

Antisemitism in Morocco

Largest Moroccan newspaper AL MASSAE attacks attempts to combat antisemitism, the inclusion of Holocaust education in schools, 'normalization with Israel' and the organization Dialogus

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The Moroccan organization '*Dialogus: Organisation Nationale Marocaine pour la Promotion de la Tolérance et la lutte contre la Discrimination, le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme*' and several individuals and initiatives were attacked by Morocco's largest newspaper *Al Massae*. In its November 10th, 2011 edition *Al Massae* published a two page exposé including several articles, an interview and photos under the title '*Al Massae discovers the real relation between Moroccan Amazigh [Berber] activists and Israel*'.

The exposé focuses on several initiatives which have taken place since 2007 by Moroccan Amazigh activists: initiatives to combat antisemitism and hatred against Israel in Morocco, visits to Israel, seminars at Yad Vashem and activities on the promotion of Holocaust education in Moroccan schoolbook curricula. In the guise of conspiracy theories and without any evidence it reports the initiatives were financed and coordinated by Israel and Israelis. It accuses the Amazigh activists of acting against the will of the Moroccan people. A special focus was put on the vice-president and porte-parole of *Dialogus*, Abdellah Benhssi. His private photos were obtained and published illegally, and he is mentioned as coordinator for the activities and the collaboration with 'suspicious' 'Zionist' and 'Jewish' organisations. What is the context in Morocco for something like this to happen?

Morocco is widely known as a comparably tolerant Arab-Islamic country. Mostly unknown, is that a competition takes place between different movements and political groups, over the question of Moroccan religious and ethnic identity and heritage. Amazigh (Berber) activists claim an Amazigh-Jewish heritage in Morocco. Even if more than half of the Moroccan population is Amazigh, the state apparatus is dominated by an Arab-Islamic ideology. Prior to the mass exodus of Jews between 1948 and 1967, Morocco had a large Jewish population of more than 250,000. Today, fewer than 5,000 Jews live in Morocco. Jews of Moroccan descent live all over the world, mainly in Israel (around 1 million), France, Canada, United States, Venezuela and Spain.

Since 2007 there have been several initiatives by Moroccan Amazigh activists and

organizations to promote tolerance and combat antisemitism and hatred against Israel in Morocco. Amazigh activists went to an OSCE conference in Tel Aviv at the end of 2007 breaking the taboo of publicly visiting Israel. After their return they defended their freedom to visit all countries in the world including Israel against attacks by (leftist) pan-Arabists and Islamists. In January 2008 two Moroccan children participated in an international Holocaust commemoration event for youth at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. After their return a demonstration by Pan-Arabists and Islamists in front of one youngster's school took place and many threats were announced.

In February 2008 *Mémoire Collective* ('Collective Memory' – known in Morocco as an Amazigh-Jewish or Amazigh-Israeli friendship organization) was founded in the North of Morocco in the Mediterranean port city Al Hoceimas. After the foundation of *Mémoire Collective* was established, a large discussion in all Moroccan media took place for several weeks. Discourse on antisemitism, hatred against Israel, and a positive Jewish-Amazigh heritage were brought into public discussion which confronted the hegemonic pan-Arab, Islamist and antisemitic view. The foundation of *Mémoire Collective* had such an important impact in the Moroccan public that it had more news coverage than the foundation of the new political party of the Moroccan King. As an effect of this discussion the term 'antisemitism' became established in the Moroccan public. *Mémoire Collective* was never legalized by the state and its founder and members faced death threats by Islamists among other horrors. The Moroccan state did its best to undermine the possibility that the initiative could continue and did not protect the members against the threats.

In November 2009 a delegation of 18 Moroccan Amazigh activists visited Israel and participated in a seminar on the Holocaust at Yad Vashem. The media coverage and public attacks in Morocco were again astonishing.

In February 2011 a meeting took place in the south of Morocco on 'Teaching the Holocaust in Morocco. Why and How?' The conference was attended by teachers, journalists and individuals dealing with school curricula in Morocco. The authorities did allow the event on the condition that the event would not be announced publicly in advance.

A milestone took place in June, 2011. *Dialogus*, a Moroccan wide organization, held its first *legal* inaugural meeting in Rabat to discuss democratic reforms. It is the first *legalized* Moroccan organization that combats antisemitism on Moroccan soil. The meeting was attended by *all* different and competing Amazigh organisations and movements. It was the first event for almost a decade where all Amazigh fractions sat at one table.

Dialogus claims, among other things, the promotion of diversity, plurality and tolerance among all religions, cultures and people. It combats discrimination based on sex, religion, race and language. It advocates for a *collective memory* including Amazigh-Jewish heritage in Morocco and names explicitly the fight against antisemitism and religious extremism. Furthermore *Dialogus* promotes the memory of the Holocaust, as a crime against humanity.

Morocco, as many other countries in the region, faces turbulent and transitional times with a not yet determined direction. The Moroccan 20th of February Movement, demanding democratic reforms, was initiated by young Amazigh activists. At the beginning it was clearly dominated by secular positions and called for, among other things, 'minority' rights and the right to change the Islamic religion without being penalized by the state. With time traditional political organizations such as (leftist) Pan-Arabists and Islamists entered the game and tried to dominate the movement by putting a formal strategic alliance in place.

As an effect of the 20th of February movement, the broader changes in the 'Arab' world and international diplomacy, King Mohammed VI announced constitutional reforms. As one outcome democratic structures became somewhat stronger, Tamazight (Berber language) was recognized as the second official language and the 'Amazigh' and 'Hebraic' heritage is mentioned in the new constitution which was officially announced in July, 2011. But still, in the constitutional reform process the Islamists and Pan-Arabists were powerful enough to prevent the terms 'Jews' or 'Jewish' to be mentioned in the constitution.

Elections will be held in Morocco on the 25th of November, 2011. With the November 10th, 2011 edition, *Al Massae*, Morocco's largest newspaper which sympathizes with the Islamists, now opened the battle with its antisemitic campaign against the secular Amazigh movement.

Website 'Dialogus: Organisation Nationale Marocaine pour la Promotion de la Tolérance et la lutte contre la Discrimination, le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme'
www.dialogus-ong.org/