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Case Analysis

The Amazigh in Morocco: Between the Internal and the External

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Introduction

The August 2010 publication of a study by Bruce Weitzman, an Israeli researcher at the “Moshe Dayan Center,” sparked a debate about Israel’s support of the radical movement within the Amazigh movement in Morocco, and Israel’s use of this movement as an entry point for normalization with Israel in a social and political milieu that rejects such normalization and such relations.¹ According to Weitzman, fostering and using agents and activists it considers more moderate within the Amazigh movement in Morocco is part of Israel’s foreign policy in the region that aims to counter the forces that Israel classifies as hostile. “From the Israeli perspective, the relations with Rabat are an extension of Israeli policies with the ‘surroundings,’ and the fostering of non-Arab agents in the Middle Eastern surroundings is carried out in order to establish a counterweight to the pressure of radical and hostile Arab states.”²

The publication of this study tipped the scales on the subject of the suspicion of activists in the Amazigh movement in Morocco with regards to their involvement in normalization activities with Israel. This study, published by a center affiliated with the University of Tel Aviv and linked to political decision-making centers in Israel, highlights Israel’s endeavor to employ actors in the radical wing of the Amazigh movement in order to “improve its image” in the region and pave the way for its social acceptance in the Arab world.

The matter does not extend to all components of the Amazigh movement in Morocco, but to a radical current that has grown with the new generation of Amazigh activists who began to join the ranks of this movement in the early 1990s, after a long period in which most such activists belonged to the left. This movement began to raise slogans that looked favorably upon Israel, betraying an indifference to the issues that concern the nation, particularly the Palestinian cause, and criticizing the Arab and Muslim presence in Morocco. In a statement to the *Hespress* news agency, the founder of the banned Amazigh Democratic Party, Ahmed Aldagharni, stated that the question of Amazigh relations with the Israeli side is “one of the means of self-defense against the targeting that is faced by Amazigh in the Maghreb region at the hands of Arab nationalists and some Islamic extremists.”³ Such statements and sentiments led Weitzman to confirm in a subsequent study that the defiance of a small group of Amazigh activists “and their interest in Israel and Jewish history, especially the alleged historic relationship between Jews and Berbers in ancient times, including the initial resistance to the Arab invasions by *al-Kahina* [the priestess] who was supposedly a Jewish Berber queen,”⁴ forms part of the context of Amazigh activists seeing Israel as a strong ally in the face of Arab nationalism. This reflects, in Weitzman’s opinion, Amazigh “opposition to Arab-Muslim domination and the subjugation of the Amazigh language and culture.”⁵

¹ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, “The limits and potentials of Israel-Maghreb relations,” *IPRIS Maghreb Review*, August 2010.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ “Aldagharni: Relations with Israel are in Amazigh Interests,” *HesPress* electronic newspaper, August 19, 2009.

⁴ Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, “Morocco’s Berbers and Israel”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2011, p. 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The Problem of Identity: Between unity and diversity

The roots of the Amazigh issue in Morocco can be traced to the beginning of the last century, with such French colonial efforts as the “Scientific Expedition,” and the “Berber Institute” in Paris and Rabat, and with the publication of the *Berber Archive* journal (1915-1918), followed by *Hespress* magazine, which was first published in 1921 and prepared by French military officers and Orientalists, as well as French anthropologists and sociologists. The appearance of an Amazigh “issue” actually goes back to Micho Blair, who can be considered the first person to call for the employment of the Arab-Berber dichotomy that would later become part of the paradigm for all colonial studies in Morocco. Robert Montagne, a political officer in French naval intelligence, studied the phenomenon of leadership in the Amazigh tribes in his famous book *The Berbers and the Makhzen*,⁶ after the French had faced serious difficulties in subjugating the Sus area to their control. Montagne introduced the idea of “Berber republics,” and other concepts that have been fundamental to the biases of Western knowledge production in order to construct the contrast between the Arabs and the Berbers. Central to his claim was the proposition that the Arab presence in Morocco was marginal, while the Amazigh presence was an extension of the West and its culture.

According to Muhammad Ghilani, Montagne’s study was set against the backdrop of the policies of the French occupation authorities in Morocco that aimed to partition Morocco according to the framework of what was called the “Berber Dahir” (decree), which explains the timing of the book’s publication and issuance of the Dahir (1930).⁷ According to Younis Abu Ayyub, the “Berber Dahir,” which was issued on May 16, 1930, was an attempt to “institutionalize two different legal systems in Morocco; the first to be based on the local ‘customary’ laws that would specifically apply to people considered to be ‘Amazigh,’ and the second to be based on Islamic *shari’a* and applicable to ‘the Arabs’.”⁸

In fact, it would be quite difficult to narrate the development of the Amazigh issue in Morocco within a few lines. For the purpose of this paper, it will suffice to outline the dynamics that have defined the Amazigh movement over the past two decades in its relation to the state and the society as the actual public Amazigh movement in Morocco emerged with the signing of Agadir Charter of 1991. It is for this that an understanding of the dynamics of the Amazigh issue in Morocco at the present time requires that the subject be situated in its regional and local context as the elites are caught in an identity crisis, with Islamic and national currents on one side, and the secular current in the Amazigh movement on the other. This crisis has witnessed several stages in Morocco today, most notably the so-called “battle of the alphabet” (*marakat al-harf*), a conflict that took place in 2003 over the script to be used for the writing of Tamazight (the Amazigh language). Some advocated the use of the Arabic script (the Islamic Movement and the Independence Party) while others advocated for a Latin script (part of the Amazigh movement).

⁶ Robert Montagne, “Berbers and the Makhzen in Southern Morocco: An essay on the sedentary Berbers political transformation group Chleuh” (Translated from French), (Paris: Libr. Felix Alcan, 1930).

⁷ Mohammed al-Ghilani, “The experience of the scientific mission of Micho Blair and Robert Montagne,” *al-Masa newspaper*, September 30, 2008.

⁸ Younis Abu Ayyub, “Morocco: The Policy of Reform and the Fragmentation of Identities,” *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 6, 2011.

The conflict was finally resolved through royal arbitration which resulted in the adoption of the “Tifinagh” alphabet as a compromise solution.

Since the outbreak of the Arab revolutions, the Amazigh movement in Morocco has entered a new dynamic in which it seeks to capitalize on the popular protests in Morocco that began on February 20, 2011 (known in Morocco as the February 20 Movement) by raising the level of Amazigh demands. The Amazigh movement called for the amendment of the Moroccan constitution to include Tamazight as an official state language, considering this to be a fundamental demand upon which no compromise would be acceptable. This demand spawned a debate between Moroccan political forces, which divided into four main viewpoints on the issue. The first of these considers Tamazight a national language, without taking a position on actions that such official adoption of the language would engender. In its memorandum, the second group recommended that Tamazight be adopted as a national language, calling for the development of regulatory policies and the drafting laws that explain how the language would be gradually incorporated into the public sphere, paving the way for the official adoption of the language as an official state language. The third current called for the adoption of Tamazight as an official language to ensure that it is not extinguished, on the condition that legal texts are drafted that define the functions of the language on an official level, guaranteeing that it does not come into conflict with the Arabic language and its usage. The fourth current has called for the official adoption of Tamazight as an official language in the country’s constitution without any scrutiny over the specifics of content and procedure. Ultimately, it was the third group’s position that prevailed in the new constitution that was adopted after the July 1, 2011 referendum; the constitution embraces Tamazight as an official state language with policies outlining and explaining the ways this language is to be officially used. The new constitution also endorsed the pluralistic nature of the component parts of Moroccan identity, with the Islamic component as an essential one in addition to Arab, Berber and Sahrawi Hassani components, while adopting the Tamazight language as the second official language after Arabic. The second paragraph of the new Moroccan constitution states: “the Kingdom of Morocco is an Islamic state enjoying full sovereignty, committed to its unity, national integrity, cohesion and the maintenance of the elements of its national identity, united by the cohesion of its Arab-Islamic, Amazigh, and Sahrawi Hassani component parts, and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Jewish and Mediterranean heritage.”

Formal Integration of the Amazigh: The public and private context

Individual and Civil Society Efforts

We can say that the Amazigh issue in Morocco moved from the margins to the center along a cumulative path with several stops on the way. The journey began at the end of the 1960s with the establishment of the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange. It then evolved in the early 1990s with the Charter of Linguistic and Cultural Rights (known as the Agadir Charter) and the development of the work of Amazigh organizations at the level of internal coordination.

Two defining events contributed to the emergence of the Amazigh issue, bringing it to the fore. The first of these was of an external nature as it was related to the events of the “Amazigh spring” in Algeria during the month of April 1980 when large demonstrations erupted in the neighboring country to protest the banning of a lecture that was to be delivered by the writer Mawlud Maamari on the topic of old Amazigh literature at the University of Tizi Ouzou. The second event was internal because it was related to the “Fateh incident” in Rashidiya in May 1994 in which seven secondary school teachers who had been in a protest carrying placards with Tifinagh writing were arrested by Moroccan authorities.

These internal and external events had significant repercussions on the Amazigh issue in Morocco. The arrest of the Rashidiya teachers led Amazigh activists to launch a broad solidarity campaign in which many Moroccan lawyers and politicians participated calling for their release. The Amazigh movement was also bolstered by leftists who joined the cause leading to changes in the internal structures of the component parts of the Amazigh movement in ways that have affected the ways in which this movement has worked, developing its demands from those of a strictly cultural nature to legal and political demands.

A second transformation is one that relates to the Agadir Charter, which has formed the ideological basis from which a set of coordination initiatives has emerged between Amazigh organizations. These organizations, which have doubled in number, with ten such organizations now in existence, have formed an alliance within the framework of a coordinating council called the “National Coordination Council” (French acronym: CNC) that was established on February 19, 1993 with the adoption of bylaws for the Council that regulate its functioning. The coordination between the organizations aims to intensify their efforts on the basis of the common ground between them regarding their strategies of struggle in order to act as a pressure group within civil society, aiming to achieve the demands set out in the Agadir Charter.⁹

The year 1999 is also considered to have been a turning point for the Amazigh movement as it was the year in which the movement mobilized for the *Tawada* demonstration, the first planned, mass protest to be organized by the Amazigh movement. The protest’s timing coincided with the death of King Hassan II and the transition of power to King Mohammed VI, however, which led to a postponement of the protest. It was around the same time that what was known as the “Shafiq statement” (also known as the “Amazigh statement”) was formulated, in March 2000,¹⁰ just a few months after Mohammed VI’s assumption of power. The statement was signed by 229 people (including academics, writers, poets, artists, officials, and industrialists) acting as individuals rather than representatives of the organizations or associations to which they belonged. Mohamed Shafiq, the author of the statement, described it as being the “essence of what the Amazigh movement’s discourse had reached in its demands for the official adoption of the Tamazight language and its call for an approach to development that treated all regions of Morocco on an equal footing, in addition to a precursor to the transformation of the Amazigh

⁹ Ahmed Aseed, “Amazigh Affairs Management Policy in Morocco: Between Policies of Political Compromise and Containment,” *Amazigh Monitor of Rights and Freedoms*, (2009), p. 37.

¹⁰ Mohammed Shafiq, “A Statement on the Need for Formal Recognition of Morocco’s Amazigh,” March 2000.

cause from a cultural issue to a political one with historical depth and of relevance to the political class, the major political currents and the identity-related bases of the state's official policies.”¹¹

The State and the Integration of the Amazigh

Until 2000, the Amazigh movement remained at a distance from the official institutions of the state, limited as it was to the expression of the Amazigh community's aspirations that aimed to empower Amazigh citizens in the country's public sphere. The movement did, however, maintain communication with the ruling circles in Morocco, both during the reign of King Hassan II and later with King Mohammed VI.

The indirect contributions of two Amazigh figures were of great significance in the empowerment of the Amazigh movement at the official level, and in defending it within the higher circles of power in Morocco. The first of these is Mohammed Shafiq, a former teacher of the current monarch at the Mawlawi school and a prominent figurehead of the Amazigh cultural movement. He was the author of the “Amazigh Statement” of 2000, the key ideologue of contemporary Amazigh movements in Morocco, and the mediator between these movements and the Royal Palace.

The second significant indirect actor is Hassan Aourid, a former classmate of King Mohammed VI. He was director of the Tariq ibn Ziyad Center for Research, having written a comparative analysis between Islamic movements and the Amazigh movements in Morocco for his university dissertation, maintaining his interest, research and writing on these movements since then. The Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture was his brainchild and, after King Mohamed VI took the throne, Aourid was promoted from his position at the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to become the official spokesperson for the Royal Palace. In fact, he presented the demands of the Amazigh movement to the palace in the months following King Mohamed VI's coronation.

In addition to the efforts of the Amazigh movement in defense of its demands, these two actors played a central role in accelerating the official recognition of the importance of the Amazigh component in Morocco, and in working to integrate this component in the projects initiated by the government in the period after 1999 that were designed to bring about a new dynamism in what was then known as the ‘new era’.

With the ascension of King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999, the state's position towards the Amazigh issue witnessed a marked change because the new king's desire to establish and consolidate his rule by working to resolve the issues and legacy that he inherited from his father, King Hassan II. It was this impetus that drove the new monarch to launch several initiatives, such as the “equity and reconciliation commission,” the “board of grievances,” and the “higher audio-visual communications authority”.

In this context of preemptive and containment policies, King Mohammed VI founded the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture in late 2001 as called for by the Dahir (no. 1-01-299) that established the Institute, coordinated its functions, and set out its areas of competence and work.

¹¹ Ahmed Aseed, “Amazigh Affairs Management Policy in Morocco: Between Policies of Political Compromise and Containment,” *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹² The text of the Dahir was prepared by a group known as the Committee of Five that was composed of influential figures in the state. The first of these was Mohammed Shafiq; the four other figures were: Abdul Aziz Meziane Belfaqih (advisor to the King, died in 2010), Muhammad Rushdie Chraibi (Director of the Royal Court), Hassan Aourid (at the time, the official spokesperson of the Royal Palace), and Abdul Wahhab Ben Mansour (historian of the Kingdom of Morocco). The excellence of those involved in the preparation of the Dahir that founded and organized the work of the Royal Institute, the unique, formal institutional character of its establishment, and the state's heavy investment in some of the Amazigh movement's demands, as well as their incorporation in the Institute's work, all highlight the importance that the state attached to the promulgation of this Dahir. Indeed, the establishment of a national institute was among the classical demands of the Amazigh movement.

The Institute has experienced some turbulence in its functioning since it was established, especially during some of the key events of relevance to the Amazigh in the country. The election of its board of directors has been a major challenge, and in 2010, a conflict between Amazigh elites erupted over the vacant seats on the board of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture. Nine of the seats on the board were vacant for the following reasons: two of the seats belonged to people who had passed away (the late Ali Sidqi Azaiko and Mohamed Bahri), some of the remaining seven seats were vacant because their holders' terms on the board had expired, and the remainder of the seats were vacant because several board members submit their resignations from the board of the Institute in 2005 because of what they, in a statement released to the public, described as "the absence of political will at the government level to ensure the development of the Amazigh and to give them their due."¹³

The growth of popular Amazigh movements and organization in Morocco in terms of size, evolution, and presence of mediators and actors within the institutions of Moroccan governance were all factors that ushered in a political context wherein the Moroccan political leadership responded to the movement's demands by making available and integrating a suitable foundation for the implementation of these demands. The state responded to the demands of the Amazigh movement through the royal speech delivered at Agadir in 2001, in which the monarch declared "the advancement of the Amazigh is a national responsibility". This was followed by the establishment of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture in late 2001. The royal speech at Agadir is indicative of a significant transformation in the state's relations with the Amazigh. The official adoption of the slogan "the advancement of the Amazigh is a national responsibility," which has been a slogan of the Amazigh cultural movement since the 1991 Charter of Agadir, as well as the establishment of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture, work to demonstrate the elevation of Amazigh demands from the level of social movement agitation to the level of official state policy.

¹² King Mohammed VI's speech on the occasion of the royal approval of the updated Dahir establishing the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture, Agadir - Khenifra, (October 2001).

¹³ "Statement of those Resigning from the Board of Directors of the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture," Fez, October 16, 2005.

The Impact of External Expectations on Engagement with the Amazigh

Recently, corresponding to official discourse and action on the Amazigh issue, new tendencies within the Amazigh movement have begun to emerge that are increasingly oriented towards the internationalization of the Amazigh issue. These tendencies aim to bring external pressure in support of the Amazigh movement's demands to the Moroccan state. This offensive-defensive strategy has manifested in several ways, through participation in international seminars and lectures on the rights of indigenous peoples and the fight against racial discrimination at the United Nations or other international forums, through the work of activists of the Amazigh movement to develop relations with Israel to further the demands of the Amazigh movement, and through calling on the European Union to cut economic ties with Morocco, downgrading the advanced status of the North African state on the basis that Morocco has not respected its commitments to the European Union with regards to the protection of human rights and democracy. These new tendencies in the Amazigh movement are important to monitor and analyze in order to assess where the movement has reached and in order to evaluate these new directions in light of the overall course of this movement.

This direction towards the internationalization of the Amazigh cause is being led by a number of activists working through the World Amazigh Congress, which is the most prominent body in the Amazigh movement at the international level. Composed of more than one hundred Amazigh associations, this Congress is the first non-governmental, international organization in the world that is specifically dedicated to the Amazigh issue. This is despite the organizational problems and the clear split in the Congress that has manifested in its having two separate executive offices. The split emerged in October 2008 when the Congress elected Alwannis Belkacem as president at Meknes, while Rashid Rakha was elected to the same position at the conference held in the Tizi Ouzou in Algeria.

In July 2008, before the October 2008 elections, an Amazigh delegation composed of Alwannis Balkacem, President of the World Amazigh Congress, Rashid Rakha, then vice-president, and a number of international Amazigh activists visited the headquarters of the European Union and its different bodies. In their meetings, the delegation presented what it saw as the marginalization of the Amazigh people and the violence directed at them by the *Tamatzga* states (North Africa and the Sahara). Ahmed Aldagharni, who was part of the delegation, raised the issue of the banning of his political party, pointing to the illegality of some of the arguments made by the Rabat administrative court in its decision to ban the party. Rakha gave an exposition of the harassment suffered by the Amazigh of Morocco, with particular attention to the arrest of students who were members of the Amazigh cultural movement in Meknes. Also discussed at these meetings were the events of Sidi Ifni, and the police intervention that accompanied those events.¹⁴

In April 2009, the political attaché of the United States embassy in Rabat met with Rashid Rakha, President of the World Amazigh Congress (Tizi Ouzou section), and Amazigh Democratic Party leader Ahmed Aldagharni. During the meeting the participants examined the cultural situation of the Amazigh in Morocco, the status of the Amazigh language, and the state's role in integrating it into the various spheres of public life, in addition to the issue of Amazigh Democratic Party that had been dissolved by the Court of Appeals after the Ministry of Interior

¹⁴ See the Amazigh News website.

had filed a suit against the party.¹⁵ In February 2010, an Amazigh delegation composed of members of the World Amazigh Congress, as well as representatives of the Amazigh movement in Belgium, visited the European Parliament to discuss the advanced status granted by the European Union to Morocco. In their presentations, the delegates addressed several issues, emphasizing the issue of human rights in Morocco and the extent of its commitment to its human rights obligations.

Paralleling these efforts to bring European Union and United States pressure to bear on Morocco, a group of Amazigh activists has called for the normalization of relations with Israel and the severing of all ties with the Arab world. This movement has witnessed significant development since 2007, when the Berber Jewish Friendship Association was formed in the city of Agadir. Moroccan Amazigh activist leader Ahmed Aldagharni also visited Israel in November of 2007, holding meetings with several Israeli officials, including Tzipi Livni who was the Israeli foreign minister at the time. Aldagharni also participated in an international symposium in Tel Aviv in December 2007. In November 2009, eighteen Amazigh activists (mostly professors) participated in a training workshop on the history of the Holocaust that was organized by the “Yad Vashem” institute in Jerusalem.¹⁶ In a statement issued in March of 2011, the World Amazigh Congress (Meknes section) called on the Moroccan state to terminate its membership in any and all international institutions of an ethnic or religious character (specifically, the Arab Maghreb Union, the League of Arab States, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference), and to instead seek membership in international bodies that have come together on the basis of cultural and humanitarian concerns, geographical proximity, and the development of international cooperation oriented towards the sharing of universal values and common interests among the other nations of the world.¹⁷

Conclusion

These facts remain a truncated piece of the analysis if they are not linked to the overall context of the current Amazigh movement. This movement consists of two main groups. The first of these is moderate, centering primarily on the Amazigh cultural component that is anchored in the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture. The second is the radical wing of the movement that is of a predominantly political and human rights focused character, and has largely undertaken protest and struggle activities outside the framework of the established institutions. This group is critical of the Royal Institute and the way that it operates, tending to adopt arguments and positions that aim to sever Morocco from its Arab and Islamic milieu.

For this, the management of the Amazigh issue in Morocco today requires the political will of all moderate social forces; it also necessitates that the state will have to think in a far-reaching manner about the potential solutions available that will guarantee the maintenance of Morocco’s strategic depth in the Arab and Muslim world, and, at the same time, the preservation of its distinctive cultural, linguistic, and ethnic attributes. This cannot be achieved without genuine

¹⁵ See the *Hespress* electronic newspaper on April 17, 2009.

¹⁶ *Al-Tajdeed* newspaper, September 24, 2010.

¹⁷ "Morocco: Amazigh basic requests," Paris, March 12, 2011, Office of the Amazigh World Congress, www.congres-mondial-amazigh.org.

democracy that links responsibility with accountability and respects the rights of individuals within the society to express their ideas and choose their representatives and leaders. This can be achieved through the deepening of group autonomy that gives groups the broad powers of managing their political, economic, and cultural affairs within a pluralistic framework that maintains the unity of the country. Several steps can be taken towards this end, including: the drafting of a covenant that would ensure the common defense of the national identity and the higher interests of the nation, the identification of a platform of action based on the issues of common concern, especially the advancement of Amazigh culture and development of all regions of Morocco without discrimination as to race or language, and the fortification of the gains achieved in Morocco on these issues so as to ensure the continuity of the country's belonging to the Arab world while preserving the cultural specificities now confirmed by both the new constitution and the trends in the public opinion of Moroccan society.

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