

# MERIA

## ISRAEL AND THE MAGHREB AT THE HEIGHT OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: 1950s – 1970s

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*This study highlights Israel's contacts with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia from the 1950s to the 1970s, at a time when such contacts were conducted very secretly. The author uses archival materials and interviews to detail these developments and explains the motivations and constraints of various Arab and Israel actors.*

Israel and the Maghreb states—Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia—have never technically been in a state of war, nor have they ever enjoyed a real peace. For decades, though, secret contacts between Israel and these states have led to greater understanding and limited cooperation against the backdrop of turbulent Arab-Israeli politics.

Israeli ties with Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan nationalists originated in the 1950s at the initiative of Israeli government officials and diplomats, including the Mossad; through third parties, such as Israeli journalists and intellectuals; and by representatives of international Jewish organizations, notably the World Jewish Congress (WJC); influential Tunisian and Moroccan Jews close to leftist political circles in their countries or the Moroccan monarchy; and Western diplomats. Israel sought to develop such contacts in order to distance the Maghreb from the Arab League and as part of Jerusalem's objective to avoid isolation in the Third World.

Maghrebi nationalists, many of whom became deeply saturated in French culture, appeared to the Israelis as more moderate than their Middle Eastern counterparts. At the same time, Maghrebi nationalists contacted Israelis in order to gain support for their struggle for independence from France. Progressive Israeli journalists undertook private initiatives to support their causes, often to the great displeasure of the Israeli

government, which feared jeopardizing relations with France. (1)

### ISRAEL AND TUNISIA: BETWEEN BOURGUIBISM AND NASSERISM

The earliest contacts between Israel and Tunisia were established in New York in 1951-1952, at the height of Tunisia's independence drive, when Tunisian representatives approached the Israeli mission to the UN or Israeli labor leaders, often through the good offices of American politicians. (2) Among the Neo-Destour Party envoys who met with Israeli officials was Bahi Ladgam, a senior member of the party's political bureau and a close confidant of Tunisia's nationalist leader and future president, Habib Bourguiba. In a June 25, 1952, meeting between Ladgam and Gideon Raphael of Israel's UN mission, Ladgam sought support for a resolution backing Tunisian independence and assured Raphael that his party was not behind the anti-Jewish riots that plagued Tunis at the time. (3) Israel also had contacts with another Tunisian, Salah Ben Youssef, who later became a Nasserist and Bourguiba's chief political opponent. Ben Youssef approached the Israelis on February 9, 1953, to express frustration with Israel's lack of support for Tunisia and explained that the Arab states were the only ones assisting Tunisia's independence efforts and that it was

inevitable that Tunisia would side with them in the future. (4)

Bourguiba himself first advocated a settlement with Israel in a June 1952 interview with *Le Monde*. While in political exile in France two years later, Bourguiba told Alec L. Easterman, head of the WJC's political bureau in London, that a future Tunisian government would enter the Arab League but would not necessarily follow Arab League policies or support its political activities. As an individual, Bourguiba said that he understood Jewish nationalism, but as an Arab, he felt compelled to regard the establishment of the state of Israel as a form of colonialism. Yet as a matter of practical politics, he could not support Israel's elimination and would seek peace in the Middle East by playing a vital role to influence Arab states in this direction. (5)

Israeli officials were divided over whether to maintain secret ties to pre-independence Tunisia and Morocco. Some believed that contacts could safeguard the position of Maghrebi Jews, while others maintained that open channels, as in the Ladgam-Raphael meeting, would result in negative French reactions. (6)

From the end of 1953 until October 1955, when Moshe Sharett served as Israel's prime minister and foreign minister, he did not endorse secret ties but supported future Israeli-Maghrebi cooperation so as "to prevent the extension of the Arab boycott to North Africa and to...set a precedent to our relations with Arab countries." (7) In the governments of David Ben-Gurion and Levi Eshkol, Israel opted for both open and back channels once France granted Tunisia and Morocco independence in 1956. They envisioned in the Nasser-Bourguiba rift a trend that could weaken Arab unity.

In February 1956, when Tunisia and Morocco were about to achieve independence, Bourguiba held a discreet meeting with Ya'akov Tsur, Israel's ambassador to France in which the former's dislike for Nasser was plainly evident. Tsur understood that it was vital for Bourguiba to

enlist American Jewry's endorsement for securing U.S. economic aid. (8)

Unofficial Israeli-Tunisian meetings continued until the outbreak of the Suez crisis later that year. On October 3, 1956, after Tunisia achieved independence, Tsur met with the Tunisian finance minister who requested Israeli aid in building cooperative agricultural settlements. Tsur, who also met with another Bourguiba aide, was authorized to accede to Tunisian requests with the aim of weakening the Arab economic boycott and entering the Maghrebi sphere. The parties agreed that Paris would best serve as the center for coordinating joint projects under the aegis of Pinhas Sapir, Israel's minister of commerce and industry. (9)

Israel's foreign ministry justified assistance to Tunisia by arguing that Bourguiba would not identify with the Arab League's economic policies toward Israel; joint economic cooperation could be mutually beneficial; and Israel's labor federation could collaborate unofficially with its Tunisian counterpart, paving the path for other types of institutional cooperation. (10) However, nothing came of these possibilities following the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in October-November 1956, and once Tunisia joined the Arab League in October 1958.

In joining the Arab League, Bourguiba did not conceal his displeasure with pan-Arabism. Except for a brief lull in 1961-1963, when Nasser manifested solidarity with Tunisia's struggle against French troops who held a naval base in the Tunisian city of Bizerta, by the mid-1960s the breach between the two leaders became irreconcilable. Bourguiba boycotted Arab League meetings over differences related to inter-Arab issues, and even allowed Jews to leave for Israel via France, permitting the Jewish Agency to maintain operations in Tunis. But Bourguiba could ill afford to nurture ties with Israel and in fact toughened his stance. In a 1959 interview with a Lebanese newspaper, he asserted: "If you wish to end the existence of a given country, you should prepare the strategies that will result in her elimination.

We do not have commercial and diplomatic ties with Israel.” (11) Additional attacks raised doubts about Tunisia’s image as a moderating force in the Arab world. (12) An expert on the Maghreb at the Quai d’Orsay assuaged Israeli concerns saying that Bourguiba’s aggressive behavior regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict was intended to impress other Arab states; in the future he could in fact mediate between Israel and the Arabs. (13)

The collapse of the United Arab Republic in 1961, Egyptian efforts in 1963 to resuscitate Arab unity, Nasser’s military involvement in Yemen, and the emergence of Arab summitry as a channel for inter-Arab dialogues, motivated Bourguiba to promote state particularism over pan-Arabism. (14) Early in 1964, Bourguiba expressed skepticism about Middle East peace. He proposed that the Palestinians organize themselves within an Algerian-style National Liberation Front (FLN) movement, and thought the best way to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict was to resettle Israeli Jews outside the region. Yet Bourguiba knew that resettlement was unrealistic and had doubts about effective Arab military options against Israel. Moreover, he believed that the West would never allow Arab states to win a war against the Jews. (15)

In March 1965, Bourguiba posed a genuine challenge to Arab leaders in a speech he delivered in Jordan, publicly urging them to recognize Israel in return for negotiations in the spirit of UN Resolution 181 (1947) recommending the partition of Palestine, and Resolution 194 (1948) calling for the return of Arab refugees to their homes. (16) While in October 1966, he attacked Israel as a Zionist state that dispossessed Muslim and Christian Arabs, he called for an “equitable solution” to the Arab-Israeli conflict. (17)

Bourguiba was a man of great ability and intelligence, but also one of great vanity. He was frustrated that Tunisia’s small size and few resources would prevent it from playing as large a role in world affairs as Egypt. (18) Some believed that Bourguiba

was impelled to promote dramatic and creative policies to attract attention and, given Tunisia’s marginal status in Arab affairs, economic aid from the West. By calling for Arab-Israeli negotiations and leading the few Arab states that refused to sever diplomatic relations with West Germany for opening an embassy in Tel Aviv, Bourguiba, it was thought, hoped to secure U.S. and European economic support and simultaneously discredit Nasser by portaying him as anti-Western and a war monger.

Indeed, in May 1965, Tunisian foreign minister Habib Bourguiba Jr. (the president’s son) came to Washington in search of financial support for Tunisia’s four-year economic development plan. The State Department prodded the Israelis to “convince” the Germans and the French to grant Tunisia \$20 million in aid, and for Israel to purchase Tunisian wine. (19) The Israelis intervened on behalf of Tunisia without prior coordination with Tunis. It was hoped that despite Tunisia’s relatively marginal role in inter-Arab affairs, Bourguiba might enlist the help of moderate Arab leaders and together they would foil or sabotage Egyptian and Syrian Arab unity efforts.

Regarding Bourguiba’s unrealistic proposal involving UN Resolution 181, some Israeli observers thought that Bourguiba did not seriously believe any pre-1949 UN resolution could serve as a basis for negotiations; he wanted to break the psychological barriers that prevented an Arab-Israeli dialogue.

Arguments about his objectives notwithstanding, the Foreign Ministry under Golda Meir and her successor, Abba Eban, spared no effort to approach Bourguiba and boost his prestige. In November 1965, on the occasion of Bourguiba’s visit to Liberia, upon the request from Liberian security services and with the knowledge of the head of Tunisian security, the Israeli Mossad reinforced local security personnel in Bourguiba’s security detail. (20)

Equally intriguing was the Foreign Ministry’s effort to promote Bourguiba’s

candidacy for the 1966 Nobel Peace Prize. Wanting to spare him embarrassment, it was decided that a third party would handle the matter. Thus, Hebrew University professor Nathan Rottenstreich, in conjunction with Israel's ambassador in Washington, chose the rector of the University of Brazil to recommend Bourguiba to the prize committee. It was clear from the outset that Bourguiba would not receive the Nobel Prize, which was offered to individuals who actually resolved conflicts, but as one Foreign Ministry official observed: "It is important that we are able to bring to Bourguiba's attention that we are behind the initiative." (21)

Beginning in 1966, Israel's ambassador to France, Walter Eytan (with help from the Mossad) initiated secret talks in Europe with Muhammad Masmudi, Tunisia's ambassador in Paris, with Bourguiba's blessings. Simultaneously, the WJC's Easterman maintained direct links to Bourguiba and his son, as well as Masmudi. The Bourguibas preferred that their own personal contact with Israel be maintained indirectly through Easterman, while all other direct Israeli-Tunisian channels would go through diplomats in Europe. Because Israel's Foreign Ministry could not have a direct pipeline to the Bourguibas as late as 1967, they continued to rely on Easterman, yet without telling him of their back channel links to Masmudi. It appears that Masmudi and the Bourguibas cooperated with Israel over this matter. Moreover, Abba Eban also met with Masmudi on at least one occasion at the home of Baron Edmond de Rothschild.

There were at least five components of these back channel deliberations. First, it was conveyed to the Tunisians that the Israelis appreciated Bourguiba's challenge to Nasserism, even if they opposed the pre-1949 UN resolutions on which he based his peace proposal. In March 1966, at a meeting in Tunis with Bourguiba and his son, Easterman said that Foreign Minister Eban authorized him to praise Bourguiba "for the wise and statesmanlike effort toward a new approach to

peace and conciliation between the Middle East Arab states and Israel," and for the struggle "to bring about an end to Nasser's intransigent and inflammatorily demagogic policies for an Arab war to destroy the State of Israel." Bourguiba told Easterman that many Arab leaders knew that his views were sound but they did not yet have the courage to support him; they were still obsessed by "the fiction of Nasserist power." Referring to pan-Arabists, Bourguiba portrayed them as unscrupulous, ruining every move to settle Arab-Israeli tensions by conciliatory means. Above all, Israel and Tunisia needed to exercise prudence, to gain time and to let his ideas sink steadily into the Arab mindset. Bourguiba was prepared to accept contact for high-level cooperation, but would refuse to do anything that directly or indirectly implied entering into diplomatic relations with Israel. (22)

Second, in his meeting with Easterman in Paris on October 4, 1966, Masmudi recommended that Tunisian-Israeli economic contacts be facilitated by Western Jews with vital positions in finance. Tunisia and Israel would thus be insured against attack "by their enemies" as forming any devious arrangements between themselves, while both might benefit economically from the appropriate non-Israeli Jewish elements. (23) Likewise, Tunisia's Muhammad Sfar met with the Israelis in Paris about "Jewish" investments. He never told Tunisian bank directors and industrialists that the potential "Jewish" investments he represented were Israeli-inspired, as Israel's direct involvement needed to be camouflaged. The projects discussed with Sfar included the construction of a hotel in Mahdia, as a collaborative venture of Sfar and a jointly-owned company by Israel and Baron Edmond de Rothschild; developing a glass factory in Tunis; and furnishing hotel equipment by Israel via a British firm. (24)

Third, the Tunisians expected Israel to pressure the French to improve Franco-Tunisian relations, which had deteriorated since 1961, and to influence the United States

and West Germany to grant economic assistance and military aid. (25)

Fourth, Tunisia made no secret of its desire to expand tourism. In the final months of her tenure at the Foreign Ministry, Golda Meir urged Israel's ambassador in Washington to enlist Jewish-American support by requesting local communities to add Tunisia to their list of tourist attractions. He was told that should these endeavors succeed, "we will find the way to inform the Tunisians that the operations were initiated by us as a token of goodwill." (26) Indeed, Jewish-American organized tour groups did arrive in Tunisia in 1965. (27) Easterman also informed Bourguiba Jr. that Israel was prepared to offer its skills in the field of tourism and that the increasing trend for travel among world Jewry, especially American Jews, could be an important financial potential for Tunisia's tourist traffic. (28)

Last on the list was assistance in agricultural development. As Easterman told Bourguiba Jr., Israel was universally known for developing modern agricultural industries and had passed along its experience and techniques to a number of new African states. The Israeli government, he said, was "most willing and ready to put them at the service of Tunisia." (29)

In the final analysis, Bourguiba was reluctant to seek any direct long-range Israeli ties, and so it is difficult to know if anything came of most of these proposals. Arab territorial losses, and the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization, engendered new realities which left few options for a peace settlement. Not totally disillusioned, Bourguiba confided in Easterman in October 1967 that Arab leaders would eventually negotiate with Israel but that permanent peace could not be achieved as long as Israel insisted on the principle of "what we have conquered we hold." He hinted that in light of recent circumstances it would be better for him to reduce his overt endorsement of a Middle East peace initiative. (30)

During the October 1973 Middle East War, Bourguiba supported the Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel and, like other Maghrebi states, sent troops to bolster the Arab effort. Despite his preference for "state particularism" over pan-Arab unity, since 1970 he flirted for a while with Muammar Qadhafi over a Tunisian-Libyan union. In October 1976, Bourguiba once again flaunted to the Arab states and the PLO the need to accept UN Resolution 181 on the partition of Palestine. The Sadat peace initiative of November 1977 buried such proposals once and for all. In the 1980s, Bourguiba demonstrated deep solidarity with the PLO, allowing it in 1982 to set up its headquarters in Tunis following its expulsion from Lebanon, leading in 1985 and 1988 to retaliatory military and commando operations by Israel on Tunisian soil. He also agreed to have the Arab League headquarters transferred from Cairo to Tunis once the Arab states isolated Egypt for signing a peace agreement with Israel. This does not preclude secret Israeli-Tunisian discussions after 1967; but these, if they occurred, amounted to very little. Bourguiba's anti-Islam policies led to Zayn al-Abidine Ben Ali's palace coup of November 7, 1987. Ben Ali, following the 1993 Oslo accords, emulated Morocco's example by opening in 1995 a liaison office in Tel Aviv and allowing Israel to do the same in Tunis. In 1997, the head of this office was recalled in protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Middle East policies, but a new representative, Tariq Azuz, was sent to Israel following the 1999 Israeli elections.

#### ISRAEL AND ALGERIA: LINKS THAT FAILED

Israeli connections with Algeria were nurtured through representatives of the Front for National Liberation (FLN), as well as the FLN's Provisional Government-in-Exile (GPRA), headquartered during 1958-1962 in Tunis. Until 1961, when Algeria was on the brink of independence, Ben-Gurion shied away from identifying with her struggle so as

not to anger the French. The Mossad maintained a self-defense underground—the Misgeret (Framework)—to protect Algeria's Jewish communities during the Algerian revolution, and on at least one occasion, Misgeret's activists opened fire on Algerian rebels and killed them. (31)

Goodwill ambassadors to Algeria's nationalist struggle were only found among progressive Israeli circles. Israeli journalists, for example, broached the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict with FLN and MNA emissaries in New York, Florence, and Paris during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Algerians were split in their reactions: some criticized Israel for operating against Algerian independence and for endorsing pro-French resolutions at the UN; others understood Israel's dependence on France and remained neutral in the conflict between Israel and its neighbors, despite Egypt's support for Algeria's revolution. (32)

Generally, little sympathy could be found toward Israel within the FLN and GPRA. The Israeli enthusiasts were Abd al-Raziq Abd al-Qadir, the FLN's envoy to Germany, and Myriam Mekaouche, who shuttled between Geneva and Tunis as Muhammad Yazid's personal aide. They loathed pan-Arabism and manifested admiration for Israel's kibbutz movements. However, they were marginal in the decisionmaking process. Abd al-Raziq Abd al-Qadir's story is interesting. Bearing the name of a renowned Algerian family, the Syrian-born Abd al-Raziq Abd al-Qadir settled in Kibbutz Hatsor in 1952, but left Israel two years later hoping to join the FLN and enter Algeria. In the late 1950s, he became the FLN's representative in Germany and formed ties with Israeli diplomats, putting them in touch with Ferhat Abbas, president of the GPRA between 1958 and 1961. (33) Abd al-Raziq later left the FLN. In 1989, he returned to Israel under the name of Dov Golan. He died in 1999 at the northern colony of Migdal.

Myriam Mekaouche, a leading woman within the GPRA, held several meetings in

the summer of 1962 with Ya'akov Yanai, a Geneva-based Israeli diplomat, arranged with the aid of a French-Jewish journalist stationed in Geneva. Mekaouche and Yanai each reported to their superiors the progress of their meetings, which revolved around future Algerian-Israeli cooperation in the economic sphere, and the criticism leveled by the GPRA and FLN at Israel and Algerian Jews for supporting the Secret Army Organization (OAS). The OAS, which consisted of desperate European civilians intent on saving French Algeria and bitter army officers bent on overthrowing de Gaulle, spread anti-Muslim terror in the Algiers and Oran regions. Yanai was instructed to dispel the notion of secret OAS-Israel ties, though he admitted that some Algerian Jewish youths did join that organization. According to Mekaouche, the GPRA's minister of information, Muhammad Yazid, welcomed these meetings but insisted on complete secrecy. He believed that it was premature to upgrade Algerian-Israeli contacts so long as Algeria had not yet formed a national government. (34) Similarly, Israel's ambassador to Guinea, A. Dikan, established links with Ibrahim Abouia, the GPRA's ambassador in Conakry, and informed him that Israel would assist Algeria by setting up cooperative settlements and collaborating with the UN Commissioner on Refugees in building temporary housing to resettle the thousands of Algerian refugees who spent the revolution in Tunisia. (35)

Notable efforts were also made by Algerian-born Albert-Paul Lentin, a French journalist, and Senator Gaston Defferre, mayor of Marseilles. Defferre apprised Ben-Gurion of the political struggles within the FLN between the moderates and the radicals, (36) and Lentin, a correspondent for *Liberation* and the weekly *France Observateur*, was invited to Israel in June 1962 for a tour of Israel's rural settlements and major industries. The visit was intended by the foreign ministry to supply Lentin with knowledge about Israel's economy and the potential assistance it could render to an independent Algeria.

Lentin promised to broach with the Algerians the option of top-level back channel meetings with Israeli officials. He had no doubt that Algeria would join the Arab League, but thought that the Algerians loathed Nasser and would refuse to emulate his policies related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. (37)

Israel was less interested in the Algerian National Movement (MNA), which was unable to attract wide political support. The MNA did not support Nasser's Arab unity, opposed the Syrian-Egyptian union in 1958, and generally distanced itself from Cairo. The MNA's Muhammad Saadoun said to Israel Neumann, Davar's Paris correspondent, that his organization could not disregard the Palestinian refugees, with whom all Arab sympathized. (38) In an interview with Davar, MNA head Messali Hadj was vague on questions relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict, merely saying that in the future, Algeria ought to mediate between the diverse nationalist currents in the Middle East rather than exacerbate the ongoing crisis. (39)

After independence in July 1962, Algeria emerged as the most blatant anti-Israeli Maghrebi nation, despite Israel's formal recognition of Algerian sovereignty. Algeria, for example, turned down an Israeli offer to send a medical team to assist in rehabilitating the nation's health facilities. (40) In the fall of 1962, Ahmad Ben Bella's FLN forces neutralized their opponents and he became Algeria's first president, until his overthrow by Houari Boumedienne in June 1965. Persons associated with the GPRA who had sought contacts with Israel in the past or disapproved of Ben Bella's leadership were either arrested or fled into exile.

In a bid to compete with his Egyptian ally for leadership of the Arab world, Ben Bella exceeded Nasser's virulence toward Israel. He was prepared to dispatch 100,000 soldiers "to liberate Palestine" and, in October 1962, claimed that Algeria would remain Israel's permanent enemy. (41) Ben Bella enabled Palestinian students affiliated with al-Fatah and the PLO to receive military training in Algeria (42), a process that

continued under Boumedienne. (43) Equally critical of Israel's aid to Sub-Saharan nations, Ben Bella argued that the Zionists were deceiving Africans when they portrayed Israel as a small country interested in economic development. He claimed that the "Zionist imperialists" were penetrating African labor organizations and influencing them, a dangerous trend that Algeria needed to combat. (44) The Israelis believed that Ben Bella's hostility was motivated primarily by the threat Israel posed to his ambitions in Africa. (45)

Boumedienne (June 1965 to December 1978) augmented Algeria's influence in inter-Arab affairs but seemed less obsessive about regional political ambitions than his predecessor. Boumedienne figured among Nasser's staunchest critics after the 1967 War and subsequently participated in the October 1973 War by dispatching army units to the Middle East.

In the aftermath of 1967, in light of Boumedienne's strong advocacy of a military solution to the Palestine problem, Israel monitored opposition groups that attempted to oust Boumedienne from power. (46) In December 1967, Belkacem Krim, the leader of the Democratic Movement for Algerian Renewal (MDRA) opposition movement, asked for Israeli assistance. The Mossad authorized Arie Levin of Israel's embassy in Paris to hold a series of back channel meetings with the MDRA through the help of Edmond Kwort, a French Jew who in the past maintained special links with French intelligence and was close to the MDRA. Levin told Kwort to warn the Algerians that meetings should not be construed as an obligation on Israel's part to assist them against Boumedienne. (47) In 1969, Kwort wanted to introduce to the Israelis someone named "Mourad" (full name not disclosed), who served during the revolutionary period under Belkacem Krim in the GPRA and now sought to destabilize the Algerian regime. "Mourad" was interested in obtaining weapons and explosives from Israel. (48)

Whether or not any or all of the planned meetings with Belkacem Krim, “Mourad,” and others actually took place is unclear. The Israelis were skeptical about the opposition groups’ ability to challenge Boumedienne’s effective control over the Algerian army. Yet they maintained links with the opposition in order to assess the magnitude of support they enjoyed inside Algeria.

Privately and gradually, Boumedienne altered some of his perspectives about the Middle East. In August 1975, in the presence of a Socialist International delegation headed by Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, Boumedienne said: “Palestinians and Israelis are competing for the same piece of land. Some call it ‘Israel’ (after their forefather Israel), others call it ‘Palestine’ also referring to ancient history. But let us leave history at the side. Let us ask the question: have Israelis the right to live on this piece of land? And we can answer positively. But likewise have the Palestinians.” Boumedienne’s moderation also applied to the broader Arab-Israeli conflict: “We do not think it possible to find a solution without guaranteeing the minimum rights of those directly concerned....Whatever solution the contending parties—Israel and the Palestinians, but also Egypt and Syria—accept, Algeria would also accept and without any reservation.” He concluded that the solution to the Palestine issue should center around one of three options: coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians within borders of one Palestine in which the population balance would be kept; implementation of UN resolutions in the spirit of the 1947 Partition Plan; or, the “lame solution”: grouping the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank of Jordan. (49)

There is limited information available on Algerian-Israeli contacts during the Chadli Ben-Jedid regime (1979-1995), or on the post-FLN, National Democratic Rally (RND) governments under Muhammad Boudiaf (1991-1992), Liamine Zeroual (1992-1995), and Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika (since 1999).

Bouteflika and the RND’s effort to mend fences with the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and the Society’s Movement for Peace (MSP) to end Algeria’s civil war is meant to garner support from the West for the nation’s shattered economy. His public meeting with Ehud Barak in July 1999 during the funeral of Morocco’s King Hasan was part of this strategy. Bouteflika agreed to establish formal ties once Israel withdraws from Lebanon and the Golan Heights, and reaches a permanent settlement with the Palestinians. It was hinted that Bouteflika and Barak discussed mutual cooperation in a number of sensitive areas. Of course, as long as the Islamic fundamentalist movements succeed in pressuring the government not to adopt unpopular policies, the potential for ties is reduced.

#### ISRAEL AND MOROCCO: FROM SECRET LINKS TO OPEN CHANNELS

Israeli-Moroccan links followed a pattern similar to other Israeli-Maghrebi ties. In Morocco, however, contacts spread to a wider variety of partners consisting of government officials, opposition groups, the Palace, and the security and intelligence services. (50) In the diplomatic arena, Paris and New York served as meeting grounds for Israelis with Moroccan personalities. Alec L. Easterman and Gerhard Riegner of the WJC met with Moroccan officials with the prior knowledge of the Israeli government.

By attempting to establish a pipeline to the Palace and to nationalist circles, Israel hoped to “assist” Morocco to distance itself from Cairo. To accomplish this, Israel offered the same kind of assistance, technical and otherwise, it had previously sent other newly emerging African nations. Since February 1956, when Morocco ended negotiations with France over independence, and in the months that followed, Israeli and Moroccan leaders met regularly in Paris. However, political realities in the latter half of 1956, as well as after Morocco joined the Arab League, made it temporarily impossible for Jerusalem and Rabat to agree on mutual cooperation.



In June 1956, Ambassador Ya'akov Tsur met in Paris with Abdarrahim Bouabid, a leading Istiqlal party figure who later co-founded the left-wing National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP) and served as minister of finance. The meeting was held prior to Rabat's decision to close down the Jewish Agency's Morocco operations and ban Jewish emigration to Israel (aliya). Tsur's motive was to discuss the option of Israel offering economic aid to Morocco as a bridge for future relations. Bouabid, who resisted falling under Cairo's influence, said that King Muhammad V and the government of Si M'barek Bekkai looked favorably upon economic cooperation as long as Israeli experts conducted their work cautiously. Morocco's intention to join the Arab League should not be interpreted as a signal that the new government supported Nasser's policies. Bouabid predicted that Morocco would oppose the Arab League economic boycott of Israel and would emerge as a moderating force within that body. (51) After consulting with his government, Bouabid visited Tsur on July 3, informing him that Moroccan-Israeli ties had to remain unofficial. (52)

On February 25, 1956, Easterman met with Prime Minister Bekkai and proposed, with the approval of the Israeli government, that Muhammad V receive Israel's ambassador to France for an informal conversation so that the ambassador could convey his government's friendship to the new Moroccan state. Bekkai replied that until Morocco is fully stabilized, any act in favor of Israeli-Moroccan ties would be counterproductive. The Egyptian press was waging a campaign against Muhammad V and the Moroccan government, branding them as traitors to the Arab cause for negotiating with the French before their independence was fully recognized. Thus, it would be unwise for Muhammad V to meet an official Israeli representative. (53)

The Moroccan ban on immigration to Israel in September 1956 precluded cooperation. Israel formed a clandestine aliya apparatus affiliated with the Mossad's

Misgeret to smuggle Jews out of the country, sometimes with fake passports and often without travel documents. Misgeret also bribed officials for authentic passports and relied on Muslim and Spanish smugglers. In 1960, Misgeret's headquarters in Paris were no longer satisfied with these measures and sought a negotiated solution with the Palace, even opting to bribe its members. In July 1960, Ephraim Ronel, head of Misgeret, noted that the Palace was in need of capital to be deposited out of the country in case the monarchy was overthrown. Ronel recommended that a Jewish personality or a public figure close to Crown Prince Hasan II serve as a mediator between Israel and the Palace. (54)

Meanwhile, with the help of Sam Benazeraf, a Jew with Palace connections, Easterman contacted Prince Hasan and was invited to Morocco. The Hasan-Easterman meeting, supported and monitored by Israel, was held on August 11, 1960 in secrecy, at night, outside Rabat, at the private residence of a friend of the Crown Prince. The two spoke about the aliya restrictions and Morocco's decision, in 1959, to sever postal ties with Israel. The meeting ended inconclusively, though Easterman quoted Hasan as saying: "The State of Israel is a fact, a reality. No one can deny the factual existence of Israel. Besides, that country is far from us and does not directly concern Morocco. But the Arab states of the Middle East are our brothers and we cannot ignore them. I am obliged to act accordingly." (55)

Then, in September-October 1960, the Foreign Ministry recruited Marcel Franco, a prominent Jew of Turkish origin with commercial ties to Morocco, to meet with Hasan in New York, where the Crown Prince attended the annual UN General Assembly meeting. The two discussed the Moroccan Jewish problem. Franco was instructed to convey to Hasan that in return for flexible policies toward Moroccan Jews, Israel and American Jewry could exercise their influence to secure substantial U.S. investments in Morocco. (56)

With no coherent Moroccan aliya policy in place in 1960, Israel indirectly lobbied the real head of government and also exploited other channels, none of which proved successful. In November 1960, Ronel reported that due to the mediation efforts of a European entrepreneur active in Morocco, and Isaac Cohen Olivar, an affluent Jew from Tangier, Israel informed Prince Moulay Ali, the son of King Muhammad V's brother, of funds he could receive in return for the Jews' departure; an initial "proposal" in the amount of \$10 to \$15 per emigrant was made. (57) However, the breakthrough over aliya occurred in 1961. With King Hasan on the throne, secret talks were underway in Europe between A. Benjelloun, the Palace representative, and Alex Gattmon, Misgeret's commander in Morocco. The negotiations, including pledges of "indemnities" to Morocco, led to the resumption of aliya under the auspices of "Operation Yakhin," in which tens of thousands of Jews emigrated. (58)

Recent evidence shows that the Gattmon-Benjelloun negotiations were preceded by secret Israeli-Moroccan ties since the end of 1959, unrelated to the Jewish question. In December of that year, Moroccan authorities arrested several UNFP members and accused them of having contacted junior army officers in a plot to assassinate Prince Hasan. (59) The forewarning of a plot was supplied by the Mossad to Morocco's internal security apparatus. As a result, local senior intelligence forces now sought to nurture limited ties with the Israelis. In 1960, the Mossad was allowed to form an embryonic nucleus, separate from Misgeret, whose existence was not reported to Israeli and Moroccan government officials. Even the Palace may have been unaware of it. The apparatus was headed by Ya'akov Karoz.

This "understanding" did not lead to a change of heart toward the underground aliya. Morocco still disapproved of it until the completion of the Gattmon-Benjelloun negotiations. All in all, the Israeli-Moroccan collaboration in 1959-1960, and the

negotiations in 1961 that opened the gates of emigration, offered an opportunity for other types of cooperation, such as mutually beneficial and extensive intelligence and defense exchange. In 1963, Colonel Muhammad Oufqir, Morocco's minister in charge of internal security, and Meir Amit, head of the Mossad, concluded a pact providing for the training of Moroccan security services by the Israelis. (60) Since then, Israel developed the sort of ties with Morocco she had enjoyed with the non-Arab Middle Eastern states of Turkey and Iran, yet the kind that fell short of diplomatic relations.

Before the Gattmon-Benjelloun negotiations, Israel established contact with Mehdi Ben Barka of the UNFP during his voluntary exile. Although most UNFP party leaders were not well disposed toward Israel, Ben Barka, like Bourguiba, admired the country's economic growth and had not yet nurtured pro-Nasser sentiments. In meetings held in France, Ben Barka promised that when he could lead a Moroccan republic, or when the monarchy was transformed into a constitutional one, Jewish emigration would resume and postal ties with Israel would be renewed. He spoke about the prevalence of corruption in the Palace, depicting Prince Hasan as a man who suppressed the nation's democratic forces in order to promote "a feudal-military-police autocracy." (61) The solution for the UNFP was to enter into protracted struggle against the monarchy.

On March 28, 1960, while meeting Ya'akov Karoz, Ben Barka requested Israeli assistance in four areas: influencing Morocco's Jews to back the UNFP, for which they would be free to emigrate after his rise to power; mustering Western--including international Jewish advocacy organizations--to support Morocco's "popular forces,"; providing financial assistance, with the help of world Jewry; and, should the struggle adopt the character of an armed resistance, aiding the "popular forces" in securing weapons. (62)

Israel had since fortified ties with the Palace and refused to render support to the

opposition. If Karoz had already been in collusion with Moroccan internal security elements, one might speculate that he apprised them of Ben Barka's requests. Ben Barka returned to Morocco in 1962, but fled into permanent exile a year later. He was abducted and killed by Moroccan security agents in France in November 1965. Although it appears that the Mossad was not responsible for his elimination, it was asked to help track him down. (63)

Moroccan-Israeli relations were upgraded during the 1960s and 1970s. Not only did Morocco tolerate various types of activity, such as organizing aliya under the aegis of Israeli emissaries, but the Mossad helped organize discreet meetings between King Hasan and Israeli political leaders. (64) Upon Hasan's invitation, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin arrived in Morocco in October 1976 disguised in a blond hairpiece. Hasan wanted to play a key role in Arab-Israeli mediation, saying that the radicalization of the Palestinians and Arab dependence on the Soviet Union posed a threat to pro-Western regimes. In his view, the Americans would not succeed as mediators; the initiative had to come from within the region. Though realizing that Syria was Israel's toughest opponent, Hasan suggested that negotiations begin with the more difficult issues. He volunteered to discuss the matter with Hafiz al-Asad, though Rabin never did hear from him about his direct or indirect demarche before Asad. (65) In August 1977, when the King invited Moshe Dayan to lay the foundation for Israeli-Egyptian talks, the Syrian option was ignored. The invitation was followed in September 1977 by a meeting between Hasan al-Tuhami, Anwar al-Sadat's envoy, and Dayan, paving the way for the Begin-Sadat peace initiative.

The links became more visible over time, though they were maintained by a small number of intelligence personnel. Until 1985, Hasan avoided meeting Israeli leaders publicly. This changed in July 1986 when Shimon Peres, then prime minister, visited Morocco in a much-publicized trip. His

meeting with Hasan caused consternation in Arab states, with Syria severing ties with Morocco.

Influential Moroccan Jews played a cardinal role in local politics, an advantage that enabled them to promote Morocco-Israel connections which has continued in recent years. For example, Andre Azoulay, a leading economist, was a driving force behind the September 1, 1994 announcement that Israel and Morocco would exchange liaison offices. It also appears that Azoulay, a close adviser of Hasan, helped lay the groundwork for the Casablanca Middle East-North Africa Economic Summit of October 1994, in which Israel played a dominant role.

Following the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Accord, when Hasan signaled to Jerusalem that he wished to establish formal ties, he appointed Serge Berdugo, a scion of a distinguished Jewish family and a highly regarded entrepreneur, minister of tourism. His appointment was attributed to Hasan's wish to attract investors (including Jews) from Europe and the United States, as well as to lure Israeli tourists.

On June 2, 1994, Hasan convened a special emergency session of the cabinet. The ministers who arrived at the meeting were surprised to find Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres there, together with Foreign Ministry director-general Uri Savir, Avi Gil (director of the prime minister's office), and David Dadon (future head of the Israel liaison office in Rabat). Hasan made known his intention to improve ties between the two nations. Peres called for a regional economic summit to be organized in Casablanca, direct telephone dialing between the two countries, and the exchange of liaison offices. Most Moroccan cabinet members were reluctant to support the opening of liaison offices, arguing that the time was not ripe for such measures. Yet when the meeting ended, Hasan predicted that liaison offices would be established. (66)

The result of the 1996 Israeli elections evoked concern about the peace process, and it was no secret that Hasan preferred the Labor government to the Likud. During the

election campaign, he urged Israelis of Moroccan origin to rally around Peres. During his visit to Morocco in 1996, Peres, then Labor opposition leader, heard from Hasan that Israel's alleged "No to Jerusalem," "No to a Palestinian state," and "No to a settlement over the Golan Heights," was reminiscent of the 1967 Arab summit in Khartoum, when the three "nos" were raised: "No to a negotiated settlement with Israel," "No to peace," and "No to recognition of Israel." Criticisms aside, these complications did not alter the secret collaborations.

After King Hasan's death on July 23, 1999, his son, Muhammad VI, ascended to the throne. The changes in Morocco coincided with the formation of the Barak government. There is good reason to believe that the threads which the two countries weaved in their relationship over the decades are sufficiently strong to weather most crises. Hasan took special care over the past five years to acquaint Muhammad VI with Israeli leaders as part of the political grooming process of the future king. At the same time, if in the past a certain dichotomy existed in Morocco whereby the Palace and the security/intelligence services collaborated with Israel while various Moroccan governments and opposition forces had mixed feelings about the Jewish state, it hardly exists today. Of course, this does not apply to Islamic fundamentalist movements that have gained some strength, or other groups on the fringes of Moroccan politics.

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#### NOTES

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- 2) Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 283.
- 3) *Ibid*, pp. 284-285.
- 4) Israel UN Delegation, February 18, 1953, Israel State Archives (ISA), Foreign Ministry (FM), 3043/18.
- 5) Conversation with Bourguiba, August 9, 1954, secret, ISA/FM, 2541/21A.
- 6) See footnote 2 (p. 284-285).
- 7) A. Barkai to the Bern Legation, Jerusalem, February 14, 1956, ISA/FM, 2542/7.
- 8) Y. Tsur to FM, Paris, February 6, 1956, top secret, ISA/FM, 2541/26.
- 9) R. Dubek to FM, Jerusalem, October 3, 1956, ISA/FM, 2541/26.
- 10) R. Dubek to FM, October 12, 1956, ISA/FM, 2541/26.
- 11) *al-Hayat* (March 19, 1959).
- 12) *Oslo Dagbladet* (June 2, 1961).
- 13) Z. Zak to FM, June 13, 1961, ISA/FM, 3316/3.
- 14) Avraham Sela, *The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 81.
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- 16) Sela, *The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 80.
- 17) Habib Bourguiba's Speech at the UN General Assembly, October 10, 1966.
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- 19) D. Yenon to the FM, Washington, May 4, 1965, secret, ISA/FM, 3549/4.
- 20) Embassy in Monrovia to FM, November 24, 1965, secret, ISA/FM, 3549/2.
- 21) S. Bar-Hayyim to A. Harman, Jerusalem, October 20, 1965, ISA/FM, 3549/2.
- 22) A. L. Easterman to A. Eban, London, March 1966, ISA/FM, 4027/6.
- 23) Conversation with Muhammad Masmudi, London, October 21, 1966, ISA/FM, 4097/4.
- 24) Note sent to FM, ISA/FM, 4097/4.

- 25) M. Gazit to A. Eban, Jerusalem, May 3, 1966, top secret, ISA/FM, 4077/3.
- 26) Bar-Hayyim to A. Harman, Jerusalem, June 4, 1965, top secret, ISA/FM, 4077/3.
- 27) Same as Footnote 22.
- 28) Ibid.
- 29) Ibid.
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- 32) Davar (December 2, 1960).
- 33) Y. Yanai to S. Divon, Geneva, September 22, 1962, secret, ISA/FM, 2541/22A.
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- 44) al-Ahram (May 11, 1963).
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for Public Affairs (April 1997), No. 3
- 65) *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, Weekend Supplement (December 5, 1995).
- 66) See footnote 64 (pp. 4-5).