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After Israel, will Morocco normalize with Christians?

As fledgling local church movement lauds increased ties with the Jewish state, Moroccan believers debate if official recognition of their faith is needed at home.

By Jayson Casper

Christianity Today (08.01.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3hW5GZm> – President Donald Trump’s Abraham Accords have been singular in focus—build Middle East peace upon Arab states establishing full relations with Israel.

And although not officially linked, three of the four nations to normalize with the Jewish state this year received something from the United States in return.

The first, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was cleared to purchase American F-35 fighter jets. (The second, Bahrain, which already hosts a US naval base, is understood to be part of a gradual Gulf alignment with Israel.)

The third, Sudan, was removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

This month, the fourth, Morocco, was granted US recognition of its longstanding claim to the Western Sahara, a mostly desert region on the northwest coast of Africa, which seeks independence.

But absent from the accords is any emphasis on religious freedom, despite the Trump administration making it a central feature of its foreign policy. And in relation to Christians, each nation has a unique situation.

The Emirates is officially 100 percent Muslim, though it facilitates the worship of its majority population of migrant workers. And following normalization, the UAE relaxed its sharia-based laws.

Bahrain has a native Christian population of about 1,000 people, descended from communities in Lebanon, Syria, and India. Three years ago, its king signed a declaration esteeming individual “freedom of [religious] choice” as a “divine gift.”

Sudan’s Christians, though only 3 percent of the population, are indigenous citizens. And following the 2019 popular revolution, Sudan implemented religious reforms, including repeal of its apostasy law.

Morocco is in between.

Long lauded for its treatment of local Jews, Morocco’s constitution recognizes Judaism and considers the 3,000-strong community as an integral part of its society. And during last year’s visit by Pope Francis, King Muhammad VI interpreted his official title of “Commander of the Faithful” as “the Commander of all believers ... [including] Moroccan Jews and Christians from other countries, who are living in Morocco.”

But the omission stood out.

"He didn't mention us," said Zouhair Doukali, a Moroccan Christian.

"I want the government to recognize all minorities, so that we can live as Moroccan citizens."

Estimates of the North African nation's unofficial Christian citizens vary widely, from 5,000 to 50,000. Foreign-resident Christians are estimated at about 30,000 Catholics and 10,000 Protestants, who enjoy religious freedom in legally registered churches.

But whereas the UAE and Sudan have been improving their religious freedom image, Morocco has moved backwards, according to a new report on blasphemy laws by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

One of eight nations to have expanded blasphemy provisions since USCIRF's last report, in 2018 Morocco doubled its fines and jail terms. It also expanded the law's jurisdiction from only official publishers to include any individuals in public or online forums.

And proselytizing, described as "shaking the faith of a Muslim," can be punished with up to three years in prison.

Open Doors ranks Morocco No. 26 on its World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is hardest to be a Christian.

But unlike the UAE, where conversion is illegal and can meet the death penalty, Morocco assigns no penalties for conversion. The government has said so publicly.

"There is no persecution in Morocco," stated spokesman Mustapha El Khalfi, "and there is no discrimination on the basis of faith."

Moroccan Christian sources agree there is no state persecution. Over the past decade, the government has largely left converts alone. And since all are assumed to be Muslim, there are no issues marrying other believers. (Marriage in Morocco is a matter of civil registration, whereas in some Arab states it has a religious character and Muslims may not enter into Christian marriage.)

Some Christians, however, want full human rights.

Doukali accepted Christ in 2000 and lived 10 years as a secret believer. But taking courage from the book of Acts, he decided to go public.

"You cannot stay afraid forever," he said. "Some family members stopped talking to me, but I won back my life."

It helps that he is self-employed as an electrician. Most Moroccan Christians keep their faith private, Doukali said, afraid of social pressures that might cost them their jobs.

But private does not mean hidden. Most Christians meet in house churches, with many locations known by local residents, and presumably all by national intelligence. Doukali worships with about 15 others in Casablanca, under a local Moroccan pastor.

The rule for safety is the same for neighborliness: Keep down the noise.

But allowance is not the same as facilitation.

In 2016, Doukali and other believers formed the Coordination of Moroccan Christians (CMC) and approached the National Council of Human Rights. They were received warmly, he said, and were promised assistance.

The next year, they gave their papers to the government to register as an official organization. To date, there has been no reply. Several sources stated they were involved in the CMC at some point, but the organization has since withered amid personal disputes.

Still, the demand remains for legal recognition as Christians and registration of church buildings. Some also ask for the right to Christian marriage and burial.

For others, there are more important issues—including personal safety.

“We are not asking for freedom,” said Saeed, a Moroccan Christian using a pseudonym in order to protect his ministry. “We have to build the church first, so people can be firm in their faith.”

Having become a Christian in 1990, Saeed translated the Bible into the local dialect of his Amazigh language. The indigenous population of many parts of Morocco and Algeria, the Amazigh were a mix of Christians, Jews, and animists before the spread of Islam.

Notable church leaders include Augustine (whose heritage was previously highlighted by CT), Tertullian, and Cyprian of Carthage.

Today, Saeed’s house church includes about 40 believers. They meet in a single-family home, so their worship does not alert the neighbors.

He is concerned about Muslim radicals, not the government. But there is an advantage to keeping faith below the radar, Saeed said. Security monitors the public figures, which he believes can limit their effectiveness.

“We are not a threat to the government; we are too small,” he said. “Our treatment depends on their interests, and what they want to show to the outside world.”

Morocco’s reputation is good.

In 2012, the UN Human Rights Office convened in the nation’s capital and formulated the Rabat Plan of Action to curb discrimination and incitement against religious minorities.

In 2016, the Marrakesh Declaration assembled more than 200 clerics from around the world, urging Muslim nations to better protect their Christian minorities.

And now in 2020, normalization with Israel highlights Morocco’s historical relationship with the Jews. During World War II, the then-king rebuffed Nazi efforts to deport the community to Germany.

The accord with Israel will help Christians indirectly, Saeed said. Ordinary Moroccans will learn to accept diversity and eventually Christian citizens also.

One day, thousands will come to Christ, he said. He wants the church to be ready to receive them and not risk complicating things now through public advocacy. If the radicals rise up in offense, the government may be forced to crack down.

“I can deal with prison, or death, but we have to take care to protect the others,” Saeed said.

“If you want to do things long term, you have to be wise, and slow.”

However, that does not necessarily mean silent.

Youssef Ahmed is one of the few second-generation Moroccan Christians. From Tangier, his father converted in 1936 through the colonial-era headquarters of the North Africa Mission. In 1945, the father spent two years in prison after refusing to recant his faith. And as a boy, Youssef regularly had rocks thrown at him on the way to the mission school.

In 1975, Youssef married a fellow Moroccan Christian, but shortly afterwards the government seized the mission hospital and church in which they had wed. Many believers stopped meeting, afraid for their safety. But others joined to form a house church in the Ahmed family home, known to neighbors to this day.

In 2004, God called him into full-time ministry. Six years later, he helped mitigate a crisis.

By then the house church movement was going strong. In 2005, the Newsboys headlined a Christian music festival in Marrakesh. But in 2010, the government kicked out more than 100 foreign Christian workers throughout the country.

Once again, Moroccan believers scattered.

Only this time, there was significant infighting. Pastors feared informants. Would-be leaders jostled over funding. And denominational conflicts between groups connected to Baptist or Pentecostal missions contributed to overall disunity.

Ahmed, now 66 years old, summoned his senior status to convene 35 national leaders from each region of Morocco. After leading them in reconciliation, the church began to grow again.

“The king says you have the freedom to believe what you want, but not to show it publicly,” Ahmed said. “The message is this: We respect your religion, but you respect ours—meaning Morocco’s.”

Polling data, however, suggests Moroccans are respecting their own religion less and less. The number declaring themselves “not religious” has tripled since 2013, now encompassing 15 percent of the population. The same survey, released in 2019 by Arab Barometer and the BBC, finds only 25 percent have faith in their religious leaders.

And 4 in 10 desire to emigrate.

Some of these come to the church seeking baptism, said Ahmed. Their aim, however, is the baptismal certificate they can present to officials in Europe—when they seek asylum. After clarification, some become true seekers.

But while care must be taken lest Christian pastors “shake the faith of a Muslim,” many leaders want the record put straight.

“If anyone claims religious asylum because of government persecution, he is lying,” said Rachid Imounan, an Amazigh church planter who lives in the southern city of Agadir.

“The king has my loyalty and respect, as a Moroccan Christian.”

Like Ahmed, Imounan's children have had rocks thrown at them. He has suffered death threats. Yet he continues his public internet radio ministry and supervises a network of 150 believers in the surrounding area—including the Western Sahara.

The security network serves the monarchy and keeps overall stability, he said. While the king has implemented a liberal agenda, the Moroccan government has been dominated by political Islamists since 2011, when constitutional reforms staved off Arab Spring protests.

Moroccan Christians hope next year's elections might unseat them.

The prime minister has not publicly rejected normalization with Israel, though he used the opportunity to pledge "unshakable support" for the Palestinians. But his coalition allies have called it "deplorable."

All Moroccan Christian sources expressed strong support for relations with Israel, however. And obtaining US recognition of the disputed Western Sahara territory—rich in phosphates and fishing resources—will strengthen the nation's economic development, especially in the south.

Many analysts chided the Trump administration for reversing longstanding US policy, which favored a referendum on independence, and noted the territory's facilitation of church-supported Christian workers. But Moroccan believers once rejected a shipment of Arabic Bibles due to their inclusion of a world map listing the Western Sahara as distinct from Morocco.

Muhammad VI chairs the al-Quds [an Arabic name signifying Jerusalem] committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Formed in 1975, the committee is dedicated to implementing the OIC resolutions in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Anger from the Palestinians has been muted compared to the preceding normalization deals, as the king reached out directly to assure them of his continued support for their independent state.

But while the recent deal brokered by the Trump administration is popular with the small Christian community, polling data suggests they are the minority. In a November survey by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, only 17 percent of Moroccans express support for the Abraham Accords. Only 26 percent believe Israel has a right to exist, and 7 in 10 view the Jewish state unfavorably.

Imounan used to be one of them.

"Moroccans were raised to be against Israel, and to hate the Jews," he said.

"But now this will change—and be a blessing to our nation."

Since the accord, the education ministry announced it has revised curriculum to include Jewish history and culture.

Whether or not future developments include Morocco's Christian heritage—and present—the young church believes that relations with Israel signal that the nation is headed in the right direction.

"As Christians, our goals are for peace, with love toward all peoples," said Imounan. "This puts Morocco on the right path with the world."