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**Research Report**

## Of friends and foes: Israel and Iran in the Maghreb. Perceptions and instrumentalisation

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SWP Research Paper

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*Isabelle Werenfels*

# Of Friends and Foes: Israel and Iran in the Maghreb

Perceptions and Instrumentalisation



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 8  
June 2024, Berlin

- For decades, Maghrebi decision-makers have instrumentalised friend and foe narratives with regard to Israel and Iran, two of the most controversial regional actors in the MENA region. Only Morocco has official relations with Israel, only Algeria and Tunisia with Iran.
- A systematic analysis of news agency reports and social media shows that political elites in the Maghreb exploit public sentiment on Israel and Iran for their own domestic and foreign policy ends: distracting from socio-economic challenges, restricting freedom of expression, strengthening the security apparatus, demonising neighbours, and nation-branding.
- The escalation of violence in the Middle East since 7 October 2023 has amplified existing trends in the three Maghreb states concerning Israel and to a lesser extent Iran, and revealed almost unanimous public rejection of Israel and, to a lesser degree, growing sympathies for Iran.
- The official responses vary: Rabat is sticking to its normalisation with Israel and rejection of Iran. Algiers is seeking to position itself as a voice for global justice in the international arena, while the Tunisian president styles himself as one of the Arab World's most steadfast proponents of the "liberation" of Palestine.
- Decision-makers in Europe need to develop an understanding of the frustrations in the Maghreb over Western double standards, and of the fundamentally different perspectives on Israel/Palestine. Otherwise they risk losing all their (civil society) partners in the region.
- At the same time, European policy-makers should be attentive when Maghrebi governments restrict freedom of expression and religious pluralism under the pretext of opposing Israel or Iran and – in the case of Algeria and Morocco – resort to potentially destabilising propaganda and sabre-rattling.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Isabelle Werenfels*

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## Table of Contents

<b>5</b>	<b>Issues and Recommendations</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>State of Relations – the Background to Instrumentalisation</b>
7	Israel: Normalise or isolate?
9	Iran: Blowing hot and cold
11	Economic and security cooperation: Deliberately opaque
<b>14</b>	<b>Official Framings and Political Instrumentalisation</b>
14	Framings in news agency reports
19	Fields of political instrumentalisation
<b>24</b>	<b>The Resonance and Limits of Instrumentalisation</b>
24	Sentiment on Israel: Significant correspondence with official framings
30	Iran: More scepticism than in the official framings
<b>34</b>	<b>Public Sentiment and Risks of Its Instrumentalisation</b>
34	Deepening authoritarian practices
34	Exacerbating regional and international tensions
35	Reinforcing anti-Western sovereignty discourses
35	Europe: Trends to support and to counteract
<b>36</b>	<b>Abbreviations</b>

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### **Of Friends and Foes: Israel and Iran in the Maghreb Perceptions and Instrumentalisation**

The Maghreb states that form Europe's immediate southern neighbourhood have witnessed strong political and societal reactions to the violence in the Middle East on and after 7 October 2023. Fundamental rejection of Israeli policies and alienation from Western positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have become glaringly obvious. This is in line with patterns that have emerged in recent years, namely growing post-colonial and vibrant sovereignty discourses in both governments and societies. These frequently involve explicit friend/foe constellations and are not restricted to Western actors like France and the United States; influential regional actors like Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also objects of controversy. Yet, Israel and to a lesser extent Iran stand out as particularly contentious and divisive states.

The debates about Israel already heated up in the Maghreb after the so-called Trump deal in December 2020, when Morocco normalised its relations with Israel in return for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Cooperation between Morocco and Israel has intensified significantly since the deal. In Algeria and Tunisia, which have no diplomatic relations with Israel, rejection of any form of economic, political or cultural relationship with Israel or Israelis is foundational – and associated with criticism of Morocco.

Iran also looms remarkably large in the public debate, especially in Morocco and Tunisia, despite its negligible actual cooperation with Maghreb states. Here the basis is frequently more rumour than fact. Morocco broke off diplomatic relations with Tehran (again) in 2018. Rabat accuses Iran of interference in Moroccan affairs and arming the independence movement in Western Sahara, and speaks of an Algerian-Iranian axis of regional destabilisation.

The heart of the present study is therefore neither an analysis of the grey zones of actual cooperation between the Maghreb states with Israel respectively Iran nor of the agendas of these two external actors in the Maghreb. Instead, it is about understanding how decision-makers in Algiers, Rabat and Tunis seek to



influence attitudes to and discussions about the two controversial states, and to exploit these for domestic and foreign policy ends. What public mood and resonance are involved? Where does state influence meet its limits? And not least, what are the implications of the intersection of sentiment and instrumentalisation for domestic political and regional dynamics, as well as for relations with European countries?

The findings presented in this study are based in the first place on a systematic analysis of state news agency reports, tweets and Facebook posts between 2020 and 2022. In other words, research for this paper began long before the escalation of violence on and after 7 October 2023. However, selected news portals and social media were analysed and numerous interviews conducted in the Maghreb after October 7 and through to spring 2024. The analysis shows substantial continuities. Maghrebi decision-makers, while having genuine sympathy for the Palestinian cause or genuine disaffection with Iran, exploit the public mood on those two countries and in some cases stoke it in order to distract from socio-economic challenges, to delegitimise the political opposition, to restrict freedom of expression, to strengthen security apparatuses – and thus to consolidate their own power.

The real or perceived Israel and Iranian presence in the Maghreb and the escalation of violence in Israel/Palestine is also instrumentalised in the foreign policy and security sphere to demonise neighbours, to justify costly arms purchases and to advance nation-branding in the regional and international context. Morocco presents itself as a moderate pro-Western actor standing firm against an Iranian-led “axis of resistance” and motivated to mediate for peace in the Middle East. The Tunisian president styles himself as an uncompromising fighter against Zionism, advocating the liberation of (all of) Palestine and thus standing ideologically close to the “axis of resistance”. Algeria builds on its traditional solidarity with Palestine and parades its consistent rejection of Israel to distinguish itself as a central voice of the “Global South” and global justice. These framings have great resonance in the public sphere, but limits and contradictions are also visible. In Morocco for example the population overwhelmingly rejects normalisation, while Algeria in theory encourages solidarity with Palestine but largely suppresses its manifestation in public demonstrations, fearing that they could morph into anti-regime protests.

Maghrebi populations’ and governments’ negative perspectives on Israel also apply to European states

that back Israel. This predates 7 October 2023 and some European governments’ very emphatic declarations of solidarity with Israel and condemnations of Hamas (and its support from Iran), and poses an acute challenge for Europe. How should foreign policy, security and development actors respond to the heated public moods, political instrumentalisations and sometimes rampant disinformation concerning Israel and Iran in the Maghreb and the resulting manifest political consequences? While there are no easy answers, a number of basic principles can be enumerated:

*Distinguish between rejection of Israeli policy and anti-semitism.* It is a necessary balancing act for European actors to distinguish legitimate rejection of Israeli policies and solidarity with the Palestinian struggle from support for violence against Jews and Israelis. Even if Maghrebi support for the Palestinian cause, rejection of Israel in its current form and calls for boycotts are considered one-sided by many European governments, they need to be respected. Also, Europeans need to take seriously the criticisms of double standards coming from those actors they considered natural partners in the region: democracy oriented civil-society actors. Calls for violence against Jews, on the other hand, must be called out and condemned.

*Keep an eye on freedom of expression, academic freedom and cultural pluralism.* The public mood on Israel and to a certain extent Iran serves as a pretext for repressive measures and restrictions on freedom of expression. It is quite possible that legislation to criminalise any relations with Israel or Israelis will be revived, at least in Tunisia – and become a lever to restrict freedom of expression more generally. That would have negative repercussions for Tunisia’s Jewish minority and could narrow the country’s room for manoeuvre in the international arena – as European politicians should point out. In all three states Shiite proselytising is attributed to Iran. Shiites are sometimes persecuted or at least viewed with suspicion. European actors should consistently speak out against all discrimination against religious minorities.

*Avoid instrumentalisation.* Algerian and Moroccan decision-makers have a manifest interest in drawing European actors onto their side. European politicians must avoid any attempt to involve them in intra-Maghrebi defamation campaigns, which often feature arguments over Israel and Iran. The risk of escalation is ever-present. Europe’s goal must be to de-escalate by counteracting disinformation and aggressive rhetoric within and between the Maghreb states.

# State of Relations — the Background to Instrumentalisation\*

Neither Iran nor Israel are new actors in the Maghreb. Yet only Morocco currently maintains diplomatic relations with Israel, while only Algeria and Tunisia have official relations with Iran. Even where there is no formal relationship, however, the two countries are discussed and political actors — especially political decision-makers — seek to exploit their real or purported presence. There is nothing new about authoritarian regimes in the Arab world using Israel or Iran to boost their internal legitimacy and to project a specific image in the international arena.<sup>1</sup> But political instrumentalisation of Israel in particular has increased sharply in recent years, in both the domestic and foreign policy arenas. That trend has in some cases intensified since the Hamas massacres in Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel’s massive military assault on Gaza.

The following analysis examines the official framings and political instrumentalisations of Israel and Iran in the Maghreb, and explores how they relate to the respective public moods. It goes without saying that neither the instrumentalisation nor the mood can be understood in isolation from real historical events and the actual development of relations be-

tween the individual Maghreb states and Israel and Iran respectively. This paper therefore begins by outlining the most important milestones in the respective bilateral relationships, which are entrenched in the collective memory of each Maghreb state and often lend themselves to political exploitation.

## Israel: Normalise or isolate?

Morocco has pursued largely clandestine economic and intelligence cooperation with Israel since the 1960s. An official liaison office existed between 1993 and 2002, but was closed in the course of the second Intifada. Under the radar, however, economic and security cooperation continued and expanded. Israelis with Moroccan roots were able to visit the land of their forebears (more than 10 percent of Israeli Jews being of Moroccan extraction).<sup>2</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak attended the funeral of King Hassan II in 1999 and other prominent Israeli politicians, including Shimon Peres, Ariel Sharon and Yitzhak Rabin, also visited Morocco.<sup>3</sup>

The big public shift came on 10 December 2020, when US President Donald Trump announced the normalisation of relations between Morocco and Israel — in return for Washington’s recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Official relations between Morocco and Israel have deepened and intensified rapidly since then. Israel’s recognition

\* The author would like to thank Paul Bochtler, Amina Bousnina and Pelican Mourad for their crucial contributions to the data analysis.

1 See for example Samira Mobaied, “The Baath-Assadist System, a System of Political Instrumentalisation”, *Open Journal of Political Science* 10 (2020): 124–33, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=97937>, “Morocco Severs Relations with Iran”, *Aljazeera*, 9 March 2009, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/3/8/morocco-severs-relations-with-iran>, see also Annie Tracy Samuel, “Commanding the Faithful: The Kingdom of Morocco’s Relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *Journal of North African Studies*, 20 September 2023.

2 Ilanit Chernick, “Moroccan Jewry in Israel Set to Commemorate 60 Years of Aliya”, *Jerusalem Post*, 25 August 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Moroccan-Jewry-in-Israel-set-to-commemorate-60-years-of-aliya-599658>.

3 Peres visited Morocco in 1981 and 1986. Rabin and Peres made a stopover in Morocco in 1993.

of Morocco's claim to Western Sahara in July 2023 represented another milestone and paved the way for the diplomatic representation to be upgraded to embassies.

### The relationship with Israel has become a political tightrope walk for the Moroccan king.

The close relationship with Israel became a political tightrope walk for the palace after the ascent of the far-right Israeli government in late 2022 – especially for the Moroccan king, who is directly responsible for this sensitive matter. The king also chairs the Al Quds committee of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which monitors the situation at the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. Here Israeli security forces regularly clash with the Palestinian population. Such events are closely followed by the Moroccan public, which takes a largely negative view of the normalisation (as will be shown in greater detail below). That negative public mood probably accounts for Rabat's occasional distancing gestures even before the events of 7 October, such as the last-minute cancellation of a visit to Israel by the president of the Moroccan parliament in early September 2023.

Rabat's balancing act has become a great deal more tricky since the events of 7 October. The king and the foreign minister condemned Hamas' violence and criticised Israel's response. Rabat called on both sides to exercise restraint, protect civilians and return to a political process.<sup>4</sup> But Rabat has upheld its bilateral relations with Israel and occasionally floated the possibility of acting as a mediator.

Historically, *Tunisia's* relationship with Israel has been especially turbulent. President Bourguiba was initially significantly less negative towards Israel than other Arab heads of state, but that was not to last.<sup>5</sup> Tunis hosted the PLO's headquarters from 1982 to 1994, following its withdrawal from Beirut, and Israeli

air strikes on the organisation's facilities in 1985 also killed Tunisian civilians. Under President Ben Ali (1987 – 2011) demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine were almost the only permitted public protests. Nevertheless there was a brief diplomatic thaw during the Oslo Process in the 1990s, and Israel opened a liaison office in Tunis, which was closed again in 2000.<sup>6</sup> Israel has been a central topic of public discourse since the election of Kais Saied as president in 2019, with Saied insisting that normalisation with Israel amounts to high treason.<sup>7</sup> The Tunisian constitution of 2022 underlines that “the Palestinian people have a right to their stolen land”.<sup>8</sup> In September 2023 the Tunisian president blamed “Zionist infiltration” for the destruction caused by a severe storm in North Africa.<sup>9</sup> After 7 October the president spoke of Zionist massacres and the right of the Palestinians to reclaim their land after decades of Zionist occupation, while saying not a word about Hamas's murdering of Israeli civilians.<sup>10</sup> But in early November 2023 the president did reject – at the last minute – a far-reaching legislative proposal that would have criminalised relations with Israel (including by non-state actors), under pressure from among others the foreign ministry and the armed forces, which feared that the

6 The liaison office was headed by Khemaies Jhinaoui, who later became Tunisia's foreign minister. When President Saied assumed office in 2019 he immediately replaced Jhinaoui, reportedly on account of the latter's pro-normalisation views, see Lamine Ghanmi, “Tunisia's New Leader Raises Eyebrows as He Gives Short Shrift to Ministers”, *Arab Weekly*, 3 November 2019, <https://thearabweekly.com/tunisia-new-leader-raises-eyebrows-he-gives-short-shrift-ministers>.

7 Thomas Hill and Sarah Yerkes, “Tunisian Foreign Policy under Kais Saied” (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 January 2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/01/11/tunisian-foreign-policy-under-kais-saied-pub-88770>.

8 DCAF Tunisie, *Décret présidentiel n° 2022-607 du 8 juillet 2022*, 8 July 2022, <https://legislation-securite.tn/ar/law/105312>.

9 Allison Kaplan Sommer, “Tunisian President Says Zionists Are Responsible for Deadly North African Storm”, *Haaretz*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2023-09-19/ty-article/.premium/tunisian-president-says-zionists-are-responsible-for-deadly-north-african-storm/0000018a-ad30-dd0e-afdf-affe368d0000>.

10 See post dated 7 October 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/>.

4 Aurélie Collas, “Moroccans Mobilize for Gaza Despite the Rapprochement between Rabat and Tel Aviv”, *Le Monde*, 25 October 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/25/moroccans-mobilize-for-gaza-despite-the-rapprochement-between-rabat-and-tel-aviv\\_6202517\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/25/moroccans-mobilize-for-gaza-despite-the-rapprochement-between-rabat-and-tel-aviv_6202517_124.html); post by Telquel on X, 19 October 2023, <https://twitter.com/TelQuelOfficiel/status/1714975143187877950>.

5 Michael M. Laskier, “Israel and the Maghreb at the Height of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1950s – 1970s”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2000), [https://ciaotest.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria00\\_lam01.html](https://ciaotest.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria00_lam01.html).

law would restrict their international relationships and activities.<sup>11</sup>

Another sensitive issue is the question of Tunisian residents with dual Israeli and Tunisian citizenship, some of whom live on the island of Djerba. Djerba has the oldest synagogue in Africa, is also visited by significant numbers of Israelis (travelling on non-Israeli passports), and is a place of pilgrimage for Israelis of Tunisian origin. It suffered terrorist attacks in 1985, 2003 and 2023. Escalations in the Middle East conflict have resulted in tangible hostility towards Jewish Tunisians.<sup>12</sup>

Algeria has had absolutely no official relations with Israel since gaining its independence in 1962. Algeria's stance is rooted in its own anti-colonial struggle and its support for anti-colonial independence movements – including Hamas, which it sees as such a movement. Indeed, the Palestinian Declaration of Independence was proclaimed in Algiers in 1988. Nobody can enter Algeria on an Israeli passport and Jews with Algerian roots must avoid being branded as Zionists by not mentioning that they have been to or support Israel.<sup>13</sup>

The hard line was occasionally relaxed under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999–2019), for example when Algerian journalists and academics travelled to Israel in the early-2000s with the knowledge of certain decision-makers. A similar trip occurred in 2017.<sup>14</sup> Bouteflika's public handshake with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the funeral of Moroccan King Hassan II in 1999 even appeared to suggest a shift in the official policy – and promptly drew domestic criticism.<sup>15</sup>

11 Interviews with (former) Tunisian officials, December 2023.

12 “Chaque fois que des Palestiniens sont tués, les Juifs de Tunisie sont attaqués à leur tour”, *Courrier international*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/tensions-chaque-fois-que-des-palestiniens-sont-tues-les-juifs-de-tunisie-sont-attaques-a-leur-tour>.

13 In 2000 President Bouteflika had to rescind an invitation to the Algerian-born Jewish singer Enrico Macias on account of his relationship with Israel.

14 “Algerian Journalists Visit Tel Aviv at the Invitation of Israel”, *Echorouk Online*, 14 March 2017, <https://www.echoroukonline.com/algerian-journalists-visit-tel-aviv-at-the-invitation-of-israel>.

15 Unconfirmed media reports suggest that Bouteflika promised Barak that Algeria would open an embassy in Tel Aviv, see Farid Alilat, “Quand Bouteflika promettait d’ouvrir une ambassade d’Algérie à Tel-Aviv”, *Jeune Afrique*, 24 July

In the post-Bouteflika era Algeria's leaders have returned to the line of consistent rejection of Israel, and are among the sharpest critics of the normalisation pursued by other Arab states and in particular Morocco. Chief of Staff Saïd Chengriha, who fought in two Arab-Israeli wars, has been especially forthright. In 2022 the Islamist Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix (MSP) proposed a draft law criminalising normalisation with Israel. The proposal, which has not to date been adopted, reportedly includes a ban on private travel to Israel and on all forms of contact with Israel and Israelis by non-state actors.<sup>16</sup> The official line is that normalisation is only conceivable after implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which proposes an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.<sup>17</sup> When violence escalated on and after 7 October 2023 Algeria only condemned Israel. Algiers maintains good relations with Hamas and has regularly been involved in mediating between Palestinian groups. Algeria refused to attend the so-called Cairo Peace Summit at the end of October 2023 citing double standards on the part of the international community.<sup>18</sup>

## Iran: Blowing hot and cold

The three Maghreb states' relationships with Iran have also been characterised by turbulence since the Iranian revolution of 1979, which reverberates to this day in the framings, public moods and instrumentalisation. The escalation of violence since 7 October has boosted Iran's standing among Maghrebi populations, but not substantially altered the (very different) official relationships.

2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1465356/politique/quand-bouteflika-promettait-douvrir-une-ambassade-dalgerie-a-tel-aviv/>.

16 “Algeria Lawmakers Seek to Criminalise Normalisation with Israel”, *Middle East Monitor*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220517-algeria-lawmakers-seek-to-criminalise-normalisation-with-israel/>.

17 “Algeria's Tebboune Calls for UN Vote on Granting Palestine Full Membership”, *The New Arab*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/algeria-calls-un-vote-full-membership-palestine>.

18 “L’Algérie décline l’invitation de l’Égypte au Sommet pour la paix prévu au Caire ce samedi”, *algeriepatriotique*, 20 October 2023, <https://www.algeriepatriotique.com/2023/10/20/le-president-tebboune-invite-au-sommet-pour-la-paix-prevu-au-caire-ce-samedi/>.

Algeria maintained close relations with Iran until the early 1990s, for example playing an important role in the negotiations to release the US embassy hostages in 1981. But relations cooled massively in the early 1990s when Algeria's military rulers accused Iran of funding and arming the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Diplomatic relations were suspended between 1993 and 2000.<sup>19</sup> In the meantime the relationship has greatly improved, notwithstanding occasional irritations over questions like the supposed Shiite proselytising of Sunnis in Algeria.<sup>20</sup> There is considerable overlap between the two states' geopolitical interests, in particular in connection with the Non-Aligned Movement, close relations with Russia, support for the Palestinians and rejection of Israel.<sup>21</sup> Reciprocal high-ranking visits intensified in spring and summer 2023 and the Algerian president visited Iran in March 2024. Both sides also lifted visa requirements in summer 2023.<sup>22</sup>

### Iran stands with the Polisario in the Western Sahara conflict.

Morocco's relations with Iran have been difficult for decades. After the revolution Iran came down on the side of the Polisario liberation movement in the Western Sahara conflict and recognised the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Relations between Rabat and Tehran were completely frozen between 1981 and 1991, and remained cool thereafter. Morocco broke off diplomatic relations with Iran again in 2009, on the grounds that Iran was questioning Sunni-ruled Bahrain's sovereignty and propagating Shiite Islam

in Morocco.<sup>23</sup> Diplomatic relations resumed in 2017, but the next crisis was just around the corner. In 2018 Rabat accused Tehran of supporting the Polisario Front through its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, and diplomatic relations have been suspended since. Even the normalisation of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia – to which Morocco is close despite occasional irritations – in early 2023 has not led to any kind of thaw. Tehran's diplomatic overtures in summer 2023 were not reciprocated by Rabat.<sup>24</sup>

Tunisia's pragmatic post-independence relationship with Iran also went through a difficult phase following the Iranian revolution. In 1982 Tunis accused Tehran of fomenting dissent in Tunisia and closed the Iranian embassy. A diplomatic rapprochement began in the mid-1990s, and relations improved further after 2011. The strongest governing party, the Islamist Ennahda, in particular, was comparatively open towards Iran – not least because Tehran (unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE) was not working to subvert the "Arab Spring". The current President Kais Saïed (elected 2019) is said to be fascinated by Iran. In May 2024, he was one of the few Arab heads of state – and the only North African one – to travel to Iran to express his condolences after the Iranian president's death in a helicopter accident. His brother Naoufel is an open admirer of the Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati.<sup>25</sup> The Salafists, who emerged strengthened from the 2011 democratisation, and parts of the secular elites, remain vehemently hostile to Iran.<sup>26</sup> Tunisia is the only country in the Maghreb to host

19 Banafsheh Keynoush, *Revolutionary Iran's Africa Policy*, Special Report (Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, June 2021), <https://kfcris.com/pdf/dd448fcd67b35ab48903bd18c6fcffd160d99d2290923.pdf>.

20 Ibid., p. 32.

21 "Attaf et son homologue iranien conviennent d'insuffler une nouvelle dynamique à la coopération bilatérale", *L'Expression*, 31 March 2023, <https://www.lexpression.dz/info-continu/attaf-et-son-homologue-iranien-conviennent-d-insuffler-une-nouvelle-dynamique-a-la-cooperation-bilaterale-335358>.

22 Murat Başoğlu, "Téhéran: l'Iran et l'Algérie conviennent d'annuler les visas politiques", *Agence Anadolu (AA)*, 9 July 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/politique/t%C3%A9h%C3%A9ran-liran-et-lalg%C3%A9rie-conviennent-dannuler-les-visas-politiques-/2940491>.

23 "Morocco Severs Relations with Iran", *Aljazeera*, 9 March 2009, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/3/8/morocco-severs-relations-with-iran>, see auch Samuel, "Commanding the Faithful" (see note 1).

24 Syed Zafar Mehdi, "Iran Would Welcome Restoration of Ties with Egypt, Morocco: Foreign Minister", *AA*, 30 June 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-would-welcome-restoration-of-ties-with-egypt-morocco-foreign-minister/2933908>.

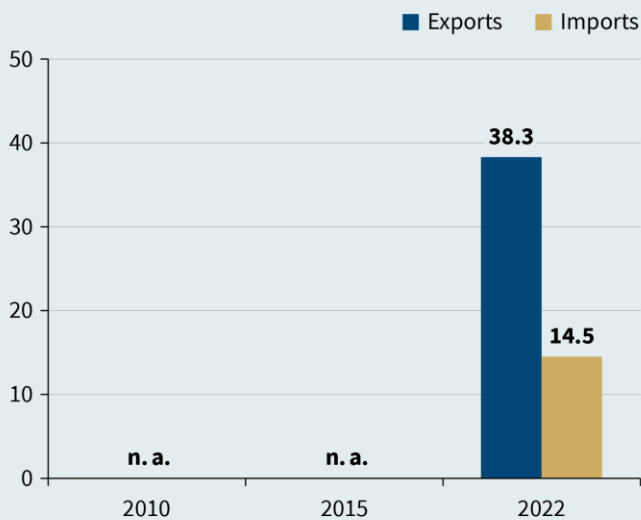
25 Frida Dahmani, "Tunisie: Kais Saïed, l'Iran et le chiisme", *Jeune Afrique*, 5 August 2022, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1367548/politique/tunisie-kais-saied-liran-et-le-chiisme/>.

26 For the latter see "Naissance de la Ligue Tunisienne pour la lutte contre la marée chiite", *Tuniscope*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.tuniscope.com/article/12819/actualites/bienetre/chiite-275910>.

Figure 1

**Morocco, visible trade with Israel**

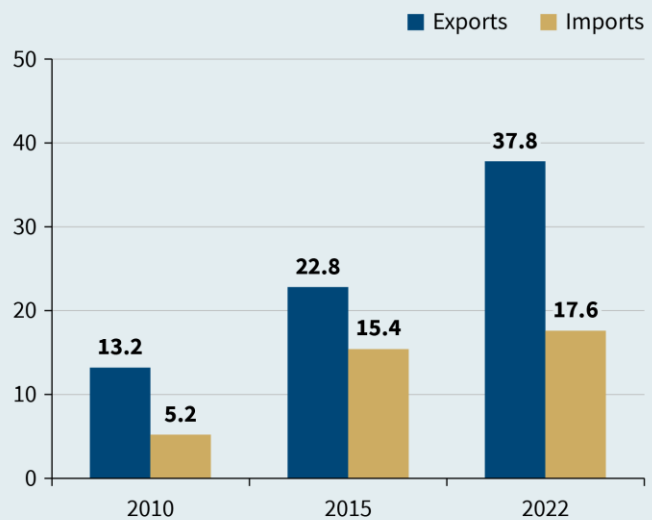
million US\$



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics, April 2024

**Israel, visible trade with Morocco**

million US\$



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an Iranian cultural institute, which opened in 2007<sup>27</sup> but remains a target of political controversy.

### Economic and security cooperation: Deliberately opaque

Examination of the respective Maghreb states' economic and security relationships with Israel and Iran reveals an opaque and in certain respects contradictory picture. These spheres also form part of the basis for instrumentalisation. The level of opacity suggests that governments are seeking to conceal unpopular trade links. The Algerian and Tunisian trade statistics show no trade with Israel at all, while Israeli statistics for 2016 list data for all three Maghreb states. Morocco's official statistics only begin listing trade with Israel from 2021, although it had in fact been growing steadily prior to normalisation (see Figure 1). Another contradiction is that Israel and Morocco each claim a trade surplus with the other. Morocco in particular would have an interest in demonstrating a surplus, in order to emphasise that the domestically contested normalisation was bearing fruit. Prior to 7 October,

<sup>27</sup> "Iran's Cultural Center Opens in Tunis", *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, 17 March 2007, <https://en.irna.ir/news/8919779/Tunisia-Culture-Iran-GNR>.

Rabat was announcing new cooperation agreements on an almost weekly basis.<sup>28</sup>

The trade and investment data for Iran paints a similarly vague and contradictory picture.<sup>29</sup> Algeria's exports to Iran have expanded enormously of late, although their exact nature is difficult to clarify as the figures are not broken down in the relevant trade statistics (UNCTAD, IMF). There is a certain amount of low-level economic cooperation between Morocco and Iran, despite the absence of diplomatic relations. Exports to Iran from Morocco's state-controlled phosphates sector were not insignificant through 2009, but have dried up entirely since. On the other hand, the volume of imports from Iran has been increasing again since 2020.<sup>30</sup>

Tunisia's imports from Iran remain constant at a very low level; its exports to Iran are even smaller.

<sup>28</sup> Intissar Fakir, *Morocco and Israel: Economic Opportunities, Military Incentives, and Moral Hazards* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1 December 2022), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/morocco-and-israel-economic-opportunities-military-incentives-and-moral-hazards>.

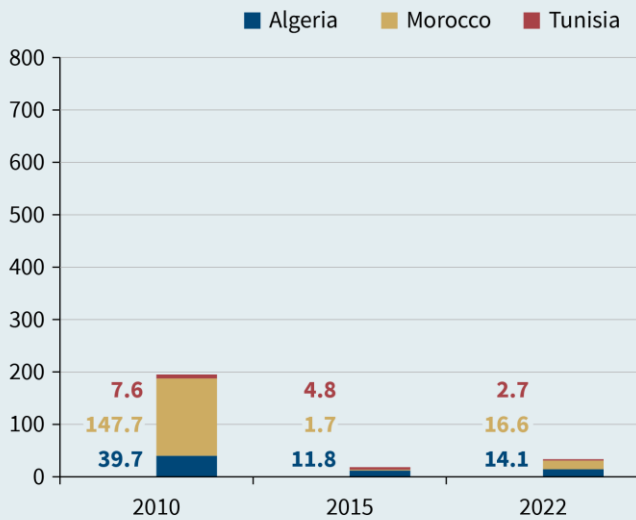
<sup>29</sup> See also the chapters on the Maghreb states in Keynough, *Revolutionary Iran's Africa Policy* (see note 19).

<sup>30</sup> Trading Economics, "Iran Exports to Morocco", <https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/exports/morocco>, see also: Trading Economics, "Morocco Imports from Iran", <https://tradingeconomics.com/morocco/imports/iran>.

Figure 2

**Visible imports from Iran**

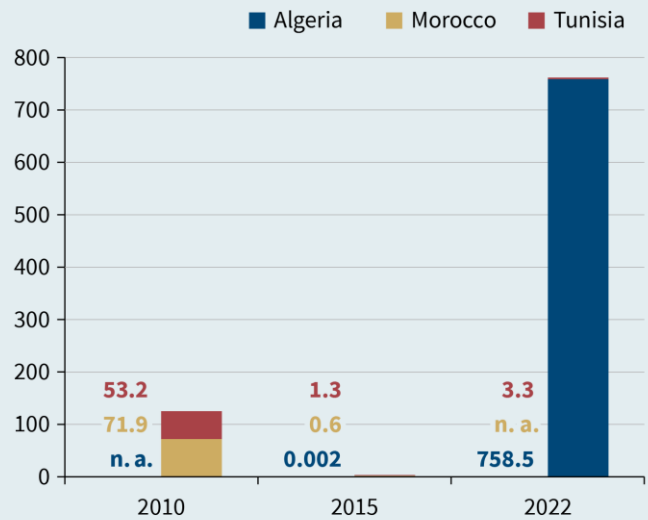
million US\$



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics, April 2024

**Visible exports to Iran**

million US\$



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Altogether, one can say that the official figures on economic relations between these states are opaque, unreliable and skewed by political interests and taboos. Additionally, the statistics for Moroccan-Israeli trade and investment are likely to lag behind the latest developments. Paradoxically, at least for the moment, an analysis of official discourses leads to clearer and more plausible conclusions about the state and quality of the Maghreb states’ relations with Israel and Iran than the economic data.

The only case where at least partial information is communicated publicly is the intensifying Moroccan-Israeli security cooperation, including reciprocal high-level visits. In November 2021 the Israeli defence minister travelled to Morocco to sign a memorandum of understanding on defence, Israel’s first agreement of this nature with any Arab state.<sup>31</sup> Moroccan’s substantial purchases of Israeli defence equipment, including tanks and drones, have received prominent publicity – not least to send a message to Algeria.<sup>32</sup>

31 Judah Ari Gross, “In Morocco, Gantz Signs Israel’s First-ever Defense MOU with an Arab Country”, *Times of Israel*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-morocco-gantz-signs-israels-first-ever-defense-mou-with-an-arab-country/>.

32 Safaa Kasraoui, “Morocco, Bahrain, and UAE Contribute to Israel’s 2022 Arms Sales Increase”, *Morocco World News*, 15 June 2023, <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2023/06/15/morocco-bahrain-and-uae-contribute-to-israels-2022-arms-sales-increase>.

In another first, the chief of staff of the Israeli armed forces visited Morocco in July 2022.<sup>33</sup> In the opposite direction there appears to be more caution concerning visits.

**Talk about security cooperation with Iran is based largely on rumour.**

There are rumours about Algerian-Iranian security cooperation, but very little in the way of reliable up-to-date information. The last official reports on genuinely high-level meetings in the security and defence sector are from 2002. Sporadic reports on lower-level military meetings<sup>34</sup> suggest that security discussions have continued. Regional and international security challenges and conflicts (Ukraine, Israel/Palestine, Yemen, Libya etc.) are also discussed regularly at po-

06/355963/morocco-bahrain-and-uae-contribute-to-israels-2022-arms-sales-increase.

33 “Israeli Army Chief Lands in Morocco for First Visit as Ties Normalise”, *France 24*, 19 July 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/diplomacy/20220719-israeli-army-chief-lands-in-morocco-for-first-visit-as-ties-normalise>.

34 Ministry of National Defence, Algiers, “Air Force Commander Receives the New Military Attaché to the Embassy of Islamic Republic of Iran in Algeria”, 8 March 2021, [https://www.mdn.dz/site\\_cfa/sommaire/actualites/an/delegation-cfa-iran-08032021-an.php](https://www.mdn.dz/site_cfa/sommaire/actualites/an/delegation-cfa-iran-08032021-an.php).

litical summits.<sup>35</sup> Both countries' official communiqués refer to cooperation in numerous areas without mentioning defence.<sup>36</sup> Although there have been frequent announcements of military and security cooperation, the extent to which this is actually realised remains unclear. In late 2022 it was reported that Algeria was among the countries seeking to purchase Iranian drones.<sup>37</sup> While the frequent Moroccan, Saudi and Israeli reports about the Polisario Front receiving support through the Iranian-backed Hezbollah cannot be independently verified, certain Western intelligence services and financial investigators are claimed to have information to that effect.<sup>38</sup>

*Tunisian-Iranian* security cooperation is simply non-existent. As such the discussion in the Maghreb about security cooperation (and arms deals) with Iran is based almost exclusively on rumours and therefore ideal for stirring trouble. Like the reports about Israel's real or alleged cooperation with Morocco, these stories are often picked up, circulated and politically instrumentalised by decision-makers and other actors in the Maghreb.

35 Ghaya Ben Mbarek, "Algerian Parliament Speaker Meets Iranian President Raisi in Tehran", *The National*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/08/23/algerian-parliament-speaker-meets-iranian-president-raisi-in-tehran/>; Ali Izadi, "FM: Iran-Algeria Ties on Right Track", *IRNA*, 8 July 2023, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85163205/FM-Iran-Algeria-ties-on-right-track>; "Iran's Foreign Minister Visits Algeria over Syrian, Gulf Crisis", *North Africa Post*, 19 June 2017, <https://northafricapost.com/18405-irans-foreign-minister-visits-algeria-syrian-gulf-crisis.html>.

36 "Development of Iran-Algeria Relations", *nournews*, 7 August 2023, <https://nournews.ir/En/News/145099/Development-of-Iran-Algeria-relations>.

37 "22 Countries Requested to Purchase Iran Military Drones, Official Says", *Middle East Monitor*, 19 October 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221019-22-countries-requested-to-purchase-iran-military-drones-official-says/>.

38 Christine Kensche, "Wie der Iran ein weltumspannendes Terror-Netz gegen Israel in Stellung bringt", *Die Welt*, 10 November 2023, <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus248426070/Geheimdienstberichte-Irans-weltumspannendes-Terror-Netz-gegen-Israel.html>.



# Official Framings and Political Instrumentalisation

The analysis of official and semi-official sources presented in this study demonstrates how Maghrebi decision-makers seek to define and control their respective national discussions about Israel and Iran. Often Israel and Iran serve simply as vehicles for consolidating and legitimising power by constructing an external enemy and ostentatiously demonstrating foreign policy successes at home and abroad. In other words, the discursive treatment of Israel and Iran – the “official story” – is related to the politics of authoritarian rule<sup>39</sup> and nation-branding.<sup>40</sup> Although the data for the present study was gathered and analysed before 7 October 2023, a supplementary more selective review of post-7 October publications reveals that the underlying tendencies in the official framings of Israel and Iran remain essentially stable. Any significant differences identified after 7 October are noted in the following discussion.

## Framings in news agency reports

Prior to October 7 the heads of all three states – the Moroccan king and the Algerian and Tunisian presi-

dents – mentioned Iran and Israel only occasionally in their speeches. Statements on Israel and Iran are more commonly found in the official news agencies’ reports and, especially, in the local pro-government media. Given the increasingly strict state control over the entire media spectrum in Algeria and Morocco, it can be assumed that the official news agencies Algérie Presse Service (APS) and Maghreb Arabe Presse (MAP) reflect the positions of the respective political leaders towards Israel and Iran and the specific image of those two states that their rulers wish to communicate in their own public sphere and internationally.

For this study a quantitative analysis was conducted of the reports published by APS and MAP between 1 January 2020 and 1 June 2022. 25 percent of all reports that mentioned Israel and Iran were also subjected to manual coding, in order to identify positive, negative and neutral sentiments as well as specific patterns of argumentation (for detailed information on the data gathering and analysis see doi: 10.7802/2691).

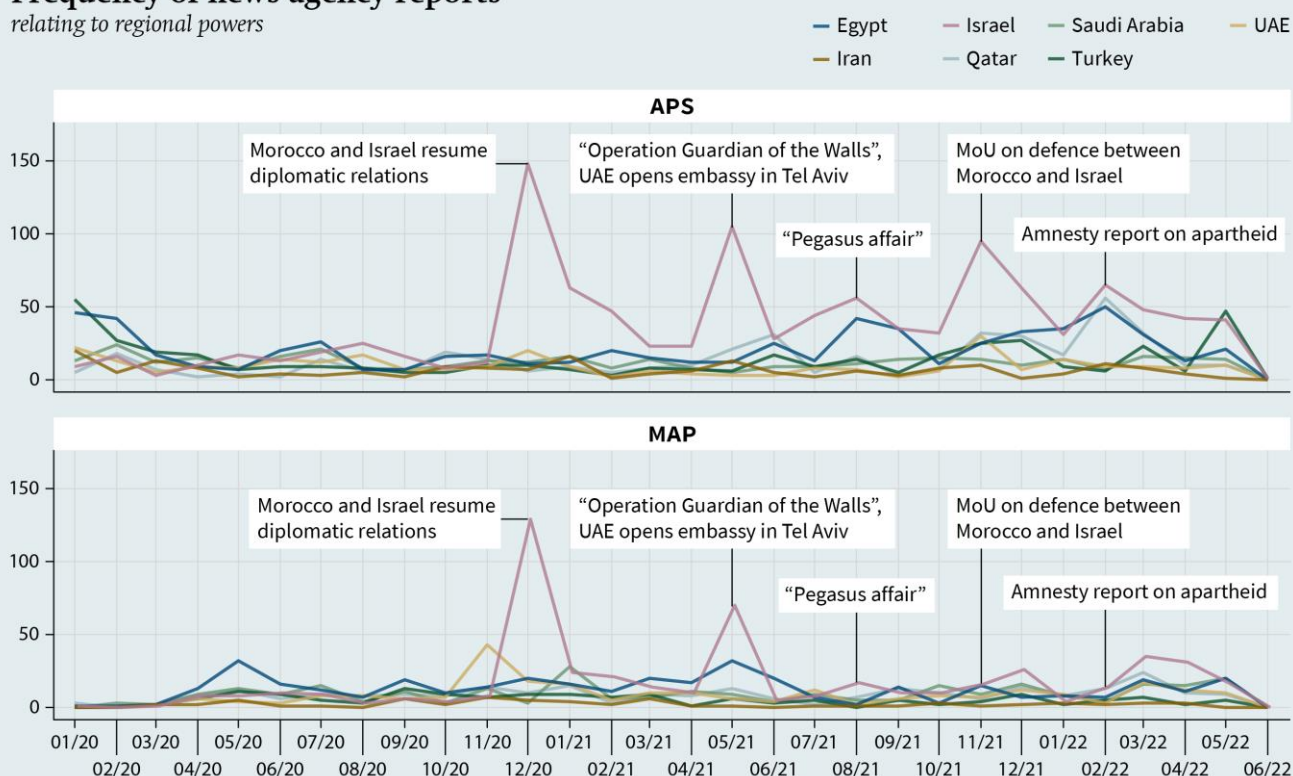
The Tunisian state agency TAP was not included in this systematic analysis, because it exhibited a comparatively independent line until spring 2023. Here the analysis focused on the Facebook posts of the Tunisian presidency during the period between July 2021, when President Kais Saied began to massively expand his powers, and July 2022. To an extent this Facebook page can be regarded as equivalent to the official news agencies in Algeria and Morocco, because it served as the principal platform for presidential pronouncements during the investigated period and thus represented the official political line. Since the appointment of a new director in March 2023 the Tunisian news agency TAP has also shifted towards reflecting the president’s positions.

<sup>39</sup> There is a significant body of political science literature on the importance of the ability to influence and control discourses, to develop narratives and to adapt them to changing national and international circumstances for the legitimacy and power of authoritarian rulers. See Laurie A. Brand, *Official Stories: Politics and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), <https://www.sup.org/books/title?id=23394>, and Christian Göbel, “Authoritarian Consolidation”, *European Political Science* 10 (2011): 176–90, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/eps.2010.47>.

<sup>40</sup> “Nation-branding” refers to efforts to project a particular image in the international arena through deliberate marketing and communication strategies. See Steffen Wippel, ed., *Branding the Middle East* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), doi: 10.1515/9783110741100.

Figure 3

### Frequency of news agency reports relating to regional powers



Source: author's data and analysis, see doi.org/10.7802/2691  
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### Disproportionate focus on Israel

Our quantitative analysis of the texts published by APS and MAP reveals that more reports were published on Israel than on any of the other six “regional players” included in the investigation (Egypt, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE; see Figure 3). Out of 39,785 reports published by MAP and APS during the period in question (on all topics), 1,654 mentioned Israel. Roughly twice as many Algerian agency reports mentioned Israel compared to Moroccan.

The frequency of reports on Israel spiked in connection with three types of development: The first were “milestones” in the normalisation between Israel and Morocco. These included President Trump’s announcement that there would be full diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco (on 10 December 2020), and the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Israel and Morocco on cooperation in the security sector (in November 2021). A second set of peaks was associated with conflicts between Algeria and Morocco in which Israel played

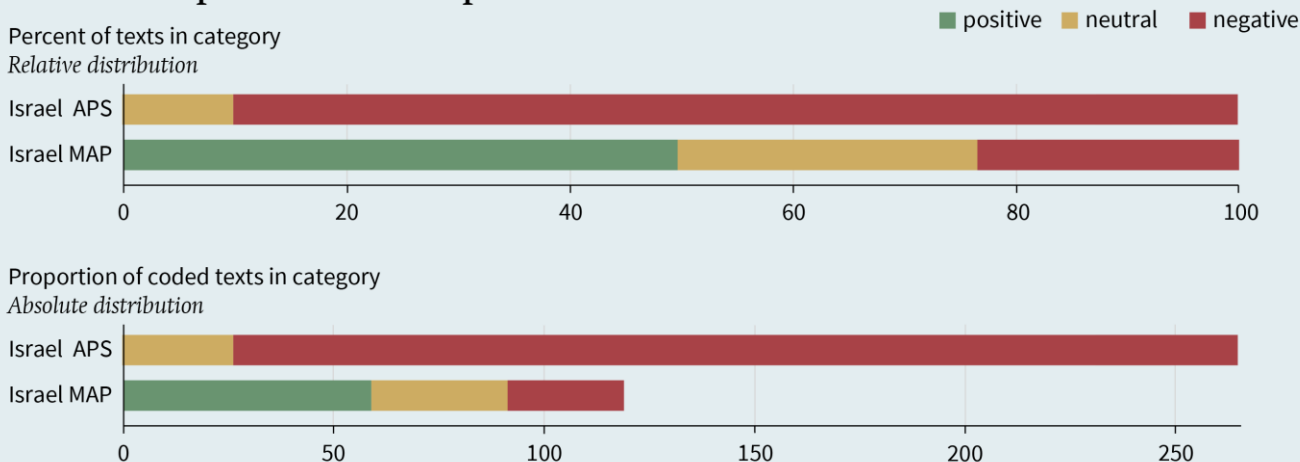
a role, such as at the Pegasus affair, where Morocco apparently used Israeli-sourced spyware to target – among others – members of the Algerian political elite. Another example was the controversial question of Israel’s observer status at the African Union, on which Algeria and Morocco took opposing stances. Finally, peaks occurred with significant developments in the Israel/Palestine conflict, and included Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip, confrontations between Israeli security forces and Palestinian worshippers on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (for example in April/May 2021), and the publication of Amnesty International’s report accusing Israel of apartheid (in February 2022).

### Algeria as bulwark against “Zionist aggression and destabilisation”

Israel’s official framing by the Algerian agency was unambiguous: not a single report containing statements on Israel reflected a positive perspective. Less than 10 percent of the reports were classified as neutral reporting without value judgements, while

Figure 4

### Sentiment expressed in news reports



Source: author's data and analysis, see doi.org/10.7802/2691

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more than 90 percent contained negative statements or condemnation of Israel (see Figure 4). The language generally referred not to “Israel” but to “the occupation forces” or the “Zionist entity” (the latter essentially calling its right to statehood into question). The content can be classified into three broad currents. In the first Israel was presented as the aggressor, the Palestinians as victims, and Algeria as a determined and reliable supporter of the Palestinians. The reports condemned acts of Israeli violence against the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank, expressed solidarity with the Palestinians, highlighted Algeria’s pro-Palestinian activities in regional and international organisations, and noted third-party recognition for Algeria’s support for the Palestinians.

A second current was reports attacking Morocco, in which Israel was mentioned as a supporter of Morocco, as a potential danger to Algeria’s security, and as a destabilising actor in the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. Accordingly, “normalisation” was one of the terms most likely to be found systematically in combination with “Israel”, “Zionist state” or “Zionist entity” in APS texts.<sup>41</sup>

41 “Normalisation” came first, followed by “Palestine/Palestinian(s)”, “Al-Quds” (Jerusalem), “Gaza” and “West Bank”. “Morocco” and “Trump” came before “occupation”, presumably reflecting the relevance of Morocco’s Trump deal for Algerian decision-makers (and the latter’s irritation).

Morocco was frequently accused of spying on behalf of Israel.<sup>42</sup> And there was unequivocal condemnation of statements made by Israeli politicians in Rabat that were interpreted as direct aggression against Algeria.<sup>43</sup> But Israel was also attributed an indirect role in the forest fires in summer 2021, for which the Algerian government blamed the (non-violent) Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie (MAK). The MAK, it was asserted, was actively supported by the Zionist entity and “a North African state” (meaning Morocco).<sup>44</sup>

### Israel is presented as a destabilising factor in the region.

The third identified current involved general rejection of any normalisation between Arab states and Israel, of the dropping of the Sahrawi by Arab states and the United States, as well as Israel’s attempts

42 “Affaire ‘Pegasus’: le Maroc continue à faire de l’espionnage au profit d’Israël”, *Algérie Presse Service (APS)*, 19 July 2021, <https://www.aps.dz/monde/125117-affaire-pegasus-le-maroc-continue-a-faire-de-l-espionnage-au-profit-d-israel>.

43 “Explainer: Why Did Algeria Cut Diplomatic Ties with Morocco?” *France24*, 26 August 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210826-explainer-why-did-algeria-cut-diplomatic-ties-with-morocco>.

44 “Démantèlement d’un groupe terroriste appartenant au ‘MAK’”, *APS*, 13 October 2021, <https://www.aps.dz/algerie/128855-demantelement-d-un-groupe-terroriste-appartenant-au-mak?tmpl=component&print=1>.

to “infiltrate” Africa with the help of friendly Arab states. In this case the reports concentrated on Algerian (counter-)initiatives and diplomatic successes. For example, the withdrawal of Israel’s observer status at the African Union in 2023, for which Algeria had campaigned hard, was celebrated as a victory in its own right – and against Morocco. All in all, the official framing of Israel was that of an enemy seeking to destabilise Algeria and the entire region – including the Sahel – by manipulating and subverting neighbouring Morocco.

The reporting shifted after 7 October. Now the overwhelming majority of all APS’s international reports concerned developments in and around Gaza.

### **Morocco: Normalisation as opportunity, the king as peacemaker**

Unsurprisingly MAP’s reports reflect a significantly more positive perspective on Israel. Expressions such as “Zionist entity” were not found in the present dataset. More than 75 percent of the reports on Israel in the period under investigation were neutral or positive, while about 22 percent contained statements expressing (in some cases very forthright) criticism of Israel (see Figure 4).

The concern to strike a balance between gradual normalisation with Israel and solidarity with the Palestinians was particularly conspicuous in the Moroccan reports. Here again, three patterns were found. Firstly, Morocco’s ongoing support for the Palestinians was emphasised,<sup>45</sup> accompanied by regular condemnation of Israeli policy towards them (often indirectly, by citing international human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International). Secondly, the normalisation was praised – again via the voices of third parties lauding the wisdom, tolerance and openness of Morocco’s policies and in particular of the king. Those quoted ranged from representatives of Jewish communities in Australia, the United States and Europe through to Latin American states.<sup>46</sup> Thirdly cooperation with Israel was presented

as an opportunity for Morocco, for example for tourism and investment. Particular emphasis was placed on cooperation in security and development.<sup>47</sup>

The dominant message across all the MAP reports was that normalisation represented an opportunity not only for Morocco but for a just peace in the Middle East, and that the king played a positive and de-escalating role as a mediator in the Israel/Palestine conflict or could do so in the future.<sup>48</sup> That is also indicated by the analysis of terms that appeared systematically close to the word “Israel” in MAP texts. “Peace” for example came fourth.

Since October 2023 there has been a significant cooling in the underlying tone of the agency reports on Israel with more emphasis on the suffering of the Palestinians and international criticism of Israel. Overall, however, even after 7 October the MAP data included strikingly little news about the war in Gaza, compared with Algeria and Tunisia. The palace, it appeared, was pursuing a strategy of diversion and focussing on topics of immediate public relevance within Morocco and the immediate neighbourhood: reconstruction after the severe earthquake, economic and development projects, and military attacks by the Polisario Front.

### **Tunisia under “normalisation pressure”**

Although the analysis of reports published by the Tunisian news agency TAP was selective and exclusively qualitative, certain patterns can be identified. Until early 2023 Israel played no particularly conspicuous role in TAP’s reporting. That observation tallies with the systematic analysis of the written statements on the Facebook page of the Tunisian presidency, where Israel was not mentioned once between July 2021 and July 2022.

A significant shift began in spring 2023. The president spoke increasingly often about Israel/Palestine

communauté juive au panama salue le leadership du maroc dans la promotion de la paix.

<sup>45</sup> “ONU: le Maroc et Israël organisent une conférence de haut niveau sur la sécurité alimentaire et l’agriculture innovante”, MAP, 23 April 2021, <https://www.mapnews.ma/fr/actualites/economie/ONU-le-maroc-et-israel-organisent-une-conference-de-haut-niveau-sur-la-securite-alimentaire-et-l-agriculture-innovante>.

<sup>46</sup> “Maroc/Israël: le rétablissement des relations est salubre pour la cause palestinienne (député danois)”, MAP, 23 December 2020, <https://www.mapnews.ma/fr/actualites/politique/marocisrael-le-retablissement-des-relations-est-salubre-pour-la-cause-palestinienne>.

<sup>45</sup> “La Ligue arabe salue la décision de SM le Roi d’envoyer une aide médicale et humanitaire d’urgence au peuple palestinien”, *Maghreb Arabe Presse* (MAP), 19 May 2021, <https://www.mapnews.ma/fr/actualites/politique/la-ligue-arabe-salue-la-decision-de-sm-le-roi-d-envoyer-une-aide-medica-et-humanitaire-d-urgence-au-peuple-palestinien>.

<sup>46</sup> “La communauté juive au Panama salue le leadership du Maroc dans la promotion de la paix”, MAP, 28 January 2021, <https://www.mapnews.ma/fr/actualites/politique/la-communaute-juive-au-panama-salue-le-leadership-du-maroc-dans-la-promotion-de-la-paix>.

and following the appointment of a new director in March 2023 TAP also reported more frequently on Israel, with increasing use of the term “Zionist entity”.

Three essential strands were identified: Firstly there were regular sharp condemnations of Israel, quoting presidential statements on the issue, and announcements of concrete aid for the Palestinians.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, the president and his associates were quoted denying rumours about normalisation with Israel and categorically rejecting any such move; even before 7 October 2023 there were announcements discussing legislation to criminalise any form of normalisation. Thirdly, in a development largely but not exclusively attributable to the attack on the synagogue in Djerba on 9 May 2023, TAP published reports that were obviously designed to distract attention from accusations of antisemitism (also directed against the president),<sup>50</sup> by focussing on Israeli violence against Palestinians and the anniversary of the Nakba.

After 7 October TAP’s international coverage, like that of the APS, focussed very strongly on the Middle East with a special section dedicated to the “War against Gaza”. And likewise, there was no criticism of Hamas’s killing of civilians. European support for Israel, for instance in UN votes, was increasingly widely and critically reported.

### Fluctuating focus on Iran

A great deal less was said officially about Iran than about Israel (see Figure 3). Out of 39,785 reports in APS and MAP just 254 mentioned Iran. The Moroccan agency in particular published very few reports on Iran, in contrast to the broader Moroccan media (especially in 2023). After 7 October there was little change in the editorial thrust of reporting on Iran, even if the frequency of reporting intensified, particularly in Tunisia.

<sup>49</sup> For example TAP news agency, post dated 11 May 2023, <https://twitter.com/TapNewsAgency/status/1656424235202494467?s=20>; post dated 15 May 2023, <https://twitter.com/TapNewsAgency/status/1658122250300665856?s=20>.

<sup>50</sup> Khalil Jelassi, “Kais Saied revient sur l’attaque de Djerba: ‘Ils évoquent l’antisémitisme alors que nous sommes au 21e siècle’”, *La Presse*, 12 May 2023, <https://lapresse.tn/158147/kais-saied- revient-sur-lattaque-de-djerba-ils-evoquent-lantisemitisme-alors-que-nous-sommes-au-21e-siecle/>.

### Algeria: Iran as a “partner” with “significant overlapping interests”

Most of the Algerian agency reports on Iran reflected a neutral perspective (see Figure 5). Four topics recurred. The first of these was announcements of cooperation, for example at meetings of OPEC and the Gas Exporting Countries Forum and in the context of state visits. Some of these reports were neutral in tone, while others emphasised shared interests and perspectives for example concerning the Israel/Palestine conflict and Syria. The second theme was declarations of solidarity in connection with the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the IRGC, by the United States in January 2020. Thirdly there was reporting on the Iranian nuclear programme, again a mix of neutral reporting, support for the Iranian line and criticism of the P5+1. And finally, Iran was frequently mentioned in connection with recalling Algeria’s role in the liberation of the hostages held in the US embassy in Tehran in 1981.<sup>51</sup> What the texts do not indicate is any special proximity between the two countries.

The list of terms that appear systematically close to “Iran” is led by “light” (as an oil-related term) followed by “Soleimani” and “hostages”.

### Morocco: Iran as “supporter of Morocco’s adversaries”

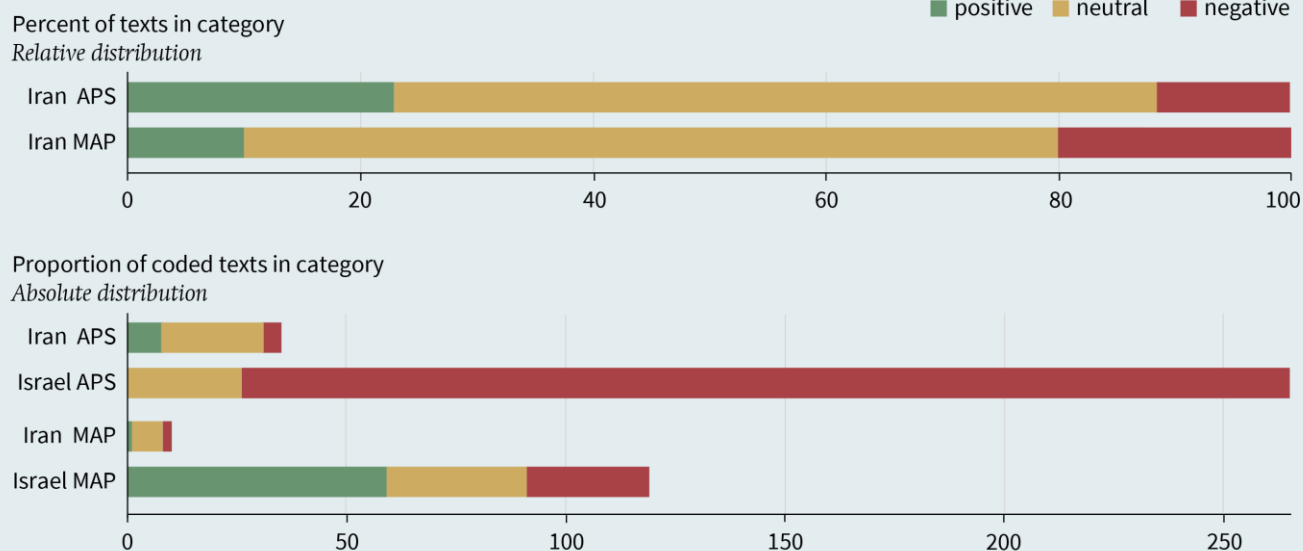
There were similarly obvious themes in the few MAP reports mentioning Iran. The first of these concerned the United States’ relationship with Iran, for example the imposition of US sanctions against Iran and the consequences of American elections for Iran. Secondly, Iran was mentioned in the context of meetings of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, often suggesting a negative mood towards Iran within those organisations. Thirdly, there were frequent reports on Iranian support for the Polisario Front via Hezbollah, specifically deliveries of Iranian arms (especially drones), as well as reports on Algerian-Iranian cooperation.

“Hezbollah” was conspicuously dominant among the terms appearing systematically close to “Iran” in MAP reports. “Nuclear” came a distant second, followed by “Arab” and “China”.

<sup>51</sup> “41 ans après la libération des otages US ... Rétrospective des efforts de la diplomatie algérienne”, APS, 20 January 2022, <https://www.aps.dz/algerie/134527-41-ans-apres-la-liberation-des-otages-americains-retrospective-des-efforts-de-la-diplomatie-algerienne-dans-le-reglement-des-crisis>.

Figure 5

## Sentiment expressed in news reports



Source: author's data and analysis, see [doi.org/10.7802/2691](https://doi.org/10.7802/2691)

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### Tunisia: Iran as a distant “partner”

Because the analysis of the TAP reports was selective and purely qualitative it is only possible to identify broad trends. These indicate that Iran did not play a significant role in the reports until 2023.

From 2023, though, Iran was increasingly mentioned in TAP reports and presidential communications. These tended to be positively worded statements on official visits and planned cooperation between Tunisia and Iran. Reporting on Iran proliferated following the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's massive military operations in Gaza. On 8 October 2023 TAP ran two reports on Iranian statements on the Palestinians' right to self-defence.<sup>52</sup> The frequency of reporting also reflected increasing high-level interaction, such as a meeting of the presidents of both countries in Algiers at the Summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in March 2024, or Kais Saïed's trip to Iran after President Raisi's death in May 2024.

<sup>52</sup> “L'Iran soutient la ‘légitime défense’ des Palestiniens – Raïssi”, *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse*, 8 October 2023, <https://www.tap.info.tn/fr/Portail-Monde/16694428-l-iran-soutient-la>, and “L'Iran soutient le droit de la Palestine à se défendre contre Israël, selon le président iranien”, *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse*, 8 October 2023, <https://www.tap.info.tn/fr/Portail-Monde/16695585-l-iran-soutient-le>.

### Fields of political instrumentalisation

Analysis of the news agency reports reveals a clear political slant in relation to Israel and a less obvious one vis-à-vis Iran. This phenomenon is often even clearer in the broader media landscape – which is more or less exclusively pro-government in Algeria and Morocco, where those critical journalists who do not practise self-censorship are either in prison or in exile. Even in Tunisia, where there was significant freedom of expression until 2021, less than a handful of independent media platforms remain.<sup>53</sup>

#### Israel and Iran serve as vehicles for legitimising certain domestic policies.

Algerian, Moroccan (and to a certain extent also Tunisian) supporters of their respective governments employ similar tropes to the news agencies when they write about Israel and Iran on social media. But they often polemicise wildly about (real or alleged) Israeli and Iranian presence and activities. Here, as will be shown in the following, they draw on and exaggerate the political stances conveyed by the news agencies.

<sup>53</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *2023 World Press Freedom Index*, <https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry>.

This is very clearly not in the first place about Israel and Iran at all; both are instrumentalised to legitimise the respective regime internally, to demonise the neighbouring state (in the cases of Algeria and Morocco) and for nation-branding.

### Distracting from problems, delegitimising political adversaries

While Maghrebi leaders' polemics against Israel and ostentatious solidarity with the Palestinians tend to be genuine, they are also ideal for distracting attention from problems at home. The paradigmatic case is the strategies of the Tunisian president and government after 7 October. Two days after Hamas's attack on Israel the Tunisian education ministry called on all Tunisian schools to fly the Palestinian flag and sing the Palestinian national anthem,<sup>54</sup> and for weeks if not months the president's public communication was dominated by the events in Gaza and anti-Zionist rhetoric. This took the country's considerable domestic political problems – at least temporarily – out of the national headlines: the cost and availability of basic foodstuffs, great migration pressure, imprisonment of leading opposition figures, and growing repression of civil society and restrictions on freedom of expression.

Opposition actors such as Ennahda have also employed normalisation as a stick to beat the president, accusing him of seeking diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>55</sup> Conversely, the leader of the PDL (Parti destourien libre), which in recent years has been by far the most popular party in opinion polls, accused both the president and Ennahda of being too close to Iran in order to discredit them among secular and (Sunnī) conservative groups.<sup>56</sup>

In Algeria the “Zionist threat” – now just across the border in Morocco – served to unite the population behind the army, to justify steeply rising

54 “Tunisia-Palestinian Flag and Anthem in All Tunisian Schools”, *Tunisie Numérique*, 8 October 2023, <https://news-tunisia.tunisienumerique.com/tunisia-palestinian-flag-and-anthem-in-all-tunisian-schools/>.

55 “Tunisian ‘Ennahda’: Celebration of occupying state confirms falsity of Saied’s slogan equating normalisation with high treason” (author’s translation from Arabic), <https://bitly.ws/3d2AF>.

56 “Le PDL refuse les références chiites utilisées par Kais Saied dans ses discours”, *Business News*, 19 April 2022, <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/le-pdl-refuse-les-references-chiites-utilisees-par-kais-saied-dans-ses-discours,520,118464,3>.

defence spending, and to discredit opposition actors (particularly activists of the so-called Hirak movement) as a French-Moroccan-Zionist – controlled fifth column.<sup>57</sup> The prime targets were the Rachad movement, which includes actors from the former FIS Party, and the Kabyle separatist movement MAK. MAK was accused of starting forest fires on behalf of Morocco,<sup>58</sup> and its leader faced even greater disdain on (social) media platforms after 7 October for his relations with Israel.<sup>59</sup> These two movements, which are classed as terrorist in Algeria, were also involved in the Hirak, so exaggerating their limited role in it served to weaken the Hirak overall and legitimise the repression of activists.

After 7 October, when the government kept a very tight lid on demonstrations, Moroccan news outlets published a video in which an Algerian politician claimed that proponents of normalisation had gained a foothold within the Algerian regime. In other words, all sides exploited Israel to delegitimise their political adversaries.<sup>60</sup>

Conversely Morocco exhibited little tolerance of criticism of normalisation before 7 October 2023, in particular if it implicated the king. Imprisonment was a potential consequence.<sup>61</sup> And because the Trump deal tied normalisation with Israel to US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, serious criticism of the deal in Morocco was largely impossible anyway.<sup>62</sup> At least until 7 October these strategies also succeeded in weakening the monarchy's potentially strongest opponent, the Islamist PJD. It was the then PJD prime minister who had to sign the normalisation agreement with Israel, which was especially strongly rejected by his own party's supporters. Their disappointment can be regarded as one reason for the PJD's election defeat in 2021. When the PJD's leader

57 Post by Adlene Mohammedi, 5 June 2023, <https://x.com/AdleneMo/status/1665688078730551298?s=20>.

58 Shaquile Goff, “Algerian President Claims Morocco Helped Cause Forest Fires in Algeria”, *Morocco World News*, 18 August 2021, <https://bitly.ws/3d2BZ>.

59 Post by TSA Algérie, 8 October 2023, <https://x.com/TSAlerie/status/1711065991122202890?s=20>.

60 Post by Morocco Intelligence, 16 October 2023, <https://x.com/MoroccoIntel/status/1713843108809519406?s=20>.

61 “Au Maroc, un homme condamné à cinq ans de prison pour ‘offense à la monarchie’ après des posts sur Facebook”, *Le Monde*, 3 August 2023, <https://bitly.ws/3d2Bh>.

62 Human Rights Watch, “Morocco and Western Sahara – Events of 2022”, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/morocco-and-western-sahara>.

criticised Morocco's policy of normalisation with Israel as irresponsible in March 2023 and called for greater support for the Palestinians, he was slapped down by the palace and the PJD had to walk his statement back. The escalation of violence post-7 October has put wind back in the PJD's sails and it felt strong enough to unequivocally demand the termination of relations with Israel.<sup>63</sup> This is likely to have more than restored its popularity.

## Demonising the neighbour

Both Morocco and Algeria exploit Israel and Iran to discredit each other domestically and in the international arena. The facts tend to be secondary. On an almost daily basis pro-government Moroccan and Algerian (social) media accounts polemicise against each other, veering into conspiracy theories and conjuring up dangers. Here there appears to be a strong element of trouble-stirring to distract from domestic problems: evoking external threat creates cohesion between leaders and populations. It also lays the groundwork for justification or even expansion of the already strong security apparatuses.

For example, Algerian media published statements by Moroccan opponents of normalisation who feared that the Israeli state "is being transferred to Morocco",<sup>64</sup> wrote about joint Israeli-Moroccan plans in Africa,<sup>65</sup> and accused Israel and Morocco of having successfully put pressure on India to prevent Algeria being invited to join BRICS.<sup>66</sup> When Algeria reported that the Israeli, French and Moroccan intelligence ser-

vices were coordinating to destabilise Algerian provinces and Sahel states, the Moroccan press accused Algeria the very next day of lying and inventing anti-Moroccan conspiracies.<sup>67</sup> It tends to be difficult or impossible to ascertain the truth of such claims.

## The escalation of the Israel/Palestine conflict is instrumentalised against Maghreb neighbours.

The escalation in Gaza in October 2023 was also exploited to the same ends. Algerian and Tunisian (social) media crowded over the predicament Morocco now found itself in.<sup>68</sup> In response to Morocco's verbal distancing from Israel, Algerian media commented that as a colonial state itself (in other words, illegally occupying Western Sahara), Morocco was in no position to make accusations against another colonial state, namely Israel.<sup>69</sup> Moroccan media retorted that demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinians were permitted in Morocco – unlike in Algeria. It is quite possible that that was one factor motivating Algeria to organise quasi-state demonstrations before the end of October 2023.

Moroccan media and monarchy-adjacent elites regularly conjure the Iranian threat and warn of a Iran-Hezbollah-Algeria-Polisario axis that also presents a threat to the West.<sup>70</sup> Reports of this kind can also serve, especially post-7 October, to justify Morocco's highly controversial decision to maintain relations with Israel. Our analysis of the hashtag "Algeria is an Iranian agent" (الجزائر عميل إيراني) between 1 June 2020 and 30 January 2023 found that a majority of the accounts that provided their location were in Morocco (see Figure 6).

Tunisia was also dragged in. In August 2023 Abdelkader Bengrina, former minister and leader of an

63 "Moroccan Palace Asks Islamist Party to Stop Criticizing Ties with Israel", *Reuters*, 13 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/moroccan-palace-asks-islamist-party-stop-criticizing-ties-with-israel-2023-03-13/>, Safaa Kasraoui, "PJD Calls on Morocco's Government to Cut Ties with Israel", *Morocco World News*, 13 November 2023, <https://www.morocco-worldnews.com/2023/11/358929/pjd-calls-on-moroccos-government-to-cut-ties-with-israel>.

64 Hasna Yacoub, "Israël phagocyte le makhzen", *L'Expression*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.lexpressiondz.com/nationale/israel-phagocyte-le-makhzen-339406>.

65 For typical examples from Algeria and Morocco see "L'entité sioniste et le Maroc veulent contrecarrer l'Algérie en Afrique", *APS*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.aps.dz/algerie/126285-l-entite-sioniste-et-le-maroc-veulent-contrecarrer-l-algerie-en-afrique>.

66 Saïd Boucetta, "Un veto indien ferme contre l'Algérie", *L'Expression*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.lexpressiondz.com/nationale/un-veto-indien-ferme-contre-l-algerie-372916>.

67 "Complot France-Maroc-Israël contre l'Algérie: Un mensonge de plus du régime algérien", *Hespress*, 1 June 2023, <https://fr.hespress.com/316803-complot-france-maroc-israel-contre-lalgerie-un-mensonge-de-plus-du-regime-algerien.html>.

68 Post by TSA Algérie, 11 October 2023, <https://twitter.com/TSAAlgerie/status/1712153088906105091>.

69 Post by TSA Algérie, 6 November 2023, <https://x.com/TSAAlgerie/status/1721435013743251746?s=20>.

70 Post by Lahcen Haddad, 31 October 2023, <https://x.com/Lahcenhaddad/status/1719241838156976146?s=20>, Mohamed Jaouad El Kanabi, "Les drones iraniens fournis au polisario s'invitent au Parlement britannique", *Hespress*, 12 July 2023, <https://fr.hespress.com/322338-les-drones-iraniens-fournis-au-polisario-sinvitent-au-parlement-britannique.html>.



Figure 6

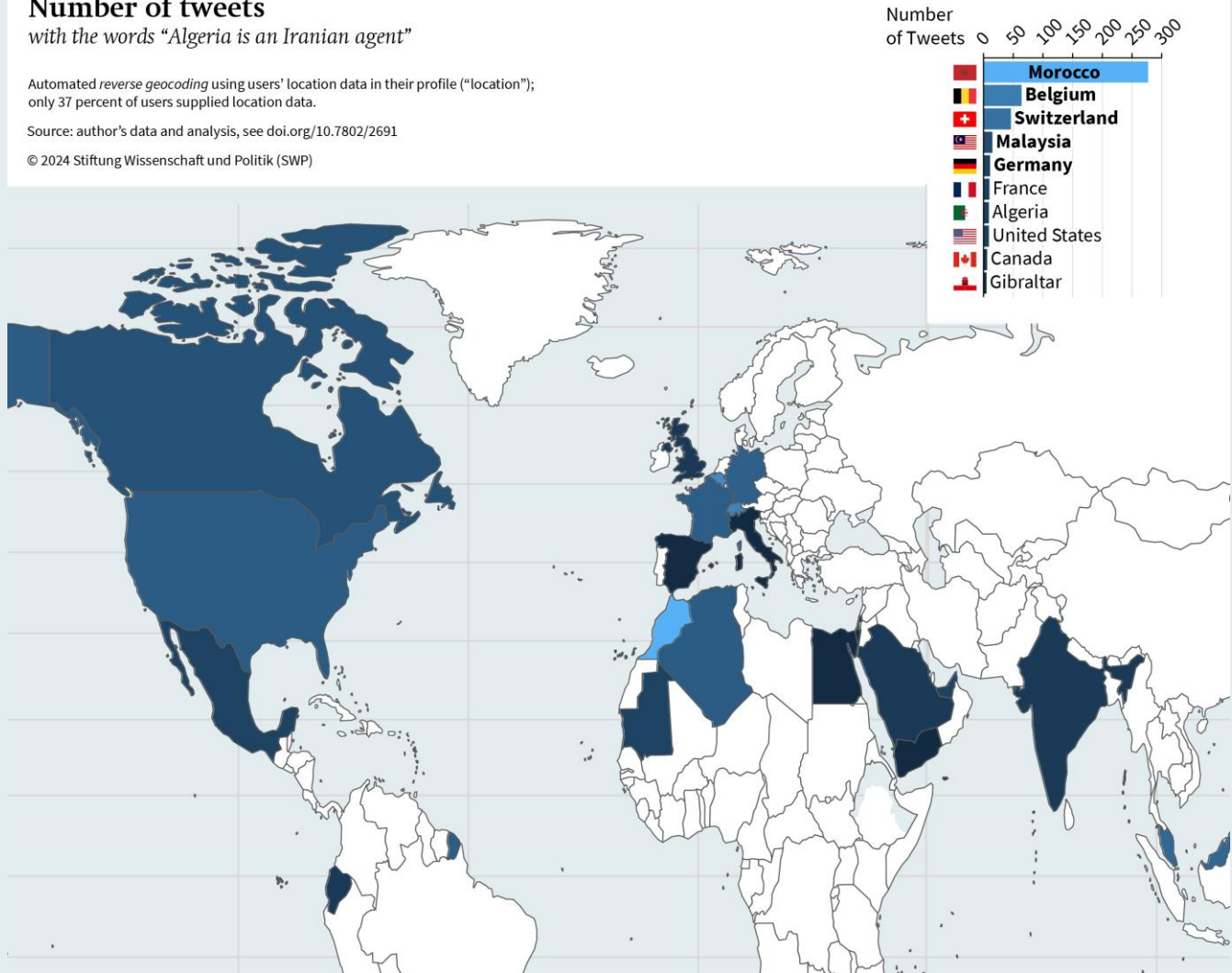
### Number of tweets

with the words “Algeria is an Iranian agent”

Automated reverse geocoding using users’ location data in their profile (“location”); only 37 percent of users supplied location data.

Source: author’s data and analysis, see doi.org/10.7802/2691

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Algerian Islamist party, announced that Tunisia would soon normalise its relations with Israel, claiming that Tunisian officials had made multiple visits to Israel to prepare the move.<sup>71</sup> Algerian media cited high-level visits from Saudi Arabia and the UAE at which, they alleged, pressure had been placed on Tunisia. In late August 2023 the Algerian foreign minister announced at a press conference that Tunisia had assured Algeria that it continued to reject normalisation.

Moroccan media also commented on the rumours, but suggested that the Tunisian president was in fact

71 Riyad Hamadi “Bengrina: ‘La Tunisie va normaliser ses relations avec Israël’”, *TSA*, 13 August 2023, <https://www.tsa-algerie.com/bengrina-la-tunisie-va-normaliser-ses-relations-avec-israel/>.

increasingly close to Iran and influenced by advisers aligned with the Shiite camp.<sup>72</sup>

### Nation-branding and block-building

All three Maghreb states demonstratively instrumentalise their own and their neighbours’ relations with Israel and Iran to position themselves in the international arena and sharpen their geopolitical profile.

72 Bachir Abdallah, “Normalisation avec Israël: la Tunisie entre rumeurs et réalités”, *Maroc Diplomatique*, 16 August 2023, <https://maroc-diplomatique.net/normalisation-avec-israel-la-tunisie-entre-rumeurs-et-realites/>, “Kais Saïed, un président sous influence”, *MAP*, 1 September 2022, <https://www.mapnews.ma/fr/actualites/politique/kais-saied-un-pr%C3%A9sident-sous-influence>.

If Algeria speaks of significant overlapping regional interests with Iran — meaning above all Syria and Israel/Palestine — it is also referencing its prominent past as a key member of the Non-Aligned Movement and a central supporter of anti-colonial liberation movements. Its refusal to participate in the Cairo Peace Summit at the end of October 2023 supported this framing as an independent state immune to Western influence, as did the various resolutions Algeria proposed in the UN Security Council, to which it was elected in June 2023.<sup>73</sup> Algeria's anti-Western messaging is not least directed towards Sub-Saharan Africa — where, as mentioned, it campaigned successfully against Israel's observer status at the AU in 2023.

Morocco for its part has used its normalisation with Israel since December 2020 as a “seal of approval” in its relations with Western actors, which take a very positive view of Arab states recognising Israel. Even through the war in Gaza Rabat has been keen to avoid any suggestion that it was turning against the West, while maintaining its sharp criticism of Israel's actions.<sup>74</sup> Morocco is also clearly determined to present itself as a bulwark against Iranian expansion in the Sahel and West Africa, insinuating Algerian-Iranian connections there.<sup>75</sup> It is probably no coincidence that a flurry of articles of that nature appeared straight after Morocco's good reputation in Europe had been harmed by the Qatargate corruption scandal in the European Parliament, in which Morocco was also implicated.

After the 2011 revolution Tunisia styled itself as a beacon of Arab democracy in the international arena. But under President Kais Saïed it has turned to a very different form of nation-branding, presenting Tunisia as an Arab country that refuses to take orders from the West. Saïed exploits Israel and to a lesser extent Iran to create an image of Tunisia as a bastion of pan-Arab and anti-imperialist resistance against the West and Israel. Under his presidency Tunisia's positions

on regional conflicts have grown closer to Algeria's and even Iran's, for example concerning Syria, Israel/Palestine and Western Sahara.<sup>76</sup> During Israel's war against Hamas Saïed has stood out as a prominent radical voice among Arab rulers and hesitates to endorse the two-state solution.<sup>77</sup> At the end of October 2023 Tunisia was the only Arab country to abstain in a UN vote on a humanitarian ceasefire — on the grounds that it found the demand too weak.<sup>78</sup> Tunisia also refused to support the case against Israel brought by South Africa before the International Court of Justice in December 2023 on the grounds that that would have meant recognising the state of Israel.<sup>79</sup> Saïed also disseminates a stream of conspiracy theories, including the suggestion that Zionists had influenced the Tunisian and Libyan constitutions in order to destabilise these states from within.<sup>80</sup> His anti-Western and anti-colonial rhetoric is likely also addressing an African audience in efforts to obscure the memory of his racist speech in February 2023 and subsequent discriminatory policies, which triggered a still ongoing wave of violence against migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>81</sup>

73 Mohamed Moslem and Dalila Henache, “Algeria Will Not Participate in the Cairo Peace Summit”, *Echorouk Online*, 20 October 2023, <https://www.echoroukonline.com/algeria-will-not-participate-in-the-cairo-peace-summit>.

74 Fadw Islah, “Guerre Israël-Hamas: au Maroc, le difficile pari de la neutralité”, *Jeune Afrique*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1491892/politique/guerre-israel-hamas-au-maroc-le-difficile-pari-de-la-neutralite/>.

75 Mohammed Jaabouk, “ONU: Accusations mutuelles entre le Maroc et l'Iran à la quatrième commission”, *Yabiladi*, 12 October 2023, <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/143281/accusations-mutuelles-entre-maroc-l-iran.html>.

76 Tunisia was one of the first Arab countries to resume normal relations with Syria. It has also deviated from its formerly neutral line on Western Sahara, much to Morocco's irritation, see “Sahara occidental: Incident diplomatique entre le Maroc et la Tunisie”, *Tribune de Genève*, 26 August 2022, <https://www.tdg.ch/incident-diplomatique-entre-le-maroc-et-la-tunisie-640975605641>.

77 “Palestine: la Tunisie émet des réserves sur la solution à deux États”, *Business News*, 16 May 2024, <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/palestine-la-tunisie-emet-des-reserves-sur-la-solution-a-deux-etats,520,137934,3>.

78 “Gaza UN Resolution: Tunisia Outlines Motives behind Abstention”, *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse*, 28 October 2023, <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Top-News-EN/16762467-gaza-un-resolution>.

79 Basma El Atti, “Tunisia Will Not Endorse Legal Actions in ICJ Genocide Case to Avoid ‘Implicit Recognition’ of Israel”, *The New Arab*, 11 January 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisia-will-not-endorse-legal-actions-against-israel-icj>.

80 Post by Tounes El Kahdra, 3 November 2023, <https://x.com/TounesKhadra/status/1720518955482202294?s=20>.

81 Frida Dahmani, “Pourquoi Kais Saïed a réveillé les démons du racisme antisaharien”, *Jeune Afrique*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1420935/politique/pourquoi-kais-saied-a-reveille-les-demons-du-racisme-antisaharien/>.

# The Resonance and Limits of Instrumentalisation

The findings of the analysis of sentiment on Israel in the individual Maghreb states are largely congruent with the official framings. It can be assumed that decades of political instrumentalisation will have left their mark, as described by the academic literature on the effects of state propaganda in authoritarian contexts.<sup>82</sup> However we should not jump to conclusions concerning causality. For one, public sentiment is strongly influenced by developments on the ground in the Middle East. Moreover, it is both formative and reflective of official framings and of steering efforts by decision makers. The aim of the present study is not to solve the “chicken and egg” problem of the direction of causality, but to understand the formative and reflective contexts of the official framings and instrumentalisations, where the latter (will) encounter their limits, and what domestic and foreign policy risks are associated with the confluence of instrumentalisation and public resonance. To this end we drew on various surveys as well as a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Twitter accounts of 35 influencers in each of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia in the period January 2020 to September 2022.<sup>83</sup> The accounts chosen had tweeted in Arabic on foreign policy issues, represented a broad political spectrum and had a large number of followers in their

<sup>82</sup> As the literature shows, state-controlled media are an effective instrument for authoritarian rulers seeking to shape public opinion. When government positions change, the political positions of the target audience also tend to shift, regardless of the prior stances of individuals. See for example Jennifer Pan, Zijie Shao and Yiqing Xu, *How Government-controlled Media Shifts Policy Attitudes through Framing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://bitly.ws/3d6h5>.

<sup>83</sup> The sample for this study was taken when X was still called Twitter. This paper thus refers to Twitter and tweets when speaking of the sample, and to Twitter/X and tweets/posts when speaking of the period both before and after the rebranding. When referring to the period after the rebranding, we use X and posts only

respective contexts.<sup>84</sup> Additionally specific relevant Twitter/X debates up to July 2023 in French and English were also subjected to a qualitative analysis.

## Sentiment on Israel: Significant correspondence with official framings

The Arab Barometer and the Arab Opinion Index show clear and unambiguous attitudes to Israel in Algeria and Tunisia. Both states are towards the top of list in the MENA region when it comes to rejection of recognition of and diplomatic relations with Israel. The situation in Morocco is more mixed (see Figures 7 and 8).<sup>85</sup> However, a closer examination of the mood on the basis of sources such as Twitter/X, Facebook and interviews with Maghrebi officials and civil society actors suggests a more differentiated situation. In all three states certain limits to steering of public opinion are visible.

## Morocco: Limits of official steering efforts

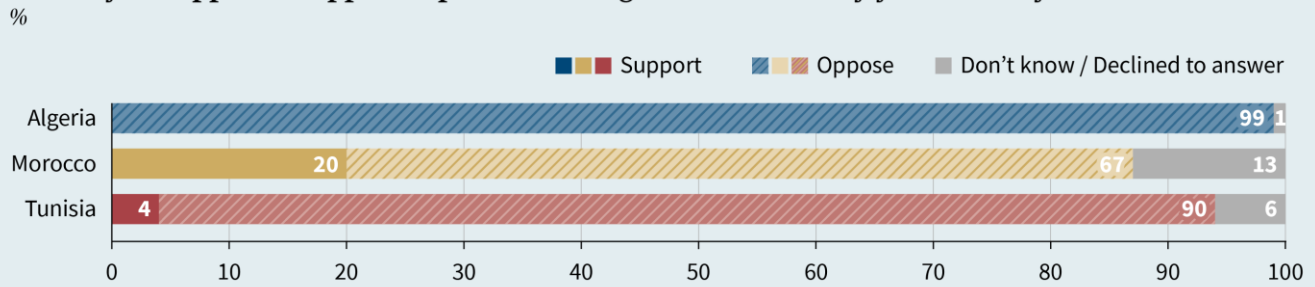
Before 7 October there were signs that the framings on Israel were effective in Morocco. Surveys suggested that between one fifth and one third of the population were in favour of Morocco – and the Arab states in general – normalising relations with Israel (see Figures 7 and 8). Before the Trump deal and the shift in Morocco’s official position and rhetoric only 4 percent of Moroccans favoured normalisation with Israel

<sup>84</sup> Out of 8,074 Arabic-language Tweets mentioning Israel, 518 containing the word “normalisation” were coded for support or rejection of normalisation (as well as neutrality and irrelevance).

<sup>85</sup> Such surveys must always be treated with caution, because a slight change in the question can significantly change the results. In the present study they are therefore only one of multiple sources used to judge public sentiment.

Figure 7

### Would you support or oppose diplomatic recognition of Israel by your country? 2022

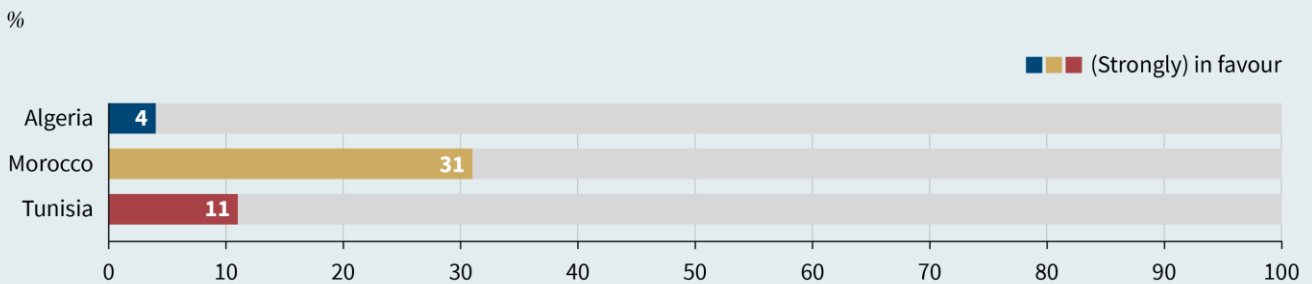


Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Arab Opinion Index 2022: Executive Summary, Figure 27

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Figure 8

### Normalisation of relations between Arab states and Israel, 2021–2022



Source: Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021–2022), How Do MENA Citizens View Normalization with Israel?

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(see Figure 9). This suggests that positive official representations of normalisation in Morocco found a certain degree of resonance even if the mood in surveys as a whole reflected greater scepticism.

The same also applies to the Moroccan Twitter sample, where 61 percent of the Arabic tweets exhibited negative attitudes towards normalisation with Israel (see Figure 10).

Negative tweets criticised high-level Israeli visits, described normalisation as a crime, and questioned the economic benefits for Morocco. The positive tweets argued the opposite: Morocco could profit strongly from normalisation geopolitically as well as economically – and was now in a position of strength diplomatically and security wise, not least vis-à-vis Iran. Above all they argued that Morocco had gained a great deal through US recognition of its claim to Western Sahara. Not least, they said, Morocco was now well placed to contribute to peace between Israelis and Palestinians (in a two-state solution). In other words, the positive tweets matched the described official framing, and it is plausible that they were following it.

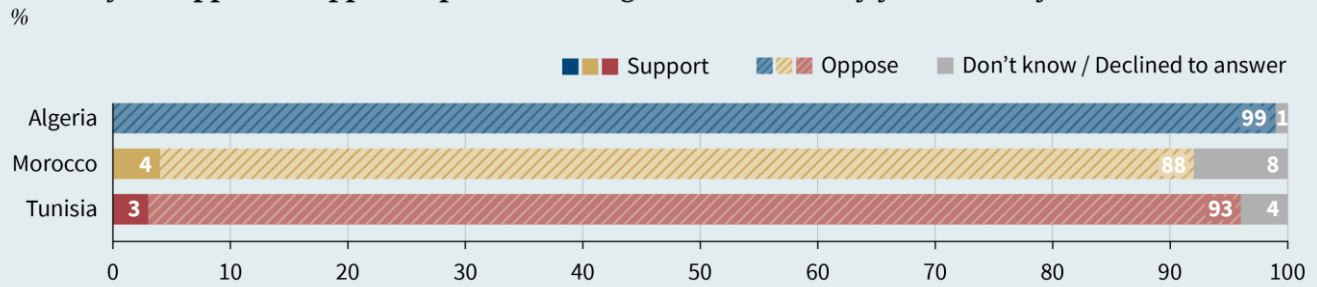
Before 7 October statements by the main Moroccan political parties demonstrated great solidarity with the Palestinians,<sup>86</sup> but virtually no criticism of normalisation. In other words, they reflected the MAP line. Until 7 October posts on Facebook by Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch's RNI (Rassemblement national des indépendants) were consistently positive, especially concerning the economic opportunities offered by normalisation.<sup>87</sup> The only major party to express public criticism of normalisation before 7 October was

<sup>86</sup> The analysis included texts from the Facebook pages of the following parties: Parti authenticité et modernité (PAM), Rassemblement national des indépendants (RNI), Parti de la justice et du développement (PJD), Istiqlal (Independence Party) and Union socialiste des forces populaires (USFP).

<sup>87</sup> The complexity of the situation in Morocco is illustrated by the growing (although still modest) numbers of Moroccans visiting Israel (first half of 2023: 2,000). That said, the number of Israelis visiting Morocco was an order of magnitude larger (2022: 70,000). Lina Ibriz, "Entre janvier et juin 2023, plus de 2000 Marocains se sont rendus en Israël", *le Desk*, 17 August 2023, <https://ledes.ma/encontinu/entre-janvier-et-juin-2023-plus-de-2-000-marocains-se-sont-rendus-en-israel/>.

Figure 9

**Would you support or oppose diplomatic recognition of Israel by your country? 2019–2020**



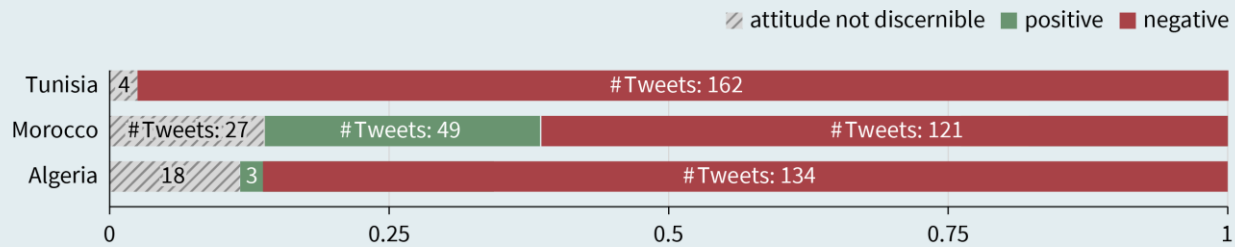
Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019–2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief, Figure 35

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Figure 10

**Sentiment classification**

in tweets on Israel containing the word “normalisation”, by user’s country of origin



Source: author’s data and analysis, see doi.org/10.7802/2691

Based on tweets in Arabic, country of origin identified through qualitative research.

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the Islamist PJD. Clear rejection also came from the Islamist association Al Adl wal Ihsane, which has a strong mobilising base but no legal status — although it is to an extent tolerated by the state.<sup>88</sup>

**The events since 7 October have revealed the limits of top-down steering.**

The new situation after 7 October demonstrates the limits of top-down steering of public sentiment. Despite the largely positive official framing of normalisation in Morocco since December 2020 there were major demonstrations across the country in October 2023 after the Israeli bombing of Gaza began. The only Arab country to see more pro-Palestinian rallies

in October 2023 was Yemen.<sup>89</sup> The demonstrations supported by the PJD in particular called for relations with Israel to be broken off.<sup>90</sup> Other parties were more cautious initially and called on their supporters above all to show solidarity with Gaza and to call for more pressure on the Israeli government. The number of pro-Israel posts on X declined rapidly after 7 October. Individuals who argued for maintaining relations with Israel risked stigmatisation on social media.<sup>91</sup>

It is impossible to say to what extent this represented a shift in the mood or whether it was merely the open expression of a pre-existing uneasiness

88 A. Kadir Yildirim, *Islamist Responses to Arab Normalization Agreements with Israel*, Issue Brief (Houston, TX: Baker Institute for Public Policy, 27 January 2021), <https://repository.rice.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/a3c79edb-1ee3-4dbf-ac6c-9cbe13fcfa2/content>.

89 “Infographic: Global Demonstrations in Response to the Israel-Palestine Conflict”, *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)*, 7 November 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/11/07/infographic-global-demonstrations-in-response-to-the-israel-palestine-conflict/>.

90 “Gaza: à Rabat, 3000 manifestants exigent la rupture des liens avec Israël”, *le Desk*, 10 December 2023, <https://ledesk.ma/encontinu/gaza-a-rabat-3-000-manifestants-exigent-la-rupture-des-liens-avec-israel/>.

91 Post by Ali Lmrabet, 21 November 2023, <https://x.com/Alilmrabet/status/1727085731519336644?s=20>.

about normalisation. But it is apparent that the official pre-7 October framing was strategically prescient, in the sense that it had not been euphorically pro-Israeli. For example, it consistently included criticism of Israeli measures against Palestinians and supported a two-state solution. After 7 October Moroccan decision-makers could simply expand this strand of the reporting.

With respect to nation-branding the official framing of the tolerant, moderate and peace-loving king fitted even better after 7 October than it had before – at least for a Western audience. French media for example noted Morocco's stance approvingly.<sup>92</sup> This image likely helped Morocco to win the vote to head the UN Human Rights Committee against South Africa in January 2024<sup>93</sup> – despite Rabat's less than perfect human rights record.

### Algeria: Framing and sentiment almost identical

In Algeria the Israel/Palestine conflict obscures the political differences between the regime, the political opposition and the population (see Figures 7 and 8). That was already the case long before 7 October. It is the result of a largely consistent anti-Israeli official framing since independence, which originates in the collective memory of the anti-colonial liberation struggle. Algerians see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the prism of decolonisation. Solidarity with the Palestinians in the form of flags and banners was omnipresent in the 2019 popular uprising against the Algerian regime, the so-called HIRAK.<sup>94</sup> All parties across the political spectrum vehemently rejected diplomatic relations and formal recognition of Israel. Political and economic actors with positions diverging from the official line expressed these – if at all – only behind

closed doors.<sup>95</sup> These isolated voices were found principally among radical Amazigh (Berber) activists who feel oppressed by the Arab majority. The Kabyle separatist movement, the Mouvement Autonome Kabyle (MAK), was the only political actor to make pro-Israeli statements. In fact, its leader even visited Israel, for which he was heavily attacked on social media especially after 7 October.<sup>96</sup> The MAK is listed as a terrorist organisation in Algeria and its leaders live in exile.

It was noticeable that in the sample of pre-7 October Algerian tweets “only” 86 percent featured negative attitudes towards normalisation (see Figure 10). In other words, the tweets were a little less negative than the opinion surveys (see Figures 6, 7 and 8). One reason for this could be that the Algerians on Twitter tend to be internationally networked and critical of the government, and include radical Amazigh activists. Alongside solidarity with the Palestinians and anger over the Israeli attacks, negative tweets from Algeria also expressed worries over Israeli destabilisation of the Maghreb. The handful of Algerian tweets that could not be interpreted as negative argued that Morocco's normalisation was understandable given the size of its Jewish community,<sup>97</sup> or suggested that they rejected the instrumentalisation of Israel by their own government. At least one of these tweets was deleted after 7 October.

### The Algerian government and opposition have almost identical views on Israel.

After 7 October Algerian opposition activists found themselves in a paradoxical situation. They generally concurred almost absolutely with the government line on Israel/Gaza but wanted to avoid being co-opted. That was not easy because the only legal demonstrations were those organised by the official side. The

<sup>92</sup> Yasmine Tijani, “Guerre Hamas-Israël: pourquoi la position du Maroc est particulière”, *Le Point*, 20 October 2023, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/guerre-hamas-israel-pourquoi-la-position-du-maroc-est-particuliere-20-10-2023-2540102\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/guerre-hamas-israel-pourquoi-la-position-du-maroc-est-particuliere-20-10-2023-2540102_3826.php).

<sup>93</sup> “Morocco Elected as 2024 Human Rights Council President”, *France 24*, 10 January 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240110-morocco-elected-as-2024-human-rights-council-president>.

<sup>94</sup> Aziza Mehdid, “Le hirak soutient la cause palestinienne”, *Le Jeune Indépendant*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.jeune-independant.net/le-hirak-soutient-la-cause-palestinienne/>.

<sup>95</sup> This has also been the author's personal experience during twenty-two years of regular research in Algeria. One of the few exceptions is the writer Boualem Sansal, stated publicly that he had visited Israel. He was accused of treason and threatened with prosecution. “Human Rights Activists to Echorouk: ‘Writer Boualem Sensal Betrayed Algeria Twice’”, *Echorouk Online*, 26 July 2016, <https://www.echoroukonline.com/human-rights-activists-to-echorouk-writer-boualem-sensal-betrayed-algeria-twice>.

<sup>96</sup> Post by Ferhat Mehenni, 12 October 2023, <https://x.com/FerhatMhenni/status/1712457469228728714?s=20>.

<sup>97</sup> Retweet by Fayçal Métaoui, 12 December 2020, <https://twitter.com/Fmetaoui/status/1337691087478132736>.

Hirak activists either boycotted the official rallies or attempted to signal their independence from the regime by clearly separating their groups from the pro-regime participants.<sup>98</sup>

The moderate Islamist MSP (Mouvement de la société pour la paix) in particular opposed the ban on demonstrations, for example by staging sit-ins. Like in Morocco the Islamists sought to boost their popularity through provocative rhetoric. But this was a great deal more difficult in Algeria, where their positions were almost indistinguishable from those of the government. Ultimately the public mobilisation remained comparatively modest, partly because political freedoms were severely restricted – yet also because many Algerians ultimately appeared to trust their government to engage internationally over Palestine and to do the right thing.<sup>99</sup>

### Tunisia: Immense resonance post-7 October

Support for normalisation with Israel has always been thin on the ground in Tunisia. One reason for this would be that the PLO leadership was based in Tunis for many years, with the Israeli bombing of its headquarters in Tunisia in 1985 still deeply embedded in the collective memory. The 2016 assassination of a Tunisian drone engineer working for Hamas, which was attributed to the Mossad, also caused public consternation.<sup>100</sup> However surveys reveal a significant shift in mood in the weeks following 7 October. In 2022 11 percent still favoured diplomatic relations between Arab states and Israel (see Figure 8), and according to Arab Barometer on 7 October 2023 12 percent of those surveyed supported a normalisation between Tunisia and Israel. By 27 October 2023 the figure had fallen to just 1 percent.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Interviews in Algiers, October/November 2023.

<sup>99</sup> Interviews in Algiers and Tunis, October/November and December 2023.

<sup>100</sup> “Hamas Mourns Tunisian Drone Engineer Murdered ‘by Israeli Mossad’”, *The New Arab*, 7 December 2016, <https://www.newarab.com/news/hamas-mourns-tunisian-drone-engineer-murdered-israeli-mossad>; see also: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2017-11-16/ty-article/hamas-gives-new-evidence-linking-mossad-to-drone-experts-killing/0000017f-e8f6-da9b-a1ff-ecffb000000>.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Robbins et al., “How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views”, *Foreign Affairs*, 14 December 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/how-israel-hamas-war-gaza-changing-arab-views>.

For decades Tunisians have been accustomed to demonstrating their solidarity with the Palestinians on the streets, for example after major Israeli raids on Gaza or clashes on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.<sup>102</sup> The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) plays a leading role in such protests. Even before 7 October formal declarations of solidarity with Palestine and condemnation of normalisation moves were common practice at its meetings.<sup>103</sup> Yet our analysis of the Facebook pages of five major Tunisian parties between January 2021 and July 2022<sup>104</sup> revealed that only the social democratic Attayar and the populist, pan-Arab Echaab Party even mentioned Israel. Where they did, it was principally to warn against normalisation. In January 2021 Echaab announced that it suspected that a (rumoured) assassination attempt on the president had occurred because of his anti-normalisation rhetoric.<sup>105</sup>

Tunisia’s Arabic-language Twitter debates also fit into the overall anti-Israeli picture. Even before 7 October 98 percent of tweets/posts expressed rejection of normalisation and there was not a single pro-normalisation tweet (see Figure 10). Sporadic rumours about a possible official Tunisian-Israeli normalisation elicited numerous concerned and negative responses. The selective analysis of pre-7 October English- and French-language tweets/posts from Tunisia appeared to suggest a very slightly less negative stance and thus tallied with the rather less uniform results of pre-7 October opinion polling.

<sup>102</sup> Mirco Keilberth, “Zusammen für Gaza”, *TAZ*, 21 May 2021, <https://taz.de/Diskussion-um-Nahostkonflikt-in-Tunesien!/5773571/>.

<sup>103</sup> “L’UGET dénonce la normalisation académique avec l’entité sioniste”, *L’Économiste Maghrébin*, 12 April 2023, <https://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2023/04/12/uget-denonce-normalisation-academique-entite-sioniste/>; “Tunisian Civil Society Calls for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel on the 7th Anniversary of the Revolution of Freedom and Dignity in Tunisia”, *BDS website*, 12 January 2018, <https://bdsmovement.net/news/tunisian-civil-society-calls-academic-and-cultural-boycott-israel-7th-anniversary-revolution>.

<sup>104</sup> Ennahda, Parti destourien libre, Attayar, Harakat Echaab, Qalb Tounes.

<sup>105</sup> “The secretary general of the popular movement #Zuhair\_Al-Maghzawi in his first response to the assassination attempt on Kais Saied: The president’s position on normalisation puts him in danger.” (author’s translation from Arabic); <https://www.facebook.com/Echaab.Tunisie/videos/221242396314432>.

Before October 2023 there were in fact lively debates over Israel, which diverged from the increasingly clear presidential framings or discussed Israel's instrumentalisation. Debates over normalisation were, at least before 7 October, not least also a proxy for struggles over freedom of expression and cultural pluralism. For example, in spring 2023 more than six hundred academics and civil society figures signed a petition for the defence of academic freedoms in Tunisia.<sup>106</sup> This occurred after Manouba University announced it was withdrawing the title of professor emeritus from an internationally renowned historian on the grounds that he had participated in a colloquium in Paris where Israeli researchers had also been present. Moreover, the question of whether Tunisian sportspeople should compete against Israelis is a recurring topic of debate.<sup>107</sup> Among the elites it was an open secret that certain businesspeople and artists had travelled to Israel.<sup>108</sup>

Tunisia has also seen recurring discussions concerning antisemitism, for example in the context of the shooting at the synagogue in Djerba in 2023.<sup>109</sup> In response to reports that one of the victims was a Tunisian-Israeli dual citizen, social media posts called for the victim's Tunisian family to be deported or demanded that they decide whether they were Israeli or Tunisian, Jewish or non-Jewish.<sup>110</sup> This provoked a relatively sophisticated discussion about racism and antisemitism.<sup>111</sup> Certain actors equate (Tunisian-) Jewish with Zionist, as seen in November 2022 when an event co-organised by the German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation on topics including the Judeo-Tuni-

sian language was disrupted by members of the "National Commission to Fight Normalisation and Zionism" shouting racist slogans, insulting the organisers and condemning what they regarded as normalisation with the "Zionist entity" under the guise of academic freedom.<sup>112</sup> This in turn elicited a response from activists for cultural pluralism and freedom of expression.<sup>113</sup>

Those voices largely fell silent after 7 October. While 66 percent of Tunisians favoured a two-state solution directly before 7 October, the figure had fallen to 50 percent by the end of October. At the same time support for armed resistance rose, in some cases even including dissolution of the state of Israel.<sup>114</sup> The narrowing of the discourse after 7 October was also reflected on X, where barely a handful of accounts bucked the trend. For example, posts pointed out the paradox that many Tunisians hated the Islamist Ennahda and its leadership but blindly celebrated the Islamist Hamas, or they noted that the president advocated freedom for the Palestinians but kept political prisoners himself, or they simply highlighted the instrumentalisation of Palestine.<sup>115</sup>

### President Saied will have a hard time putting the genie back in the bottle.

The data gathered daily by Arab Barometer after 7 October suggests that it was not in the first place the Hamas attacks that caused these changes but the subsequent Israeli reactions. It remains unclear to what extent they were also a consequence of the president's populist official rhetoric or whether the president was successfully riding a wave of deeply rooted anti-Israeli sentiment. But the question arises whether the president will be able to control the

**106** "Affaire Kazdaghli: une pétition pour la défense des libertés académiques", *Business News*, 16 April 2023, <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/affaire-kazdaghli--une-petition-pour-la-defense-des-libertes-academiques.520,128470,3>.

**107** "Mondial U20: En cas de Tunisie — Israël en quarts de finale! Que faire?" *webdo*, 29 May 2023, <https://www.webdo.tn/fr/actualite/sport/mondial-u20-en-cas-de-tunisie-israel-en-quarts-de-finale-que-faire/206145>.

**108** Interviews conducted by the author in Tunis between 2005 and 2023.

**109** Doan Bui, "Tunisie: 'Il y a une espèce de gangrène populiste'", *L'Obs*, 22 May 2023, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20230522.OBS73615/tunisie-il-y-a-une-espece-de-gangrene-populiste.html>.

**110** Post by Wejdene Bouabdallah, 13 May 2023, <https://x.com/tounsiahourra/status/1657343153156898822?s=20>.

**111** Mirco Keilberth, "Tunesier gegen Tunesier", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/djerba-tunesien-antijudaismus-1.5859078>.

**112** "From House of Novel to National Book House: Attempting a cultural normalisation in Tunisia" (author's translation from Arabic), *Alchourouk*, 10 November 2023, <https://bit.ly/4biLPPg>.

**113** Communiqué from the organisation *Nous Tous*, 11 November 2022 <https://m.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=140420845429155&set=ecnf.100083837200814>.

**114** Robbins et al., "How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views" (see note 101).

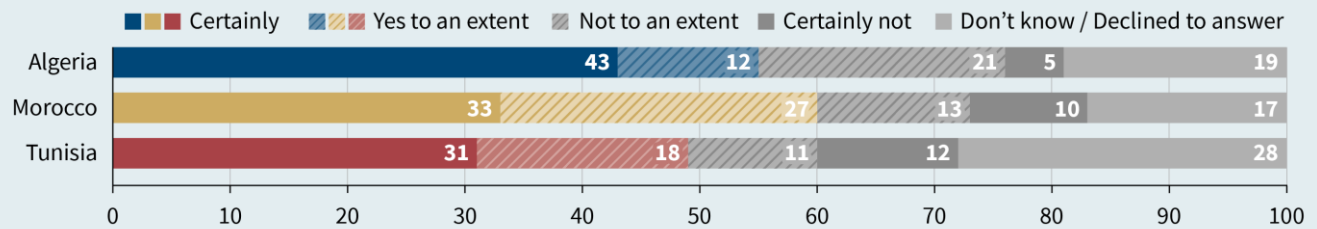
**115** Post by Gargabil, 10 October 2023; <https://x.com/Gargabil/status/1711724850727862673?s=20>; post by Sentenza, 24 October 2023, <https://x.com/RealSentenza/status/1716709420439142836?s=20>; post by Nessler J, 3 November 2023, <https://x.com/sasoukee/status/1720415577007595863?s=20>.



Figure 11

## Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the Arab region? 2019–2020

%



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Arab Opinion toward Iran 2019/2020, Figure 4

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spirits he has summoned. For example, when he withdrew the draft law on “criminalising normalisation” in November 2023 he found himself confronted with protests from his own otherwise completely loyal camp. Limits to the instrumentalisation of Palestinian solidarity also became apparent. Attempts to exploit it ahead of the planned local elections at the end of 2023 apparently had no noteworthy mobilising effect: the turnout was just as low as in the parliamentary elections a year earlier.

### Iran: More scepticism than in the official framings

It is harder to judge the resonance of the official framings on Iran, and more generally public sentiment vis-à-vis Iran. Iran is less present in the public discourse, and the positions of central political actors – with the exception of Morocco’s official position and a few Tunisian politicians and civil society actors.

Surveys asking specifically about attitudes to Iran are rare in the Maghreb. Moreover, although many in the Maghreb sympathise with Iran’s anti-imperialist and anti-Israeli stance they tend not to do so openly for fear of coming under suspicion of Shiite leanings or because Iran is “not one of us” (i.e., not an Arab country).<sup>116</sup>

Those surveys that do deal specifically with Iran or compare Iran with other regional and international actors suggest considerable levels of distrust. A survey in 2019/2020 in all three Maghreb states found that about half the respondents in Tunisia and considerably more in Algeria and Morocco saw Iranian policies

<sup>116</sup> Author’s interviews with academics, politicians, journalists and civil society activists, Tunis and Algiers, 2023.

as “certainly” or “to an extent” a threat to security and stability in “the Arab region” (see Figure 11).

However, since 7 October there have also been signs that Iran has gained a degree of sympathy, not least on the basis that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”.

### Morocco: Minor deviations from the official framing

Morocco’s official framing of Iran as a hostile actor appeared at least partially successful. The more recent surveys in particular reveal a rather critical view of Iran. For example, in 2022 the Arab Barometer presented participants with a list of potential threats to national security interests. It found that Israel and Iran were perceived as presenting the greatest danger (see Figure 12). The Iranian nuclear programme and “Iranian influence in the region” occupied second and third place on the list.<sup>117</sup> But the list was headed by “Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories”.

In a 2022 survey in Morocco on the popularity of the foreign policy of regional and international heads of state the Iranian Ali Khamenei came last behind Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin. Joe Biden’s foreign policy found twice as many supporters as Ali Khamenei’s.<sup>118</sup> This might be associated with the largely negative official representations of Iran in Morocco, but could also have to do with other factors such as solidarity in parts of Moroccan society with opposition actors and women in Iran.<sup>119</sup>

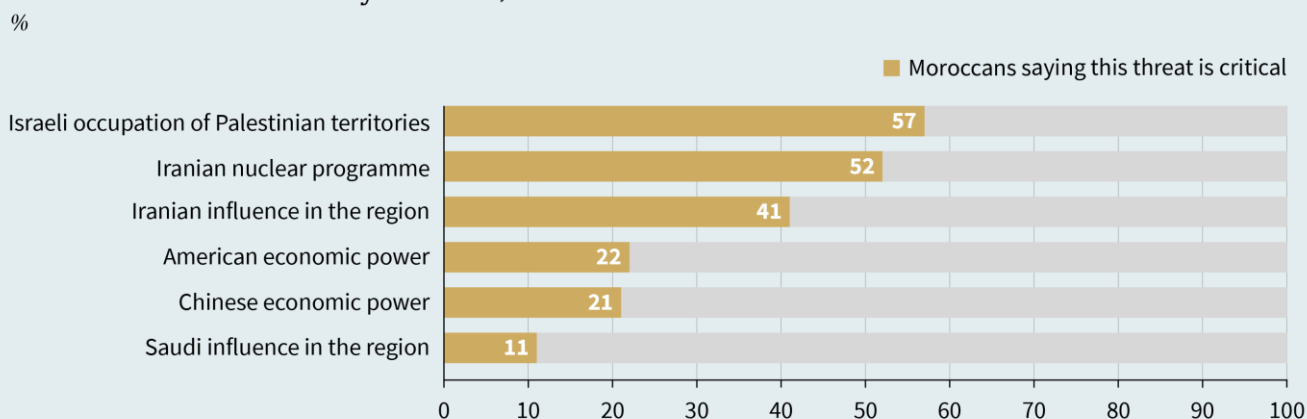
<sup>117</sup> Arab Barometer VII, Morocco Report (October 2022), 37, [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Morocco\\_Report-ENG.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Morocco_Report-ENG.pdf).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>119</sup> During the Iranian protests in autumn 2022 there were also demonstrations of solidarity with Iranian women

Figure 12

## Threats to national security interests, 2021–2022



Source: Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021–2022), Morocco Report, p. 37

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In the Twitter analysis negative sentiment on Iran was more prevalent than in the (few) MAP reports. Only about 5 percent of the tweets reflected a positive perspective on Iran while almost 60 percent were negative and about 30 percent neutral (see Figure 13).

Any positive perspectives were connected with the failure of Arab states to support Palestine. For example, it was stated that Hamas could not be condemned for turning to Iran after it had been abandoned by Arab states normalising their relations with Israel. Or it was argued that it was divisions between Arabs that made Iran strong. The assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the IRGC, by the United States in January 2020 was also condemned. The dominant theme of negative Moroccan tweets on Iran were religion (specifically rejection of Shiite Islam), the Iranian stance on Western Sahara, and Iran's negative influence in the region through Hezbollah and other actors in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. Outside of the analysed period there were also tweets/posts connecting Russia, Algeria and Iran, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>120</sup> Reports about dangers emanating from Iran, such as drones supplied to the Polisario, also

appeared regularly on social media and were often specifically addressed to international actors.<sup>121</sup>

The results were very different when Iran and Israel were compared directly. Although the Moroccan public's view of the danger posed to the region by Iran was very close to the official discourse, 27 percent of Moroccan respondents in a 2020 survey regarded Israel as the greatest danger to their country while only 2 percent named Iran; the rest were distributed among other states.<sup>122</sup> This suggests that the official framing, which propagated normalisation with Israel and no relations with Iran, was not terribly successful. It is also worth mentioning that the most important political parties said nothing at all about Iran on their Facebook pages in the period studied.

There is insufficient reliable data to say whether 7 October caused any shifts in mood concerning Iran. The official framing of Iran as an enemy might deter Moroccans from speaking completely freely about the question. But we can assume that Morocco's framing of Iran's role in the Maghreb and the Sahel found (more) resonance in Europe after 7 October. As already mentioned, even before 7 October numerous European media outlets were interested in reports that Iran and Hezbollah were supporting the Polisario Front via Algeria. The fact that the Qatargate corrup-

in Morocco. Hind El Grari, "Journée nationale des droits des femmes: des Marocaines se coupent les cheveux en soutien aux Iraniennes", *le Desk*, 10 October 2022, <https://ledes.ma/encontinujournee-nationale-des-droits-des-femmes-les-marocaines-se-coupent-les-cheveux-en-soutien-aux-iraniennes/>.

<sup>120</sup> Post by Lahcen Haddad, 27 February 2023, <https://x.com/Lahcenhaddad/status/1630225849474580482?s=20>.

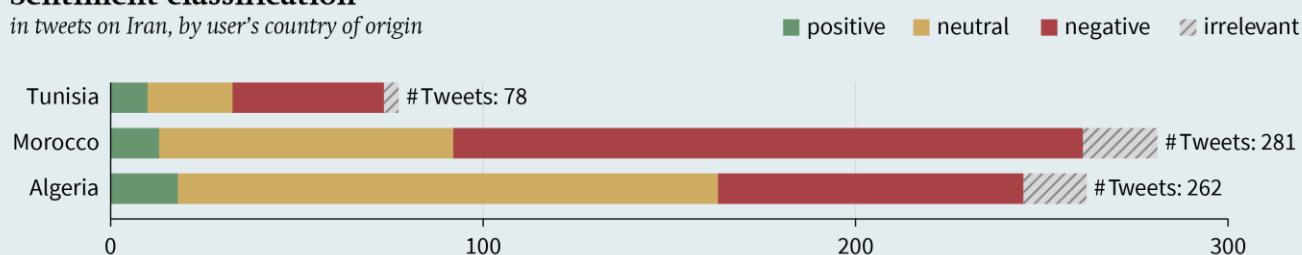
<sup>121</sup> Post by Ibtisam, 8 March 2023, <https://twitter.com/Ibtisam/status/1633428654632976384>.

<sup>122</sup> "Does Iran Pose Greater Threat to the Region than Israel? Here Is What Arab Citizens Think", *Arab Barometer*, 3 January 2020, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/01/israel-or-iran-which-is-the-greater-perceived-threat-copy/>.

Figure 13

### Sentiment classification

in tweets on Iran, by user's country of origin



Source: doi.org/10.7802/2691

Based on tweets in Arabic, country of origin identified through qualitative research.

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tion scandal in the European Parliament, in which Morocco was also implicated, had no meaningful impact on Euro-Moroccan cooperation is probably attributable not least to Rabat's anti-Iranian and pro-Western positions.

### Algeria: Considerable divergence from the official discourse

While the official framing of Iran in Algeria was neutral to positive, surveys revealed a more mixed picture. For example, 55 percent of those surveyed believed that Iran was “certainly” or “to an extent” a threat to the “Arab region” (see Figure 11). The proportion that were certain that Iran posed no danger was lowest in Algeria with 5 percent. In another survey, also from 2019, Iran came last in the list of nations with which the surveyed Algerians wished to see closer relations – behind the United States and Saudi Arabia. This poor ranking contrasted with Iran's status as a promising cooperation partner in the APS agency reports. In other words, the factual prevailed: there is very little economic exchange between the two (partly on account of the international sanctions) and the broader population has no tangible reason to regard Iran as an attractive economic partner. Iran also appeared to be very marginal to the Algerian political parties. Our analysis of the Facebook pages of five of the most important Algerian political parties between January 2021 and July 2022 found not a single post on Iran.

Algerian perspectives on Iran on Twitter diverged from the official line. Less than 10 percent of the tweets reflected a positive perspective, just over half were neutral and more than 30 percent critical. Iran's anti-American and anti-Moroccan stances were viewed positively by Algerian Twitter accounts. Critical tweets

mentioned the Iranian dictatorship, Hezbollah's crimes in Syria, the arming of the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Iran's failure to provide effective support for Hamas against Israel. At least the latter is likely to have shifted since 7 October 2023. Implicit anti-Shiite sentiment played a role in the negative perspectives on Iran, often without Iran being named explicitly.<sup>123</sup>

Although Shiite proselytising did not feature in APS reporting in the analysed period it has frequently made headlines over the past decade. Above all Salafists, as ultra-conservative Sunnis, have campaigned on this issue. Often their criticism was directed not specifically at Iran but at Shiites across the entire MENA region, for example where a preacher issued a fatwah against watching Shiite television stations.<sup>124</sup> But the official measures, such as closing Iranian stands and seizing books at the Algerian book fair, demonstrate that Iran was the principal target.<sup>125</sup>

The differences between public opinion and official framing reveal something of the subtext of the framing. While the official framing emphasised cooperation and agreement with Iran in international and ideological questions, measures against Shiite proselytising and culture communicated distrust. This might explain why Iran did not feature very prominently in public discourse even after 7 October.

<sup>123</sup> See the following Tweet by a well-known Salafist preacher, [https://twitter.com/Fawaid\\_Djazair/status/1477258749060464643](https://twitter.com/Fawaid_Djazair/status/1477258749060464643).

<sup>124</sup> “Le jugement relatif au fait de regarder les chaînes de télévision chiites”, official website of Sheikh Mohamed Ali Ferkous, 8 July 2011, <https://ferkous.com/home/?q=fr/art-mois-fr-72>.

<sup>125</sup> See for example [https://www.facebook.com/France24/posts/10156264743101936/?locale=fr\\_FR](https://www.facebook.com/France24/posts/10156264743101936/?locale=fr_FR).

## Tunisia: Substantial deviation from presidential messaging pre-7 October

In Tunisia — at least before 7 October — the public sentiment on Iran deviated from the rather positive signals given by the president. In 2020 31 percent of Tunisians were “certain” that Iran presented a threat to the “Arab region”, 29 percent “to a certain extent”, and only 12 percent said “certainly not” (see Figure 11). In a survey in Tunisia on the MENA policies of regional heads of state in 2022 revolutionary leader Ali Khamenei came last, a long way behind the Saudi, Emirati and Syrian heads of state.<sup>126</sup>

In the Twitter analysis almost half the Tunisian tweets were critical towards Iran, roughly 13 percent reflected a positive perspective and the rest were neutral. Among the accounts that were positive, Iran’s support for the Palestinians and strong stance against Israel were the most prominent themes. Iran’s support for the Yemeni Houthis and their attacks on Saudi Arabia featured heavily in the negative accounts.

Unlike Algeria and Morocco, Tunisia has one party that massively criticised Iran and instrumentalised this for domestic gain: the radical secular Parti destourien libre (PDL). For example in the run-up to the constitutional referendum in summer 2022, the PDL accused the president of being inspired by the Shiite religion and the authority enjoyed by Ayatollah Khomeini to nudge the Tunisian system towards Iran and therefore seeking to suppress democracy and civil liberties.<sup>127</sup> About a decade earlier the “League of Struggle against Shiism” called for the Iranian cultural centre to be closed<sup>128</sup> and in 2018 a “League to Combat the Shiite Wave” appeared in the media.<sup>129</sup> Whereas the mobilisation against Iran in Algeria was above all a Salafist affair, in Tunisia it was secular non-left forces that accused Iran of interference or

proselytising. In the course of the autumn 2022 protests in Iran various platforms associated with these political currents carried positive reports about Tunisian NGOs demonstrating against the oppression of Iranian women (including in front of the Iranian cultural centre).<sup>130</sup>

Iran did enjoy support from other parties, however. In February 2023 a photograph of Rachid Ghannouchi, the president of the Islamist Ennahda party, at the Iranian embassy for the anniversary of Iranian revolution created a storm on social media. The photo showed him cutting a cake together with the leader of a left-wing opposition party and a former trade union functionary who the president had recently appointed to the cabinet.<sup>131</sup> A certain “League for Tolerance”, which was conspicuously active until 2021, was also openly pro-Iranian. Its statements exhibited closeness to Shiite actors and Iran and argued vehemently against any form of normalisation with Israel.<sup>132</sup>

Positive perspectives on Iran proliferated after 7 October. In Arab Barometer surveys three weeks before 7 October 29 percent of Tunisians were positive about Khamenei’s foreign policy. By the end of October 2023 the figure had risen to 41 percent. And there were more pro-Iranian posts on social media. Sometimes support was expressed obliquely, for example when a prominent supporter of Kais Saied praised Hezbollah’s secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>133</sup> In April 2024, celebrations of Iran’s attack on Israel appeared to be widespread on social media, while criticism of the attacks was much less visible.<sup>134</sup> This suggested that the debates were shifting closer to the president’s official line.

<sup>126</sup> “Citizens Lukewarm on Leaders’ Cold War”, *Arab Barometer*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2022/09/citizens-lukewarm-on-leaders-cold-war/>.

<sup>127</sup> Communiqué from the organisation Nous Tous, 11 November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=516418629852896&set=a.416536273174466>.

<sup>128</sup> “La ligue pour la lutte contre le chiisme appelle à la fermeture du centre culturel iranien”, *Business News*, 21 August 2012, <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/la-ligue-pour-la-lutte-contre-le-iisme-appelle-a-la-fermeture-du-centre-culturel-iranien,520,32972,3>.

<sup>129</sup> “Naissance de la ligue tunisienne pour la lutte contre la marée chiite”, *Tuniscope*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.tuniscope.com/article/12819/actualites/bien-etre/chiite-275910>.

<sup>130</sup> “Un collectif d’associations organise une marche de soutien aux Iraniennes”, *Business News*, 29 September 2022, <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/un-collectif-dassociations-organise-une-mare-de-soutien-aux-iraniennes,520,123243,3>.

<sup>131</sup> Dahmani, “Tunisie: Kais Saïed, l’Iran et le chiisme” (see note 25).

<sup>132</sup> Its website was no longer functional in November 2023, but the calls can still be found on other platforms. <https://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/Mots-Clefs/ligue-tunisienne-pour-la-tolerance/>.

<sup>133</sup> Beat Stauffer, “Ihr werdet nicht mehr in Ruhe leben können!”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 21 November 2023, <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/der-krieg-um-gaza-laesst-auch-im-maghreb-die-emotionen-hochgehen-ld.1765034>.

<sup>134</sup> For an example of a typical post celebrating the attack on 13/14 April 2024, see <https://www.facebook.com/100008437817368/videos/1170408394157309>.

# Public Sentiment and Risks of Its Instrumentalisation

The political instrumentalisation of public sentiment and international attitudes to Israel and Iran described above comes with obvious risks in the Maghreb. Not least, it also impacts on Europe's interests and reputation in the region.

## Deepening authoritarian practices

Authoritarian Arab rulers have long stoked and instrumentalised the popular mood on Israel and Iran for their own domestic political ends. Phases of (at least slightly) greater political freedom have seen voices and practices emerge in all three Maghreb states that deviate from the official framing on Israel and Iran to different degrees. The analysis laid out in this study shows how escalations in the Israel/Palestine conflict and shifting geopolitical alliances lead to rejection and suppression of diverging opinions. A heated mood in the broader population makes it easier for decision-makers to exploit Israel and Iran in order to restrict freedom of expression, freedom of religion and/or academic freedom in the interests of national security or to discredit diverging voices as enemies of the state. All this occurs with the aim of further consolidating their own authoritarian rule and justifying the expansion of security and surveillance apparatuses.

## Exacerbating regional and international tensions

As well as conducting propaganda wars in which Israel and Iran play prominent roles, Algeria and Morocco also justify their arms race with the danger posed by their neighbour (and in the case of Morocco, by the Polisario Front) which they connect directly or indirectly with Israel or Iran. Algeria almost doubled

its defence budget in 2023,<sup>135</sup> while Morocco announced it would be increasing its military spending by almost US\$500 million in 2024.<sup>136</sup>

## Algerian and Moroccan sabre-rattling creates a danger of unintended escalation.

While neither side is genuinely seeking military confrontation, the sabre-rattling creates a real danger of unintended escalation. The conflict between Algeria and Morocco is rooted above all in the Western Sahara question, but has also been driven in recent times by the two states' competition over influence in and relationships with the states of Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>137</sup> Morocco's normalisation with Israel has widened the rift and, given that the Tunisian president has also taken a determinedly anti-normalisation line, Maghrebi integration – which has been essentially deadlocked for years – has become an even more illusory prospect. The respective stances of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia on Israel and Iran can also negatively influence processes in international organisations and European institutions. For example the struggle over Israel's observer status at the AU, where Algeria lobbied massively, absorbed capacities at the AU and distracted attention from

<sup>135</sup> “Dépenses militaires : flambée en Algérie, baisse au Maroc”, *Jeune Afrique*, 24 April 2024, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1561678/politique/depenses-militaires-flambee-en-algerie-baisse-au-maroc/>.

<sup>136</sup> Safaa Kasraoui, “Morocco's 2024 Finance Bill Allocates \$12 Billion for Defense”, *Morocco World News*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2023/10/358504/morocco-s-2024-finance-bill-allocates-12-billion-for-defense>.

<sup>137</sup> Isabelle Werenfels, *Maghrebi Rivalries over Sub-Saharan Africa: Algeria and Tunisia Seeking to Keep Up with Morocco*, SWP Comment 54/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2020), doi: 10.18449/2020C54.

more pressing issues.<sup>138</sup> Israel and Iran also play a role in Maghreb lobbying in the EU – especially by Morocco, which can count on goodwill on account of its positions towards the two states.

## Reinforcing anti-Western sovereignty discourses

The starkly diverging attitudes to Israel in the Maghreb and Europe since 7 October 2023 demonstrate more clearly than ever before the magnitude of the gulf between Maghrebi popular opinion and official views in many European countries on this issue. This exacerbates existing tensions. In the Maghreb the reactions of some European states (including related domestic measures) to the Hamas massacre and Israel's massive response are perceived as an affront not only against the Palestinians, but more broadly against all Muslims. The notion that the West exhibits double standards on Ukraine and Palestine is shared by broad sections of Maghrebi societies.<sup>139</sup> Arab nationalist, Islamist and radical left-wing actors demand the complete “decolonisation” of Palestine and mobilise against European support for Israel. In Tunisia anger has also been directed at German institutions in the country,<sup>140</sup> on account of Germany's unequivocal support for Israel's right to defend itself militarily. Tunisian civil society representatives have complained that German political foundations in Israel were permitted to publicly express pro-Israeli positions but staff of the same organisations in Tunisia were not allowed to voice solidarity with Palestine in the name of the foundations.<sup>141</sup> This illustrates well how deeply the issue of Israel affects Euro-Maghreb relations.

Europe's criticisms of Iran, on the other hand, for example following Tehran's violent suppression of protests in autumn 2022, have elicited little in the way of public criticism in the Maghreb. This reflects the described ambivalences with respect to Iran. Its

worldview is shared, especially on Palestine, but it is not part of the Arab world. Ultimately, its regional ambitions and potential for meddling are feared.

## Europe: Trends to support and to counteract

Until a few years ago European foreign policy, security and development actors still enjoyed the luxury of being able to ignore discursive polarisation, political instrumentalisation and disinformation concerning Israel and Iran in the Maghreb. There were no repercussions for Europe when Morocco broke off relations with Iran for example. The situation gradually began to shift with Morocco's normalisation of relations with Israel at the end of 2020. European actors had to realise that this development further exacerbated the existing tensions between Algeria and Morocco and was a trigger (or at least a pretext) for Algeria to break off diplomatic relations with Morocco. As the present study has demonstrated, the pre-existing aggressive rhetoric between the two states has been aggravated by Israel's presence in Morocco and Algeria's instrumentalisation thereof.

### Europe cannot avoid facing the Maghreb/Israel complex.

After the events of 7 October 2023 Europe can no longer turn a blind eye to these dynamics, especially where European actors on the ground are feeling real consequences. Even assuming a de-escalation and possible positive developments in the Middle East, Israel and to a lesser extent Iran will remain hot topics in the Maghreb. Israel in particular will continue to be resented in large parts of the populations and instrumentalised by political leaders for domestic, regional and foreign policy purposes.

Europe's prime objective must be to counteract aggressive rhetoric between the Maghreb states – in which Israel and Iran play a role – rather than falling for the propaganda. Information about (mis)deeds attributed to Israel and Iran by Maghrebi sources must always be verified, even if that may be difficult in a landscape of growing disinformation. Generally, the surviving local fact-based information platforms should be supported wherever possible and cooperation expanded. Europe-based media platforms with outreach into the region can also play an important

**138** “Algeria Takes Its Anti-normalisation Fight to AU”, *Arab Weekly*, 3 February 2022, <https://thearabweekly.com/algeria-takes-its-anti-normalisation-fight-au>.

**139** Interviews by the author in Algiers and Tunis in 2022 and 2023, and with Moroccan actors in Berlin, Brussels and Madrid in 2023.

**140** Mirco Keilberth, “Deutsche Botschaft unbeliebt”, *TAZ*, 31 October 2023, <https://taz.de/Nahost-Konflikt-in-Tunesien/!5970088/>.

**141** Interviews in Tunis, December 2023.

role. In Germany these would include Qantara and Deutsche Welle.

Secondly, Europe should avoid exacerbating the polarisation around Iran and Israel through its own rhetoric and actions, and instead show consideration for the popular mood. In the case of Morocco that would mean giving careful consideration to any future trilateral European cooperation with Morocco and Israel and to restrict this to areas where Israel has special expertise to offer and there is no manifest public opposition to the relevant projects. One example would be cooperation on water management in Morocco, where the EU, Morocco and Israel have already initiated a joint project.

Closely related, thirdly, European actors need to distinguish legitimate and fundamental rejection of Israeli policies (including calls for boycotts) from antisemitism and violence against Jews and Israelis in the Maghreb. In other words: even if they consider them one-sided, European policy-makers will have to learn to live with Maghrebi views of Israel as a colonial actor and with anti-Zionist rhetoric in the Maghreb. Incitement and violence against Jews, on the other hand, must be called out as such and condemned — as various European governments did after the shooting at the synagogue on Djerba in May 2023.

Fourthly, European policy-makers must have on their radar that Israel and to a certain extent Iran also serve as a pretext for restrictions on freedom of expression and academic and religious freedom. At least until October 2023 actors in Morocco who spoke out against normalisation risked harassment — as did those in Tunisia that refused to explicitly reject it. In all three states Shiite proselytising is attributed to Iran, although the truth remains murky. But there is no doubt that Shiites are sometimes persecuted or at least kept under surveillance. European actors should call for consistent freedom of expression and speak out against all discrimination against religious and cultural minorities.

Fifthly, German and European foreign policy actors must be prepared for legislation to criminalise normalisation to be revived in Tunisia, and possibly also introduced in Algeria. In the past Europe applied considerable diplomatic pressure to prevent such initiatives in Tunisia. In the current context in the Middle East and in view of the accusations of European double standards after 7 October, such pressure would be counter-productive. All that can be done here is to point out the narrowing of foreign policy

and security options that would result from such legislation. If — as in previous draft legislation — contact with Israeli citizens by non-state actors in the fields of culture, sport and academia is criminalised, European messaging on freedom of expression and scientific pluralism could nevertheless be considered. Not least because such legislation could turn out to be tool to suppress freedom of expression more generally and could have negative consequences for Tunisia's Jewish minority.

Last but not least, European politicians must avoid being instrumentalised in intra-Maghreb conflicts. The arms race and sabre-rattling between Algeria and Morocco — supported by propaganda leveraging Israel and Iran — increase the risk of military confrontation in Europe's immediate neighbourhood. European policy-makers thus have every reason to subvert related Maghrebi zero-sum logics and instrumentalisations by pursuing a balanced and de-escalating line.

## Abbreviations

APS	Algérie Presse Service
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
FIS	Front islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRAN)
IRNA	Islamic Republic News Agency
IWF	International Monetary Fund
MAK	Mouvement Autonome Kabyle (Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie)
MAP	Maghreb Arabe Presse
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MSP	Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
P5+1	The five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany
PDL	Parti destourien libre
PJD	Parti de la justice et du développement
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
RNI	Rassemblement national des indépendants
TAP	Tunisie Agence Presse
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (Tunisian General Labour Union)
UAE	United Arab Emirates





