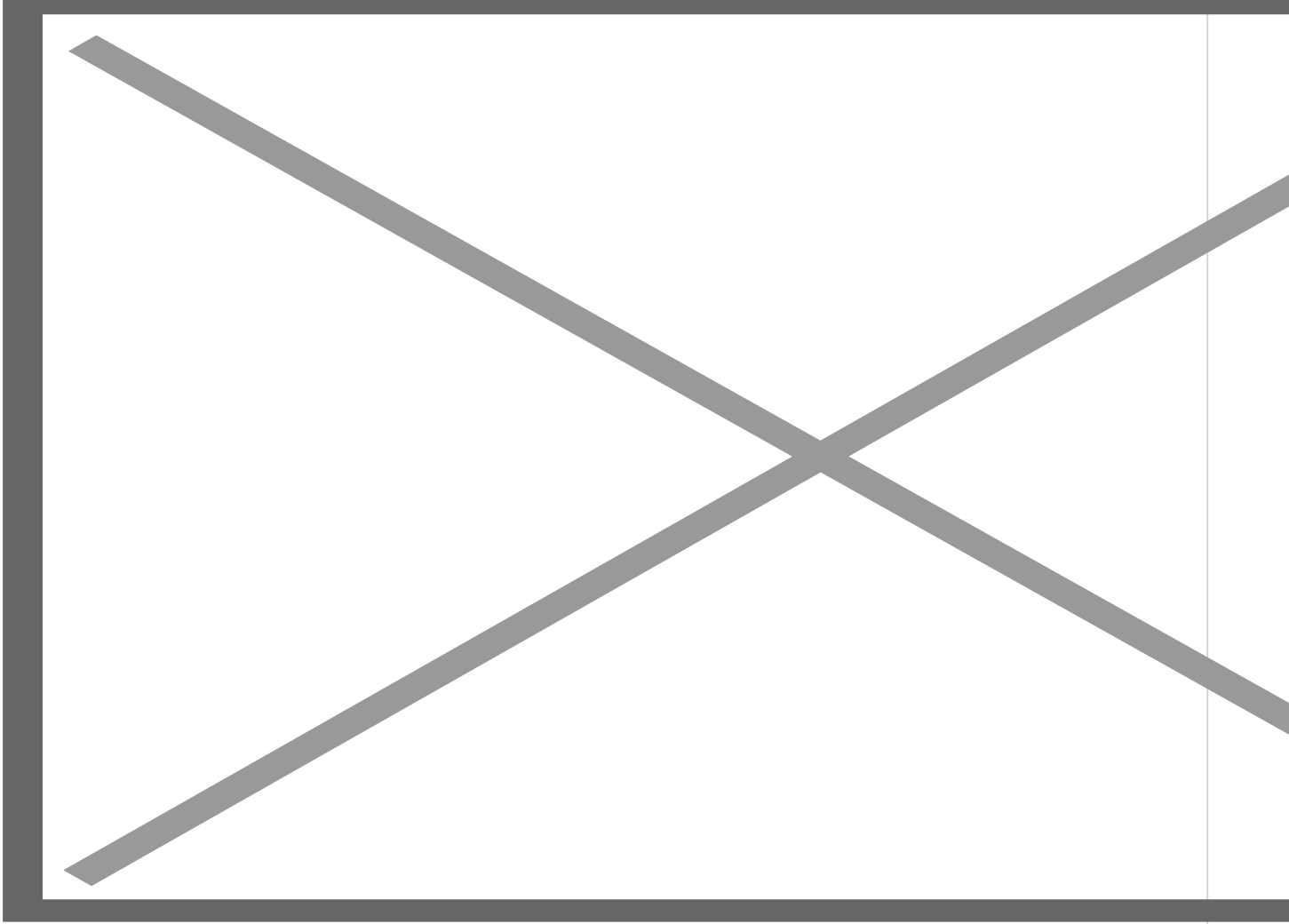


Israel and Morocco agree to normalize relations in U.S.-brokered deal

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Rabat, December 11 (RHC)-- Israel and Morocco agreed on Thursday to normalize relations in a deal brokered with the help of the United States, making Morocco the fourth Arab country to set aside hostilities with Israel in the past four months.

As part of the agreement, U.S. President Donald Trump agreed to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, where there has been a decades-old territorial dispute with Morocco pitted against the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a breakaway movement that seeks to establish an independent state in the territory. Trump sealed the agreement in a phone call on Thursday with Morocco's King Mohammed VI, a senior U.S. official said.

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

Under the agreement, Morocco will establish full diplomatic relations and resume official contacts with Israel, grant overflights, and also direct flights to and from Israel for all Israelis. "They are going to reopen their liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv immediately with the intention to open embassies. And they are going to promote economic cooperation between Israeli and Moroccan companies," White House senior adviser Jared Kushner told reporters.

The White House said Trump and Morocco's king agreed Morocco would "resume diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel and expand economic and cultural cooperation to advance regional stability." The U.S. will also recognize Morocco's claim over Western Sahara, the former Spanish North African territory that has been a long-running dispute that has confounded international negotiators for decades, a White House statement said.

"The United States believes that an independent Sahrawi state is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution," it said. "We urge the parties to engage in discussions without delay, using Morocco's autonomy plan as the only framework to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution."

Morocco, a country with centuries of Jewish history, has long been rumored to be ready to establish ties with Israel. Before Israel's establishment in 1948, Morocco was home to a large Jewish population, many of whose ancestors migrated to North Africa from Spain and Portugal during the Spanish Inquisition.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews trace their lineage to Morocco, making it one of the country's largest sectors of Israeli society, and a small community of Jews, estimated at several thousand people, continues to live in Morocco.

The North African country has for years had informal ties with Israel. Israel and Morocco established low-level diplomatic relations during the 1990s following Israel's interim peace accords with the Palestinians, but those ties were suspended after the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000.

Since then, however, the informal ties have continued, and an estimated 50,000 Israelis travel to Morocco each year on trips to learn about the Jewish community and retrace their family histories.



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