

A New Morocco?

Amazigh Activism, Political Pluralism and Anti–Anti-Semitism

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FOR ALL THE INITIAL OPTIMISM about the rise of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa, the recent uprisings in the region (often termed “the Arab Spring”) have come to be characterized in the West as a threat. European observers present the war in Libya, the broader instability in the region, and the seemingly new and uncontrollable tide of refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean as veritable crises on Europe’s southern frontier.¹ Meanwhile, Western security officials fear that the power vacuums created by the fall of authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen will create openings for “radical” Islamist groups and al-Qaeda affiliates in particular.² The storming of the Israeli embassy in Cairo and the burning of a synagogue in Tunisia seem to bode poorly for future Israeli security, and the rise of Iran and a newly assertive, independent-minded Turkey as regional power brokers appear to threaten an already tenuous *Pax Americana*.³

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Yet to examine the uprisings solely through the lens of crisis and threat would be both misleading and shortsighted. In this essay I will draw on the case of Morocco and the decades-long struggle for Berber/Amazigh rights—particularly the Amazigh movement’s avowed solidarity with Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities in the region—to argue that the uprisings mark the culmination of a long fight for cultural and political inclusion that bodes well for the future of pluralism in the region. The recent mass demonstrations

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in Morocco and across North Africa built on and expanded the claims for cultural rights made by the Amazigh movement and allied them with parallel demands for social justice, political transparency, and economic equity arising from emergent student, labor, feminist, and human rights movements.⁴

In this sense, examining the Berber/Amazigh case casts the uprisings as hopeful rather than threatening. The emergence of new political actors in the region could very well challenge the ideological hegemony of Arab nationalism and spur forward a stalled Israeli–Palestinian peace process. Leaders of the newly elected al-Nahda party in Tunisia, while opposing the normalization of relations with Israel that some Amazigh activists have supported, have nonetheless reached out to local Jewish populations and publicly condemned the use of anti-Semitic chants in demonstrations.⁵ The rise of youth movements animated by social media has created vectors of solidarity across ethnic, national, religious, and ideological borders, with activists in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco learning from the experiences of those in Serbia, the Ukraine, and Iran, and inspiring new movements in Greece, the United States, and Israel.⁶ Moreover, the movements have forced leaders across the region to scramble to introduce preemptive social, economic, and political reforms, which have expanded rights and protections for women and ethnic and religious minorities. These reforms, while yet to be fully enacted, promise precisely the kind of open, inclusive, and plural society for which Moroccan Amazigh activists have long hoped.

AMAZIGH ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL REFORM

The international media has portrayed Morocco as a cardinal example of a revolution averted and its king, Mohammed VI, as a paragon of political foresight and savvy. Lacking deep pockets to purchase quietude like those of his oil-rich monarchical counterparts in the Gulf, the Moroccan king has instead relied upon his symbolic religious capital as “Commander of the Faithful” and his burnished public image as a modern reformist committed to transforming the clientelist *makhzen* (the ruling establishment) into a transparent structure operating according to the rule of law.⁷ Indeed, since taking the throne in 1999, the king has pursued a series of public education initiatives targeting corruption and pollution; released a number of political prisoners and initiated a truth and reconciliation process to indemnify victims of his father’s iron-fist rule; reformed the family code (*al-mudawana*) to promote greater equality between men and women in matters of marriage and divorce; and created the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) to introduce the three dialects of

Berber (collectively known as *Tamazight*), the mother language of an estimated 40 percent of Moroccans, into state education and the media.⁸ The creation of the IRCAM responded to a long-standing demand by the Amazigh movement for better inclusion of Berber speakers into the national fabric of Morocco. As Bruce Maddy-Weitzman details in his essay in this issue of the *Journal*, Berber students, schoolteachers, artists, and journalists in Morocco—in conjunction with their counterparts in Algeria and France—have worked since the 1960s to preserve Berber arts, culture, and language from extinction through the collection, recording, and publication of oral poetry and folklore in a written, standardized Tamazight they devised.⁹ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Moroccan Amazigh activists were subject to police harassment and occasional arrest for defying state authority.

They called attention to Berbers as indigenous peoples of North Africa who have been progressively Arabized through intermarriage and state-sponsored assimilation programs; nonetheless, substantial populations still speak Berber in the mountainous and oasis regions of Algeria and Morocco, as do smaller numbers in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and across the Sahel.

After the April 1980 “Berber Spring” strikes and demonstrations in Kabylia, Algeria, Moroccan Amazigh activists increasingly demanded state recognition of Berber culture as a key component of the Moroccan nation and of Tamazight as a national and official language. They founded cultural associations in urban centers and in peripheral rural regions that quickly became sites for the articulation of local demands for inclusion and rights. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Moroccan Amazigh activists were subject to police harassment and occasional arrest for defying state authority. Perhaps the most famous case occurred in 1994 when police arrested six members of the southeastern association Tilelli for displaying signs written in Tamazight during a May Day parade in Errachidia. Police held the group for several weeks, after which the courts sentenced three to prison terms and large fines. The three were later released on appeal, and the charges were dropped after the case received widespread international attention. Responding to the public outcry, the Moroccan government promised reforms, with Prime Minister Abdellatif Filali opening channels for Berber-language programming in the national broadcast media and King Hassan II declaring in his 29 August 1994 Throne Day speech in Agadir that Amazigh “dialects” were “one of the components of the authenticity of our history.” This speech paved the way for his successor to create the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture.

In spite of IRCAM’s promise to promote Tamazight, many Amazigh activ-

ists have suspected it of trying to co-opt the Berber movement and folklorize Berber culture.¹⁰ They demanded that Tamazight be recognized as a fully official language of Morocco with equal status as Arabic. They viewed the IRCAM's focus on arts and media as a distraction from more pressing issues of material and territorial inequality in socially, politically, and economically marginalized Berber-speaking regions.

Increasingly, the Berber movement has involved itself in protecting the land and irrigation rights of rural collectivities. In many cases, the Moroccan state

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has encouraged the privatization of tribal grazing lands in order to promote the development of the tourism, agricultural, and mining sectors or has claimed eminent domain in order to delimit

nature reserves or develop rural infrastructures. In a number of instances, these land expropriations caused local controversy by impeding rural communities from water and firewood collection or by having alienated territory traditionally held for the collective use by granting it to non-local individuals.¹¹ Activists founded federations demanding fiscal and territorial self-determination in the northern Rif Mountains, the southeastern pre-Saharan oasis, and the southwestern Souss valley.

They considered themselves part of a global movement of indigenous peoples, drawing inspiration from the struggles of Native American and Amazonian groups, and in active solidarity with the Movement for Kabyle Autonomy, the plight of Berber speakers in Qaddafi's Libya, and the armed struggle to create a Saharan republic for the Berber-speaking Touareg in Mali and Niger.¹² For Moroccan Amazigh activists, territorial control and language rights were both essential preconditions for developing a vibrant Berber future.

Amazigh activists have found numerous allies in their dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reforms, the ongoing social inequalities, and the closed Moroccan political system, which endured into Mohammed VI's reign. Secular women's groups bemoaned that the new *mudawana* (family code) did not outlaw polygamy or require gender equity in inheritance rights (daughters' shares of inheritance remain only half those of sons).¹³ The national press remains heavily censored, and journalists are periodically imprisoned for questioning the integrity of the king, Islam, or Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara.¹⁴ Morocco continues to actively participate in the global war on terror, accepting terrorist suspects for interrogation (including past documented uses of torture), as well

as surveilling and periodically rounding up members of Islamist groups. These practices have increased in the wake of the 2003 bombings in Casablanca and the more recent April 2011 explosion in a tourist café in Marrakesh.¹⁵

More broadly, in spite of promises of fairness in hiring, avenues for social mobility have remained largely inaccessible for those without connections to the Palace or the Fez business and political elite. Unemployment for youth 25–34 years of age has been as high as 26 percent and close to double that in urban areas.¹⁶ These conditions have only worsened with the privatization of state industries and the fiscal austerity measures demanded by recent free-trade agreements with the European Union and United States.¹⁷ Over much of the last decade, unemployed university graduates (*les diplômés chômeurs*) staged weekly demonstrations in front of the Parliament building in Rabat calling for job creation and an open employment market.¹⁸

A NEW CONSTITUTION

In the wake of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, protests in Morocco took on new fervor. Militants from trade unions, Islamist associations, and the Amazigh movement—groups that for years had waged (sometimes bloody) battles in the streets, university campuses, and the press—united in an unlikely coalition for political and social reform, calling for a more fair and inclusive parliamentary monarchy based on dignity, respect, cultural rights, and social justice.¹⁹ On 20 February 2011, and in the months thereafter, they mobilized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators across the country, publicizing on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media platforms their demand for a “New Morocco” that is both non-sectarian and inclusive. A YouTube video created to publicize the February 20th protest featured men and women, young and old, veiled and unveiled, Arabic and Berber-speaking, all under the rubric of “I am Moroccan [...] and I am joining the February 20th protest.”²⁰ Demonstrators brandished placards with Arabic quotes from the, human rights banners written in French, and Amazigh flags and standards. Their slogan was *mamfakinch*: “We will not be disunited.”

King Mohammed VI quickly responded to this mass movement. In a nationally televised speech on 9 March 2011, the king promised a set of sweeping reforms and appointed a commission to revise the country’s constitution. He publicly presented the radically revised constitution for a national referendum on 17 June; it was subsequently adopted with 98.5 percent of the vote. Activists associated with the February 20th Movement have since contested the revision

process as non-transparent, rushed, and undemocratic—as having been accomplished behind closed doors by palace favorites without substantial input from the broader populace. They criticize the new constitution as heavy on political rhetoric but light on actual changes. The constitution invokes a greater separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers, but does not substantively alter the king's absolute authority or fundamentally change the structure of governance. It guarantees wide civil rights and social protections, but premises these on institutions yet to be established and laws yet to be written. The February 20th Movement has continued to press for change with monthly protests, but these have not drawn nearly the same amount of popular support since the constitutional referendum.²¹

What is nonetheless significant about the new constitution is its emphasis on regional, cultural, linguistic, and religious pluralism. Whereas previous constitutional revisions since Morocco's independence in 1956 further centralized power in the hands of the Rabat political elite, the new constitution provides significantly more regional control of budgets and administrative decision making. The first article of the document defining Morocco as a "constitutional, democratic, parliamentary and social monarchy" also describes its territorial organization as "decentralized, based on an advanced regionalization." Seven new articles elaborate, proposing new state efforts to foster local citizenship and human development across the regions (Articles 136 and 139). They outline a limited degree of local financial independence while assuring an "equitable allocation of resources, in order to reduce disparities between regions" (Articles 141 and 142).

Likewise, the new constitution directly expands linguistic and cultural rights. Whereas all previous constitutions since Morocco's independence in 1956 had specified the Moroccan nation as an "Islamic and fully sovereign state whose official language is Arabic," Article 5 of the new constitution specifies that "Arabic remains the official language of the State," but further stipulates that "Amazigh constitutes an official language of the State, as the common heritage of all Moroccans without exception." Some Amazigh activists continue to worry that the distinction between *the* and *an* will maintain Tamazight's secondary status. Moreover, they remain skeptical of the timetable and effectiveness of the future law that will integrate the Amazigh language into the education and media systems. But the state's embrace of Tamazight as an explicit element of national heritage does represent a significant shift in the official national imagination away from a monolithic Arab nationalism that traced Morocco's roots to a genealogical origin point in the Arabian peninsula. It puts Morocco ahead

of its North African neighbors in its support for Amazigh indigenous rights.

Moreover, the new constitution does not delimit Morocco's diversity to an Arab–Berber divide, but rather embraces the country's station as a cultural and geographic crossroads. Just as Amazigh culture is declared to be the patrimony of all citizens, so too is its broader ethnocultural diversity declared to constitute its “national identity, one and indivisible.” The new preamble specifies a “convergence” of Arab–Islamic, Amazigh, and Saharan (Hassaniyya) “components,” which is “nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebrew, and Mediterranean influences.” This represents a significant expansion from prior constitutions written in the language of decolonization and third-world solidarity and aligns itself with recent attempts by French president Nicolas Sarkozy to foster a Euro–Mediterranean partnership. While its ultimate impact on the lives of ethnoreligious minorities in Morocco remains to be seen, the preamble constitutes an act of political rhetoric that at the least performatively situates Morocco within a global community of liberal, open, and democratic nation-states. The decades of Amazigh activist protests have nominally succeeded in shifting Morocco's outward self-presentation from the ethnic and religious bounds of Arabism and Islam to one that offers a regional model of multicultural inclusion. It offers a hopeful vision of a New Morocco and a New Maghreb that transcends the anxieties of the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric.

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ANTI–ANTI-SEMITISM

One potential stumbling block in the development of a globally oriented and inclusive Morocco has been the country's internal political tensions over its relationship with its Jewish minority and the state of Israel—a tension that has historically split the protest movement between philo-Semitic Amazigh activists and strongly anti-Zionist Marxist militants. In this regard, the new constitution's invocation of Morocco's “Hebrew influences” is a striking victory for the Amazigh movement. Certainly Morocco has cultivated expansive economic and cultural ties with Israel since the late 1970s, ties mediated by the nearly one million Israelis of Moroccan descent, as well as the hundreds of thousands of Moroccan Jews now living in France and the Americas. As Judaic studies scholars Oren Kosansky and Daniel Schroeter, among others, have argued, over this same period the Moroccan state has variously embraced the small remaining Jewish community, its religious practices, and its heritage sites as signs of national authenticity and political liberalism.²² However, such official performances of inclusion were generally situated in particular ritual contexts of pilgrimage,

tourism, and cultural festivals—moments of intercommunal contact especially visible to the international press. In contrast, the new preamble inscribes such an acknowledgement of the Hebrew elements of Moroccan culture in the supreme law of a land whose population is 99 percent Muslim.

Such an acknowledgment has been controversial. Anti-Zionist and occasional anti-Semitic discourse is common fare in the café political discussions of retirees, civil servants, and other underemployed Moroccan men. The 2003 Casablanca bombings targeted Jewish community centers among other objectives and, despite broad nostalgia for the former Jewish presence in parts of the country, vandalism of Jewish heritage sites occurs from time to time.²³ The Palestinian cause continues to rally mass support and pro-Palestinian slogans tend to accompany most political marches and demonstrations, regardless of the object of protest. The February 20th Movement's Mamfakinch.com website, for instance, includes several articles denouncing the Moroccan government's tacit normalization of relations with Israel.²⁴

Yet, as Samir Ben-Layashi, Aomar Boum, Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, and others have argued, public opinion is becoming increasingly fractured.²⁵ Amazigh activists in particular have criticized the Moroccan opposition's political orientation toward Palestine as a distraction from domestic problems of inequality and marginalization, particularly in rural Berber-speaking areas. In the course of my research in southeastern Morocco over the last decade, activists often repeated an apocryphal story of a Palestinian law student at the university in Fez who spent his holiday break trekking in the High Atlas. Wherever he went, Berber villagers he met asked what they could do to help the Palestinian cause. Remarking on their abject poverty, their homes' lack of electricity or running water, he replied

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that the question should be what the Palestinian people could do to help rural Morocco. Amazigh activists interpreted this tale as evidence that popular support for the Palestinian struggle operates as a form of false

consciousness that only exacerbates the Moroccan people's own suffering. Indeed, the disagreement over the Palestinian question has often split Amazigh activists from other opposition movements. Repeated violent confrontations have broken out over the past decade on southern university campuses between Amazigh, Marxist, and Islamist groups within the national student union for control over campus life in general, and over the significance of the Palestinian *intifada* to political life in particular.

More generally, Amazigh activists often view their own struggles against discrimination through the historical lens of Jewish oppression and redemption.²⁶ They see in the Zionist movement a model for the Amazigh struggle: a successful codification and preservation of a threatened language and the securing of political and territorial autonomy with the establishment of the State of Israel. Since 2005, a number of younger activists across Morocco have founded Judeo–Amazigh friendship associations, with one even sending a delegation of educators to a Holocaust seminar at Yad Vashem in November 2009.²⁷ In recent months, Berber groups in Libya have taken advantage of the fall of the Qaddafi regime to carve out a space for cultural and linguistic self-expression and, as part of this claim to self-determination, have similarly expressed nostalgia for a lost Jewish past and a willingness to establish connections with Israel.²⁸

Berber groups in Libya have taken advantage of the fall of the Qaddafi regime to carve out a space for cultural and linguistic self-expression.

In the southeastern town of Goulmima, Morocco, where I lived and researched in the mid-2000s, Amazigh militants refer to their entire community as a *mellah*—a historical term for a marginalized Jewish quarter. Several Amazigh activists have actually taken up residence in the old *mellah*, occupying homes deserted by the last Jewish families over the previous century. One artist has turned his mellah home into a veritable museum of the former Jewish presence, preserving technological implements and storage techniques marked “Jewish,” and displaying his own artwork which explicitly combines Jewish and Berber themes, and incorporates writing in both the Hebrew and Berber (or Tifinagh) scripts. In like fashion, young Amazigh activists have defiantly graffitied the town with heart-filled variants of six-pointed stars. One even changed his name to Kahen, converted to Judaism, and made *aliyah*. Others have revived a local masquerade festival where Berber Muslims dress up as “Jews” (*udayen*), commemorate the region’s historical Jewishness, and use their masked identity to anonymously advocate Berber language and cultural rights, demand local development projects, and generally criticize the Moroccan state.

Such philo-Semitic practices and performances explicitly strive to present Amazigh activists as democratic and tolerant global citizens, and to distance them from the stereotype of “fundamentalist” Muslims. In the post–September 11 world, acceptance into the civilizational fold requires not only the denunciation of terrorism, but also the avowal of tolerance for the civil rights and lifestyle practices of certain protected classes, most notably women, homosexuals, and

Jews.²⁹ For many Western observers, Islamic membership in the world community is considered suspect insofar as Muslims are accused of being genealogically and/or politically anti-Semitic, of being the transnational agents of a “new anti-Semitism.” Through their overt performances of *anti*-anti-Semitism, Amazigh activists seek to distinguish themselves as beacons of liberal, modern civilization in North Africa, far from the “barbarians” implied in the “Berber” name given to them by one occupying power after another since Roman times.

A NEW MOROCCO?

To a great extent, Morocco as a whole confronts the same political predicament internalized by Amazigh activists. If Jews present a useful historical model for Amazigh activists, Berbers are equally positive exemplars for Moroccan reformers. The New Morocco envisioned by the revised constitution parallels the Berber situation as promoted by Amazigh activists: a society at the crossroads of Mediterranean, African, and Middle Eastern cultures that embraces its Judaic, Christian, and Islamic past, and has a global, modern, secular outlook; a society endangered by its marginal geopolitical and economic position, but which nevertheless has the potential to be a beacon of democracy and pluralism in the larger region. While the new constitution certainly adopts the rhetoric of rights of the February 20th movement and promises many of the political reforms and job creation mechanisms demanded by the protesters, its ultimate audience may actually be an international community prone to question the future of officially Islamic states in a putatively secular world. As for Amazigh activists, avowing the “Hebrew elements” of Moroccan culture certainly makes for good publicity in a geopolitical climate where Islam is too often associated with anti-Semitism and terrorism.

But such a declaration of *anti*-anti-Semitism is more than merely a strategic resource: it is part of a package of reforms, long demanded by Amazigh activists, that calls forth a new regime of governance premised on rights-bearing citizens rather than submissive religious subjects. It builds into the law protections for minority ethnic and religious communities, promises a redistribution of resources to marginalized areas, and further opens the public sphere to a Berber cultural and linguistic presence. It is highly doubtful that the uprisings in Morocco—like elsewhere across the Middle East and North Africa—will produce a profound social revolution. New political elites will surely emerge that will seek to remonopolize state resources for their own ends. But the juridical ground on which these new elites will operate will have shifted toward far greater national

and international transparency. Furthermore, the younger generation of social activists—newly united across ethnic, gender, and ideological divides—will not easily be dispersed or quieted. They will continue to push for dignity and social justice, including deeper cultural, linguistic, and regional pluralism. While it is unclear how long the more radical Amazigh activists pushing for territorial autonomy will remain within the opposition coalition, their long history of protest and courageous advocacy of human rights has changed the ground on which the New Morocco will be built. 

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