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### Did Amrika promise Morocco's independence? The nationalist movement, the Sultan, and the making of the 'Roosevelt Myth'

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# Did *Amrika* promise Morocco's independence? The nationalist movement, the Sultan, and the making of the 'Roosevelt Myth'

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In January 1943, the leaders of the Allied Forces met in Casablanca to discuss their war strategy. During the course of the Anfa Conference, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) had a private dinner with Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef, which came to change the course of Moroccan history. Although the details of the conversation between the two statesmen remained shrouded in mystery due to FDR's untimely death just two years later, the Moroccan side later claimed that the American leader had promised to support their country's independence once the Second World War had ended. This article sheds fresh light on both the meeting and its impact on the trajectory of Moroccan history by utilising a number of new sources. It argues that the Sultan and the local nationalist movement seized this opportunity and created a 'Roosevelt Myth', thus turning FDR into a saint-like figure whose anti-colonial stance legitimised their own aspirations to abolish the French and Spanish Protectorates established in 1912. Until they finally obtained complete independence in 1956, the Moroccans used FDR's supposed promise to convince the highly reluctant US diplomats and politicians to support their anti-colonial struggle. The meeting between Roosevelt and Sidi Mohamed became one of the central elements of the national historical narrative, and the memory of the late President is still very much alive in the political discourse of today's Morocco.

**Keywords:** Morocco; Roosevelt; Anfa; the Second World War; colonialism; nationalism; decolonisation

## Introduction

In January 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), Winston Churchill, and Charles de Gaulle met at Anfa, a posh suburb of Casablanca, to discuss the latest developments in the war and to plan the upcoming invasion of Europe. During his stay in the Moroccan coastal city, President Roosevelt received Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef for dinner, a meeting that came to have considerable influence over the course of history of the North African kingdom during the following years. According to the Moroccan side, the President promised the Sultan that America would support

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Morocco's desire for independence once the war with Germany and Japan was over. After his return to Washington, it was said that Roosevelt sent a series of letters to Sidi Mohamed in which he repeated his promise and invited the Sultan to visit the USA. Although the truth of this claim could never be verified due to Roosevelt's untimely death on 12 April 1945, the Moroccan nationalist movement quickly adopted his statements of support to provide legitimacy to its campaign calling for complete abrogation of the French and Spanish Protectorates.

As the Second World War came to an end, the world witnessed the twilight of empire and saw European hegemony over the colonial world rapidly giving way to a new bipolar system that would shape global politics for the next five decades. As the former colonial system lost its legitimacy even in the eyes of many Western politicians, progress towards self-government for all colonised territories came to be seen as a universal goal (Darwin 2000, 18). However, this so-called process of decolonisation was not intended to create a global system of nation states, equal before international law and united in partnership and mutual respect. Even the institution symbolising this brave new world order, the United Nations, was an undemocratic organisation founded on the premises of a hierarchy of nations (Mazower 2009, 14–17). Historian Prasenjit Duara has pointed out that

while anti-imperialist rhetoric pervaded global political discourse (...) during the Second World War, the competitive and exclusivist goals embedded in the system of nation-states could hardly be wiped clean by rhetoric or even by the creation of cooperative institutions such as the United Nations. The Cold War developed in the context of the contradiction between domination and self-determination in the relations of the superpowers with their junior partners and client states. (2011, 476)

The considerable geopolitical transformations taking place during the 1940s and 1950s thus created little room for manoeuvre for the colonised peoples of the world, despite the fact that the era of European colonialism was nearing its end. From a historian's point of view, this period nonetheless constituted an important turning point that radically remade the relationship between the Western nations and the countries of the Third World.

Although scholars of the Cold War continue to write predominantly political and diplomatic histories focusing on Washington and Moscow as centres of global events, the last two decades have seen dramatic shifts in the scholarship of this era. Many historians have moved towards incorporating the histories of Africa and Asia into the larger narrative of the Cold War, analysing the impact of global conflict on society and politics in non-Western nations (see Smith 2000; Gleijeses 2002; Yakub 2004; Westad 2005; McMahan 2013; Schayegh 2013; Hahn 2006). Others have demonstrated how the situation in North Africa influenced geostrategic considerations in Washington and Paris, as well as the diplomatic relations between the two capitals (see Lacroix-Riz 1988; Sangmuah 1989; Sangmuah 1992; Zoubir 1995; El Machat 1996; Wall 2001). Connelly's (2002) work has been especially important in integrating the activities of anti-colonial independence movements into the larger narratives of Cold War diplomacy. Scholarship thus has moved away from depicting the Cold War era as a binary between the two superpowers, with the Third World constituting only a passive victim. Instead, historians have argued convincingly that non-Western peoples repeatedly challenged post-Second World War global institutions such as the United Nations that upheld the hierarchy of nations (see Westad 2005; Prashad 2007; Crowl 2009; Mazower 2009; Bradley 2010; Chamberlin 2012).

Morocco and Tunisia have never featured prominently in writing about the Cold War or decolonisation for two simple reasons: they had no popular Communist movements strong enough to attract the attention of either Washington or Moscow, and they did not witness the large-scale armed insurgencies that characterised anti-colonial struggles in Indochina, Algeria, and

elsewhere. In other words, they lacked the necessary strategic relevance to global politics. Consequently, although both the Second World War and the subsequent Great Power rivalry proved central to the North African struggles for independence, studies of the Maghrib and of global history in the second half of the twentieth century have rarely converged (with the notable exception of Algeria). The aim of this article is to bridge this historiographical gap by introducing Morocco into both Cold War and decolonisation discourses. Although the sources I utilise are insufficient for a grandiose meta-narrative of Morocco's position in post-1945 international politics, they do tell the story of how the native elites viewed and understood the global developments of their time and tried to benefit from them.

Moroccan and non-Moroccan scholars habitually make reference to the importance of the contacts between FDR and Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef in providing a stimulus to native anti-colonialism, although details of their contacts continue to be shrouded in mystery (see, for example, Bernard 1963, 47–48; Halstead 1967, 204; Julien [1953] 1972, 293–294; Oved 1984, 2:199; Sangmuah 1992, 131; al-Qadiri 1997, 152–155; Ghallab 2000, 248–250; Pennell 2000, 262; Azzou 2006; Miller 2012, 144). According to historian Joffé, the meeting between Roosevelt and the Sultan gave impetus to the nationalist campaign for independence (1985, 302). Rivlin noted that Roosevelt's statements 'were encouraging words for the Sultan to hear and an important personal rapport was established between [them]' (1982, 65). King Hassan II, who had accompanied his father to the Anfa Conference, asserted in his biography that FDR had indeed promised Morocco's independence during the dinner (1993, 18), a claim supported by the testimony of former American diplomat Murphy (1964, 172–173). Nonetheless, while few would deny the importance of the encounter at Anfa in 1943, so far no one has analysed this topic with an eye to its short- and medium-term impact on US–Moroccan relations in the post-war period.

Here I offer new evidence about what exactly happened during and after the Anfa Conference in an effort to unpack the mystery surrounding these fateful events. However, even more interesting from a historian's point of view is the role Roosevelt's statements played after the war in positioning Morocco in a rapidly changing world that witnessed not only the decline of empire, but also the rise of a new superpower across the Atlantic. By incorporating into a single narrative the attitudes of the USA, France, and the Moroccan nationalist movement regarding FDR's promise, we open a window onto the views, beliefs, and interests that prevailed in America, Europe, and Africa during the era of decolonisation. Furthermore, we understand more clearly why the figure of Roosevelt began to take on a saintly aura for ordinary Moroccans, his supposed contributions to Morocco's independence appearing second only to those of the great Mohamed ben Youssef himself.

It is my contention that that the Moroccan nationalists were instrumental in turning Roosevelt's promises into a myth that helped to legitimise their claims in the eyes of Western diplomats and politicians.<sup>1</sup> During the years leading up to Morocco's independence in 1956, the nationalists skilfully utilised this incident to enlist the support of the US government in their struggle against the colonisers. In order to strengthen their demands for a sovereign nation state, they deployed the Roosevelt Myth to justify their efforts whenever they met foreign politicians or diplomats. Proclaiming that the much-admired leader FDR had promised Morocco's independence became their preferred weapon of choice to portray the colonial status of their country as illegitimate and outdated. As had been the case with nationalist movements across Africa and Asia following Woodrow Wilson's anti-colonial statements in 1918, the Moroccans used the Roosevelt Myth to 'bolster and expand their legitimacy both at home and abroad' (Manela 2007, 8). This brilliant strategy contributed to the delegitimisation of French colonial rule and Morocco's independence in 1956.

## The Anfa Conference

The Allied troops that landed on the North African coast in November 1942 quickly defeated the pro-Vichy French forces, thus increasing exponentially the American influence in Morocco. Although Washington had no specific plans to take over from a France severely weakened by the war, the presence of US soldiers disquieted the Protectorate authorities who feared the growing influence of the new superpower. Morocco's strategic location at the crossroads between Europe, Africa, and the Atlantic Ocean, and the new Allied position at this strategic node, prompted the leaders of the USA, Great Britain, and the Free French Forces to meet at Anfa, a suburb of Casablanca, from 14 until 24 January 1943, to coordinate and plan future war efforts.<sup>2</sup> During the course of this conference, President Roosevelt organised a dinner in honour of the ceremonial host Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef, which was preceded by a private meeting during which the Sultan showered the President with precious gifts, including a gold dagger as well as beautiful bracelets for the First Lady. In return, FDR gave Sidi Mohamed a picture of himself in an elegant silver frame (Sherwood 1948, 689–690).

The encounter with the American leader left a lasting impression on the Moroccan Sultan. According to General Patton, the Sultan later confided to him: 'Truly your President is a very great man and a great friend of myself and of my people' (1972, 158). The meeting, however, much less pleased Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle, who were also present. Both statesmen remained ardent supporters of Western colonialism, and they resented Roosevelt's friendly attitude towards the Sultan. After Roosevelt's return to Washington, the American and the Moroccan leaders continued to exchange a series of letters, bypassing the normal diplomatic channels. The content of the conversations and the correspondence that passed between them remained obscure, but the royal palace would later claim that in those exchanges, Roosevelt had promised to support Morocco's independence and to invite Sidi Mohamed to Washington once the war was over. Within only a short period of time, the 'Roosevelt Myth' became a touchstone for the rising nationalist movement that gained great momentum and mass support during the following decade.

## The reemergence of the nationalist movement

A native protest movement in the French zone had first appeared on the national scene in May 1930, when a group of students from urban, upper-middle-class backgrounds started popular demonstrations against the Berber *dahir* (edict) issued by the Residency. Led by Ahmed Balafrej and 'Allal al-Fassi, they subsequently expanded their organisation, both openly and clandestinely, and founded the *Kutlat al-'Amal al-Watani* (Comité d'Action Marocaine in French), which eventually became the *Hizb Watani li-Tahqiq al-Matalib* (National Party for the Realization of the Demands). In 1934, the young nationalists published the *Plan de Réformes marocaines* that proposed substantial changes to the framework of the Protectorate, but did not call for complete independence.<sup>3</sup> When local protests in Meknes over a controversial water project developed nationalist overtones and led to clashes with the police in September 1937, French authorities seized the opportunity to crush the nascent movement by sending its leadership into exile.<sup>4</sup> The reformists suspended overt activism for the time being, but in secret, they reorganised in anticipation of the end of the war.

Inspired by the arrival of the Allied Forces on Moroccan soil in November 1942, the Moroccan protest movement prepared to reemerge in public once again. On 11 January 1944, members of the newly founded *Hizb al-Istiqlal*, or Independence Party, under the leadership of Secretary

General Ahmed Balafrej made their first public appearance, presenting an ‘Independence Manifesto’ to the French Resident General, Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef, and US and British diplomats. Abandoning their previous restraint, the nationalists now demanded complete independence. The proclamation called upon ‘the Allies, who are shedding their blood for the cause of Liberty ... to permit the adhesion of Morocco to the Atlantic Charter’ of August 1941 that promised all peoples the right to self-determination (*Hizb al-Istiqlal* 1946, 2–3). In the Spanish zone, the member of the *Hizb al-Islah al-Watani* (Partido Reformista Nacional or PRN) had made a similar appeal on 14 February 1943 in Tetouan and Tangier.<sup>5</sup> In September 1946, after an audience with the Sultan, leaders of the PRN and the *Istiqlal* met secretly in Rabat and agreed to coordinate their efforts under the aegis of the ‘Alawi royal family (al-Fassi 1948, 373).

The arrival of the Allied Forces in November 1942 impacted significantly on the nationalist movement, not only motivating it to renew its anti-colonial efforts, but also providing it with a set of ideas to legitimise its aspirations. During the next few years, the *Istiqlal* and the PRN, as well as the much smaller *Hizb al-Shura wa-l-Istiqlal* (Party of Democracy and Independence or PDI) and *Hizb al-Wahda al-Maghribiyya* (Moroccan Unity Party, or MUP), followed a two-track strategy. At home, they created broad-based mass movements that would challenge the French and Spanish authorities and underscore their claims to be the vanguard of the Moroccan people’s desire for independence; abroad, they conducted a well-organised propaganda campaign to enlist the support of diplomats, politicians, journalists, and intellectuals for their struggle (Stenner 2012). Moreover, they established close contacts with US diplomats stationed in Morocco, updating them on the latest developments and enlisting their sympathies for the Moroccan cause. His delicate position under the watchful eye of the French resident general prevented Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef from publicly criticising the colonisers or meeting in person with American officials; instead, he used his close links with the nationalists to stay in contact with them.

### **The State Department’s attitude towards Morocco**

The State Department maintained a pro-French policy after the end of the Second World War, even as nationalist movements across the Maghrib increasingly manifested their objections to colonial rule. However, individual diplomatic agents in Washington, North Africa, and Europe displayed a range of different opinions on the question of Moroccan independence and made it difficult for the Department to adopt a consensus position. On the one hand, the US Ambassador in Paris, Jefferson Caffery, became a passionate spokesperson for the French government and used every opportunity to decry the Moroccan nationalist movement. But diplomatic agents stationed inside Morocco, on the other hand, gradually became more sympathetic towards native aspirations, influenced by regular visits and the persuasive power of the nationalist leaders. Yet when push came to shove, they, too, sided with the French. Nonetheless, the Protectorate authorities repeatedly complained about the activities of the US diplomats, believing that the Americans were secretly encouraging the nationalist movement. After the Sultan’s famous speech in Tangier on 10 April 1947, during which he publicly proclaimed Morocco’s right to independence for the first time, US Consul General Alling felt the need to assure Washington that ‘no American official ... has encouraged the idea that we would support any movement against the French’.<sup>6</sup>

It appears that several fears inspired the State Department officials’ ambivalent attitude towards the nationalists, among them: France would think the USA was encouraging the nationalists and

loosen its commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); the Moroccans would become so discouraged by the lack of American support that they would resort to violence; the French or the Moroccans would demand the closure of the important naval air bases constructed by the USA after 1943; Washington's refusal to support the aspirations of the peoples of North Africa at the United Nations would upset newly independent states across Asia and Africa; and instability in North Africa would lead to the 'spread of Communism' in the region. In a desperate attempt to square the circle, the State Department advised its diplomats in the field to 'reconcile' the 'seemingly contradictory' positions of the French authorities and the Moroccan nationalists 'because no other satisfactory alternative appears at present'.<sup>7</sup>

In June 1947, high-ranking American diplomats met in Paris to devise a coherent strategy vis-à-vis French North Africa. Their final report, approved by the State Department, expressed the hope that 'the North African entities should, under France's benevolent leadership, develop into friendly and profitable partners contributing to France's strength and influence, rather than into weak and unwilling vassals costing France money and perhaps men'. The US government expected France to enact concrete reforms that would put Morocco on the path to 'economic advancement' and 'true sovereignty'; at the same time, it called on the nationalists to show moderation since their country was '[not] yet ready for self-rule'. Moreover, it asked the Arab League to convince the Moroccans to cooperate with France and encourage 'active participation ... in these evolution programs'.<sup>8</sup> According to Washington, this was the only way to prevent a destabilisation of the entire region, embarrassing France before the United Nations, and inevitably strengthening Communism in North Africa. As Sangmuah has pointed out, it was this emphasis on stability, on the hierarchy of nations and races, and on liberal capitalism that shaped Washington's approach towards North Africa after the Second World War (1989, 5).

### The 'Roosevelt Myth' and the nationalists' claim to legitimacy

Despite the reluctance of the US government to support the Moroccan demands for independence, the members of the Istiqlal strove to win over the American diplomats on the ground, invoking the 'Roosevelt Myth' when sending nationalist delegates to call on US officials in Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier. They discussed many issues with the Americans, but the topic of Roosevelt's support for colonised peoples was regularly brought up. Already during the war years the nationalists had been in contact with men from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the US wartime intelligence agency. In the spring of 1943, Ahmed Balafrej told Capt. Gordon Browne, an OSS officer in Tangier, that they had been inspired by speeches made by Roosevelt that were broadcast by the BBC.<sup>9</sup> This admiration for the US President carried over into the post-war era, which provided the Moroccans with many more opportunities to enlighten American officials about their demands.

On 4 July 1944, nationalist Ali Bargach made his first appearance at the US Consulate in Rabat on the occasion of Independence Day. He submitted a letter addressed to President Roosevelt, noting that his famous Four Freedoms Speech had influenced the Moroccans to ask for their own 'right to independence'.<sup>10</sup> A few months later, Bargach discussed with Vice Consul Donald A. Dumont about the invitation that Roosevelt had supposedly extended to Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef to visit the USA, the first of many conversations dealing with this topic.<sup>11</sup> The Roosevelt Myth gained further momentum in 1946 when Elliott Roosevelt published *As He Saw It*, a biography of his late father in which he confirmed the Moroccan claims (1946, 109–122). FDR's son had served with the US Army in Morocco during the Second World War and was present at the Anfa Conference. When the Istiqlal's official newspaper, *al-'Alam*,



dedicated a lead article to the book, the French censor became so alarmed that he removed the section containing President Roosevelt's opinion on the future of Morocco.<sup>12</sup> A few days before his famous visit to Tangier in April 1947, Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef sent two emissaries to the American Legation in that city to reiterate his wish to be invited to the USA.<sup>13</sup> Rumours of the monarch's impending state visit to Washington became so widespread that even the Spanish authorities took notice of them.<sup>14</sup>

When FDR died in office on 12 April 1945, the Moroccans lost a friend and hero. Instead of forgetting about him, however, the nationalist movement turned him into a saint-like figure whose mystical powers grew steadily. His death day quickly became a *mawlid*, commemorated in ways similar to the passing of a local Sufi saint, with vigils and public celebrations of his words and deeds. On the first anniversary of FDR's death, the MUP sent a telegram to President Truman, praising 'the great work accomplished by that great man'.<sup>15</sup> Each year at the beginning of April, the Moroccans visited the US Consulate in Rabat and the Legation in Tangier to express their condolences to the American people. For the French, there were positive aspects to the Truman presidency, because they deemed the new President much more friendly to their colonial ambitions than his predecessor. Referring to the demise of their hero FDR, a police report noted the growing 'concerns' among the Moroccan nationalists, because they have seen 'disappear with Roosevelt one of the master pieces of their propaganda'.<sup>16</sup> This assessment by the French authorities turned out to be unfounded, however, since Roosevelt's passing actually gave new impetus to the myth surrounding his name and served as an inspiration to both the nationalists and their monarch.

### **The Sultan and the 'Roosevelt Myth'**

Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef took every available opportunity to express his feelings of sympathy towards the USA and FDR. Whenever he granted an audience to US diplomats, the Sultan eulogised the late President, a shrewd means of recalling the promise of American support in the presence of the French officers who closely watched his public appearances.<sup>17</sup> At a reception for foreign diplomats on the occasion of the Feast of the Throne on 18 November 1946, the Sultan asked the American representative 'to transmit our thanks to His Excellency the President', adding, 'we always think of the great man Roosevelt ... and we are sure that President Truman will follow in [his] steps ... and that the Arab peoples will obtain their rights with [his] support'.<sup>18</sup>

When Assistant Secretary of State George C. McGhee toured French North Africa in the fall of 1950, the Sultan again seized the opportunity to send a clear message. At a lengthy audience with the high-ranking American visitor, the Sultan recalled the memory of FDR, who 'was not only a great man in his own time, but had become a person of historical stature with the passage of time'.<sup>19</sup> These gestures by the monarch did not go unnoticed; McGhee noted that the Sultan was clearly appealing to the USA for support. When McGhee's successor, Henry A. Byroade, met the Sultan two years later, Resident General Guillaume coolly remarked that Mohamed ben Youssef had used the same language 'habitually reserved to distinguished Americans ... [about] the noble intentions of President Roosevelt'.<sup>20</sup> Apparently, the reference to FDR's alleged promise had become an integral part of the monarch's discourse, much to the chagrin of the French authorities.

### **The Roosevelt Club**

Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef was not alone in using the memory of the late President to challenge French rule over Morocco; members of the nationalist movement also used the Roosevelt Myth in

their own way, in order to attract the attention of the USA to their demands. One Moroccan who reached out to American diplomats was Abdellatif Sbihi, a staunch nationalist and pro-monarchist whose role in the revocation of the Berber dahir in 1930 has been described by Brown (1972, 209). Scion of an important family that had served the makhzan for generations, Sbihi never was officially a member of the Istiqlal; rather, his main goals were to promote US–Moroccan friendship, the Sultan, and himself. In the fall of 1944, the hyperactive and omnipresent Sbihi organised the first ‘Roosevelt Tea’ where US diplomats and military officers met with members of the Moroccan elite. According to US Consul Maurice Pasquet, the meetings were held in an ‘atmosphere of friendship’ with pictures of Roosevelt and the Sultan prominently displayed against the background of a large American flag.<sup>21</sup> On 17 February 1946, Sbihi and a few friends officially founded in Rabat the ‘Roosevelt Club’, whose mission was to introduce members of the native elite to Americans living in Morocco and to exchange economic and political ideas (Blair 1970, 98–99). In a letter to fellow nationalists, he laid out his motives:

if we succeed in creating our Moroccan circle to honor the memory of Roosevelt ... it will be possible for us to obtain the necessary directives from the United States, and to consolidate the links of friendship that unite the children of our country to the noble American people, which won't be without certain advantages.<sup>22</sup>

Sbihi even contacted Eleanor Roosevelt, asking her ‘very respectfully’ to allow the Club to be named after her late husband.<sup>23</sup> The possibility of the former First Lady lending legitimacy to this endeavour made the French authorities extremely nervous, and they asked the US State Department to discourage Mrs Roosevelt from recognising the Roosevelt Club in order to avoid ‘sully’ing the name of her late husband by associating it with a good-for-nothing like Sbihi.<sup>24</sup> A reply from Hyde Park never arrived, and the French authorities forbade the inaugural meeting of the Roosevelt Club just hours before it was to take place on 12 April 1946.<sup>25</sup> However, these setbacks did not deter Sbihi, who relocated to Tangier a few months later in order to try his luck in the international zone that was not under French control.

One year later, on 12 April 1947, the Roosevelt Club held its first official meeting at Hotel Minzah in Tangier to commemorate the death of the former President. The event was a great success, with more than 200 Moroccans and 50 Americans in attendance. Abdellatif Sbihi talked at length about the evils of colonialism, and Mehdi Bennouna, a leading member of the PRN, summarised his comments ‘in good English’. US Consul General Alling noted that ‘frequent and loud applause greeted his praise of Mr. Roosevelt’s many qualities and particularly [his] concern ... for the welfare of small nations’.<sup>26</sup> But the main reason for the success of the Roosevelt tea was the simultaneous visit of Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef to Tangier, when, for the first time, he publicly voiced support for the independence movement. Diplomatic protocol prohibited the monarch from attending the meeting, but it was widely known that he wholeheartedly supported the appeal to US–Moroccan friendship. According to Alling, it was ‘reliably reported’ that the Sultan encouraged Sbihi and even provided some financial support,<sup>27</sup> and that the event was ‘wholly beneficial to American prestige in Morocco’.<sup>28</sup>

The first meeting of the Roosevelt Club constituted only the beginning of the public outreach campaign organised by the Moroccans that was to last until independence. Five years later, the Secretary General of the PRN, Tayeb Bennouna, wrote to his brother Mehdi:

The Istiqlal organized two events under the name Roosevelt Club to honor the officers and sailors of the American fleet anchored in Tangier ... All of Tangier appeared decorated with Moroccan and American flags, especially the native quarters. The French are very upset by the friendly reception which the Moroccans show towards the Americans.<sup>29</sup>

The name Roosevelt had entered the daily vocabulary of the nationalists, who never failed to evoke this historical figure at every opportunity available. Since visiting US servicemen constituted the only regular link to the America, the local activists viewed them as representatives of their countrymen and hoped to transmit their admiration for the late President through them. At the same time, however, the nationalist movement also dispatched its own delegate across the Atlantic in order to propagate its demands in the land of Uncle Sam.

### The 'Roosevelt Myth' abroad

In June 1947, Mehdi Bennouna travelled to New York to promote the Moroccan case before the American public and at the United Nations. A few weeks after his arrival, he told his friend and mentor Abderrahman 'Azzam Pasha, first Secretary General of the Arab League, about the Roosevelt letters sent to the Sultan after the Anfa Conference. 'Azzam Pasha immediately released the story to the media to attract public attention. The next day, *The New York Times* in a front-page article declared that 'Roosevelt promised post-war assistance to the Sultan of Morocco in his efforts for Moroccan independence from France.'<sup>30</sup> Faced with this inconvenient publicity campaign, the US government decided to go public with their objections. In an official statement, the White House denied any knowledge of such promises and the State Department insinuated that the Sultan may have misunderstood what the late President said.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, activists in the Istiqlal's Paris office publicised the claim that Roosevelt promised support for their country's independence, and the local press picked up the story. Confronted by French journalist Maurice Ferro, a spokesperson of the State Department felt obliged to repeat that he had no knowledge such a promise had ever been made.<sup>32</sup> *Le Monde* immediately announced that 'the alleged promises of independence, which Roosevelt would have given in 1943 to the Sultan of Morocco, begin to take on the aspect of a recurrent argument ... [but] no document exists relating to the famous promises of Casablanca'.<sup>33</sup> Upon Bennouna's urging, the royal palace sent copies of the letters to New York, but under strict orders not to publish them; naturally, 'Azzam Pasha wanted to show them to the media to prove that he was not a liar, but Bennouna refused his request so as not to embarrass the US government, thereby causing a serious strain in his relationship with the Egyptian diplomat that lasted several weeks.<sup>34</sup>

During his stay on the East Coast, Bennouna repeatedly travelled to Washington to meet State Department officials who were eager for more details about the Roosevelt letters. In December 1947, Bennouna explained to the Americans that Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef had warned the nationalists not to publish the letters lest they embarrass their American friends. The recording officer thanked his Moroccan interlocutor for this display of diplomatic tactfulness and explained that he 'could see no benefits which would accrue to the nationalists by making [the letters] public'.<sup>35</sup> In reality, however, the US officials continued to remain sceptical regarding Bennouna's claims, because they still had not seen any evidence corroborating the alleged Roosevelt promise.

'Azzam Pasha continued to refer to Roosevelt's promise for years, whenever he attacked France for its policies in North Africa.<sup>36</sup> By this time, the Roosevelt Myth had spread across the world and the leaders of other newly independent nations referred to it whenever the topic of North African independence arose. On 16 March 1951, Prime Minister Nehru spoke on behalf of the Moroccan cause before the Indian Parliament, referring to Roosevelt's promise that Morocco would obtain its freedom.<sup>37</sup> During the Sixth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1951, the Iraqi delegate reminded his listeners that 'Roosevelt had promised the Sultan of Morocco that his country would regain complete sovereignty and its

independence after the end of the World War.<sup>38</sup> Evidently, the Moroccan nationalist movement had successfully made the Roosevelt Myth an integral part of the global anti-colonial discourse on French colonialism. With foreign politicians and diplomats publicly referring to FDR's promise to support Morocco's independence, it became clear that it had become a serious threat to the moral foundations of the Protectorate.

### **The Roosevelt letters**

Alarmed by the rapid spread of the Roosevelt Myth across the world, the US government decided to start an investigation in order to get to the bottom of the rumours surrounding the meeting between the late President and Sidi Mohamed in January 1943. After a thorough internal investigation, American officials concluded that no letters had ever been transmitted from the White House to the Sultan, that the late President's alleged promises were nothing more than a rumour, and that the entire issue was not worthy of their attention. However, this assessment quickly turned out to be false. In September 1947, a group of Istiqlalis held a private luncheon for US Consul Maurice Pasquet in Rabat where, to his complete surprise, they presented him the original Roosevelt letters. Claiming that they had 'borrowed' them from the palace archive without the Sultan's knowledge, they urged Pasquet to use his camera to take pictures of the unique documents. Facing a highly embarrassing situation, Pasquet developed the pictures at home and sent them to Washington, but told the nationalists that the film had been ruined by light exposure. Disappointed, the Istiqlalis gave him a self-help guide on photography as a present.<sup>39</sup>

In a top-secret internal memorandum, the State Department now made an about-turn and confirmed that Roosevelt had indeed promised the Sultan that he could 'count on the truly unselfish aid from the people of the United States'. Furthermore, he had expressed his sincere hope that 'you [Mohamed ben Youssef] will be able to visit us in Washington as soon as this dreadful war is over, and that you will bring with you your fine son, the Crown Prince [Hassan]'.<sup>40</sup> State Department officials now understood why the Moroccans had repeatedly referred to Roosevelt's promise at Anfa and requested an invitation for the Sultan to visit the USA.<sup>41</sup>

The entire affair put the Americans in an extremely awkward position, since they feared that publishing the letters would increase pressure on the USA to support Morocco's bid for independence, at a time when Washington's main interest was in a strong France closely allied to NATO. Therefore, the State Department ignored all the evidence to the contrary and advised its field staff to stand by the claim 'that we do not believe such a promise was ever given'.<sup>42</sup> Pasquet was congratulated on his brilliant trick that had 'much amused' his colleagues in Washington. With the American authorities stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the truth, Moroccan nationalists abandoned the direct approach and looked elsewhere for help.

### **Eleanor Roosevelt**

The most natural potential ally was former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a world-famous champion of human rights, and it was to her that the Moroccans now turned. In December 1952, the activists of the Moroccan Office of Information and Documentation (MOID) in New York convinced Mrs Roosevelt to dedicate one of her widely read newspaper columns to explaining the Moroccan cause to her readers.<sup>43</sup> In Rabat, the Sultan sent an emissary to the American Consulate to express his appreciation after the former First Lady gave a speech at the United Nations in favour of the peoples of North Africa.<sup>44</sup> When Mrs Roosevelt publicly spoke out against the

position being taken by the US delegation to the United Nations regarding French North Africa, the nationalist newspaper *al-Istiqlal* dedicated an article on its first page to her statements.<sup>45</sup>

The relationship between the Sultan and Mrs Roosevelt did not end after Morocco obtained independence on 2 March 1956. A few weeks later, a black limousine pulled up at her residence in Hyde Park and several Moroccans emerged carrying a huge bouquet of flowers that they placed on the late President's grave. In her autobiography, she wrote that the head of the delegation then conveyed to her the personal invitation of the monarch to visit him in Rabat (Roosevelt, 1992, 364–365). Mrs Roosevelt accepted and travelled to Morocco the following year.<sup>46</sup> When Sidi Mohamed came to the USA in November 1957 for his first state visit, *The New York Times* introduced him to its readers as 'a hero of Moroccan nationalism, a friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt, [and]... a dynamic leader of the twentieth century Arab world'.<sup>47</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt accompanied his three daughters during the monarch's speech to the Twelfth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on 9 December 1957. She later lauded him as a great leader who 'can form a bridge between the West and the Near East'.<sup>48</sup> Due to her husband's legacy as well as her own contributions to the nationalists' global propaganda campaign during the 1950s, Eleanor Roosevelt became an integral part of modern Moroccan history and Sidi Mohamed's attentiveness underlined his nation's continuing appreciation of her.

### The American view

As historian Andrew Buchanan has shown, during the Second World War the Roosevelt administration had developed a 'grand strategy' towards the entire Mediterranean, which eventually became an 'indispensable element in the overall process by which America's postwar hegemony in Europe and beyond was established' (2013, 11). However, Washington envisioned a close cooperation with the Western colonisers, rather than the nebulous idea of an alliance with the native population, despite FDR's repeated statements of support for Moroccan independence. In a similar vein, his successor Truman repeatedly criticised French policy in North Africa from behind the scenes, but he never acted forcefully to change the situation. Both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations attempted to balance their own strategic and military concerns against those of their French allies, and they did little to support the native nationalists (Zoubir 1995). As a result, no American administration adopted a foreign policy openly challenging the French Empire in North Africa (Thomas 2002, 47). Instead, they preferred an 'ambivalent approach' that balanced short- and long-term interests without overtly offending anyone (El Machat 1996, 11). The pressing global crises of the moment, such as the Berlin Blockade (1948–49) and the Korean War (1950–53), made it even less feasible to interfere in French colonial policies. A statement made by the US Ambassador to France Jefferson Caffery is an excellent case in point. According to his French interlocutor, Caffery explained that 'the leanings of the United States [towards France] have never been more favorable, ... they have been completely reversed since the times of Roosevelt'.<sup>49</sup>

Nonetheless, French authorities in Rabat and Paris were very wary of the growing US influence in North Africa. Archival documents show that French officials remained deeply fearful that the Americans were plotting to replace them as the colonial masters of the region. Throughout the immediate post-war period, France did everything in its power to discourage contacts between Americans and the native population, including a diplomatic affront to an American consul general that forced Secretary of State Dean Acheson to personally intervene.<sup>50</sup> In December 1952, the assassination of Tunisian labour leader Farhat Hached by right-wing French settlers led to days of violent protests in Casablanca, followed by a wave of brutal repression by the

French. Resident General Guillaume made it clear to the Americans that he blamed Roosevelt's statements for the unrest inside the Protectorate.<sup>51</sup> An internal French report concluded 'the real danger emanates not only from the North Africa parties ... [but] also from the subterfuges certain Great Powers use for the conquest of new strategic bases'.<sup>52</sup> The anxiety displayed by the French authorities demonstrates the shift in global politics away from Europe and towards Washington, and the extent to which the Moroccan campaign for American support had upset them.

At the same time, the Moroccan nationalists managed to draw the attention of the American public through the propaganda campaign organised by the MOID in New York, and especially their success in winning Eleanor Roosevelt's backing. By associating their struggle with wartime hero FDR, they gained legitimacy at home and abroad. Rivlin has concluded that 'whether the United States intended it to be so or not ... the effect of World War II and of the United States in internationalizing the Moroccan challenge to France ... contributed significantly to the success of this effort' (1982, 82). We might add that the contacts between President Roosevelt and Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef were always central to this aspect of US–Moroccan relations. The image of America as Morocco's saviour from European colonialism became an integral part of the nationalist narrative, and FDR's reputation as a friend of the Moroccan people persists until today.

## Conclusion

The Moroccan nationalist movement and Sultan Mohamed ben Youssef skilfully crafted the Roosevelt Myth as a powerful tool to legitimise their campaign for independence, attaching American diplomats and politicians to their struggle. They used Roosevelt's statements of support to present themselves as an oppressed nation seeking the help of a generous benefactor. The angry reactions of the French authorities, and the awkward attempts by some US diplomats to avoid a diplomatic fallout with Paris, demonstrate the effectiveness of this strategy and the degree to which they succeeded. Although the Roosevelt Myth was only one of many reasons behind France's decision to grant independence to Morocco in 1956, in the popular imagination it created a permanent and indissoluble bond between the actions of the US government and the fate of the Moroccan people. It also shaped the thinking of the Moroccan elites who dominated politics in the post-independence era, and it contributed to Morocco's historically close relationship to the USA that endures into the present.

It is important to not reduce this connection to mere realpolitik, however. The historical record indicates that the Moroccans felt a deep-rooted admiration for the 'great man', who displayed much respect and sympathy towards their country. Roosevelt's attitude stood in sharp contrast to the arrogant and patronising demeanour of his French and British counterparts, whose colonial history in the Muslim world did not endear them to the North Africans. The appropriation of the President's public and private words, as well as the language Atlantic Charter – widely considered to be his brainchild – also contributed to the image of a world leader who seemed to care for the people of the Maghrib. After decades of suffering under the yoke of an unwanted servitude, the people of North Africa finally seemed to have a powerful friend. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that the Moroccan nationalists embraced the larger-than-life President as the first secular saint of their nation.

The history of the Roosevelt myth also positions Morocco in the larger historiography on the era of decolonisation and the early Cold War. At a time of intense Great Power rivalry and the decline of European colonialism around the world, the political elites of a small country in the northwestern corner of Africa now claimed a place in the international system of nation

states. Rather than dedicating their energies to a grandiose revolutionary struggle for the political and economic equality of all peoples, the Moroccans used the uneven distribution of power in the hierarchical international system in their favour. They petitioned the USA to support their campaign for independence, thereby implicitly offering their nation as a potential client state to the government in Washington. According to Duara, such a relationship ‘should not be seen as merely hypocritical’, but rather as the outcome of ‘the constellation of institutions that appeared ... and had world transforming consequences during this period’ (2011, 459). The manner in which the native elite manipulated the Roosevelt Myth to gain the attention and support of US decision-makers is a prime example of how the unequal power relations between ‘North’ and ‘South’ endured into the era of decolonisation, albeit in new forms and framed by a new rhetoric.

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## Notes

1. This paper uses the term ‘myth’ as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a person or thing held in awe or generally referred to with near reverential admiration on the basis of popularly repeated stories (whether real or fictitious)’ as well as ‘a popular conception of a person or thing which exaggerates or idealizes the truth’.
2. The Treaty of Fez of 1912 had created the French Protectorate in Morocco. A narrow strip of land on the northern coast was placed under Spanish tutelage, and the French Resident General officially represented the Sultan in matters pertaining to foreign affairs.
3. For a detailed treatment of the nascence of the Moroccan nationalist movement, see Rézette (1955), Halstead (1967), and Brown (1972).
4. For a discussion of the events of 1937, see Guerin (forthcoming).
5. Ma‘alamat al-Maghrib (Encyclopédie du Maroc), ed. M. Hajji (Salé: Matabi‘a Sala, 2003), s.v. ‘Abdelkhalek Torres’.
6. US Legation Tangier to Department of State (DoS), 30 April 1947, 711.81/4-3047 in Central Files for State Department Records (Record Group 59), United States National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter USNA).
7. Smith to Chase – Official Memorandum, 22 September 1948, RG59, 711.81/9-2248, USNA.
8. ‘Report of North African Conference at Paris’ enclosed in ‘The Ambassador in France (Caffery) to the Secretary of State’, 20 June 1947, Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter FRUS) (1947) 5: 691–692, 694, 696–697; ‘The Secretary of State to the Embassy in France’, 11 July 1947, FRUS (1947) 5: 697.
9. Browne to Villard, 21 September 1944, RG59, 881.00/2845, USNA.
10. Letter Addressed to Roosevelt by Bargach, 11 July 1944, RG59, 881.00/7-1144, USNA.
11. Conversation with Nationalist Ali Bargach, 29 September 1944, RG59, 881.00/9-2944, USNA.
12. ‘Kitab al-jiniral Elliott Roosevelt ‘an walidihī al-raīs Roosevelt’, *al-‘Alam* (Rabat), 17 September 1946, 1.
13. Tangier to DoS, 28 March 1947, RG59, 881.00/3-2847, USNA.
14. Asunto: próximo viaje del Sultán a América – Boletín 560, 12 May 1947, 15 (13.01), Box 81/2166, Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares (hereafter AGA).
15. MUP Telegram to White House, 12 April 1946, RG59, 881.00/4-1246, USNA.
16. Lettre adressée au Department, 18 May 1945, Protectorat français au Maroc – Cabinet Diplomatique, 1912–1956 (IMA/5), Box 976, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes (hereafter CADN).
17. Tangier to DoS, 22 November 1947, RG59, 881.00/11-2247, USNA.
18. ‘Jallalat al-Malik al-Mafdiy yuqtabilu sa‘adat al-safir wa rijal al-silk al-diblumasi’, *al-‘Alam*, 19 November 1946, 4.
19. Memo of Conversation: McGhee and Mohamed ben Youssef, 30 September 1950, RG59, 611.71/11-850, USNA.
20. Résident général à Paris, 3 May 1952, IMA/5/979, CADN.
21. Arab Congratulations on 8 November, 16 November 1944, RG59, 881.00/11-1544, USNA.
22. Lettre circulaire adressée par Sbihi dans les principales villes du Maroc, October 1945, IMA/282/199, CADN.

23. Télégramme: Rabat au Ministère des Affaires étrangères, 23 February 1946, Série M (Maroc 1944–55) 24QO, Box 65, Archives diplomatiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères, La Courneuve (AMAE); Télégramme Sbihi à Roosevelt, 19 February 1946, IMA/282/199, CADN; Memorandum of Conversation: Henry Villard and Francis Lacoste, 11 March 1946, RG59, 881.00/3-146, USNA.
24. French Prohibit Formation of Roosevelt Club, 18 April 1946, RG59/881.00/4-1846, USNA.
25. Note sur le Club Roosevelt, 19 April 1946, IMA/282/199, CADN.
26. Meeting in Commemoration of President Roosevelt, 18 April 1947, RG59, 711.00/4-1847, USNA.
27. Alleged Views of the Sultan of Morocco, 5 June 1947, RG59/711.00/6-547, USNA.
28. Meeting in Commemoration of President Roosevelt, 18 April 1947, RG59, 711.00/4-1847, USNA.
29. Carta de Taieb Benuna a su hermano el Mehdi, 1 October 1952, 81/12710, AGA.
30. 'Roosevelt Pledge to Arab Reported', *New York Times*, 20 June 1947, 1.
31. Asunto: suspuestas promesas sobre la independencia de Marruecos; Embajada de España en Washington, 1 July 1947, 10 (26.2), Box 54/12734, AGA.
32. Memo of Conversation: Schwartz and Ferro, 14 January 1948, RG59, 881.00/11-2247, USNA.
33. 'La fin d'une légende – le President Roosevelt n'a jamais promis l'indépendance au Maroc', *Le Monde* (Paris), 16 January 1948, 8.
34. Memorandum of Conversation: Bennouna and Schwartz, 3 December 1947, RG59, 881.00/12-347, USNA.
35. Memorandum of Conversation: Bennouna and Schwartz, 3 December 1947, RG59, 881.00/12-347, USNA.
36. Rabat: Press Review, 13–19 June, 1951, 20 June 1951, RG59, 971.61/6-2051, USNA.
37. Statement of Indian PM – 13–19 June 1951, 27 March 1951, RG59, 771.00/3-2751, USNA.
38. La cuestión marroquí ante la ONU – Radio Londres; Boletín de Info – Radio Árabe no. 164, 13 December 1951, 15 (13.01), Box 81/2161, AGA.
39. Sultan Counts on US for help, 9 October 1947, RG59, 881.00/10-2447, USNA.
40. Letter from Roosevelt to Sultan of Morocco, 24 October 1947, RG59, 881.00/10-2447, USNA.
41. Actually, the US diplomats should have already been familiar with this issue before. On 2 February 1943, during a press conference held right after his return to Washington, FDR stated that he had invited Mohamed ben Youssef to Washington during their encounter in Casablanca. However, the attending journalists displayed little interest in the issue and instead urged the President to move on to more pertinent topics; Roosevelt (1972, 21, 102–104).
42. Memo of Conversation: Schwartz and Ferro, 14 January 1948, RG59, 881.00/10-2447, USNA.
43. 'My Day by Eleanor Roosevelt', 3 January 1953, [http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?\\_y=1953&\\_f=md002422](http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1953&_f=md002422), accessed 25 May 2013.
44. Latest News From the Palace, 18 April 1952, RG59, 771.00/4-1852, USNA.
45. 'Après la decision du Conseil de Sécurité sur la plainte tunisienne', *al-Istiqlal* (Rabat), 19 April 1952, 1.
46. 'Mrs. Roosevelt in Morocco', *New York Times*, 18 March 1957, 2.
47. 'Westernmost Arab King', *New York Times*, 26 November 1957, 5.
48. 'My Day by Eleanor Roosevelt', 12 December 1957, [http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?\\_y=1957&\\_f=md003984](http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1957&_f=md003984), accessed 24 February 2014.
49. Ministre des Affaires étrangères au Résident général, 25 July 1947, IMA/5/976, CADN.
50. During a luncheon with the gathered foreign diplomatic corps in Rabat on 11 October 1951, Guillaume ordered US Consul Doorman to stop meeting with Moroccan nationalists or he would ask to have him recalled (Rabat to DoS, 13 October 1951, RG59, 771.00/10-1251, USNA). Secretary of State Dean Acheson immediately demanded an explanation from the French for this incident and assured Doorman that he still had the full support of Washington (DoS to Tangier, 15 October 1951; DoS to Rabat, 23 October 1951, RG59, 771.00/10-1251, USNA).
51. Paris to DoS, 22 December 1952, RG59, 771.00/12-2252; Paris to DoS, 20 December 1952, RG59, 771.00/12-2052, USNA.
52. Les nationalistes nord-africains au Caire, 4 January 1949, 26, IMA/200/338, CADN.

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