

News

## Israel, Morocco agree to normalise relations in US-brokered deal

*Under the agreement, Morocco will establish full diplomatic relations and resume official contacts with Israel.*



Morocco's King Mohammed VI gives a speech in the capital Rabat [File: EPA]

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Israel and Morocco agreed on Thursday to normalise relations in a deal brokered with

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As part of the agreement, US President Donald Trump agreed to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, where there has been a decades-old territorial dispute with Morocco pitted against the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a breakaway movement that seeks to establish an independent state in the territory.

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Trump sealed the agreement in a phone call on Thursday with Morocco's King Mohammed VI.



Morocco is the fourth country since August to strike a deal aimed at normalising relations with Israel. The others were the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

Palestinians have been critical of the normalisation deals, saying Arab countries have set back the cause of peace by abandoning a long-standing demand that Israel gives up land



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Palestinian officials reacted angrily to the announcement. Bassam as-Salhi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee, condemned the deal.

"Any Arab retreat from the [2002] Arab Peace Initiative, which stipulates that normalisation comes only after Israel ends its occupation of Palestinian and Arab lands, is unacceptable and increases Israel's belligerence and its denial of the Palestinian people's rights," Salhi said.

In Gaza, Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said: "This is a sin and it doesn't serve the Palestinian people. The Israeli occupation uses every new normalisation to increase its aggression against the Palestinian people and increase its settlement expansion."

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Moroccan King Mohammed told Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in a phone call on Thursday that Rabat stands by a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a royal court statement said.

The king added negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians are the only way to reach a final, lasting and comprehensive solution to the conflict.

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## Economic cooperation

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed the normalisation deal with Morocco as “another great light of peace”, saying there would be direct flights between the countries and the opening of diplomatic missions.

Under the agreement, Morocco will establish full diplomatic relations and resume official contacts with Israel, grant overflights, and also direct flights to and from Israel for all Israelis.

“They are going reopen their liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv immediately with the intention to open embassies. And they are going to promote economic cooperation between Israeli and Moroccan companies,” White House Senior Advisor Jared Kushner told reporters.

Kushner said it was an “inevitability” that Saudi Arabia will also recognise Israel.

The White House has tried to get Saudi Arabia to sign on to a normalisation deal with Israel, believing if they agreed other Arab nations would follow. But Saudi Arabia has signalled it is not ready.

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Al Jazeera's senior political analyst Marwan Bishara said Thursday's announcement was another example of "America as a diplomatic mercenary on behalf of Israel".

"Let's call it what it is – the imperial proclamation. At the end of the day, Washington is using its influence around the world on behalf of Israel, or rather Israel is outsourcing American power for its own benefit in the greater Middle East," said Bishara.

### **'Not a realistic option'**

The US will also recognise Morocco's claim over Western Sahara, the former Spanish North African territory that has been a long-running dispute that has confounded international negotiators for decades, a White House statement said.

"The United States believes that an independent Sahrawi state is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution," it said.

"We urge the parties to engage in discussions without delay, using Morocco's autonomy plan as the only framework to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution."



Kushner added recognising Moroccan sovereignty in the Western Sahara, “is something that has been talked about for a long time but that is something that seems inevitable at some point”.

“It is something that we think advances the region and helps bring more clarity to where things are going,” he said.

In an official statement, the Polisario Front slammed the US decision.

“The stance... is a blatant violation of the United Nations charter and the resolutions of international legitimacy,” the group said, adding that the move “obstructs efforts by the international community to find a solution to the conflict”.

“This will not change an inch of the reality of the conflict and the right of the people of Western Sahara to self determination,” the Polisario’s Europe representative Oubi Bchraya said earlier on Thursday. “The Polisario will continue its struggle.”

Morocco’s king lauded the “historic” US recognition of sovereignty over Western Sahara, and Morocco’s Royal Court said the US would open a consulate in Western Sahara as part of its deal.

“This is the United States being now the only Western nation to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara,” Al Jazeera’s Kimberly Halkett reported from Washington, DC. “There’s going to be a tough choice for President-elect [Joe] Biden when he comes in: is he going to affirm what Donald Trump has done, or is he going to have make the decision to reverse it?”

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The Polisario Front was launched in May 1973 for an armed struggle against Spanish occupation of Western Sahara [Mohamed Messara/EPA]

## Long history

Morocco, a country with centuries of Jewish history, has long been rumoured to be ready to establish ties with Israel.

Before Israel's establishment in 1948, Morocco was home to a large Jewish population, many of whose ancestors migrated to North Africa from Spain and Portugal during the Spanish Inquisition.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews trace their lineage to Morocco, making it one of the country's largest sectors of Israeli society, and a small community of Jews, estimated at several thousand people, continues to live in Morocco.



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“My parents, who immigrated from Morocco and left their entire lives behind, always spoke of peace and about good relations with the Arab neighbours in Morocco,” he tweeted.

The North African country has for years had informal ties with Israel.

Israel and Morocco established low-level diplomatic relations during the 1990s following Israel’s interim peace accords with the Palestinians, but those ties were suspended after the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000.

Since then, however, the informal ties have continued, and an estimated 50,000 Israelis travel to Morocco each year on trips to learn about the Jewish community and retrace their family histories.

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## Gulf crisis next?

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Much of the momentum behind the deal-making has been to present a united front against Iran and roll back its regional influence.

One more Middle East breakthrough is possible. Last week Kushner and his team travelled to Saudi Arabia and Qatar seeking an end to a three-year rift between Doha and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

A tentative deal has been reached on this front but it was far from clear whether a final agreement to end a blockade of Qatar will be sealed. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt have maintained a diplomatic, trade and travel embargo on Qatar since mid-2017.

While Biden is expected to move US foreign policy away from Trump's "America First" posture, he has indicated he will continue the pursuit of what Trump calls "the Abraham Accords" between Israel and Arab and Muslim nations.

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