

Opening of Israeli news channel sparks backlash in Morocco

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Staffers work in a studio of television channel i24news in Tel Aviv, Israel, on July 28, 2013. (file photo by AP)

Rabat, July 18 (RHC)-- The Moroccan government's move to facilitate the opening of an Israel-based channel has reportedly caused widespread backlash among media journalists across the African country, in a move viewed as yet another step towards normalization of ties with the occupying regime.

The international news channel i24NEWS launched operations in Morocco on May 30 and became the first Israeli media company to operate in the country, with the channel's CEO Frank Melloul later announcing the opening of two bureaus in the cities of Rabat and Casablanca.

The launching ceremony was held in the archaeological site of Chellah, one of the most iconic places in the Moroccan capital, bringing together public figures from Israel and Morocco.

The opening of i24 was facilitated largely thanks to the support of the Moroccan culture minister, who had also helped the channel rent the Chellah site to celebrate its launch, according to two Moroccan sources, who spoke to Middle East Eye on condition of anonymity.

The move triggered widespread anger among Moroccan media workers who see it as yet another step towards normalization of relations between the illegal entity and Morocco, part of a wider drive for rapprochement between Israel and Arab countries since 2020.

In a statement widely shared on social networks, 80 Moroccan journalists said they followed "with great concern the dangerous path of normalization pursued by the Moroccan State, since December 2020, through several agreements and decisions that allow the institutions of the Zionist occupation to desecrate our country."

The two sources also told MEE that after succeeding in forming its administrative and editorial teams, the managers of i24News were seeking partnerships with local private and state-owned Moroccan channels.

According to the sources, discussions were underway with several potential partners on topics of interest to the Israeli media in Morocco, including diplomacy, geostrategy, history and culture.

The model was said to have already been tested in the United Arab Emirates, where the Israeli channel had established partnerships with the two state-owned groups Abu Dhabi Media and Dubai Media before extending its collaboration with private media.

The i24 opening would not be the first time that the Israeli and Moroccan media have sealed a partnership. On 22 December 2020, the Moroccan magazine L'Observateur announced in a press release a "strategic partnership agreement" with Israel's The Jerusalem Post, consisting "of syndication, resulting in an exchange of content."

Israel and Morocco agreed on December 10, 2020 to normalize relations in a deal brokered with the help of the administration of former US president Donald Trump, making the North African country the fourth Arab state to strike a normalization deal with the regime. The others were the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

Trump sealed the agreement in a phone call with Morocco's King Mohammed VI. As part of the agreement, the US president agreed to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara region, which has been at the center of a dispute with neighboring Algeria.

The Algerian Foreign Ministry later rejected Trump's stance, saying the US decision "has no legal effect because it contradicts UN resolutions, especially UN Security Council resolutions on Western Sahara."

The Algeria-backed and pro-independence Polisario Front has also rejected "in the strongest terms" Trump's stance on the disputed Western Sahara Desert region, stating that Trump had attempted to give to Morocco "that which does not belong to it."

The agreement with Israel also drew condemnation from the Palestinians, who have termed it a "stab in the back" and a betrayal of their cause.

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