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Daniel Zisenwine, *The Emergence of Nationalist Politics in Morocco: The Rise of the Independence Party and the Struggle against Colonialism after World War II*. London and New York, N.Y.: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010. xi + 260 pp. Bibliography and index. \$92.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1848853232.

Review by Susan Gilson Miller, University of California, Davis

In this finely-grained study of the period 1944 to 1956 in contemporary Moroccan history, Daniel Zisenwine, Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, focuses on the history of the *Harakat al-Istiqlal* (Independence Movement) and its role in bringing about Morocco's liberation from France after forty-four years of colonial rule. The study is limited in scope to the immediate post-war period, retelling events that led up to the declaration of independence on March 2, 1956. The narrative begins with the emergence of the Istiqlal in 1944 as a full-blown political entity whose radical Manifesto marked the beginning of an active movement for independence, and it ends with the attainment of freedom in 1956 and the subsequent isolation of the *Istiqlal* as a political party. By bracketing the narrative with these two events, the author stakes out a field of interest that he claims is "underrepresented" in contemporary Moroccan historiography, a view that might be contested by those familiar with the publication in Morocco in recent years of memoirs and first person accounts of the period. Other restrictions also apply: this research is mostly confined to the French zone of Morocco, treating only peripherally developments in the northern Spanish zone, and it pays little attention to Istiqlal activities on the international level, where in fact the party showed some of its greatest strengths.

The central issue of the book hinges on the vexing question of why the Istiqlal, with its foundational aim of turning Morocco into a constitutional monarchy, was unable to achieve this goal following independence. Rather, the author argues, crippling shortcomings allowed the sultan-turned-king Mohammed V to seize the reins of power, marginalize the nationalists, and remake the state into a model of twentieth-century royal absolutism. The underlying assumption is that the *Istiqlal*, under different circumstances, could have become the political beacon of a post-independent Morocco founded on principles of democratic liberalism. But somehow, the movement failed in its mission, with the result that Moroccan politics "to this day" have been shaped by this lapse (p. 6).

Methodologically speaking, the author seeks out those aspects of mid-twentieth century Moroccan history that best underscore the *Istiqlal's* supposed inability to win public support. Among them are its oft-mentioned failure to create a broad base of support in the countryside; its so-called "elitism" based on the urban origins of its leaders (a proposition now held to be highly suspect); its penchant for pursuing "diplomatic goals" rather than "strengthening the party's structures" (p. 39); its inability to shape an "all-encompassing Moroccan identity" (p. 27); its lack of a "charismatic leader" or "guiding light" (pp. 222-23); and its "difficulty in addressing the needs of unfamiliar social sectors" (p. 223). These cumulative deficits, so the argument goes, made the *Istiqlal* unacceptable to the rural, undereducated and "traditional" Moroccans who formed the vast majority of the population. Instead, the Sultan-King, armed with his invincible sword of uncontested religious-spiritual authority, swept the field and became the leader of popular choice. Initially allied with the *Istiqlal*, the monarchy eventually separated itself from this unruly and burdensome partner when it became clear that the costs of the liaison outran its benefits. Not long after independence, King Muhammad V, modern Morocco's first monarch, usurped the *Istiqlal's* primacy altogether and took over the leadership of the nationalist cause, quickly, efficiently, and without remorse.

There is no doubt that this version of events carries considerable veracity insofar as it goes. The Sultan's ascension to symbolic figurehead lent immeasurable prestige to the nationalist cause when he first embraced it in the late 1940s. Equally, his decision to withdraw support from the *Istiqlal* a decade later inflicted a fatal blow. To a large extent, Mohammed V's triumph was also *Istiqlal's* defeat. But it is also important to keep in mind that for a long period, between 1947 and 1956, these two poles of authority complemented each other and worked, if not hand in hand, at least in tandem, profiting from each other's strengths. Mohammad V's forced banishment from Morocco in 1953 was the most serious blunder of the colonial regime, for it galvanized popular sentiment against the Protectorate as no other event, while raising the profile of the nationalists who served as his surrogates while he languished for two years in a Madagascan exile.

While this conjuncture of interests is obvious, the reasons for the subsequent divorce between the monarchy and the *Istiqlal* are less clear. Why did the monarchy pursue a course that eventually delegitimized the nationalist leadership? Why, as the Dr. Zisenwine claims, did the *Istiqlal* place itself in a "subordinate" position to the monarchy (p. 40) and allow itself to be sidelined? More precisely, what were the subtleties and inner mechanisms in that relationship, and why did they fail? Finding answers to these questions is no easy task. They lay buried in myriad graves: in the file cabinets of the *Istiqlal* party, in the archives of the Protectorate in Rabat and Nantes, in the memoirs and recollections of a generation that is now largely passed, and in the pages of the party newspaper, *al-'Alam*, founded in 1946. Meanwhile, in the public mind, these matters remain wrapped in a heated debate, so much so that ancient battles of sixty years ago still stir the blood and call for resolution.

The present study seeks answers to these questions in less likely locations than those noted above. Drawing primarily on official and foreign sources, the author is especially drawn to the archives of the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C., where Morocco and its politics became an item in the years following World War II. Before the war, the U.S. was a bit actor in Moroccan history, considering it France's domain, and relations of any kind—diplomatic, commercial, and cultural—were very limited. It was only with the Allied landings in North Africa in 1942 that the US became belatedly acquainted with the intricate politics of French-held North Africa and with the difficult problems attendant on its decolonization. As Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia came more sharply into focus, American intelligence scrambled to get the lay of the land. Spies and O.S.S. men, soldiers and ordinary statesmen, became instant experts on the Maghrib. Caught between the need to placate French and British allies still enmeshed in colonial endeavors, on the one hand, and a bland commitment to anti-colonialism on the other, the Americans often failed to see a clear path between them.

Reading the stream of messages from Rabat to Washington that document this work, one is impressed by the naiveté of many of these communications. Strongly influenced by their French and native informants, American diplomats refused to believe that the nationalists constituted a real threat to the status quo until a very late date, and tended to discount their actions as pointless and without substance. In tone, they are doggedly insistent on the ineptitude and weakness of the *Istiqlal* and their inability to govern. The patent disingenuousness and biased judgment of U.S. officialdom as revealed in these documents is striking. One can only conclude that while the U.S. archives on the Moroccan question may offer an interesting and hitherto unexploited perspective on Moroccan affairs in this period, it is nonetheless a view that must be placed in meaningful and critical dialogue with other sources.

The source of the American dilemma is not difficult to discern, and should be taken into account. An important reason why the U.S. was not an unbiased observer was America's growing involvement in the Cold War. An overriding concern of the U.S. both during and after the war was the danger of losing France as an ally who could help shore up North Africa's defenses against the Soviet threat. How to maintain that friendship, while not shunning the Moroccans, was an ongoing problem. Thus the Americans adhered to a cautious policy, entering Moroccan political circles mainly through the figure of the monarch, rather than via contacts with the nationalists, who were held in suspicion for their "leftist" tendencies.

Mohammad V's fateful meeting with President Roosevelt at Anfa in 1943 initiated that relationship, and from there it slowly matured. That apocryphal story is reported here with the usual ambiguity about what Roosevelt actually said. Did he promise to help the Sultan gain independence, as the nationalists would later aver, or did he merely smile benevolently and make vague promises of support (as his son and secretary Elliott would later report) before heading to dinner? [1] In any case, there were good reasons for the U.S. to hesitate before jumping into bed with the nationalists: Moroccan intentions were nebulous, they were in fierce contention with France, and the outcome of their campaign for independence could not be foreseen.

Meanwhile, the *Istiqlal*, too, was playing the Cold War card. With greater freedom of movement than the Sultan, the *Istiqlal* before 1956 developed a far-reaching network of agents, spokesmen, lobbyists and other activists who spread the word about the nationalist cause. A Moroccan office of propaganda opened in New York in the early 1950s, and Ahmad Balafrej, the most eloquent of the *Istiqlal* leaders, published articles in U.S. journals such as *Foreign Affairs* aimed at capturing the attention of the American media. As the Cold War gained momentum, international politics figured increasingly in the *Istiqlal's* march toward independence. Like the Algerians and Tunisians who followed a similar strategy, the Moroccan nationalist leadership took an aggressive stance toward building networks of support, deploying these contacts with special effectiveness at the U.N. and with the U.S. Congress. Although the Moroccans did not receive the same attention at the world body as did the Algerians, they nevertheless gained momentum through other actions at the international level. Here is an area where *Istiqlal* strengths have been seriously underestimated. Moroccan independence was won not only in the streets, but also in the councils of state, and it is tendentious to separate the "domestic" from "foreign" affairs when discussing the passage to independence.

Moreover, world historical events like the Brazzaville declaration, the founding of the U.N., the humiliating French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Bandung conference of 1955, the outbreak of the Algerian war of independence in that same year--each a milestone in the larger processes of decolonization--had a profound impact on Moroccan nationalist aspirations. These moments were more than background noise: they shaped mentalities, won adherents, and captured the attention of Moroccans as well as outsiders. Even in an account of the "inner workings" of the movement, it is difficult to separate the global from the local. The shaping of a "Moroccan identity," if such a construct does in fact exist, came largely as a result of an exposure to other selves that the nationalist cause made possible.

In the struggle between the palace and the *Istiqlal* for dominance, there were no winners, least among them the Moroccan people. The breach between them undermined the movement toward democratic and parliamentary rule and led to the installation of an archaic variety of absolutism that characterized Moroccan governance for the next half-century. Is the "weakness" of the *Istiqlal* to blame for this failing, as the present work asserts? Few independence movements possess a full-blown program for reform before they actually assume power, for the goal of freedom is the trump card that supersedes all else. Indeed, it is often the case that practical politics follow only in the aftermath of achieving political mastery. In the case of the *Istiqlal*, the expectation that they would "provide practical answers on how to improve Morocco's political, social and economic situation" (p.138) in advance of actually wielding authority is not unreasonable, but it rarely happens. Many issues were left on the table as Morocco entered into its independent life. The fundamental character of the state and its sources of legitimacy were still undefined; the position of the monarchy vis-à-vis the political parties was unresolved; Morocco's future relations with France were still in doubt; and, most important of all, the Moroccan people were unsure of where to place their trust. The surge toward independence was the *Istiqlal's* *raison d'être*, and the fact is, when that goal was achieved, it became a rudderless ship with a rebellious crew, unsure of its direction, ultimately torpedoed from below by a regime that became increasingly conscious of its own historical destiny.

It is important to remember, too, that nationalist movements are not static entities but life forms that evolve over time. Even though they sometimes turn out to be ephemeral in the short run, their legacy survives into the future. In that sense, the experience of the *Istiqlal* is not unique but follows

closely with that of other Middle Eastern nationalist movements of the period; some inherited positions of dominance, while others disappeared into the cultural mainstream and became “facts” of daily existence, part of the “national heritage” that shaped the popular imagination and armed the next generation with the tools for social activism. We must not forget, too, the extent to which Cold War politics intervened, with the reified monarchy emerging as the “safe bet” on which the Western powers could build their aspirations for national security, rather than on the strife-ridden *Istiqlal*, riven by personal squabbles and a paucity of means.

Finally, is it even fruitful to examine a particular historical epoch on the basis of “winners” and “losers”? Is it not more in our interest to see the past as an intermingling of multiple strands that make up the composite narratives that form the crux of a nation’s history? The *Istiqlal* was no doubt a chief propellant for Morocco’s transit to political maturity, and its role in that process was (and continues to be) seminal, whether it is holding power (as it is today) or not. In retelling this tale, Dr. Zisenwine’s account lays bare the broad dimensions of the *Istiqlal*’s rise and fall. Now it is up to others to fill in the details, wring out the ambiguities, and follow in his footsteps by pursuing answers to the many questions still unresolved.

Notes

[1] Elliott Roosevelt, *As He Saw It* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946): 109-112.

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