

EMERGING FROM THE WESTERN SHADOWS

THE RISE OF NORTHEASTERN MOROCCO THROUGH THE LENS OF OUJDA

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ABSRTACT

Oujda, situated in the Northeastern region (Oriental) near the Algerian border, has a historical connection to Algeria that is stronger than its connection to the western regions of its own country. However, a difficult border situation has existed between Oujda and Algeria since 1994 due to escalating tensions. This border location has impacted Oujda throughout its long history, which exists for over a thousand years. The effects of this were clearly visible after the French colonization of Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881, which led to the colonization of Morocco. Morocco supported the Algerian resistance against the French government, which resulted in the expansion of the French protectorate in the 'Maghrib'. Independence resulted in the reconstruction of national identity and post-colonial developments, which included the creation of new infrastructure projects and boundaries. Yet it had to deal with underinvestment during the independence period, as development efforts focused on Morocco's economic centres in Casablanca and Rabat. The region's development has been significantly influenced by transborder interactions with Algeria and Spain. Illicit cross-border trade between local communities within and outside the country has helped to boost the regional economy of the Oriental region over time. Legal trade traffic could only be done by air or sea, leading to new investments in infrastructure and technology to support the increasing demand for trade and commerce. Morocco's once-neglected eastern region has already developed into a more resilient region than before, with visible growth and expansion of the city and its surrounding areas.

KEYWORDS

Oujda, oriental, colonization, decolonization, transborder influences, urban development

1. INTRODUCTION

Morocco was a post-colonial nation that has been directly affected by French colonialism for more than thirty years (1907-1956) and for some parts by Spanish colonialism. In addition, Morocco has also actively engaged in the process of re-constructing its own national identity and decolonizing Moroccan culture.¹ "The changes and the re-constructing of national identity in Morocco are the consequences of post-colonial developments of new cities and

¹ Youssef El Kaidi, "The Post-Colonial Novel and the Re-Construction of National Identity in Morocco: Conflicts and Paradoxes," *The Journal of North African Studies*, February 7, 2022, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2022.2034503>.

boundaries''.² A view with which Leon Buskens, director of NIMAR in Rabat (Morocco) and professor of Law and Culture in Islamic Societies, also agrees.

This research provides a historical overview of north-eastern Morocco. It questions the extent to which the region has been resilient to changes in regimes, development of new cities, and boundaries. The focus point for this research is the city of Oujda, Northeastern Morocco. Oujda is a major Moroccan city, located near the border with Algeria and is the capital city of the Oriental region of north-eastern Morocco with a population of about 558.000 people.

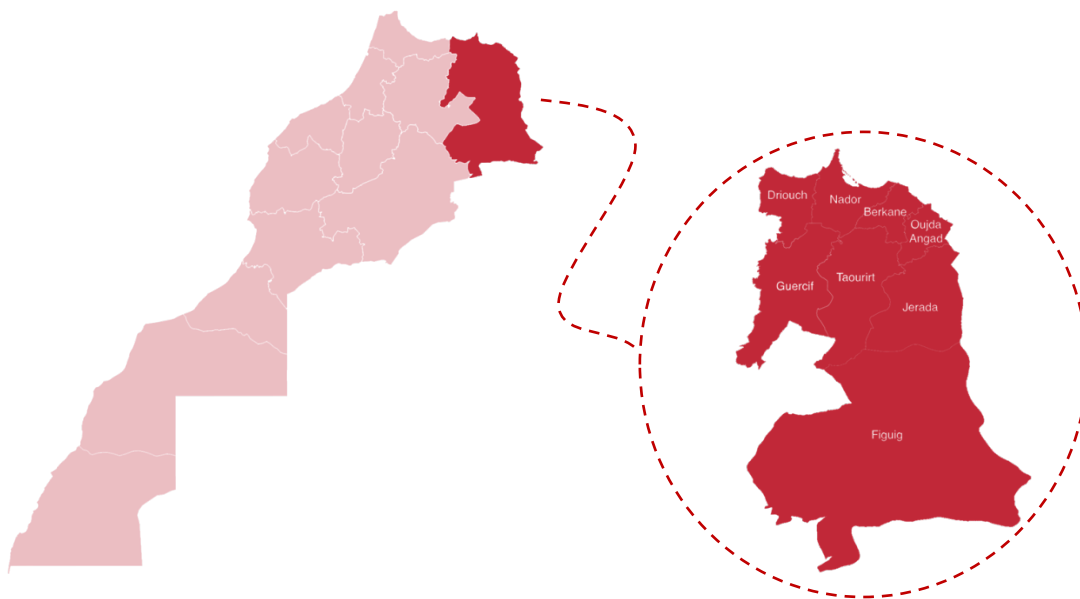


Fig. 2: Map of Morocco showing the Oriental region, developed by author Younes Chergui.

In terms of urban scale, Morocco can be divided into the East and West. Most of the major cities, such as Tangier, Casablanca, Rabat, and Agadir, are located on the western part, along the Atlantic coast, and they are all connected. While only two of the major cities are located on the east side, along the Mediterranean coastline: Nador and Oujda. Isolated from the west, it seems they are connected to Algeria, and yet there is a hard/ closed border with Algeria due to rising tensions since 1994.³ The coastal cities at the west such as Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat-Salé, make up Morocco's economic centre and were the primary focus of reconstruction during the post-independence period.⁴ Between the years 1956 and 2003, the

² Léon Buskens, "The changes, and the re-construction of national identity in Morocco are the consequences of post-colonial developments of new cities and boundaries," History: The History of Morocco (class lecture, NIMAR, Rabat, February 20, 2023).

³ Al Jazeera, "Timeline: Algeria and Morocco's Diplomatic Disputes," Politics News | Al Jazeera, January 15, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/15/timeline-algeria-and-moroccos-diplomatic-disputes>.

⁴ Yasmine Zarhloule, "Defying Peripherality: How Morocco Has Sought to Integrate Its Eastern Borderlands," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 18, 2023, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/01/18/defying-peripherality-how-morocco-has-sought-to-integrate-its-eastern-borderlands-pub-88836>.

Moroccan government invested a lot in these cities which led to the isolation of the eastern part of Morocco. Several factors, such as dependence on trade in Algeria and Southern Spain, distance from the major cities, and a poor infrastructural network, contributed to disconnecting the Northeastern region from national development efforts until the beginning of the 21st century.⁵ The book *Globalized Authoritarianism*, for instance, describes how the big economic centres in the West, such as Rabat and Casablanca, have changed through time and space. It is also a critical attempt to the royal family and King Mohammed VI who has become the primary capitalist of the country.⁶ Since there is not much written about the rise of North-eastern Morocco, the aim of this thesis is to add a new perspective on the regional development of North-eastern Morocco through the lens of Oujda.

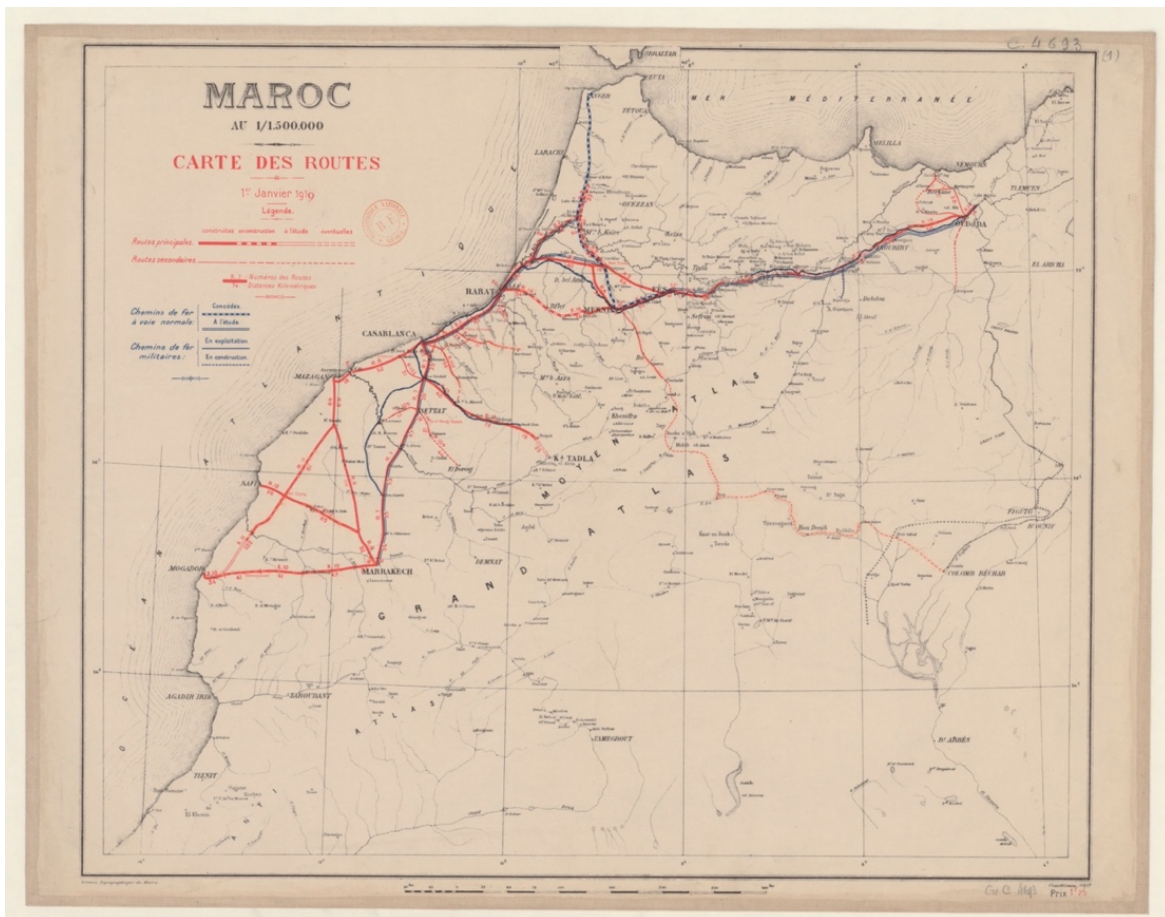


Fig. 3. Roadmap of Morocco (1919), showing the infrastructural connection between the major cities and the isolation of Oujda in the Northeastern part. Carte Des Routes as featured on gallica.bnf.fr.

⁵ Oxford Business Group, *rising in the east: The region aims to establish a dynamic, self-sufficient economy*, November 20, 2022, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/reports/morocco/2014-report/economy/rising-in-the-east-the-region-aims-to-establish-a-dynamic-self-sufficient-economy>.

⁶ Koenraad Bogaert, *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco* (U of Minnesota Press, 2018).

This research emerges from a personal interest. As a Dutch-based second-generation Moroccan migrant, I have regularly travelled to Oujda where many of my relatives live. As I travel back to Oujda over the years, I have noticed significant changes in the city's urban landscape. The visible evolution of the city has captured my attention and sparked my fascination. I remember passing by a billboard that showcased a bold vision for the new train station near my family's home, which was then an empty space. The announcement of this development marked a significant milestone in the history of Oujda, surpassing even the changes brought about during the French protectorate era. The resulting experiences convinced me to dig deeper into the history and development of Oujda and its surrounding region. Therefore, this research is a form of situated knowledge that combines historical and archival research with a set of interviews with multiple locals of Oujda. These interviews are seen to add a personal dimension to the historical information.

This historical research starts with the French protectorate period. Therefore, the first section is a historical overview of *colonial influences* in the city of Oujda and its region during the French Protectorate. The second section discusses the *reconstruction strategy* of the Oriental region. The last section provides an overview of how Oujda and its region are connected to the surrounding regions. What is the historical evolution of the port of Nador, and which role did the port play in the development of Oujda and its region? And which connections can be drawn to developments in shared border countries such as Algeria and Spain?

2. THE FRENCH PROTECTORATE (1907-1956)

2.1. Border influences

Since the beginning of the 20th century, various European countries have tried to occupy Morocco. The city of Oujda has been affected by its border location throughout its history, which exceeds thousand years. The North-eastern culture is clearly influenced by the Algerian culture as they share many traditions such as clothing styles like kaftans and the use of the Arabic Darija language. But the effect of the shared border appeared more clearly after the French colonization in Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881.⁷ According to a number of the collected oral narratives, the city of Oujda and its inhabitants had to embrace the Algerian resistance and support them with money and weapons, especially during the reign of Emir

⁷ John Gulick and L. Carl Brown, "From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City.," *Social Forces* 53, no. 1 (September 1, 1974): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2576861>.

Abdelkader Al Jazeera. The French had never planned to colonize Morocco, which had been an independent kingdom for years, and only began the colonization process when it became clear that the Moroccans were going to support the Algerian resistance against the French government.⁸ Historians Pennell and Conklin also support the idea. ‘‘French colonialism in Morocco was largely a response to the perceived threat of Moroccan support for Algerian resistance against French rule. The French saw the Moroccan monarchy as an obstacle to their control over North Africa and therefore sought to undermine it through colonization.⁹ Another historian, Conklin, notes that the French saw Morocco as a potential ally for the Algerians, and therefore sought to neutralize it through colonization.¹⁰



Fig. 4. Traditional way of wearing clothes by woman in Algeria and Morocco during the French protectorate, date unknown. Source from relatives.

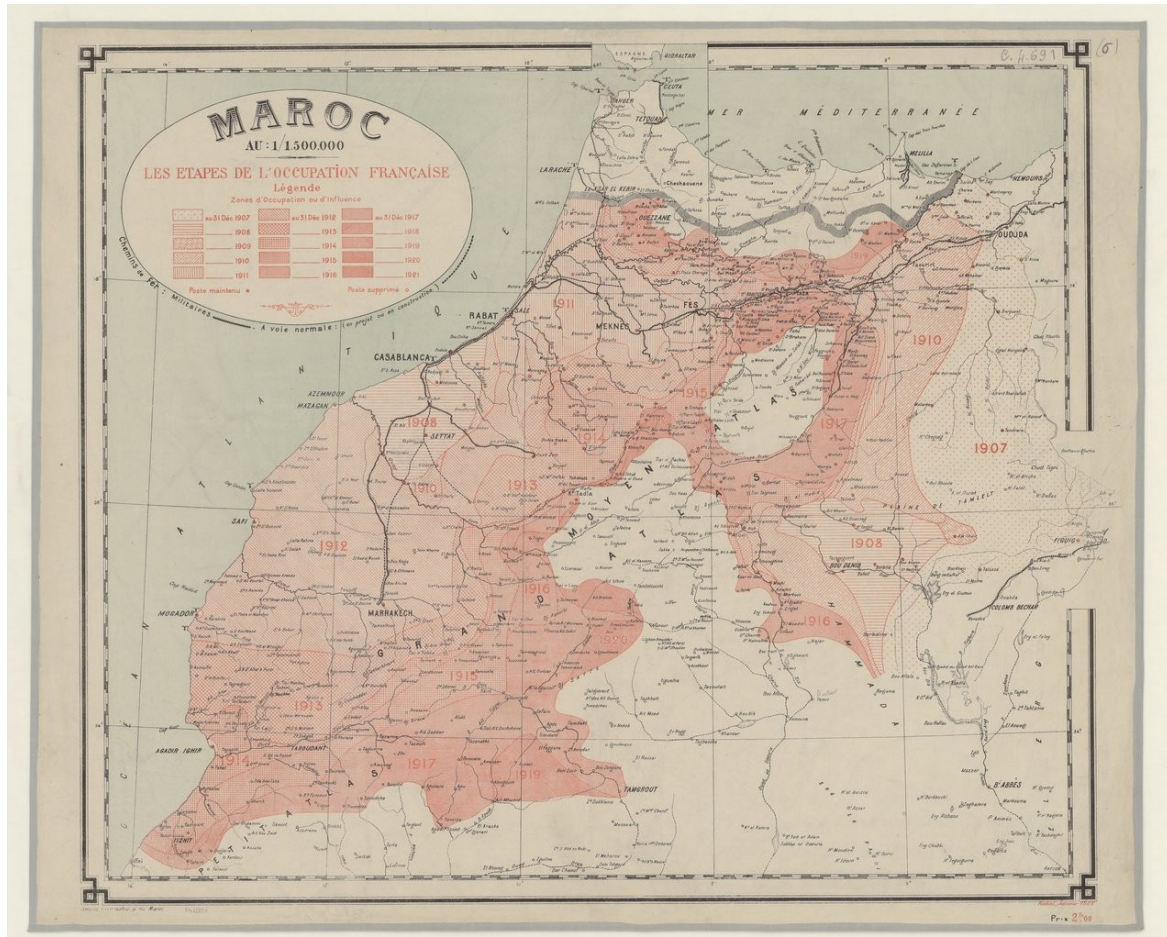
Therefore, after colonizing the ‘Maghreb’ countries, Tunisia and Algeria, the final Maghreb country to be colonized by the French were Morocco. According to a number of the collected oral narratives, France has been convinced that the city of Oujda is the first link to the occupation of northern Morocco and the elimination of the rear bases of the Algerian resistance. It put pressure on the city against France, which made it enter a war with the

⁸ Mohamed Chtatou, ‘‘An Overview of French Colonialism In The Maghreb – Analysis,’’ Eurasia Review, March 5, 2019, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/05032019-an-overview-of-french-colonialism-in-the-maghreb-analysis/>.

⁹ C.R. Pennell, *Morocco: From Empire to Independence* (Simon and Schuster, 2013).

¹⁰ Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*, 1997.

Moroccans in the battle of Isly in 1844, which ended in a great defeat for the Moroccans.¹¹ France forced Morocco to sign a treaty in the same year, and one of its most important provisions was drawing the borders between the Moroccan state and colonial Algeria. It was agreed that the border extends from the current Castle of Saida.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 5. Oujda as the first occupied city under the French conquest in Morocco. Les Etapes De L'occupation Francaise – as featured on gallica.bnf.fr.

Yet despite the separation of Morocco and Algeria as independent states, regions on both sides of the border remained connected through trade. Much of the economic activity was concentrated in the border cities of Oujda in Morocco and Tlemcen in Algeria. Such stories are also transferred orally among different generations. I remember my grandfather confirming this as he was one of the couriers that travelled to Tlemcen, Algeria, as a routine run to deliver goods. This was often in groups in the afternoon to prevent being seen by the Algerian army. After arriving at the Algerian border, there was somebody waiting for them to

¹¹ "Morocco | History, Map, Flag, Capital, People, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, February 24, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Morocco/Decline-of-traditional-government-1830-1912>.

pick up the goods and to send goods from Algeria in return. These were mainly electronic goods. At that time, a railway system connected North-eastern Morocco with western Algeria. So, when they picked up the goods again from Algeria, they were often taking the train back to Oujda. Before arriving in Oujda, they were throwing the goods out the window of the train, where a friend of theirs was there to pick them up. This was again to avoid the control post at the Oujda station. This whole process of trade at the border and avoiding the control post was a continuous cycle and the city became known for that which led to the name of the city, Oujda, in Arabic: ‘‘Oujed’’ meaning preparing.



Fig. 6. A routine courier run from Tlemcen, Algeria to Oujda, Morocco, 1912. Source from Jonesblog.

The French Army entered Oujda, as the first region of Morocco, on March 24, 1907, and the leaders of the Bni Znasen tribes surrendered after resisting the occupation for several months.¹² After establishing the eastern part, the western part was established as well in Casablanca. Historian Gershovich also agrees with this. The author explains that the occupation of Oujda was part of France's broader efforts to extend their control over Morocco's western parts to establish a protectorate over the country.¹³

¹² Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

¹³ Moshe Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco: Colonialism and Its Consequences* (Routledge, 2012).



Fig. 7. Occupation of Oujda, April 1907. Bab-el-Khémis: Main Entrance to the Town Guarded by the Zouaves. Occupation d'Oudjda Avril 1907 – as featured on Delcampe.net.

2.2. Urban Development under the French Protectorate

The main characteristic of the city, like most Moroccan cities, is having the old city in the centre. Most Moroccan cities retain at least some of their traditional character. During the period of the French protectorate, many historians claim that colonial authorities did not want to change the traditional urban centers, or medinas, which were usually surrounded by walls to protect the national territories from foreign aggressions.¹⁴ Their first rule was that new European quarters must be separated from the old medina in order to protect the autonomy.¹⁵ Rather than modifying these traditional centers to accommodate new infrastructure and economic development, they created ‘new towns’ alongside them. The French lived in these new towns while Moroccans stayed in the old medina. In addition, they shifted the focus of political and economic life from the interior of Morocco, where it was for a long time around the cities of Fès, Meknès, and Marrakech, to the coast.¹⁶ That is where for example the gate to the west of Oujda, Bab el Khemis, has been destroyed in 1920 for the

¹⁴ John Gulick and L. Carl Brown, “From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City.,” *Social Forces* 53, no. 1 (September 1, 1974): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2576861>.

¹⁵ Pennell, *Morocco: From Empire to Independence*. (London: OneWorld Publications, 2009), 126.

¹⁶ Gulick and Brown, “From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City.”

expansion of the city, as seen in fig. 9, trying to shift the focus from the interior of Oujda to the outside of the medina, all the way to the Mediterranean coast.



Fig. 8. Map of Oujda showing the separation between European and Moroccan residential areas, 1951. Source from cinumedpub.mmsh.fr.



Fig. 9. A gate to the west of Oujda, destroyed in 1920 for the expansion of the city. Source from Archnet.org.

As a result, huge development efforts were made around the economic centres, and many locals relocated to the coast. Although the western part of the country received more investments, the French did invest in the Northeastern region. They built modern infrastructure, including roads and railways, and developed industries targeting the economy. The expansion of Oujda included the construction of a train station that became an important connector to other parts of Morocco, hospitals, and other industries that boosted the economy. This clearly visible when you compare the maps of fig. 10 and fig.11. The French influence was also visible in careful urban planning based on their strategic plans with strict rules on where to build and not. However, France's control over Morocco's economy resulted in a long period of suffering for Morocco called the 'Great Depression'. According to historian John Damis, the depression was made worse by droughts and bad harvests from 1935 to 1937: in addition, the French development projects, while ambitious, were also costly and did not generate sufficient returns to support the Moroccan economy during this period of crisis.¹⁷

¹⁷ John Damis, "Development in Morocco under the French Protectorate, 1925-1943," *Middle East Journal* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 1970): 74–86, <https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=192694421&DB=p>.

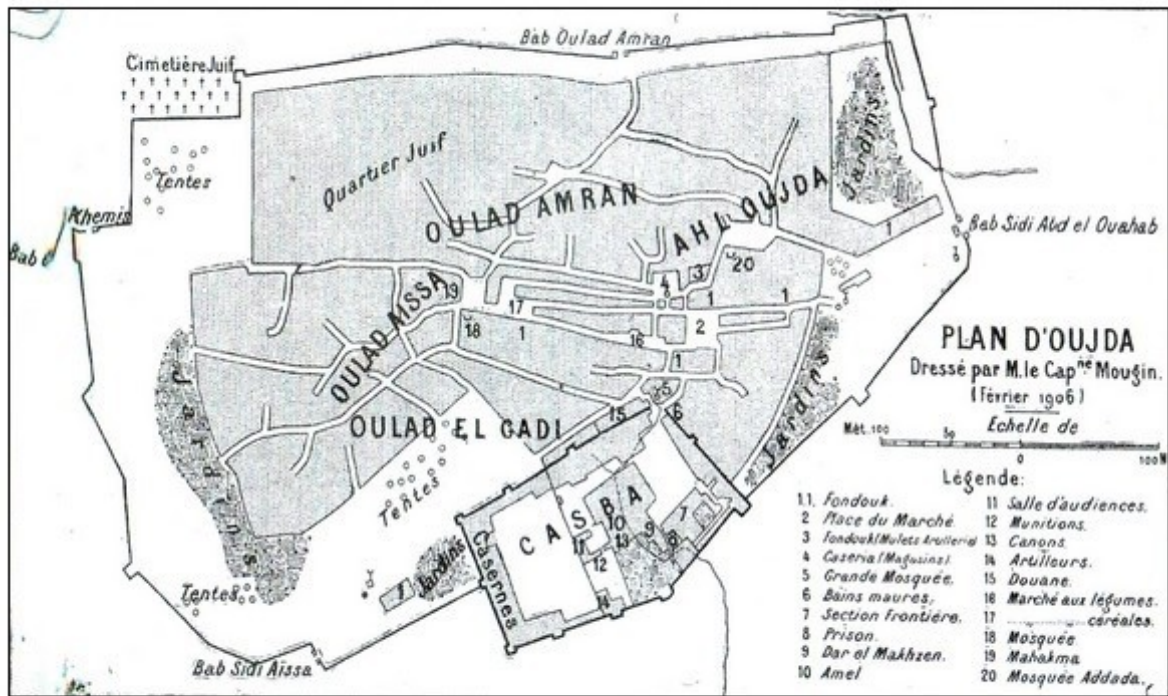


Fig. 10. Traditional urban medina of Oujda before the expansion, c. 1906–1927. Plan d'Oujda - as featured on afdaarab.fr.

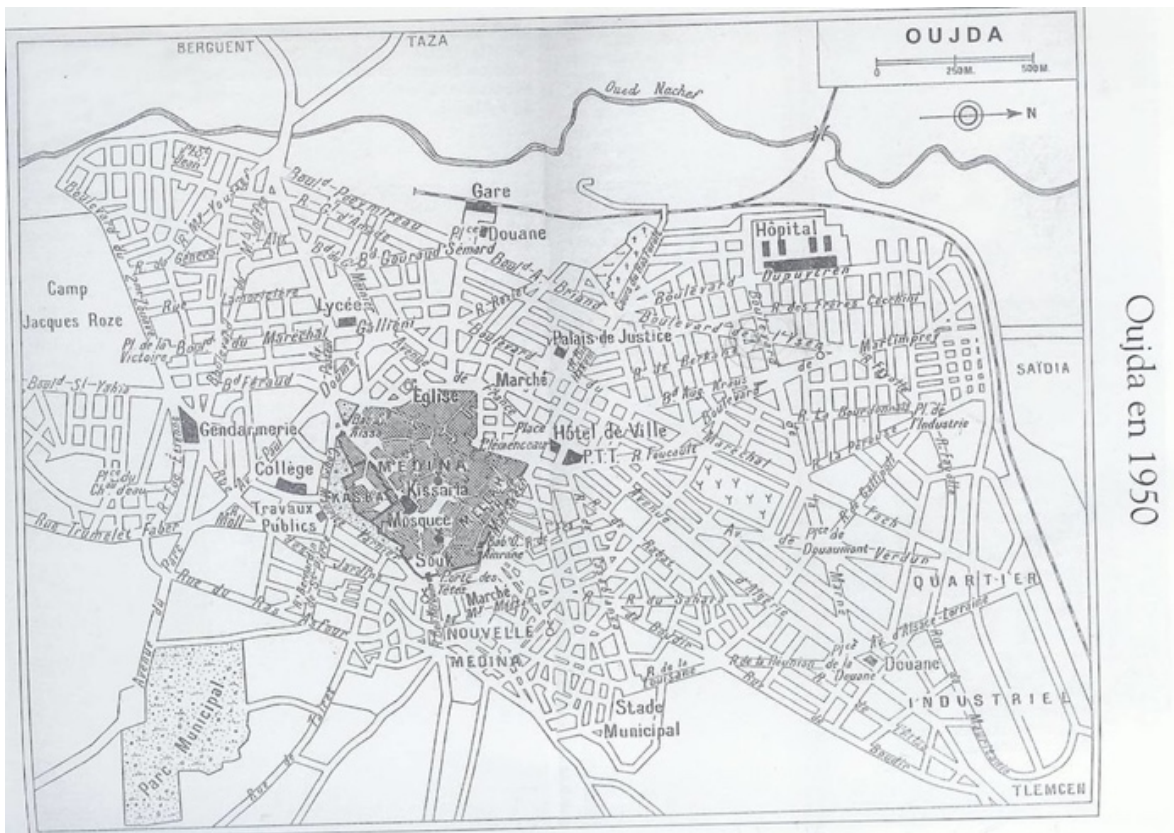


Fig. 11. Oujda after the expansion, c. 1950. Source from Dafina.net.

OUJDA 1880

d'après le capitaine Voinot

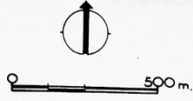


fig. 1

OUJDA 1917

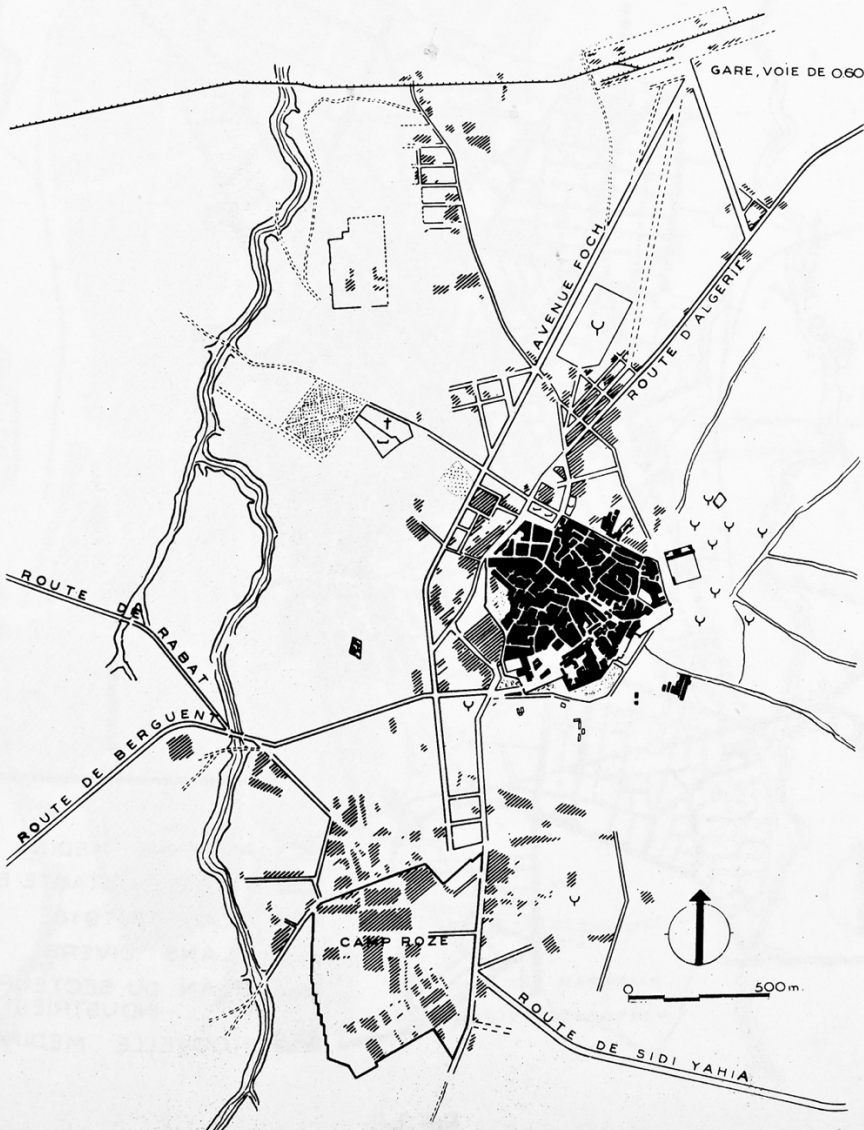


Fig. 12. Oujda in 1880 and 1917. Source from cinumedpub.mmsh.fr.

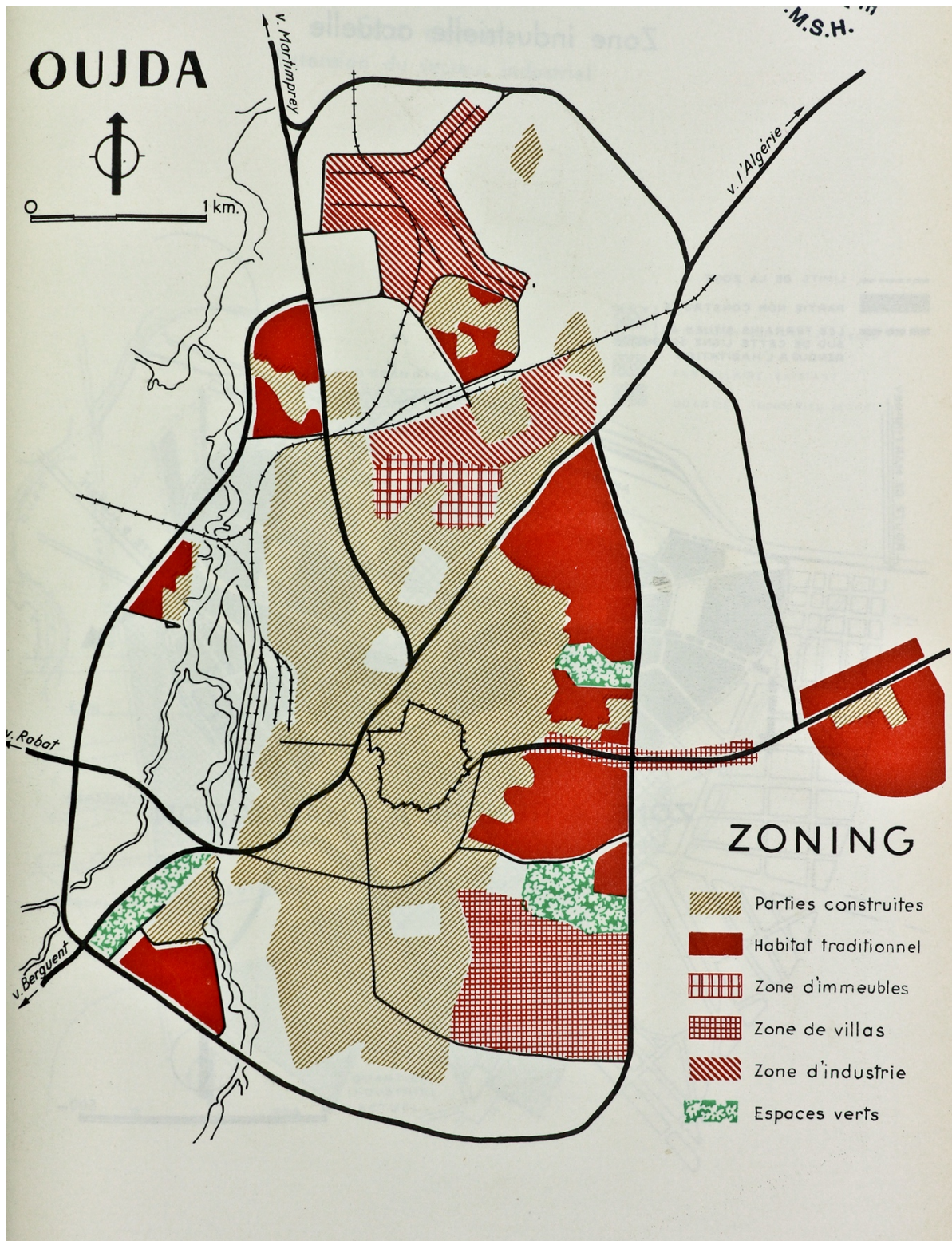


Fig. 13. Urban plan of Oujda's centre showing zoning rules by the French. Source from cinumedpub.mmsh.fr.

During the start of the French colonization, a creation of interests started to appeal from 1907 to 1912 when numerous parts of the land were taken into custody in Morocco. According to Gulick and Brown, the French had a strategic interest in North-eastern Morocco. The French had an interest in Northeastern Morocco because they saw that the Oriental region had

specific strengths that give it its own identity and make it a territory with important values and strategic interests.¹⁸ Historian David Stenner also agrees with this. “The French saw the region as a potential site for economic development and modernization, particularly in the areas of agriculture and mining. The region features natural and cultural resources which are the basis of its potentialities: fresh climate, valleys of great beauty, natural character of certain places with rich diversity, as well as the existence of local practices and cultural traditions”.¹⁹ According to Rabat-based professor of architecture, Ouafa Messous, export-oriented agriculture was largely reserved for French companies who occupied the best land. Only a very few Moroccans entered the modern agricultural sector.

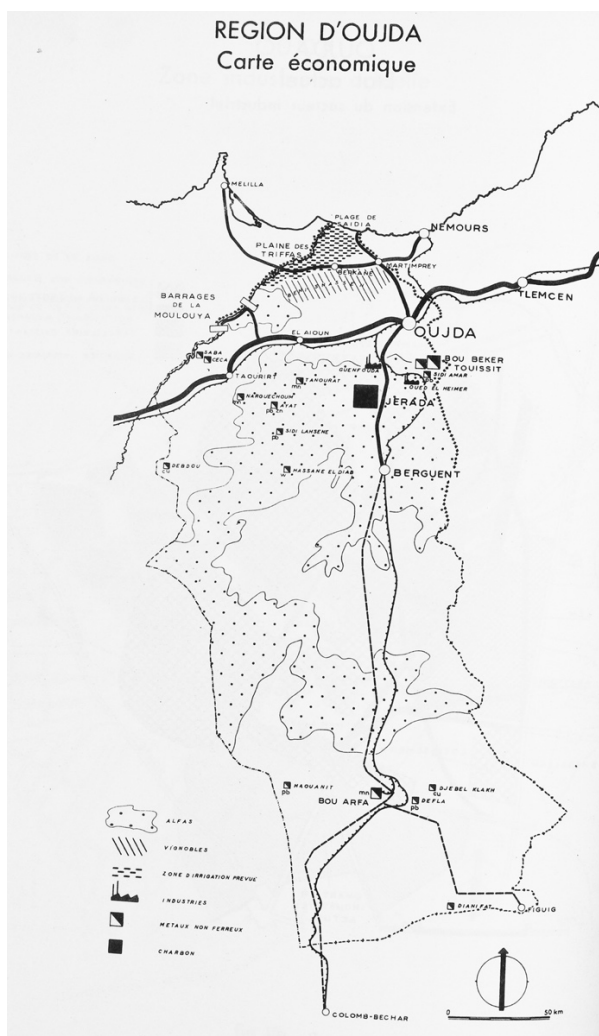


Fig. 14. Map of Oujda showing natural, and cultural resources. Carte économique – as featured on cinumedpub.mmsh.fr.

¹⁸ John Gulick and L. Carl Brown, “From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City.,” *Social Forces* 53, no. 1 (September 1, 1974): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2576861>.

¹⁹ David Stenner, *Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State* (Stanford University Press, 2019). 36-37

After the expansion of important cities, the French came up with the idea to zone Morocco into three parts based on their needs and interests. The northern and southern parts became Spain territory for some parts, while the central part was occupied by the French.²⁰ “Morocco was functioning as a machine during the colonial period. The country was purely used for trade with the main vision to export the needs, from the biggest port at that time: Casablanca, to France”.²¹

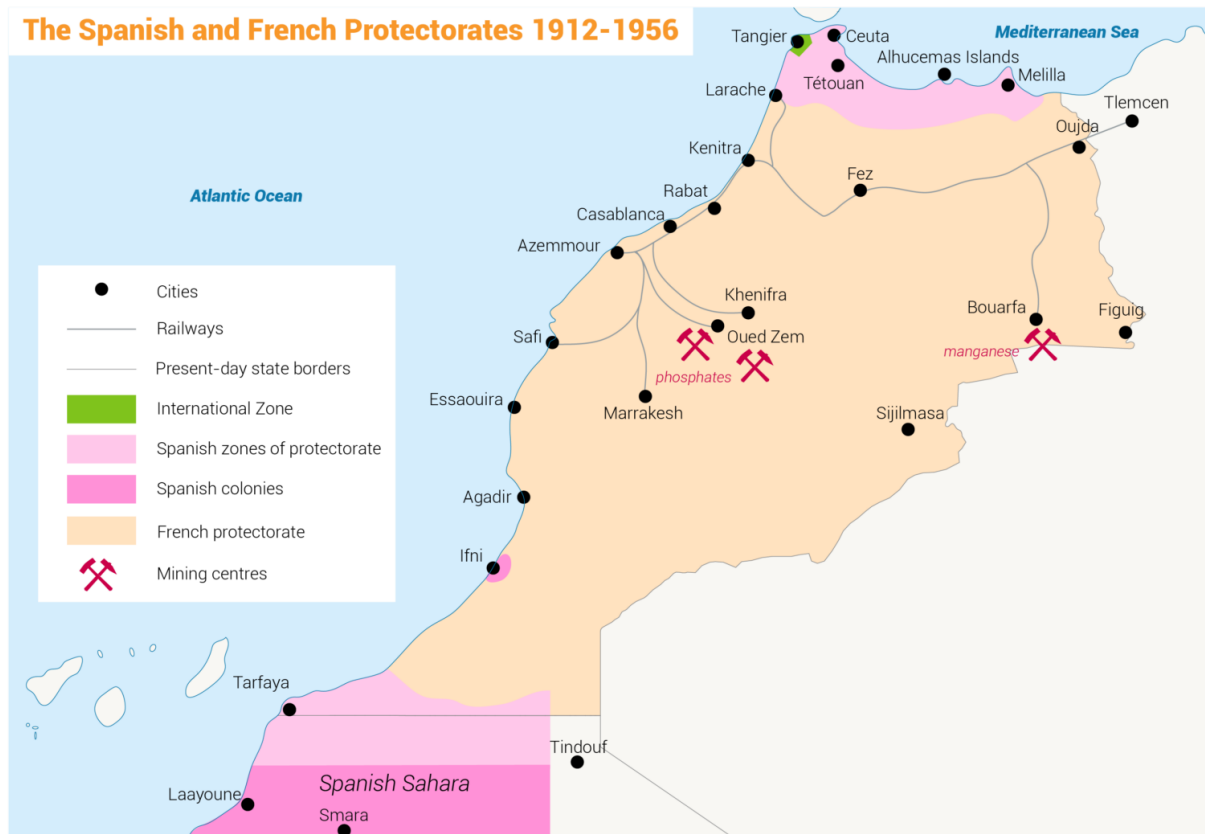


Fig. 15. Morocco divided into three parts based on the needs and interests, 1912-1956. Source from fanack.com.

The French made two major decisions that were to have a considerable effect on the entire organization of the country which indirectly influenced Oujda and its region of the Oriental. First, the aim was to shift their focus from the interior to the exterior of the country as mentioned before, by shifting the capital from Fez to Rabat which became the new administrative capital.²² Several main roads and routes were opened in every direction including towards the Oriental region to prevent isolation.

²⁰ Dima, “Morocco: The Colonial Protectorates,” The MENA Chronicle | Fanack, January 24, 2023, <https://fanack.com/morocco/history-of-morocco/morocco-the-colonial-protectorates/>.

²¹ Ouafa Messouss. (Rabat-based professor of architecture), in discussion with Younes Chergui. March 2023.

²² Susan Gilson Miller, A History of Modern Morocco (Cambridge University Press, 2013). 68-69

Second, a new, modern harbor at Casablanca has been created which become the economic metropolis of the country and one of the largest harbors in Africa. Casablanca became the biggest and most important port city because of its central position in the country under the French protectorate.²³ Spain did the same from Tangier, but because of its proximity to Spain and its international status, there was no need for another big port in Tangier. This trend of having one main port is still relevant to this day. If you take a map of Africa and identify all the under-development countries, you will see that all the under-development countries have only one big port where all the maritime traffic happens to prevent concurrence.

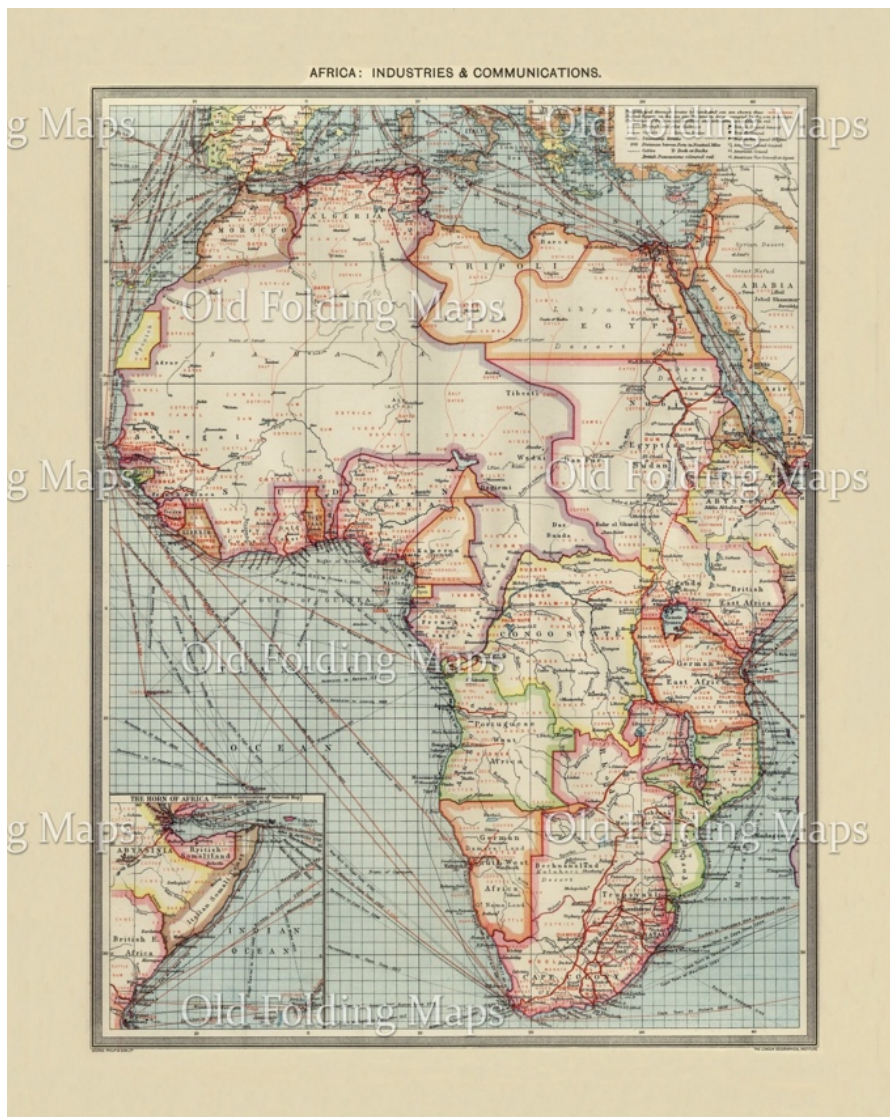


Fig. 16. Straight lines showing the shipping routes to major seaports per African country before the establishment of the Casablanca harbor, 1900. Source from foldingmaps.co.uk.

²³ Fanack, "Morocco: Encroaching European Powers in the 19th Century," The MENA Chronicle | Fanack, January 24, 2023, <https://fanack.com/morocco/history-of-morocco/morocco-encroaching-european-powers-in-the-19th-century/>.

3. RECONSTRUCTION STRATEGY (1956-PRESENT)

3.1. Independency

Morocco gained full independence in 1956.²⁴ However, after the independence of Morocco, the country was left very poor. The influence of the French protectorate was clearly visible, Morocco still depended on the French. But because of the continuing war in Algeria, which Morocco tacitly supported, relations with France were strained. Therefore, the goal was to keep the relationships with the French. In general, the changeover to Moroccan control, assisted by French advisers, took place smoothly, but it took decades to take over full control. Many factors such as trade interests, technology interests, and financial aid, were the reasons why relations between the French government and the Kingdom of Morocco were strengthened.

As discussed before, since the independence, there was no equal reconstruction in the country under the French protectorate as the French were focusing on what was interesting and not interesting for them. Morocco had to develop a strategic plan to reconstruct their national identity. Therefore, the goal was to make unification in Morocco: making sure that the land law was in every region the same. It is to this day not done yet, for example, Melilla which is still one of the state territories of Spain.

3.2. Balancing the economic regions

The Oriental region has several advantages, because of its position on the Mediterranean coastline, a rich agricultural environment in the north, and a diverse topography. Yet it had to deal with underinvestment during the independence period, as development efforts focused on Morocco's economic centres in Casablanca and Rabat as explained before. For many years, industries, businesses, and job opportunities have been primarily located along the coast. As a result, people living in rural areas were moving away from the outskirts of the country where they may have been marginalized, and instead, have settled towards cities along the coast like Rabat and Casablanca.²⁵ Casablanca grew rapidly and became an "urban monster". The city expanded to an enormous size, with its urban territory extending over a

²⁴ "Independence for Morocco and Tunisia - Decolonisation: Geopolitical Issues and Impact on the European Integration Process - CVCE Website," n.d., <https://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/dd10d6bf-e14d-40b5-9ee6-37f978c87a01/2796f581-3e5a-4dff-9fbe-fd3d48966b38>.

²⁵ John Gulick and L. Carl Brown, "From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City.," *Social Forces* 53, no. 1 (September 1, 1974): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2576861>.

distance of 20 kilometers. This resulted in huge investments in and around the city of Casablanca. Therefore, the goal was to balance the urban glue in Morocco by focusing on ‘stability points’ and making connections inside the country instead of outside. This was mainly to control the growth of Casablanca and its surrounding areas and to promote the development of industries in the central and northeastern regions of Morocco such as Meknes, Agadir, Marrakesh, Nador, and Oujda. This would help to balance the economic growth and opportunities across the country, rather than just focusing on one specific area.

The first move after independence was to create *other port cities* in the north (Tanger Med), in the middle (Agadir), and in the south. But due to the location of the Sahara, it was hard to realize a port in the south. Morocco needed more stability points in order to stabilize the economy. Therefore, it must build another port in the Oriental region which will enable it to strengthen trade relations with its main trade partners and position itself as an economic gate to the African continent.²⁶ Morocco made significant investments in its port infrastructure because nearly all of its external trade was and is to this day happening through ports.

Moreover, the country's maritime trade with its economic partners is increasing, which means that there is a need to improve and expand the port facilities to accommodate this growth.

Therefore, Nador West Med is introduced and set to be one of the biggest ports in Morocco which is still under development.

Ports are not just a part of the city, they are essential for imports, the economy, and geopolitics. Port cities serve as links between the sea and land, where goods and people are transferred. They have expensive and long-lasting port infrastructure that is designed for a specific function. These cities face various global challenges, including rising sea levels, migration, digitization, governance conflicts, space constraints, and environmental pollution. However, many of these cities share common values, which is known as a maritime mindset or port-city culture. One of them is to prevent concurrence between them to strengthen their position.

²⁶ Mahdi Birafane, Wei Liu, and Sarvar Khalikov, “The Strategic Positioning of Moroccan Seaports: An Application of the Boston Consulting Group Growth-Share Matrix,” *The Open Transportation Journal* 14, no. 1 (July 14, 2020): 133–42, <https://doi.org/10.2174/1874447802014010133>.

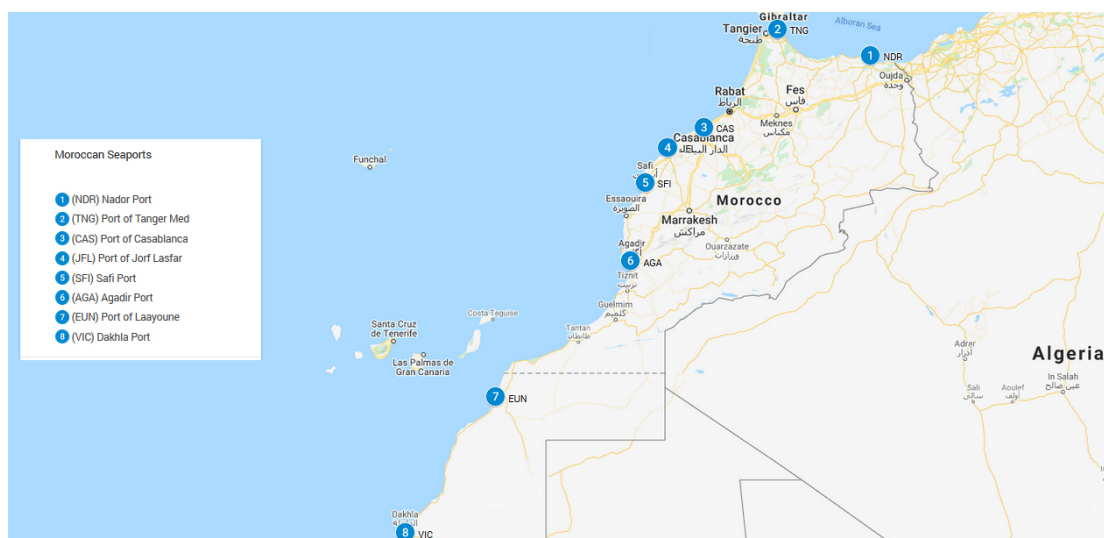


Fig. 17. Moroccan biggest seaports. Source from opentransportationjournal.com.

Therefore, the second strategy for the link between the city and the port: is making *vocations* (unique concepts for each port). For each port, vocations were needed so that these ports could strengthen their position in the city. For example, Tanger is working with shipping (functioning as a hub), Casablanca is changing its vocation to a marina and Agadir its primary focus is the fishery industry. This raised questions about the Oriental region on which vocations the region has. What is interesting in the Mediterranean Sea? There is already Tanger Med in the north for the shipping industry. It is important that there must not be two big ports next to each other having the same vocation. That is why Nador has shifted its focus on transport for people, functioning as a gate to the country.²⁷

4. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

4.1. The historical evolution of the port of Nador and its influences

One way in which the transborder countries have impacted Oujda's development is through *trade* which dates back to the 17th century through maritime traffic. According to a number of the collected oral narratives, a trading post was established at the coast of the Oriental region, which is now Nador. The post served as a hub for trade between North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Nador became an important center for the trafficking of goods in the Mediterranean, with its strategic location near the border between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Melilla. Trade provides jobs for many citizens, but shipping does not always bring

²⁷ Mahdi Birafane, Wei Liu, and Sarvar Khalikov, “The Strategic Positioning of Moroccan Seaports: An Application of the Boston Consulting Group Growth-Share Matrix,” *The Open Transportation Journal* 14, no. 1 (July 14, 2020): 133–42, <https://doi.org/10.2174/1874447802014010133>.

positive effects to the region. This was clearly feasible when this led to conflicts between Morocco and Spain over control of the region. However, this didn't seem to affect the continued growth of the port. In the 20th century, the port of Nador underwent significant modernization and expansion, as Morocco sought to develop its maritime infrastructure to support growing trade. The "Djebel cargo" boat was often used and recognizable by the locals.



Figure 18. Djebel Nador cargo boat, 1939. Source from Delcampe.net.



Figure 19. The Moroccan cargo boat from Nador identified at the port of Marseille which confirms the trade. Source from Delcampe.net.

According to Carola Hein, professor of Architecture & Urban Planning History at the Department of Architecture in Delft, in the 1960s, container districts, and offshore ports became more separated from the urban centers. The increase in the distance between ports and urban centers resulted in a global trend of waterfront regeneration, with many port cities undertaking projects to revive their waterfront areas. Therefore, a new port facility was constructed, which included a large commercial port, a fishing port, and a marina. This expansion helped to transform Nador into a major center for international trade, with significant exports of fish, agricultural products, and industrial goods. In the 21st century, the port of Nador has continued to evolve and expand, with new investments in infrastructure and technology to support the growing demand for maritime transport. The port is now one of the largest and most modern in Morocco, with its new extension under construction, and a wide range of facilities and services for both commercial and leisure vessels, including container terminals, oil terminals, and cruise ship terminals.²⁸

The growth of the port of Nador has contributed to the development of Oujda in several ways. Some of the key development efforts were targeting the infrastructure and industry. The continued growth of trade activities led to the construction of logistic centers and industrial parks. Several extensions were made to support the growth focusing on storage, distribution, and transport of goods. Furthermore, due to the growing demand for trade, new roads have been constructed in order to support the increase in traffic. Modern highways were built to connect Oujda and Tlemcen to their capital cities, making it possible for drivers to reach coast cities such as Rabat and Tangier in five to six hours. The growing demand for trade, led directly to an increase in economic growth, creating new businesses and new jobs in the region. The growth of the economy led to the construction of new residential areas and shopping centers. Every situation within the growing demand for trade had a direct impact on the development of Oujda.

²⁸ Liesbeth, "Design and Construction of a New Seaport in Nador, Morocco," Jan De Nul, December 7, 2022, <https://www.jandenul.com/projects/design-and-construction-new-seaport-nador-morocco>.

OUJDA
Etat actuel
Extension du secteur industriel

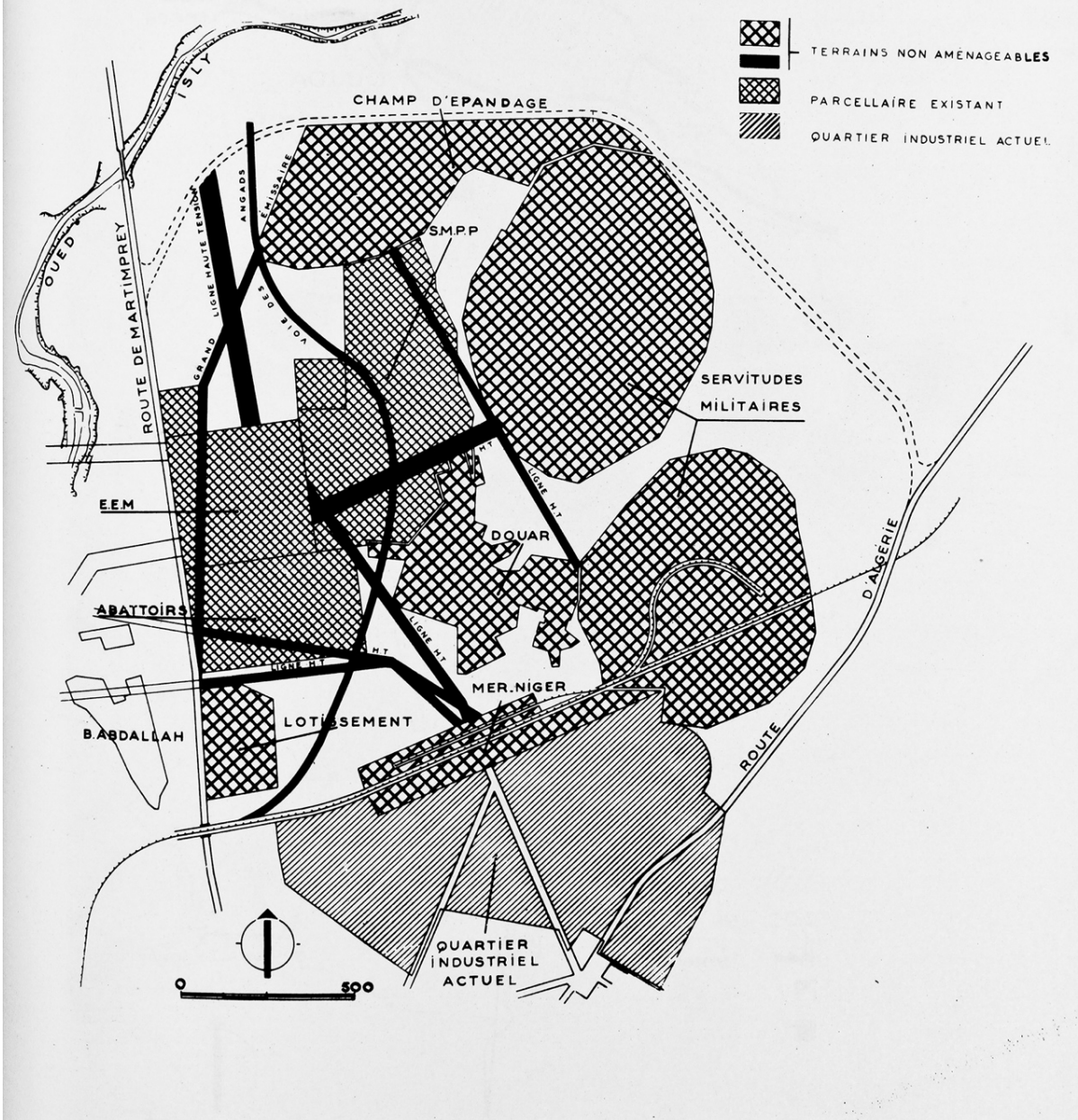


Fig. 20. Map of Oujda showing the extension of the industrial sector to support the growing demand for trade. Extension du secteur industriel – as featured on cinumed.mmsh.univ-aix.fr.

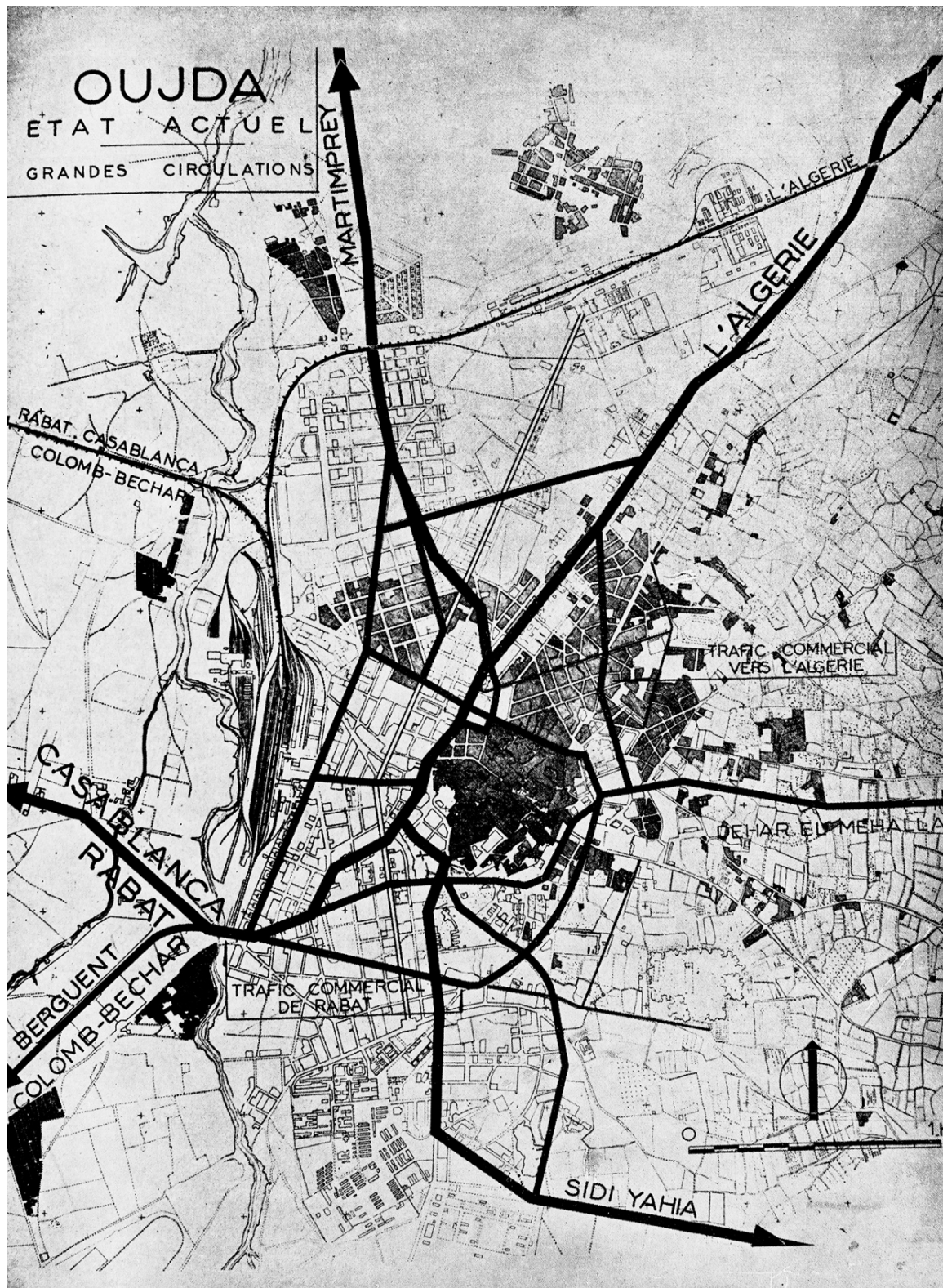


Fig. 21. Modern highways were built to connect Oujda, Morocco's capital cities and Algeria. Grandes circulations – as featured on cinumed.mmsh.univ-aix.fr.

4.2. Transborder influences

Oujda, a city located near countries that share borders, has also faced problems in its development because of these border restrictions. The border between Algeria and Oujda is closed for legal trade, which has made it difficult for the city to integrate economically with neighboring regions.²⁹ In terms of urban flow, most trade between Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia tends to flow north and south, with relatively little movement east or west which has limited business growth in Oujda.³⁰ According to a Moroccan security expert, borders are never truly closed, some people still try to cross the border secretly to trade, which creates opportunities for those who are willing to take risks. As previously mentioned, due to limited legal trade caused by closed borders at the frontier, my grandfather participated as well in illicit trade networks to sell or buy goods in cross-border countries.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 22. Trade and accessibility from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia tends to flow north and south, with relatively little movement towards east or west, 1907. Source from gallica.bnf.fr.

²⁹ Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, “Divided they fall Frontiers, borderlands and stability in North Africa,” 2020, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/nar-6.pdf>.

³⁰ Yasmine Zarhloule, “Defying Peripherality: How Morocco Has Sought to Integrate Its Eastern Borderlands,” Carnegie Middle East Center, January 18, 2023, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/01/18/defying-peripherality-how-morocco-has-sought-to-integrate-its-eastern-borderlands-pub-88836>.

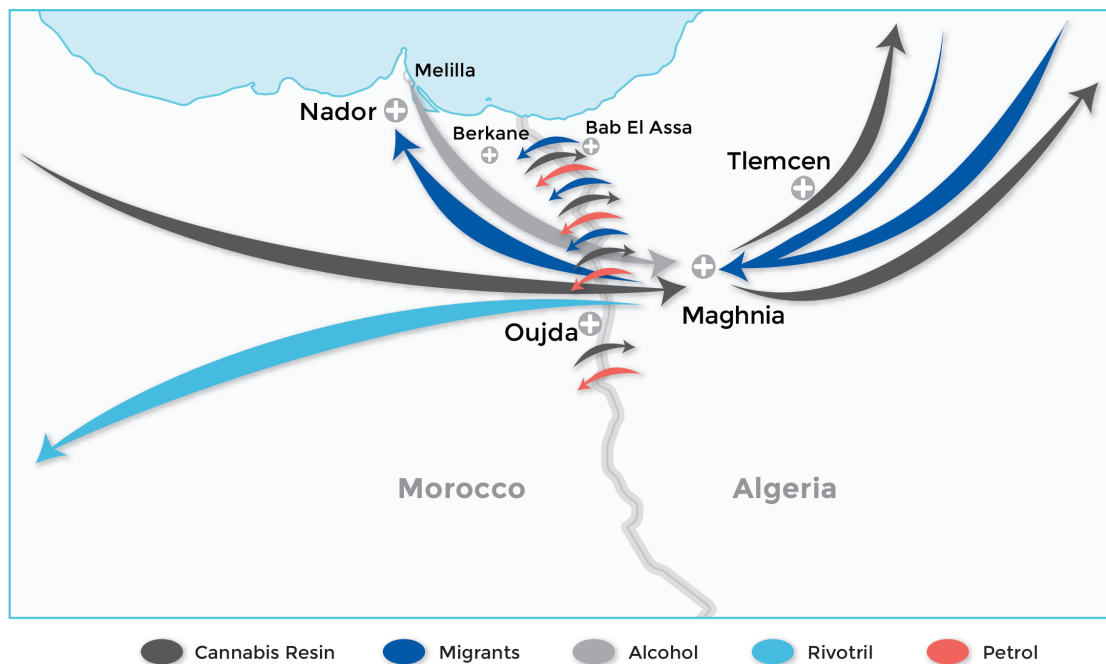


Fig. 23. Smuggling from the border regions to large urban centers in Algeria and Morocco. Source from files.ethz.ch

Nevertheless, the illicit cross-border trade between the local communities in and outside the country has helped to boost the regional economy of the Oriental over time. In a relatively short period, Moroccan postcolonial society had changed fundamentally. The beginning of Mohammed VI's reign was characterized by the launch of mega projects in the Oriental region.³¹ All large cities in Morocco and especially the Oriental region experienced growth, largely due to the increase in infrastructural projects such as the new port. The increase in infrastructural projects had largely to do with transborder influences.

The border countries, including Algeria and Spain, have had an impact on the development of Oujda in several ways. Although the border with Algeria has been closed since 1994, regions and towns on both sides experienced growth with large projects under construction.

Smuggling was happening all along the Algerian Moroccan frontier but was and is still particularly intense between the city of Tlemcen in Algeria and the city of Oujda in Morocco. These regions have the largest population centers along the border, and these populations are

³¹ SCIENCES PO URBAN SCHOOL, "URBAN GOVERNANCE: Field study in Rabat and Casablanca," (2015), https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/sites/sciencespo.fr/ecole-urbaine/files/rabat_casablanca%202015.pdf.

growing rapidly. This has led to the development of businesses and industries in Oujda that rely on cross-border trade, such as logistics and transportation.³²

Travel and trade between the two countries is allowed but must be done either by air or sea. It is crazy if you think that goods need to transit between these neighbors via the French port of Marseilles when they could simply cross over by land. This led to *the expansion of the airport* of Oujda and the seaport of Nador. That is for example when the new building of the Oujda-Angad Airport was planned as an extension of the existing 1970s airport to meet the growing demand for air travel in the region.



Fig. 24. Oujda-Angad Airport renovation for the expansion of the airport, 1995. Source from Archnet.org.

Furthermore, *the expansion of the seaport* in Nador is currently under development: The Nador West Med port. It is the second Mediterranean gateway to Morocco, next to Tangier and in a good location for business between Casablanca, Algeria, and Spain. The port will be mainly used for storing petroleum and shipping containers.³³

³² Querine Hanlon and Matthew M. Herbert, “BORDER SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE GRAND MAGHREB,” *Peaceworks* No. 109, 2015, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191018/PW109-Border-Security-Challenges-in-the-Grand-Maghreb.pdf>

³³ “Nador West Med : complexe portuaire intégré - Agence de l’Oriental,” Agence De L’Oriental, January 5, 2021, <https://www.oriental.ma/projet/nador-west-med-complexe-portuaire-integre/>.



Fig. 25. Nador West Med port under construction with shipping routes for container and petroleum product traffic as its vocation. Source from jeuneafrique.com.

Another significant development effort by the Royal Family in response to the growing demand for infrastructural projects, railroads were established to connect the southern parts of the eastern region to northern Morocco. This led to the *construction of the new train station* of Oujda intended to abandon the old station, built by the French during the protectorate around 1928. Relocating the station, creating new platforms, and creating a square in front of the giant passenger building, were some of the major interventions of the new station.



Fig. 26. The new train station of Oujda, 2022. Photo took by Author Younes Chergui.

The new train station project is a major project aimed at repositioning Oujda as an urban metropolis and will contribute to make it a bigger and more attractive city.³⁴ It's part of a bigger plan to help the area grow and develop with an area of 30 hectares and has four parts: a park with residential, a district with a train station, a green area by the water, and a center for shops and services. For all partners, this project is considered to have great potential since it will initiate the process of metropolization by rehabilitating the urban center, enhancing a vast, well-located urban area, and establishment of new public, private, and tertiary facilities that will strengthen the city's attractiveness. It is a program in harmony with national development programs to meet the multiple expectations in this area.



Fig. 27. Oujda as an urban metropolis. Source from Oriental.ma.

Another development influence caused by cross-border countries, is the Mediterranean-Niger Railway which was the only railway line between the east of Morocco and the west of Algeria. The line changed its route and function due to the closed border. The railway line was abandoned and stopped at Bouâarfa, Morocco. The southern part of the Oriental region has many natural and cultural treasures like beautiful scenery, oases, and historical

³⁴ “Urba-Pôle Oujda - Agence de l'Oriental,” Agence De L'Oriental, January 5, 2021, <https://www.oriental.ma/projet/urba-pole-oujda/>.

sites, even though it is not well-known as a tourist destination. To attract more visitors, the Royal Family came up with the idea of using the railway line for tourism.³⁵



Fig. 28. Locals clearing up the Mediterranean-Niger Railway. Source from Oriental.ma.

CONCLUSION

To what extent has the region been resilient to changes in regimes, development of new cities, and boundaries?

What was the French protectorate in Morocco and how did it impact the development of Oujda and its region? The French protectorate (1907-1956) had a significant impact on the city of Oujda. The French established new towns alongside the traditional medinas and shifted the focus from the interior of Morocco to the coast. After the independence period (1956), Morocco developed a reconstruction strategy to rebuild their national identity. The Northeastern region faced underinvestment due to the development efforts that were focused on Morocco's economic centers in Casablanca and Rabat. The strategy was to create "stability points" to balance economic growth. Several investments in infrastructure have been done including the extension of the port in Nador with its vocation.

³⁵ "Développement du projet touristique : « Train du désert » - Agence de l'Oriental," Agence De L'Oriental, April 22, 2022, <https://www.oriental.ma/projet/developpement-du-projet-touristique-train-du-desert/>.

Which role did the port of Nador and cross-border countries play in the development of Oujda and its region? The port of Nador, located near Oujda, has played a critical role in the growth of the city, with its expansion and modernization in the new airport and train station caused by an increase in trade activities. Additionally, the illicit cross-border trade between Oujda and cross-border countries has also contributed to the economic growth of the city and its region.

Overall, Morocco's once-neglected East has already developed into a far more resilient region than before. Many influences including urban extensions under the French protectorate, the unbalanced economic growth, and the growing demand for trade and commerce in and around the country, led to significant changes in regimes, developments of new cities and boundaries.

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