



## Mediterranean crossroads: Spanish-Moroccan relations in past and present

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INTRODUCTION



## Mediterranean crossroads: Spanish-Moroccan relations in past and present



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Tariq b. Ziyad's conquest of al-Andalus in 711, the travels of Maimonides from Córdoba via Fez and Tunis to Cairo during the twelve century, the acquisition of the *presidios* of Ceuta (1415/1668) and Melilla (1497) by the Crown of Castile, or the waves of migrants currently hoping to overcome the barriers separating Morocco from Spain: each of these topics underscores the centuries-long reciprocal relations uniting the Iberian Peninsula and the Islamic Maghrib. Situated at the intersection of Europe and Africa, the Middle East and the Atlantic world, the Strait of Gibraltar constitutes the centre of these linkages; on a good day one can see the Spanish coast from Tangier and vice-versa – but far too often, clouds and fog obfuscate the spectacular view. Despite the significance of this transcontinental space though, contemporary scholarship on this cultural intersection is blurred and unfocused, creating absences where there should be narratives of connections spanning eras and genres. What are the main features of this shared relationship, what are the sources of its specificity, and how has it continued to shape events in the western Mediterranean until today? These are some of the questions we seek to answer by deploying an array of methodological frameworks to explain the mechanisms – both positive and negative – that have brought these two regions together.

It was right at the heart of this geographical nexus, in the city of Tangier, that we convened the 2015 annual conference of the American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS). Symbolising the intimate connection between these two world regions, the Spanish coastline was clearly visible from our conference hall at the Grand Hôtel Villa de France, where scholars from six countries gathered to study both the past and present of Iberian-Maghribi relations. Specifically, we sought to shift our focus away from the perennial topic of medieval al-Andalus to the modern era, which has received significantly less scholarly attention. The ultimate outcome of this two-day event is the current special edition of the *Journal of North African Studies*,

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which contains articles from eight European and North American – though regrettably no North African – academics.

Central to our discussions was the Strait of Gibraltar as a crossroads that we might consider a ‘key’ allowing us to solve the ancient ‘Euro-African equation that is simultaneously based on both attraction and rejection’ (Morales Lezcano 2006, 29). Of course, the issue of trans-Mediterranean relations is nothing new as numerous scholars have studied the sea’s history as a place of intercultural contact before (see for example Horden and Purcell 2000; Mallette 2010; Clancy-Smith 2012; Khuri-Makdisi 2013). Although none of the conference participants directly analysed the role played by this important maritime space, our focus on connections between Europe and Africa indirectly challenged the notion of the Mediterranean as a frontier separating two worlds, and instead highlighted its role as a shared cultural space. As the contributions to this special edition attest, we concentrated predominantly on the recent relationship of Spain with the kingdom of Morocco – and the other way around. Rather than studying interstate relations, though, they deal with the ideas, people, texts, and material goods that have circulated across the sea and continue to do so until today. That these two countries share the only African-European land border further underlines their somewhat unique relationship.

An important motivating factor behind this project was the marginalised position of both Spain and Morocco within the scholarly literature on modern Europe and the Arab world respectively. Spain is located on the western edge of the Eurasian landmass and usually considered as the periphery of Europe. Whether due to its ‘backward’ character vis-à-vis ‘progressive’ nation states like France and England during the nineteenth century, its ‘delayed’ democratisation after Francisco Franco’s regime remained the last holdout of Fascism during the twentieth century, or its role as a ‘gateway’ for migrants seeking a better life in the northern hemisphere in recent years, the country has always been both a part of, and a counterpoint to, the rest of the continent. A solid knowledge of Iberian history is certainly no requirement for scholars of modern Europe. One reason behind this was the continuing influence of an extraordinarily reactionary Catholic church at a time when much of the continent witnessed a steady decrease of clerical authority, as exemplified by the Concordats between Madrid and the Vatican of 1851 and 1953. Furthermore, although few would nowadays uncritically accept the sixteenth century ‘black legend’ that had characterised the Spanish conquest of the Western hemisphere as extraordinarily ‘barbaric,’ the underlying ideas persisted well into the twentieth century (Martin-Márquez 2008, 39–42). In addition to its geographical location, such historical developments have contributed to the perception of Spain as not properly European, a notion that only began to change after the country joined the European Economic Community in 1986.

A similar story of perceived difference can be told about the Maghribi kingdom just 14 kilometres to the south. Situated in the north-western corner of Africa, Morocco has been equally marginalised as its European counterpart. Because it remained the only territory outside the control of the Ottoman Empire, it never became as integrated into the trajectory of the Middle Eastern world as its counterparts in Algiers and Tunis. Its large non-Arabic speaking Amazigh (Berber) minority further set it apart. Of course, commercial interactions as well as religious practices – especially the annual *hajj* to the Holy Sites – meant that the country was never isolated from the rest of the Islamic world. But it nonetheless maintained an identity apart; after all, where else would a local monarch be bold enough to assume the pompous title of Commander of the Faithful? Simultaneously, Morocco served as a gateway to sub-Saharan Africa by way of commerce, (forced) migration, and circuits of religious scholarship. Whether black slaves or ostrich feathers, it constituted a trade hub that connected three distinct regions. Yet as was the case with Spain, Morocco has long remained on the margins of scholarship on the Muslim world (with the notable exception of several foundational works in the field of cultural anthropology, including Geertz 1968 and Gellner 1969). As a result, a scholar of the Middle East rarely possesses any in-depth knowledge about North Africa in general, and Morocco in particular.

The modern relations between these two kingdoms took on new forms during the nineteenth century as the Spanish empire in Latin America began to collapse and the government in Madrid displayed a renewed interest in the Maghrib. In the wake of increasing French and British economic penetration, Spain sought to assert its regional interests during the Hispano-Moroccan War (1859–60) that bankrupted the North African state and foreshadowed the age of European control (Ayache 1979). Spanish migrants constituted the largest European community in all of Morocco by the late nineteenth century (Martín Corrales 2012; López García 2012). Following the establishment of the protectorate over the northern Rif mountains in 1912, Morocco played a central part in Spanish history. After all, it was here that Francisco Franco's military coup against the Second Republic commenced in 1936 and ultimately led to a Fascist dictatorship that lasted until 1975 (Madariaga 2002). Moreover, the dropping of chemical weapons on Moroccan resistance fighters from airplanes during the Rif War (1921–26) – a powerful display of the intersection of two modern technologies – continues to haunt the local population until today, as proven by the abnormally high rates of cancer patients in the region (Kunz and Müller 1990; Balfour 2002).<sup>1</sup> The contentious nature of the relationship continues until today, as could be witnessed during the brief armed conflict over the Perejil island/*Jazirat Tura* in 2002, the dispute over King Juan Carlos I's visit to Ceuta and Melilla in 2007, the ongoing controversy over Morocco's occupation of the former

Spanish colony in the Western Sahara that began in 1975, or the participation of Moroccan citizens in the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and Barcelona (2017). Few other European and African countries share such an intrinsically intertwined past.

Yet the story of Moroccan-Spanish relations is about much more than just conflict. The colonial project had been influenced by the concept of Spanish-Muslim 'brotherhood' proposed by nineteenth century Spanish Africanist Joaquín Costa (Martin-Márquez 2008, 57). Due to the shared past of al-Andalus, the Iberian kingdom saw itself in a unique position to uplift the 'backwards' Moroccans not as foreign invaders, but as 'spiritual' relatives. (Mateo Dieste 2003, 29). And this ideology had a concrete impact on the functioning of the protectorate regime. Unlike their French counterparts in Rabat, the high commissioners in Tetouan permitted the founding of the nationalist party *Hizb al-Islah al-Watani* (Party of National Reform) in 1936 and sent a Moroccan delegation to the cultural committee of the Arab League in 1946 (Stenner 2016). Seeking to 'befriend' their colonial subjects, Spanish officials sought to appease the anti-colonial sentiments of the native population, and by extension increase the diplomatic acceptance of the Franco regime in the wider Arab world (Algora Weber 1995). Though often forgotten today, the first Moroccan declaration of independence was published by the nationalists in Tetouan on 14 February 1943 – almost one year before their compatriots in the French zone followed suit (Bouaziz 2013). A telling example between the rhetoric and reality of Spanish colonialism occurred in January 1948. Upon his return from an anti-colonial propaganda campaign at the United Nations in New York, the Spanish authorities refused to readmit Mehdi Bennouna to their protectorate and forced him to live in exile in Tangier for almost four years. When the inhabitants of Tetouan protested against this decision by the high commissioner, the colonial police force brutally repressed the large demonstration. The Spanish authorities, while regularly proclaiming their friendship to the Moroccans, could never fully conceal the underlying logic of colonial difference that ultimately upheld their regime.

The close relationship between the two kingdoms located on opposite coasts of the Mediterranean took a new turn after 1956. Spain and Morocco maintained only minimal diplomatic relations during the first two decades following the end of the protectorate, partially due to the continuing presence of Spanish troops in Sidi Ifni (until 1969) and the Western Sahara (until 1976) (Larramendi 1997, 354–364). But this diplomat ice age eventually came to an end. Beginning in 1979, the two countries embarked upon an ambitious programme of scientific and cultural cooperation that included regular exchanges between academic institutions on both sides of the Mediterranean (Velasco de Castro 2014, 197–198). And Moroccan migration to the Iberian kingdom reversed the patterns of mobility of the colonial era (López García 2004); today, citizens of the North African kingdom constitute the second

largest immigrant community in the country.<sup>2</sup> The somewhat special relations between the two states extends even into the realm of security operations. What could better symbolise the often-surprising dynamics of the Spanish-Moroccan alliance than an article published in *El País* in 2015, which revealed that Moroccan anti-terrorism agents operate freely inside Spain, with the full cooperation of the local authorities?<sup>3</sup>

The historical reality obviously evades any simplistic categorisations of either constant cooperation or confrontation. Rather than being a symbol of fraternity based on equality, Spain's 'rediscovery' of its Andalusí past actually served the kingdom's expansionist agenda amidst its collapsing empire in Latin America (Martin-Márquez 2008, 11). It was a lack of economic resources that made Spanish officials focus on the 'spiritual', rather than the material, aspects of the colonial regime (Aziza 2003, 259). Yet the same discourse that had initially underpinned the imperialist project was subsequently embraced by the Moroccan nationalists as well, who used it as a rhetorical weapon to demand an end to the protectorate regime in order to achieve the historical promise of brotherly equality. Moreover, this ideological relic of the colonial era lives on until today, despite its problematic origins. Explicitly mentioned in the preamble of the constitution adopted in 2011, the legacy of al-Andalus has become a central part of country's self-understanding by linking 'a prestigious past, a refined high culture, and a hoped-for (utopian) future' (Shannon 2015, 88). The same ideas that once served European colonialism nowadays form part of Moroccan national identity (Calderwood 2018).

It is such examples that underline the unique characteristic of the transcontinental dynamics of the western Mediterranean, which has been aptly described as 'a neighbourhood under construction' (Planet and Ramor 2005). Although the modern history of the two countries extends far beyond the colonial period, the complicated relationship between the kingdoms nonetheless gravitates around the legacy of the protectorate. With the four decades of foreign rule always in the back of our minds, we seek to explore the nuances of the evolution of Spanish-Moroccan relations during the last two centuries by drawing on cutting-edge scholarship from across the humanities and social sciences.

We begin our intellectual journey with Domingo Badía y Leblich, a Catalan explorer who toured North Africa and the Middle East from 1803 until 1818 disguised as the Muslim dignitary Ali Bey. While his travel accounts initially served the colonial interests of the Spanish government, it is the literary after-life of his memoirs that provides us with the most fascinating insights into the shared history of Spain and Morocco. As Antonio Gonzalez shows in his contribution, the original text was reedited, republished, and reinterpreted numerous times during the last two centuries by authors who drew upon his 'presumed hybridity as a convenient emblem for bridging cultural identity

and international politics.' By 'test[ing] our conventional understandings of borders, our sense of cultural homogeneity and our faith in pre-existing power dynamics on a transnational plane,' Ali Bey did much more than provide us with facts and truths that can be mined by contemporary scholars. Instead, his legacy reminds us of the important role played by literary works in the construction of the Iberian-Arab foundations of Spanish national identity.

The second article reassesses the aftermath of the Hispano-Moroccan War (1859–60), which made all too evident the fragmented nature of the North African kingdom and heralded the country's ultimate integration in the global colonial system. Through close readings of Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's *Diario de un testigo de la guerra de África* as well as several other Spanish and Moroccan accounts written in the aftermath of the occupation of the northern city of Tetouan, Itzea Goikolea-Amiano demonstrates that the defeated Moroccans employed discursive tactics of resistance to undermine the Spanish colonial project – at least in the short term. By referring to Spain's status as a second-class world power or arguing that a prolonged military occupation would inevitably lead to anarchy and thereby threaten Madrid's regional interests, both local residents and royal diplomats shaped the way many Spaniards perceived their country. Moving beyond their initially quite jingoistic rhetoric, the chroniclers of the military campaign slowly began to empathise with the Moroccan Muslims, whose 'unyielding' character and 'dignity' they had come to admire. Even influential members of parliament eventually cautioned against their country's military adventurism in Africa, thus underlining how European colonialism was always a conversation (even though an extremely unequal one) between coloniser and colonised.

Next, we transition to the protectorate period by looking at the city of Tangier as a space of Spanish-Moroccan interactions through the lens of prostitution and whoredom during the early twentieth century. According to Camila Pastor de Maria Campos, the Spanish protectorate was constructed through the 'management of subaltern Metropolitan and Maghrebi Spanish' sex workers, who were fully integrated into cross-border circuits of migration and constantly moved in and out of territories under colonial control. By analysing Hispanophone correspondences, memoirs, and fiction literature, she demonstrates how these individuals were not only the targets of modernising discourses and social control, but also contributed to the popularisation of the colonial ideology by becoming popular motifs of postcards and journal articles that circulated across the Mediterranean and allowed their European consumers to imagine Morocco as a place of exotic sexual pleasures. By studying such 'peripheral and ephemeral Orientalisms of popular practice,' we can not only 'effac[e] the boundary between colonizer and colonized,' but also experience the reality of daily life in colonial North Africa. From a methodological perspective, the article demonstrates how literary approaches enable



us to write social histories that expand our understanding of the colonial era by moving beyond the recurring topics of conquest, rule, and resistance.

The fourth contribution to this volume studies the relationship between Spanish colonialism and the local Jewish community. Eric Calderwood analyzes how the Spaniards benefitted from the 'Philo-Sephardic' movement by integrating Morocco's Jews into the colonial apparatus and thereby challenging France's cultural influence among North Africa's most important religious minority. Although initially a liberal ideology that emerged in the early twentieth century, the 'Philo-Sephardic' discourse continued to flourish during the rule of Francisco Franco, thereby demonstrating the continuities between Republican and Fascist Spain that scholars too often ignore. Through his study of Isaac Benarroch Pinto's novella *Indianos tetuanés*, Calderwood shows that Morocco's Jewish elites actively contributed to the creation of the colonial ideal of Spanish-Maghribi brotherhood by 'articulat[ing] their place within Spanish and Moroccan history.' The article provides another example for how the inter-disciplinary combination of literary analysis and archival research can further our understanding of the past.

Having concluded our study of the Spanish protectorate, we transition to the intellectual afterlife of the colonial discourse of the *hermandad hispano-árabe*, which continues to resonate on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar until today. The notion of the exceptional character of Spanish-Maghribi relations still occupies an almost hegemonic position not only in public memory, but even in some academic circles, as Gonzalo Fernández Parilla and Carlos Cañete demonstrate. According to its logic, the Spaniards are the older brothers of the North Africans and thereby had (and have) a duty to uplift their 'underdeveloped' relatives. Even contemporary Moroccan politicians continue to refer to this alleged 'brotherhood' in nostalgic terms, thereby glossing over the extreme violence that characterised much of the protectorate period. By studying this topic from a post-colonial perspective, the authors reveal 'the risks of this persistent rhetoric of uniqueness and exceptionalism that ultimately leads to the whitewashing of the colonial past as well as of Spanish fascism.' Only a critical assessment of the discursive legacy of the colonial age can ultimately lead to a relationship based on true equality.

Focusing on the role of memory in contemporary Spain, Elena Arigita studies how the 1609 expulsion of the Moriscos from the Iberian Peninsula is revisited today in public debates. Through an analysis of several official and private initiatives that sought to commemorate the tragic end of Muslim life in Spain on its 400th anniversary, she argues that whereas Islam is finally being integrated into official narratives of Spain's past, today's Muslim community continues to remain on the margins of Spanish society. Although civil society associations and even some politicians of national prominence have successfully pushed the topic to the forefront of public debate,



the state's continuing refusal to consider reparations for the injustices committed centuries ago highlights the disconnect between the abstract memory of the Moriscos and the concrete reality of today's religious minorities. In other words, whereas the Morisco has slowly become Spanish, the Muslim immigrant remains first and foremost a North African.

Finally, we move to the issue of migration patterns as the persistent connection between North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Usually considered primarily as a country of origin for large numbers of labour migrants to Europe, Morocco has now become a centre of transit for young men and women from sub-Saharan Africa seeking a better life north of the Mediterranean. More often than not, however, they get stuck in the no-man's-land of the Rif mountains, able to see – yet unable to reach – the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Seeking to stem the flow of Africans, the European Union has virtually outsourced its border protection to the Moroccan authorities, thereby creating extra-legal 'liminal spaces' in which human rights no longer apply. By reading their status through the frameworks of international politics as well as local traditions of slavery and exclusion, Isabella Alexander demonstrates that these sub-Saharan migrants have become the new racialised underclass that positions Morocco closer to Europe by distancing itself from its African heritage.

The last contribution comes from Catherine Therrien, who studies the contemporary phenomenon of 'reverse' migration from Europe to North Africa. Based on extensive fieldwork among the Spanish community in Tangier, she highlights the multitude of reasons behind relocations to the Global South. Whether driven by work, love, business, or cultural curiosity, a growing number of Spaniards are seeking a better life in Morocco, thus challenging common stereotypes about the North African kingdom as solely a source of – or transit place for – emigrants. Although these migrations are usually temporary and their numbers pale in comparison to those travelling in the opposite direction, they nonetheless demonstrate that Morocco maintains an undeniable attraction to Westerners beyond mass tourism. Therrien's rich ethnography thus offers a welcome change of perspective for all of those interested in European-Maghribi relations by reversing our notions of centre and periphery with regard to this important topic of public debate.

By way of this diverse set of articles, we aim to increase our understanding of the multifaceted character of Spanish-Moroccan relations. It is the combination of different disciplinary approaches – including history, anthropology and literary studies – that brings to life both past and present of this fascinating relationship right in front of your eyes. Suddenly, the two kingdoms no longer appear to be located on the margins of Europe and Africa respectively. Instead, we begin to perceive a distinct world with its own internal logic that is so much more than a mere agglomeration of intra-civilisational contacts. In other words, the Strait of Gibraltar becomes a unique crossroads of human

interaction whose specificity can only be captured by focused scholarship that moves beyond simplified notions of colonial hierarchies and North–South relations.

## Notes

1. Ignacio Cembrero, 'El veneno que llegó al Rif desde el cielo,' 9 February 2002, *El País*, [https://elpais.com/diario/2002/02/10/domingo/1013316759\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2002/02/10/domingo/1013316759_850215.html) (accessed on 20 November 2017).
2. Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Population Figures at 1 January 2015 Migrations Statistics 2014, 25 June 2015, [http://www.ine.es/en/prensa/np917\\_en.pdf](http://www.ine.es/en/prensa/np917_en.pdf) (accessed on 20 November 2017).
3. Agentes secretos marroquíes combaten a la yihad en España, 4 January 2015, *El País*, [http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/12/29/actualidad/1419876499\\_947344.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/12/29/actualidad/1419876499_947344.html) (accessed on 20 March 2015).

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