The American landing in November 1942: a turning point in Morocco’s contemporary history

Jamaâ Baida*
National Archives of Morocco, Rabat, Morocco

The Allied landings of November 1942 were a critical step towards the final victory over the Axis; they were also meaningful in terms of Morocco’s foreign and domestic policy, marking a sharp turn towards the USA and the West that endured far into the future. The arrival of the Americans revived the hopes of the nationalists, encouraged the Sultan to defy the French, and stimulated military and diplomatic contacts between the Moroccan political class and the Americans. The landing also produced a windfall of goods that relieved the suffering of the Moroccan people, as well as a wealth of propaganda on all sides. Nazi media seized upon the event to vilify both Americans and Jews, French propaganda stressed the ignorance of Americans about Muslim customs, while American propaganda featured symbols of its military might. For Moroccan–American relations, the landings are highlighted as contributing to a progressive relationship of warmth and friendliness stretching back to the time of the early Republic.

Keywords: propaganda; nationalists; diplomacy; US–Moroccan relations

The Allied landings in North Africa constituted an important turning point in World War II; for Morocco, Operation Torch produced long-term consequences that shaped policy in that country for years to come and brought it, in many ways, into the Western sphere. It would be no exaggeration to say that the impact of those events continue to influence the diplomatic choices of Morocco today.

American troops landed on Moroccan soil on the morning of 8 November 1942. French Resident General Charles Noguès, who had remained loyal to Vichy since its rise to power in 1940, did not welcome them. He even attempted to fight back until he was compelled to surrender on November 11, after realising that resistance was futile against the overwhelming American military power.

The effort to oppose American forces was actually accompanied by political discord in the local arena. The Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ben Youssef, who up to that time had followed the instructions

*Email: jbaida@yahoo.fr
© 2014 Taylor & Francis
of the Residency (except in a case involving Moroccan Jews in 1941), refused to respond favourably to Noguès’ request to transfer the capital from Rabat to Fez in order to avoid the American bombing. For the Sultan, the Americans were to be greeted as friends and allies. The Moroccan monarch’s attitude earned him appreciation from the Americans that was expressed in several ways. The most striking evidence of this esteem was the conversation between the Sultan and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in January 1943 during the Anfa conference. The meeting did not receive the blessings of the Residency, and it fuelled the Sultan’s desire to free the country from the French rule (Hoisington 1984, 241). Contacts between the Palace and the Americans had been carefully planned since the first days of the landing, a fact that had not escaped the secret services of the Residency, already in a weakened position because of its hostile attitude towards the Americans. On 28 November 1942, Brunel, the Chief Administrative Officer at the Residency, wrote the following:

According to absolutely reliable sources, since the arrival of the Americans, the Sultan has held many secret meetings with Si Ahmed Bargach and Si Ahmed Messaoud, systematically excluding Si Mammeri. On the night of November 10, he sent emissaries to the Pasha of Casablanca and the Pasha of Port Lyautey, ordering them to deal directly with the Americans, without referring to the French authorities.

It is likely that these contacts led the US President to send a letter to the Sultan of Morocco on 23 November 1942 through General Keyes, aide to General George Patton, who was ill at that time. Roosevelt’s letter to Sidi Mohammed Ben Youssef and the meeting of the two leaders in Casablanca in January 1943 encouraged Moroccan nationalists to believe that they were in the twilight of the French presence in Morocco. The nationalist movement had gone underground after the great repression of the autumn of 1937, when many of its leaders were either deported or imprisoned. Now, in the context of the war, nationalists saw an opportunity to revive their activities. A combination of events, including the Atlantic Charter of 1941, the landing of 1942, and the Anfa meeting in 1943, awakened nationalist aspirations once again. Indeed, since the first quarter of 1943, the secret services of the Residency had noted a revival of a reformist spirit among the students of al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez. Similarly, in Rabat, graffiti appeared in various locations in the medina: ‘Long live America, Down with France, Morocco for Moroccans.’

Writing on behalf of the Hizb al-Watani or National Party (which would later become the Istiqlal Party), four leaders (Ahmed Mekouar, Ahmed Balafrej, Mohammed Lyazidi, and Omar Ben Abdeljalil) addressed a letter to President Roosevelt on 15 June 1943 as follows:

The people of Morocco (…) for whom we are the qualified representatives, since for the last twenty years we have suffered all kinds of persecutions while defending its interests, hopes only in God and in you to help it escape from the servitude [of the Protectorate] which it has endured for more than thirty years. This hope was strengthened by your visit to Morocco and by the personal contact you have had with our beloved Monarch.

As their position became increasingly favourable, on 11 January 1944, the nationalists of the Istiqlal Party seized the opportunity to present their famous Manifesto of Independence to French authorities, the Sultan, and the representatives of the USA, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. The Manifesto opened a new phase in the confrontation between the national movement and the Residency. A close reading of this document shows how the Moroccan nationalists, excluding the communist tendency, expected that the USA would help them realise their ambitions. This hope was reiterated in another message addressed to the US President on 8 March 1945 by Mohamed Lyazidi, on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Istiqlal Party:
Our people have not forgotten the great honor you bestowed upon our sovereign in cordially receiving him at Anfa. We take pleasure in rendering solemn homage to your untiring efforts to achieve victory and establish a just and lasting peace. The Moroccan people aspires to a place in the Free World that the Great American Democracy and her Allies are determined to create.

The positive feeling towards Americans was shared by many nationalist leaders in the Spanish zone. Abdellkhaleq Torrès, President of the Nationalist Reform Party, and Mohammed Mekki Naciri, President of the Moroccan Unity Party, contacted the US representative in Tangier in 1943, in order to submit a list of their grievances to the US Government. Their first wish was for ‘a declaration of the abrogation of the Protectorate regime imposed by force on the Moroccan territory’.

In the context of this nationalist revival following the American landing, a symbolic gesture that had an impact on subsequent events was the creation by Abdellatif Sbihi of the ‘Roosevelt Club,’ aimed at promoting closer ties between Moroccans and Americans. Sbihi presented himself to Americans as the sultan’s official spokesman. Among the founding members of this club was Ahmed Reda Guedira, who would play an important role in the politics of independent Morocco.

The consequences of the American landing were not only political; there were also social and economic benefits, as reported in the French and American archives and captured on film. From an economic perspective, the native population of Morocco suffered severely because of the war. Shortages and the rationing of basic foodstuffs aggravated the already precarious conditions resulting from an extended drought. Thus the landing was perceived by a large part of the population as a sort of blessing. A month after the landing, the Residency reported the presence of 2000 Moroccan workers in the port of Casablanca employed in unloading relief supplies.

Completely ignoring the will of the French authorities, the Americans carried out economic surveys in both urban and rural areas and among both elites and the masses, violating the prerogatives of the protective power in the eyes of the Residency. News of the direct contacts between Americans and the indigenous Muslim and Jewish populations reached the ears of the Residency; it was also repeated in German propaganda broadcast to North Africa. Reports from the Residency’s Department of Political Affairs indicate that anti-Semitic feelings were rife within the Residency. Following the enthusiastic reception Moroccan Jews gave to the Americans, the Residency remarked on their ‘arrogance,’ seen as a direct threat to both the French authorities and the Muslim population. Similar rhetoric was used by Nazi propaganda when it commented on the disregard of the ‘American invaders’ for Muslim traditions, their complicity with the Jews against Muslims, and other complaints based on real or imaginary events. German propaganda even tried to convey to its Muslim audience that the yellow star on American vehicles seen everywhere in Morocco was evidence of the complicity of Americans and Moroccan Jews against Muslims. Radio Berlin broadcast the following message in Moroccan colloquial Arabic on 8 December 1942:

Since the landing, the Americans have repeatedly violated Islamic traditions. In Safi and Casablanca, they enter mosques and holy places with their shoes on and brutally face down Muslims who disapprove of them. They treat the Muslims of North Africa as they treated slaves in America. In Casablanca, two American soldiers approached a Muslim woman, took off her veil, and photographed her. The two Muslim men who tried to stop them were shot dead. North African Muslims, you should stop suffering the oppression of Jewish America and its agents, the traitors Darlan and Noguès, traitors to France, to the Marshal and the Sultan.

Rumours of the comportment of Americans in violation of the practices and customs of indigenous Muslims became widespread, French authorities made the most of these alleged breaches of
protocol and drew the attention of the Americans to the absolute need to follow three basic rules in their dealings with the Muslim population:

First: Respect the mosques and the saints’ tombs
Second: Respect the cemeteries
Third: Respect women

Exaggeration and hyperbole are not unusual in propaganda, and it is not our purpose to make a detailed analysis of them here. This would include the propaganda of the Axis powers, the French, and of course, the Americans. US wartime propaganda in Morocco was aimed at displaying American power in all its forms, especially in the economic and military spheres. The image of the Sultan appeared on postcards sold on the streets of the big cities in conjunction with symbols of American military power, along with messages of Moroccan–American friendship. This friendship, as President Roosevelt recalled in a message addressed to the Sultan, dated back to the eighteenth century and the time of Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah and

Figure 1. Letter from Moroccan Nationalists (Mekouar, Balafrej, Lyazidi and Ben Abdeljalil) to the US President, 15 June 1943; National Archives, Washington D.C., File: FW.881.00/2639.
President George Washington. The historical reference to a longstanding relationship was calculated to make use of the past to serve the needs of the present; repeated often since, it has become a recurring motif in the diplomatic speeches and in the media deployed to underscore the enduring warmth in Moroccan–American relations. In this sense, Operation Torch occupies a privileged place as a milestone in the processes that have shaped the history of contemporary Morocco (Figure 1).

Acknowledgement

My deepest gratitude to Susan Miller, who kindly read this article in draft and shared her comments with me.

Notes

3. Memo from the Contrôleur Civil and Head of Municipal Services, Rabat, 23 November 1942: ‘The nationalists see in the personal message of Pres. Roosevelt to His Majesty a new situation that fills them with joy; for the first time since the beginning of the Protectorate, a head of state has sent a personal message to the Sultan. This is proof that Morocco is, diplomatically speaking, a country.’ AND, Direction de l’Intérieur, carton 96.
4. In the aftermath of the Boufekrane events in the fall of 1937 in the region of Meknes, Allal al-Fasi was exiled to Gabon, while Mohammed Ben al-Hassan al-Ouezzani was placed under house arrest.
7. See infra a copy of the letter; National Archives (NARA), Washington D.C.
10. US Legation to the Department of State; Tangier, 15 June 1943; NARA, RG 84, File 881.00–2571, PS-DAB.
12. DAP, Casablanca, 11 décembre 1942; ADN/Direction de l’Intérieur/carton 96.
13. See the report from the Région of Marrakech, signed by Division Commander Général de Henry Martin, 22 November 1942. A.D.N/Maroc, Direction de l’Intérieur, carton 96.
14. ADN, France, Intelligence note, DAP, 14 December 1942, carton 96.
15. Letter of the Contrôleur Civil, Head of the Territory of Safi, to the Head of the Region of Marrakesh, 5 January 1943. ADN/Maroc/Direction de l’Intérieur/carton 96. Public opinion held that contact between the Americans and Muslim women caused the women to behave in a manner that was offensive to conservative Moroccan [male] society. A humorous song by the popular Moroccan entertainer Houcine Slaoui (1921–1951) ‘al-Marikan’ (the Americans) that echoed this state of mind.
16. Aware of American ‘soft diplomacy,’ in 1947 the Sultan advised Paul Alling, US representative at Tangier, of his desire to visit the USA; however, it was 10 years before the visit actually took place. NARA, Washington/881.001/4 1647-CS/A. This same ‘diplomatic charm’ was directed towards several important Moroccan notables, such as Thami al-Glawi, Pasha of Marrakesh. General Mark Clark, Commander of the American Fifth Army, enjoyed a golfing party with Glawi on his private course, offering him in return a US Army Jeep to use while hunting. Report of the visit of General Clark to Marrakesh, sent to the Residency by Henry Martin, 9 March 1943. ADN/, Direction de l’Intérieur/carton 96.

References
