

Israel recognises Western Sahara as part of Morocco

Morocco claims sovereignty over territory, but other countries back separatist movement.

A separatist movement, backed by Algeria, has long pushed for the Western Sahara to be an independent state [File: Ryad Kramdi/AFP]

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Israel has recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara, the Moroccan government and a statement from the Israeli prime minister's office say.

Rabat said on Monday that Israel is considering opening a consulate in Dakhla.

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A statement from Morocco's royal palace said Israel's position was expressed in a letter to King Mohammed VI from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Morocco has had control of the territory, but little international recognition, since 1975 after Spanish colonial rule ended.

The Algerian-backed Polisario Front demands an independent state in Western Sahara. In 2020, then-US President Donald Trump recognised Morocco's claim to the territory in return for its partial upgrade of relations with Israel.

The Israeli position "will be sent to the United Nations, regional and international organisations ... as well as all the states Israel has diplomatic relations with", the statement from Morocco's royal palace quotes the letter as saying.

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Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen said recognition of the Western Sahara as Moroccan territory “will strengthen relations between the countries” and advance regional stability.

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Twenty-eight other countries – mostly African and Arab – have opened consulates in the Western Saharan cities of Dakhla or Laayoune in what Morocco sees as tangible support for its rule of the territory.

Israel’s position on the Western Sahara is “clear-cut” and comes as momentum builds in Morocco’s favour after Washington and Madrid in addition to other European capitals supported its autonomy plan for the territory, a senior Moroccan government official told the Reuters news agency.

The Israeli recognition will not affect Morocco’s principles in defending a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he added.

Morocco expects the decision to encourage Israeli investment in the territory, he said.

In 2020, Morocco agreed to normalise relations with Israel in a US-brokered deal. As part of the agreement, Trump agreed to recognise Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

Morocco became the fourth country to strike a deal aimed at normalising relations with Israel. The others were the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

Palestinians have been critical of the deals, saying Arab countries have set back the cause of peace by abandoning a longstanding demand that Israel gives up land for a Palestinian state before it can receive recognition.

As an indication of warming ties, the Israeli military earlier on Monday appointed a colonel as defence attache to Morocco.

Since the resumption of ties, Morocco and Israel have signed cooperation agreements, including a defence pact.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES

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