

Arab Countries Increase Ties With Diaspora Jews in Possible, Silent Approach to Israel

As New York community honors Morocco's WWII king, Diaspora Jews increase their links with moderate Arab countries, quietly forming a bridge between them and Israel.

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The Moorish-inspired sanctuary of Congregation Bnei Jeshurun in New York was packed on Sunday night with the Upper West Side Jewish crowd one would expect - except for the red-fez-and-long-robe-wearing Moroccan dignitaries filling the first row.

The evening, marking the 10th anniversary of Kivunim, a gap-year travel program for young American Jews, chose to honor the late King Mohammed V of Morocco, for his protection of the Jewish community of Morocco during Nazi occupation. The king, according to some accounts, refused to implement anti-Jewish race laws or hand over the Jewish community, despite pressure from the Vichy government in what was then a French protectorate. Moroccan Ambassador-at-Large Serge Berdugo recounted at a United Nations event in 2007 that the late Moroccan king swore to his father, a Jewish community leader during the war, that “no harm would come to Jews which did not affect first my family and myself.”

While no official application has been filed yet for the king to be included in Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations, Moroccan-Jewish community leaders have been quietly pushing the idea with Israeli officials for close to a decade now - in an effort to improve whatever discreet diplomacy exists between the two states.

Kivunim's convocation ceremony had the usual sort of interfaith program - the nonprofit leaders (namely, Peter A. Geffen, founder of the Abraham J. Heschel School and executive director of Kivunim), the rabbis and imams chanting prayers, the diplomats bowing to one another. As Israel and Morocco do not have official diplomatic relations, Israel was barely mentioned, even though the Kivunim program includes a full academic year of Israel-focused study coupled with travel in the Jewish state, and only 12 days in Morocco. The Israeli flag did not appear, and the only anthems sung were those of the United States and Morocco. Princess Laila Hasna (dressed in a traditional Jewish kaftan) accepted the posthumous award on behalf of the late king, her grandfather; Andre Azoulay, a Moroccan Jew and counselor to the current ruler, King Mohammed VI, delivered a message on his behalf.



Princess Lalla Hasna of Morocco at the ceremony honoring her grandfather, the late King Mohammed V of Morocco, to her left Andre Azoulay, Counselor to the current king. *Asher Krell*

“Today we need, more than ever, to ponder the lessons and relevance of this part of history in order to stand up more forcefully to the deadly aberrations of those who are hijacking our cultures, our faiths and our civilizations,” he said.

In his address, the king praised “enlightened Islam” and noted that societies are too often “impaired, not to say poisoned, by regression and archaism”.

What was perhaps most interesting about this event was not the program itself - but rather that it was taking place at all.

It is unlikely that the Moroccans are attending events of this sort for the sake of promoting a gap year program for American teens gallivanting around the world - it seems more probable they are seeking friendly conversation with Diaspora Jewish communities, and thus indirectly, with Israel, with whom they share common enemies. Jewish communities are thus playing an interesting role, by carefully avoiding the word “Israel” on stage and choosing to enthuse instead about tolerance and peace.

Lately, in New York, there’s been a surging interest from the moderate Arab world to engage with Jewish communities. Diaspora Jews, Geffen said later, “remain an extraordinary international bridge”; Geffen himself has taken Moroccan students on tours of Israel and the Palestinian territories, as part of the Rabat-based student club, Mimouna.

Kivunim’s event was the third Jewish-Moroccan partnership program this year in the United States alone: Just last month, the Council of Jewish Communities of Morocco and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations of America organized a gathering of



religious leaders at New York's Museum of Modern Art to honor Mohammed VI for preserving Morocco's Jewish burial places. A similar event was held on Capitol Hill around the same time - also honoring the king.

And it's not only Morocco that's testing the waters of Jewish engagement. Just a few weeks ago, Bahrain held its first Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony since 1948, with Conference of European Rabbis' Moshe Levin leading the ceremony. On Saturday, Tunisia announced its prestigious literary Goncourt prize would go to Tobie Nathan, for his work on the expulsion of European Jews. Attend a private Jewish event in Manhattan these days - and you may run into a Qatari or Omani diplomat snacking on canapés with a group of businessmen and rabbis. Backdoor channels of informal conversation between Jewish leaders and Muslim politicians seem to be multiplying. And then, of course, there is the ultimate recognition: the recent announcement that Israel is opening a mission in the United Arab Emirates.

We'll see what happens next, but it wouldn't be surprising to see more events in 2016 involving Arab diplomats and Jewish leaders - with New York's Jewish communities serving as discreetly apolitical platforms.