



Transnational Political Activism and Imagined Identities: The Case of Larubi F Mirikan

Dr Tariq Bekkaoui

Professor of English, ENCG,

Chouaib Doukkali University

Morocco

ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersection of transnational political activism and identity formation in the YouTube videos of Chafik Omerani a Moroccan activist based in America, known online as "Larubi f Mirikan." Unlike many digital activists who focus solely on online engagement, Larubi's activism aims to create tangible political change in Morocco by mobilizing citizens in his homeland. This article explores Larubi's dual Moroccan-American identity and how he employs symbols, language, and rhetoric to engage with his Moroccan audience. By analyzing his content, which tackles issues such as political corruption, human rights abuses, and the Moroccan Arab Spring, the study highlights how Larubi seeks to bridge the gap between digital activism and real-world political impact. Additionally, it assesses how his American citizenship influences his activism, offering both protection and a platform for criticism of Moroccan authorities. This investigation sheds light on the complex relationship between diaspora activism, transnational identity, and digital media within the framework of global political movements.

Keywords: Digital Media, Diaspora identities, Global political movements, Larubi f Mirikan, Transnational political activism.

1. INTRODUCTION

YouTube has become a platform for distant political activism and the construction of imagined transnational identities. Numerous Moroccans in the American diaspora leverage YouTube to express their political opinions. Among them is Chafik Omerani, nicknamed Larubi f Mirikan. Unlike Richard Azzouz and Adam, whose political activism is essentially a digital performance in the virtual world, Larubi f Mirikan's political activism in cyberspace is designed to spill out to the concrete world, to mobilize audiences in his homeland to produce concrete political change.

1.1 LARUBI F MIRIKAN AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY POLITICS

Chafik Omerani was born in 1971, studied in Morocco and Russia, and moved to America where he joined the Democratic Party. (Chafik Omerani Voting Profile). He was initially based in North Carolina and currently resides in the State of Minnesota.

He says that his father was a resistance fighter against colonialism and calls himself in a series of videos addressed to President Barack Obama "nashit huquqi" (a human rights activist) and identifies himself as "yassari hatta nukhaa fikran, wa sulukan wamu marasa," (a leftist to the marrow, intellectually, in behavior, and practice), and that he is the coordinator of the 20 February Movement in the Southeast of the USA. (Al-'Arubi fi Mirikan to Mr Barack Obama). He affirms that he is "a member of 20 February Movement, founder of the Movement Sarkhatu Ashaab al Maghribi" (Scream of the Moroccan People), as well as a member of the Moroccan Student Union, which he praises for spreading political consciousness and contributing to the political struggle in Morocco. (Hasriyan lil-Ittihad al-Watani)

The earliest online appearance of Larubi f Mirikan dates back to June 2011. Larubi has remained active ever since, with now a total of about 5 million views. His videos deal with parliamentary elections, monarchy, the judicial system, corruption, Makhzen's tyranny, political and religious prisoners, the Moroccan Arab Spring, etc.

Chafik Omerani nicknames himself Larubi f Mirikan, which can be translated as a peasant or countryman in America, perhaps with a play on the connotation of Arabness in Larubi. His identification with the homeland, and with the Moroccan and Arab identity is expressed in his clothing. On many occasions, he dresses in a traditional Moroccan djellaba and a golden turban or a red gandoura and a red fez.

His Arab-Islamic identity and Moroccan nationalism are invoked by means of a series of banal symbols as in his YouTube video on Hassan II Casablanca Mosque. Larubi is wearing a white djellaba and a traditional white hat. Behind him on the computer screen, there is a Moroccan flag, and Morocco written in white script. The red color of the flag is also the color of the table lamp, the window curtains, the sofa, and Larubi's son's tank top. The deliberate insertion of the son in the video is quite interesting. It is perhaps meant to enhance the traditional Moroccan family. These are visual symbols deployed by Larubi to highlight his Moroccan identity in America and connect him with an imagined community in his native land.

He addresses his audience with expressions such as: "masaa al khayr ahlan wasahlan wa marhaban" (good evening, hello, and welcome). He often quotes verses from the Koran and explains some of them. As Karim observes, "Forced or voluntary migrations diminish the physical links of those who leave the homeland; but they take with them the mythical and linguistic allusions to the ancestral territory, which they invoke in nostalgic reminiscences. Some hold on to a hope of eventual return. This creates the demand for cultural products that maintain and ritually celebrate the links of the diaspora with the homeland." (Karim, 2003, p. 3).

Similarly, Omerani's use of Moroccan expressions and attire is a deliberate effort to preserve and emphasize his connection to Morocco through his digital profile. By integrating these cultural elements into his YouTube presence, he not only strengthens his bond with his Moroccan audience but also legitimizes his political activism. This approach allows him to navigate the complexities of his diaspora identity while actively engaging with his homeland's political and social issues, despite his physical separation from it.

Explaining the reasons for his political activism, Larubi states that he is "A Moroccan citizen who experiences the same suffering as other Moroccans. Therefore, I have decided, like many of them, to get out of the circle of silence and break the wall of fear and be positive and effective." (*Hespress online magazine*) On another occasion, he says, "I am an ordinary man who sees and feels the injustice inflicted on the sons and daughters of my country." He adds:

I express my political convictions in a peaceful and civilized manner, as do political and human rights activists in Morocco. ... My main and fundamental problem, against which we are all struggling, is tyranny and the lobbies that control the fate of the people and the country.

This shared suffering creates a bond between Larubi in America and those he considers his brothers and sisters, located far away, and separated from him by thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean. It is a transcontinental sharing of the social and political hardships and sufferings of an imagined homeland community, to use Benedict Anderson's vocabulary, combined with the determination to fight in order to alleviate or highlight such suffering.

Long distance nationalism as Schiller explains "is a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home; moreover, forms of actions taken by those nationalists may range from 'voting, demonstrating, lobbying, contributing money, creating works of art' to 'fighting, killing and dying'" (Nina Glick Schiller, 2005, p. 570). Despite living in the relative security and comfort of their host countries—where they acquire citizenship and participate in the host economy—diaspora communities often feel compelled to engage with the social, economic, and political hardships of their homeland. This involvement reflects a profound emotional connection to their ancestral home, highlighting the complex and intriguing balance between solidarity and distance.

Like other Moroccan-American YouTube political activists opposing the Moroccan regime, such as Richard Azzouz and Adam, America has provided Larubi with a safe haven to engage in transnational political activism and criticize his native country's regime without fear of persecution. A song that he sometimes uses to initiate his videos makes fun of the failure of the Moroccan secret service to reach him in his exile in America. Speaking through the voice of a secret agent, Larubi says in the song he composed and sang:

Erroneous orders came to us,
Larubi is a rotten deal,
We couldn't find a price for him.
He is living in America.

The lyrics mock the Moroccan secret police who are helplessly powerless to arrest a political dissident since he lives in America. America is symbolically both a remote and inaccessible land and an immune, invulnerable national identity.

Significantly enough, in the video where Larubi speaks about being a co-founder of the online political blog site, “Marsad Maroc,” and that he has posted videos on the site inciting (*tahrid*) people to take to the streets on the throne day to ask for their “legitimate and lawful rights.” (I'tirafat, 2017) Interestingly, the audience detects behind the podcaster the picture of an American flag hanging on the wall, small but distinctly visible.

One is obviously reminded of Billig's idea that the production of nationhood is symbolized more by the unnoticed than by the noticed flag. “The metonymic image of banal nationalism,” to quote Billig, “is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.” (Michael Billig, 1995, p. 8)

Being secure within the protective shield afforded by his host country, Larubi defiantly declares:

Why should they arrest me? I express my opinion with complete freedom. I have American nationality so I am an American citizen and I express my opinion from the land of America. I don't think there is a power on earth that can interfere with the internal affairs of American citizens who practice their freedom on American territories. (Ha kifaash, 11 May, 2020)

What is particularly interesting in the above statement is how Larubi f Mirikan distances himself from his Moroccan nationality to emphasize his acquired American citizenship. He invokes his American citizenship to underscore the protection it offers, suggesting that it shields him from persecution by his native country. By emphasizing his American status, he implies that his opinions and actions are safeguarded by American institutions and values, such as Congress and the Democratic Party. In doing so, he portrays his original homeland as a foreign entity, creating a stark contrast between his American identity and his Moroccan origin.

Thus, America is imagined by Larubi not as a nation among nations but as a negation of all nations since, he insists, using the language of jingoism and wartime propaganda, “there is no power on earth which can interfere with the internal affairs of American citizens who practice their freedom on American territories.”

Larubi's fervent American ultra-nationalism sounds like a celebration of America's unlimited power and belligerent foreign policy. Surprisingly, when Larubi comes into contact and conflict with his native country, his American nationalism quickly and decisively triumphs over his Moroccan roots.

His American citizenship is visibly reinforced through his blue tank top with five white and five red stars and the inscription “Freedom Isn't Free.” It promotes freedom of expression but also American patriotism. Thus, the tank top becomes in the video a signifier of banal nationalism and banal patriotism.

The statement above is full of discursive contradictions. Having an American nationality has empowered Larubi to interfere in the political affairs of a foreign nation and to speak directly to the subjects of a foreign sultan to mobilize them against their sovereign and change the regime without expecting any form of retribution, simply because he is a subject of America.

These contradictions are captured by the comments of the viewers. “You haven't been arrested because you are an American citizen,” one comment says. “Arab rulers are terrified of America.” Another comment states with admiration and awe: “American nationality has saved you.” Another comment, however, angrily condemns the interference of “an American citizen” in the internal affairs of their country:

You have no right to express an opinion on the future of our country since you have the nationality of a different country. If you want to reform things you should come here and express yourself... Morocco belongs to the Moroccans.

In Morocco, instead of being arrested, Larubi claims, a delegation from the royal palace (Larubi calls the golden circle) visited him in his own house and communicated the royal message to him: “Sidna welcomes you in your own country and salutes you for your bravery and he says he is pleased with you.” The “American citizen” was utterly baffled and confounded. This was extremely astonishing to the viewers too. Many were skeptical. “What a lie!” a comment sarcastically states, “The king said to him ‘I salute you for your bravery’ and ‘I am pleased with you?’ Have the Moroccans become crazy to believe this stupid claim? By God, you are a *roubi*, a peasant.”

If this message truly came from the Sultan of Morocco to Larubi f Mirikan, it must be read as both a compliment and a warning. The subjects of the Sultan remain Moroccans even if they acquire American citizenship. His power can reach them wherever they are, should they dare to destabilize the security and stability of his kingdom.

2. LARUBI'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM: FROM THE VIRTUAL SPACE TO THE REAL STREET

Larubi starts his recent videos by greeting his audience and giving his location and time and providing the corresponding time in Morocco, using expressions such as “Good evening today is Tuesday, 28 January 2020. The time is 1 o'clock in the afternoon in the State of Minnesota in the United States of America, which corresponds to 8 o'clock in the evening in Morocco.”(Jareemat, 28 January, 2020) What is extremely interesting in this introductory statement is that Larubi discursively invokes imaginary binary geographies that divide and define the boundaries between democratic America and despotic Morocco.

Strikingly, Larubi's videos occur during the daytime in the host country, while his native homeland and, because of the time difference, is constantly in the darkness of the evening. In line with this metaphorical reading, we notice that Larubi's videos often draw a comparison between these two different geographies. In the videos devoted to George Floyd, for instance, he states that “Among the people who instigate racism is the current President Donald Trump and we say it. His declarations are for me the most atrocious crimes. Do we dare to say something similar in our Morocco?” For him, this is merely a rhetorical question that does not require an actual answer.

He cites the case of Abdalmula who was run over by a police vehicle in the town of Jrada. The state neither took responsibility for the crime nor did it take medical responsibility for the victim. He also cites Muhsin Fikri, the fishmonger who was crushed in a garbage truck in Al Houcima. When people went to the streets to protest against his savage killing, they were crushed by the police, and the leaders of the protests were accused of being Republican separatists and given very heavy sentences. In America, Larubi goes on with his comparative rhetoric, all sorts of people took to the streets to protest the death of Floyd without being accused of separatism or being funded by foreign enemy institutions. Larubi admits that

President Trump accused the protestors of being terrorists who were plotting to destroy the country. However, in twenty-four hours, he backed down on his statement. Why? Because, soon after his speech, the number of protestors doubled and increased. In Morocco, we have a regime that persecutes journalists, social media activists, and whoever expresses his opinion. (Ta'leeqi 'ala marasim)

This comparison between the practice of politics and respect for human rights permeates Larubi's videos. In the above video, he acknowledges the fact that human rights violations occur in America as well as in his native country. The difference is that in America there is accountability, investigation, and punishment of the perpetrators of human rights violations, while in Morocco the perpetrators remain unpunished.¹

Thus, in Larubi's political discourse, American democracy and respect for human rights offer a contrast to Moroccan abuses. Naturally, America (the States of North Carolina and Minnesota) is the place from which Larubi launches his political campaigns against his home political system. From this diaspora setting, the land of freedom and free speech, he manufactures a digital space of virtual *hirak* which he endeavors to translate into concrete action by trying to mobilize “an imagined community” of wretched Moroccans, actually, his digital recruits/fans, residing thousands of miles away from him. He exhorts them to take action using expressions such as:

1. You who are in Morocco speak out and say this is wrong
2. It's high time for Moroccans to launch a campaign to demand from France the release of Moroccan political prisoners
3. Protesters should go to the American consulate in Casablanca and ask for political asylum because of state terrorism (Kayfanaqdi, 15 October, 2018)
4. Boycott the elections
5. Research to understand the truth and see with open eyes
6. The greatest jihad in Islam is a word of truth, so utter it with your mouth, don't remain dumb. (Larubi fi Mirikan kaydawi 'ala al-bitala)

7. Take to the streets dressed in white and chant this slogan, he has himself coined: “*Silmiya, silmiya, la shaqur la janwiya, la ghtisabat jinsiyya*” (Peaceful, peaceful, neither an axe nor a knife, nor sexual rape). (Larubi fi Mirikan to Mr Barack Obama II)

Larubi knows that his call to people to take action if implemented will expose them to police attacks, imprisonment, or death. He tells them that democracy comes with sacrifices and that “freedom isn’t free.” He repeats this motto: “Freedom comes with a price.”

This study does not investigate the possible correlation between watching and listening to political YouTube videos and the mobilization of viewers for political action, but in the case of Larubi, as illustrated in the above examples, he endeavors to move political activism from the digital landscape to the concrete world. In the following examples, we see how Larubi himself shifts between the virtual space and the concrete world. For instance, Larubi claims to be one of the founders of the electronic news site “Marsad Maroc,” a platform intended to support the Rif uprising. It quickly became famous, attracting four million fans. (I’tirafat khatiira, 16 August, 2017) He also asserts that the video he posted on the “Marsad Maroc,” website in which he called people to go out into the streets on the throne day to fight for their “legitimate and lawful rights” drew huge numbers of Moroccan diaspora protesters, especially women, to the streets of Barcelona in processions that “impressed many Europeans.”(Ibid.)

Moreover, he declares that he is one of the founders of the 20 February Movement, which spearheaded the Moroccan Arab Spring. He says in one of his videos: “I am proud to be one of the founders of the 20 February Movement and one of the founders of the Sarkhat Shaab al Maghribi.” (Larubi f Mirikan to Mr Barack Obama IV)

In an address to President Obama, in a video entitled “Larubi f Mirikan to Mr. Barack Obama,” Larubi says how honored and delighted he was to learn that President Obama had seen some of his videos and that they were translated for him. (Larubi f Mirikan to Mr Barack Obama I) Dressed in a white shirt and standing on a bridge over a river, he speaks directly to the president of the USA saying, “Permit me, Mr. President, to place before you a file of extreme emergency, which is the use of the Moroccan regime of sexual rape against the activists of the 20 February Movement and the activists of Sarkhat Shaab al Maghribi.” He calls upon the President to intervene to put an end to such abuses. (Larubi f Mirikan to Mr Barack Obama I, II and II)

In another instance, Larubi expresses his activism beyond the virtual landscape by stating that he was in constant contact by phone with the political detainees in Salé’s Prison who took to the roofs to protest against the horrendous prison conditions and that he contacted their families and relatives, warning them of an imminent onslaught by the police forces.

Additionally, in August 2011, Larubi traveled to Europe to participate in the protest rallies organized by the Moroccan diaspora communities and attended 20 February Movement meetings in Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Italy. (Jawla Uropia, 2011)

As an expression of his performative transnational politics, Larubi participated in a protest rally in support of the 20 February Movement in front of the Moroccan embassy in Washington DC on 10 December 2011. (Min Qalb Washigton: Benkiran Irhal)

During the protest, Larubi gave a speech, calling for the implementation of the democratic demands of the 20 February Movement and the release of the political prisoners.

In 2011, Larubi f Mirikan traveled and met Mohamed Aliouine, a Moroccan YouTube political activist based in America. They made a joint video where they performed a humorous sketch satirizing the regime in Morocco. (Larubi fi Mirikan fi awal Duhur)

On December 5, 2020, despite the coronavirus pandemic and transatlantic tight flight restrictions, Larubi traveled from Minnesota in the USA to Germany to meet former political prisoner, Islamist Mohammed Hajib, who spent seven years in Moroccan prisons on terrorism charges. Larubi visited Hajib in his home in the city of Ludwigsburg to interview him. Larubi’s idea was to video-record Hajib’s own version of his incarceration and persecution by the Moroccan authorities as well as his refutation of the terrorism charges and the official media campaigns against him. Larubi qualifies this meeting as a great historical event and a valuable asset in his activism archive. (Liq’a’ wajhan liwajh 6 December, 2020) During the interview, Larubi keeps repeating that he flew for more than 8,000 miles and went through several stopovers to make this meeting possible.

As part of this cross borders political mobilization and translation of the digital and virtual into the real and concrete, Larubi provides guidance and instruction, calling on the Moroccan Student Union (UNM) to participate in the general political life of the country and stressing that their struggle should not be confined their daily college demands or confined to the student’s daily life within university walls. Students should embrace the struggle of the

Moroccan people in general and be the force of political change because their destiny is closely tied to democratic reforms. (Hasriyan lil-Ittihad al-Watani) He goes on to summarize his recommendations for students in the following items:

1. Achieve high-quality academic knowledge because that is what would distinguish the student in his/her cultural and political struggle.
2. Offer guidance and orientation to pre-college students.
3. Move from being a mere technocratic student who excels in her/his field of specialization to a cultured intellectual who understands what is going on around them.
4. Become involved in the 20 February Movement, which he recommends as the bastion of real political change.
5. Avoid divisive ideological conflicts and concentrate on what unifies.
6. Boycott the elections and refuse to participate in the Makhzen’s political theatrical show.

It is interesting to note that the video is shot in a college amphitheater and delivered in classical Arabic, which he reads from a laptop screen without digression or improvisation. His speech is replete with revolutionary jargon such as “tyranny,” “political prisoners,” and “oppression,” to condemn the regime. On the other hand, he associates the students with “sacrifices”, “popular struggle,” “dignity,” “freedom,” and “martyrdom.” He affirms that “students are the real movers of political change” and refers to famous world revolutions led by the students such as the French student’s rebellion in May 1968 and other students led revolts in Latin America and the Arab world.

Larubi ends his video with “Your brother Dr. Chafik Omerani, North Carolina.” This is, perhaps, the first time that he refers to himself as Dr., which strikingly reads as patronizing. Though he calls himself “your brother” to create bonds of brotherhood with the students, he does distance himself from them by using the title of Dr. The title charts boundaries of power relations and separation between the students and the academic professor, a dichotomy between the powerful and all-knowing mentor and the disempowered subordinate mentee.

3. RIFFI HIRAK AND DIASPORA SOLIDARITY

Several of Larubi’s videos deal with the Moroccan Spring, especially the Rif Hirak. He has devoted at least six YouTube videos to this subject. The total number of likes the six videos have received is a comparatively substantial like-to-dislike ratio: 82.75% likes in comparison to dislikes 17.24%. This is quite indicative that Moroccan seekers of news on social media tend to be sympathetic to dissident voices.

The videos generated a total number of 511 comments. It can be inferred from this figure, though relatively low, that viewers interact with the content of the videos. The majority of the comments consist of short phrases of praise or condemnation.

| Video title | Date | Views | Likes | Dislikes | Comments |
|--|-------------|--------|-------|----------|----------|
| Larubi f Mirikan delivers a strong, direct, and clear message to the people of the Rif and the Justice and Spirituality movement | 28 May 2017 | 97,573 | 1.4K | 434 | 70 |
| Larubi f Mirikan the Hirak of the Rif, and the political detainees | 30 May 2018 | 21,009 | 707 | 45 | 93 |
| Ramadan Chat with Larubi f Mirikan about the Rif and Change | 3 Jun 2017 | 50313 | 1K | 125 | 45 |
| Larubi f Mirikan Talks about the Arrest of Salima Ziani, Featuring Her Picture and that of Nasser Zefzafi in the Background | 9 Jun 2017 | 62437 | 1.4K | 229 | 183 |
| Urgent Message from Larubi f Mirikan to Our People in the Rif and the Moroccan Diaspora | 23 Jun 2017 | 37205 | 840 | 109 | 106 |
| Who is Zefzafi's Fiancée? | 4 Jun 2018 | 233920 | 2K | 589 | 14 |
| Total | | 502457 | 7347 | 1531 | 511 |

Chart of Larubi’s YouTube videos on the Riff Hirak

The most interesting of his videos on the Riff Hirak is entitled “An urgent message from Larubi f Mirikan to our families in the Riff and the Moroccans in diaspora.” (Risalat’ajila min Larubi f Mirikan ila ahlina fi al-Rif) The video is shot in a room with black and crimson curtains in the background, a lit red table lamp, and framed black and white photos of two political detainees of Al Hoceima’s Hirak: Nassa Zafzafi and Salima Ziani. The video was published on 23 June 2017. It has 39,241 views, with 839 likes, 109 dislikes, and 106 comments.

Dressed in a black shirt, Larubi speaks mainly in Moroccan Arabic, with many words and expressions in classical Arabic. His language is casual, his tone is slow and calm. At the outset, the Youtuber introduces himself in this way: “I am Chafik Omerani, also known as Larubi f Mirikan.” He states that he is in continuous contact with the families of the Riff political prisoners and that they call him “brother Larubi, sometimes brother Chafik, or my son, because they are old people.” They speak to him, though located very far away from them, to recount to him the plight of their loved ones: how “they first beat them, they stepped on their faces and told them to say ‘Long live the king.’ Then, after arresting them, they stripped them all naked during the Ramadan, a picture of inconceivable humiliation.” (Risalat’ajila min Larubi f Mirikan)

The detainees’ relatives, explains Larubi f Mirikan, have to spend huge amounts of money and time traveling from Al Hoceima to Oukacha Prison in Casablanca to see their imprisoned family members, and once there they are exposed to the humiliating insults of state-sponsored “mercenaries” (*al mortaziqa*). The relatives communicate their decision to “Larubi f Mirikan” to go on hunger strikes. He advises them in this respect:

I have suggested to them that a hunger strike gives no results in Morocco; it is more effective if done outside of Morocco. Many of those family members are old and ill, some of them have diabetes or cancer, which makes it risky for their health and lives. ... In my very modest point of view, I think that before starting a hunger strike: First, a press conference should be held in one of the houses of the concerned families of the political abductees. It should be a big place, easy to reach, and should gather many families, and the press conference should be promoted widely. The national media should be informed, as well as foreign media, and I very much insist on foreign media. In the media conference, those families should define the issue of the political detainees, as well as announce the date on which the hunger strike should start.

These cross-border communication and mobilization are really interesting. It is, indeed, significant to see how a diaspora political activist uses social media from his host home to attempt to mobilize the masses in his home country and how he hopes to gain the confidence of his countrymen at home and inspire and instigate their *hirak*. His advice to them:

Another crucial thing is that those families should be organized. The profile of the victims should be clear, first, there should be all the information, name, date of birth, job, family status, and an official picture of every political abductee (not a random picture from the *hirak* in the street or anything). As well as the place of their arrest, and the nature of the accusations, and the place where the judicial proceeding is taking place.

For Larubi, they are not political prisoners, but rather political abductees because, for him, they did not commit any crime to deserve arrest. Reacting against pro-regime anti-protest discourses which brand Riff activists as anti-Arab separatists, Larubi says:

They are not the children of the Riff, they are the children of all Moroccans because they are making the history and the future of Morocco. It is unacceptable that Moroccans and the whole world shouldn’t hear about them. These are the men and women who are shaping the present and the destiny of the country.

So, unlike Azzouz who invokes the Riff uprising to capitalize on his Republican anti-Arab separatist agenda, Larubi connects with the Riffians within an encompassing nationalism that transcends the geographical borders of Morocco to include a transnational Moroccan identity. Within this context of a broader Moroccaness, Larubi, from his base in America, offers advice to both the families of the detainees and the Moroccans abroad:

The families should create a committee that represents them and represents all detainees of the Rif. And, in my opinion, they should open a bank account so that each Moroccan in Morocco or abroad should be able to donate because those families are spending a lot of money for the sake of their children. So they should open a bank account and promote it on online websites that have credibility. They deserve this help from Moroccans at home and the Moroccans in the diaspora.

This social media transnational political activism to mobilize and engage both home and diaspora countrymen is interesting. Addressing Moroccan immigrants in Europe, the Youtuber urges them to “launch a series of consultations and calls to get foreign lawyers, from Belgium or Netherlands or France ... who are human rights activists and who could access the file of the political abductees of the Rif.” Then, Larubi tries to reach out to Moroccan Americans:

I am still making calls and contacts, to make Moroccan Americans hire an American lawyer ... additionally, as Moroccan Americans, we should protest anywhere Moroccan Americans choose, whether in front of the Moroccan embassy in Washington DC or in front of the United Nations Headquarters in New York or even in front of the White House. Protests should take place in America and be of a great magnitude.

Larubi also explains that the DNA tests the authorities conducted on the political abductees are illegal and warns that the Makhzen’s intention might “probably be to use the tests to accuse the detainees of terrorism or something in the future.” Therefore, he calls for vigilance and caution because “we must be responsible and it is our duty to take civilized steps.”

Larubi’s video on the Rif HIRAK, “An urgent message from Larubi f Mirikan to our families in the Rif and the Moroccans in diaspora,” received 106 comments, all of them positive, except in one case, which reads

Now you incite violence and chaos ... your donkey deserves to be at the top of the list of those wanted to be arrested, even if you have an American nationality and even Russian donkeys. Did you enjoy the attacks on the police and the state property? Oh if I had power!

Comments praised Larubi f Mirikan for his solidarity with the oppressed: “You are a great man; I respect and am proud of you and of the national identity that unites us.” Another comment reads: “Thank you, praiseworthy brother, for your solidarity with your Riffian brethren.” A comment praises him as “the mighty hero, whose words are golden, and do not speak in vain; your words shine with light and we are never tired of listening to you. You do enlighten our dark path. ... You are an example for freemen outside the homeland.”

Many commentators address the Youtuber as “brother”, “my brother”, or “dearest professor.” Such expressions create kinship affinity with a virtual person who is based many thousands of miles away from them. A bond of blood, kinship, and trust is established between the podcaster and viewers on social media, cross-border geographical mobilization. A viewer supports Larubi’s idea of calling for protests in front of the White House, stating: “The case should be internationalized, especially standing in front of the American White House. I am ready to board a plane to Washington when an action is coordinated.”² Another agrees with the initiative, hoping that the US President “will admonish the abusive rulers of Morocco.” He goes on to call on Moroccan immigrants to appoint “a foreign lawyer” to defend the Rif detainees.

Other viewers insist on “creating a Moroccan association abroad to bring Moroccans together against the Makhzen,” while other viewers declare themselves ready to contribute financially. A viewer from France writes in Arabic:

Today we have become one man. From France, we are in solidarity with the prisoners. Create a bank account and all Moroccans are with you... and thank you brother Chafik for your emancipating words; we are waiting for American Moroccans.

Another viewer from Morocco calls on the “Moroccans of diaspora to make monthly contributions to the families of detainees, until the release of their children.” While another viewer shows himself ready to help: “Brother, I am a Moroccan who has been living in America for a long time. I want to help financially, what should I do?”

4. REINVENTING DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

On 6 February, 2021, Chafik Omerani was arrested at the Rabat-Salé airport following his arrival from the United States. The Casablanca criminal court of first instance tried him on charges of “publishing a series of videos containing insulting and defamatory expressions against constitutional institutions, organized establishments and public officials.” He was sentenced to three months in prison and a fine of 40,000 dirhams. Upon his release from Oukacha prison in Casablanca after serving his sentence, Omerani expressed his solidarity with historian Maati Monjib and journalists Omar Radi and Soulaïman Raïssouni, stating that “prison would not deter him from what he was doing before.”(Latifa Babas, 6 May 2021)

After his release from Oukacha Prison and his return to America, Omerani redesigned his YouTube channel and redefined his identity. He now prominently displays a banner featuring six American flags—three on each side—under his name, Chafik Omerani, rather than his previous alias, Larubi f Mirikan. The banner also carries the designation "Former Political Prisoner." His name and profile as a former political prisoner are displayed in red and blue, the colors of the flag, and are adorned with stars from the flag.

The inclusion of American flags is meant to suggest that his activism is influenced by American democratic principles.

Interestingly, in the videos where Omerani recounts his arrest and imprisonment, there is a prominent display of American symbolism. Two American flags are hanging on the wall behind him in a wooden frame. He wears a shirt emblazoned with “USA” on both the front and sleeve, and features an American flag with “USA” at the bottom. In another video, he sports a cap with an American flag and the slogan, “Freedom is Not Free.”

Identifying himself as a "former political prisoner" and a journalist adds a layer of personal experience and credibility to his activism. This label not only establishes an emotional connection with his audience but also enhances his authority on issues related to political freedom and human rights.

Omerani's excessive use of American symbolism in his videos creates a narrative of resistance and reflects a deliberately constructed "imagined American identity" that is central to his post-imprisonment narrative, activism, personal journey, and credibility among his Moroccan audience. By prominently displaying American flags and wearing clothing adorned with American symbols and slogans, he frames his personal story of arrest and imprisonment within a broader narrative of struggle and resistance against oppression.

In her article, “Banal Nationalism and Belonging within the Echoed Imagined Community: The Case of New Zealand Anthems on YouTube,” Cynthia White considers YouTube digital to be as “a significant virtual context for the discursive construction of nationhood.” (White, 2015, p. 634) She argues that YouTube “can act as sites of narrative production for both the assertion of belonging, the evaluation of others’ claims and also for the drawing of boundaries ... while highlighting the interface between the personal and the political in the complexities and contingencies of belonging.” (Ibid., p. 627) In the case of Omerani, his use of language and clothing prominently emphasizes his Moroccan identity. However, by displaying American symbols and glorifying America, he creates a stark distinction between himself and his homeland, establishing unbridgeable boundaries between himself and his Moroccan audience. While American symbols might strengthen his credibility, they ironically undermine his politics of belonging and introduce inherent ideological tensions into his political discourse.

Moreover, the display of American symbolism is somewhat ironic. Despite his American citizenship, Omerani was unable to avoid arrest and imprisonment in Morocco, revealing the limitations of his diasporic identity. Additionally, his embrace of American ideals seems detached from criticisms of U.S. foreign policies, which often contradict the democratic values he espouses.

5. CONCLUSION

It is interesting how Larubi f Mirikan uses YouTube’s platform to define his identity across geographical borders and to communicate and connect with home and countrymen. Being located abroad and having American citizenship offer him and other human rights activists the opportunity to express themselves without fear of censorship. By incorporating American imagery and symbols, Omerani constructs a “narrative of resistance” and helps him fashion for himself an "imagined American identity.”

Social media allows activists in diaspora to create a site of freedom and articulate their resistance by turning technology into a tool of self-expression. They are able to achieve this by fostering “an imagined community,” to use an expression from Benedict Anderson. (Anderson,1998) In the case of YouTube political activists, this virtual imagined community establishes a virtual kinship and brotherhood across territorial and political borders and reframes transnational engagement.

For Omerani, his online presence becomes a tool for self-expression and resistance. His strategic use of American symbolism reflects his attempt to align his personal struggle with global ideals of democracy and human rights. However, this reimagined identity also highlights the complex dynamics of diasporic activism, including the limitations imposed by geopolitical realities and the contradictions inherent in his engagement with American values.

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