

Israel 'formalising' defence ties with Morocco on minister's visit

Issued on: 23/11/2021 - 04:44 Modified: 23/11/2021 - 04:42



Benny Gantz will be the first Israeli defence minister to make an official visit to Morocco EMMANUEL DUNAND AFP/File

3 min

Tel Aviv (AFP) – **Israel's Defence Minister Benny Gantz heads Tuesday to Morocco on a visit that will "formalise" cooperation between the two countries, officials say, at a time when Rabat is embroiled in a standoff over Western Sahara.**

ADVERTISING

The two-day trip comes less than a year after Morocco normalised ties with Israel in a deal brokered by former US president Donald Trump's administration.

In return, Washington recognised the North African kingdom's sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

Gantz, the first Israeli defence minister to make an official visit to Morocco, will sign "a memorandum of understanding that will outline defence cooperation between the two countries", his office said.

The trip aims to "set the foundation for all future security cooperation between Israel and Morocco", a source familiar with the visit told AFP.

"Until now there has been some level of cooperation, this truly formalises it," the source said.

Morocco controls most of Western Sahara and considers the former Spanish colony as its sovereign territory.

Tensions have flared between Morocco and Algeria, which backs the Western Sahara's Polisario Front independence movement.

Algeria cut diplomatic ties with Morocco in August citing "hostile actions" -- a charge denied by Rabat.

Earlier this month, Algiers accused Morocco of killing three Algerian civilians on a desert highway, raising fears of an escalation.

And Polisario head Brahim Ghali said last week that the movement has decided to step up military operations.

Timing 'not coincidental'

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, an Israeli expert on Morocco, said the timing of Gantz's visit and the signing of an MOU was not a coincidence.

"It's possible that in the context of the Moroccan-Algerian tensions, the Moroccans were the ones who were keen on this," he said.

"It would seem to me that the Moroccans are the ones who are keen on showing everybody — their own public, their Algerian rivals, the West -- that they are deepening their relationship with Israel," said the Tel Aviv University professor.

Morocco and Israel previously set up ties in 1993 but Rabat broke them off at the start of the second Palestinian intifada (uprising) in 2000.

Rabat normalised ties with the Jewish state last December, shortly after similar announcements by the UAE and Bahrain.

'Benefits of recalibrating

The US-brokered deals facilitated agreements on political, cultural and economic cooperation.

Last month, Israel's Ratio Petroleum announced an agreement with Rabat on "exploration operations" off Dakhla in Western Sahara.

Israel's defence ministry oversees all security exports, with the Jewish state offering state-of-art products ranging from attack drones to the vaunted Iron Dome missile defence system.

One Israeli product, the NSO's Pegasus spyware, has already made its way to Morocco, according to Amnesty International and Paris-based organisation Forbidden Stories.

Rabat allegedly used it against French President Emmanuel Macron -- a claim denied by Morocco which said it never bought the software and has filed lawsuits against French media and Amnesty International.

A spokeswoman for Gantz would not comment on NSO or other possible defence technologies set to be discussed during the visit.

Pegasus software has also reportedly been discovered on the phones of Palestinian officials.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to mobilise civil society, Islamists and the far-left in Morocco, with a call for a November 29 demonstration against "creeping normalisation with Israel" and in support of the Palestinians.

According to Maddy-Weitzman, while Rabat has not abandoned the Palestinian cause, "there are too many other interests in play, too many other benefits to be gained by recalibrating".

"Most of the countries in the region just don't want to be held hostage any more on the issue, they want to pursue their interests as they define them, and at this point in time obviously Israel has a lot to offer," he said.

© 2021 AFP

PROMOTED CONTENT

