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MOROCCO AND THE WAR IN GAZA: THE DILEMMA OF PRINCIPLES AND INTERESTS

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Abstract

Morocco finds itself facing the ongoing war in Gaza between the hammer of geopolitical interests on one hand and the anvil of popular pressure and its historical commitments on the other. Morocco has adopted a cautious and moderate stance, condemning civilian targeting, calling for an immediate cease-fire, and emphasising respect for international humanitarian law. In response to the ongoing events in Gaza, a substantial number of Moroccans have organised demonstrations in various cities to express their solidarity with the Palestinian cause and condemn the Israeli attacks on Gaza.

This article aims to explore how Morocco can solve this dilemma and to what extent popular protests can potentially jeopardise the normalisation process of relations between Morocco and Israel.

Introduction

Morocco finds itself today in a delicate position with regards to the war between Israel and Hamas, which erupted on 7 October 2023. Therefore, Morocco is attempting to take cautious positions, using a moderate tone in its official [statements](#) concerning the developments of this war. It condemned the targeting of civilians, called for an immediate ceasefire, for the protection of civilians, and [humanitarian access](#).

There are three main elements that determine Morocco's position at this stage: the principled commitment to support Palestinian rights, the interests of Morocco arising from the [Tripartite Declaration](#), which was signed between Morocco, the United States (US) and Israel on 22 December 2020, and the widespread popular sympathy for the Palestinian cause among the Moroccan people, many of whom oppose the normalisation of relations with Israel.

These competing factors help explain the nature of Morocco's - and most Arab countries' - official positions vis-a-vis the events in Gaza thus far. However, Morocco will face a real challenge in the coming days in reaching an appropriate balance between these three factors if the war continues for a longer period and leads to greater public participation in protests condemning the war on Gaza.

Therefore, how can Morocco solve this dilemma, and will the scenario of 2002 be repeated itself when popular pressure against Israeli policy in dealing with the Second Intifada led to the closure of the Israeli liaison office in Rabat? Will such a scenario affect ongoing normalisation of relations between Morocco and Israel?

The Government's Middle of the Road Policy

Morocco expressed its [position](#) on the events on the first day of Hamas multifaceted attack against Israeli military bases and settlements in the external perimeter of the Gaza Strip. The Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement used a moderate language in its statement about the event.

While condemning the targeting of civilians by any party, it did not assign responsibility to a specific party for the outbreak of this new confrontation. The new relations with Israel have not affected Morocco's relationships with Palestinian factions, as it still maintains good relations with them, including Hamas. In June 2021, [leaders of Hamas visited Rabat](#), led by Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh, and they were hosted at a royal dinner at the Guest Palace in Rabat. It is worth noting that Morocco has not faced sharp criticism from Palestinian factions, including Hamas, following the signing of the Tripartite Declaration, compared to other Arab countries (such as the UAE and Bahrain, for example) when they engaged in the Abraham Accords.

A few days after the outbreak of this ongoing war, Morocco called to hold an extraordinary session of the Council of the Arab League at the foreign ministers' level in Cairo on 11 October 2023. The content of the speech delivered by Morocco's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nasser Bourita, at this summit was designed to express solidarity with the residents of Gaza, recall the rights of the Palestinian people to establish an independent state, and warn against the regional repercussions of this war.

Following the escalation of confrontations, notably after the tragic bombing of Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza, resulting in the loss of over 500 lives, [Morocco](#) issued a strong condemnation of this attack. It reiterated the imperative for an immediate cessation of hostilities and emphasised the critical importance of respecting international humanitarian law. Nonetheless, it is essential to underline that these positions did not signify a fundamental shift in Morocco's overall policy towards the ongoing events, nor did it signal a transformation in its approach towards Israel specifically.

At the Summit for Peace held in Cairo on 21 October 2023, Morocco's Foreign Minister maintained the same [moderate language](#) that refrained from direct criticism of any of the parties involved in the conflict. Instead, he reiterated the urgent call for de-escalation, underlining the necessity to protect civilians, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the residents of Gaza, oppose the displacement of Palestinians, and initiate "a real peace process".

A careful analysis of the statements issued by the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs in response to the unfolding events reveals a consistent approach. Despite the evolving nature of the war and its complex developments, Morocco has adhered to a stance that refrains from attributing responsibility to any specific party involved in the conflict. This approach has been evident in Morocco's continuous interaction with the evolving situation, where the terminology and expressions used have been adjusted to accommodate the changing context and severity of the conflict. The key feature of Morocco's position is its avoidance of laying blame on any particular party up to this point.

The Public Put the Normalisation Process at Stake

Popular demonstrations that have been taking place since 7 October 2023 in different Moroccan cities, including the [march](#) held in Rabat on 15 October 2023, showed that the overwhelming majority of the Moroccan people are in solidarity with Gaza, and condemn the Israeli attacks. Moreover, these events have underscored that the Palestinian cause and anti-normalisation continue to be unifying factors among different political forces, especially the Islamic and leftist opposition groups.

Most of the [political parties](#), including those in the current government coalition, have issued statements of solidarity with the Palestinians and condemned the Israeli attacks against Gaza. However, Islamic, and leftist movements remain the most active in mobilising public opinion in favour of the Palestinian cause. In addition to physical gatherings, Moroccans use different social media platforms to express solidarity and share pictures and videos of the destruction and civilians, mainly children, who died due to the Israeli air strikes in Gaza.

According to [Arab Barometer](#), most Moroccans do not support the normalisation of relations between Morocco and Israel and consider the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories a critical threat to national security. Indeed, this war has also showed that despite the gradual pace of normalisation, it is clear that the Palestinian cause remains a high priority and a deep concern for Moroccans. There is still widespread popular opposition to normalisation with Israel in all Arab countries, including Morocco, as we clearly saw during the recent World Cup and also in the

demonstrations supporting the Palestine cause in various Arab countries since the outbreak of this new confrontation in Gaza.

So far it appears that these demonstrations have had only a limited impact on Morocco's official position. At the very least, authorities have shown tolerance toward these demonstrations, in contrast to previous months when some anti-normalisation marches in Rabat were prohibited. Furthermore, Israeli liaison office staff in Rabat departed on 18 October, on orders of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs following the escalation of protests against Israel. The ongoing war in Gaza may greatly strengthen the anti-normalisation and boycott campaigns against Israel in Morocco.

It is worth noting in this regard that there is no Israeli lobby in Morocco; instead, there are only individuals with some interests. This is confirmed by the fact that Morocco, despite enduring months of pressure, refrained from signing the Tripartite Declaration until the final days of Donald Trump's presidency, and after securing a good deal— the [United States' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara](#). Therefore, the Tripartite Declaration cannot be regarded as an establishment of an alliance between the signed countries, rather, it can be understood from the Moroccan side in the context of geostrategic dynamics in the Maghreb region, especially the issue of Western Sahara.

Conclusion

Today, Morocco finds itself facing the war in Gaza between the hammer of geopolitical interests on one hand and the anvil of popular pressure and its historical commitments on the other. Given that there are no indications of the war coming to an end soon, Morocco will remain under pressure as long as the war continues.

While Morocco is accustomed to adopting a realistic and pragmatic approach in such complex situations, the moral aspects of this war constitute a great pressure on Moroccan foreign policy makers. The interplay of ethics and interests is extremely complex in this case.

Nevertheless, it appears so far that despite the possibility of a slowdown in the normalisation process and potential freezing of certain aspects of cooperation, such as postponing the Negev Summit, which was scheduled to take place in Morocco, this path will not come to an end. Morocco has signed various agreements with Israel, some of which were concluded under US auspices. Hence, cutting ties with Israel will significantly affect Morocco's commitments and interests resulting from these agreements. However, if the war continues and its humanitarian consequences worsen further, Morocco might be compelled to freeze the normalisation process.