

# Morocco and North Africa Are Feeling Anti-Normalization Ripples from the Gaza War

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Oct 25, 2023

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Tracking International Reactions to the Hamas-Israel War](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/tracking-international-reactions-hamas-israel-war)(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/tracking-international-reactions-hamas-israel-war>)

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The conflict will make it more difficult for Washington and Israel to preserve—let alone expand—the diplomatic progress they have made with North African governments in recent years, particularly as public opposition intensifies.

North Africa has not been spared from the reverberations of the Hamas-Israel war. Morocco may be the country most profoundly affected given its relatively strong relations with Israel and the United States, while [anti-normalization trends](https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/90567) (<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/90567>) elsewhere in the region are being firmly reinforced, creating new challenges for Washington.

## Implications for Morocco

Morocco and Israel first established formal diplomatic relations in December 2020 following Israel’s U.S.-brokered normalization agreements with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. In exchange, the United States recognized Rabat’s sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. Since then, Moroccan relations with Israel have rapidly [deepened](https://www.mei.edu/publications/morocco-and-israel-economic-opportunities-military-incentives-and-moral-hazards) (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/morocco-and-israel-economic-opportunities-military-incentives-and-moral-hazards>), particularly in the security arena but also economically, diplomatically, and culturally. The process peaked with Israeli recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara this July—a move that was meant to be reciprocated by Rabat hosting Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu before year’s end.

The October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel—compounded by the October 17 explosion at Gaza’s al-Ahli Hospital, originally and erroneously attributed to Israel—have disrupted this diplomatic progress in several ways. Most significantly, they put a spotlight on the divergence between Moroccan government and public views of Israel. While official [statement](https://www.mapnews.ma/ar/actualites/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%82%D9%84%D9%82%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9) (<https://www.mapnews.ma/ar/actualites/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%82%D9%84%D9%82%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9>) s condemned the targeting of civilians “by any party” and emphasized the need for “dialogue and negotiations,” thousands of Moroccans [rallied](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/17/morocco-s-normalization-of-relations-with-israel-jeopardized-by-war_6180014_124.html) ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/17/morocco-s-normalization-of-relations-with-israel-jeopardized-by-war\\_6180014\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/17/morocco-s-normalization-of-relations-with-israel-jeopardized-by-war_6180014_124.html)) in Rabat to demand annulment of the 2020 normalization agreement. And some actors, most notably the Islamist Justice and Development Party, [praised](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/world-reacts-surprise-attack-by-hamas-israel-2023-10-07/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/world-reacts-surprise-attack-by-hamas-israel-2023-10-07/>) the Hamas attack as “a heroic act” and a “natural and legitimate reaction to daily violations.” Even prior to the war, polls [suggested](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Morocco_Report-ENG.pdf) ([https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Morocco\\_Report-ENG.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Morocco_Report-ENG.pdf)) that only one-third of Moroccans favored normalizing relations with Israel.

In the past, King Mohammed VI has shown deftness at absorbing popular unrest. During the “February 20 movement” of 2011, the palace responded to calls for more democratic governance by implementing a meaningful but carefully controlled constitutional reform process. This created a sense that Morocco [might be an exception](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/moroccan-exception) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/moroccan-exception>) to the instability and chaos engulfing neighboring countries as they attempted political reform following the Arab Spring uprisings. More recently, the monarchy was initially [criticized](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/12/world/middleeast/morocco-earthquake-king-mohammed-vi.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/12/world/middleeast/morocco-earthquake-king-mohammed-vi.html>) for its response to the devastating September 8 earthquake, but then seemingly recovered amid an outpouring of national solidarity. These precedents reinforce the idea that the palace will move slowly and carefully to manage the current unrest.

Yet one potential casualty of the Gaza blowback may be the remarkable strategic cooperation between Israel and Morocco since 2020. The two countries have been steadily strengthening their security partnership, including through the sale of [drones](https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/09/29/morocco-drones-from-israel/) (<https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/09/29/morocco-drones-from-israel/>), [tanks](https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/morocco-boosts-firepower-with-israeli-merkava-tanks/20230705120112187719.html) (<https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/morocco-boosts-firepower-with-israeli-merkava-tanks/20230705120112187719.html>), and—most controversially—[spyware](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2023-05-23/ty-article/-premium/israel-torpedoed-morocco-spyware-deal-and-nso-competitor-quadream-shut-down/00000188-425a-d805-a7c9-dbd7f50000) (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2023-05-23/ty-article/-premium/israel-torpedoed-morocco-spyware-deal-and-nso-competitor-quadream-shut-down/00000188-425a-d805-a7c9-dbd7f50000>). These arms transfers will likely slow as Israel’s military supply capacity becomes strained by the war.

Notably, this slowdown is unlikely to change Morocco’s main purpose for boosting its arsenal: its rivalry with Algeria. Instead, the kingdom may turn to other (possibly European) suppliers, particularly if it anticipates longer-term delays in Israeli transfers. Although beneficial from the standpoint of Morocco’s security, such efforts could also fuel its arms race with Algeria, further eroding the dim prospects for thawing their frigid relations in the near term. Rabat will also likely intensify its diplomatic campaign to convince more countries to recognize its sovereignty claim over Western Sahara—another key friction point with Algiers.

Other forms of cooperation with Israel may suffer as well. For example, normalization had begun to reap clear benefits for water security—a critical sector given that [roughly 40 percent](https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/morocco/#economy) (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/morocco/#economy>) of Morocco’s population is employed in agriculture. Yet Israel likely will not have the resources to devote to such projects in the near term—most of its technical experts and companies will presumably be preoccupied with war needs, and others may hesitate to work in the kingdom due to security concerns. The rapid expansion in bilateral tourist exchanges will no doubt slow as well (Israel has [already issued](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-tells-citizens-to-leave-egypt-and-jordan-as-soon-as-possible-avoid-morocco/) (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-tells-citizens-to-leave-egypt-and-jordan-as-soon-as-possible-avoid-morocco/>) a tourist travel warning for Morocco).

## Ripple Effects Elsewhere in North Africa

The implications for most other North African countries are simpler but no less worrisome (with the exception of Egypt, whose quandaries are discussed in [a new CNN article \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-egypt-wont-open-border-its-palestinian-neighbors\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-egypt-wont-open-border-its-palestinian-neighbors) by Washington Institute experts). In Algeria's initial [statement \(https://twitter.com/Algeria\\_MFA/status/1710662799829917864\)](https://twitter.com/Algeria_MFA/status/1710662799829917864) on the Hamas attacks, the government reiterated "its conviction that the Zionist settlement occupation is the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and that ending the...tragedies resulting from this conflict undoubtedly lies in responding to the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people." Since then, Algiers has taken various steps to demonstrate its deep opposition to Israel and show solidarity with the Palestinians, such as [suspending \(https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231019-algeria-suspends-all-football-matches-in-solidarity-with-palestine/\)](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231019-algeria-suspends-all-football-matches-in-solidarity-with-palestine/) sporting events.

In Tunisia, President Kais Saied accused Israel of committing "crimes of genocide" during an emergency meeting of the National Security Council on October 18, the day after the hospital explosion. Popular reactions have been powerful as well. Leading Tunisian civil society organizations have [called \(https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Politics/16700638-national-committee\)](https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Politics/16700638-national-committee) for demonstrations to denounce Israel's actions, while separate, large-scale [protests \(https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/18/Outrage-erupts-at-French-embassy-in-Tunisia-following-deadly-Gaza-hospital-strike\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/18/Outrage-erupts-at-French-embassy-in-Tunisia-following-deadly-Gaza-hospital-strike) have broken out in front of the French embassy. On October 19, rioters [burned \(https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/10/18/rioters-burn-down-synagogue-in-tunisia/\)](https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/10/18/rioters-burn-down-synagogue-in-tunisia/) an ancient unused synagogue in the town of Gabes—an event that Saied has still not denounced as anti-Semitic, just as he [refused \(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/05/15/tunisian-authorities-downplay-significance-of-djerba-synagogue-attack\\_6026769\\_124.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/05/15/tunisian-authorities-downplay-significance-of-djerba-synagogue-attack_6026769_124.html) to apply that label to the May 9 terrorist attack at a Jewish festival in Djerba.

In Libya, the country's two rival governments have been uniform in criticizing Israel while not condemning Hamas. And local popular sentiment against Israel was already inflamed before the Hamas attack—in August, for example, a [botched meeting \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rise-and-immediate-fall-israel-libya-relations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rise-and-immediate-fall-israel-libya-relations) between the Israeli and Libyan foreign ministers sparked protests.

In Mauritania, reactions were similar: the government [called the attacks \(https://twitter.com/RIMMAECME/status/171070006011813973\)](https://twitter.com/RIMMAECME/status/171070006011813973) "the logical result of the ongoing provocations and regular violations of the rights of the Palestinian people," and pro-Palestinian demonstrations broke out in Nouakchott. Interestingly, Mauritania once normalized relations with Israel under the auspices of the United States and Spain [thirty-four years ago \(http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9910/28/israel.mauritania/index.html\)](http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9910/28/israel.mauritania/index.html). In 2008, however, the government [announced \(https://www.voanews.com/a/mauritania-affirms-break-with-israel-88763857/153795.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/mauritania-affirms-break-with-israel-88763857/153795.html) that it was cutting ties again, largely as a result of Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza and mounting popular opposition. Thus, while Mauritania is [reported \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/israel-eyes-normalization-mauritania-indonesia-expand-abraham-accords\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/israel-eyes-normalization-mauritania-indonesia-expand-abraham-accords) on the list of potential Arab additions to Israel's Abraham Accords, in reality the country will likely continue struggling with the same internal reservations and public opposition that plagued it the first time around.

## Conclusion

The current wave of popular outrage at Israel presents new challenges for managing U.S. partnerships with North African countries. For example, the rising anti-Israeli sentiment will make it even more difficult for Washington to operate in Tunisia, where President Saied's [anti-democratic actions \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisia-timeline-key-developments-and-us-responses-july-2022\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisia-timeline-key-developments-and-us-responses-july-2022) had already prompted cuts to U.S. bilateral assistance. Saied has even [spurned EU funding \(https://www.politico.eu/article/tunisia-hands-back-60-m-eu-funding-migration-deal/\)](https://www.politico.eu/article/tunisia-hands-back-60-m-eu-funding-migration-deal/) as part of his anti-Western campaign, indicating just how difficult it will be to restore the once-strong partnership.

Elsewhere, Washington has been actively seeking to strengthen ties with Algiers, as demonstrated in the recently concluded bilateral [Strategic Dialogue \(https://www.state.gov/u-s-algeria-strategic-dialogue/\)](https://www.state.gov/u-s-algeria-strategic-dialogue/), the Algerian foreign minister's [August visit \(https://embwashington.mfa.gov.dz/news-and-press-releases/attaf-holds-talks-with-us-counterpart-in-washington\)](https://embwashington.mfa.gov.dz/news-and-press-releases/attaf-holds-talks-with-us-counterpart-in-washington) to Washington, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Josh Harris's [September trip \(https://twitter.com/StateDept\\_NEA/status/1697343979124097367\)](https://twitter.com/StateDept_NEA/status/1697343979124097367) to Algeria and Morocco. In the wake of the Gaza crisis, however, the Algerian leadership—which [many argue \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/parliamentary-elections-wont-rescue-algeria-from-its-legitimacy-problem/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/parliamentary-elections-wont-rescue-algeria-from-its-legitimacy-problem/) operates with tenuous domestic legitimacy—will likely take steps to slow down this bilateral engagement, at least publicly. Similarly, Libyan prime minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh may be willing to risk straining his relations with the West in order to disassociate himself from both the Gaza war and the botched August meeting with Israeli officials.

Indeed, some North African governments are already complicating U.S. diplomatic responses to the Gaza war. Algeria and Tunisia [reportedly decided \(https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/algeria-tunisia-refuse-to-participate-in-cairo-peace-summit\)](https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/algeria-tunisia-refuse-to-participate-in-cairo-peace-summit) not to attend an October 21 summit in Cairo, perhaps due to rumors that Israel would be participating. And the Tunisian parliament is apparently [planning \(https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/tunisia-to-approve-draft-law-criminalizing-normalization-">of the following text: The Secretary General of the People's Movement in Tunisia 2020 Zouhair normalization with the 20 Israeli occupation.](https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/tunisia-to-approve-draft-law-criminalizing-normalization-) to pass a law criminalizing normalization with Israel.

Meanwhile, relations with Morocco could suffer if the United States remains overly preoccupied with other regional priorities—particularly now that Rabat can lean more on its [growing economic ties \(https://en.hespress.com/62327-china-new-step-to-promote-investments-in-morocco.html?print\)](https://en.hespress.com/62327-china-new-step-to-promote-investments-in-morocco.html?print) with China. Hence, even at this time of limited U.S. bandwidth, Washington should retain at least a minimum level of funding for programs that benefit North African publics (e.g., English-language learning and other education programs).

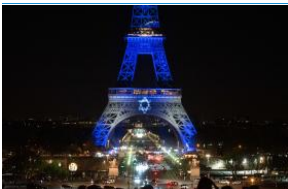
In the longer term, Morocco is unlikely to suspend its relations with Israel or change its security approach to the Western Sahara and Algeria. The United States should therefore consider ways to advance regional integration while incorporating public sentiments about the Palestinian issue, for example through cross-national exchanges or other forms of dialogue on this topic. And as the Gaza war unfolds, Washington should step up as a technical partner to Morocco and the rest of North Africa. This means helping them develop technology related to water use and, if necessary, finding alternate sources of technical support, since their urgent needs may not wait for the outcome of current regional crises.

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