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## **Maghrebian Nights**

By Brian M. Carney

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CASABLANCA, Morocco -- There really is a Rick's Cafe in Casablanca. It was opened a year ago by an American expatriate named Kathy Kriger, who decided to stay on after a stint here as a trade attache for the U.S. Commerce Department.

Ali Kettani, the man sitting across from me at Rick's, is also a returnee. Although born and raised in Morocco, he'd spent the best part of the last 15 years in Paris and New York as a banker. "Before the previous king died," Mr. Kettani says, "I would have sworn that I would never have come back to Morocco." But here he is, moving back and forth between the U.S. and Morocco to raise American money for a planned \$35 million Moroccan private-equity fund, which he says is the first of its kind.

Mr. Kettani's renewed enthusiasm for his country is not unusual in this, the country that claims to be America's oldest ally. (Morocco signed a friendship treaty with the U.S. in 1787 that has been in force ever since.) In February, a bilateral free-trade agreement went into effect between the U.S. and Morocco, lowering 95% of tariffs between the two countries to zero and phasing out the rest over the next several years. A so-called "association agreement" with the EU is likewise gradually lowering trade barriers between Europe and Morocco. Businessmen in the country hope to capitalize on this privileged access to the two largest economies in the world by trading with both.

"The future of Morocco," said Ali Belhaj, a businessman and opposition politician, "is in services, logistics, tourism and agriculture." Agriculture is already a substantial chunk of the Moroccan economy, but in the future Mr. Belhaj sees Morocco selling more and more farm products to the U.S. and Europe, thanks to its privileged trade status and low costs. As for services, he offers an example. "The biggest dental-implant company in Paris is Moroccan. You go to the dentist in Paris, he takes a mold of your teeth and ships it to Casablanca, where the implants are made and shipped back to Paris. We can turn around dental implants in 48 hours." For Mr. Belhaj, proximity and good relations with the West are the foundations of Morocco's economic future.

Morocco is a potential bridge between the West and the Arab world in more than just economic ways. At a time when U.S. President George W. Bush's Greater Middle East project is viewed by many in both Europe and the Arab world as a "neo-conservative" pipe dream, Morocco stands out as a country furiously trying to show that Arab ways and a Western, modernizing orientation are not incompatible.

Morocco is a high-absolute monarchy, but one whose king has been steadily if gradually ceding power to an elected Parliament. The elections in 2002 are generally viewed, both within Morocco and among Western NGOs such as Freedom House, as the first free and fair ones in the country's 1,300-year history. And this year, the Parliament is expected to pass and the king is expected to ratify a law strengthening the role of parties in the country's politics. For Ali Belhaj, a businessman who is trying to found a center-right party dubbed Alliance of Liberties, it is a vital step toward democracy. "We have 26 parties that get nearly all of their funding from the state," Mr. Belhaj says. "The annual budget for the parties? \$1 million. How can you build a democracy like that?" Even so, he allows that he sees "the beginnings of democracy in Morocco," and would like to see the Parliament strengthened.

But in terms of civil rights and freedom of the press, the country has made some real strides, enshrining habeas corpus and the presumption of innocence in law in the last few years. The Parliament is working on a bill to decriminalize libel, meaning disgruntled politicians would no longer be able to lock up journalists for writing things the ruling class would rather not see in print.

In Rabat, the country's capital, I spoke to Ahmed Abbadi, the director of Islamic affairs in the Ministry of Religion, about the role of religion in a modernizing Morocco. Last year, Morocco passed a reform of its so-called Family Law. The new law grants women equal status in the family, with equal rights to divorce their husbands, an equal say in family governance and the right to marry without the consent of a male relative.

There were Islamist elements who had opposed some of these reforms on religious grounds; I asked Mr. Abbadi what the government's response had been on a religious level. "We are concerned with finalities," he said. "When you are concerned with finalities, you do not get bogged down with the literal words." He continued: "There is a saying in Islam: 'Wherever is the interest of the whole, there is sharia.'" So bearing in mind the interest of the whole, he said, "We must determine how to implement the general principles of sharia law in a way that is appropriate to our time." In short, the Ministry of Religion determined that the Family Law, giving women broadly equal rights in the family context, was consonant with Morocco's official interpretation of Islam. It's a dose of historical relativism that's badly needed in much of the Arab world.

What about Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's claims ahead of the Iraqi elections that democracy was un-Islamic? "He does not have the skills, the knowledge or the class to talk about democracy," was Mr. Abbadi's response, delivered with just a touch of condescension. And, speaking of Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist brand of Islam, he observed: "When you have a simple society," you wind up with a "simple, superficial" interpretation of Islam -- "like the 'Bedouin Islam' in Saudi Arabia."

All of which sounded pretty encouraging. So, did Mr. Abbadi see Morocco's flavor of Islam as a model for the rest of the Arab world -- a modern, forward-looking alternative to Wahhabist fundamentalism? He didn't want to go that far, but in the end

he allowed, "We believe -- humbly -- that Morocco could be a model" for others, although they had no inclination to actively export their interpretation.

Morocco is democratizing, liberalizing and modernizing on several fronts. Is it a model for the Arab world? I repeated the question to Bob Holley, a former American diplomat who is now consulting for the Moroccan government in Washington, and who facilitated a number of my meetings in Morocco. "It's a great sales pitch -- Morocco as model for the greater Middle East," Mr. Holley noted. But in the end, given its historical, cultural and ethnic particularities, "I think Morocco's utility as a model is limited," he admitted.

Mr. Holley may be right, and in any case Morocco's progress is far from perfect or uniform. After the May 16, 2003, suicide bombings in Casablanca, the police rounded up some 2,000 people, a reaction that for some in Morocco harkened back to the bad old days when the government was empowered to imprison anyone it deemed a threat to the public order. (That law, known in the country as Art. 35, has been repealed.)

But model Arab democracy or not, Morocco is nevertheless showing what is possible within an Arab monarchy that looks west and north, rather than only east or inward. Back at Rick's Cafe, our table-mate, Dr. Bouthayna Iraqui-Houssaini, who owns a medical-supply company here in Casablanca, offers her own appraisal. "Not everything is good, but it is all changing. People believe life is getting better," she said. And that's not a bad beginning.

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