



**Arab Media Watch**  
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

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## **Monitoring Study: Media Portrayals of Morocco**

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## **Introduction**

Arab Media Watch monitored editorials, columns, commentaries, analyses and features from the British national daily press for 20 months: June 2006 - February 2008 (excluding weekends and bank holidays). This study focused on press commentary on Morocco rather than straight news coverage. As such, news articles were largely excluded.

There were no relevant items in three of the five tabloids: the Daily Mirror, Daily Express and Daily Star. These represent the third, fifth and sixth highest circulation figures respectively among the 10 newspapers monitored.

Furthermore, the Daily Telegraph, the Independent and the Sun had just one relevant item each, and even then, Morocco was only mentioned in passing. This is noteworthy as the Sun is by far the highest circulation newspaper in Britain, and the Telegraph is the highest circulation broadsheet and fourth highest among the 10 newspapers.

The Guardian and Financial Times together accounted for the vast majority of items (11 in the former), followed by the Daily Mail with five items, then the Times with four.

Generally then, British press commentary on Morocco during the monitoring period can be described as scant. Any significant amount of commentary was localised to just four of the 10 national daily newspapers, three of which (the Times, the Guardian and the FT) have relatively low circulation figures (only the Independent's is lower).

Furthermore, the issue of terrorism received by far the most comment, with all its negative connotations.

## **Terrorism**

Much press commentary on Morocco revolved around terrorism, specifically Al Qaeda / Islamist / jihadi terrorism, the 'war on terror,' and the consequences of the Iraq war.

The only commentary in the Daily Telegraph mentioning Morocco was in September 2007 by **Denis MacShane**, who said that economic development, while needed in countries such as Morocco, "will not take place without a defeat of jihadi terrorism."

A **Times editorial** in April that year said Morocco, along with Algeria and Tunisia, were "struggling to contain terrorism."

The Financial Times and the Guardian devoted the most commentary to this issue. The FT's **Andrew England** wrote of "worries about regional links between extremist groups and the recruitment of Moroccans into terrorist training camps."

**Stephen Fidler** wrote in the same newspaper that "the idea that Islamist terrorists are drawn from the ranks of the poor and oppressed...may be the pattern in some countries such as Morocco."

Two **FT editorials** highlighted the effects of the Iraq war. "Although many foreign jihadis go to die as suicide bombers in Baghdad, others are now being encouraged to go home - to countries such as...Morocco - or take their terrorism to the streets of Europe," said one editorial in July 2007.

"It was perfectly foreseeable, and indeed predicted, that the US-led invasion of Iraq, far from striking a decisive blow against terrorism, would proliferate militant Islamism all over the Arab and Muslim worlds, from where a new generation of jihadis would strike into Europe and the west," said another editorial in May 2007. "The roll-call of atrocities, from Casablanca to Istanbul, Bali to Mumbai, Riyadh to Amman, London to Madrid, is bloody indeed."

The Guardian's Middle East editor **Ian Black** pointed to US intelligence showing Moroccans, Algerians, Libyans and Tunisians "well represented among foreign jihadis joining the Iraqi insurgency over the past year, providing many suicide bombers."

A **Guardian editorial** said that when "Islamist militants" carry out "bombings and kidnappings" in North African countries such as Morocco, "international reaction veers between two extremes."

They are either "all seen as part of a conspiracy of trans-national terrorism, to create an 'Afghanistan-like hinterland' within striking distance of Europe," with Al Qaeda "spreading its tentacles." Or they are interpreted as "purely internal events...The truth may be more complex than either scenario would have us believe."

**Simon Tisdall**, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian, wrote that regarding Al Qaeda "and like-minded Islamist groups" that "are rapidly gaining strength" in North Africa, while "the terrorists' immediate fight is with the pro-US

governments of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, their longer-term target is western interests in the Maghreb - and possibly Europe itself."

In a separate article, Tisdall said US plans for a military command based in Africa "have hit a wall of hostility from governments in the region reluctant to associate themselves with the Bush administration's 'war on terror' and fearful of American intervention...Even Morocco, considered Washington's closest north African ally, indicated it did not welcome a permanent military presence on its soil."

Two relevant commentaries in the Daily Mail focused on the 'war on terror,' but from different angles. **Michael Burleigh** said the CIA "covertly flies people to destinations such as Morocco" which "routinely beat detainees, imprison them in dark and dank holes, or subject them to electric shocks or savage dogs."

The Mail's regular columnist **Peter McKay** expressed sympathy for Moroccan Ahmed Errachidi, 39, who worked as a chef in Britain for 20 years. "He is held at America's Guantanamo torture camp in Cuba because the US suspects him of being an Al Qaeda terrorist, even though he has been cleared by a US judge who reviewed evidence unearthed by The Mail on Sunday that he was working at the posh Westbury Hotel, London, at the time," said McKay.

"Since he was a resident here, not a citizen, our Foreign Office won't help him...We kicked up an almighty row when 15 of our military personnel were detained by the Iranians but no one here makes a fuss when America does it."

## **Western Sahara**

The dispute over Western Sahara - which has domestic, Arab, regional, European and even international implications - received few comments.

The "huge sand berm built by Morocco to keep Polisario guerrillas out of the slice of the Western Sahara it claims as its own" was described by the Guardian's diplomatic editor **Julian Borger** as the "modern descendant of the Great Wall of China and Hadrian's Wall.

"Unlike its predecessors, which relied on height and sentries to keep the enemy out, the Moroccan wall is enforced with electronic surveillance equipment and landmines, but the purpose is similar," he added.

"The UN favours self-determination but no progress has been made since a ceasefire in 1991," said **Simon Tisdall**, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian. "Meanwhile, refugees remain in camps on the Algerian side of the border more than 30 years after fighting began."

**Paul Torrisi** wrote in the Daily Mail that Morocco "has its troubled regions, including Western Sahara, where half of the population live in camps courtesy of the Algerian state."

## Political System

The Financial Times and the Guardian highlighted Morocco's political system - mostly during the September 2007 elections - in a generally (but not exclusively) negative fashion. The country's political system "ensures no single party can expect a majority, forcing groups into coalitions," said the FT's **Andrew England**.

This allows for "fracturing the vote and bolstering the king's ability to fix things his way," according to the Guardian's Middle East editor **Ian Black**. King Mohammed VI "appoints ministers, including the prime minister, regardless of the election result," so "scepticism was rife," voter "apathy" was "widespread," and "most" Moroccans "seem under-whelmed by the election."

"Real power" lies with King Mohammed VI, according to **England, Black** and a particularly critical **FT editorial**, which added that parties are allowed "to compete freely for a feeble parliament."

The editorial focused on the "record low" turnout of 37% at the last elections, saying there were "many reasons for voters' apathy, including widespread perceptions that much of the political class is co-opted, if not corrupt."

"Even Morocco's Islamist Justice and Development party, which campaigned on the promise of social justice and transparent government, failed to make a strong impression on voters. (It won only 46 seats in the 325-member assembly, coming in second to the traditional conservative Istiqlal party)."

The editorial added: "The fundamental problem is that voters believe their voices do not matter. In Morocco, after all, King Mohammed VI ignored the results of the 2002 elections and named a prime minister who belonged to none of the winning parties."

King Mohammed VI "may have shown some reformist credentials, pushing through, for example, a personal status law that improved the rights of women," said the editorial. "But the lesson he - and other rulers - should draw from the waning popular enthusiasm for polls is that voters want genuine change. A democratic façade will no longer do."

However, **Black** was more positive, saying the election "is expected to be freer and fairer than anywhere else in the region," and "is being closely watched - in the Arab world and the west - as an example of how moderate Islamists can take part in democratic politics."

"Elsewhere they are banned outright, marginalised, or, like Egypt's powerful Muslim Brotherhood, face constant state repression. No one fears a rerun of the bloody civil war next door in Algeria where the military cancelled elections after the first round in December 1991 to stop a more radical Islamist party taking power...Ordinary Moroccans seem little troubled by the Islamist question."

Focusing on the participation of Justice and Development, he said Islamist parties "don't come any tamer...It does not seek to impose sharia law or restore the caliphate

and - crucially - accepts King Mohammed VI as 'commander of the faithful', the ancient title that makes him both a religious and secular ruler."

Black added: "No other party approaches it for organisation, credibility or popular appeal. It would ban the sale of alcohol only in public places, compares itself to Turkey's ruling AK party (the name means the same) and encourages parallels with Europe's Christian Democrats."

On a different but related issue, the FT's **Guy Dinmore** said in January 2007: "The culturalist argument is...being heard again in Washington - not so much that Arabs and democracy do not mix but that, with the exception of ethnically homogeneous states such as Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, the other nations of the Middle East, notably Iraq, are too bound by ties of clan and sect to make a pain-free transition."

### **Tourism**

Tourism is an area where Morocco received good press, though not as much as one would expect given its traditional attraction to tourists. There were only a few relevant articles. "Tourism is booming, with direct low-cost flights from Europe," wrote the Guardian's Middle East editor **Ian Black**.

The Moroccans have "big ideas" and are trying to "bolster their tourist traffic," according to **Paul Torrisi** in the Daily Mail.

"Under the Plan Azur and Vision 2010 strategies launched by King Mohamed VI, the Moroccan government aims to attract ten million visitors annually by 2010, to upgrade the nation's infrastructure and to create six new major coastal developments," Torrisi said. "An open skies policy is also attracting a growing number of budget carriers."

In the same newspaper, **Zoe Dare Hall** said: "The Moroccan city of Tangier has never failed to inspire artists...With its exotic, laidback char, and curious blend of traditional Arabic and bohemian Western culture, at its very heart lies the ancient Medina, a warren of surprisingly bright backstreets."

However, she added: "Since Tangier's heyday in the 1960s, when it was Morocco's top tourist destination, the city's star has waned, eclipsed by Marrakech and Agadir."

The Mail's regular columnist **Stephen Glover** wrote: "One of the joys of being in Marrakesh...is hearing the morning call to prayer."

### **Illiteracy**

Illiteracy in Morocco was mentioned twice. The Guardian's Middle East editor **Ian Black** pointed out that illiteracy rates are at 43%, while a **Sun editorial**, criticising Britain's slide in child literacy, said: "Only Morocco and Romania have plunged faster down the league table." This was the Sun's only comment on Morocco.

## **Relations with Europe**

There were a few unconnected commentaries which, in different ways, dealt with Morocco's relations with Europe. Guardian columnist **Timothy Garton Ash** recommended that the European Union focus on "the rule of law and women's rights in Morocco."

Guardian columnist and feature writer **Gary Younge** quoted "the late gay Dutch anti-immigration activist" Pim Fortuyn: "I have gay friends who have been beaten up by young Moroccans in Rotterdam. In Rotterdam we have third-generation Moroccans who still don't speak Dutch, oppress women and won't live by our values." Younge concluded sarcastically: "There was, it seems, no gay-bashing or sexism in Rotterdam before the Moroccans came."

The largest comment in this section came from **Robert MacPhail** in the Times on 5 November 2007. He wrote about Morocco's relations with Spain, specifically regarding immigration and land disputes over the Ceuta and Melilla enclaves, and an island known to Spain as Perejil and to Morocco as Leila:

"An historic visit by the Spanish King to two enclaves on the Moroccan coast will go ahead today, despite triggering an embarrassing diplomatic row between the two nations...Both towns have been under Spanish control since the 15th and 16th centuries, but are claimed by Morocco as its territory...Spanish leaders have tended to stay away from the two enclaves in an attempt to avoid inflaming political sensitivities."

MacPhail added: "Relations had been improving between Madrid and Rabat since 2002, when the two nations declared 'war' after Morocco sent troops to reclaim the tiny uninhabited island of Perejil, which is in the Strait of Gibraltar near Ceuta, and is Spanish territory. Spanish troops were deployed to oust Moroccan forces."

MacPhail stated as fact that the island is "Spanish territory," with no mention of Morocco's claim, that its claim is supported by the Arab and Muslim worlds (a significant portion of the international community), and that the island lies within Morocco's territorial waters.

Even Spain's El Pais newspaper published on 19 July 2002 a long treatise on the history of Spain's North African territories, and concluded that Perejil/Leila belongs to Morocco. Arab Media Watch's factsheet on the territory is available at:

<http://tinyurl.com/24fuqq>

MacPhail said Ceuta and Melilla "are Spain's only remaining African territories, both having been under its control for 500 years...In recent years both enclaves have been at the centre of attempts by illegal immigrants from Morocco and other African countries to enter Spain before heading to other European countries, including Britain.

"In 2005 a number of illegal immigrants were shot by police during a series of increasingly desperate mass assaults on the frontier defences in Ceuta and Melilla. This forced Spain and Morocco to agree to deploy extra troops to try to secure the borders, which in turn has led African migrants to change their route to Europe...But both enclaves are still bases for people traffickers."

## **Property**

Morocco received generally good coverage for its property market in a few relevant articles.

"As silently as the desert breeze, properties of a rare and exotic provenance are stealing on to the market in Morocco," wrote **Celia Brayfield** in the Times.

"Villa by sumptuous villa, the old-established foreign community in Marrakesh is selling its legendary houses; those with a taste for the Arabic-style architecture of Andalucia can find the real thing here," she added. "These opulent homes, a fusion of European and Moorish architecture, were built or restored in the mid 20th century when Morocco was discovered by the international jet set."

The city of Tangiers is "inspiring" the foreign property investor, according to **Zoe Dare Hall** in the Daily Mail, "thanks to King Mohammed VI's 'Plan Azur', which aims to make Tangier one of the country's six leading coastal resorts by 2010 with 10 million visitors. And with a growing number of budget airlines scheduled to link the UK to Morocco, it looks like it will succeed."

The Mail published a lengthy article by **Paul Torrissi**, who advised readers on where to invest £100,000 abroad. He described Morocco as "a real bargain", "reliably warm", "relatively nearby", a "fairly liberal" Muslim country "compared to Saudi and Pakistan at least," and "trying to cater to the European second home and investment market."

Morocco offers "attractive investment opportunities," and is "making genuine progress towards joining the European property party," he added.

Specifically, the city of Tangiers "offers real opportunities because of its proximity to Spain and shorter flying time from mainland Europe. It will also be close to the site of a proposed tunnel linking the two continents that is due to start next year and should be completed in 2025.

"Other cities, such as historic Fez and Marrakech, have also been undergoing great changes, but these two areas are at least 100 miles from the coast, and with Morocco's climate it would be a shame not to take advantage of the sunshine on a sandy beach."

However, Torrissi said the country is "a bit of a gamble," and warned people to "be careful not to believe the hype. With Morocco...most of the information that is in the public domain is developer-backed, and it is interesting to note the disparity between information from developers (or those on their payroll) and independent bodies."

Furthermore, in comparing Morocco with Turkey, he favoured the latter: "It is fair to say that Morocco is David to Turkey's Goliath. Morocco received 2.2 million visitors in the same year that Turkey received 24 million, Morocco's population is about half the size of Turkey's, and, more importantly, Turkey carries more political clout on the global stage...If it were my money, I would back the Turkish Goliath. David is indeed a worthy opponent, but in this instant, his sling will not be enough."



## **Economy**

Morocco's economy got a few brief mentions. It "shows promise, with GDP growth above 9 per cent last year and inflation at 2.8 per cent," according to **Paul Torrisi** in the Daily Mail in October 2007.

"Political stability has paid off" in the form of foreign investment flowing in, said the Guardian's Middle East editor **Ian Black**. "But Morocco's dark side is impossible to ignore...with real unemployment at perhaps 20% - the reason so many young people are desperate to do menial jobs abroad. The poor worry about price rises and a bad harvest, while the middle classes focus on the booming stock market."

On employment, **Peter Popham** wrote in the Independent that Libya's "open borders policy is convenient for this rich but oddly undeveloped society, because Libyans...don't need to do the dirty jobs when there are Moroccans or Chadians to do it for them." This was the only commentary relating to Morocco that appeared in the Independent, and even this is a fleeting reference in an article about Libya.

**Robert MacPhail** wrote in the Times in November 2007 that "Madrid and Rabat have found common ground recently over economic ties."

## **Obituary**

There was an obituary by **Lawrence Joffe** in the Guardian about Moroccan-born social campaigner Sa'adia Marciano, "the founder and public face of Israel's Black Panthers protest movement, and one of the most charismatic, if tragic, figures in Israeli society.

"He battled ceaselessly for Israel's poorer Sephardim and Mizrahim (Jews of Spanish and oriental origin) and at his death was still campaigning to provide food and heating for Jerusalem's needy...The Panthers attacked the ruling Labour party for housing Sephardi immigrants in substandard ma'abarot (transit camps) and 'development towns', and denigrating Arabic-Jewish culture...Marciano's group challenged two sacrosanct ideas of Israeli society: that Jews constituted one, indivisible bloc, and that social concerns had to wait until peace arrived.

"They also claimed common cause with Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the occupied territories, and were among the first Israelis to meet Yasser Arafat in 1972...Sa'adia's cousin became chief aide to the Moroccan-born Amir Peretz, who was elected Labour's second Mizrahi leader in late 2005. Marciano was born the sixth of 11 children in Oujda, a town on the Moroccan-Algerian border. He emigrated to Israel in 1950 after violence between local Arabs and Jews."