

The american duplicity vis-a-vis the colonial problem of the Maghreb during the second world war

Résumé

This article attempts to show the American Government's duplicity towards the North African colonial problem during the Second World war. This duplicity is to be examined in the approach of the American Government to Vichy France colonial authorities and North African nationalists during the preparation of the invasion of North Africa and during the presence of the Anglo-American expeditionary forces in this area.

Indeed, duplicity and realpolitik were the essence of the policy of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his close collaborators, who, above all, wanted to insure the security of their troops during their passage in North Africa. It is in this perspective that President Roosevelt's representatives, in Vichy and Algiers promised to restore France in its pre-war integrity; while, at the same time, the American president, associated himself with the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, in issuing *The Atlantic Charter* in which occupied countries and colonised peoples were promised self-determination and freedom.

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ملخص

سنحاول من خلال هذه المقالة إبراز ازدواجية موقف الحكومة الأمريكية من مسألة الاستعمار بشمال إفريقيا أثناء الحرب العالمية الثانية. سنتفحص هذه الازدواجية في سياسة الحكومة الأمريكية تجاه السلطات الاستعمارية خلال حكومة فيشي الفرنسية وتجاه الحركات القومية بشمال إفريقيا عند التحضير لغزو شمال إفريقيا وأثناء تواجد القوات الأنجلو-أمريكية بالمنطقة.

Very quickly, after the defeat of France, the British Prime Minister tried to give the war a southward thrust with the aim of pushing it away from the British Isles and bringing back France to continue the fight from her North African colonies. Winston Churchill who had opted for such an approach - a peripheral approach of the war- had reinforced the Home Waters to prevent Germany from invading the British Isles and had, in the Mediterranean and Northwest Africa, adopted an aggressive posture to ensure the security of British sea communications and deter the Axis from moving into the area. Desperate for action, and because his efforts with Vichy France were to no avail, Winston Churchill went for the Anglo- Gaullist combined attack on Dakar, which turned out into a naval disaster. The British discovered that "de Gaulle was unable to make

وفعلا، فلقد كانت الازدواجية وما يسمى بالاتجاه الواقعي في السياسة (realpolitic) جوهر سياسة الرئيس فرنكلين روزفلت ومقربيه في الحكم الذين كان شغلهم الشاغل ضمان أمن قواتهم أثناء مرورها بشمال إفريقيا. وانطلاقا من هذا التصور، وعد ممثلو الرئيس روزفلت في حكومة فيشي وفي الجزائر إعادة الأراضي الفرنسية إلى الوضع الذي كانت عليه قبل الحرب لكن، وفي نفس الوقت، اشترك الرئيس روزفلت مع الوزير الأول البريطاني ونستون تشرشل في إصدار ميثاق الأطلسي الذي وعد البلدان المحتلة والشعوب المستعمرة بالحرية وبتقرير المصير.

good his assurances that the French colonies would break away from Vichy and rally [him]"(1); they, therefore started looking for an alternative policy to keep North Africa out of Axis's hands.

The British strategy of peripheral war had dragged the European war closer to the Western Hemisphere and the Anglo-Gaullist attack on Dakar had given a serious warning to the United States which had suddenly realised that the war had slipped away from Europe, southwestwardly, and was steadily, creeping into Western Africa and the Atlantic. For this new development, the Americans blamed de Gaulle and immediately after this episode, decided to reopen their Consulate at Dakar and initiated a diplomatic approach towards Vichy and Vichy's colonial authorities in North and West Africa with the aim of maintaining these territories in friendly hands.

It is this development, reinforced by Hitler's meeting with Marshal Pétain and General Franco a month after the Dakar attack - September, 23, 1940- that decided the Americans to act quickly for rumours had it that a German intrusion in Northwest Africa and the Atlantic was imminent. A German move, in the area, was made more likely after the German request to Vichy to use the French naval bases in the Mediterranean and western Africa. The danger for the United States security was made more serious and more imminent after the redeployment of the Royal Navy in the British home waters which gravely affected the balance of power in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

It is in the light of these developments that North Africa acquired a very high strategic value for offensive and defensive actions. Indeed, from the coast of Senegal, which overlooks the naval communications in the Atlantic, the eastern coast of Brazil was within good striking range of Axis bombers.

But what could be done to stop the advance of Hitler if Vichy France were to give its green light to the Axis to use its naval bases in the area? Not much, because the United States was still politically and militarily unprepared to enter the war. President Roosevelt, a former secretary of the US Navy had very early realised the threat the situation posed to the interests and security of America. The attack by the Anglo-Free French on Dakar had not only failed, but it had also brought the danger even closer to the US. Further moves of this kind were abandoned on the ground that they would only contribute to push France to adopt a more collaborationist policy at a time when neither the US nor Britain was militarily prepared to stop any Axis move in this area.

Consequently, it was important for Washington, at least during the early stages of the preparation of "Operation Torch", to cultivate friendly relations with Vichy France and French colonial authorities to maintain the French Fleet and the French colonies in French hands. It was on the basis of these considerations that the US devised its strategy with regard to Vichy France and North Africa. This strategy was to be carried

out in a subtle way. The US promised to provide the French with a substantial economic programme to relieve the suffering of Free France and North Africa which would put Vichy in a better position to resist the pressure of the Axis to surrender its fleet and naval bases of Northwest Africa. Furthermore, promises were made to French officials to restore France in its pre-war frontiers, while, at the same time, the principles of self-determination contained in the *Atlantic Charter* were publicised among North African nationalists to gain their support for the US cause. This duplicity was adopted by the US authorities, principally because the US could not act quickly and decisively in the war to prevent it from spreading into the Western Hemisphere. And how could the US act in an area about which the State Department possessed no reliable information for up to 1940, it “had not rated Africa high on its list of vital interests”? (2).

Since the signing of the Armistice in June 1940, the Germans and Italians had been very busy in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, through their Commissions of Control, sending mineral and agricultural products to the Axis and Axis controlled countries but also contributing with Radio Berlin to the German propaganda campaign for the Maghrib. The British Consul in Tangier, Gascoigne wrote to the Foreign Office in April 1942 to express his feeling of apprehension lest the Vichy “ policy will so develop as to place French North Africa in the hands of French officials who are completely co-operationists ” (sic) [with Germany] “ Efforts of General Weygand ”, the British Consul added, “and his successors to stem the German tide will be abandoned and territories will gradually be placed entirely under German domination...and if we or our allies are not able to counter this slow and subtle move on the part of Laval, the French Prime Minister, Germans seem likely to get in first and disposition will then be rendered much more difficult to tackle later on.”(3).

For the purpose of devising an American policy for the Maghrib, in order to counter the Axis, Robert Murphy, a diplomat, was sent on a tour in Northwest Africa, in 1940, as a special envoy of President Roosevelt. The objective of this mission was to provide the Roosevelt with first hand information about an area then said to be the next most likely theatre of war. And throughout 1941 and 1942, which corresponded to the preparatory stage of the invasion of North Africa by the Anglo-Americans, the mission of Robert Murphy and his agent, who were commissioned as Vice-Councils in the Maghrib, was to buy time, gather intelligence, manipulate people and counter-balance Axis propaganda.

Why did Washington go for this intelligence work and counter propaganda in the Maghrib and for what reasons and by which means ?

In fact, the aim of the whole American approach was meant to buy time so that the US could prepare itself to defend its interests in the Western Hemisphere. But the food situation in the Maghrib had seriously deteriorated due to large agricultural exports to Europe and to the effects of the British economic blockade. The result was famine and total destitution of local populations. Furthermore, with the Maghribian nationalists’ demands of political independence and German radio propaganda campaign calling the Maghribian populations to rebel against the French colonial authorities, the Maghrib was transformed into a very volatile area on the verge of revolt. According to the French and the Americans this gave enough reason to the Axis to move into the area

and occupy it.

Rumours had it that the Axis were about to create some small scale troubles in the Maghrib to justify their move into the area on restoring order ground. The French could do nothing against this propaganda campaign ; they, however, imprisoned Maghribian nationalists on the ground that they were Axis' agents and persisted claiming that the Maghribian populations were as loyal to France as ever. However, secret reports spoke of growing and daring nationalists' activities against the French authorities. On January 25, 1941, for instance, hundreds of tirailleurs of the Levant Regiment most of them Algerians took up arms and spread throughout Maison Carrée, Algiers, calling for a holy war on France (4). This alarmed the French and the Americans who were engaged in secret negotiations meant to give economic assistance to North Africa in order to ease its food situation, avoid giving Germany ground for intervention and bring Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, headed by General Weygand, the French Delegate General in North Africa, to war on the Allied side.

In February 1941, an agreement between the US and France, known as the Murphy-Weygand Agreement, providing for American economic aid for North Africa - plus Vichy France - was signed. With the signing of this agreement, the Maghrib was open to American intelligence agents who immediately started feeding Washington with all sorts of first hand information relating to geography, history, the military forces, the economic situation of the populations their sympathies and the political life in the Maghrib. Thanks to this comprehensive assessment of the area, the planners of the United States Defence Department could start drawing up plans to prevent the Maghrib from falling into Axis' hands. This planning, conducted with great care and secrecy, showed great concern for the European population and the restoration of the French authority ; to the Muslim population of the Maghrib, on the other hand, the American attitude, as presented by Murphy, was rather opportunistic. In the propaganda campaign to win over the Muslim populations of North Africa, the Americans made great use of their broadcasting capabilities to present themselves "as the savior of humanity, the only friends of the Muslims for they never participated in any colonisation and America as the only democracy which never lived on other peoples' labour." (5). However, the Americans were alarmed at the popularity Germany had started enjoying in North Africa. Their intelligence reports spoke of sympathy Germany had begun "enjoy[ing] in Marakesh among the people and a few old notables who have been in relation with German agents and businessmen before 1914. [The report added that] These people see in America a justice maker and a deliverer..." (6). The United States had to act quickly to strengthen and cultivate its relationships in the area. Its agents were advised by Sidi Mehdi el Glaoui "to counter the German propaganda by breaking silence and making known in the Maghrib the force of their arms, the size of the war effort they were making, their reasons for hoping for victory and their faith in the final outcome" (7).

In this war propaganda campaign, Mehdi el Glaoui a Moroccan official assessed the situation in Morocco and pointed out the major lines along which the American approach should be carried out. Addressing the Americans in this respect, he pointed out :

I. In order to rally the members of dissolved parties [North African nationalist parties]

state your opposition to any sort of German intervention in North Africa ;

II. to rally Arab youth, speak of your plans for world reorganization after the war. Discuss this in detail and refute enemy propaganda etc...

III. Speak of your universities in the Arab countries (8).

The American approach to North African nationalists soon became a matter of worry for the French colonial authorities. In this respect, General Noguès, the French Resident General in Morocco warned R. Murphy that “ the native population... could not be trusted [as] they would take advantage of the chaotic situation ” that might follow an American intervention in the area “ to attack not only the French but the expeditionary forces as well ” (9).

To prevent such a prospect the Americans were advised to stress the overwhelming material strength of America, its ideals of democracy and freedom; the initiation of this propaganda campaign gave birth to all sorts of illusions in Maghribian circles. In this respect, *The Atlantic Charter*, an Anglo-American statement of fundamental principles for the post-war world, issued jointly by Roosevelt and Churchill on August 14, 1941, played a decisive role. Kennet Pendar, one of the American agents, commissioned as a Vice Consul to Marrakesh and later to Algiers, wrote that the Atlantic Charter had an enormous effect on the Arab mind:

It made a truly profound impression on them, and for months
They hardly talked of anything else.... The effect it had on the
Arabs, the way it helped win them to our cause cannot
be highly emphasized (10).

In his book *Guerre et révolution*, Ferhat Abbas also speaks of the Atlantic Charter and confirms the great impact it had in the Maghrib principally because of its provisions for self-determination and freedom for colonial peoples (11).

The North African leaders who were in contact with the American agents, were not aware of the American political duplicity. With the French authorities, the Americans spoke of the complete restoration of France into its pre-war integrity; with the Maghrebian nationalists, they spoke of self-determination and freedom.

R. Murphy, the special representative of President Roosevelt in North Africa, was of the opinion that the US should work hand in hand with the French administration to maintain the status quo. In this respect, he assured General Noguès that “ the US stood for friendly co-operation and support of the French in North African and that an active propaganda was being effected among the Arabs, and particularly among Arab troops.”(12). This assurance given to the French colonial authorities came at a time when intelligence reports reaching Washington and London confirmed the opinion that “ it would not be difficult to organise a subversive movement against the French – The danger is ... that such a movement might easily be transformed into an anti- European Jihad (13) with its accompaniment of indiscriminate massacre on purely religious criteria ...”(14) Therefore, the risks were estimated very high. In this regard, Professor Rushbrook Williams of the French Department of the Foreign Office, in confidential report, spoke of confidential sources which reported that:

The United States Consul at Tunis has again been approached
by Arabs leaders who are trying with considerable success, to foster

pro-British and American sentiments. Their organisation, which is allied with similar movements in Morocco, Algeria and the Near Eastern Arab States, aims at elimination of French and establishment of autonomous states under English protection. Leaders are willing to intensify propaganda campaign, and with guidance of technicians to do active work and even prepare military resistance against the Axis, if given arms (15).

In Tunisia, the French authorities were very hostile to the Allied cause. And the Italian community, which was of substantial size, had adopted a pro-Italian attitude. In this hostile environment to the Allied cause, the only alternative left for the American agents trying to foster the American influence in Tunis, was to respond to Muslim leaders' approaches. Thus, Hooker Dolittle, the US Consul in Tunis, established contacts with the Tunisian leader of the Destour Party, Cheikh Taalabi. In his reports to Washington, via Tangier, Dolittle spoke of the great influence of Cheikh Taalabi who could, according to the US agent's reports to Washington, raise 200,000 men to fight on the side of the Allies if the latter could guarantee the independence for North Africa on the Egyptian lines (16).

These recommendations requesting co-operation with the Arabs infuriated and alarmed R. Murphy who considered the project of Dolittle a folly because according to him, "nothing would have enraged [the] French... more than this monkey-business, or been more ruinous to [the U.S.]... chances of obtaining the support of the French military forces" (17). Consequently, Murphy arranged for the removal of Dolittle from North Africa. Liberals, in America, were disturbed by their government attitude and conduct in North Africa. They refused to believe that President Roosevelt knew nothing of the colonial problem of North Africa and of the oppression the French exerted on the Maghrebi peoples. They blamed the State Department, its emissaries and more particularly R. Murphy for their venal and bungling policy. The American liberals estimated that in winning the war in North Africa, the U.S had lost the moral values for which they fought it (18) It is clear that the reports of R. Murphy stressing the importance of cultivating French colonial sympathies were decisive in shaping the American official attitude detrimental to the North African peoples.

Therefore, the fever which had seized the nationalist circles during and in the immediate aftermath of the Anglo-American landing started to abate when the Americans through the "Clarck-Darlan Deal" recognised the French colonial order in North Africa and worked to strengthen it. Progressive and conservative opinion in America opposed and criticised the cynical and hypocrite attitude of the U.S government because "the Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans were not given an opportunity to express their views." (19).

From the very beginning, it was clear that the landing of the American forces in North Africa was not meant to free the Maghrib from the French rule. In their secret talks with French officials and leaders of French underground movements, they stressed their commitment to maintain the status quo in North Africa, though, on the surface, they encouraged North African leaders to believe that the U.S was for their emancipation. President Roosevelt's meeting with Sultan Mohamed ben Youcef of Morocco in January 1943, was seen as an American commitment to free Morocco from

French rule. The meetings Murphy had with the Algerian moderate leader, Ferhat Abbas were also considered as an encouragement to the emancipation of Algerians. However, when the war in North came to an end, with the defeat of the Axis forces, *The Atlantic Charter* was looked at as a mere propaganda exercise. Roosevelt declared it "a beautiful idea" (20). Churchill, for his part, wrote to Roosevelt warning him of "the unforeseen cases which will arise from any new and further declarations of proposed application of *The Atlantic charter* to Asia and Africa" (21).

In North Africa, Roosevelt and Churchill had worked for a status quo. They primarily wanted to prevent the prospect of having their troops caught in a bloody war of independence in North Africa which they planned to use as a spring board to attack the soft belly of Europe. For this reason, the Americans wanted North Africa in friendly hands. Ostensibly, Vichy France, with the help of the U.S had proved that it was capable to satisfy these requirements, no matter if by doing so, they, with the approval of the U.S. Government had deprived the 18 million people of North Africa of their fundamental rights of self-determination and independence.

According to Kennet Crawford, "nothing was done by the U.S to free the Arab and Berber majorities from rule and exploitation by the French colonial minority... The French colonial system which is not only undemocratic but downright ruthless in some of its manifestations, was left undisturbed" (22).

The American politics in North Africa was one of military expediency and power politics rather than one of self-determination and freedom as promised in *The Atlantic Charter*.

However, the absence of clear and strong demands for independence in the Maghrib contributed much to encourage the U.S in its political duplicity. The reason of the absence of strong demands for independence was mainly due to the fact that well articulate Maghribian leaders like Massali Hadj, Habib Bourguiba and Allal El-Fasi were arrested and deported by the French colonial authorities. Those left on the scene, were moderate leaders loyal to the French authorities. For instance, in Morocco, on the outbreak of the War, Sultan Mohamed ben Youcef declared that: "From today and until such time as the efforts of France and her allies are crowned with victory, we must render her every help without reserve." (23). In Algeria, Ferhat Abbas made a similar declaration to suspend "all political activities, so as to devote full attention to the welfare of the nation [i.e. France] on which our future depends." (24). In these circumstances, the only message the Americans got was that the French authorities were in full control of the Maghrib. Therefore, there was no need for them to enter into political deals regarding political changes in the Maghrib.

By the time Ferhat Abbas had produced his manifesto (Manifeste du Peuple Algérien), February 12, 1942 the Americans had nearly finished their military campaign against the Axis and were planning for the invasion of Sicily and Italy. Thus, after invading, defeating and occupying the Maghreb, the Anglo-Americans returned it to the French colonial authorities. The American campaign in the Maghrib and the extensive contacts with the Maghribi leaders appear as mere calculations meant to calm down the Moslems and keep them away from German hands and propaganda.

So the fever which had seized the Maghribi leaders after the American landing, started dimming when the Americans through the "Clarck-Darlan Deal" recognised the

colonial administration in the Maghrib and worked to strengthen it. Progressive and conservative opinion in America criticised this "immoral" attitude of the U.S government as Crawford Kennet put:

Instead of extending suffrage to Moslems, we encouraged General Giraud to appease the Moslems by depriving native Jews of the privilege of voting.... Our basic policy, it became apparent, was one of military expediency and power politics rather than reform and welfare politics. It was realism with the vengeance. If by dealing with Darlan we could save the lives of American soldiers to fight another day, we would deal with Darlan. If 99 per cent of the North African native population were illiterate and patently unfit for self-government, we would not try to impose self-government. If we could use the ruling bureaucracy to help whip the access, we were prepared to use that bureaucracy [and therefore maintain it in place].... In winning the battle for North Africa, Crawford Kennet added, "we had lost the moral values for which the war was fought" (25).

After the defeat of the German forces in North Africa the American President and his Chiefs of Staff were very busy planning the next steps of the war in Europe and the Pacific. North Africa was returned to the French colonial authorities who embarked on a policy of revenge to subdue the Muslims with full knowledge of the United States. All the provisions contained in *the Atlantic Charter* and all the promises made to Maghribi leaders were ignored. The Maghribi populations, together with the American radicals and liberals who hoped that this war would be a revolutionary war- in Europe and in the colonies- were totally frustrated.

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