

UPF Europe and the Middle East: Morocco - Focus of Abraham Accords Webinar

Jacques Marion
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Europe and the Middle East - Experts from Morocco, Israel, the United States and Europe discussed the Morocco Tripartite Agreement at the third "Toward Peace in the Middle East" webinar.

The Europe and Middle East branches of UPF and its International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) convened a distinguished panel on April 15, 2021, to discuss the impact of the agreement signed by Morocco, Israel and the United States in December 2020.

UPF organized the "Toward Peace in the Middle East" webinar series to give voice to all major stakeholders in the Abraham Accords, and indeed in the broader search for peace in the Middle East.



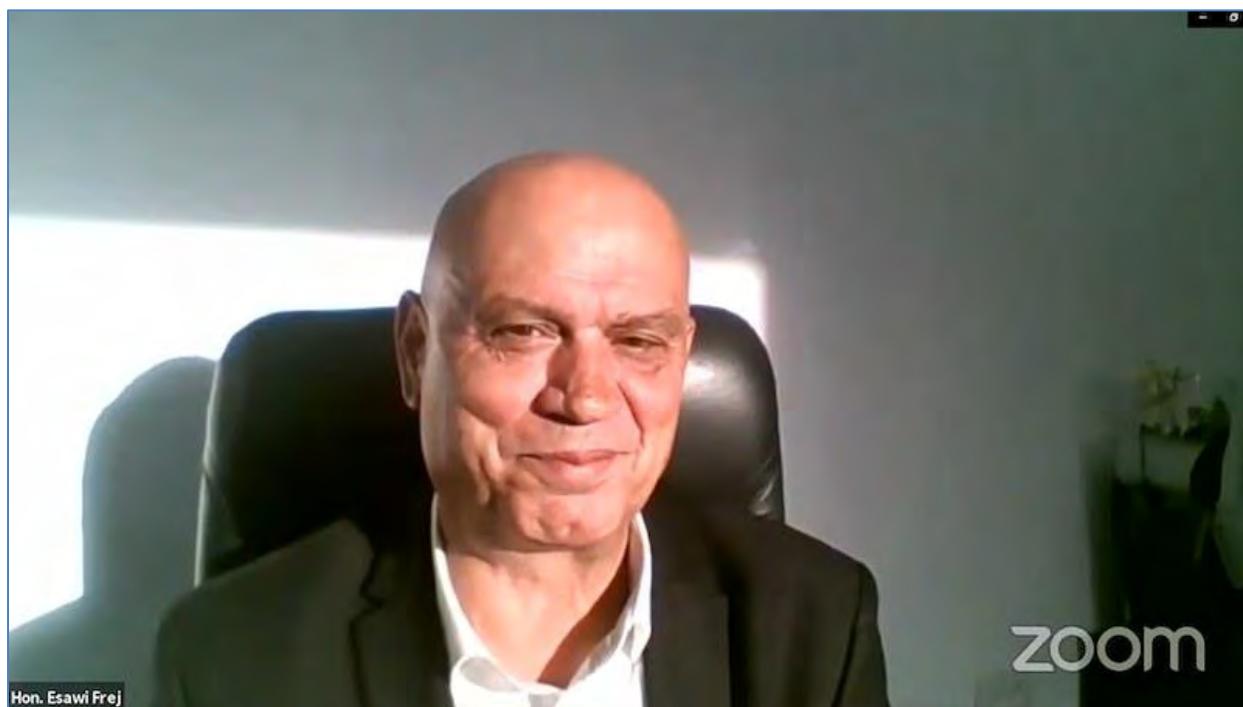
Speakers:

Hon. Joe Wilson, U.S. House of Representatives (2001-present), ranking member, Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism;

Dr. Yasmine Hasnaoui, PhD, board member, Institute of Saharan Studies Al Andalous, Morocco; specialist in North African affairs and conflict transformation;

Hon. Esawi Frej, member, Israeli Knesset, Meretz party; Committees on Foreign Affairs and Defense, and Economic Affairs.

Dr. Sarah Ahmed, MBBS, a medical doctor and the vice president of UPF for the Middle East, moderated the webinar.



In his opening remarks, Jacques Marion, co-chair of UPF for Europe and Middle East, placed this series in the wider context of UPF's Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI), which already in the early 2000s organized fact-finding trips, interfaith pilgrimages, and conferences in Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Jordan. Starting with religious leaders, the MEPI events then attracted political leaders, women and youth leaders, and civil society representatives from around the world.

Emphasizing the global implications of these efforts, Mr. Marion ended on a personal note, expressing his happiness to see Morocco playing a role in the process, not least because of the deep impression the nation had made on him during his years of study at King Hassan II University in Casablanca.

Dr. Yasmine Hasnaoui made it clear from the start that Moroccans do not refer to what has happened as "normalization": They would rather speak of the resumption of relations with the state of Israel, she said, something which "we in Morocco have been waiting for, for many years." There cannot be peace without communication, she explained, so the establishment of relations is important.

Hon. Esawi Frej echoed Dr. Hasnaoui's point that relations between their two countries go back a long way. He also expressed his happiness at the opening of relations between Israel and four Arab states: "It's a new thing for us." He went on to say, "Everyone in Israel welcomes and likes the recent Abraham Accords." Openness, tolerance and dialogue among different countries are the way to go, he said.

Aware that he might be called into a Foreign Affairs Subcommittee meeting scheduled for the same time as our webinar, Hon. Joe Wilson agreed to record his remarks in advance, along with answers to questions prepared by UPF. He began by thanking The Washington Times for facilitating the event, adding his appreciation of the fair and unbiased reporting provided by the newspaper. As co-chair of the Morocco Caucus, appreciating the US alliance with the people of Morocco, which dates back to 1786, he was glad to discuss the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel.

Referring, as previous speakers had, to the almost 1 million Moroccan Jews in Israel, he added: "It is only fitting, as the two nations have such an intertwined history, that they resume friendly relations at this pivotal point in history, for the mutual benefit of their citizens." After commenting on his 2019 visit to Marrakesh for the autumn meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, he called the Abraham Accords a "historic framework for peace in the Middle East as well as a new era of cooperation for regional security."

In response to a question about what developments he would like to see following the Tripartite Agreement, Congressman Wilson praised Morocco as a beacon of hope and opportunity for the people of North Africa and a bridge to Europe. He noted increasing investments by US companies in Morocco, speaking of the great benefits of foreign investment witnessed by his own home state of South Carolina.

A lively question-and-answer session was ably handled by Dr. Tageldin Hamad, vice president of UPF

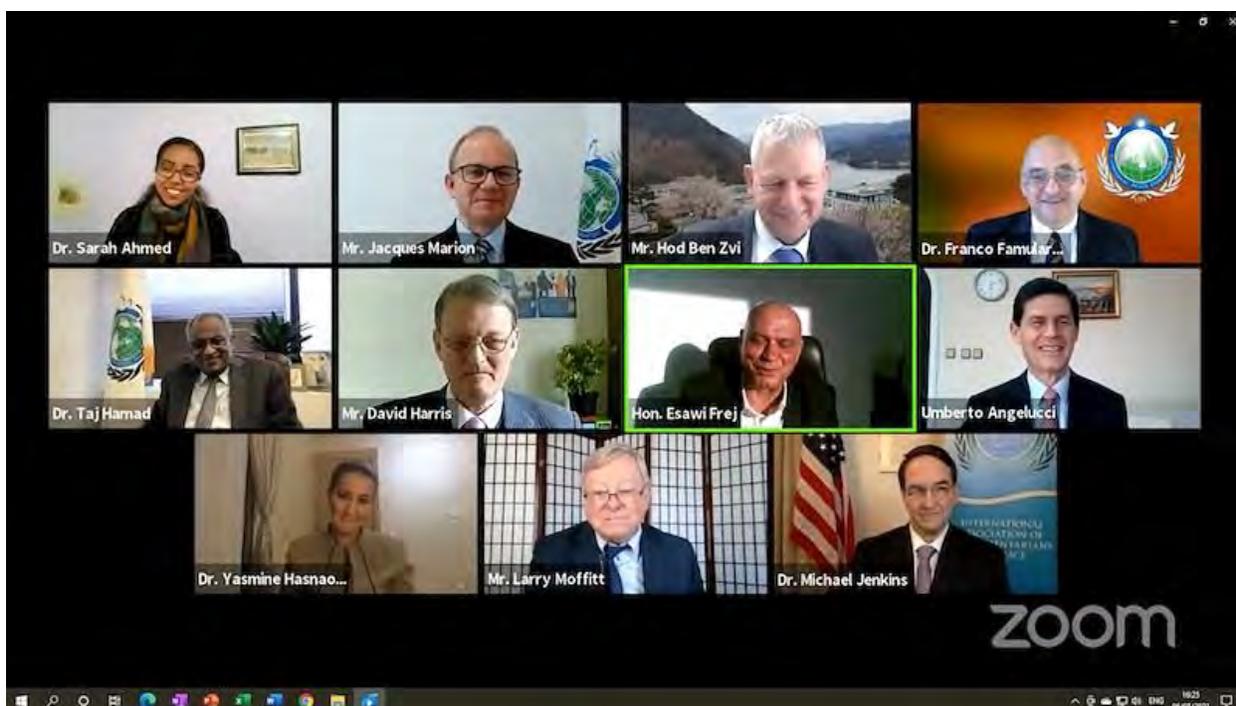
International, who managed to ride a technical roller coaster while drawing out the very best from the enthusiastic and experienced speakers.

Hon. Frej said that Morocco is well placed to broker the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian people, ultimately helping to bring the two peoples together.



Dr. Hasnaoui pointed to a history of such brokering: "Morocco's relations with Israel date back to the 1950s and 1960s, and Morocco has always played a role in solving Israeli-Palestinian conflict." This continued through the 1970s, when Morocco's King Hassan II held secret peace talks with Israel. Now, upon the resumption of relations, the current king, Mohammed VI, made it clear that Morocco remains committed to two important principles: supporting the Palestinian cause in line with the two-state solution, and preserving the ancient historical identity of Jerusalem.

Asked about the potential role that can be played by the many Moroccan Jews who are Israeli citizens, Dr. Hasnaoui said that when these people left Morocco for Israel, they left with fond memories. When the recent resumption of relations was announced, she said, the Jewish community in Morocco celebrated, sharing on social media a famous quote from King Hassan II: "When a Jew emigrates, Morocco loses a citizen, but we gain an ambassador."



Hon. Frej explained that the Moroccan Jews can be very influential in Israel: They are involved in every field of life, including both politics and business. "If we can let this community be involved in the relationship between Israel and Morocco, we will see things we have dreamed of."

He went on to talk about the potential for other Arab nations, in the wake of the Abraham Accords, to

positively influence the relationship between Israel and Palestine. "I'm sure the Arab countries will push Israel to have an agreement with the Palestinian people," he said. This is the most important thing in all these agreements, he said.

Hon. Frej paused at one point to emphasize one particular aspect: "It's good to have peace, it's very good to have normalization - but we need to have it with people, not with governments." It's one thing to sign an agreement and to begin exporting and importing goods, "but we need people to know each other, to visit each other, and to be not afraid of each other."



Agreements with the Arab nations are not a matter of adding another nation to a list; the people themselves need to be closer to each other, he said. When Dr. Hamad noted the surge of Israelis visiting Dubai, Hon. Frej was quick to reply: "Maybe it's tourism, but during this tourism you meet people and you have a dialogue with people." This is how they get to know each other, he said.

Congressman Wilson expressed his optimism that, with the leadership of the Kingdom of Morocco, peace and security and opportunity can be provided to the young people of the Middle East. He emphasized more than once that, while clearly an achievement of the Trump administration, the Abraham Accords were the result of a bipartisan effort. "The good news about the Foreign Affairs Committee is that usually - not always - it is bipartisan," he said.

He added, "We want the best for the people of the Middle East, and I look forward to working with the new administration to provide for that."

Dr. Hasnaoui said she thinks other countries will follow suit: The Abraham Accords are important not only in relation to the Palestine-Israel conflict but for the wider region.

Hon. Frej reiterated that Morocco is in a good position to lead the Palestine-Israel peace process. Everyone knows that this has to be resolved, he said.

"When we have this, we can say that we have peace. There is a big difference between normalization and peace. We need to be in peace," he said. But he also encouraged his audience to remember that there are other big challenges in the Middle East, such as the suffering of the Syrian people, Yemen, Lebanon and more. We must continue to build successful models of peace and reconciliation among nations, he said.

In his closing remarks, UPF International President Dr. Michael Jenkins thanked the panelists and all those involved in the program, noting UPF's fundamental values.

Dr. Jenkins gave an overview of the two previous "Toward Peace in the Middle East" webinars, held on January 14 and February 25, before announcing that the series will continue this summer. He concluded with words well-known to all those who have experienced UPF's MEPI program: "We pray for peace in the Middle East!"