

Morocco, Israel, and the Future of the Negev Forum

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Brief Analysis

Morocco is preparing to host the upcoming Negev Forum summit, an opportunity for the Kingdom to expand economic ties and bridge regional divides.

At the end of March 2022, six countries mainly associated with the Abraham Accords (AA)—Israel, Morocco, Bahrain, the UAE, the United States, and Egypt—participated in a summit organized by then-Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid at the Kibbutz of Sde Boker in Israel's Negev desert. Aimed at enhancing cooperation between these countries, the summit gave birth to the Negev Forum, a framework of economic and diplomatic working groups that will largely define the new Arab-Israeli relations in the region. The Abraham Accords and the Negev Forum have proven especially beneficial for the Kingdom of Morocco, which has already seen the political, economic, social, and geostrategic fruits of its newfound relationship with Israel.

Moreover, the forum's next summit will be hosted by Morocco and held in another desert locale, Dakhla, likely designed to highlight Morocco's seat in Africa and promote a message of development. During the forum itself, Rabat will likely seek to continue the developments in bilateral ties, emphasize its prestige in the Negev forum, and advocate for movement on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through the auspices of the forum.

Although hosting the Negev Forum marks a new phase in Morocco's recent diplomatic relationship with Israel, [ties \(https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/morocco-and-israel-cooperation-now-and-then/\)](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/morocco-and-israel-cooperation-now-and-then/) between the two countries—including quiet military ones—actually go back decades. The two countries established diplomatic relations in the early 1990s, before Morocco ended them at the start of the second [intifada \(https://www.ia-forum.org/Files/TXHBKO.pdf\)](https://www.ia-forum.org/Files/TXHBKO.pdf). Of course, in the two years since Rabat and Tel Aviv formally mended their partnership through the Abraham Accords, [rapprochement \(https://www.inss.org.il/publication/morocco-israel/\)](https://www.inss.org.il/publication/morocco-israel/) between the two has been undeniable, and progress on these issues has moved very quickly. Case in point, numerous leading Israeli officials—including the Minister of the Interior, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, and Chief of Police after the Minister of Defense a year before—visited Morocco in the Summer of 2022 alone.

On the economic front, an agreement signed in February 2022 has brought about a fourfold increase in trade between Morocco and Israel, now valued at 500 million dollars per year. According to the [Israeli Ministry of Regional Cooperation \(https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/morocco240322#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20import%20of,valued%20around%2067%20million%20dollars.\)](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/morocco240322#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20import%20of,valued%20around%2067%20million%20dollars.), these economic ties will only continue to strengthen. There is especially high potential in the agribusiness sector—particularly when it comes to Israeli irrigation technology and green hydrogen. Tourism is also set to be a major part of the economic partnership, as Rabat hopes to attract visitors from the large community of Israelis of Moroccan origin. Estimates include 200,000 Israeli tourists for 2022, with expectations that this number would rise further.

By May 2022, trade agreements between Morocco and Israel totalled [approximately \(https://www.aapeaceinstitute.org/latest/aapi-newsletter-june-2022\)](https://www.aapeaceinstitute.org/latest/aapi-newsletter-june-2022) \$3.1 million, an increase of 94%, compared to the same period last year, almost doubling from the previous year. It is worth noting that the UAE—the first Arab country to sign a free trade agreement with Israel in May 2022—is now seeking a trilateral trade agreement with Morocco and Israel, and to increase trade with Morocco to \$7 billion within ten years.

The UAE's ambitions are to strengthen trade with Rabat by accelerating container transport. The trilateral agreement will allow the three countries to explore investment opportunities in various sectors and strengthen the contribution of the private sector and entrepreneurs to the development of trade and economic partnerships.

Morocco and Israel: A Military Alliance in the Making

Beyond economic ties, Morocco and Israel have begun an unprecedented security cooperation campaign following their normalization, prompted especially by the escalating "challenges" of the Morocco-Algeria [rivalry \(https://www.eurasiareview.com/22102021-morocco-and-algeria-on-the-edge-of-the-precipice-analysis/\)](https://www.eurasiareview.com/22102021-morocco-and-algeria-on-the-edge-of-the-precipice-analysis/). Indeed, less than a year after the signing of the Abraham Accords between Morocco and Israel, Benny Gantz and his Moroccan counterpart Abdellatif Loudiyi [signed \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-morocco-gantz-signs-israels-first-ever-defense-mou-with-an-arab-country/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-morocco-gantz-signs-israels-first-ever-defense-mou-with-an-arab-country/) a memorandum of understanding on defense contracts, signalling the beginning of a bilateral defense industry.

A second military agreement was signed at the same time enshrining the establishment of joint military commissions, interoperability exercises between the Royal Armed Forces (FAR) and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and participation in international exercises. Practical cooperation quickly followed; in July 2022, Israel

confirmed that they had participated in the [African Lion \(https://www.eurasiareview.com/22102021-morocco-and-algeria-on-the-edge-of-the-precipice-analysis/\)](https://www.eurasiareview.com/22102021-morocco-and-algeria-on-the-edge-of-the-precipice-analysis/) joint exercises of the United States and several African countries held in Morocco. The Israeli Ministry of Defense sent two IDF officers and a senior Ministry of Defense official to join a total of 7,500 soldiers for these military exercises.

Within this context, the chief of Israel's armed forces, Lt. General Aviv Kohavi visited Morocco for the first time, though Israeli sources did not give information on the size of the delegation that accompanied him, nor the agenda of the visit. Defense cooperation between Morocco and Israel continues to be established, and contacts between the two countries are recurrent. On March 25, 2022 an Israeli military delegation quietly made its first [visit \(https://www.barrons.com/news/israel-sends-first-official-military-delegation-to-morocco-01648235107\)](https://www.barrons.com/news/israel-sends-first-official-military-delegation-to-morocco-01648235107) to Morocco, shortly before the Negev summit.

Of course, it is no secret that Morocco has long been buying Israeli weapons. There are some signs of recent successes on this front; the Kingdom is now equipped with "Heron" type drones supplied by the Israeli defense industry. The Heron, which appeared on the market in 2000, can stay in the air for 45 hours and reach an altitude of 35,000 feet.

Another transaction was made in 2021 for the Israeli "Harop" drone. Until Aviv Kochavi's visit to Morocco in July 2022, Morocco's arms purchases from Israel have always been made in absolute secrecy. Now, the contours of the contracts in progress between the two countries are becoming visible to the public. In the near future, Morocco is set to obtain new Israeli [technologies \(https://www.iai.co.il/morocco-israel\)](https://www.iai.co.il/morocco-israel) and devices that allow for the collection of complex intelligence, surveillance, patrol, and identification of targets and the conduct of missions on different terrains.

Israel Aerospace Industries has already provided Morocco with a [Barak MX \(https://www.iai.co.il/p/barak-mx-system\)](https://www.iai.co.il/p/barak-mx-system) anti-aircraft system—capable of eliminating threats up to 150 kilometers away—in a [deal \(https://www.defenceprocurementinternational.com/news/air/morocco-buys-advanced-weapon-systems-from-israel\)](https://www.defenceprocurementinternational.com/news/air/morocco-buys-advanced-weapon-systems-from-israel) that also includes a missile defense system from IAI Elta Systems, an anti-drone system manufactured by Skylock, and [conversations \(https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/05/348878/morocco-negotiating-to-acquire-israeli-cruise-missile\)](https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/05/348878/morocco-negotiating-to-acquire-israeli-cruise-missile) around modernizing the Moroccan Air Force's F-5 fighter aircraft. According to [Africa Intelligence \(https://www.africaintelligence.fr/afrique-du-nord/2021/09/15/avec-l-aide-de-tel-aviv-rabat-planche-sur-une-filiere-locale-de-drones-kamikazes,109690625-gra\)](https://www.africaintelligence.fr/afrique-du-nord/2021/09/15/avec-l-aide-de-tel-aviv-rabat-planche-sur-une-filiere-locale-de-drones-kamikazes,109690625-gra), Morocco is in turn setting up units to manufacture kamikaze drones.

The Future of the Negev Summit

Although the concrete developments stemming from the Negev Forum are still small relative to the stated ambitions of the involved parties, the forum has undoubtedly succeeded in bringing together the signatories of the "cold peace"—Egypt and hopefully later Jordan and Palestine—and those of the "warm peace"—Abraham Accords signatories including UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco. The level of the economic exchange and the increasing levels of diplomatic and military cooperation are clear proof of these developments.

Further movement is expected during the upcoming summit. In early January 2023, the Negev Forum working groups met in Abu Dhabi to discuss preparations for the next Forum Summit planned for March. During this meeting, 150 senior representatives from the various AA signatories and Egypt focused on the creation of six working groups to cover various aspects of cooperation and guide discussion at future summits, although the details remain vague. Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita referenced Morocco's significance in the upcoming summit, calling on his counterparts to meet in the future "in another desert," that of the Moroccan Sahara.

While the position of host will certainly grant Morocco some prominence among the Negev Forum members, allowing Rabat to further its economic and diplomatic interests, the Forum will also continue to be a conduit through which Israel hopes to gain more legitimacy with the countries of the region. Indeed, while announcing Morocco as the location for the second summit, the new Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Eli Cohen [highlighted \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-foreign-minister-sees-abraham-accords-summit-morocco-march-2023-01-02/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-foreign-minister-sees-abraham-accords-summit-morocco-march-2023-01-02/) the commercial ties to be developed with other countries that have normalized with his own. According to his estimates, these links represented 2.85 billion dollars in 2022. He went on further to say: "Expanding the Accords to other countries is not a matter of 'if' but of 'when'." Cohen likely hopes that the current relationships will lead to new cooperation with regional powers like Saudi Arabia, despite the widely held view in the region that Saudi Arabia will condition any diplomatic progress with Israel on progress toward a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While this point of view is synonymous with the United States' two-state solution, the far-right Netanyahu government flatly rejects it in Israel.

As plans for the upcoming summit materialize, Morocco still desires to strike a balance between its commitments to the Palestinians and its ties to the Israelis, despite the Palestinians' [disapproval \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/abraham-abandoning-palestinians\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/abraham-abandoning-palestinians) of the Abraham Accords. Morocco has long had a stake in [peace \(https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/07/350481/israel-palestine-conflict-morocco-is-the-most-mutually-acceptable-mediator\)](https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/07/350481/israel-palestine-conflict-morocco-is-the-most-mutually-acceptable-mediator) between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Through the upcoming Negev Summit in Dakhla, Rabat will likely try to use the summit as an opportunity to make progress on the Palestine-Israel issue. Morocco may seek to emphasize that in the long run, participation in the Negev Forum alongside so many major regional players will help bring Palestinians full sovereignty over their homeland in addition to peace, stability, and economic growth

By joining the Forum, the Palestinian Authority would demonstrate political maturity that will bring them important economic and social dividends. And although the tensions run deep and solutions are elusive, efforts to bring Jordanians and Palestinians on board for the next Negev meeting by Morocco and others would be an important step towards bridging the gap. Whether or not such efforts are successful, the continued advancement of cooperation on economic and security issues is a more likely outcome of March's summit, solidifying the efforts of the previous summit in the Negev Forum. ❖

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