



## Introduction

To Erase History is to Mortgage the Future

*To our very gracious servants, the caïds of the tribes of Ihamed of Touat, to their cadhis, to their Chorfa—may God protect them—to their Merabitines and to all their very important persons,— ... We have come to learn about what had happened at Ain-Salah, the arrival of some people from the Algerian Province, their violent intrusion among the inhabitants, their aggression against the state of peace, the treaties and conventions between the two governments, with no respect for what has mutually been agreed upon in the regulations pertaining to border demarcation, with no possible justification even by flow or back flow, since the people in the region advised them of their being the subjects of Our Person elevated by God, and being part of Our fortunate empire ...*

Such is the message quoted by Captain Martin (1923) that the King of Morocco, Moulay Abdelaziz, had sent on March 15 1900 to the inhabitants of Touat, his subjects. The French column arrived at Ain Salah on March 14 equipped with one thousand rifles, two cannons and one hundred and fifty swords. Stout-hearted but inadequately armed to defend themselves, the Moroccans in the oases paid dearly for their resistance with 500 to 600 casualties and many prisoners. The French

expedition ended with 11 French casualties and 44 injured. One year prior to the massacre, the *Tricouleur* was already hanging over the oases of Tidikelt despite the armed resistance of the population who vainly informed the invaders that the region was part of the Cherifian domain. The vast Moroccan Saharan region was subjected and annexed to French Algeria.

One can read in the same book, through the official mail between the leading figures of these regions, the representatives of the authorities and the king himself, the vicissitudes of French colonization of these Saharan territories that were part of what was called the Cherifian Empire. One would also find there letters exchanged between the kings of Morocco and their Saharan subjects, testimonies to the political bond between the tribes of that large region and the Moroccan kings from at least the beginning of the 16th century, the four centuries that Martin's book covers. In fact the French gunboat had come to annihilate nine centuries of political bonds.

The same goes for both Western Sahara and Eastern Sahara. The number of official documents testifying to the allegiances bonding the inhabitants of these Saharan regions to the king of Morocco is sizable and persuasive. It suffices only to open Martin's publications in particular, as well as the five volumes published by The Hague International Court of Justice (1979–82) to get the point.

Let us look into one of them. In 1884, when the Spaniards occupied for the first time a point in the Atlantic coast of Western Sahara, the ambassador of the Spanish king enquired a few months later about the southern borders of the Cherifian Empire. In his response dated June 1886, Moulay Hassan, King of Morocco, specified that Oued Ed-Dahab, le Rio de Oro, was part of his kingdom and the inhabitants therein were his subjects in compliance with the norms of Muslim law, the only valid law that set obligations on both parties.

The colonization of the Western Sahara by Spain was very slow and difficult particularly because of the resistance of Ma El Ainain who, armed and funded by the King of Morocco, called for war to be waged against the colonisers from Smara. Other resistance movements and other uprisings followed and slowed down the progress of the Spanish colonisers. The map (A2, pp. 182–183) representing the different stages of the Spanish occupation between 1884 and 1937 is self-explanatory in this regard.

In June 1900, an agreement was signed between France and Spain, circumscribing and separating the French possessions that made up

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Mauritania and the future Spanish Sahara. Another French-Spanish agreement was signed later in 1904. It remained confidential until 1912, date of the setting up of the French protectorate over Morocco. It allowed for the splitting of Morocco in two zones of influence, one French zone to the south and another Spanish one to the north. Ifni and Sakia El Hamra regions were handed over to Spain, which was experiencing great difficulty in imposing its rule upon them.

But, beyond the issue of the legitimacy of the political bond between Sahara and Morocco, the economy and the society, and even the livelihood of this Saharan population was only viable thanks to the hinterland of Tekna and their relations with the vast region stretching from Sous up to Marrakech and even beyond. Naïmi's studies, especially the latest (Naïmi 2004), provide ample evidence to that effect. Compared to those of the populations of the other Moroccan regions, the history, culture and religious practices of the Sahrawis seem more rooted in this arabo-berber Moorish civilization, specific to Morocco since the Almoravids, the Saharan Berbers of the large Sanhadja group, who controlled North Africa in the second half of the 11th and all 12th centuries. All the other dynasties that came afterwards, from the Almohads to the Alaouis, took over this heritage and strengthened it. Without the Sahara, Morocco's history would be incomprehensible, and without Morocco, Sahara would be no more than desert.

One might certainly attempt to erase history for partisan reasons; it cannot, however, be contested. Some seem to suffer from an amazing collective amnesia; but by the same token they mortgage their future.

This essay does not attempt to rewrite the history of the bonds between Morocco and Western Sahara. Others more skilled than I have undertaken this endeavour. My essay has other ambitions. It sets the issue of Sahara in its regional and international context and sheds thereby some light on the strategies of the masters of Algiers. Their desire for power, this imperial *hubris* that haunts them and of which they have become prisoners, takes them away from the new realities of their country, of the region and of the world. Should we then keep reminding them that Sahara has never been a problem for the Algerian people? They should venture out of their conclave to heed the *vox populi*.

This essay also draws attention to the perverse geopolitical effects that the balkanization of the region might generate. It presents the hypothesis that the problems of terrorism, of the massive migrations

threatening all of Europe, are unlikely be solved through the billions of dollars poured into the desert sand and the Maghreb or through the logistic support that the region has been getting since September 11, 2001.

It also seeks to place the solution to the autonomy of the Saharan regions in the framework of the major reforms already under way, the silent revolution that Morocco triggered ten years ago and that opens new political perspectives to the other regions in the kingdom and to the neighbouring countries to engage along the path of confederal democracy rather than that of stratocracy. The reader should not be mistaken about it: I am aware that there is a long way to go and of the burdensome heritage that has already been analysed and accounted for. I refer in particular to the testimony of the historian Abdallah Laroui. But for god's sake, let us stop the attacks waged against the first flowers of a democratic spring in Morocco on the grounds that the other Arab regimes from the Atlantic shore to the Red Sea are so authoritarian that they are not even worthy of criticism. Remonstrances are, for sure, beneficial provided they are measured and fair.

This sociological study raises questions, at last and above all, about the integration of the Sahrawi populations, and in a more general manner about this mixture of tribes, men and women as different from each other as the regions that have decided to share a common fate and a common Morocco with its distinctive history.

This political, economic and social integration is, in my view, the most essential element for the present and the future. I will try to depict its evolution, and also explain it by identifying its major determinants. I will certainly take time to analyse the economic and sociological data of the last four decades to really get a clear picture of its reality and scope. What better argument can be put forth than that of the matrimonial exchange between the Sahrawis and the other Moroccans? One can always set barriers and artificial borders, but one cannot annihilate the desire of living together with others, which can be expressed in ways other than through referendum.

In this century where new economic and political clusters are being created, where people are becoming aware of their common fate and understanding the necessity for a democratic federalism, we are witnessing false dissensions in the Maghreb. Whatever the solution is to these problems, the peoples of this Mediterranean region are predestined to union on pain of being relegated to the margin of history and of never being able to take part in the forceful march of global

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civilisations. What Maghrebian country would claim to be able to single-handedly meet the challenge of fierce but beneficial international competition in the economic, cultural, scientific and technical spheres? Who would boast they were able alone to achieve this critical mass without which no efficient action could be undertaken? Who would boast to have enough clout to guarantee the survival of its people, give them work, and ensure the future of their children? The modest dimensions of the countries of the region cannot allow even for the emergence of effective educational systems, and world-standard universities. If we examine the last 2006 world universities assessment by the Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, not one single North African or Arab country has a university that ranks among the 500 top universities, apart from that modest 404th rank of Cairo University.

Nonetheless, the Maghreb contains many Schumpeterian entrepreneurs, a bright intelligentsia, particularly Algerian, which is highly present and visible through its publications in the major international scientific journals. Its members are found at the highest levels in the best European and American universities and research centres. Yet it has been cruelly lacking in its native country. But, who would dare to put the onus on it? The mind can only breathe when it is free.

Pierre-André Coffinhal, president of the Revolutionary Tribunal when the case of the unfortunate Lavoisier was before him, told the scientist—who had asked for some time to finish his chemistry experiments before being taken to the guillotine—that the Revolution was not in need of scientists. The only thing history records from this obscure judge is his sad retort. But humanity carries on celebrating the memory of the great scientist, rather than political terror.