

As a Parting gift to Israel, the Trump Administration Pushes Sudan and Morocco to Recognize Israel

By [Marina Ottaway](#) on *December 17, 2020*

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In the last weeks of his presidency, Donald Trump remains engaged in securing his legacy in the Middle East. While the so-called “deal of the century” announced in January 2020 failed to restart a peace process and lead to an agreement between Palestinians and Israelis, U.S. efforts since August has opened the way for the recognition of Israel by four additional Arab states. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have joined Egypt and Jordan on the list of countries willing to break ranks with the rest of the Arab world, establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel although the Palestinian problem remains unsolved. Sudan and Morocco received major incentives from Washington to adopt the new policy. Whether this will advance the cause of peace remains to be seen, but, if it does, it will be peace on Israel’s terms, to the detriment of Palestinians. Trump’s legacy will thus remain highly disputed, but there is no doubt that he succeeded in creating facts on the ground that the incoming administration will find very difficult to undo.



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The first two countries to recognize the state of Israel under the Trump administration were the United Arab Emirates in August 2020 and Bahrain a few weeks later in September. Washington undoubtedly favored the decision and applauded it, but the two countries acted mostly for their own reasons rather than to please the United States. Officially, the Emirates justified normalization by arguing that it would put them in a better position to keep Israel from annexing a large number of West Bank settlements and making a two-state solution an impossibility. In reality, the UAE was looking for investments from and cooperation with a technologically advanced country in the region to help its transformation from an economy relying on oil to the diversified, expanding modern one it aspires to create. The UAE was also looking forward to open access to a new market and to boost its all-important tourism economy. The latter is already happening: recent reports indicate that some 50,000 tourists have already flocked to Dubai, with even larger numbers expected over the Hanukah period.

In September, Bahrain followed in the UAE's footsteps, opting for normalization for the same economic reasons as the Emirates but also hoping ties with Israel would help boost its security. With a Shia majority population and a Sunni royal family, Bahrain feels particularly threatened by Iran and is in need of more allies.

Much to the disappointment of the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia has so far not followed suit. Furthermore, while the administration managed to secure normalization with Israel by Sudan and Morocco, this required considerable pressure and above all significant concessions. Neither country, particularly Sudan, would have rushed to normalize relations with Israel without the large carrots offered by the United States.

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In the case of Sudan, the administration offered to remove it from the list of states sponsors terrorism on which it had been since 1993 because the government of Omar al-Bashir had given shelter to Osama bin Laden, who later plotted the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Sudanese transitional military-civilian government that came to power after an uprising in 2019 had been trying for months to get the country removed from the list in the hope this change would open the door to foreign investments and international aid, but had failed. Recognition of Israel offered a path forward, but the price Sudan paid could prove quite steep, both politically and economically. The regime is already fragile, the decision to recognize Israel is controversial, and it could destabilize the equilibrium between the military and political forces that govern the country jointly at present. The additional condition Sudan had to meet in order to be removed from the list, paying \$335 million in compensation to the victims of the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, is onerous for a country with a sinking economy. Given the potential cost of normalization to Sudan, some observers have argued that the United States blackmailed Sudan into recognizing Israel.

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Morocco, for its part, was induced to normalize relations with Israel by a U.S. offer to legally recognize its de facto annexation of the Western Sahara, circumventing the United Nations' role and ignoring the right of the population to decide its future. The final status of the former Spanish Sahara, which Spain relinquished in

1977 without settling the issue, has been disputed ever since, with the Algerian-backed Polisario Front agitating for independence and Morocco establishing its control over most of the territory. A desultory war between the two sides ended in a ceasefire in 1991 and repeated attempts to find a solution failed. The Trump administration decided to bypass the complicated international negotiations, ignore issues of law, and simply give Morocco what it wanted. In return, Morocco recognized Israel, a very low price to pay for a country that has been distancing itself increasingly from the affairs of the Middle East, looking instead to Europe and West Africa as its neighborhood. The costs of the transaction—the blatant violation of international law, the disregard for the role of the United Nations, and the violation of the rights of the Saharawi people to have a voice in their future—was not borne by Morocco or by the United States.

It seems unlikely that more countries will normalize relations with Israel soon. The Trump administration has little time left to cajole or force new countries to recognize Israel. The incoming Biden administration will have initially much bigger problems on its hands. We are unlikely to witness a landslide of acceptances of Israel by Arab countries. Nevertheless, the Trump administration has succeeded in creating new facts on the ground in favor of Israel that are unlikely to be reversed.

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