

Prologue

"ARIEL SHARON" IN THE SAHARA

At 12:45 P.M. on May 7, 2004, the temperature reached 115 degrees, breaking the previous day's record by two degrees. The mattress in my hotel room made it impossible to sleep. As I lay down on a wet sheet on the floor, I could still feel the heat radiating from the cement building. A dozen soldiers lined up across the hallway outside their rooms to take a cold shower in the only bathroom of the only hotel in the commune of Akka as they waited for the only bus heading north. The historical oasis of Akka, in the province of Tata in southern Morocco, is not far from the contested region of Western Sahara.

It had been a month since I had arrived in this remote region. I was one of the few customers who had stayed for more than a night in this five-room hotel. Located at the center of the administrative quarter of Akka, the hotel's dilapidated windows overlooked Tamdult, the long-gone center of trans-Saharan-trading caravans.¹ Throughout these hot days of May, sandstorms roared across the windswept eastern part of the neighboring Anti-Atlas Mountains. Specks of dust covered a folded worn-out blanket and a white plastic table in my room. Summer had already begun; the blazing heat and annoying sandstorms kept me from traveling that morning to the village of al-Qasba to interview a descendant of a Muslim judge about legal cases involving Jews and Muslims. I could not risk damaging my recording equipment, which was highly sensitive to dust.

My day usually started with an early breakfast in the hotel. After conducting one interview in the morning, generally in a villager's home, I walked back to my room unless someone forced me to stay for lunch. I tried to avoid lunching with my hosts because I wanted time to think about my interviews. A mid-day nap was a standard activity before leaving for late-afternoon interviews. When I could not sleep, I would join Omar, a Muslim in his mid-forties and the hotel's owner, for a cup of mint tea. That day, as it became difficult to close my eyes because of the heat, the stench, and the noise, I sought Omar's company. As I closed the squeaking door of my room on the second floor, the voice of

Jil-Jilala, a popular musical group from the 1970s, filled the hallway leading to the café downstairs. I sat on the stool by the counter as occasional strong winds drowned out the song. Yet a refrain continued to fill the air, as if the cassette had been stuck on this part of the song. As Omar ordered a ten-year-old busboy to clean a table that was attracting flies, a toothless man in his mid-fifties gulped down his hot mint tea and began humming the song's refrain:

Oh, Arab! Oh, Muslim! Your state of affairs is painful.
Zionists destroy the Mosque and you have given up.
Oh, Arab! Oh, Muslim! When are you going to decide?
Zionists destroy the Mosque, why are you still thinking?²

Like a number of musical groups of the 1970s and early 1980s, Jil-Jilala, along with Nass El-Ghiwane, Lamchaheb, and Essiham, produced songs about the Palestinian issue and the question of Jerusalem (al-Quds). These songs became national hits, reflecting the Moroccans' support for the Palestinians.

Yet, despite its dominating resonance, nobody seemed to pay attention to the song except the toothless man. Two soldiers slowly sipped their tea as they shared a Berber omelet. A group of children played games in the southern corner of the café. Outside the building, a demented man covered in rugs slept in the sun, not bothered by the heat. As one customer picked up a lemonade bottle from the counter, Omar turned around, served me a cup of tea, and interrupted the man's humming in a mocking manner:

"Since I came of age, the only story we have been hearing is the one of Zionists and Muslims! We have blamed everything on the French, Europeans, Christians, Jews, and Americans."

The toothless man abruptly stopped the Muslim and jokingly noted:

"You said that because you are Sharon! You think like Ariel Sharon! You are the only Jew left here in Akka. They left their trade for you!"

Throughout my stay in Akka, I overheard customers comparing Omar and Israel's former prime minister through funny, stereotypical comments about his short physique, hanging stomach, and broad shoulders. Omar had arrived in Akka in the 1980s, when a large Moroccan military regiment was stationed not far from the administrative center of the village to defend the eastern borders of Tata from the attacks of the Polisario's guerrilla. Tamdult, Omar's café

and hotel, was the only place where stranded travelers could stay and eat. At the time, all the Jews had left Akka except the Sarraf family, which continued to play a major role in the economic life of the village. For instance, in the late 1970s, the Sarraf family worked with a Muslim descendant of a former slave from the neighboring village of Tizounine to build a modern oven to supply soldiers with bread.

As Omar grinned at the humorous statements of the man, who happened to be a descendant of the former *qaïd* (tribal chief) of Akka, an adult in his mid-twenties shouted from a corner of the café as he smoked a cigarette:

“You are right, Hassan! Sharon [Omar] is probably the only man in Akka happy with the assassination of Ahmad Yassin, the leader of Hamas.”

With a smirk on his face, Omar turned toward me and noted:

“Look, Aomar! Probably sixty years ago, before all the Jews left Akka for Israel, Hassan’s parents were not only the neighbors of Jews but also their friends and trading partners. Now he blames the economic and political fall of his family on Jews and Israel.”

Before Omar finished his statement, Ali, a regular customer in his late eighties, argued back in a faint but serious nostalgic tone that seemed to counter the laughter of the other customers:

“I wish Jews were still here. This was the largest Jewish settlement in the region. Jews from neighboring villages came here to pick up kosher meat. The day they left Akka, we lost the thriving religious and economic center Akka used to be. These kids never saw what we had; if they did, they would not be laughing.”

I avoided expressions of approval or rejection to the drama staged before my eyes. I chose a neutral position and sat in silence, thinking about this performance of ritual insults and laughter whose main target was Omar. The conversation abruptly ended with the arrival of a creaky bus heading south. Hassan shouted:

“Sharon! Prepare more tea, the bus is stopping!”