

# Regional Geopolitics and the Second Negev Summit

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## After months of delay, U.S. and Israeli government officials reportedly suggested that the second Negev Summit will proceed on June 25.

*Editor's Note: Since this article was published, the Negev Summit has been postponed a fourth time and is now expected to take place in July 2023.*

Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Eli Cohen initially announced that Morocco would host the second Negev Summit in March 2023 to follow up on an inaugural summit a year prior. The first Negev Summit—one highly visible outcome of the Abraham Accords—marked a turning point in relations between Israel and its co-signatories of the Accords. The Negev Forum aims to strengthen ties between the signatory countries to the Abraham Accords and Egypt, and to strengthen regional cooperation between Morocco, the UAE, Israel, Egypt, and Bahrain.

However, a delay emerged in part due to Moroccan concerns over the political turmoil and protests that broke out in Israel, along with heightened violence in the wake of the Israeli government formation—which led to some domestic pushback within Morocco itself. Nevertheless, Morocco appears slated to move forward with the conference given that the situation in Israel and Palestine has calmed somewhat, and given the practical interests Morocco hopes to further at the event.

### Bolstering Morocco's Regional Standing

As a signatory of the Abraham Accords, Morocco has emphasized the importance of a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. Morocco would be eager to include Jordan or the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Negev Forum activities and present itself as a mediator at a time when Algeria has held numerous public meetings with Palestinian leadership, including the October 2022 reconciliation agreement between different factions.

Yet in the upcoming summit, Morocco also hopes to strengthen its bilateral economic, trade, and security ties with Israel due both to the benefits of these ties to Morocco and in order to maintain U.S. backing in its conflict with Algeria over the Western Sahara. Likewise, by positioning itself in this role, Rabat seeks to bolster its influence in the

region in order to maintain its standing in East Africa in light of its efforts to play a leadership role there, and on the African continent more broadly.

Key in broadcasting this support is the announced location of the summit, which will be held in the city of Dakhla located in the Western Sahara. This choice has helped Morocco send a clear message with regard to the willingness of summit attendees, especially Israel, to hold talks there—providing recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara, which Rabat has sought for decades.

### **Forming a Regional Axis to Counter Iranian Threats**

Morocco and its partners at the second Negev Summit are particularly nervous about the threat posed by Iran. And while several Gulf countries have recently sought to cool tensions by increasing engagement with Iran, Tehran remains an active threat in areas of interest to Morocco. Morocco previously severed diplomatic relations with Iran in 2009 and again in 2018, with King Mohammed VI accusing (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/5/1/morocco-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-iran-over-western-sahara-feud>) Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah of providing logistical and military support for the Polisario Front, which opposes Moroccan control of the Western Sahara. Iran has also pursued ties with Algeria, Morocco’s adversary in the conflict.

Iran’s alleged activity in the African Sahel region, a key strategic region in Moroccan foreign policy, has likewise raised major concerns among Moroccan and Israeli authorities in particular. Although publicly-available information is limited, reports have suggested that Iranian Quds Forces and Iran-backed Hezbollah forces have attempted to establish a presence in the Sahel, recruiting and arming Shia groups in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, and further (<https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/the-future-of-the-role-of-irans-quds-force-in-africa-1>) into central and eastern Africa. In February, Israel expressed (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/israel-chad-need-curb-iran-hezbollah-clout-sahel-2023-02-02/>) similar warnings about Iranian activity in Chad. Moreover, Morocco has long been concerned about Iran’s apparent backing of the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, an accusation that accompanied Rabat’s decision to sever ties with Tehran back in 2018.

### **Shape of the Upcoming Summit**

As the second Negev Summit appears scheduled to move forward, the Israeli protests may continue to affect the course of regional cooperation between Israel and the signatories to the Abraham Accords, especially in the fields of economic and security cooperation. Most notably, divisions in the Israeli military institution resulting from the judicial and legal amendments are of concern for Morocco, given the growing military ties between the two states.

The signatories to the Abraham Accords are also closely monitoring the current events in Israel, especially given lingering fears of a state of internal instability. While Netanyahu is determined to expand the path of cooperation with the Arab countries, other Abraham Accord signatories have shifted towards a more cautious policy in dealing with the current government—a position that has continued over the past few months.

Nevertheless, the Negev Summit may reinvigorate the public aspect of Arab-Israeli dialogue. As each participant in the forum tries to advance their own strategic and security interests, Morocco’s role as host and its focal points during the conference will shine a spotlight on what Rabat hopes to achieve through the Negev Forum. ❖

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