Morocco: A View from Within
Impressions from a Course on Culture, Coexistence and Conflict Resolution

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Last winter I taught a course in Morocco which included American, Moroccan, and Israeli students. We examined the political and popular mood, and gauged the potential for ties between Morocco and Israel. Although Morocco is on the periphery of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it has a potential key role in its resolution. Morocco reminds us that there are historical precedents of positive relations between Jews and Muslims, and of compatibility between Jewishness and Arabness. Full diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel are dependent on meaningful progress in negotiations with the Palestinians. However, the relations that already exist, and that existed during the 1990s, attest to the great potential that lies in relations between Israel and the region in an era of peace.

The report includes comments by MK Hilik Bar

Last winter I led a group of students to Morocco, in the context of a two week course I taught through George Mason University, Virginia. The course combined academic lectures, visits to different institutions, excursions to regions and sites throughout the country, and maximal immersion in Morocco’s diverse society. Our aim was to get to know Morocco both from “above” (at the political-institutional level) and from “below” (at

Impressions from the Region is a publication series that presents insights from events in which representatives from Israel and its neighboring Arab and Muslim countries take part. At times when channels of communication between Israel and the region are limited, we find it crucial to show that regional policy dialogues are indeed possible, and to distribute the content of such events. It is a tool for enhancing knowledge, and for advancing peace and Israel’s regional integration.
the local-communal level). Our group included American, Moroccan (Arab and Amazigh), and Israeli (Jewish) students.

Morocco constitutes an interesting – and somewhat unusual – case study in the regional context, mainly because of the way in which the Arab Spring has played out in it, as well as because of the existence of a relatively thriving Jewish community and the regime’s attitude toward it.

**Communities and Identities in Morocco**

In Morocco, numerous identities – ethnic, religious, linguistic, geographical, gender – exist side by side and occasionally blend into one another. The manner in which Moroccan society and the king have chosen to deal with these multiple identities and with the subsequent tensions (between these identity groups, socio-economic strata, modernity and tradition, and “West” and “East”) can teach us of the advantages of an inclusive national identity, of conflict resolution methods, and of possibilities for local and regional coexistence.

The main identity groups in Morocco are Amazigh and Arab. The vast majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, and there exist Jewish and Christian minorities. Some Jews in Morocco are prominent business people, ministers, and even an advisor to the King. Jews have the status of a protected minority and enjoy certain autonomy within the legal system. The Amazigh, who predate the Arabs and Islam in Morocco, constitute at least half of the population, but still compete for their rightful place in the Moroccan identity and landscape. The Amazigh identity, which began as a linguistic identity (whose boundaries lie beyond Morocco) is today an ethnic (and sometimes national) identity. Throughout history, there is a great deal of overlap between Amazigh and Jewish identities. For example, some of Morocco’s Jews lived for centuries in Amazigh villages alongside their Muslim neighbors (some of whom, before the advent of Islam, had been Jews or Christians), and many Jews speak Tamazight as their mother tongue.

While Morocco is usually defined as an Arab country, an excursion outside of the big cities reveals a different reality: the names of most villages and sites (and sometimes even cities) are Amazigh, as are the spoken language and local customs in most of the country.

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1 Amazigh are better known as Berbers, a name whose origins is derogatory; most prefer to be called Amazigh (which in their language, Tamazight, means “free” or “noble people”), or by the name of the particular Amazigh group to which they belong. In Morocco there are three main Amazigh groups, each with its own dialect.

2 The course’s objective was to learn how different communities define their identity, live alongside one another over the course of generations, and together merge to form the Moroccan cultural mosaic. We also examined the social and political mood in Morocco, and the way in which Morocco understands itself within the regional and international arenas. Our main partner organization in Morocco was the Institute for Leadership and Communication Studies (ILCS), Rabat. We anticipate holding in the future more such programs, with greater participation of Israelis and Palestinians.

3 Jews arrived in Morocco from many different places over the centuries, with the first ones arriving at the area now known as Morocco around the destruction of the Second – and some claim even the First – Temple. See Daniel J. Schroeter, “The Shifting Boundaries of Moroccan Jewish Identities,” *Jewish Social Studies* (The New Series) 15 (1), Fall 2008, pp. 145-164.

4 Christians comprise about 1.1% of the population. Jews constitute a religious and ethnic minority, and comprise about 0.2% of the population. They are under the jurisdiction of the Rabbinic courts for anything concerning personal status and family matters, but even certain other categories of offenses may be tried in Rabbinic courts.
The rivalry between Amazigh and Arab identities is expressed in various ways – by resource allocations and in the cultural-linguistic sphere. The current king and his father both tried in various ways to suppress indicators of (mostly nationalistic) Amazigh identity, albeit unsuccessfully. Until recently, for instance, Tamazight was not considered an official language in Morocco, and children could not be registered with Amazigh names. In the last decade there has been a cultural-linguistic revival among Amazigh activists and academics, which ultimately won institutional backing (see below on the constitutional changes).

Positive Reactions to Challenges and Tensions

The wave of demonstrations and protests that swept through the Arab world beginning in 2010 did not pass over Morocco. There, too, the people demanded greater and fairer representation, along with political and social reforms. Seemingly, King Mohammed VI managed to respond in a way that sufficiently appeased the people, at least for the time being. His response included drafting a new constitution, which passed overwhelmingly in a referendum. Among other things, the constitution, in its opening paragraphs, acknowledged the integral part of Jews and Amazigh in the Moroccan cultural mosaic, and their contribution to Morocco over the generations. The new constitution also recognized Tamazight as an official language alongside Arabic.

These changes in the constitution had significance beyond symbolic, as they provided the impetus for other changes on the ground. In February 2013, for example, a ceremony in Fas marked the end of the renovations on a 17th century synagogue. In attendance at the ceremony was the Moroccan Prime Minister, who is a member of the Islamic party. In addition, dozens of Jewish schools and sites have been renovated recently, including the Jewish Museum in Casablanca that was established about fifteen years ago.

Morocco’s way of dealing with tensions, power struggles, and different identities (like the ongoing struggles in the Western Sahara) is not perfect. Nevertheless, it can inspire other countries in the region, including Israel, that are dealing with similar challenges. The king’s policy of being responsive to his people and initiating changes that mitigate protest before it escalates, have spared Morocco harsh confrontations such as those experienced by some of the other countries in the region. Morocco’s choice to embrace its multi-cultural nature and see it as an asset is important and promising. This choice is expressed both at the political-institutional and local-communal levels. The inclusive and diverse national identity adopted by Morocco prevents, or at least mitigates, the problem of conflicting loyalties (personal, cultural, and national), because Moroccans are not asked to choose among the various components of their identity.

Dialogue About and With the Jews in Morocco

In Casablanca we watched the film “Tinghir-Jerusalem: Echoes of the Mellah,” which follows the Jews of a small Amazigh village in the mid Atlas, most of whom immigrated

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5 For example, my daughter Illi (whose name in Tamazight means “my beloved daughter”) could not be registered in Morocco by that name when she was born in 2007, in spite of her entitlement, through her father, to Moroccan nationality.

6 The film was screened throughout Morocco and in Europe, the US, and Israel, and won a number of prestigious awards. For more about the film: http://www.cinema.co.il/movies/movie.aspx?movieId=9433.
to Israel in the ‘50s. The film emphasizes the Jews being an integral part of the village, their relations with their Muslim neighbors, and the common aspects of Amazigh culture shared by both Jews and Muslims.\(^7\) The film screening was followed by a discussion (mostly in French) with the audience and film’s director, Kamal Hachkar. Some of the critique and questions raised dealt with the connection of the Jews to Morocco, and with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

During the conversation I told the audience of the many Israelis and Palestinians who devote their time and energy towards advancing Middle East peace, and I emphasized the fact that Morocco could have an important role to play in that context. Einat Levi, an Israeli from Moroccan decent who participated in our course, spoke after me and told the audience of her family’s connection to Morocco (which dates back to the 5\(^{th}\) Century at least), and said that although this was only her second day in Morocco, she felt at home. Our words were well received, and a number of people, including Israeli businessmen residing in Morocco and a Moroccan journalist, came to talk to us and interview Einat. The interview was published the following day, and stimulated a lively discussion over the internet.\(^8\)

In the course of our visit we came across additional dialogue initiatives. One of the organizations with which we collaborated in preparing our visit was Mimouna Club, which was founded in 2007 as a student organization in Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane. Its purpose is to expose young (mostly Muslim) Moroccans to Morocco’s Jewry and to Judaism more broadly. Today the organization is an independent non-profit with branches all over Morocco. It emphasizes the Jews’ indisputable place in Moroccan history and collective identity, and initiates encounters, cultural events, and visits to Jewish communities and sites. In 2010, for example, the organization initiated a seminar on the Holocaust, which received wide media attention and criticism. Organizations and initiatives such as these are not common in the Muslim Middle-Eastern and North African landscape, and they contribute greatly to dialogue between Jews and Muslims (as well as to dialogue among Muslims) in Morocco and beyond.

All of our local guides – including those who did not know there were Jews/Israelis in the group – emphasized the presence of Jews in Morocco from time immemorial and their place in Moroccan society. At times their descriptions were a bit simplistic and idealistic; nevertheless, it was important for them to emphasize – with great pride – the Jews’ contribution to Morocco. Others we spoke to during our visit exhibited similar attitudes.

On rare occasions we encountered a bit of suspicion (usually not directed at us) when people heard there were Israelis in the group; however, most of the time we were welcomed warmly – especially once people heard there was a Moroccan Jewish woman in the group. The people we spoke to had mainly a positive attitude towards Jews and acknowledged their historical importance in Morocco. At the same time, they were critical about Israel’s policies, primarily towards the Palestinians. A number of taxi drivers in Rabat were surprisingly knowledgeable about Israeli politics, and merchants in the Old City even fondly remembered President Peres’s visit. There was, however, a lack of

\(^7\) Jewish and Muslim (particularly Amazigh) Moroccans often share many more customs and cultural attributes as Moroccans than those that separate them as two different religious communities.

appreciation of the complexity of Israeli society and identity. The generally positive attitude towards Jews which we encountered throughout our visit, suggests that there may be an opportunity for deeper and more meaningful dialogue.

Morocco-Israel Relations and their Importance

Though Morocco has no official diplomatic ties with Israel, in reality there are many relations – social, business, political – between the countries. The yearning of many Israelis of Moroccan decent to renew ties with their past and country of origin, and Morocco’s encouragement of such relations, greatly contribute to relations between the countries. Morocco’s relative marginality in the Arab-Israeli conflict may be the secret to the key role it may potentially have in the conflict’s settlement. Though it is on the conflict’s periphery, Morocco is not negligible: the Moroccan King holds the official and eternal title of Chairman of the Jerusalem Committee of the Muslim states. Like other Arab states, Morocco recently renewed its commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative, and it continues to nurture its good, years’ long relationship with the United States.

Israel can learn from Morocco about inter-communal dialogue and coexistence, and about creating an inclusive national identity that connects past, present, and future, East and West, and Jewishness and Arabness. So long as we fail, as Israelis and other peoples of the region, to understand that there is an organic connection between Jewishness and Arabness, we remain limited in our ability to understand Israel and its place in the Middle East. The dimensions of their identity that the Jews of Morocco have had to relinquish in order to fit into the Zionist project are similar to the Arab dimensions of identity that Zionism has had to relinquish, partially in order to delineate the boundaries between “us” and “them.”

Artificial uprooting of aspects of identity from a broad national group is mistaken and has negative repercussions. We must remember that there are historical precedents to positive relations between Judaism and Islam, and that Jewishness and Arabness can simultaneously exist both within the same person and within the same state. Moroccan Jews – whether they live in Morocco, Israel, or elsewhere – should have an important bridging role in the development of relations between Morocco and Israel. These ties,

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9 The dilemmas with which Israel struggles, and the plethora of political and other voices within it, are usually unfamiliar to Moroccans and to others in the Arab world. Thus, most Moroccans are not aware that 20% of Israeli citizens are Palestinian Arabs, and that in spite of their problematic status, they enjoy many rights.

10 This encouragement manifests itself in the fact that Morocco allows tens of thousands of Israeli tourists to visit, even though the two countries have no formal diplomatic relations. Israeli politicians and public figures (Shimon Peres, Amir Peretz, Tzipi Livni) have visited Morocco, and Moroccan public figures have visited Israel. See Cnaan Liphshiz, “Why is the Moroccan king funding Jewish sites?,” The Times of Israel, 15 May 2013.

11 In Morocco, too, there are those who oppose normalization with Israel; however, Morocco does not attract as much attention as some other countries in the Middle East, and can thus get away with challenging certain taboos. One example is the fact that in 2009 the leading research institute in Morocco, Amadeus Institute, invited Tzipi Livni to give a keynote lecture at a conference it organized. In spite of the demonstrations against her participation, the Institute went ahead with its program.

12 The Moroccan monarchy is one of the oldest in the world and has existed for over 1,000 years. Its roots go back to the Prophet Mohammed himself. This connection gives the Moroccan king his important symbolic role.

13 The fact that a Jewish community has existed in Morocco continuously for millennia add to the “demystification” of Jews in the eyes of Muslims, another factor which could in turn contribute to positive relations between Morocco and Israel.
together with a redefinition of Jewish(ness)-Arab(ness) relations, can help Israel blend into the Middle Eastern landscape.

It is important to note that without meaningful progress in negotiations with the Palestinians, the ability to advance relations with Morocco – as well as with other Arab countries – remains limited. In the ‘90s, during the Oslo Process and up until the Al-Aqsa Intifada, Israel-Morocco relations reached their peak. This fact, in addition to the positive relations that still exist today, highlight the potential that lies in Israel’s relations with the region. Establishing normal relations between Israel and the Arab and Muslim world, as proposed by the Arab Peace Initiative, would be yet another positive dividend of reaching peace with the Palestinians.14

One way to develop such relations is by bringing groups of Jews and Arabs from the region (and particularly Jews and Palestinians from Israel) to Morocco. This would provide an opportunity to experience Morocco and learn from it about inclusive identities and Jewishness-Arabness relations. Visits of Moroccan groups to Israel would achieve similar goals.15 There are still political and social challenges, especially for visits of Moroccans to Israel, but it seems there is an opportunity for the states and peoples to grow closer. Bilateral relations of this sort between Israel and an Arab country are still rare in the region, and we would be wise to encourage them wherever possible.

On a Personal Note

As someone who grew up in a small town in the northern Negev, to a family that had immigrated to Israel from the United States in 1971, I was surrounded by Moroccan culture and identity, yet at the same time blind to many of its dimensions. The collective experience of Moroccan Jews in particular – and Arab Jews in general – and its place within Jewish and Zionist history, were a mystery to me. My many visits to Morocco (plus a few years of study and research on the topic) exposed me to the complexity and multi-dimensionality of Moroccan identity at large, and Moroccan-Jewish identity in particular, and especially the blending of Jewishness and Arabness – two identities that are still seen by many as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable.16

Understanding the history of Moroccan Jews and the nuances of their identity will enable us to better understand their collective experience in Israel, and important dimensions of Israeli identity – such as the tension between East and West. Their experience has been characterized by the demand – imposed on them for decades – to relinquish certain dimensions of their identity.17 The dissonance created by the Zionist Movement between Jewishness and Arabness (the main source of which is a protracted national conflict) is mistaken and, in my view, must be rectified.

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14 Relations with Morocco in the 1990s included, among other things, visits of Israeli heads of state in Morocco, diplomatic relations between the two countries, and Israeli participation in the first regional economic conference, which took place in Casablanca in 1994.
15 For example, on May 29th, 2013, the Knesset hosted a Moroccan delegation. For more information, please visit the Knesset’s website and see: http://nashpia.co.il/stories/51a6e9994ae36f7655000243
16 The source of this perception is that (at least according to the Zionist paradigm) Jewishness and Arabness are seen as two, mutually exclusive, national categories in a state of conflict. In addition, Arabness is portrayed as the “other” from which Jewish nationalism wishes to differentiate itself.
17 Such as language, music, dress, and sometimes last names, in addition to their closeness to Arabs and Arbness, and pride (or at least not shame) in their roots.
Comments by MK Hilik Bar, Labor Party; Chairman of the Lobby for the Promotion of a Solution for the Israeli-Arab Conflict

Dr. Adina Friedman’s initiative to include Israelis in courses in Morocco is a welcomed one. This initiative should be expanded, so that more Israelis have the opportunity to get to know Morocco – and eventually other Arab countries – up close.

Israeli-Moroccan relations have great potential. Morocco is perhaps the one Arab state with which the broadest cooperation could be established, as we have already seen in the 1990s’ Peace Process, when the two countries enjoyed diplomatic relations, social and business cooperation, and mutual visits by leaders.

The Arab Peace Initiative attests to the fact that there is, in the Arab world, a willingness to normalize relations with Israel. This willingness – which serves Israeli interests – is real and meaningful, and not just a “spin”.

Without a breakthrough with the Palestinians, the potential relations with Morocco and with the Arab world at large will not be able to be realized. Thus, Israel must respond affirmatively to the Arab Peace Initiative and renew negotiations with the Palestinians, in order to reach a two-state solution.

The Knesset’s lobby for the promotion of a solution for the Israeli-Arab conflict works towards these ends, and congratulates Mitvim’s work to advance peace and Israel’s integration in the region.

For information regarding future trips to Morocco, please contact Dr. Adina Friedman at: maroc.studytour@gmail.com

The next study tour is planned for mid-August 2013