

## **Contested Narratives: Contemporary Debates on Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews under the Vichy Regime<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines current debates on the fate of Moroccan Jews under the Vichy regime and the attitude of the sultan towards his Jewish subjects. Due to wide-ranging contributions by the media and via the internet, these debates are not confined to political or intellectual circles but also involve 'non-professionals'. My aim is to examine to what extent discussions about the Second World War are relevant in contemporary Morocco, to shed light on how established narratives are challenged by new questions, and to understand the meanings such debates have for the way Moroccans see and position themselves in contemporary Moroccan society.*

### **1. Introduction**

“There are no Jews in Morocco. There are only Moroccan subjects.” This oft-quoted statement, attributed to Mohammed V, sultan from 1927 and Moroccan king between 1957 and 1961, has become legendary.<sup>2</sup> It represents the protective position of the sultan towards his Jewish subjects during the period of the Vichy regime and became a synonym for tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of Jews and Muslims in Morocco. However, under the influence of the Vichy government, which held power in North Africa from July 1940 to November 1942, two anti-Jewish laws were promulgated in Morocco. The first was signed on 31 October 1940, the second on 5 August 1941. The laws applied to all Moroccan Jews by faith as well as those who were defined as being Jewish by the racist standards of the National Socialist *Judenpolitik*, for example those who had at least three Jewish grandparents. The restrictions imposed by the two *dahirs* (decrees) primarily affected employment opportunities: the number of Jews working in certain professions was limited, while others became completely off-limits to Jews. The *dahir* of 1941 forced Jews, for example, to move back to the traditional Jewish quarters, the so-

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<sup>2</sup> See for example ‘Moroccan Jews pay homage to “protector”’, *Ha’aretz*, 30 January 2005; “L’éternelle reconnaissance” des juifs du Maroc envers Mohammed V’, *La Gazette du Maroc*, 14 February 2005; Amale Samie, ‘Etre juif au Maroc aujourd’hui’, *Maroc Hebdo International*, 10 February 2005.

called *Mellah*. According to historian Michael Laskier, it is difficult to assess the impact of the laws and the degree of their implementation, though he does not doubt that the laws were at least partially applied.<sup>3</sup>

The image of Mohammed V as a protective ruler during the Second World War seems to be incontrovertible in Morocco. Even though the sultan himself put his seal under the *dabirs*, he is still remembered and idolized as someone who opposed the anti-Semitic laws of the Vichy regime. In historical research, this ambivalence has not been picked out as a central question so far. However, it is not the aim of this article to discuss this ambivalence in the sultan's behaviour towards his Jewish subjects from a historiographical perspective. Instead, I turn my attention to debates on the role of Mohammed V that are held outside the academic field in contemporary Morocco. Even though the Second World War is still a marginal issue in Moroccan academic research as well as in the Moroccan education system,<sup>4</sup> we can observe an increasing interest in the war and in the Vichy regime, in Muslim-Jewish relations and in the sultan's attitude towards the Moroccan Jews. Due to new media and online debates, the discussions are not confined to political or intellectual circles; rather, people of various backgrounds show their interest and express their opinions.

This paper describes how the persecution of Jews, which is widely considered to be a European issue, is remembered in Morocco and how this memory relates to contemporary discourses on identity. I intend to show how established narratives of the past are defended or called into question, and what particular arguments reveal with regard to a Moroccan self-image of today. By investigating Moroccan debates on the past, I seek to shed light on tendencies towards liberalisation and political change in Moroccan society, a continuing process since the late 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. History, Historiography, and the New Media

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Laskier, "Between Vichy Anti-Semitism and German Harassment: The Jews of North Africa during the Early 1940s", *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991): 348–49. For concrete examples of such laws being applied see Mohammed Kenbib, *Juifs et musulmans au Maroc 1859–1948*, 1st ed. (Rabat: Publication de la faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, 1994), 607–610. See also David Cohen, "Ofen yumah shel ha-teḥikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekufat mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim ḥadashim mi-misrad ha-ḥuz ha-zorfati", *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Vol. II* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 125–128.

<sup>4</sup> See Abdelmajid Benjelloun, "Maroc et la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale", in *Neue Forschungen zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Jürgen Rohwer (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1990), 310–12.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Daniel Zisenwine, "From Hassan II to Mohammed VI: Plus ça change?", in *The Maghrib in the New Century*, eds. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 132–149; Bensadoun, Mickael, "The (Re)Fashioning of Moroccan National Identity", in *Ibid.*, 13–35.

Agents of social groups who have until recently been marginalised now actively participate in debates on Moroccan national identity and on the remodelling of the process of political decision-making. Thus, various issues considered taboo for several decades, such as human rights abuses under the reign of Hassan II, are nowadays discussed by a broader public. However, this process also leads to new conflicts, as new voices challenge the established elites and their representations. The new media and party-independent magazines and newspapers become powerful tools in this struggle over meaning.

New media such as the internet open debates to people from various backgrounds and different countries, allowing them not only to share comments and questions with a wider public, but also to express criticism and introduce alternative perspectives. According to the Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy, who is researching the internet's impact on Arab society, '[it] has given a voice to the voiceless.' She stresses the internet's powerful ability to tackle issues that are considered taboo and to question established points of view.<sup>6</sup> Even though freedom of speech in Morocco has increased over the last decades, asking overtly critical questions - especially ones concerning the royal family - can still lead to severe consequences. The internet offers a way to express one's opinion anonymously and in a relatively censor-free space, thereby providing an opportunity for the emergence of new perspectives on established narratives and official historiography.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand this anonymity allows a researcher to get an insight into very open and free debates that one might not experience in face-to-face interview situations. On the other hand it is also a bone of contention. I myself was confronted with objections by historians who were sceptical of applying discourse analysis to debates held via internet platforms, chatrooms and blogs, as due to the anonymity of contributors no one can establish the identity of the speakers. However, especially in the case of Morocco and other states known for their limited freedom of speech, online debates should be and have been taken seriously and explored as part of broader discourses.<sup>8</sup> Of course, not all

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<sup>6</sup> Mona Eltahawy, "Generation Facebook - How Blogs and Social Networking Sites are Changing the Arab World" (speech given at the Peace University in San José, Costa Rica, 25 September 2008) <http://www.upeace.org/podcast/index.cfm>, accessed 17 April 2012.

<sup>7</sup> According to the ONI testing results, internet access in Morocco is more open and liberal than in other Arab countries like Tunisia and Libya. However, some websites such as *Google Earth*, *Livejournal* or *YouTube* are temporarily blocked. The question of freedom of speech and censorship in the internet was recently widely discussed after the imprisonment of Fouad Mourtada in February 2008. The 26 year old blogger was sentenced to three years in prison for creating a false profile of the Moroccan prince Moulay Rashid on Facebook. For further information see the website of the *OpenNet Initiative*, [www.opennet.net](http://www.opennet.net); See also Sami Ben Gharbia, "Morocco: Stop Internet censorship" (interview with Mohamed Drissi Bakhkhat), *globalvoicesonline.org*, 29. October 2007.

<sup>8</sup> On the development of the internet and internet practice in Morocco see, Ines Braune, *Aneignung des Globalen: Internet-Alltag in der arabischen Welt. Eine Fallstudie in Marokko*, (Bielefeld: transkript 2008). See also Mohamed Ibahrine and Bouziane Zaid, "Mapping Digital Media:

internet-based communication is oppositional and can be understood as a counter-public; rather, online media platforms are a space where different standpoints are encountered.<sup>9</sup> The internet allows its users not only consumption but production; everybody regardless of gender, age, or profession who has access to the internet is able to contribute to these debates.

Following media scholar Andreas Dörner, I understand popular culture as a relevant field of social and political practice and therefore I place popular culture and internet debates in focus for the analysis of negotiations of social norms and values.<sup>10</sup> Still, an objection ever and anon brought forward when it comes to an analysis of popular culture and discussions in new media is the ‘non-professionalism’ of the contributors; statements of non-historians in debates on the past are often not considered as serious and qualified. However, even in academic historical writing, the relevance of those narratives produced and promulgated by ‘non-professionals’ is taken into account. Paul Ricœur, for example, rejects the categorical distinction between history and memory. He argues that both the analysis offered by historians as well as the memory culture of individuals and social groups have to be understood as attempts at the reconstruction and interpretation of the past and to make sense in the present.<sup>11</sup> While Pierre Nora distinguishes between history and memory, he is yet stressing that ‘the historian has become no longer a memory-individual but, in himself, a *lieu de mémoire*.’<sup>12</sup>

Even though ‘history is a representation of the past’ that is ‘always problematic and incomplete,’<sup>13</sup> the ‘*legitimising role* of history is immense.’<sup>14</sup> As in many other societies, also in Morocco agents in political discourses often refer to academic knowledge in order to render their arguments ‘true.’<sup>15</sup> The media play a crucial role in the diffusion of academic knowledge into various fields of the society –

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Morocco”, in *Mapping Digital Media*, eds. Marius Dragomir et al. (London: Open Society Foundations, May 2011).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Sarah Jurkiewicz, “Blogging as Counterpublic? The Lebanese and the Egyptian Blogosphere in Comparison”, in *Social Dynamics 2.0: Researching Change in Times of Media Convergence*, eds. Nadja-Christina Schneider and Bettina Gräf (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Andreas Dörner, “Respekt im Regenwald: Über Inszenierung und Aneignung von gesellschaftlichen Ordnungsmustern im Unterhaltungsfernsehen”, in *Strategien der Visualisierung. Verbildlichung als Mittel politischer Kommunikation*, eds. Jens Hack and Herfried Münkler (Frankfurt: Campus, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricœur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, *Representations* 26 (1989): 18.

<sup>13</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 8.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Zachariah, “1857 in the Nationalist Imagination”, in *Uprisings of 1857: Perspectives and Peripheries*, ed. Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 2009), 112.

<sup>15</sup> With regard to the MENA region such a process has been described, for example, by Andrea Fischer-Tahir, “... to exterminate the Kurdish nation?: The concept of genocide as part of knowledge production in Iraqi Kurdistan”, in *Writing the history of Iraq: historiographical and political challenges*, eds. Jordi Tejel et al. (London: World Scientific Publishing and Imperial College Press, 2012).

a process discussed broadly in the social sciences since the ‘invention of the knowledge society.’<sup>16</sup> In the process of the popularization of academic/scientific knowledge – to speak with Michel Foucault – knowledge is transformed, organized and selected as a strategy to appropriate a specific discourse. These processes, where knowledge and power are intertwined, are to be understood as struggle for meaning and truth.<sup>17</sup> From this it follows, according to media scholar Tanja Maier, that media discourses do not merely reproduce academic/scientific knowledge in a simplified manner. Instead, practices within such discourses are part of knowledge production and compete with academic/scientific discourses for truth, knowledge and reality.<sup>18</sup>

Against this background, I will be concentrating on online debates in my article. The focal point of my analysis is the Moroccan-Jewish website *dafina.net*. This portal, which has been online since June 2000, provides information on history, genealogy and traditions of Moroccan Jews and supplies links to other websites, with recipes or photographs. Moreover, it offers a dating platform and a discussion forum where registered members debate various issues related to Moroccan Judaism. Aside from *dafina.net* I also refer to three international platforms, namely the English website of *Ha’aretz*, the English version of the Israeli website *Ynetnews* and the website of the American-Jewish daily *Forward*. I define these three websites as international, as they are much more widespread and the user base is much broader than that of *dafina.net*. They do not focus exclusively on Moroccan-Jewish topics, address more general political, social or economic issues and thus attract a wider variety of users. By comparing the discussions of a predominantly Moroccan setting to those held within a wider context, it becomes possible to trace certain specifics of the Moroccan debate.

Besides online media, investigative journalism also plays a decisive role when it comes to questioning established historical narratives. Moroccan weeklies such as *TelQuel*, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* or the arabophone *Nisban* (both of which ceased publication in 2010) but also dailies address historical topics. A reaction to the rising interest in the country’s history, especially in approaches that are marginalized or tabooed within the official historiography, was the foundation of Morocco’s first historical magazine *Zamane* in November 2010.<sup>19</sup> As the following examples will demonstrate, it is exactly the dialogue between print

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Weingart, *Die Stunde der Wahrheit? Zum Verhältnis der Wissenschaft zu Politik, Wirtschaft und Medien in der Wissensgesellschaft*, (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2001); *Zur Kritik der Wissensgesellschaft*, Dirk Tänzler et al. (eds.), (Konstanz: UVK, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dispositive der Macht* (Berlin: Merve, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Tanja Maier, “Wahrheit, Wissen, Wirklichkeit: Poularisierungsprozesse in Wissenschaftsmagazinen”, in *Medien und Kommunikation in der Wissensgesellschaft*, eds. Johannes Raabe et al. (Konstanz: UVK, 2008), 130-132.

<sup>19</sup> See Abdelahad Sebti, “Zamane, le magazine d’histoire du Maroc” (interview with Ziad Maalouf), *Atelier des médias. Web-émission participative pour la communauté des médias et réseau social de rfi*, 22 July 2011, <http://atelier.rfi.fr/profiles/blogs/zamane>, accessed 23 Novembre 2011.

and online media that leads to critical and controversial debates: whereas the former often launches discussions by revelations, the latter offers a space to the readers for further discussions.

### 3. Discussing the King, History and Identity in Morocco

#### *The narrative of the 'tolerant sultan': historiographical debates*

Towards the end of 2006 a new publication, Robert Satloff's book *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*, ignited a debate over the sultan's role in the events of the 1940s and his behaviour towards the Jewish minority.<sup>20</sup> Satloff's aim was to find Arab rescuers of persecuted Jews in North Africa. He proposed naming the Tunisian Khaled Abd Al-Wahab a *Righteous among the Nations* in Yad Vashem.<sup>21</sup> To date about 50 Muslims, most of them from Turkey and the Balkans, have been honoured as *Righteous*, yet there is not a single Arab among them.<sup>22</sup> The potential nomination of the first Arab and the question of whether there were more Arabs who had helped their Jewish fellow citizens, gave rise to the idea that the former Moroccan king Mohammed V be also honoured as *Righteous*.

In July 2007 André Azoulay, the Moroccan royal councillor, and Serge Berdugo, head of the Moroccan Jewish Community, visited Israel to discuss this idea with Israeli president Shimon Peres.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to estimate whether this nomination had serious chances of success or not. Yad Vashem's requirements of who is to be declared as righteous or not are clear:

The Yad Vashem Law went on to characterize the Righteous Among the Nations as those who not only saved Jews but risked their lives in

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<sup>20</sup> The book was published by Public Affairs, New York, and caused various discussions not only in the United States but also in Europe and in Arab countries such as Egypt where Satloff presented his research. Although the publication got many good reviews, Satloff's approach to make 'Arabs see the Holocaust as a source of pride, worthy of remembering' by telling 'the story of a single Arab who saved a single Jew during the Holocaust' is debatable. Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 6.

<sup>21</sup> The Tunisian landowner Khaled Abd al-Wahab, who died in 1997, was hiding a Tunisian Jewish Family that was expelled from their home on his land. Anne Boukris, daughter of the family and then aged 11, confirmed that al-Wahab offered not only a hiding place but also stopped a German officer from raping her mother. See the description in Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 122–27.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Gershman Norman, *Besa. Muslims who saved Jews in World War II*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Ed. Yad Vashem, *Le lien francophone*, 24 (2007), 2.

[http://www1.yadvashem.org/about\\_yad/friends/world\\_wide/france\\_img/iton\\_24fr\\_06.pdf](http://www1.yadvashem.org/about_yad/friends/world_wide/france_img/iton_24fr_06.pdf).

doing so. This was to become the basic criterion for awarding the title.<sup>24</sup>

With regard to sultan Mohammed V, the historical sources consulted so far do not allow for an ultimate decision. In 1985 a telegram entitled ‘Dissidence’ was discovered in the Archive of Foreign Affairs in Paris – a document referred to by historians in favour of a narration rendering the sultan *Righteous*. The Moroccan historian and linguist Haim Zafrani presented this document for the first time in December 1985 to members of the *Académie du Royaume du Maroc* in Rabat.<sup>25</sup> The telegram was a report to the Vichy government, dated to 24 May 1941. It reported that the sultan had invited – for the first time – members of the Jewish community to the official celebration of the anniversary of his crowning. Within this context the sultan is said to have stated his objection to the discriminatory measures targeting the Moroccan Jews. To quote from the document:

Credible sources inform us that relations between the sultan of Morocco and the French authorities have become much more tense since the day the French authorities put into application the decree on the ‘measures against the Jews’ despite the explicit opposition of the sultan. The sultan refused to make differences amongst his subjects, who were all ‘loyal’ as he said. Offended to see that his authority was overtaken by the French authorities, the sultan decided to demonstrate publicly his disapproval of the ‘measures against the Jews’. (...) For the first time, the sultan invited to the banquet the representatives of the Jewish community to whom he offered ostentatiously the best places next to the French officials. He declared to the French officials, who were surprised by the presence of Jews at this meeting: ‘I absolutely do not approve of the new anti-Semitic laws and I refuse to associate myself with a measure I disagree with; I reiterate as I did in the past that the Jews are under my protection and I reject any distinction that should be made amongst my people.’<sup>26</sup>

This document reveals that the sultan did not conceal his disapproval regarding the anti-Jewish policy of the Vichy regime. However, this document can neither be taken as proof of concrete actions in favour of the Jews, nor does it hint at a threat to the sultan’s life or his status. Definitely, this important source requires further critical contextualization and evaluation, taking up a couple of open questions. Firstly, the antagonism between the sultan’s statements in favour of the Jews and the fact that he signed the racist laws is

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted from the website of Yad Vashem <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/faq.asp>.

<sup>25</sup> Haïm Zafrani, *Deux mille ans de la vie juive aux Maroc*, (Casablanca : Editions Eddif, 2000), 296. See also Cohen, “Ofen yimumah shel ha-tehikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekufat mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim hadashim mi-misrad ha-huz ha-zorfati”.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Zafrani, *Deux mille ans*, 297.

not resolved or explained by this document. Secondly, the question remains open if the sultan had the power to protect the Moroccan Jews in case of concrete genocidal persecution. Thirdly, the quote from the telegram suggests that the sultan's protective behaviour is not only the result of a particular affinity towards his Jewish subject but strongly relates to issues of power struggles, as the anti-Jewish laws 'insulted the sultan's generations-old role as descendant of the Prophet and 'Commander of the faithful.'<sup>27</sup>

The historiography of Morocco and beyond does not provide satisfactory answers to these questions. Moroccan historian Mohammed Kenbib, for example, points in his thesis on Jewish-Muslim relations to the contradiction between the monarch's concern for his Jewish subjects and his declaration of loyalty towards the Vichy regime. Yet, at the end he describes, in a very cautious manner, the sultan's situation as 'particularly delicate.'<sup>28</sup> In a similar way other researchers stress the sultan's good will to help the Jews, but at the same time admit his inability to resist the Vichy regime, without giving an explanation for this contradictory behaviour. In a similar way, Algerian historian André Charouqui states: 'Morocco finally, despite the good sovereign, could not entirely prevent German contamination.'<sup>29</sup> Robert Assaraf, a Moroccan-French researcher and writer, explains the sultan's failure to resist the promulgation of the anti-Jewish laws in terms of his lack of experience and his youth. According to Assaraf, he signed the *dabir* 'with the conviction that this wouldn't cause any irremediable damage for his Jewish subjects.'<sup>30</sup> David Cohen who presented the above quoted telegram at the end of 1985 at a conference in Jerusalem came to the conclusion that even though the sultan opposed the anti-Jewish laws, his ability to prevent them was small. Interestingly, Cohen instead points at the Vichy-friendly general Charles Noguès, who was appointed High Commissioner of Morocco in June 1941, as someone who constantly tried to hinder the implementation of the anti-Jewish laws in Morocco.<sup>31</sup> Rita Aouad-Badoual, historian at *Centre d'Études Arabes* in Rabat, pointed out the difficulties in breaking with the myth of Mohammed V

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<sup>27</sup> Within the concept of *dhimma* (lit. protection) it is the Islamic ruler who is responsible for the security of the non-Muslims (mostly Jews and Christians) living in his territorial domain. The failure to protect them was a sign of weakness, and violence against *dhimmis* was often meant and understood as direct attack against the regime. See Daniel Schroeter, "From Dhimmis to Colonized Subjects: Moroccan Jews and the Sharifian and French Colonial State", in *Jews and the State. Dangerous Alliances and the Perils of Privilege*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104-123; Kerstin Hünefeld, *Imām Yahyā Hamid ad-Dīn und die Juden in San'ā'* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Kenbib, *Juifs et musulmans*, 626.

<sup>29</sup> Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 110. See also André Chouraqui, *Les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord entre l'Orient et l'Occident*, 1st ed. (Paris: Etudes Maghrebines, 1965), 22.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Assaraf, *Mohammed V et les Juifs du Maroc à l'époque de Vichy*, 1st ed. (Paris: Plon, 1997), 128.

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, "Ofen yumah shel ha-tehikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekufat mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim hadashim mi-misrad ha-huz ha-zorfati", 228.



as protector of the Moroccan Jews. As part of a commission reforming history books for French schools in Morocco she tried to find a rather unadorned version of the events of 1940:

In the period when Morocco was under Vichy the Moroccan Jews were afraid of their situation. Anti-Semitic laws were enacted in the country [...]. But the hesitation of the Sultan, the compromises, derogations and exceptions opposing their application, and finally the landing of the Americans spared them the terrible destiny of their European fellow believers.<sup>32</sup>

It has to be mentioned that the state of sources concerning the sultan's behaviour towards his Jewish subjects is problematic. A closer look reveals that there are mainly oral accounts ascribed to possible eyewitnesses, and their reproduction. Statements that are attributed to the sultan by eyewitnesses are reproduced as direct speech and adopted *tel quel* without critical reflections on the sources.<sup>33</sup> Since the historiographical work with regard to Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews is not very clear in its narration and the validation of the sources, it is not surprising that facts, rumors and legends are intertwined. Thus, there is still the need for a fresh look and critical analysis of the sultan's acts towards the Jews during the Vichy period, his intentions and the consequences of his behavior. At the same time it is exactly this lack of clarity that opens the space for countless interpretations, legends and myths, as I want to elaborate below by the aid of discourse fragments taken from the media.

### ***The narrative of the 'tolerant sultan': media debates***

A factor contributing towards the persistence of the image of the righteous sultan is the media coverage of this issue as well as official statements by the authorities and representatives of the Jewish community.<sup>34</sup> The incumbent king

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<sup>32</sup> Rita Aouad-Badoual et al., *Histoire. Le Maroc de 1912 à nos jours*, 1st ed. (Rabat: Centre d'Etudes Arabes, Ambassade de France, 2000), 60. See also Samir Ben-Layash and Bruce Maddy Weitzman, "Myth, History and *Realpolitik*: Morocco and its Jewish Community", in *Muslim Attitudes to Jews and Israel: The Ambivalences of Rejection, Antagonism, Tolerance and Cooperation*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz (Eastbourne: Sussex Academia Press, 2010), 34.

<sup>33</sup> Satloff, for example presents direct quotations ascribed to Mohammed V along with paralinguistic aspects (e.g. 'in a voice loud enough for Vichy officers'), based on Assaraf, *Mohammed V et les Juifs*, 129-133 and 161. However, Assaraf himself presents quotations ascribed to eyewitnesses or taken from newspapers or documents without giving comprehensible references. Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 111 ; see also Cohen, "Ofen yumah shel ha-tehikah ha-anti-yehudit be-maroko be-tekfut mimshelet Vichy al-pi mismakhim hadashim mi-misrad ha-huz ha-zorfati", 228.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, the paragraph on Moroccan history on the official website of the Moroccan government, where it reads: 'During the war his majesty king Mohammed Ben Youssef (Mohamed V), Sultan of the cherifien kingdom since 1927 and protector of all his

himself, Mohammed VI, often refers to his grandfather's position towards the Jewish community in the 1940s. On the occasion of the inauguration of the Place Mohammed V in Paris in December 2002 he stressed that his grandfather's refusal to apply the anti-Semitic laws was a decisive example for other countries.<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein, at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Moroccan independence he underlined the 'courageous and memorable position [Mohammed V] adopted on the side of the free world vis-à-vis Nazism and Fascism.'<sup>36</sup> Among representatives of the Jewish community the former king Mohammed V is celebrated almost as a cult figure. On the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, for example, Serge Berdugo, president of the Moroccan Jewish community, expressed his 'eternal gratitude' to Mohammed V.<sup>37</sup> This statement found its way into various Moroccan newspapers and magazines and was also quoted in Israel, France and Germany, where the newsletter of the Moroccan embassy published a short article about the commemoration day.<sup>38</sup> The Moroccan newspaper *La Gazette du Maroc* quoted Berdugo:

When all Jews in the world were being surrendered to the hands of the Nazis, transferred to the death camps and exterminated, the Moroccan king stood up to oppose the Nazi forces. This was an enormous display of courage. The late Mohammed V attached great importance to his role as Commander of the Faithful, which he understood to include all of the People of the Book.<sup>39</sup>

Berdugo made similar statements in 1998 in a publication of the *Conseil de Communautés Israélites du Maroc*, declaring that 'the Moroccan Jews will never forget the courageous attitude of his majesty Mohammed V, who protected them from the racist laws of Vichy and Nazi-persecution.'<sup>40</sup> André Azoulay, well known as the king's advisor, also spreads the image of the sultan as protector of the Jews on official occasions. In Washington D.C. he participated in a panel together with Robert Satloff and 'discussed King Mohammed V's

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subjects, defended the Moroccan Jews pertinaciously against the Vichy regime.' Quoted from the French version of *Portail du Maroc*, [www.maroc.ma](http://www.maroc.ma), accessed 15 April 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Speech of king Mohammed VI on the occasion of the inauguration of the Place Mohammed V in Paris on 20 December 2002, quoted from the website of the Moroccan Foreign Ministry, <http://www.diplomatie.ma/articledetails.aspx?id=2776>, accessed 10 March 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Speech of Mohammed V on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence, 16 November 2005, quoted from the website *Portail du Maroc*, [www.maroc.ma](http://www.maroc.ma), accessed 10 March 2012.

<sup>37</sup> See for example, " 'L'éternelle reconnaissance' des juifs du Maroc envers Mohammed V", *La Gazette du Maroc*, 14 February 2005; Amale Samie, "Etre Juif au Maroc", *Maroc Hebdo International*, 10 February 2005.

<sup>38</sup> See *Marokko Aktuell. Informationsblatt der Botschaft des Königreiches Marokko in Berlin*, 1 (2005); "Moroccan Jews pay homage to 'protector'", *Ha'aretz*, 1 January 2005.

<sup>39</sup> 'L'éternelle reconnaissance', *La Gazette du Maroc*.

<sup>40</sup> *La communauté juive marocaine*, ed. Conseil des Communautés Israélites du Maroc, (Casablanca, 1998), 10.

heroic efforts to protect Moroccan Jews from the repressive anti-Semitic policies of the French Vichy colonial government.<sup>41</sup>

However, as stated before, the debate on Mohammed V and his behaviour towards the Moroccan Jews is not any more confined to historians or politicians alone. In May 2007 an article in the francophone Moroccan weekly *TelQuel* cited a report on concentration camps in Morocco, promising ‘other revelations about the secret history of the Moroccan Jews under Mohammed V.’<sup>42</sup> Starting from the idea of admitting Mohammed V among the *Righteous* in Yad Vashem, two Moroccan journalists tried to investigate the role he played for the Jewish community in the 1940s. Previously, in November 2006, the magazine *Maroc Hebdo International*, also a francophone weekly, had taken up the issue of concentration camps in Morocco and the sultan’s responsibility as a reaction to an article written by Robert Satloff on the role of Arab *Righteous* during the Second World War which had been published in the *Washington Post* in October 2006.<sup>43</sup> While *TelQuel* questioned the official narrative of the heroic king, the article in *Maroc Hebdo International* rather confirmed the established image:

Mohammed V opened an enormous royal protection shield that spared the Moroccan Jews from the genocidal verdict of Nazi-Germany and its authorized executors, the Vichy regime. [...] As a consequence of his commitment no Moroccan Jew was interned in a camp!<sup>44</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that the reactions and discussions following the publication of the critical *TelQuel* article were far more numerous than in the aftermath of the first report on concentration camps in *Maroc Hebdo International*. ‘Mohammed V, ‘Righteous among the Nations’: reality or myth?’ is the provocative question *TelQuel* poses at the end of the article. The estimation of the authors that ‘the love-story between Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews is tormented, complex and not at all as idyllic as one would like it to be’ directly challenges established narratives.<sup>45</sup> While there was only one direct reaction to the article published by *TelQuel*,<sup>46</sup> it was widely disseminated

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<sup>41</sup> The discussion was organized by the American Moroccan Institute, 14 December 2007. Quoted from the website of the American Moroccan Institute, [http://www.amius.org/events/past/event\\_121406.htm](http://www.amius.org/events/past/event_121406.htm), accessed 26 April 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Karim Boukhari and Hassan Hamdani, “Des camps de concentration au Maroc”, *TelQuel*, 274 (May 2007).

<sup>43</sup> A similar article is to be found for example in the weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* by Majda Fahim “Mohammed au pantheon des Justes?”, 2 January 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Abdellatif Mansour, “Des camps de concentration nazis au Maroc”, *Maroc Hebdo International*, 721 (November 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Boukhari and Hamdani, “Des camps de concentration”.

<sup>46</sup> The letter came from Raizla Fuks, Casablanca, and was printed in *TelQuel*, 275 (May 2007).

and discussed in various online forums.<sup>47</sup> Although participants maintain their anonymity, their usernames usually indicate their gender. Moreover, some users provide direct or indirect information about their nationality, place of origin, profession and religion.

Central to the discussion on the Moroccan-Jewish website *dafina.net* is the dichotomy between ‘old-school-historians’ and ‘non-professionals.’ The former are represented by a user introducing himself as ‘*Professeur*’, who by referring to ‘his students’ indicates that he is a lecturer at a Moroccan university. *Professeur*, who attempts to exhibit a certain authority by choosing this particular username, not only questions the ‘revelations’ of *TelQuel*, he also describes them as spiteful and criticises the authors’ sensationalism, greed and imprudence.<sup>48</sup> Without reading the article (‘I forbade myself to read this journal’ and ‘I refuse to read this pseudo-article’<sup>49</sup>) *Professeur* totally rejects the existence of concentration camps in Morocco: ‘Altogether, there have never been concentration camps in Morocco!’<sup>50</sup> The other participants, all presumably ‘non-professionals’, are not satisfied with *Professeur*’s position. Even if they do not oppose the narrative of the ‘righteous king’, they demand the right to investigate historical narratives. *Sourie*, who posted the article on *dafina.net*, expresses her dismay over the fact that *Professeur* is reacting without having read the text. She demands the right to pose critical questions and to check other perspectives on historiography:

Everyone knows about the firm and noble attitude of the Sultan Mohamed V who refused to hand over his Jewish Moroccan subjects to the claws of the Nazis. Still, it is necessary to accept the history of one’s country. [...] Hence before accusing me of spreading ‘spiteful things’, take note of the documents, the facts and the analyses. This is the minimum one can demand from a professor.<sup>51</sup>

Support for her demand comes from *FoX*, who argues for weighing up the different perspectives before rejecting them: ‘Do not give a judgement about

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<sup>47</sup> The article was for example diffused and commented on the Moroccan site *Wladbladi*, Forum Maroc, <http://www.wladbladi.com/forum/showthread.php?t=35811>; *Dafina*, Le Net des Juifs du Maroc, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737>; the Moroccan site *Bladi*, <http://www.bladi.net/forum/102361-camps-concentration-maroc/index5.html>, the websites of the French TV channel Forum France 2, [http://forums.france2.fr/france2/jtfrance2/histoire-originares-maroc-sujet\\_26700\\_1.htm](http://forums.france2.fr/france2/jtfrance2/histoire-originares-maroc-sujet_26700_1.htm).

The article was also published on the following websites: *Le Site de Sindbad*, Site d’information et de résistance la propagation de la pensée néo-conservatrice en France et dans la Monde, <http://sindibad.fr/spip.php?article150>; *PorTail Du MaRoc*, Actualité et Journal du Maroc, <http://www.portaildumaroc.com/news+article.storyid+3502.htm>, all accessed 26 March 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Comment by *Professeur*, 21 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

<sup>49</sup> Comment by *Professeur*, 22 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

<sup>50</sup> Comment by *Professeur*, 28 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3>

<sup>51</sup> Comment by *Sourie*, 21 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

something you have not read. Make an effort, read it.<sup>52</sup> *Nicht* criticises *Professeur*'s 'derisive view' whilst at the same time attributing to him a certain 'naivety'. He poses the question: '[...] do you still believe that there is a country that spreads peace in the world without searching for personal interests?'<sup>53</sup> An even harsher criticism of *Professeur* comes from *Lio* who adds to *nicht*'s comment: 'More than naive; I would say that a researcher is sceptical and critical by definition, and therein lies the secret of success in this profession.'<sup>54</sup>

*Professeur* understands the article not only as a misinterpretation of historical facts, but considers the approach taken by *TelQuel* as a direct offence to the 'real values' of Moroccans.<sup>55</sup> He describes the article in *TelQuel* as an 'insult vis-à-vis our collective memory'<sup>56</sup> and a 'defamation and insult to all Moroccans, Jews and Muslims alike!'<sup>57</sup> He questions the reliability of the sources and points to the danger it carries for Moroccan historiography: 'Altogether I bet that the journalist in question will present us as his only source one sole reference, this Robert Satloff who spent one or two years in Morocco and now wants us to change our history!'<sup>58</sup> It seems that by defending 'Moroccan history,' *Professeur* is trying to defend and protect Moroccan identity and what he sees as its valuable character:

To all the people there I say: The Moroccans do not have superpower, or a super economy, or petrodollars... but we have super values with which we write history. We do not need written proof: the fact that a million Israelis are of Moroccan origin is the best and most reassuring proof that Morocco was spared from the human madness of the Second World War. When a Jew remembers Morocco and his eyes are filled with tears, this is our best emotional proof that Morocco lingers in a part of his heart.<sup>59</sup>

And later he adds: '[...] when I am defending this point of view about the scientific character of the sources it is not to annoy you! It is for the sake of us all!'<sup>60</sup>

In his defence of Moroccan history, *Professeur* relies on established narratives and perspectives. However, new questions arise and the discussants demand the right to challenge these narratives. In contrast to the very inflexible opinion

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<sup>52</sup> Comment of *FoX*, 22 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

<sup>53</sup> Comment of *nicht*, 23 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

<sup>54</sup> Comment of *Lio*, 23 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

<sup>55</sup> Comment of *Professeur*, 22 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

<sup>56</sup> Comment of *Professeur*, 22 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=1>

<sup>57</sup> Comment of *Professeur*, 28 May 2007,

<http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3>

<sup>58</sup> Comment of *Professeur*, 24 May 2007,

<http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=2>

<sup>59</sup> Comment of *Professeur*, 26 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=2>

<sup>60</sup> Comment of *Professeur*, 24 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=2>

of *Professeur*, the other participants seem to have more questions than answers, voicing considerable doubts as well. In this way, the internet serves as a platform to negotiate not only various views of the past, but also the right of knowledge production. *Sourie* criticises *Professeur* for his holier-than-thou behaviour:

To Professeur: It seems that you overestimate the ‘scientificity’ of human science in general and of history in particular. One of my professors of history [...] insisted always on an essential quality of historians: modesty.<sup>61</sup>

In a condescending manner, *Professeur* replies that he did not refer to ‘amateurism’ in a negative sense and that he too considers himself an amateur (even though he clearly demands interpretative authority throughout the entire discussion).<sup>62</sup>

By the end of the discussion *Professeur’s* standpoint has been accepted. He is able to convince the other participants of the unreliability of the sources used by the *TelQuel* journalists. With the help of authoritative arguments and frames of reference *Professeur* overcomes the questions and doubts of the other discussants.<sup>63</sup> The debates mirrors what the Moroccan historian Mostafa Bouaziz described in the following terms: ‘Today all questions are allowed but not all answers.’<sup>64</sup> However, this debate shows that there is also a growing interest among non-professionals in discussing the past, more specifically the impact of Nazi politics and persecution on Moroccan society. By questioning established viewpoints and opening up new perspectives, the discussants participate in negotiating present-day issues in Moroccan society.

#### 4. From Mohammad V to the Middle East Conflict

The sultan’s attitude towards his Jewish subject in the 1940s was not only discussed within a predominantly Moroccan context but also in the international press as a response to various media reports. These debates were launched by the question whether Mohammed V should be granted the title *Righteous Among the Nations* in Yad Vashem or not. The American Jewish weekly *Forward* published an article about the possible honouring of Mohammed V

<sup>61</sup> Comment of *Sourie*, 27 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3>

<sup>62</sup> Comment of *Professeur*, 28 May 2007, <http://dafina.net/forums/read.php?52,168737,page=3>

<sup>63</sup> *Souri* posts: ‘To Professeur: I yield to your argument and accept that I bought into Tel-Quel’s affirmations on the concentration camp in Boufara too hastily. The picture that illustrated the article appeared to show a concentration camp located in Morocco. However, the author of a personal website on [voil.fr](http://voil.fr) declared firmly that the picture shows Boufara in Algeria. Thus, I was wrong and mislead, and I do accept your caution and reservation concerning the credibility of Tel-Quel.’

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Mostafa Ouaziz in the radio feature of Ziad Maalouf, ‘Zamane, le magazine d’histoire du Maroc’.

titled ‘An Arab King Righteous among the Nations?’<sup>65</sup> Two days later the English edition of the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* printed the same text under the title ‘Stealth campaign under way to name late Moroccan king as righteous gentile’.<sup>66</sup> The Israeli website *Ynetnews.com* also took up the topic.<sup>67</sup> In January 2007 the idea of the sultan’s nomination had already come up in the *Ha’aretz* internet forum as a reaction to the honouring of Abd al-Wahab.<sup>68</sup> One participant suggested: ‘If there was a great Arab that deserves a connotation as a Just it should be the King of Morocco during the World War, under the Vichy regime.’<sup>69</sup> These texts provoked extensive debates, all of them in English, with discussants from different countries and backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> Even though the initial question was whether Mohammed V should be nominated as *Righteous*, none of the contributions to the debate explicitly refers to Yad Vashem’s respective guidelines.

Unlike on the Moroccan website *dafina.net*, in this international context the narrative of the sultan’s tolerance is directly challenged by the participants. By some, this is done in a more subtle way, for example when one discussant notes that ‘the story about the Moroccan king (like the Danish king) offering to wear a yellow star of David appears to be apocryphal [...]’.<sup>71</sup> Others, however, are harsher, such as *Tarshisha* who claims that ‘Muhammad V was connected with Nazi intelligence and [was a] sympathizer of Hitler.’<sup>72</sup> At another point the question is asked why, if they had had such a good and safe status in Morocco, ‘most of the Jews had to flee the country clandestinely without their goods or money in the late forties and fifties.’<sup>73</sup>

Judging by their names and their use of specific phrases, the majority of supporters of Mohammed’s nomination as a *Righteous* on the forums are almost certainly of Moroccan origin. The only exception is *Joseph*, whose standpoint is rather critical:

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<sup>65</sup> Marc Perelman, “An Arab King Righteous Among the Nation?”, *Forward*, 12 December 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Marc Perelman, “Stealth campaign under way to name late Moroccan king as righteous gentile”, *Ha’aretz*, 14 December 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Itamar Eichner, “Moroccan king nominated for Righteous Among the Nations title”, *Ynet*, 20 July 2007, <http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3427804,00.html>, accessed 15 April 2012.

<sup>68</sup> Amiram Barkat, “Holocaust researcher asks Yad Vashem to recognize first Arab Righteous Gentile”, *Ha’aretz*, 23 January 2007. Even though this article does not pick up the idea of nominating Mohammed V in Yad Vashem it comes up in the following discussion. For this reason the text will also be considered here.

<sup>69</sup> Comment of *BenAbuzaglo* on Amiram Barkat, *Ha’aretz*, 23 January 2007.

<sup>70</sup> I adopted the quotations with all spelling mistakes and case insensitivity. Only in some cases I did correct minor typing errors to facilitate the readability of the quotations.

<sup>71</sup> Comment of *Jake* on Marc Perelman, *Ha’aretz*, 15 December 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Comment of *Tarshisha* on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 13 December 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Comment of Marcel Hodak on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 17 December 2007.

It saddens me that we, Jews, should continue to perpetuate this lie. [...] That we should continue to believe that a king without power or influence saved the Jewish community of Morocco. There is no truth to this. We, the Jews of Morocco, should put an end to this romantic myth.<sup>74</sup>

The other Moroccans, Muslims and Jews alike, discuss the sultan's attitude and the coexistence between Jews and Muslims in a very positive way. A post on *Ynetnews.com* by a user in London reads: 'The king Mohammad V was a great king to all. We were happy to be Moroccan [...]'.<sup>75</sup> *Semsem* from New York writes: 'This fact is well known: that the King saved the Jews of Morocco.'<sup>76</sup> However, due to the fact that a number of critics of the sultan and the idea to nominate him in Yad Vashem are particularly harsh, it is not sufficient to state that the sultan was a righteous man. Moreover, the discussants supporting the king's positive image are required to produce arguments, proofs and references to back up their standpoint.

One participant, for example, refers to historians as authorised specialists by stating: 'It is well known to historians that the king Mohamed V has replied to Vichy when he was asked to deliver Moroccan Jewish leaders to the Nazi regime as followed: 'There are no Moroccan Jews, but only Moroccans.'<sup>77</sup> Another user invokes personal experience as evidence for the sultan's protective attitude: 'Sultan Mohamed V should be a righteous gentile. [...] ask any jew from casablanca, rabat, marrakesh or fes. we owe him big. he was a good man. a very good man [*sic*].'<sup>78</sup> Others refer to the past, more precisely to the Middle Ages, in order to show that tolerance towards the Jews has a long tradition and is therefore something inherent in Moroccan society: 'For centuries, Arabs offered refuge to Jews fleeing from pogroms, inquisition, and discrimination.'<sup>79</sup> A discussant named *Historian* states: 'Please don't forget that during the Spanish Inquisition many Jews fled Christian Spain and found a safe shelter in Muslim North Africa.'<sup>80</sup> Some discussants also try to support their points of view by quoting from written sources. A special authority seems to be ascribed to religious texts such as the Koran or the Torah.<sup>81</sup>

At this point the discussion turns away from the initial question of whether Mohammed V was a *Righteous*. More general issues are raised, such as the coexistence of Jews and Muslims in Morocco, which is highlighted as a particularly Moroccan value in both the past and present: 'A culture of

<sup>74</sup> Comment of Joseph on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 13 December 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Comment of *A V* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 20 July 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Comment of *Semsem* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 20 July 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Comment of *Moroccan* on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 15 December 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Comment of *benabou* on the article, *Ha'aretz*, 24 January 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 14 December 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Comment of *Historian* on Amiram Barkat, *Ha'aretz*, 23 January 2007.

<sup>81</sup> For example *Jake* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 15 December 2007 or *Farees* on Marc Perelman, *Forward*, 17 December 2007.



tolerance in Morocco has still endured and there are still Moroccan Jewish [*siz*] living in Morocco occupying even important positions in the economical and political arena in the country.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Morocco seems for them to be proof of a more general Arab or Muslim tolerance. In this context the honouring of Mohammed V acquires a wider dimension: 'It will prove that few Muslims are like Ahmadinejad [*siz*], and that Moroccans are proof of that.'<sup>83</sup> Another participant states: 'The King's actions are a fine example of Arab chivalry and the best of Islamic morality.'<sup>84</sup> Besides referring to the morals of Arabs and Muslims, some discussants also point out the responsibility of European and Christian countries in the persecution of the Jews. *Historian*, for example, posts:

Muslims have always been closer to Judaism, religiously and culturally, than we are made to believe by modern Judeo-Christian countries who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust against their own Jewish citizens.<sup>85</sup>

*Aman* makes a similar comment:

Through history, Arabs were the only people sympathetic to the Jews and they coexisted and offered them asylum from the crusaders of Europe (Spain, Germany, France, etc.). Europeans have always killed and abused the Jews till WW2 but Arabs and Muslims offered them shelter. Until Zionism came and ruined this relationship.<sup>86</sup>

Europe's responsibility is stressed by various participants, for example *1 state solution*, who writes:

Jews have lived, and continue to live everywhere from Algeria to India including Syria and Iran. Christians conducted pogroms and inquisitions while Arabs offered sanctuary. In fact, that's why 4% of the Palestinian population was Jewish when Zionism raised its ugly head in the 1890s. When European Zionists turned to violence and ethnic cleansing to create Israel it set in motion all the wars to follow, and those still yet to happen. Please take responsibility for your own wrong doing rather than blaming Arabs who were minding their own business when European Jews were fleeing the Nazis. If you want to hate, hate those who killed Jews for no reason – the Nazis – not the Arabs that are merely fighting back to get their homes back.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Comment of *Moroccan* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 15 December 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 14 December 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Comment of *Danite* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 14 December 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Comment of *Historian* on Amiram Barkat, *Ha'aretz*, 23 January 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Comment of *Aman* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 21 July 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 15 December 2007.

By referring to the persecution of Jews in Europe and their good and safe status in Arab countries, the discussants argue against the image of Arab anti-Semitism. This leads to another central point that is tackled in all the forums dealing with Mohammed's proposed honouring as a *Righteous*, namely the present-day relationship between Jews and Arabs and the Middle East conflict. One of the participants asks: 'If Jews were persecuted again, do you think Arabs and Palestinians would help them – now after all Israel had done?'<sup>88</sup> *Amin* from Paris expresses the wish 'to see the day where a YV [Yad Vashem] honouring Jews who defend Pals [Palestinians] rights will be built. Hoping that day less racism and islamophobia will be among jews Israelis [*sic*] too.'<sup>89</sup> When it comes to the situation in Israel and Palestine, some articles become very emotional. A discussant named *Nabil* calls Israel's policy 'apartheid.'<sup>90</sup> He argues that Israel does not respect other religions, that 1.5 Million people in Gaza have no right to travel freely even inside Gaza, that the inhabitants of the West Bank are hindered by the wall and numerous checkpoints, and finally that Arabs have no right to own land in Israel. The response by *Jake* is very impetuous:

Gazans [*sic*] cannot move around freely in Gaza? That's a good one. [...] How about facing up to some facts on your own side that you Arabs were not as nice to the Jews as you like to believe. [...] That your peaceful Morocco was fighting against Israel on the Syrian front on Golan Heights during their vicious attack on Israel on the holiest Jewish day of the year in 1973.<sup>91</sup>

Since we are dealing with discussion forums hosted on the websites of newspapers, we can assume that the responsible administrators removed comments that were too impertinent, illicit and offensive, as well as those that glorified violence. Nevertheless, some of the contributions clearly demonstrate the sensitive nature of the issue and the extent to which the conflict between Israel and Palestine still influences thinking about the past. The question of whether an Arab leader should be honoured for rescuing his Jewish subjects cannot be discussed without keeping the conflict in mind. Hence the discussion about Mohammed V thus inevitably touches upon the political situation of today. The matter of how others - first and foremost 'the West' - perceive 'the Arabs' is central. Emanating from the question of the 'righteous monarch,' the debate rapidly shifts its focus to the relations between Jews and Arabs or Jews and Muslims. Besides stressing the historical tradition of good relations between Arabs and Jews, some participants – predominantly of obvious Arab-Muslim origin – point to the European responsibility for the Shoah, especially the persecution and killing of Jews under the National

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<sup>88</sup> Comment of *1 state solution* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 14 December 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Comment of *Amin* on Marc Perelman, *Ha'aretz*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>90</sup> Comment of *Nabil* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 20 July 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Comment of *Jake* on Itamar Eichner, *ynetnews.com*, 21 July 2007.

Socialists. By referring to the past, the present-day situation is explained and justified, particularly with regard to positions towards and within the Middle East conflict.

## 5. Conclusion

Was the Mohammed V a 'righteous monarch'? Was he a *Righteous* in terms of Yad Vashem? Such questions are not only discussed by historians and journalists inside and outside of Morocco; instead, a wide range of individuals who meet each other in the realm of social media take a stand on this issue. In consequence new perspectives are introduced and the thematic scope of historical narratives is broadened. My analysis makes it clear that the contributions and discussions among the internet users are not limited to historical events. Rather they touch on questions of identity, politics and power. The past serves as the creator of a sense of values in the present and is referred to in order to explain certain current developments in Morocco. In various ways, participants of the internet debates either defend or challenge not only established narratives but also the rules of negotiating meaning. As I have shown in this article, the initial debate – the sultan's behaviour towards the Jews during the Vichy regime – was appropriated in order to negotiate wider issues such as Jewish-Muslim relations, the Middle East conflict, and 'the Arabs and the West'. In this regard, there is hardly a difference between actors outside and inside the academic field; the latter also construct their historiographical narratives in order to make sense of the present.

However, when it comes to the perception and evaluation of knowledge produced by historians and non-historians, it seems to make a big difference who is speaking and in what context. The material discussed here mirrors this polarisation between established historians and those 'who are simply interested in history.' Thus, various statements in the internet debate indicate a strict distinction between 'historical truth' represented by scientific researchers and the supposed biased and amateurish access to the past by 'non-professionals'. However, other statements reflect the struggle for having the right to question an alleged historical truth and to present alternative narrations. The frequent presentation of historical topics in Moroccan media and the launch of the popular historical journals *Zamane* show that there is an increasing demand to discuss topics neglected so far or new approaches to the past. The emergence of social media enables the active participation of a wide range of interested parties in debates about historical topics and therefore it leads to a democratization of knowledge production.

Even if we cannot accurately measure the impact of these debates on each and every Moroccan, we can observe that official representatives feel forced to

react to alternative narratives circulating on the internet.<sup>92</sup> In an interview with *The Jewish Chronicle* Serge Berdugo tried to dispel doubts by referring to the ‘historical documents [that] prove Mohammed V had refused to treat Moroccan Jews any different from Muslims.’ To the reproach that honouring the sultan would be based on legends, he answered that ‘historians are working very seriously on this issue and [that] there is no doubt King Mohammed saved lives.’<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> On the influence of internet debates on established views and taboos see Mona Eltahawy’s speech “[MySpace, HerSpace: Women and Alternative Media in the Middle East](#)” (paper presented at Georgia State University, 8 October 2008). Compare also her discussion of Impact of blogs on the Arab World at University of Delaware, 28 February 2009; both accessible on <http://monaeltahawy.com/>, accessed 17 April 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Shirli Sitbon, “Was this king a righteous?”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 9 August 2007.