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WRITING AND REWRITING ABD EL-KRIM EL-KHATTABI'S MEMORY

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WRITING AND REWRITING
ABD EL-KRIM EL-KHATTABI'S MEMORYNARRAZIONI E CONTRO-NARRAZIONI SULLA MEMORIA DI
ABD EL-KRIM EL-KHATTABI*Martina Tremolada **

ABSTRACT

[ENG.] Mohammed Ben Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi (1882 – 1963) is a prominent and controversial figure in Moroccan history. His memory continues to draw interest among Moroccan citizens, as shown by the display of his images during the *Hirak* demonstrations in 2017. Considering the ongoing influence of Abd el-Krim's memory on Moroccan society, the *Mahḥzan* has used several official channels, such as the educational system, to shape the narrative around his legacy. An analysis of Moroccan high school history textbooks and interviews with history teachers suggests that Abd el-Krim is widely recognized as an anti-colonialist and Moroccan nationalist. However, some interviews with high school teachers also reveal that contentious representations of this figure exist in the Moroccan educational system. Consequently, as long as Moroccan citizens persistently promote contrasting interpretations of this story, speaking about Abd el-Krim will remain sensitive and controversial.

Keywords: Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi – Contrasting representations – *Hirak* – Moroccan educational system

[It.] Mohammed Ben Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi (1882 – 1963) è una figura nota e controversa della storia marocchina. La sua memoria continua a suscitare interesse nel paese, come dimostrato dalla presenza delle sue immagini durante le manifestazioni dell'*Hirak* nel 2017. Consapevole dell'influenza che la memoria di Abd el-Krim continua a esercitare sulla società marocchina, il *Mahḥzan* ha utilizzato diversi canali ufficiali, come il sistema educativo, per plasmare la narrazione intorno alla sua figura. L'analisi di alcuni libri di testo di storia, utilizzati nelle scuole superiori marocchine, e di alcune interviste a insegnanti di storia dimostra che Abd el-Krim è ampiamente riconosciuto come anticolonialista e nazionalista marocchino. Tuttavia, alcune delle interviste rivelano anche che, nel sistema educativo marocchino, esistono rappresentazioni controverse su questa figura. Di conseguenza, fintanto che i cittadini marocchini continueranno a promuovere interpretazioni contrastanti di questa storia, parlare di Abd el-Krim rimarrà un tema controverso.

Parole chiave: Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi – Rappresentazioni contrastanti – *Hirak* – Sistema educativo marocchino

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1. CONTRASTING MEMORIES OF ABD EL-KRIM EL-KHATTABI

Mohammed Ben Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi is a prominent and controversial figure in Moroccan history. From 1921 to 1926, he led the Rifian resistance against the Spanish and French colonial powers, which had been occupying Morocco since 1912. To achieve his goal of independence, Abd el-Krim sought to unify the people of the Rif region into a single military and political entity: the Republic of the Rif. Although he repeatedly declared his loyalty to the Alawi Sultan, his project of nation-building and the *Mahzan*'s¹ reaction to it raised doubts about Abd el-Krim's intentions, making his memory contentious.

As a result, numerous contrasting interpretations of this history emerged both within and outside the academic world. Especially in Morocco, some sociopolitical actors have interpreted Abd el-Krim's story through their values, providing ideological and political justifications for his actions. While the Islamists have described him as the leader of a *ghībād*, the leftists have emphasized the anti-imperialist and republican nature of his actions. Moreover, whereas the Imazighen have underlined his Amazigh identity², the Rifians have claimed Abd el-Krim as a prominent figure of their regional past. In the Rif, people have asserted Abd el-Krim's Rifian identity, especially to underline the significant role that he and his companions played in the regional but also national history. Indeed, through Abd el-Krim's legacy, the Rifians have sought to assert their place in Morocco and escape the marginalization they have suffered since the country's independence (1956)³.

These claims became particularly evident during the *Hirak* demonstrations (2017), when protesters raised images of Abd el-Krim and waved flags of the Republic of the Rif⁴. The uprisings broke out in Al-Hoceima and were led by the *Hirak al-Ša'bi* (Popular Movement). Protesters took to the streets against governmental inefficiency and political parties' corruption, denouncing the socio-political and economic marginalization of the Rif in Morocco.

In this context, Abd el-Krim was portrayed as a symbol of resistance against the injustice perpetrated by the authorities and an example of freedom from oppression and pride in being Rifian. Beside his regional identity, however, protesters also emphasized his national belonging. As several scholars have

¹ *Mahzan* means treasure or storehouse. In Morocco, this term is used to refer to the state or the government. S. G. Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 239.

² B. Maddy-Weitzman, *Abdelkrim: Whose Hero is He? The Politics of Contested Memory in Today's Morocco*, in *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, No. 11, 2012, 146-148.

³ A. Wolf, *Morocco's Hirak movement and legacies of contention in the Rif*, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2018, 1-6.

⁴ J. L. Mateo Dieste and L. Feliu, *Revoluciones y movilizaciones populares en el Rif: de Abdelkrim al Hirak*, in *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, No. 34, 2023, 6-34.

asserted⁵, there were no secessionist intentions behind most protesters' activities. The region's inhabitants do not use Abd el-Krim's memory to deny their belonging to Morocco, but rather to reaffirm it and to demand that the central authorities respect it.

Despite their intentions, however, the Moroccan government accused the protesters of using Abd el-Krim's pictures as well as Rifian and Amazigh flags as secessionist symbols. For this reason, it distrusted those activities and signs that recalled a memory of the leader different from the one promoted by the *Mahzan* itself⁶. Since the late 1990s, Moroccan central authorities have sought to include Abd el-Krim's legacy into the national narrative. Recognizing the potential influence of his figure within Moroccan society, the government has sought to promote Abd el-Krim as a national symbol of unity rather than division.

2. CREATING A NATIONAL HERO: THE MAHZAN'S APPROPRIATION OF ABD EL-KRIM EL-KHATTABI'S MEMORY

Following Moroccan independence in 1956, Abd el-Krim was initially excluded from the country's collective memory. The *Mahzan* marginalized figures perceived as potential sources of national division, and Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi was among them. This situation remained unchanged until the 1990s, when the *Mahzan* started to portray the former Rifian leader as a nationalist who fought for the independence of Morocco in the name of the Alawi Sultan. In this way, the central authorities sought to remove the elements that made Abd el-Krim's story unique, such as his Amazigh identity and his political role in the Republic of the Rif. Instead, they emphasized his Moroccan identity and his participation in the nationalist anti-colonial struggle.

Nowadays, the representation of Abd el-Krim as a member of the Moroccan resistance movement prevails in the country's collective memory. To promote this legacy, the *Mahzan* has used several official channels, such as the educational system. Considering the crucial role that education plays in shaping and promoting a specific narration of the past, the Moroccan authorities have used teaching materials and teachers' explanations to frame the memory of Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi within the country.

Actually, despite the prominent role of the educational system in preserving Abd el-Krim's memory, the high school history curriculum devotes a limited space to him and the Rif War. Only a brief overview is provided to this topic, avoiding details and critical analysis. The scholar Bruce Maddy-Weitzman argues that this limitation results from the Moroccan authorities' strategy «to downplay the importance of Abdelkrim in school textbooks and commemorative ceremonies»⁷. However, based on some interviews I conducted with Moroccan high school teachers in Fes and Nador⁸, it appears that the problems of constriction and inadequacy of space do not concern only the figure of Abd el-Krim, but almost all

⁵ R. Lefèvre, 'No to boghral': Morocco's protest movement and its prospects, in *The Journal of North African Studies*, No. 1, 2017, 1-5; B. Nahhass, *Le Rif: Appartenance nationale dissidente et formation de l'État*, in *Ar-rabie*, No. 9, 2019, 214.

⁶ A. Dusserre and M. Marly, *La guerre du Rif: Histoire connectée, mémoires divergentes (1921 – 2021)*, in *Revue d'Histoire*, No. 158, 2023, 3-20.

⁷ B. Maddy-Weitzman, *Abdelkrim: Whose Hero is He? The Politics of Contested Memory in Today's Morocco*, cit., 143.

⁸ All the interviews used in this paper are part of a group of eleven that I conducted with Moroccan high school history teachers in Fes and Nador between October 21st and November 4th, 2024. All interviews were recorded and conducted in Darija, with simultaneous translation into English or Italian.

the topics covered by the history educational program⁹. Therefore, although some scholars denounce the marginalization of Abd el-Krim in the educational system and collective memory, most of the teachers I interviewed expressed a different view. They attribute the limited attention given to this historical episode to an inefficiency of the system rather than to an intentional exclusion.

Analyzing the textbooks *Al-ġadīd fī al-tārīḥ*, *Al-šāmil fī al-tārīḥ*, and *Fī riḥāb al-tārīḥ*, used in some classes of the second year *Baccalauréat* curriculum *Enseignement des lettres et sciences humaines* in Fes and Nador, a unique portrayal of Abd el-Krim's story emerges. In their explanations, the authors of these textbooks faithfully reproduce the portrayal of the former leader promoted by the Moroccan government. The Rifians are identified as «soldiers of Moroccan resistance»¹⁰, while Abd el-Krim is listed among the leaders of the anticolonial armed resistance in the Rif. He is recognized as a Moroccan nationalist and every political and regional connotation of his actions has been removed. No schoolbook mentions the Republic of the Rif or even tackles the relationship between Abd el-Krim and the *Mahṣan*.

Furthermore, during their explanations, teachers also reproduce the portrayal of Abd el-Krim and the Rifian affair promoted by the Moroccan official narrative. Since they have to strictly follow the ministerial curriculum, teachers have limited opportunities to personalize their explanations. Some interviews have revealed that high school teachers spend more time explaining Abd el-Krim's story than what the ministry requires¹¹. Nevertheless, all of them rigidly respect how the government interprets this affair, avoiding personal analysis.

«The study of Abd el-Krim is part of the broader context of the Moroccans' reactions to Spanish and French colonialism»¹² and teachers recognize him as «a national figure of resistance, like Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara, and Gandhi»¹³. As Khalid specifies, «there are many other resistance fighters, who are tackled in the same way as Abd el-Krim» and «have the same importance as Abd el-Krim»¹⁴. Therefore, teachers remove all the unique characteristics of this former leader, reducing his role to mere military and anticolonial activities within the Moroccan liberation movement. Notably, this nationalist interpretation of Abd el-Krim is spread across the country¹⁵. Indeed, also in the Rifian city of Nador, the regional dimension of Abd el-Krim's action is marginalized and he is portrayed as a Moroccan hero and a nationalist.

3. SHOULD ABD EL-KRIM EL-KHATTABI BE CONSIDERED A SENSITIVE ISSUE IN MOROCCO? TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

Despite the unique interpretation of Abd el-Krim's story promoted by textbooks and teachers, however, contrasting narratives about him exist within the educational system. Ali has worked as a teacher in Nador since 2022, but in the previous two years, he taught at a school in Boudinar, which is a small

⁹ Interview of the author with Karim, October 23rd, 2024, Fes.

¹⁰ *Fī riḥāb al-tārīḥ*, Maktabat al-Salām al-Jadida and Dar al-Alamia Lil Kitab, 2023, 71.

¹¹ Interview of the author with Akram, October 27th, 2024, Nador; Interview of the author with Nassim, October 27th, 2024, Nador.

¹² Interview of the author with Khalid, October 26th, 2024, Nador.

¹³ Interview of the author with Nassim, October 27th, 2024, Nador.

¹⁴ Interview of the author with Khalid, October 26th, 2024, Nador.

¹⁵ Interview of the author with Omar, November 04th, 2024, Fes; Interview of the author with Karim, October 23rd, 2024, Fes; Interview of the author with Rachid, October 27th, 2024, Nador.

village near Annual. This place plays a central role in the memory of the Rif War. Here, on 22 July 1921, Rifian forces defeated the Spanish army, despite the apparent disparity in resources and manpower. Consequently, people, who live in the areas surrounding Annual, are still emotionally attached to this episode. Ali recounted,

I had a tough experience teaching this lesson because I had to pay retribution¹⁶ to Abd el-Krim, in a very respectful way. If the lesson was not taught in a way that respected students' feelings, there was a high possibility that they reacted in a bad way. The teacher must give more time to this figure compared to the [educational] program. For this reason, I skipped the topic and left the students to do their research and present it to the class. I took off all responsibility in order to avoid any kind of misunderstanding with the students¹⁷.

This extract first demonstrates that in Bourdinar, and likely in many other places in the Rif, teachers do not strictly follow the ministerial curriculum when speaking about Abd el-Krim and the Rifian affair. They prefer to spend more time than expected to analyze this figure. Secondly, people in some parts of the Rif have a precise and personal memory of their past and distrust any other representations. Finally, this excerpt demonstrates that Abd el-Krim still represents a crucial figure for many Rifians, challenging the official narrative promoted by the Moroccan authorities.

Therefore, Ali's anecdote clearly proves that, within the Moroccan society, some representations of Abd el-Krim's story contrast with the official narrative promoted by the government. However, when I asked teachers whether Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi should be considered a sensitive topic in Morocco, they have always answered no. All interviewees affirmed that the Rif and Abd el-Krim are not considered sensitive issues in Morocco. According to Akram, who teaches in Nador, the only problem that makes Abd el-Krim a sensitive issue is related to the continued transmission of colonial propaganda in collective memory. This narrative portrays Abd el-Krim as a separatist who created a state in the Rif region. Akram argued that both in the North and South of Morocco, people still believe in this misrepresentation of the past and use it to support their sociopolitical positions. While some people refer to this idea to promote their separatist plans, others accuse Abd el-Krim of being a traitor of the nation¹⁸.

Unlike Akram's explanation, instead, Ali believes that Abd el-Krim is a controversial topic only for politicians. According to him, the *Mahḥzan* fears that history could repeat itself with the Rifians who try to separate from Moroccan sovereignty and create their state. Even if it is a historically incorrect perception, the central authorities are afraid that Abd el-Krim's memory may lead someone to pursue the objective of creating an independent state in the Rif region.

However, according to Hamza and Akram, this idea is no longer relevant. Hamza argues that after the coronation of King Muhammad VI, the political authorities have recognized Abd el-Krim as a national hero¹⁹. For him, the presence of streets and public places bearing his name represents the proof that, nowadays, Abd el-Krim is a publicly recognized figure. Moreover, Akram added, «The government is in a process of shifting from promoting the first narrative [that depicts Abd el-Krim as a secessionist] to the second one [in which Abd el-Krim is described as a nationalist]»²⁰.

¹⁶ Here, Ali meant "to pay tribute".

¹⁷ Interview of the author with Ali, October 26th, 2024, Nador.

¹⁸ Interview of the author with Akram, October 27th, 2024, Nador.

¹⁹ Interview of the author with Hamza, October 23rd, 2024, Fes.

²⁰ Interview of the author with Akram, October 27th, 2024, Nador.

In conclusion, regarding the sensitiveness of Abd el-Krim's memory, teachers' responses fit the official narrative. Over the years, the central authorities have absorbed even more the historical figure of Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi and his symbolism, trying to show that talking about him is politically accepted and peaceful. However, as long as some sociopolitical groups claim his memory, speaking about him and his story will remain sensitive and controversial. For this reason, studying how Abd el-Krim's story and memory have been written and rewritten is essential to understand the current Moroccan socio-political context.