

Morocco's Unique Position in the Abraham Accords: Coexistence, Royal Diplomacy, and Comparative Muslim Responses

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Abstract:

The Abraham Accords, brokered by the Trump administration in 2020 and actively expanded under Trump's second term in 2025–2026, represent one of the most contested diplomatic frameworks in the contemporary Islamic world. Among its signatories, the Kingdom of Morocco occupies a uniquely distinctive position — not merely as a geopolitical actor, but as a civilization with over two millennia of documented Jewish-Muslim coexistence, institutionalized through the royal-protected Mellah system and grounded in Islamic wasathiyyah (moderation). This library research employs a historical-comparative approach within Islamic Studies to examine Morocco's participation in the Abraham Accords alongside the divergent responses of other Muslim-majority states. Drawing on Maqasid al-Shariah and faith-based diplomacy theory, this study argues that King Mohammed VI's normalization decision in December 2020 was not a mere geopolitical transaction — though US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara was a key incentive — but a reactivation of centuries-old Jewish-Muslim cultural affinity distinctive to the Moroccan Islamic tradition. The study maps the spectrum of Muslim-world responses: from outright rejection by Iran, Pakistan, and Algeria, to strategic ambiguity by Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, to full participation by UAE, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan. Morocco's sustained commitment — even as public support for normalization declined from 31% in 2022 to 13% following the Gaza war, according to the Arab Barometer (Princeton University) — distinguishes it as a sui generis case underpinned by royal religious authority and historical civilizational memory. This study contributes to Islamic Studies, interfaith relations, and Muslim-world diplomacy scholarship.

Keywords: Abraham accords; jewish-muslim coexistence; royal diplomacy; maqasid al-shariah; muslim-world diplomacy

1. Introduction

The Abraham Accords are a set of agreements that established diplomatic normalization between Israel and several Arab states, beginning with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, announced in August and September 2020 and signed in Washington D.C. on September 15, 2020, mediated by the United States under President Donald Trump. The overarching goal of the Accords was to defuse tensions in the Middle East by normalizing relations between Israel and several moderate Arab states, offering these nations access to advanced technologies and fresh trade opportunities, motivated by a shared view of Iran as a strategic threat. These

agreements represented the most consequential diplomatic realignment in the Islamic world since the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979, fundamentally challenging the long-standing Arab consensus that recognition of Israel must await the resolution of the Palestinian question. Until 2020, Arab states had broadly conditioned the establishment of ties with Israel on its withdrawal from occupied land and the creation of a viable, independent Palestinian state; when the UAE and Bahrain broke ranks, the Palestinian leadership quit its role chairing Arab League meetings in protest ("Palestine Quits Arab League Role in Protest over Israel Deals," 2020).

On December 10, 2020, Morocco became the fourth Arab country that year to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, following the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan, making Morocco the sixth member of the Arab League to normalize relations with the Jewish state. Yet Morocco's entry into the Abraham Accords cannot be equated with that of other signatories. Morocco's Jewish community, once the largest in the Arab world, has strong historical ties to Israel: some 472,800 Israeli Jews were either born in Morocco or have a Moroccan-born father (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). A French intelligence bulletin of January 1948 estimated the Moroccan Jewish community at about 220,000 people in 1947, roughly 2.6% of the country's population (Nacik, 2023), and it still numbered about 240,000 at the end of the Protectorate in 1956 (Laskier, 1990). The *Mellah*, which served dual functions of royal protection and administrative control, has been described as a distinctive feature of Moroccan cities: a walled Jewish quarter established under successive dynasties and placed under the protection of the sultan (Calvo Serrano dkk., 2017; Gottreich, 2003). The Moroccan state mobilized its long-established Jewish heritage and the political, social, and religious networks associated with that heritage to garner support at the international level — an important aspect of the normalization process was the instrumentalization of Moroccan Jewish heritage and social networks (Yang dkk., 2025). Morocco's religious policy toward its Jewish heritage has likewise been analysed as an instrument of soft power (Wüst & Nicolai, 2023). This civilizational depth distinguishes Morocco's normalization from the purely strategic calculus of the Gulf signatories.

On the geopolitical side, as part of the agreement, the United States agreed to recognize Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara while urging the parties to "negotiate a mutually acceptable solution" using Morocco's autonomy plan as the only framework ("United States Recognizes Morocco's Sovereignty Over Western Sahara," 2021). A trilateral agreement between the Kingdom of Morocco, the United States, and Israel on December 22, 2020 resulted in the signing of the Abraham Accords, officially adding Morocco to the list of Arab countries that have normalized relations with Israel (Singer, 2021). In exchange, Donald Trump issued a presidential proclamation recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara. However, to reduce Morocco's decision solely to this territorial transaction would be analytically insufficient. Morocco's agreement to formalize ties with Israel in exchange for American acknowledgement of its claims over Western Sahara is in and of itself hardly novel

— it has been, as in the case of so many other regional players who have recently made similar agreements, very long in the making.

Morocco's model of moderate Islam is anchored by an institution most countries simply do not have: the King's religious responsibility as *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful). In practice, this has meant something very rare — religion supervised not to police society, but to protect it: from fanaticism, from sectarian drift, and from the cynical use of faith as a political weapon. As the highest religious and political authority in Morocco, the King's authority to exercise *ijtihad* based on his status as *Amir al-Mu'minin* not only legitimizes major reforms, but also determines their direction — including, this study argues, the normalization decision of December 2020. Since the religious reforms that began in 2004, the state has promoted a narrative of a distinctively Moroccan Islam, moderate and tolerant, resting on Maliki jurisprudence, Ash'ari theology, and the Sufism of al-Junayd, and anchored in the pledge of allegiance to the King as the constitutionally designated Commander of the Faithful (Faitour, 2024). This institutional configuration grants the Moroccan monarch a theological legitimacy in foreign policymaking that no parliamentary Islamist party can override.

The Abraham Accords exposed deep fractures within the Islamic world over the legitimacy of engaging with Israel. Since the signing of the Accords, Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel in 2023 and Israel's devastating war on Gaza have complicated the Israeli-Saudi track (Joney & Deshpande, 2025), in an explicit reminder that the Palestinian question cannot be ignored or subordinated to Arab-Israeli normalization. The spectrum of responses is wide and theologically charged. Iran condemned Morocco's normalization as a “betrayal of Islam” (Israel Normalisation: Iranian Official Condemns,” 2020), while Algeria severed diplomatic ties with Morocco in August 2021 citing Rabat's “hostile actions” (“Algeria Cuts Diplomatic Ties,” 2021). Pakistan declared that it could not accept Israel as long as the Palestinians were denied their rights (“Pakistan Will Not Recognise Israel,” 2020), while Saudi Arabia maintained strategic ambiguity, insisting on a credible Palestinian statehood pathway (Nawaz, t.t.). In July 2025, it was reported that the second Trump administration was seeking to expand the Accords to include Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, and in November 2025 Kazakhstan formally agreed to join (Teslova, 2025). This expanding yet contested landscape makes Morocco's enduring commitment all the more analytically significant.

Existing scholarship on the Abraham Accords has approached the subject predominantly through the lenses of international relations, security studies, and geopolitical analysis. Guemide and Amir (2021) read Morocco's normalization as part of the wider Arab normalization process and examine its consequences for Maghreb integration and Algerian–Moroccan rivalry, an analytical focus that leaves the monarchy's religious authority aside. Maghraoui (2025) disaggregates the political, economic, and security layers of the agreement, with Western Sahara at its core, and argues that Moroccan Jewish heritage was instrumentalized to legitimize it; yet he treats the monarchy's role chiefly as a constitutional prerogative rather than as the religious authority of the *Amir al-Mu'minin*, and he contends that no organic link exists between Jewish historical presence and the normalization policy.

This study takes the instrumentalization thesis seriously but asks whether it can account for the institutional depth of royal protection of Jewish communities. Soft-power readings of Moroccan diplomacy (Qaissi, t.t.), including accounts of how religion, history, and tradition become political instruments (Wüst & Nicolai, 2023), likewise treat religion and heritage as instruments of soft power rather than as a juridical-theological source of legitimacy. Together, these studies illuminate the strategic, economic, and symbolic drivers of normalization, yet they share a limitation: secular international-relations and soft-power frameworks do not treat the institution of Amir al-Mu'minin, or the Islamic legal concepts of dhimma, maslaha, and Maqasid al-Shariah, as analytical categories. This omission is notable because Trump and Kushner, with the endorsement of the leaders of Israel and the UAE, proposed the Abraham Accords with the idea that the three faiths of Abraham — Judaism, Islam, and Christianity — would come together in peace and tolerance in the new Middle East. Yet the religious and theological dimensions of why Morocco specifically — and not other Muslim-majority states — was uniquely positioned to join the Accords remain deeply underexplored in academic literature. To the author's knowledge, few studies examine Morocco's participation through the integrated lens of Islamic Studies, connecting the theological frameworks of Maqasid al-Shariah, the dhimmi tradition, and Islamic wasathiyyah with Morocco's two-millennia civilizational heritage of Jewish-Muslim coexistence. Furthermore, scholarship from Southeast Asian Muslim perspectives, particularly from Indonesian academics engaging the broader Islamic world, remains scarce in this field. This gap matters beyond geography: as the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia likewise upholds religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*), a principle that parallels Moroccan wasathiyyah, and shares a broadly Ash'ari-Sufi religious heritage with Morocco, while its own stance on the Accords is, as mapped in this study, one of strategic ambiguity. An Indonesian analytical lens can therefore offer a distinctive theological comparison when evaluating King Mohammed VI's political *ijtihad*, asking whether moderation grounded in comparable traditions necessarily leads to the same diplomatic outcome.

In May 2026, President Trump suggested that some of Israel's neighbors should be required to sign the Abraham Accords and recognize Israel as part of a peace deal in the war with Iran — a move that underscores the continuing and urgent relevance of the Abraham Accords framework in global geopolitics. Against this backdrop, this study examines three interrelated questions: how Morocco's tradition of Jewish-Muslim coexistence institutionalized through the Mellah system reflects Islamic values of tolerance; what theological, historical, and geopolitical foundations underpin King Mohammed VI's normalization decision as Amir al-Mu'minin; and how Morocco's position compares with the divergent responses of other Muslim-majority states across a theological-political spectrum. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to answer these three research questions in order to explain why Morocco's normalization decision cannot be reduced to a geopolitical transaction. By applying Maqasid al-Shariah and faith-based diplomacy theory as analytical frameworks, this study offers, to the author's knowledge, the first systematic Islamic Studies

examination of Morocco's Abraham Accords participation — contributing to scholarship on interfaith relations, Muslim-world diplomacy, and the role of religious authority in contemporary Islamic statecraft at a moment when these questions have never been more consequential.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative library research design in which data are collected and analyzed from existing written sources, without fieldwork. The design suits an inquiry into the historical, theological, and geopolitical dimensions of Morocco's participation in the Abraham Accords, best examined through documentary, textual, and policy sources (Bowen, 2009). Figure 1 summarizes the procedure.

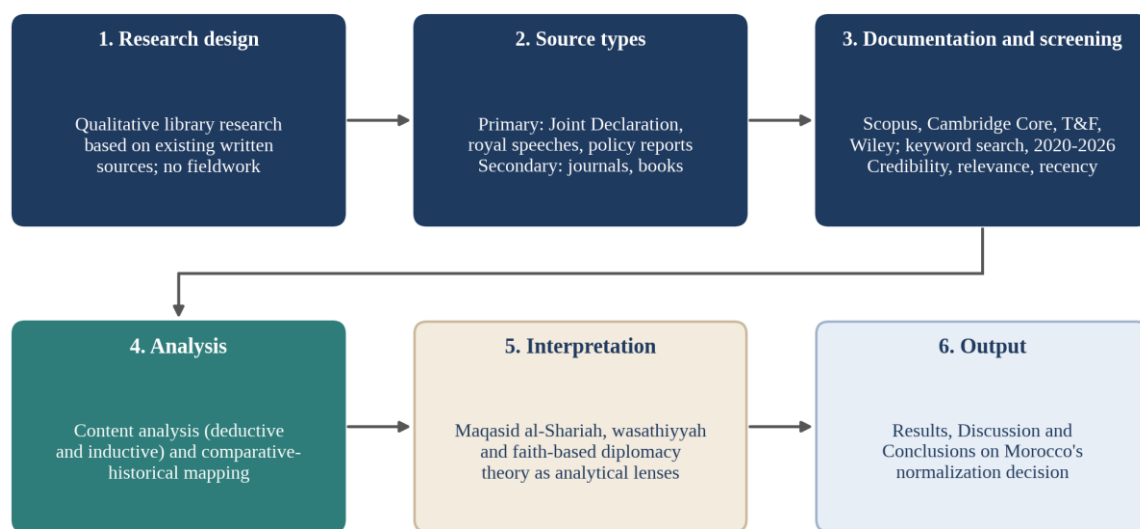


Figure 1. Research procedure of the study (author's own work).

Primary sources include the Joint Declaration between Morocco, Israel, and the United States of December 22, 2020 (Singer, 2021), royal speeches and decrees of King Mohammed VI as Amir al-Mu'minin, and reports from the Carnegie Endowment, the Middle East Institute, and the Atlantic Council. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed articles, books, and analytical reports on the study's themes. Sources from 2020 to 2026, plus classical theoretical works, were retrieved from Scopus, Cambridge Core, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley Online Library using keywords such as Abraham Accords, Morocco-Israel normalization, Mellah, Amir al-Mu'minin, and Maqasid al-Shariah, and screened for academic credibility, topical relevance, and recency.

Content analysis, combining deductive and inductive reasoning, traced how dhimmi, wasathiyyah, and Maqasid al-Shariah operate across historical and contemporary contexts. A comparative-historical approach then mapped the responses of Iran, Pakistan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan.

As Figure 2 shows, the analytical framework rests on three pillars. Maqasid al-Shariah, classically systematized by al-Ghazali and al-Shatibi and mapped in recent scholarship

(Mohammed, 2024), is the legal-ethical lens for Morocco's protection of non-Muslim minorities. Wasathiyyah is the normative framework for Morocco's distinctive Islam under the Amir al-Mu'minin. Faith-based diplomacy theory (Johnston, 2003) links Morocco's theological heritage to its foreign policy, drawing also on the interreligious-dialogue role of Morocco's official religious institutions (Abdelhak & Rhoulami, 2024).

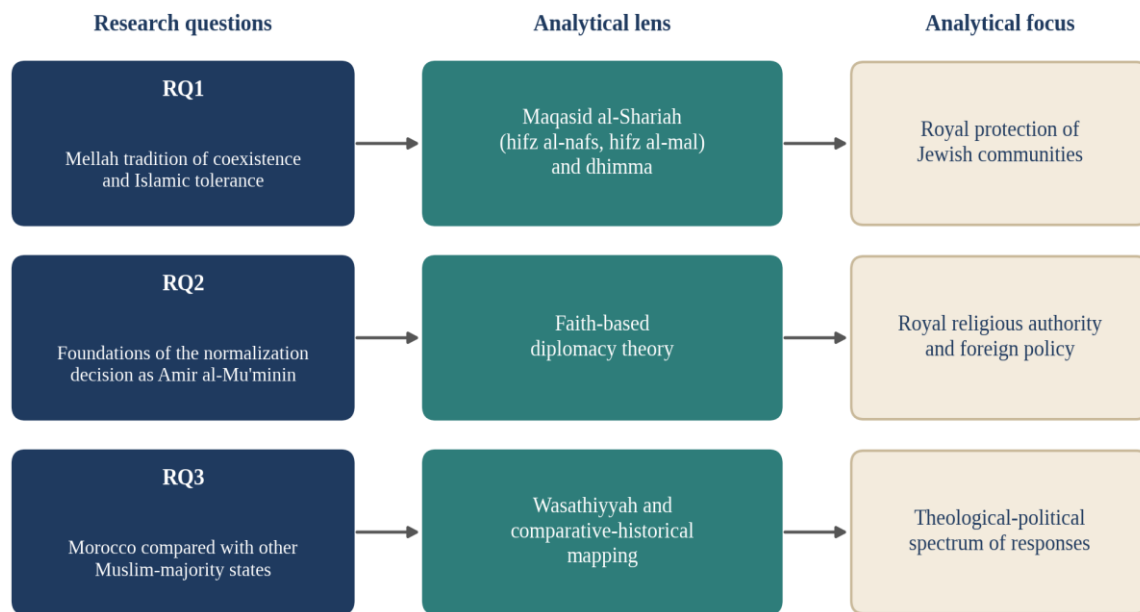


Figure 2. Analytical framework linking research questions, theoretical lenses, and analytical focus (author's own work).

Scope and limitations. The study covers Morocco's participation in the Accords from 2020 to 2026, with comparative reference to eight Muslim-majority states. As library research, it captures official and public positions only as documented in published sources, surveys, and reports; no interviews or fieldwork were conducted. Findings are interpretive and context-bound, and reliance on secondary and policy literature on a contested topic risks source bias, which the screening criteria aim to reduce. The study thus claims analytical, not statistical, generalization.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

This section reports the descriptive findings of the library research, without yet interpreting them theologically. The findings are organized around four clusters of evidence: the historical architecture of the *Mellah* system, Jewish protection policies during the Vichy era, the 2020 normalization decision and its domestic political aftermath, and a mapping of the responses of Muslim-majority states. The mapping is summarized in Table 1. The analytical interpretation of these findings follows in the Discussion section.

The Architecture of the *Mellah* System

The documentary record shows that the *Mellah* was a planned, state-sponsored urban institution rather than a spontaneous neighbourhood. The first Moroccan *Mellah* was established in Fez in the fifteenth century (conventionally dated to 1438), in Fes el-Jdid next to the royal palace complex, and gave its name to all later Jewish quarters in the country (Gottreich, 2003). The second was founded in Marrakesh in 1557–1558, when Sultan Moulay Abdallah al-Ghalib of the Sa'dian dynasty (1511–1659) ordered the city's Jews to move from their existing quarter to a site adjacent to the royal *Kasbah*; construction was probably completed around 1562–1563 (Gottreich, 2003). A third major *Mellah* followed in Meknes in 1679 under the Alawite sultan Moulay Ismail. Each new dynasty thus created, or re-created, a Jewish quarter in its own capital.

Three features recur across these cases. First, location: the *Mellah* was consistently placed beside the seat of royal or gubernatorial power, not at the urban margins. Second, legal status: the inhabitants were *dhimmi*, members of a protected non-Muslim community who paid the *jizya* poll tax in return for security of life, property, and worship, and whose protection was the ruler's direct responsibility (Emon, 2012). Third, internal autonomy: the walled quarter reproduced the urban structure of the medina, with its own synagogues, markets, and rabbinical courts, and its residents enjoyed religious freedom and a measure of self-government under the protection of the sultan (Calvo Serrano dkk., 2017). The same studies emphasize that the *Mellah* was not equivalent to the European ghetto, and that it was imposed only in certain royal cities and at particular moments, while many Jews in smaller towns and the countryside continued to live among Muslims (Calvo Serrano dkk., 2017).

The longer record confirms that this arrangement sat within an unbroken Jewish presence in Morocco that predates Islam and continued through the colonial period (Jebari, 2021). A French intelligence bulletin of January 1948 estimated the community at about 220,000 people in 1947, roughly 2.6% of the country's population (Nacik, 2023), and it still numbered about 240,000 at the end of the Protectorate in 1956 (Laskier, 1990). Early modern travel chronicles show, moreover, that the legal inequality of Jews under Islamic rule did not always translate into social separation in everyday life (Ojeda-Mata, 2020).

Jewish Protection Policies During the Vichy Era

After the fall of France in 1940, the French protectorate in Morocco came under the authority of the Vichy regime, which extended its anti-Jewish legislation, the *Statut des Juifs*, to Moroccan territory. Because the protectorate formally governed in the sultan's name, these measures had to be issued as royal decrees (*dahirs*) bearing the seal of Sultan Mohammed V. They imposed quotas (*numerus clausus*) on Jewish participation in the professions, education, and administration, and required Jews living in the European quarters to move back into the *Mellah*, a measure enforced selectively and most harshly in Fez ((Kenbib, 2014; Stein & Boum, 2019)

The sources then record a consistent pattern of royal distancing from these measures. Mohammed V is widely reported to have stated that there were "no Jews in Morocco, only Moroccan subjects," and to have regarded the protection of his Jewish subjects as part of his duty as *Amir al-Mu'minin*. In 1941 he invited senior representatives of the Jewish community to the annual Throne Day banquet and seated them next to French officials. During Vichy rule, which lasted a little more than two years until the Allied landings of November 1942, no Moroccan Jews were deported to the death camps, and Moroccan Jews were not forced to wear the yellow star (Kenbib, 2014; Satloff, 2006).

The Vichy episode also had a long afterlife. After independence, the story of Mohammed V's protection of the Jews became a central element of Moroccan national memory and of the monarchy's self-presentation. Scholars have shown how myth and memory of this kind came to serve the political interests of the Moroccan state (Ben-Layashi & Maddy-Weitzman, 2010), and the heritage of Moroccan Jewry was mobilized again to legitimize the normalization of 2020 ((Maghraoui, 2009).

The 2020 Normalization Decision and Its Domestic Aftermath

Morocco's normalization was announced on December 10, 2020, and formalized in the trilateral Joint Declaration between Morocco, the United States, and Israel on December 22, 2020 (Singer, 2021). The decision came from the palace. Under the Moroccan Constitution, foreign policy is a royal prerogative, and the PJD-led government was expected to accept a decision that had, in effect, been imposed from above (Martini, 2024). Although the 2011 constitutional reform transferred some powers to parliament, the King retained decisive prerogatives (Darif, 2012), and he combines this constitutional authority with the religious title of *Amir al-Mu'minin* and the *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance) that underpin the official model of Moroccan Islam (Faitour, 2024).

The Justice and Development Party (PJD) had historically opposed normalization. In 2013 it co-sponsored, with the PPS, the USFP, and Istiqlal, a bill that would have criminalized normalization with Israel, with prison terms of two to five years (Crétois, 2013). Yet as the largest bloc in the House of Representatives, with 125 of 395 seats (Ağrali, t.t.), it did not oppose the King's decision (Martini, 2024). Its prime minister, Saad Eddine El Othmani, signed the trilateral declaration. The party issued a measured response that deflected responsibility from the monarch and emphasized Mohammed VI's phone call with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, in which the King affirmed that Morocco's "support of the Palestinian cause remains unshakeable, and that Morocco places it at the same level of Sahara issue" (Yildirim, t.t.).

The electoral consequences were severe. In the September 2021 elections the PJD fell from 125 seats to about a dozen (Kayyali, t.t.). PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane later described normalization publicly as "a mistake," and the Royal Court reminded him that foreign policy is a prerogative of the King (Martini, 2024).

Mapping the Responses of Muslim-Majority States

The comparative mapping identifies four broad positions among Muslim-majority states, summarized in Table 1. The first is outright rejection. Iran condemned Morocco's normalization as a "betrayal of Islam" ("Israel Normalisation: Iranian Official Condemns," 2020), and Pakistan declared that it could not accept Israel as long as the Palestinians were denied their rights and a just settlement ("Pakistan Will Not Recognise Israel," 2020). Algeria went furthest in practical terms, severing diplomatic relations with Morocco on August 24, 2021, citing Rabat's "hostile actions" against a background of rivalry over Western Sahara ("Algeria Cuts Diplomatic Ties," 2021).

The second position is conditional ambiguity. Saudi Arabia acknowledged the strategic value of normalization but tied it to a credible pathway to Palestinian statehood (Nawaz, t.t.). The Gaza war then complicated the Israeli-Saudi track (Joney & Deshpande, 2025). Indonesia, which has no diplomatic relations with Israel, has stated that it would recognize Israel only once Israel recognizes an independent Palestinian state (Reuters, 2025).

The third position is full participation driven by strategic and economic interests. This is the path of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in 2020 (Singer, 2021), and of Kazakhstan, which confirmed in November 2025 that it would join the Accords while restating its support for a two-state settlement (Teslova, 2025). Kazakhstan already had diplomatic relations with Israel, so its accession was symbolic and economic rather than a change in recognition. Morocco forms the fourth position. Like the third group, it is a full participant. Unlike them, it frames its participation through royal religious authority and the heritage of its Jewish community, including the large community of Moroccan origin in Israel (Kateb, t.t.), and it has kept its ties under severe domestic pressure, as the next subsection shows.

Table 1. Mapping of the responses of selected Muslim-majority states to the Abraham Accords (compiled by the author from the sources cited in the text).

Position	States	Main justification	Diplomatic outcome
Outright rejection	Iran, Pakistan, Algeria	Islamic solidarity and the Palestinian cause; for Algeria, rivalry with Morocco over Western Sahara	No recognition; Algeria severed relations with Morocco (August 2021)
Conditional ambiguity	Saudi Arabia, Indonesia	Recognition conditional on a credible pathway to Palestinian statehood	No normalization; Saudi track complicated by the Gaza war
Strategic and economic participation	United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kazakhstan	Security alignment, trade, and technology; minimal religious framing	Full participation (2020); Kazakhstan joined in November 2025
Religiously legitimized participation	Morocco	Royal religious authority (<i>Amir al-Mu'minin</i>), Jewish heritage, and Western Sahara	Full participation since December 2020, maintained through the Gaza war

Note. Sources for each position are cited in the text of this section. Indonesia is classified as conditional because it has no diplomatic relations with Israel and ties recognition to Palestinian statehood.

Normalization Under Pressure: The Gaza War and the 2025–2026 Expansion

The Gaza war that began in October 2023 was the most severe test of Morocco's commitment. Public support for normalization, already a minority position, fell from 31% in the 2021–2022 Arab Barometer wave to 13% in the 2023–2024 wave (Robbins, 2025). After October 7, 2023, protests in support of Palestine took place in all major cities, with more than 300,000 people reportedly marching in Rabat on October 15 alone, a mobilization not seen since the demonstrations against the Iraq war in 2003 (Martini, 2024). The Moroccan Front for Supporting Palestine and Anti-normalization, a coalition of leftist, Islamist, and labour groups, intensified its campaign for the severing of ties (Chambost, 2025). In December 2024, thirteen of its activists received suspended six-month prison sentences and fines for protests against the Moroccan franchise of Carrefour, a company targeted by the BDS movement ("Morocco Sentences 13," 2024).

Despite this pressure, Morocco did not suspend relations. Its official position condemned Israeli military operations in Gaza while maintaining state-to-state ties, and it continued to support the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital. Moroccan commentators defending this line, such as the journalist Jamal Amiar, argue that establishing relations with Israel while supporting the Palestinian cause is not a contradiction ("Morocco Faces a Balance," 2023). Within the Islamist field, the PJD had distanced itself from the Muslim Brotherhood since 2015 and anchored itself in the Moroccan nationalist movement, while the largest and most disciplined Islamist force, the non-electoral Al-Adl Wa Al-Ihsan movement, remained outside institutional politics (Kayyali, t.t.).

The second Trump administration has since revived the idea of expanding the Accords, with Saudi Arabia as the intended centrepiece (Kateb, t.t.), and Kazakhstan confirmed in November 2025 that it would join (Teslova, 2025). In this context, Morocco's normalization has endured through defence, trade, and academic cooperation, while remaining closely linked to the question of Western Sahara (Kateb, t.t.). By 2026, therefore, Morocco had moved from a peripheral signatory to a reference case within the expanded framework, without any change in the institutional basis of its decision.

3.2 Discussion

The Discussion interprets these findings through the three lenses set out in the Methods section: *Maqasid al-Shariah*, the concept of *dhimma* and its modern transformation, and faith-based diplomacy theory. It then returns to the comparative spectrum and to the Indonesian analytical lens proposed in the Introduction.

The *Mellah* as Operationalized *Maqasid al-Shariah*: Hifz al-Nafs and Hifz al-Mal

The architectural findings can be read as an institutional expression of the higher objectives of Islamic law. In the classical scheme systematized by al-Ghazali and al-Shatibi, the *Shariah* aims to preserve religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Auda, 2008). Contemporary *maqasid* scholarship has expanded these objectives into a framework of human dignity, justice, and coexistence that can extend beyond the Muslim community (Mir & Anjum, 2025). The placement of the *Mellah* next to the palace or the *Kasbah* gave *hifz al-nafs* (protection of life) a physical form: in times of unrest, proximity to the sovereign's guard was the community's main security. Walls, gates, and a regulated market likewise protected Jewish property and commerce, an application of *hifz al-mal*. The internal autonomy of the quarter, with its synagogues and rabbinical courts, can be read in the same way as a protection of religion (*hifz al-din*) applied to a non-Muslim community.

This reading should not be romanticized. The same walls that protected also separated. The *jizya* and the legal restrictions of *dhimmi* status marked Jews as a subordinate community (Emon, 2012), and sultans could and did use the *Mellah* to concentrate a valuable, dependent population under their control (Gottreich, 2003). The *maqasid* reading therefore does not claim that the *Mellah* realized modern equality. Its claim is narrower and better supported by the evidence: Moroccan rulers repeatedly chose to institutionalize protection near the centre of power rather than leave Jewish security to local discretion. In *maqasid* terms, protection of life and property was treated as a public interest (*maslaha*) of the state, not a private favour. This choice, repeated over centuries, created the institutional memory on which later rulers would draw.

From *Dhimma* to Citizenship: The Vichy Precedent Reinterpreted

The concept of *dhimma* was a juridical device for governing religious difference within an Islamic polity. It combined protection with hierarchy, and its content varied with the political interests of each ruling order (Emon, 2012). The Vichy findings show this concept under pressure. Formally, Mohammed V was bound: as sovereign under a protectorate, he sealed anti-Jewish laws drafted by the Vichy administration (Kenbib, 2014; Stein & Boum, 2019). Substantively, his public gestures moved the language of protection away from the logic of *dhimma*. The attributed statement that there were "no Jews in Morocco, only Moroccan subjects" does not describe a tolerated minority. It describes members of one political community whose protection is owed by the same sovereign to all.

This marks the transition from the covenant of protection to an emerging idea of shared subjecthood, and later citizenship, under the *Amir al-Mu'minin*. The historical record, however, warns against treating the episode as pure heroism. Scholars have shown that the protection narrative was consolidated after independence and became, in part, a political myth serving the monarchy's domestic and international legitimacy (Ben-Layashi & Maddy-Weitzman, 2010). The two readings are compatible. The Vichy precedent was a real constraint

on the worst outcomes in Morocco, and it was also remembered selectively. For the argument of this study, what matters is that by 2020 this memory had become an established resource of royal religious authority. It allowed the King to frame engagement with Israel and with the Moroccan Jewish diaspora as the continuation of a royal duty, not as a departure from Islamic norms.

Royal Ijtihad and Faith-Based Diplomacy

Faith-based diplomacy theory holds that religious actors, values, and institutions can shape conflict resolution and foreign policy in ways that realist accounts miss, particularly where religious legitimacy is needed to make a political choice acceptable. In the Moroccan case the decisive religious actor is not a clerical body but the monarch himself. The *Amir al-Mu'minin* institution, supported by state-managed religious bodies, gives the King a monopoly over the authoritative interpretation of Islam in public life ((Daadaoui, 2011). Morocco's official religious institutions also promote interreligious dialogue as part of the national religious model (Abdelhak & Rhoulami, 2024). Read through this framework, the normalization decision appears as a form of political *ijtihad*: an independent judgement on public interest (*maslaha*) by the authority entitled to make it. Its legitimacy rests on the protection of Moroccan territorial integrity in Western Sahara, the welfare of a large Moroccan-origin diaspora in Israel, and a declared commitment to the Palestinian cause.

Wasathiyyah supplies the normative content of this *ijtihad*. Since the religious reforms launched in 2004, the Moroccan state has defined national Islam through three references, Maliki jurisprudence, Ash'ari theology, and the Sufism of al-Junayd, held together by allegiance to the King, and state support for Sufism has become a central instrument for promoting this moderate model at home and abroad (Faitour, 2024). In the Qur'anic sense, wasathiyyah denotes a balanced middle position that avoids both excess and neglect and is oriented to justice (Kamali, 2015). Applied to foreign policy, it allows the monarchy to present normalization not as alignment with one side of the conflict but as a middle path: engagement with Israel combined with declared support for a Palestinian state. Whether this balance is substantive or rhetorical is precisely what the Gaza war has tested. What the framework explains is why the monarchy could present the decision in Islamic terms at all, a possibility that was not available in the same way to the Gulf signatories, whose religious establishments did not carry a comparable doctrine of royal moderation linked to a living Jewish heritage.

The PJD findings show how this authority works in practice. A party whose identity was built on opposition to normalization signed the declaration, defended the King, and accepted the electoral cost. The usual explanation, that foreign policy is constitutionally reserved to the King (Martini, 2024), is correct but incomplete. The PJD's own framing, which placed Palestine "at the same level" as the Sahara (Yildirim, t.t.), borrowed the vocabulary of royal religious legitimacy rather than contesting it. Islamist politics in Morocco thus operates inside the religious field defined by the monarchy, not above or against it. This differs from

the realist and soft-power explanations reviewed in the Introduction. Those accounts correctly identify Western Sahara and heritage diplomacy as drivers (Wüst & Nicolai, 2023), but they cannot explain why an Islamist-led government accepted, and even justified, a policy it had sought to outlaw. The faith-based diplomacy lens fills this gap by showing that religious legitimacy, held by the monarch, was the mechanism that converted a territorial bargain into a decision that could be defended in Islamic terms.

This interpretation also qualifies the instrumentalization thesis. Maghraoui (2025) argues that Jewish heritage was instrumentalized to legitimize normalization and that there is no organic link between Jewish historical presence and the policy. The Results support the first claim: the heritage was clearly mobilized. They do not support the second. The *Mellah* findings and the Vichy precedent show a continuous institutional link, in which the protection of Jews has been a recurring attribute of Moroccan sovereignty, between historical presence and royal policy. Instrumentalization was possible precisely because this link existed; a heritage with no institutional depth would have offered little to instrumentalize.

The Comparative Spectrum and the Limits of Royal Legitimacy

The comparative mapping clarifies why Morocco is a *sui generis* case. The four positions differ less in their geopolitical interests than in the type of legitimacy each government needs. Iran's rejection, voiced by an adviser to the Supreme Leader who called Morocco's step a "betrayal of Islam" ("Israel Normalisation: Iranian Official Condemns," 2020), reflects a revolutionary political theology for which the Palestinian question is a test of Islamic solidarity (*ummah*). Saudi Arabia, as custodian of the two holy mosques, cannot normalize without a Palestinian pathway that protects its religious standing (Nawaz, t.t.). Kazakhstan, a secular state that already recognized Israel, needs no religious justification at all (Teslova, 2025). Morocco is the only case in which a ruler who claims supreme religious authority has joined the Accords and justified the step through the religious and historical heritage of the state. It therefore combines a civilizational-historical dimension (the *Mellah* tradition), a theological dimension (*wasathiyyah* and royal *ijtihad*), and a geopolitical dimension (Western Sahara).

The Gaza war shows the limits of this synthesis. The fall in public support from 31% to 13% (Robbins, 2025), mass protests, and the prosecution of activists ("Morocco Sentences 13," 2024), denounced by their supporters as increased state repression (Chambost, 2025), indicate that royal religious authority can sustain a policy against public opinion, but cannot by itself make it popular. Morocco's response, condemning Israeli operations while preserving state-to-state ties, is consistent with the *maslaha* reasoning described above: the King weighs the long-term interests of the state against the immediate preferences of the public. It also shows that the legitimacy of normalization now depends on visible support for Palestinian rights. If that support appears empty, the religious legitimacy that distinguished Morocco's position could become its main vulnerability.

An Indonesian Analytical Lens on Moroccan Political Ijtihad

The Indonesian comparison promised in the Introduction sharpens this conclusion. Indonesia and Morocco share important religious features: a predominantly Ash'ari theology, strong Sufi traditions, and an official commitment to religious moderation, expressed in Morocco as *wasathiyyah* and in Indonesia as *moderasi beragama*. Both concepts draw on the Qur'anic idea of the middle community (*ummatan wasatan*, Q. 2:143), understood as a balance between extremes and a commitment to justice (Kamali, 2015). In Indonesia this moderation is carried mainly by mass civil-society organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, whose moderate vision has itself been subject to scholarly re-examination (Hilmy, 2013).

Despite these shared foundations, the two states have reached different diplomatic outcomes. Indonesia keeps recognition of Israel conditional on Palestinian statehood (Reuters, 2025), while Morocco has normalized. The comparison suggests that moderation does not by itself determine foreign policy. What makes the difference is who holds the authority to interpret moderation in the public interest. In Morocco, that authority is concentrated in the *Amir al-Mu'minin*, who can exercise political *ijtihad* on behalf of the community. In Indonesia, religious authority is plural and organized in civil society, and any comparable decision would need the consent of mass organizations and an electorate for whom Palestine is a central religious and constitutional concern. From an Indonesian perspective, therefore, Morocco's normalization is better understood as the product of a specific institution of religious sovereignty than as an expression of moderate Islam as such. This distinction also cautions against presenting the Moroccan model as easily transferable to other Muslim-majority states, as some advocates of an expanded Accords framework have suggested.

Synthesis: Answering the Research Questions

Taken together, the findings and their interpretation answer the three research questions set out in the Introduction. First, the *Mellah* tradition reflects Islamic values of tolerance in a specific, institutional form: protection of life, property, and worship for a non-Muslim community, organized by the ruler as a public interest, but within the hierarchy of the *dhimma* system. Second, King Mohammed VI's normalization decision rests on three foundations that reinforce one another: the theological authority of the *Amir al-Mu'minin* to exercise political *ijtihad*, the historical memory of royal protection culminating in the Vichy precedent, and the geopolitical incentive of US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Third, compared with other Muslim-majority states, Morocco is the only case in which normalization is legitimized by a ruler holding supreme religious authority. Iran, Pakistan, and Algeria reject normalization on grounds of Islamic or national solidarity; Saudi Arabia and Indonesia keep it conditional; the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan participate with little religious framing. The central argument of this study is therefore confirmed in a qualified form. Morocco's normalization cannot be reduced to a geopolitical

transaction, because the transaction was made possible and defensible by an institution of religious sovereignty with deep historical roots. Yet that same institution now bears the cost of a policy that most Moroccans no longer support, which makes its future dependent on credible support for Palestinian rights.

4. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that Morocco's participation in the Abraham Accords of 2020 constitutes a phenomenon that is qualitatively and theologically distinct from that of other Muslim-majority signatories. Through a historical-comparative analysis grounded in Islamic Studies, three interconnected conclusions have been established.

First, Morocco's distinctive tradition of Jewish-Muslim coexistence — institutionalized through the royal-protected *Mellah* system since 1438 and rooted in the Islamic principles of *dhimma*, *maslaha*, and *Maqasid al-Shariah* — provides a civilizational foundation for the 2020 normalization that no other signatory of the Abraham Accords possesses. The *Mellah* system, uniquely mandated and regulated by an Islamic state, operationalized the *Maqasid al-Shariah* imperatives of *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-mal* toward Jewish subjects across successive Moroccan dynasties, establishing a pattern of Islamic statecraft toward non-Muslim minorities that distinguishes Morocco from all other Arab-Muslim contexts. Second, King Mohammed VI's normalization decision — exercised through his constitutional authority as *Amir al-Mu'minin* without parliamentary consultation — represents a form of royal *ijtihad* in contemporary Islamic foreign policy, legitimized by the precedent of King Mohammed V's protection of Moroccan Jews during the Vichy era. This demonstrates that the *Amir al-Mu'minin* institution in Morocco structurally supersedes electoral Islamist politics, as evidenced by the PJD's inability to oppose the normalization and its subsequent electoral collapse in 2021. Third, the comparative mapping of Muslim-world responses — from Iran's outright theological rejection to Kazakhstan's pragmatic accession — reveals that Morocco occupies a *sui generis* position synthesizing civilizational, theological, and geopolitical dimensions simultaneously. Morocco's sustained commitment to the Accords throughout the Gaza war, despite public support declining from 31% to 13% (Robbins, 2025), confirms that this commitment is structurally embedded rather than contingent on political circumstances.

Future research is recommended to examine the evolution of this tension between royal religious authority and popular Islamic sentiment, particularly in anticipation of the succession from King Mohammed VI to Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, and its implications for the future trajectory of the Abraham Accords framework.

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