



Sounds from North Africa

WHEN LOOKING AT REGIONAL developments and how they might affect their own lives, Israelis understandably tend to fix their gaze eastward. Ironically, since the end of the state of war between Egypt and Israel in 1979, Israelis have become generally indifferent towards the goings-on along the Nile. This is even more the case with regard to events further west, in Algeria and Morocco, the “core” states of North Africa.

Two recent, albeit very different, occurrences demonstrate that the Maghreb – the Islamic West – warrants greater attention.

The first was the unprecedented crisis in Algerian-Egyptian relations, which erupted in November and has still not been entirely damped down. The setting was the three-match brawl between their respective national football teams, Egypt’s “Pharaohs” and Algeria’s “Fennecs” (“Desert Foxes”), with the winner (Algeria) attaining a coveted spot in next summer’s quadrennial World Cup tournament. What ensued was the worst sort of passions that sports can ignite. Inflamed by irresponsible media campaigns and YouTube postings, and reinforced by the actions of political and business elites, significant segments of the Algerian and Egyptian publics alike viewed the contest as a zero-sum struggle for national dignity, honor and revenge. Triggered by a barrage of rocks thrown at the Algerian team bus in Cairo, which left three players bloodied and in need of stitches, the crisis spiraled out of control. Scores of injuries to supporters on both sides were incurred as well as damages to Egyptian companies in Algeria, resulting in the temporary return home of thousands of Egyptian workers there, the withdrawal of Egypt’s ambassador for consultations, boycotts, mutual insults, and inflammatory proclamations by various politicians, including Hosni Mubarak’s two sons. Calls for sanity by cooler heads on both sides, which included reminders of the history of Algerian-Egyptian solidarity on the basis of pan-Arab and “revolutionary” values, were ignored. Statist national-chauvinism of the cheapest kind was the order of the day in both countries, emanating from both “below” and “above.”

Notwithstanding Morocco’s longstanding political tensions with Algeria, the Moroccan public unreservedly backed the Algerian team, in what was clearly a case of identification with people linguistically, culturally and historically “like us.” Egyptians, one frequently heard from Maghrebis, are patronizing towards North Africans, remonstrating them for not being “true Arabs” even as they themselves emphasize their uniqueness as Egyptians.

One can only conclude that the politics of identity are alive and well in Egypt and North Africa, and that their overwhelmingly youthful populations, whose opportunities for social, economic and political advancement are severely constrained, are especially vulnerable to populist, demagogic messages.



Concurrent to the crisis, a very different sort of North Africa voice was heard in Israel: that of an 18-person delegation of Moroccan Berber/Amazigh (literally “free men”) educators and advocates participating in a week-long educational seminar at Yad Vashem. This first-ever visit by a group from a so-called “Arab” country confirmed anew the unique status of Morocco in the history of Arab-Israeli relations. What made this particular instance especially noteworthy was that it was initiated not by the Moroccan monarchy but from within Moroccan society

Berbers are the indigenous population of North Africa who, even today, after decades of Arabization and state centralization, constitute an estimated 40 percent of the population of Morocco and 20 percent in Algeria. The “Berber Culture Movement” is an amorphous, many-headed phenomenon with a clear core demand:

the recognition by the Moroccan and Algerian state authorities of the existence of the Amazigh people as a collective, and constitutional recognition of Tamazight as an official language of the state. Militant secular Berberists commonly refer to the state’s hegemonic ideology of Arab nationalism as “Arab-Islamic Ba’athism,” or even “Arab-Islamic totalitarianism.” In Algeria, Berber demands are more overtly political; in Morocco, they are primarily cultural, and are encouraged, up to a point, by the monarchy itself, in order to counterbalance the Islamist political current.

Many Amazigh activists openly or covertly admire the Zionist project, namely, the revival of a national language and the successful assertion of ethno-national rights in the face of an intolerant Arab world. Often they complain that their governments spend an inordinate amount of energy on behalf of the Palestinian cause, at the expense of the real needs of their societies. Hence, the visit by the Moroccan Amazigh delegation to Yad Vashem was not only, or even primarily, a statement about the need for Moroccan educators to incorporate the study of the Holocaust and its lessons into their curriculum. It was also a statement of solidarity with Israel and an effort to reach out, in opposition to the pan-Arab and Islamist currents in their own society. To be sure, the Amazigh current is neither a mass movement nor of one stripe. But after decades of subterranean existence, it is now an above-board, authentic, and even legitimate part of the North African political and cultural firmament.

For Israelis, so conditioned to being surrounded by unrelentingly hostile voices, the sounds of the Amazigh movement, trumpeting tolerance, liberalism, secularism and human rights for everyone, including the Jewish people, are refreshingly different. ●

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