

Casablanca is torn in two

Casablanca is Morocco's think tank and financial engine, but some of the inhabitants on the outskirts of the city have never set foot in its centre. 'They live in another world at another time,' says magazine editor Ali Amar.

It was the European expansionism in the 19th century that brought the Spanish and French to this area. A growing conflict of interests escalated into military confrontation and the outcome of this saw Morocco become a French protectorate in 1912. In the following years, the residing general Hubert Lyautey laid out great plans for Casablanca, which at the time was little more than a village.

A young city

It is this late birth that has made Casablanca so fundamentally different from other Moroccan cities. Though it has no long story as a metropolis, through its rapid growth to today's four million inhabitants it has obtained many of the same features as other megacities in poor countries.

'Casablanca is in itself a divided city,' says Ali Amar, editor of *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, one of the few Moroccan magazines that are outspoken about domestic affairs. 'The divide runs here,' he says, while drawing a line along one of the outer traffic circles on my map. 'You have the 'integrated' and the 'not integrated' on either side. Those who live outside this line live in another city, another world, even another age.'

'People come here from all over Morocco, especially the countryside. They are often poor and conservative, and many of them have never set foot in the city centre. They have a totally different mentality: one that is cemented by the TV channels they watch. Al-Jazeera and the Hezbollah-run Al-Manar are popular and influential, and it is always surprising to see how many of the poor have access to a television set.'

Art deco

The aforementioned general Lyautey once famously baptized the area from Casablanca and further up north along the coast 'le Maroc util', and so accordingly the rest of the country was brushed off as 'useless'. The colonialists clearly regarded Casablanca as their core area of interest. In spite of this, however, their imprint on the city at street level is far from prominent today. Yet in the bird's-eye view that the map invites to, a pattern from French cities can be recognized: a historical centre with small, crooked streets is surrounded by a structure that looks like a spider's web. Long avenues run outwards from the core, bound together by a number of ring roads.

Casablanca has many interesting art deco buildings, but few would be insulted by the contention that it is far from the most appealing city in Morocco. In fact the Hassan II mosque from 1993 is the only major tourist attraction in town. Nevertheless, Casablanca is the country's financial engine, and the opportunists come here from far and wide because this is where all the new ideas are born. In Rabat, the administrative capital an hour away by train to the north, they are watching with sceptical fascination.

A bomb explodes

Ali Amar was not present the first time I came around to see him. The magazine had just received reports of a bomb explosion following a police raid in the suburbs, with several people having been left dead. The bomb had gone off at five in the morning in a side street of the neighbourhood of Hay El Farah, a busy middle class area, which, it would later turn out, was situated barely inside Ali Amar's line on my map. I decided to do the stretch out to the scene on foot, an hour away along one of the avenues.

The goings-on in the streets next to the scene seem completely undisturbed as I arrive. Approaching, I see groups of people gawking on either end of the closed-off alley. Despite the sensational and tragic circumstances, the atmosphere is best described as one of chirpy curiosity: kids point, young girls wink, and adults share their contradicting rumours with me. Speculation already suggests that this is linked to another bomb explosion in an internet café earlier in the year. Now uniformed men are guarding the barriers, and only Arab star journalists and earnest-looking local detectives are allowed to pass. Later that afternoon, another bomb goes off on the avenue I took both ways.

During my next visit to see Ali I find him working on the suicide bombers' profiles. He describes them as desperately poor people, some heavy drug abusers who can barely spell their own names. Furthermore, the raids seem utterly unorganized. Then he asks himself what kind of terrorist would begin to swing desperately around with a keyboard in an internet café because he is refused entry to a *jihadist* site, and then blow himself up? This is what happened in March.

Infamous slum

One thing is certain: they are all Moroccans, and even if both the government and the international press like to draw lines to Afghanistan and Palestine, there is no evidence or indication of logistical or financial support from outside. And many of these evil-doers are from the same place: namely the infamous slum quarters of Sidi Moumen on the outskirts of Casablanca.

Sidi Moumen is not merely outside the ink line drawn on my map, it is actually way off its borders. In spite of some attempts to get an escort out there, it was Google Earth that provided me with my only glimpse of this feared slum. It can only be identified by the white light that is reflected off the corrugated iron roofs, that – along with the government censorship of the web tool – see to it that it evades the scrutinizing look of the curious.

It is of course hard to estimate how many people live within the magnetic fields of this city, but off my map. However, the pattern of the terrorist acts seems to suggest that the 'not integrated' are performing guerrilla-like sting operations onto 'integrated' domain. So is Mike Davis right when he claims in his book *Planet of Slums* that the future clash of civilizations will be an urban Orwellian war, imagined as Western order pitted against Eastern chaos, and thus displaying the highest form of self-righteous orientalism?

A modern king

Freedom of speech has been under pressure in Morocco, and it is commonly said that there are three taboos: the royal family, the Muslim religion, and national unity (or

more accurately, the conflict in Western Sahara). The country has had a surprisingly brutal past, not just before but also after the French left in 1956.

Things were looking good under the first king, Mohammed V, but he passed away too early. Hassan II (1961-99) was a virtual catastrophe, however. The optimism has returned under the reign of the current king, Mohammed VI, and it seems he is full of good intentions, as evidenced by his change to the family laws, something that has especially benefited women.

‘In reality this development started earlier, during Hassan’s last years,’ says Ali Amar. ‘And it started from below, *in* the people and *by* the people. Anyway: the biggest problem is not the king himself, but the security forces and the police. But regardless of which obstacles we face, my opinion is that the development towards more freedom has gone beyond the point of no return.’

The right direction

The Norwegian-Moroccan Nour-Eddine Lakhmari has directed the film *The Gaze (Le Regard, 2005)*, which is about an elderly distinguished French photographer who is looking back at his years working for the French colonial powers in Morocco in the 1950s. Interestingly, Morocco has itself had to go through a similar self-examining process about its past, in the form of the truth commission, the IER. This was also called for by the current king Mohammed VI, in 2004.

‘The IER processes worked well, to a certain degree,’ Nour-Eddine says. ‘The truth about what had happened was revealed, to an extent, and this was the most important issue. Former political prisoners received compensation, but no one was punished. But, as I said, the vital thing is that history now can be written properly. Look at Abraham Serfaty, a Jew and a communist. He was in prison for 17 years during the *années de plomb* [‘years of lead’, around 1960-90]. Ten years ago you couldn’t even talk about these people, but now they are writing in the papers. Today Abraham Serfaty is a hero!’

It should not be forgotten that Morocco also has a face of tolerance. During the Second World War the country refused to hand over Jews to the Vichy Government in France, and both the current and the former king have used prominent Jews as close advisers.

Net receiver

Casablanca has been a composite entity since day one. Italian, Spanish and American architects were invited in the 1930s and 1940s, and the result of their playfulness might best be described as ‘Moorish-Californian’. But what has happened later is that the new ‘ruthless’ architecture – for the rich and the poor alike – has taken over as the city expands. Morocco has suddenly become a net receiver of immigrants, a fact that is most easily felt in Casablanca. The large influx of people is indeed creating insecurity.

‘And at the same time, Casablanca itself remains a myth in its own right. People from all over the country visit just to be able to tell their friends and relatives that they have been shopping or night clubbing here. In by far the most liberal country in the Arab world, ‘Casa’ is by far our most liberal city. Suffice to recall what happened in

Tangier in the 1970s, which is something that also Moroccan writers like Mohamed Choukri both wrote about and lived out.⁷

Controversial films

Everyone I talk to in Morocco mentions – albeit somewhat reluctantly – the films *Les Anges de Satan* (Ahmed Boulane, 2006) and *Marock* (Laila Marrakchi, 2005). The first one is based on real events surrounding what is a well-known phenomenon for us in the north, a satanic rock band. The members of this group were accused of worshipping the devil, and even if what the film reveals is pretty tame, and all the musicians were eventually acquitted, this remains a good case study for those with a fascination for the bizarre.

Marock is a film that revolves around a Jewish-Muslim love affair among the young in the secular upper class of Casablanca. It might primarily be a film for teenagers: nonetheless it can be claimed that its main objective is social criticism through its poking into taboos.

Both these films were attacked by PJD, Morocco's Islamic party, which has recently reached up to 40 % support in polls. The judicial epilogue is interesting. Ali Amar speculates that the crew behind *Les Anges de Satan* were lured into the courts in order to protect them from the Islamists, who themselves often find trouble with the law, while Nour-Eddine wonders who paid the enormous fines that *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, to take one example, has received. His rhetorical question involves an implication that it was the king himself who wrote up the fine in the first place, to appear as the guardian of the state religion, and then paid it out of his own pocket, to protect freedom of speech.

At night, a laser from the minaret in the Hassan II mosque, the world's third largest, shows the way back to Mecca. Countless satellite dishes point the same way. It seems to serve as a reminder, even if the message is unclear. Which way will Morocco chose?