

"Israel doesn't support the Amazighs," an interview with Bruce Maddy-Weitzman in *Actuel*, No. 61, 18-24 September 2010, p. 47-8.

1- You seem to be very interested in the study of the Moroccan Amazighs. Why are you interested in this field of research?

I am a scholar who has spent more than 30 years teaching and writing about the modern history and politics of the Middle East and North Africa. My interest in the Amazigh movement in Morocco, Algeria and the diaspora, is an outgrowth of previous studies focusing on various aspects of Moroccan and Algerian society, e.g., the status of women, Islamist movements, and the evolution and durability of the Maghreb's political systems. My forthcoming book, "The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States," is being published in Spring 2011 by the University of Texas Press. As part of the research for that book, I interviewed numerous Amazigh activists and intellectuals on three continents.

2- Can Morocco still play a key role in the process of peace between Israel and the Palestinians?

Morocco, as you know, has in the past played a facilitating role in the Arab-Israeli peace process - e.g., hosting Egyptian-Israeli preparatory meetings before Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, King Hassan welcoming Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres in the mid-1980s to discuss the Fez peace plan, and participating in the Madrid-Oslo process by establishing formal low-level ties with Israel and hosting the first MENA economic summit. Since the severing of those official ties in October 2000, Morocco has generally taken a back seat, as King Mohamed VI has chosen to concentrate primarily on domestic affairs. The fact that Morocco has remained open to Israeli tourists indicates that Morocco continues to have a unique perspective on Arab-Israeli relations, even while generally adhering to the Arab consensus. The moderate Arab bloc of states (Egypt, Jordan, the GCC states and Morocco) is eager to see significant progress in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Certainly, the Obama administration would like to see this bloc play a supporting role. I believe, however, that Arab states, Morocco, included, will be cautious in their actions. Certainly, from the perspective of Israeli public opinion, Moroccan gestures of openness would be received favorably and help persuade an understandably skeptical Israeli public that there are partners for peace in the Arab world.

3- To what extent can the Moroccan Amazighs contribute to peace? Why?

Peace will be made between Israel and its immediate neighbors. The fact that there are some Moroccan Amazigh who are willing to speak publicly in favor of Israel's right to exist and in recognition of the enormity of the Holocaust inflicted upon the Jewish people, and challenge the strident anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic views expressed in other Moroccan circles is a unique phenomenon in the MENA region, one which Israelis are generally not aware of, but would certainly appreciate. The fact that these differences are publicly expressed is a credit to Morocco's evolving civil society and increasingly pluralist public space.

4 – Last week, a part of the Moroccan press accused the Moshe Dayan Center and,

moreover, the Israeli authorities of supporting the Amazigh activists. What's your opinion about this polemic?

I'm not aware of items in the Moroccan press, but am aware of a very demagogic and distorted item broadcast on *al-Jazeera* regarding the subject. The Dayan Center supports no one except its own scholars - it is an academic research institute which is an integral part of Tel Aviv University, peopled by respected historians of the modern and contemporary Middle East. Nor is it a policy think tank which publishes recommendations for future action by governments; rather, it promotes in-depth knowledge about the history, politics, society and economics of the MENA region (see [www.dayan.org](http://www.dayan.org) for a full account of the Center's activities). I am not aware of any Israeli government involvement in support of the Amazigh movement, which would in any case probably be counterproductive. The movement's opponents in Morocco and elsewhere may find it convenient for their own political needs to tender accusations of "Israeli plots to penetrate North Africa", but these shouldn't be taken seriously.

6- What about the other Maghreb countries? Is there a rising opinion among the elite that favors peace and negotiations?

Tunisia is extremely cautious, preferring to maintain a very low profile regarding Arab-Israeli matters. We do see the beginning of Israeli tourism in Tunisia, following the Moroccan example, but Tunisia is deliberately keeping this at a small scale. I'm not aware of any interest in Algeria in this regard. Like Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria will, I believe, support progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Given the concern in all three countries with Iran's growing power projection in the region, as well as with the specter of jihadi terrorist groups, there is a broad commonality of interests between North African states, other moderate Arab states and Israel. But this can only be actualized if the peace process moves forward.