Narrating The Past, Serving the Present: The Berber Identity Movement and the Jewish Connection*

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A decade ago, while researching the modern Berber identity movement in North Africa, I showed the syllabus of my course on the history of the Berbers, the first such course ever to be taught in an Israeli university, to a movement veteran in Morocco. His eyes immediately settled on a learned, pithily titled article by the anthropologist David M. Hart, entitled "Scratch a Moroccan, Find a Berber."[1] "Hah," he laughed. "He should have added to the title, 'Scratch a Berber, Find a Jew.'"

Flabbergasted, I could only guffaw at what struck me at the time as an utterly absurd notion. But it introduced me to a number of durable origin myths, factual uncertainties and a rich and complex history of Jewish-Muslim relations in North Africa. Moreover, and is so often the case with modern ethno-cultural identity projects, this contested and uncertain past has provided useful elements for modern Berber identity workers

* This essay draws in part on my articles, "Moroccan Berbers and Israel," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 2011), pp. 79–85, and "Arabization and its Discontents: The Rise of the Amazigh Movement in North Africa", *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (June–December 2012), pp. 109–135; and on my book, *The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).

1. David M. Hart, "Scratch a Moroccan, Find a Berber," *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 23–26.

as they search for a "useable past" that can serve them in the present.[2]

Origins: Jews and Berbers

According to both Jewish and Muslim collective memory in Morocco, the Jewish presence there predates Islam. Beyond that, however, things become murky. For North African Jews, their most common origin myth is the one that begins with the fall of the Kingdom of Judea, and the destruction of Jerusalem, including the First Temple, by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. While most of the population was deported to Babylon, a smaller portion was said to have fled to North Africa. Tradition holds that a group of *kohanim* (members of the priestly caste) carried with them a door and a stone from the destroyed Temple and used it to establish the Ghriba synagogue on the island of Jerba, in Tunisia. Similarly, many Moroccan Jews believe that descendants of those fleeing Nebuchadnezzar founded what they deem to be their oldest continually existing community, Oufrane, in the anti-Atlas mountains, which would acquire the nickname "Little Jerusalem."[3] Even earlier than that, the Phoenician seamen and traders who plied the North African coasts and founded

2. Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past, and Other Essays in Historiography* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) (ACLS Humanities E-Book) http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;cc=acls;idno=heb07389.0001.001;view=toc;node=heb07389.0001.001%3A1.
3. The story was repeated in detail in the 1950s by the chief rabbi of the pre-Saharan oasis of Akka to a European journalist, and is quoted at length in Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 2013, pp. 95–96). My own brief visit to the abandoned *mellah* (Jewish quarter) of Oufrane in 2010, was quickly reported to a Moroccan on-line newspaper, which announced that an Israeli scholar was visiting "Little Jerusalem"<www.hespress.com/tamazight/24050.html> (last accessed on May 16, 2014).

Carthage in 813 B.C. brought their Semitic language and culture to portions of the local population, which undoubtedly contributed to the widespread notion of the Berbers' Semitic origins, making them "cousins" to both Jews and Arabs.

Concrete historical evidence shows that Jewish communities, often sizeable, existed in Hellenized North African cities and towns during Second Temple times and the initial centuries of the Christian era, reaching as far west as Volubilis, near what is today the Moroccan city of Meknes. Religious belief and praxis in those centuries and settings was highly syncretic. Most likely, these communities were made up of both Jews whose origins were Eretz-Israeli, and Hellenized Berber converts. Other Hellenized Berbers most likely engaged in some kind of Judaic practices, albeit without undergoing circumcision, a prerequisite for formal membership in the community. Given this varied picture, it is certainly conceivable that some North African Jews made their way into the interior, either for trade or fleeing Roman and Byzantine crackdowns, and established communities on the fringes of the Sahara in pre-desert oases. However, the historical evidence necessary for concluding that the twentieth century Jewish communities of the Atlas Mountains and pre-Saharan oasis and valley directly descend from these ancient communities is lacking. [4]

Similarly, Berber origins are shrouded in myth and mist, thanks in no small part to the politically driven agendas of Muslim and French conquerors of North Africa in the 7th and 19th

4. Anna Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), p. 197; Judith Lieu, John North, Tessa Rajak (eds.), *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2013); Karen Stern, "Limitations of 'Jewish' as a Label in Roman North Africa," *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, Vol. 39 (2008), pp. 1–31; Yigal Ben-Nun, *"The Origins of North African Jews: Between Myth and Reality"*, lecture delivered at Ben Gurion University conference, "North African Jewry: Yesterday and Today," December 11, 2013 (in Hebrew).

centuries, respectively.[5] Only in recent decades has scholarship been able to present a more credible, albeit partial account, showing that Berbers' geographical and anthropological origins are multiple, emanating from the Mediterranean, Nile valley and the Sahara, resulting in a composite population during Neolithic times.[6]

Regarding the Berber-Jewish connection, Muslim historians and chroniclers writing centuries after the initial conquest, particularly the world renowned Ibn Khaldun, provided "proof" of the linkage. They referred to a Berber queen, Dihya, also known as the Kahina ("priestess" or "sorceress"), who was said to have led a fierce, albeit ultimately failed resistance to Arab-Islamic conquerors at the end of the seventh century by what may have been Judaized Berber tribes in the Jerawa and Aures mountains (the central interior highlands in today's Algeria and Tunisia). For modern day Berber activists, the Kahina story seems to confirm my Moroccan interlocutor's off-hand remark regarding my course syllabus. But the Kahina story itself is suspect, and in any case, the most thorough scholarly study of the subject rejects the notion that there were any large-scale conversions of Berbers to Judaism beyond the primarily coastal Hellenized areas during centuries past, as mentioned above.[7]

North Africa's mostly pagan Berbers were converted to Islam, either peaceably or forcefully, within the first few centuries after the initial Islamic conquests, and native Christianity died out entirely by the twelfth century, thanks in part to the pressure of the militantly Berber Muslim Almohad rulers. Jewish communities, on the other hand, had already taken root in Morocco, survived, and would subsequently benefit from an influx of Andalusian Jews fleeing the Inquisition. Some of them lived amongst, and in proximity to Berber communities, up until

5. Maddy-Weitzman, *The Berber Identity Movement*, pp. 32–33, 40–41.
6. Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress, *The Berbers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
7. H.Z. Hirschberg, "The Problem of the Judaized Berbers," *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 4, Issue 3 (1963), pp. 313–339.

the time of independence. According to a 1936 census taken at the approximate midway point of the French Protectorate era, three-quarters of Morocco's 161,000 Jews were bi-lingual in Berber and Arabic, and another 25,000 were exclusively Berber speakers.[8] As merchants, traders and small artisans, Jews often played an intermediary role between Arabs and Berbers, and between different Berber tribal groupings. Performing important social and economic functions within the rural tribal Berber world afforded them a considerable measure of safety, legal recourse and economic leverage.[9] By the colonial period, the notion had developed that many of the Jews of North Africa were in fact Berbers who had descended from the ancient indigenous population of the region. To be sure, neither these "Berber Jews" nor the Berber Muslims among whom they lived, viewed themselves as sharing a common descent. Nonetheless, one can speak of linguistic and cultural commonalities which justify usage of the term "Judeao-Berbers."[10] Moreover, as Aomar Boum and others have recently shown, contemporary memories of the now absent Jews among older generations of Moroccan Berber Muslims, their neighbors, are generally positive, and even tinged with nostalgia. These stand in sharp contrast to the prevalent anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli sentiments of the younger generation, who themselves had no first-hand experience with Jews, but had imbibed the hostile messages of the Moroccan and pan-Arab media, and teachings of Muslim clerics.[11]

8. Harvey E. Goldberg, "The Mellahs of Southern Morocco: Report of a Survey," *The Maghreb Review*, Vol. 8, Nos. 3–4 (1983), pp. 61–69.
9. Boum, pp. 29–55.
10. Daniel Schroeter, "Berber Jews" Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World. Executive Editor Norman A. Stillman. Brill Online, 2014 (last accessed on 26 January 2014) http://www.encquran.brill.nl/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/berber-jews-SIM_0004140.
11. Boum, *idem*; see also the film by Kamal Hachkar, "From Tinghir to Jerusalem," http://vimeo.com/37178768; Kemal Hachkar: "Notre identité plurielle reste un tabou", *Jeune Afrique*, November 20, 2013

Nor are these Berber-Jewish connections confined to Morocco. In a discussion of religious festivals in Kabylie, Youcef Allioui wonders whether the Kabyles in Algeria borrowed the holiday of Nnisan from North African Jews, and relates that his grandfather told him that the inhabitants of a number of Kabylie villages, and Algerians inhabiting other regions as well, were of Jewish origin, while cautioning him not to repeat the information to anyone. This warning obviously stemmed from the fact that Jews had been branded as collaborators with French colonialism and as usurpers of Palestinian lands.[12] And in a January 2010 discussion of the Amazigh question in North Africa on al-Jazeera's English-language television channel, the sociologist Marnia Lazreg noted with astonishment that some young Kabyles were declaring that they were of Jewish origin.[13]

Identity Politics in Post-Colonial North Africa: The Amazigh Dimension

Centuries of population movements into North Africa, thorough Islamization, partial but significant Arabization and, in particular, accelerated state centralization and economic integration policies after independence, resulted in significant language loss, rendering Berber-speakers a minority within the region. As is usually the case with ethnic groups, language

<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/JA2755p034.xml1/maroc-musulman-jerusalem-israelkamal-hachkar-notre-identite-plurielle-reste-un-tabou.html> (last accessed on January 29, 2014); Lhoussain Azergui, "Je revendique la part juive en moi," in Miléna Kartowski-Aïach, "Sur les traces des juifs berbères du Maroc: Histoire silencieuse — identité retrouvée". Mémoire de Master 2 Sociétés et Religions Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3, 2013, pp. 208–212.

12. Youcef Allioui, *Les archs, tribus berbères de kabylie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 309.
13. "Berbers in North Africa," <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2010/01/201012112581722647O.htm> (last accessed on January 29, 2014).

has been a central component of Berber ethnicity, raising the question of what would survive of Berber identity if the language declined or disappeared. For some Moroccan nationalists in the first generation after independence, its disappearance would have been a welcome contribution to Morocco's state-building and nation-building projects. This was pithily expressed by the socialist opposition leader and subsequently murdered icon, Mehdi Ben Barka, who told an interviewer that, "*Le Berbère est simplement un homme qui n'est pas allé a l'école*." ("The Berber is simply someone who hasn't gone to school.")[14]

However, even as the Berber language, which until recently has been almost exclusively oral, steadily receded in usage, and Berber communities became increasingly integrated into wider economic, social and political frameworks, it could not be easily dispensed with. There are currently approximately 20 million Berbers within their historic core territories, and another two million outside of them, mostly in Europe. Speakers of Berber dialects, are commonly said to constitute approximately 40 percent of the c. 35 million population in Morocco (although less than 30 percent use it as their primary daily language), who are sub-divided into three main ethno-linguistic groups, rooted in three distinct regions. Algerian Berbers, numbering approximately 20 percent of the c. 38 million population, are divided into two primary groups and four smaller ones. Berber speakers in Libya number 6-9 percent of the total Libyan population of approximately six million persons. Tunisian Berber speakers live in a number of villages in the country's south-central highlands, and on the island of Djerba, and number no more than 1-2% of the country's 10 million people. Approximately 20,000 Berbers inhabit Egypt's western desert Siwa oasis, and an estimated one million traditionally nomadic

14. Jean and Simonnie Lacouture, *Le Maroc, a l'epreuve* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1958), p. 83, quoted by El Khatir Aboulkacem, "Etre berbère ou amazigh dans le Maroc modern: histoire d'une connotation négative", in Hélène Claudot-Hawad (ed.), *Berbères ou arab? Le tango des specialists* (Aix-en-Provence: Non Lieu/ IREMAMM), p. 127.

Touareg Berbers inhabit the Sahel-Sahara region, primarily in Mali and Niger.

Moreover, an Amazigh (lit. "free man", preferred by activists over the pejorative "Berber") movement has emerged in recent decades demanding official recognition of linguistic and cultural rights, and challenging the hegemonic narrative of history propagated by ruling elites. This development was inconceivable 40 years ago, when the eminent scholar Ernest Gellner wrote that, "in his heart, the Berber knows that Allah speaks Arabic, and modernity speaks French." Gellner believed that the inexorable processes of modernization and national integration would eventually subsume the Berber tribes, and with it the Berber language and, in essence, their collective identity.[15]

Instead, the "Berber question" has now become a part of the overall social, economic and political challenges which now confront North African states. From a broader perspective, the rise of the Amazigh movement has been part of a more general trend. Ironically, the ever-accelerating processes of globalization, which some thinkers heralded as the harbinger of the long-awaited post-national age, are also generating an intensified "politics of identity," marked by ethno-cultural assertion by formerly marginalized minority groups, combined with a demand for the democratization of political life. For some, e.g. the Kurds, this has reached a critical mass, morphing into full-fledged nationalism. Berberists, who are keenly aware of the Kurdish issue, are not in that position, and may not ever be, but they too have achieved a measure of recognition and self-definition that was inconceivable a generation ago.

15. Ernest Gellner, "Introduction," in Ernest Gellner and Charles Micaud (eds.), *Arabs and Berbers: From Tribe to Nation in North Africa*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1972), pp. 11–21.

The Amazigh Movement, the Jews and the State of Israel

As with all socio-political and ethno-cultural movements that challenge predominant paradigms and ideologies, the Amazigh movement has made enemies. In this particular case, its rejection of the Arab-Islamic historical and civilizational narrative, its criticism of the fetishization of the Arabic alphabet, and its affinity to the universalist paradigm espoused in Western intellectual circles, has understandably aroused the ire of Islamists and pan-Arab nationalists. The Islamist current's traditional hostility towards Amazigh self-assertion is grounded in what Islamists view as an unbreakable umbilical cord connecting the Qur'an, the literal word of God, with the Arabic language in which it was uttered, as well as the belief in Islam's "civilizing mission." From this angle, Arab-Islamic warriors did not conquer North Africa, rather they brought the truth of God's message to their long-lost primitive Berber "cousins." Not surprisingly, these adversaries have frequently resorted to labeling Amazigh activists as "Zionists."[16]

In earlier decades, Amazigh movement circles were extremely reticent to mention anything to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict or the belief in their Jewish "roots." But starting in the beginning in the 21st century, they became more open and blunt. Emphasizing past and present Jewish-Berber connections has an instrumental value in their struggle to escape the bear hug of Islamist movements and the state's own official Islamic and Arab nationalist-centered narrative. Foregrounding their indigenousness and pre-Islamic identity in North Africa is central to their claims for recognition and remedial action by North

16. E.g., Boum, p. 139; email communications with a Tunisian Amazigh activist, January 2014; statement on an Algerian television station by a former presidential candidate that Zionist-funded Berbers were fomenting violence in the ethnically mixed Mzab region http://www.amazighworld.org/human_rights/index_show.php?id=4241 (last accessed on February 7, 2014); Azergui, "Je revendique la part juive en moi".

African governments. While avoiding any open declaration of having once been Jews, the grand narrative articulated in a 2007 Amazigh organization manifesto stated that, of all the outsiders who interacted with the Berbers throughout history, "only the Jews" came in peace.[17] Lhoussain Azergui's personal testimony, entitled "Je revendique la part juive en moi" [I claim the Jewish part in me"], contains all of the themes mentioned here.[18]

Anecdotal evidence of the Amazigh movement's interest in things Jewish and Israeli abound. In conversations with Israelis, Amazigh activists invariably inquire after the state of the Berber language in Israel, brought by Jews who had immigrated from Berberophone areas in Morocco (and are usually quite disappointed to learn that it is not being passed down to subsequent generations.) In Goulmima, one of the many southeastern Moroccan Berber villages inhabited by Jews until the mass exodus to Israel in the late 1950s and early 1960s, an annual masquerade ritual has been transformed among the youth into an expression of Amazigh activism and militancy, rejecting Islamist discourse and identifying with Judaeo-Berber culture and even Israel. The expressions of philo-Hebraism among the town's youth were so disturbing to some that the local Islamic imam issued a *fatwa* forbidding them, albeit to no avail.[19] More generally, the annual gathering draws many former Goulmima Muslims now living abroad, as well as Kabyle activists.[20]

Complementarily, the dominant anti-Israeli, pro-Palestinian discourse of North African states comes under criticism. A common complaint of Amazigh activists is that their

17. "Plateforme: Option Amazighe," January 13, 2007 <http://www.amazighworld.org/auteur.php?auteur=Groupe%20Option%20Amazighe>.
18. Azergui, "Je revendique la part juive en moi".
19. Paul A. Silverstein, "Masquerade politics: race, Islam and the scale of Amazigh activism in southeastern Morocco", *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 17, pp. 65–84; doi: 10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00454.x.
20. Communicated to me by Paul Silverstein.

governments spend an inordinate amount of energy on behalf of the Palestinian cause, at the expense of the real needs of their societies.[21] One even suggested, presumably sarcastically, that Palestinian refugees could be resettled in the Saharan expanses.[22] Inevitably, Arab nationalists and Islamists view any Amazigh sympathy expressed towards Jews and Zionism as part of a new plot to divide and conquer Muslim lands. Indeed, in recent years, the entry of competing Amazigh and Islamist discourses into the public sphere, an outgrowth of the newly liberalizing policies of North African states seeking to better manage and re-legitimize their rule, has produced a number of verbal confrontations between the Amazigh movement and its Arab nationalist and Islamist opponents.

Memories of Jewish-Berber comity in the service of building a pluralist Morocco were invoked in 2007, when a group of 30+ young Moroccan Amazigher from the Souss region, the heartland of the former Judaeo-Berber milieu, announced plans to create two complementary Amazigh-Jewish friendship associations. The purpose of these associations, said one of the founders, was to promote the various aspects of Morocco's cultural heritage — Berber, Jewish, African, and Arab, to disseminate the culture of coexistence and respect of the other while rejecting violence and intolerance toward others, to give real standing to the Berber and Hebrew languages inside Morocco, in order to make it a homeland for all, and to build bridges with Moroccan Jews, both inside the country (approximately 3,000, out of the 270,000 at the end of the 1940s) and overseas, particularly "Amazigh Jews in various countries."[23] In addition to leveraging the Judaeo-Amazigh factor to promote a multi-cultural, Amazigh-

21. Boum, p. 138.
22. Malika Hachid, *Les Premiers Berbères, Entre Méditerranée, Tassili et Nil* (Alger, Aix-en-Provence: Ina-Yas, Édisud, 2000), p. 311.
23. "AN ISRAELI AND AMAZIGH FRIENDSHIP ASSOCATION PROJECT/PROJET D'UNE ASSOCIATION D'AMITIE ENTRE LE PEUPLE AMAZIGH ET LE PEUPLE HEBREU" (document outlining main objectives, communicated to me by one of the founders).

centered Morocco, they emphasized that it was designed to open up a dialogue between the Amazigh movement and the State of Israel.

Although support for contacts with Israel was not explicitly expressed, the announcements immediately provoked sharp reactions from a number of Moroccan associations supporting the Palestinian cause and opposing U.S. actions in Iraq. They also prompted a heated debate on Iran's Arabic-language al-`Alam television station between the veteran militant Amazigh activist Ahmed Adghirni and an Algerian writer hostile to both Israel and North African Jews, whom he claimed were utterly foreign to the region and eager collaborators with French colonialism. Adghrini responded in kind: "If only the Arabs had believed in friendship with the Jews all these years," he said, "we would not be seeing rivers of blood flowing, among the Arabs themselves, and between the Arabs and the Jews…. The Amazigh have nearly 3,000 years of history behind us, throughout which the Jews lived together with us." As for the new Amazigh-Jewish association itself, "it has to do with friendship, which is a humanist value for the benefit of all peoples, including the Arabs. The Arabs replace friendship with enmity and war."[24]

One year later, another Berber-Jewish friendship association, "Memoire Collective," was founded, this time in Morocco's northern coastal city of al-Hoceima. Led by Mohammed Moha, the association's declared focus was the need to struggle against anti-Semitism in Morocco as part of the larger need to promote individual rights, tolerance, and democracy. Moha was prompted to create the association after attacks from leftist, pan-Arab, and Islamist groups on the participation of Moha's daughter and another Moroccan teenager in an international youth seminar at Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust

24. MEMRI, Special Dispatch — No. 1695, August 24, 2007, "Debate About New Berber-Jewish Friendship Association in Morocco on Iranian Al-Alam TV", http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP169507.

Memorial Museum. The association's creation drew further harsh responses, including the intimidation of the family of the other teenager who had joined Moha's daughter in Jerusalem. Moha was demonstratively expelled from the leftist group to which he had belonged, *al-Nahj al-Dimuqrati* (Democratic Path), for "crossing all of the party's red lines in contributing to the normalization [of relations] with Israel," while the *al-Tajdid* newspaper of the Islamist PJD party even accused Moha of receiving €300,000 from Israel in order to set up the organization, and called for acts of violence against him. [25]

Israel's military operation against Hamas forces in Gaza at the beginning of 2009 sparked another round of polemics and mutual invective between Morocco's Islamists and Amazigh movement figures. *Al-Tajdid* castigated Amazigh associations for not joining in the series of demonstrations held in solidarity with the Palestinians, wondering what was behind their failure to condemn Israel. The movement's leading Arabophone intellectual, Ahmed 'Assid, replied caustically that no one had the right to question their identification and solidarity with the Palestinians, yet with the Islamist and pan-Arab currents in Morocco having a complete monopoly on organizing the demonstrations, the Amazigh had no choice but to avoid them, not least since the protests had contained both anti-Jewish as well as ethnic Arab themes, which the Amazigh movement completely rejected.[26]

In November 2009, Yad Vashem became a more explicit site for Amazigh activism against the prevailing pan-Arab and Islamist currents in their own society, and in the region, when an 18-member delegation of the movement's educators and

25. *TelQuel*, March 3, 2008; *Maroc Hebdo*, February 13, 2008; "The Past Two Months Were Hell," interview with Mohamed Moha (in German, translated by Kim Robin Stoller) http://jungle-word.com/artikel/2008/14/21486/html (last accessed on June 10, 2010).
26. Hassan Bouikhf, in *al-Tajdid* (Rabat), Jan. 15, 2009; Ahmed 'Assid, in *Bayan al-Yawm* (Casablanca), Jan. 23, 2009, quoted in "Berbers, Where Do You Stand on Palestine?" MEMRI, Special Dispatch — No. 2262, Feb. 26, 2009.

advocates participated in a week-long educational seminar there. One of their declared purposes was to begin incorporating the study of the Holocaust and its lessons into the Moroccan school curriculum, a subject that has been almost entirely neglected.[27] Beyond that, though, it was clear that the visit was designed to openly challenge the conventional taboos regarding contact with Israel.

The matter quickly became public knowledge and provoked a number of articles in the Moroccan press, many of them negative. But space was also given to delegation members to defend themselves, an indication of Morocco's increasingly pluralist and competitive press. One of them, Boubker Outaadit, an Amazigh activist for more than fifteen years, who had been involved in the formation of one of the Amazigh-Jewish friendship associations, was interviewed by a Moroccan weekly news magazine against the backdrop of the Israeli, Moroccan, and Amazigh flags. This was a picture worth a thousand words. Defending the educational and humanitarian value of the seminar, he declared the participants' readiness to answer those critics who "traded in foreign problems … such as the Palestinian issue," which could not be classified as a Moroccan national problem. The Arab-Israeli conflict, he declared, could have been settled sixty years earlier had the Arab side not rejected the right of the Jewish people to return to their land and defend it.[28] Another, Abdellah Benhssi, justified the delegation's visit in terms of furthering the promotion of tolerance and universal brotherhood, and the rejection of fanaticism and racism, universal values which, he said, both the Amazigh and Israeli cultural systems shared.[29] In a lengthy and trenchant analysis, the Moroccan scholar Mohamed Elmedlaoui, who deplored what he viewed as the Yad Vashem visit's instrumentalization of the Holocaust for political purposes, nonetheless characterized

27. Arièle Nahmias, "Moroccan Educators at Yad Vashem," International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, January 2010.
28. *Maghrib al-Yawm* (Casablanca), Nov. 27, 2009.
29. *Al-Watan al-An* (Casablanca), Oct. 25, 2010.

the anti-Amazigh diatribes emanating from certain Moroccan urban nationalist circles as constituting an updated version of the older, unfair branding of Berbers as collaborators with French colonialism. These attacks, he said, were essentially an alibi being used to promote a certain cultural vision for the country.[30]

The 'Arab Spring' and the Amazigh Factor

North African states, and the adjoining Sahel region, have been very much a part of the tumultuous, misnomered 'Arab Spring' events over the past three years. Two regimes were toppled (Tunisia's, where the first spark of the protests were lit, and Libya's), while two others (Morocco's and Algeria's) took a variety of steps to forestall similar scenarios from developing. In addition, the fallout from Libya led directly to the violent destabilization of Mali and eventual French military intervention to roll back a *salafi-jihadi* bid for power in the country's northern region. With the exception of Mali, Amazigh groups were not significant actors in the upheavals. Nonetheless, they are very much a factor in the evolving, increasingly contested public sphere throughout North Africa.

In Morocco, Amazigh militants were active participants in the "February 20th" protest movement that challenged the Moroccan regime to enact fundamental reforms, including recognition of fundamental Amazigh demands. King Mohammed VI succeeded in defanging the protests with a number of proactive measures, culminating in the adoption of a new constitution. Its preamble emphasized that the Amazigh people and culture constituted an integral component of Moroccan identity;

30. Muhammad Elmedlaoui, "Al-Karru Ba'da al-Farru Fi al-Masalat ath-Thaqafa al-Amazighiyya fi al-Maghrib," Ahewar.com, October 27, 2010, http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=233319 and "Lorsque la tragédie de la Shoah devient l'instrument de la petite politique," November 24, 2009, http://orbinah.blog4ever.com/lorsque-la-tragedie-de-la-shoah-devient-un-instrument-de-la-petite-politique (both last accessed on May 18, 2014).

concretely, this was translated into the explicit recognition of Tamazight as an official state language, alongside of Arabic, the central core demand of the decades-old Amazigh identity movement across North Africa. No less interesting, from the perspective of this essay, is that the constitution also declared that the Moroccan identity had been enriched over the course of many centuries by a number of currents, including the Hebraic one.[31] This statement was certainly not a departure from the Moroccan monarchy's long-standing discourse promoting a tolerant, multi-cultural country based on an idealized version of the "golden age" of Andalusian Islam. But enshrining it in the new constitution gave it extra symbolic weight. While far from being identical to the Amazigh movement's discourse regarding the history of Amazigh-Jewish relations, it did partly complement it.

Coda: The Anti-Normalization Law

In the summer of 2013, a cross-section of Moroccan political parties, representing 70% of the members of parliament including that of the Islamist prime minister Abdallah Benkirane, tendered a bill in parliament entitled "Criminalizing Normalization with the Israeli Entity." It would, if passed, outlaw any activity in Morocco in which an Israeli citizen or resident participated or attended, with a promise of imprisonment and heavy fine for any Moroccan facilitating normalization.[32] The motivation for tendering the bill was obscure, and the likelihood of the Palace allowing it to become law seemed nil. But it created a stir, as the regular visits to Morocco of many thousands of Israeli citizens of Moroccan descent, who are still considered to be Moroccan citizens as well, would be jeopardized. As such, it certainly

31. For an English translation of the constitution, see http://www.ancl-radc.org.za/sites/default/files/morocco_eng.pdf.
32. "Moroccan parliament moves to outlaw contacts with Israelis," *Times of Israel*, November 21, 2013 http://www.timesofisrael.com/moroccan-parliament-moves-to-outlaw-contacts-with-israelis/ (last accessed on January 29, 2014).

contradicted at least the spirit of the new constitution. It also stood in sharp contrast to the Palace's long-standing policy of embracing the Moroccan Jewish community,[33] seeking to facilitate Arab-Israeli peace, and maintaining quiet links with the state of Israel, even after the severing of low-level diplomatic relations in October 2000.[34] Not surprisingly, a number of Amazigh intellectuals and journalists, along with other liberals, were vocal in condemning and ridiculing the proposed law.[35]

Conclusion

The contemporary Berberist discourse regarding Jewish-Berber comity throughout the ages, and even their pre-Islamic Jewish roots, however problematic historically, has become an accepted part of the Amazigh movement's efforts to promote a different vision of North Africa, one that would foreground Amazigh

33. Facing a drought in early 2014, the king pointedly asked Moroccan rabbis to pray for rain.
34. In early 2014, Morocco was reported to have purchased a number of Israeli pilotless drone aircraft. <http://www.worldtribune.com/2014/01/20/morocco-said-to-buy-israeli-designed-drones-from-france/>(last accessed on January 29, 2014).
35. Hasan Ourid, the former classmate of the king and ex-spokesman of the Royal Court, "Une proposition de loi absurd," *Zamane*, January 3, 2014 http://www.zamane.ma/une-proposition-de-loi-absurde/ (last accessed on January 29, 2014); Sami Ami Lakhmahri and Reda Mousine, "Israël, pour ou contre la normalisation?", *Zamane*, January 17, 2014, http://www.zamane.ma/israel-pour-ou-contre-la-normalisation/ (last accessed on January 29, 2014); Ounghrir Boubaker, an Amazigh activist and writer wrote a number of pieces on the subject, including "Al-Nakhba al-Siyasiya al-Maghribiya wa-Yahudifobia," http://www.qudsnet.com/news/View/258958/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%87%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%81%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7-/(last accessed on January 29, 2014).

language and culture within a democratic and pluralist order. The considerable discussion in Morocco surrounding Kamal Hachkar's 2012 documentary film, "From Tinghir to Jerusalem,"[36] which centered on the Jews who left his parents' village for Israel in the 1950s, further demonstrated that the issue of Berber-Jewish relations, the meaning of Morocco's past and its future direction, are all very much live issues, and will continue to reverberate in Morocco's increasingly contested public space. As for Israel and the Jewish world in general, it can perhaps now begin to include a Berber dimension to the perennial discussion regarding "who is a Jew."

36. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcZoLaMvaP0.