a tripartite cooperation agreement involving Morocco, the European Union and Israel two days before, and provoked a strong rejection by the Palace. This included the issuing of a response by the Royal Cabinet, which stressed the king’s prerogatives over foreign policy and rejected third actors’ intervention on the country’s

Conclusion: the political spaces of evolving consensus

- 17 Generally speaking, it is clear that the Palace is having a hard time walking the tight rope between support to Palestinians and collaboration with Israel.²⁸ As Israel's government further shifts towards authoritarian practices and the situation of Palestinians worsen (Tahhan 2023), the task is further complicated.
- 18 When the monarchy changed the position regarding Morocco-Israeli relations, it moved the new red line that establishes the consensus. As this change caused pro-Palace parties to realign with this new position, it also opened new opportunities for actors to voice their disagreement. This included the possibility of finding new common ground for action, something which had proven hard in the past, even regarding international issues (Bennani-Chraïbi 2019). The formation of new coalitions and the engagement in novel repertoires of action contributed to shifting the opposition to this policy from political elites to other spaces.
- 19 Fundamentally, it is not only the normalisation itself that is at the centre of the contested consensus; this discussion is getting dangerously close to questioning the prerogatives of the monarchy. The evolution of the political space for the normalisation showed that enduring negotiations not only define the issue at hand, but also the role of the actors involved and their respective margin of action. The case of the PJD, which evolved from being the actor that signed off the normalisation to the one that seemingly questions foreign policy choices, provides a key example of how actors navigate evolving political spaces to either consolidate or challenge the hegemonic consensus.

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- 22 Interview held by the authors with members of the National Front.
- 23 The AMDH registered the restriction of at least 143 protest rallies throughout 2021, 14 if which were aimed at the National Front. See: <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/123200/maroc-2021-annee-restrictions-rassemblements.html> In parallel, pro-normalisation

25 Statement published on March 4th 2023 on the PJD website: <https://bit.ly/3RVenax>

26 The Royal Cabinet's statement can be read at: https://fr.le360.ma/politique/depassesments-irresponsables-dabdelilah-benkirane-sur-les-relations-maroc-israel-le-recadrage-du_7H2W2CNDCJA7JNFC4CS5P4GQJ4/

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