Abdelkrim: Whose Hero is He?
The Politics of Contested Memory in Today's Morocco

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One of the many, albeit less noticed, features of the uprisings which have cascaded back and forth across the Middle East and North Africa this past year has been the increasing salience of the Amazigh (Berber) factor. In Libya, the small and generally forgotten Amazigh community played an important role in the fighting against Muammar al-Qaddafi's forces. In Morocco, the constitutional reform undertaken by King Mohammed VI included the recognition of Tamazight, the Berber language spoken by an estimated 40–45 percent of Morocco's 31 million people, as an official language of the state, alongside Arabic. Post–Ben Ali Tunisia, where only a small number of Berber villages remain, hosted a meeting of the World Amazigh Congress. Touareg Berbers are now in open revolt against the authorities in Mali. No matter what happens in Algeria, the Berber factor will surely play a role.

An integral part of the Amazigh awakening has involved the renewed cultivation of links between the past and present. In Morocco, these efforts have been especially directed toward Mohammed bin Abdelkrim al-Khattabi, the leader of a five-year resistance to Spanish and French colonialism in northern Morocco between 1921 and 1926. The larger context for these efforts has been the gradual opening of civic and political space during the reign of King Mohammed VI, which began in 1999. The state actively participates in the competition over Abdelkrim's memory as it seeks to control the pace of change

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and maintain political and social stability.

Shared memory, says Anthony Smith, is as essential to the survival of a collective cultural identity as is a sense of a common destiny.[1] As with all ethnonational projects, the elaboration and dissemination of the modern Amazigh (Berber) identity across North Africa and in the diaspora is being accompanied by the fashioning of a "memory community" in order to help bind the community together more closely as it pursues its objectives.[2] This involves searching for a useable past and enshrining it in new narratives, rituals, and collective commemorations. Foregrounding and developing the legacy of Abdelkrim has been an important component of the Moroccan Amazigh movement's efforts in this regard.

Moreover, as Morocco's political space has become increasingly pluralist and contested, other actors, some of whose agendas partially overlap with the Amazigh movement, have also joined in the process of recovering and reworking Abdelkrim's legacy. State authorities have not been indifferent to the phenomenon and have sought to neutralize the potentially subversive impact of Abdelkrim's legacy by reframing and thus co-opting it after decades of willful neglect.

Historical Background

To set the stage for this discussion, a brief historical account is in order. The 1912 Treaty of Fez marked the official loss of Moroccan sovereignty and its establishment as a French protectorate.[3] Spain's centuries-old efforts to extend its influence into northern Morocco just across the Straits of Gibraltar were rewarded by the Treaty's acknowledgement of a Spanish zone there. However, extending Spain's influence beyond the Mediterranean coast and into the rugged interior of the Rif Mountains proved to be a formidable task. When the Spanish authorities finally decided to muster sufficient forces for that end, they ran into a formidable foe. Abdelkrim, a gifted and charismatic leader of the Ait Waryaghar, the largest of the notoriously fractious and quarrelsome Rifian Berber tribes, managed together with his brother M'hamed to unite the tribes as never before. The result was the establishment of an embryonic state, the "Rifian Republic." Its most celebrated moment was the infliction of a catstrophic defeat on advancing Spanish forces at the Battle of Anoual in the summer of 1921, in which more than 10,000 Spanish soldiers died

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and thousands more were captured.[4] It was the worst defeat inflicted upon any colonial army in the twentieth century up to that point, and news of the battle reverberated throughout the Middle East and beyond. The guerrilla tactics of both Ho Chi Minh—who was studying in Paris at the time—and Mao Zedong are said to have been influenced by Abdelkrim's methods.

Had the conflict remained solely between Abdelkrim and Spain, the ultimate result might have been far different. However, France's entry into the battle on the side of Spain sealed Abdelkrim's fate. His "republic" would ultimately be squeezed and starved into submission, and Abdelkrim himself would be captured and exiled. He would never to return to his home region again, not even after Morocco attained its independence in 1956.

Who was Abdelkrim and what did he stand for? Dispassionate historical inquiry provides a complex picture. As a *qadi* (a judge ruling in accordance with Islamic law) who studied in Fez's Islamic institute of higher learning, al-Qarawayn, Abdelkrim strongly preferred reformist Islam over the traditional Sufi–maraboutic practices of the illiterate tribes of the Rif and attempted to impose strict Islamic practices in his domain. Yet he was also a great admirer of the avowedly secularist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In that vein, Abdelkrim also sought to build the trappings of modern state institutions (e.g., a parliament). At the same time, his tribe provided the core backing needed to impose his leadership on the rest of the region. As for his political and territorial aspirations, did they extend beyond the Rif region into other parts of Morocco? Was Abdelkrim imbued with Moroccan nationalist sentiment even before there was an organized Moroccan national movement? Did he, though never having said so, even desire to replace the Sultan? For the modern Amazigh movement, the answers to these questions are less important than the fact that Abdelkrim provides a powerful example of Amazigh agency and strength at a time when the rest of Morocco lay prostrate before colonial supremacy.

Marginalizing Abdelkrim, Marginalizing the Rif

The uncertainty among scholars over how to classify and categorize Abdelkrim runs parallel to both the views of his contemporaries and more concrete modern political considerations. Traditionally, the Moroccan authorities have sought to downplay the importance of Abdelkrim in school textbooks and commemorative ceremonies, grudgingly recognizing him as an early *mujahid* fighting for Moroccan independence, and thus as an inspiration for some youth. But according to the state narrative, Abdelkrim was marginal to the real story of the

urban-based nationalist movement led by the Arab Islamic elite that began to crystallize in the 1930s.

The systematic downplaying, even effacing, of Abdelkrim by the authorities stemmed from a number of interrelated factors. Historically, the relationship between the Rif region and the Moroccan *makhzen*—the pre-modern Moroccan state authorities headed by the Sultan—has been mainly antagonistic, based on ethnic, class, and religious factors. The fear of Abdelkrim's "uncouth" Rifian Berber tribal warriors goes far in explaining why the urban Arab religious-minded classes of Fez (known collectively as *Fassis*), which provided much of the backbone for the makzhzen's administrative apparatus, did not rise up in support of Abdelkrim's rebellion. Instead, they preferred to watch from the sidelines as French troops pushed the rebel forces away from Fez, ultimately defeating them.

The next and no less problematic episode in Rif–makhzen relations came in 1958–1959 when tribal unrest was brutally crushed by Morocco's armed forces commanded by Crown Prince Hassan and his right-hand man, General Mohammed Oufkir. Throughout Hassan's 38-year reign, he refrained from visiting the region and willfully directed investment elsewhere. As an economically marginalized region, it became Europe's primary source of *hashish*, as well as a center for smuggling goods and people. In 1984, riots touched off by sharp increases in the price of bread and other staples were dealt with harshly, accompanied by threats from Hassan of another violent crackdown.

American anthropologist David McMurray writes in *In and Out of Morocco* that all he found in 1986–1987 to mark the site of the Battle of Anoual was a small stone monument "partially buried in the weeds beside the road." From there, he ventured into a nearby village where he found very little interest in Abdelkrim among the young men hanging out in a local eatery. His conclusion was that the people of the region were suffering from "historical amnesia"—victims of the hyperimportation of even the most basic commodities. The "consumption of so much Westernalia," he wrote, and the resulting decentering associated with it, had the effect of devaluing all things local, thus helping obliterate popular memory, including a "heritage of resistance."[5]

Reopening the Past, Engaging the Present

A quarter century later, the picture is much more varied, and McMurray's conclusions regarding the obliteration of popular memory appear to have been overstated.[6] The Amazigh movement has emerged from underground and scored important symbolic gains. Indeed, Morocco's *Amazighité* (the English equivalent

would be "Amazigh-ness") has been legitimized by the state, and the Amazigh language was even recognized as an official language by the new 2011 constitution. Movement ideologues and activists have embraced Abdelkrim as an iconic figure as have local Rif-centered militants and activists seeking a more liberal, democratic Morocco. Islamists have sought to combat the Amazigh movement by appropriating Abdelkrim as one of their own: an Islamic reformer in line with the current of Islamic modernism that has emerged throughout the Arab Middle East and North Africa. All of this has occurred against the background of Morocco's halting and uneven—but unmistakable—policies of political liberalization adopted tentatively during the 1990s under Hassan II, and more meaningfully under his son and successor, Mohammed VI.[7]

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Indeed, the new king quickly made his intentions known, both for the Rif and the country as a whole. Just a few weeks after his coronation, Mohammed VI undertook a high-profile motorcade visit to the Rif, in stark contrast to his father's deliberate neglect of the region. Since then, the Moroccan state has invested large sums to promote economic development in the region, with a huge new port facility near Tangier—slated to open in 2012—as the centerpiece.[8] The king's initial visit also included a meeting with Abdelkrim's son, who flew in from Cairo for the occasion. By acknowledging the legacy of Abdelkrim, Mohammed VI was obviously keen to emphasize that the Rifian Berbers were an integral part of the Moroccan fabric—and thus expand the boundaries of collective Moroccan identity—all the while making sure that the monarchy remained the central axis of the Moroccan polity and society.

To be sure, this acknowledgement has only been partial. While initiating commemorative events marking the Anoual battle, the role of Abdelkrim is largely ignored in the official ceremonies. Much greater emphasis given to the role of Sultan Mohammed V in leading the struggle for Morocco's liberation (even though Mohammed V had no role whatsoever in Anoual). Nor has Mohammed VI's acknowledgement of Abdelkrim's legacy and qualified support for the Moroccan Amazigh movement's activities been extended to a painful episode, which highlights the makhzen's historic indifference to the Rifian war, namely the Spanish military's systematic use of poison gas against Rifian fighters and civilians. The Amazigh movement has worked to promote the findings of professional historians on the matter, including what it claims are the inordinately high rates of cancer among survivors. The Moroccan authorities have

ignored Amazigh demands and been unwilling to ask the Spanish government for acknowledgement and compensation for elderly survivors, fearing that it would adversely affect bilateral ties. Nor is the Spanish government willing to take responsibility for its actions, although some political parties and civil society groups have advocated doing so.

Promoting Abdelkrim: Amazigh Activism

From the perspective of the overwhelmingly secular Amazigh movement, appropriating Abdelkrim requires ignoring certain aspects of his legacy. His promotion of Islamic reform came at the expense of popular religious practices that Berber activists often recognize as central to their heritage. Nor did Abdelkrim emphasize an explicitly Amazigh/Berber identity in his efforts to mobilize fellow Rifians against the foreigners.

But contemporary Amazigh activists have not been deterred by these caveats. They concentrate on portraying Abdelkrim as a leader who heroically led his people against the occupier, unlike the urban Arab class, which sat idle during the Rifian revolt. The recovery of the history of Abdelkrim and his short-lived "Rifian Republic" is hence an ongoing project, intimately connected to the themes of marginalization and identity denial that characterize the contemporary Berberist discourse. Its methods include publications, conferences, Facebook pages, the dissemination of Abdelkrim-themed children's crossword puzzles, and illustrated comic-book-like stories. Amazigh activists have also sought (albeit to no avail) to promote the construction of a combination mausoleum–museum–cultural complex in Abdelkrim's Ajdir redoubt. But reinterring Abdelkrim's remains from Cairo, where he died and was buried in 1963, is an idea whose time has not come. Notwithstanding reports that the king had apparently been amenable to the idea, neither the Moroccan authorities nor the Cairo-based family was interested, each for their own reasons. Hence, Ajdir remains a crumbling, neglected building watched over by policemen who do not come from the territory—yet another point of friction between Rifians and the central government.[9]

No Longer Taboo

Unlike in McMurray's time, the subject of Abdelkrim can now be discussed openly. The pride in Abdelkrim expressed by some of my own interlocutors during my visit to the region in September 2011 was palpable. Abdelkrim memorabilia and paraphenalia—including key chains and tiny pillows with

his image on it, as well as scholarly books and assorted other publications—are now available in bookstores. Their proliferation is connected not only to the increasing visibility and actions of the Amazigh movement as a whole, but also to the public articulation and assertion of a more local, Rifian Amazigh identity—something which clearly was present in Abdelkrim's time and does not seem to have faded away (though tribal distinctions certainly remain present as well). Indeed, there are even groups, admittedly marginal at present, that dare to trumpet the idea of autonomy for the region. Although Moroccan authorities report plans for devolving more authority to regional bodies, the idea of genuine autonomy for the Rif is not one that the central government is willing to countenance. The monument commemorating the Battle of Anoual that McMurray struggled to find is still difficult to locate without a guide and does not appear to be frequented very often, but it has now been replaced by a new plaque, and is the site of annual commemorative gatherings by activists held separately from state-sanctioned ones.

With the subject of Abdelkrim no longer taboo and with an increased willingness among Morocco's diverse sectors to challenge long-standing, state-sponsored narratives, Rifian, Amazigh, and republican ideas have begun to intersect in fascinating ways. One example of this new development is provided by the activities of Mohammed Nadrani, the author of a colorful graphic novel for children entitled, *The Amir, Ibn Abdelkrim*.Published in Arabic, French, and Dutch (with an eye to the large Moroccan Berber diaspora in the Netherlands), the book depicts Abdelkrim's heroic struggles against the Spanish invader, culminating in the Battle of Anoual, and ends with his triumphant return to his Ajdir redoubt in 1922 (four years before his ultimate defeat and exile).

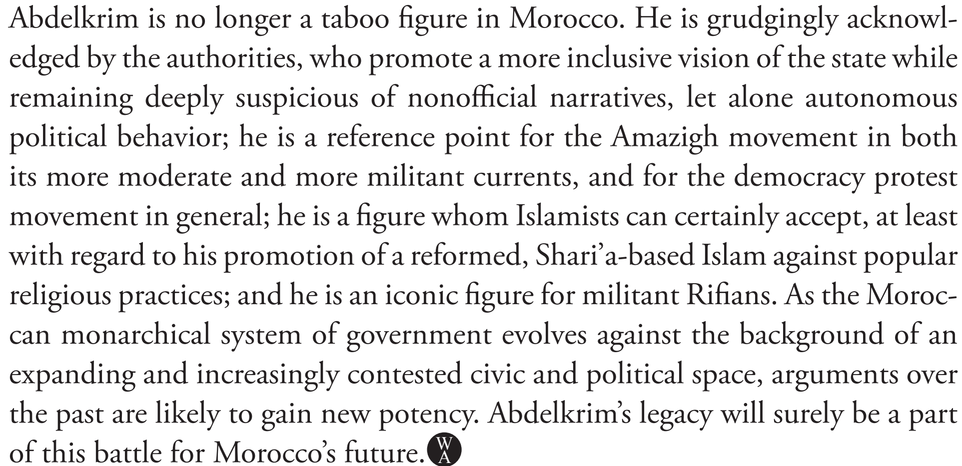
What makes the book especially poignant and relevant to the ongoing struggles over Morocco's identity and political system is the biography of the author. Nadraniwas one of the survivors of the so-called Years of Lead, a period during the 1970s and 1980s when political dissidents and associated family members were tortured and cast into Morocco's darkest prisons. Nadrani himself spent eight and a half years there for his militant Marxist opposition to the regime.[10] He learned to draw during his years of isolation, using a piece of charcoal to sketch on the floor of his cell. Upon his release, he graphically documented his experience in drawings and text in his first book, *Les Sarcophages du Complexe.* His second book was about Abdelkrim, a man whose spirit was that of a "free bird" and who, as the "Lion of the Rif," fought colonialism and oppression before the Vietnamese and the Algerians. He explained his decision to write the book:

> For me, this part of our history has been erased, altered, and especially denied by those in power. We wanted to get rid of this history, erase the memory of our people. I say this with great modesty. We have to revive this history in order to safeguard the memory of our people.[11]

The value of Abdelkrim goes beyond the Amazigh movement, which itself provided a considerable number of members to the February 20th democracy movement, which sprung up in early 2011 as part of the Arab Spring. One small indication that Moroccan pro-democracy activists view Abdelkrim as a useful reference and symbol is the masthead of an online news publication, *Demain*, published abroad by a leading Moroccan opposition journalist, Ali Mrabet. Mrabet was a leading figure in the liberalization of the Moroccan press during the early years of Mohammed VI's reign but was too independent for the authorities and was exiled. On one side of the masthead is an image of Mohammed VI, who is declaring that he is offering to Morocco a monarchical system according to his own measurements ("*Je vous offer unemonarchiefaite à ma mesure*"); on the other side is an image of Abdelkrim, who is replying that he already had a small republic in 1922 ("*Maismoi, j'avai déjà ma petite republique en 1922*").[12] The juxtaposition constitutes a cynical retort to the king's much-heralded constitutional reforms, which purport to devolve greater authority to elected officials. In other words, Abdelkrim is being employed by Mrabetto to challenge the very nature of the Moroccan political system, which constitutionally places an inviolable monarch at its epicenter.

The state, for its part, has no interest in ceding the playing field to its critics. An officially sanctioned project to establish a museum of Rifian history and culture in the northern Moroccan city of al-Hoceima is now underway. Its establishment is one of the outcomes of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (*Instance Equité et Réconciliation*), which held public hearings in 2004–2005 to allow the survivors and families of victims of the Years of Lead to gain acknowledgement, compensation, and a measure of closure. Already, there have been complaints that the state is dominating the planning at the expense of civic groups whose ideas regarding the content of the new museum are likely to differ from those of the authorities.[13] The unfolding story of the museum will clearly be a part of the ongoing battle over Abdelkrim's legacy.

Conclusion



Abdelkrim is no longer a taboo figure in Morocco. He is grudgingly acknowledged by the authorities, who promote a more inclusive vision of the state while remaining deeply suspicious of nonofficial narratives, let alone autonomous political behavior; he is a reference point for the Amazigh movement in both its more moderate and more militant currents, and for the democracy protest movement in general; he is a figure whom Islamists can certainly accept, at least with regard to his promotion of a reformed, Shari'a-based Islam against popular religious practices; and he is an iconic figure for militant Rifians. As the Moroccan monarchical system of government evolves against the background of an expanding and increasingly contested civic and political space, arguments over the past are likely to gain new potency. Abdelkrim's legacy will surely be a part of this battle for Morocco's future.

Notes

1. Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), 146.
2. For a detailed discussion of the movement's origins and evolution, see: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, *The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).
3. For the text of the Treaty of Fez, see: "French Protectorate Established in Morocco," *American Journal of International Law* 6, no. 3 (1912): 699–702.
4. Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61–75; Daniel Woolman, *Rebels in the Rif* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), 83–102; C.R. Pennel, *A Country with a Government and a Flag: The Rif War in Morocco, 1921–1926* (Wisbech, UK: Menas Press, 1986).
5. David A. McMurray, *In and Out of Morocco*: *Smuggling and Migration in a Frontier Boomtown* (Minneapolis: Univeristy of Minnesota Press, 2001), 138–43.
6. Ibid., 155–57.
7. See: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisewine, eds., *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics, and Society under Mohammed VI* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2012).
8. Ángela Suárez Collado, "El Regreso de la Monarquía al Norte de Marruecos: Un Decenio de Desarollo Económica y de Reconciliación Política," in *Mohamed VI: Política y Cambio Social en Marruecos*, ed. Thierry Desrues and Miguel Hernando de Larramendi (Cordoba: Almuzara, 2011), 115–38.
9. Information gathered from author's on-site interviews with activists, September 2011.
10. He gave an extensive account of his ordeal to Amnesty International. See: "Testimony of Mohamed Nadrani," in *Morocco: Breaking the Walls of Silence: The Disappeared* (Amnesty International, April 13, 1993), http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE29/001/1993/en.
11. Mohammed Nadrani, interview by Christophe Cassiau-Haurie, *Mohammed Nadrani: le dessin ou la Folie*, MSN, January 16, 2009, http://www.bdzoom.com/spip.php?article3884; Mohamed Nadrani, *Al-Amir*, *Ibn `Abd al-Karim* (Casablanca: Al-Ayyam, 2008), 9–10.
12. Demain Online Masthead, www.demainonline.com.
13. "Memoire: Unmusée pour le Rif," *Zamane: L'Histoire du Maroc*, no. 10–11 (August–September 2011): 16.