

## On the Margins of the Arab World?

DAVID STENNER

Department of History, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA;  
email: [david.stenner@cnu.edu](mailto:david.stenner@cnu.edu)  
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The western Egyptian desert separates the Maghrib geographically from the other three still existent sub-regions of the Arab world so eloquently delineated by Albert Hourani.<sup>1</sup> Often perceived as not quite Arab, nor sufficiently Islamic, nor really African by outside observers, North Africa does indeed remain culturally distinct from Western Asia.<sup>2</sup> The region's colonization by France as well as Italy and Spain that commenced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century further accentuated this division, which was subsequently reproduced by Western academia. The historiography on the modern Maghrib consequently became the purview of francophone scholars. For example, studies of North African nationalism written in English—with the notable exception of the Algerian Revolution—remain scarce.<sup>3</sup> So how do we overcome this historiographical

<sup>1</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 179–88.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke III, “Theorizing the Histories of Colonialism and Nationalism in the Arab Maghrib,” in *Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism in the Maghrib: History, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Ali Ahmida (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the standard works on Algerian nationalism are: Mahfoud Kaddache, *Histoire du nationalisme algérien* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 2003); Mohammed Harbi, *Aux origines du FLN: La scission du PPA/MTLD* (Éditions Bouchène, Paris-Alger, 2003); Omar Carlier, *Entre nation et jihad: Histoire sociale des radicalismes algériens* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1995). See also the recent and more critical: James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Malika Rahal, *L'UDMA et les Udmistes. Contribution à l'histoire du nationalisme algérien* (Alger: Éditions Barzakh, 2017).

For an introduction to Tunisian nationalism, see: Ali Mahjoubi, *Les origines du mouvement national en Tunisie (1904–1934)* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1982); Mustapha Kraïem, *Mouvement national et front populaire: La Tunisie des années trente* (Tunis: Institut supérieur d'histoire du mouvement national/Université Tunis 1, 1996); *Actes du V colloque international sur la Tunisie de l'après-Guerre, 1945–1950 (26, 27 et 28 Mai 1989)* (Tunis: Institut supérieur d'histoire du mouvement national, 1991); *Actes du XIII<sup>ème</sup> colloque international sur le thème: L'indépendance de la Tunisie et les processus de libération dans le monde colonial* (Tunis: Institut supérieur d'histoire du mouvement national, 2010). On the relationship between the Tunisian nationalist movement and trade unions, see: Abdesslem Ben Hamida, *Le syndicalisme tunisien de la deuxième guerre mondiale à l'autonomie interne* (Tunis: Université de Tunis 1, Faculté des sciences humaines et sociales, 1989); Abdesslem Ben Hamida, *Capitalisme et syndicalisme en Tunisie de 1924 à 1956* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, Faculté des sciences humaines et sociales, 2003); Hafiz Tabbabi, *Muhammad 'Ali al-Hami, 1890–1928* (Tunis: al-Ma'had al-'A'la li-Tarikh al-Haraka al-Wataniyya, 2005).

The literature on Moroccan nationalism is particularly outdated: Robert Rézette, *Les partis politiques marocains* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1955); Stéphane Bernard, *Le conflit franco-marocain: 1943–1956* (Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, Institut De Sociologie, 1963); John P. Halstead, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Origins and Rise of Moroccan Nationalism, 1912–1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). These works are complemented by detailed historical accounts written by former nationalists: Abu Bakr al-Qadiri, *Mudhakarati fi al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Maghribiyya: 1941–1945* (Casablanca: Matba'at

bifurcation?<sup>4</sup> One way to do so, I argue, is by focusing on the process of decolonization that spawned countless transregional links. Morocco provides a good example for this dynamic. Even though the country called “the Far West” (*al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*) might have been situated on the Arab world’s geographical margins, the local anticolonial movement ultimately created social networks of solidarity that reached from Rabat to Baghdad. The history of the North African kingdom thus enables us to better understand the trajectory of the entire Arab world during the 20th century.

Morocco’s colonization by France and Spain in 1912 occurred relatively late; Tunisia had already experienced its first anticolonial mass-protests by the time the Moroccan sultan agreed to the establishment of a protectorate regime. Just a few years later, in the aftermath of World War I, intellectuals across Africa and Asia began the first worldwide debate about the moral bankruptcy of Western-style modernity.<sup>5</sup> Pan-Islamism and Socialist Internationalism offered ideological alternatives.<sup>6</sup> And the term “decolonization” began to make the rounds among Europeans reflecting upon the future of imperialism.<sup>7</sup> The “Wilsonian moment” passed quickly as the global political and economic orders teetered toward collapse, the impact of which would be particularly hard felt in the colonies.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-1930s, French rule in North Africa began a slow but steady decline as its inherent contradictions accelerated the region’s social disintegration.<sup>9</sup> Spain, by contrast, lacked the resources to rapidly modernize its

al-Najah al-Jadida, 1997); ‘Allal al-Fasi, *Al-Harakat al-Istiqlaliyya fi al-Maghrib al-‘Arabi* (Cairo: Maktab al-Maghrib al-‘Arabi, 1948); ‘Abd al-Karim Ghallab, *Tarikh al-Harakat al-Wataniyya bi-l-Maghrib* (Casablanca, Morocco: Matba‘at al-Najah al-Jadida, 2000).

With regard to Libya, the small amount of existing scholarship focuses primarily on anticolonial resistance as well as modern state-formation: Adrian Pelt, *Libyan Independence and the United Nations, a Case of Planned Decolonization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970); E. G. H. Joffé and K. S. McLachlan, eds., *Social and Economic Development of Libya* (London: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1982); Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Rachel Simon, *Libya between Ottomanism and Nationalism: The Ottoman Involvement in Libya during the War with Italy (1911–1919)* (Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1987); Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830–1932* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); Dirk J. Vandewalle, *History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2017); Katrina Yeaw, “Women, Resistance and the Creation of New Gendered Frontiers in the Making of Modern Libya, 1890–1980” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2018). The most detailed introduction to Libyan nationalism can be found in Anna Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial Legacy, Exile and the Emergence of a New Nation-State* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Noteworthy attempts starting this process can be found in Amal N. Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1802–1930s)* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism: The Politics of History and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2017), ch. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Adas, “Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology,” *Journal of World History* 15, no. 1 (2004): 31–63.

<sup>6</sup> Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), ch. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Ward, “The European Provenance of Decolonization,” *Past & Present* 230, no. 1 (2016): 227–60.

<sup>8</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 138–40; Robert Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Berque, *French North Africa: The Maghrib between Two World Wars* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967).

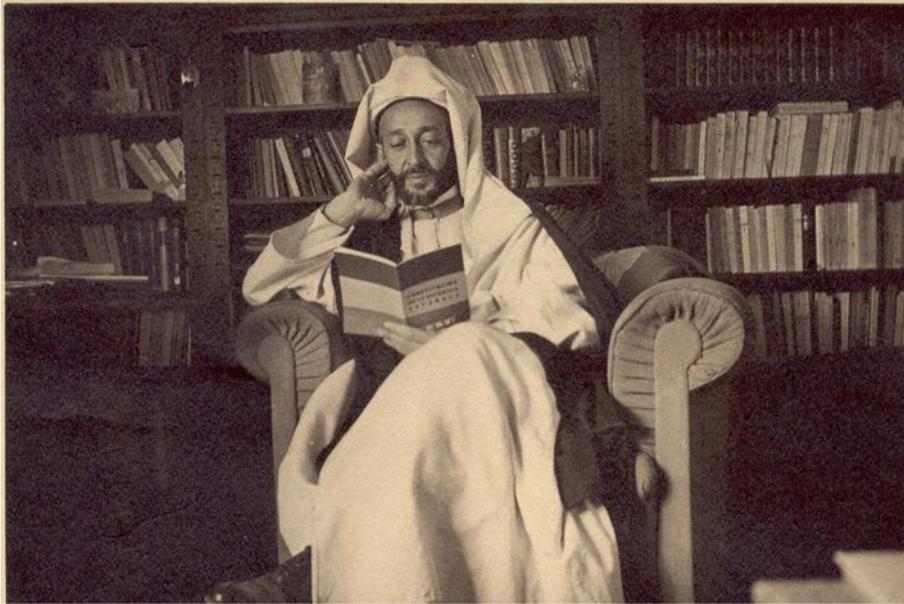


FIGURE 1 Abdelsalam Bennouna in June 1930 (courtesy of Aboubakr Bennouna).

protectorate, and the civil war (1936–39) further complicated its tenuous hold over northern Morocco. The Francoist regime thus sought to accommodate the local nationalist movement.<sup>10</sup> This unique confluence of global and local factors created the context in which Moroccan anticolonialism developed at a breakneck speed; the different stages—armed resistance, protonationalist cultural reformism, liberal bourgeois nationalism, and popular mass-mobilization—unfolded within only two decades.<sup>11</sup> As Britain and France were reaching their “imperial zenith,” Morocco underwent a dramatic social transformation in an astonishingly short period of time.<sup>12</sup>

The trajectory of the Bennouna family from Tetouan, the capital of the Spanish protectorate, offers a window onto the evolution of Moroccan anticolonialism—as well as its links to developments in the Middle East. Hajj Abdelsalam Bennouna (‘Abd al-Salam Binnuna), the patriarch, represented the city’s bourgeoisie of Andalusí origin that cultivated its social status as a culturally refined elite loosely connected to the royal court in Fez (Figure 1). During the first two decades of colonial rule, he worked for the newly established tax office, cofounded the reformist newspaper *al-Islah* in 1917, facilitated

<sup>10</sup> María Rosa de Madariaga, *Marruecos, ese gran desconocido: Breve historia del Protectorado español* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2013), ch. 5.

<sup>11</sup> For the stages of anticolonialism, see: T.O. Ranger, “Connexions between ‘Primary Resistance’ Movements and Modern Mass Nationalism in East and Central Africa: Parts I and II,” *Journal of African History* 9 (1968): 437–53, 631–41; and Geoffrey Barraclough, “The Revolt against the West,” in *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (London: Harmondsworth, 1973), 153–98.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Thomas, *Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and their Roads from Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 1. See also Raymond F. Betts, *Decolonization* (New York: Routledge, 2004), ch. 1.

the establishment of Tetouan's first electric power plant in 1928, and was elected to the municipal council in 1931.<sup>13</sup>

Yet Bennouna also sought to strengthen the region's traditional links with the wider Arab world.<sup>14</sup> Together with a few associates, he founded the first "free school" in 1924 to disseminate modernist Islamic thought emanating from Cairo and beyond. He also established Morocco's first independent Arabic-language printing house in 1928.<sup>15</sup> His network of associates with whom he exchanged letters about global events reached as far as Lebanon and the Arabian Peninsula. In August 1930, at his urging, the famous pan-Islamist Shakib Arslan visited Tetouan to bring the efforts of the burgeoning local anticolonial movement to the attention of the wider Islamic world. For his compatriots, Bennouna became the "father of Moroccan nationalism"; in the eyes of prominent Mashriqis such as Rashid Rida and Riyad al-Sulh Bey, he confirmed Morocco's status as an integral part of the Arab world. When he unexpectedly died in 1935, his funeral procession attracted thousands and condolences arrived from across North Africa and Western Asia.

Transregional links during the era of decolonization thrived on multiple levels. In 1928, Bennouna sent a group of students—including his two eldest sons, Tayeb (al-Tayib) and Mehdi (al-Mahdi)—to Nablus to complete their education at the Najah School under the aegis of prominent intellectuals like Ibrahim Tuqan (Figure 2).<sup>16</sup> In their free time, the young Tetouanis participated in the activities of the Boy Scout movement organized by *Jama'iyyat al-Shubban al-Muslimin* to strengthen themselves, physically and morally, against the continuing threat of European colonialism (Figure 3). Even though limited to the male scions of wealthy families, such student missions reaffirmed the attachment felt by many Moroccans to the wider Arab world. The two Bennouna brothers maintained their interest in the Middle East long after their departure from Palestine.

Upon graduation in 1932, and after a brief stay at the American University in Cairo, Tayeb moved to Istanbul to study engineering at Robert College, but had to end his training upon the death of his father. Back home, he served as the secretary general of *Hizb al-Islah al-Watani* (Party of National Reform) and coauthored the first Moroccan independence manifesto published on 14 February 1943. Tayeb Bennouna returned to the Middle East on several occasions to lobby Arab politicians to support the case for Moroccan independence on the global stage. His visits to Cairo caused mixed emotions: he felt inspired by the passionate atmosphere caused by raucous mass demonstrations against both the Egyptian regime and the British colonial authorities during the aftermath of World War II. But the impotence of the Arab League stood as an awkward counterpoint to the energy he felt each time he walked the city's streets. Nonetheless, Egypt remained his ultimate political reference point throughout the years of the liberation struggle. After

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad b. 'Azzuz Hakim, *Ab al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Maghribiyya al-Hajj 'Abd al-Salam Bimmuna: Hayatuhu wa Nidaluhu*, vol. I (Rabat: Matba'at al-Sahil, 1987), 177–225.

<sup>14</sup> David Stenner, "Centring the Periphery: Northern Morocco as a Hub of Transnational Anti-Colonial Activism, 1930–43" *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 3 (2016): 430–50.

<sup>15</sup> Rocío Velasco de Castro, "El protectorado de España en Marruecos en primera persona: Muhammad Ibn Azzuz Hakim, al servicio del líder de la unidad" (PhD diss., University of Sevilla, 2011), 1252–54.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza, *Mudhakkirat Muhammad 'Izzat Darwaza, 1305 H-1404 H/1887 M-1984 M*, vol. I (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993), 537. For a study of the Najah School as a center of reformist Palestinian nationalism, see Suzanne Schneider, *Mandatory Separation: Religion, Education, and Mass Politics in Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 145–59.



FIGURE 2 The Moroccan student delegation in Nablus in 1929, including Tayeb Bennouna (seated, left of center) and Mehdi Bennouna (standing on the far right) (courtesy of Aboubakr Bennouna).

Morocco's independence in March 1956, Tayeb Bennouna worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and served as ambassador in Madrid, Istanbul, and Tehran.

Mehdi Bennouna also moved to Cairo in 1936, where he studied journalism at Fu'ad University and the American University Cairo while becoming a student organizer and writing a number of articles for Egyptian newspapers, thereby "filling the press with propaganda for the beloved homeland."<sup>17</sup> In July 1947, at the behest of Morocco's two leading nationalist parties, he traveled to New York where he laid the groundwork for an anticolonial lobbying campaign that flourished until late 1955.<sup>18</sup> His reputation among fellow Arab diplomats reached extraordinary heights, and they enabled him to enter the UN headquarters as a member of their delegations. Mehdi Bennouna even attended their secret deliberations just prior to the General Assembly vote on the partition of Palestine on 27 November 1947. Throughout his years in New York, he worked closely with representatives from the Arab world even though their support proved often more rhetorical than practical. In 1956, Mehdi Bennouna became the Moroccan king's press secretary before founding the country's first news agency.

These three brief biographies underline the close connections between Morocco and the wider Arab world throughout the first half of the 20th century. They are also representative of a broader trend. Hundreds of students attended Egyptian universities where many of them became politicized. Moreover, Moroccan nationalists participated in two of the most important anticolonial regional events of the interwar period, the General

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Mehdi to Tayeb Bennouna, 15 September 1944, Mehdi Bennouna File Vol. I, Bennouna Family Archive (BFA), Tetouan, Morocco.

<sup>18</sup> David Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), ch. 4.



FIGURE 3 Nablus branch of the *Jama'iyyat al-Shubban al-Muslimin* boy scouts honoring its Moroccan members, July 1932. Tayeb Bennouna is seated on the far right, Mehdi Bennouna on the far left (courtesy of Aboubakr Bennouna).

Islamic Congress in Jerusalem in 1931 and the Arabic-Islamic Parliamentary Conference for the Defense of Palestine in Cairo in 1938. And they played leading roles in the establishment of *Maktab al-Maghrib al-'Arabi* (Office of the Arab Maghrib) in Cairo in 1947.<sup>19</sup> The transregional links based on commerce, religious learning, and the hajj that had existed for centuries underwent a transformation during the colonial period.<sup>20</sup> The countries of the Middle East emerged both as inspiring examples of modern political activism and as targets of anticolonial solidarity efforts whose active diplomatic support might hasten the decolonization of Morocco.

At the same time, a growing generational divide became apparent all across Morocco. Abdelsalam Bennouna, for example, had explicitly chosen the Najah School for his sons because it was “based on religious principles” and far removed from “the life in Egypt filled with cabarets, political parties, and distracting newspapers.”<sup>21</sup> His goal had been to raise a new generation of status-conscious gentlemen well-versed in modernist Islamic thought as well as Western scientific achievements. But his sons could not resist Cairo’s undeniable attractions. After he accidentally found himself in the midst of a violent street battle between anti-British protesters and the police in October 1951, Tayeb showed himself deeply impressed by this personal encounter with mass politics, concluding that “Egypt’s soul is great and powerful. It is a spirited people, which has proven that it cannot be colonized.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> M'hammad Bin 'Abbud, *Murasalat al-Shahid M'hammad Ahmad bin 'Abbud*, 1946–1949. (Tetouan: Matba'at Titwan, 2016); Toumader Khatib, *Culture et politique dans le mouvement nationaliste marocain au Machreq* (Tetouan: Association Tetouan-Asmir, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Eric Calderwood, “Franco’s Hajj: Moroccan Pilgrims, Spanish Fascism, and the Unexpected Journeys of Modern Arabic Literature,” *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1097–1116.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Abdelsalam to Tayeb Bennouna, 23 October 1928, Tayeb Bennouna File Vol. I, BFA.

<sup>22</sup> Documents saisis dans les bagages de Mehdi Bennouna: lettre du 23 Octobre 1951, IMA/282/56, Centre des Archives diplomatiques, Nantes, France.

The Middle East continued to simultaneously fascinate culturally and disappoint politically. Mehdi's activities also symbolized the widening gap between young and old accelerated by the realities of interwar world politics. Whereas his father had created Morocco's first printing office to enable educated debates among genteel elites, he founded the country's first news agency, *Maghreb Arabe Press*, in 1959, which became a pillar of the mass media closely allied with the royal family. The second generation of anticolonial activists had indeed continued Morocco's historical relationship with the Middle East while adjusting it to the realities of 20th century politics.

How, then, does this case allow us to rethink the liberation of the Arab world during the age of imperial decline? It highlights the links—both personal and intellectual—between Maghrib and Mashriq. The countries of the “Arab East” remained points of reference for many Moroccans, because they symbolized the possibility of an authentic Islamic anticolonial modernity that could counteract European hegemony. Ideas and movements emanating from Egypt and beyond inspired activists challenging their local conditions. Learning from developments abroad seemed necessary not only for practical reasons, but also because it legitimized those seeking to reform Moroccan society. However, Moroccans did so on their own terms and not as mere “derivative player[s]” of trends emanating from the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> The founding of the Arab League in April 1945 represented the climax for any hopes of transregional unity, even though the constraints of geopolitics soon thereafter disillusioned its adherents. Yet the *idea* of Arab solidarity that had emerged during the interwar period still inspired many Moroccans long after their country had achieved independence. Studying the decolonization of North Africa is thus not just a worthwhile endeavor for its own sake or a means to better understand the making of modern France.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it allows for a historiographical integration of an Arab world that was much less fragmented than we often assume.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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<sup>23</sup> Eric Calderwood, *Colonial al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 164.

<sup>24</sup> For an introduction to the recent scholarship integrating the North African colonies into the history of modern France, see: Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Yann Scioldo-Zürcher, *Devenir métropolitain: Politique d'intégration et parcours de rapatriés d'Algérie en Métropole (1954–2005)* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2010); Jennifer E. Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Maud Mandel, *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Amy L. Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noir, Identity, and Exile* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Ethan Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Sung-Eun Choi, *Decolonization and the French of Algeria: Bringing the Settler Colony Home* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Megan Brown, “Eurafrican Future: France, Algeria, and the Treaty of Rome (1951–1975)” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2017); Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962–1979* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).