The Neglected High Atlas Mountains and the Challenges of Life Post-Earthquake

by **Mohamed Chtatou (/experts/mohamed-chtatou)**

Oct 10, 2023
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/jbal-alatls-alkbyr-almhmsht-wthdyat-alhyat-bd-alzlzal)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mohamed Chtatou (/experts/mohamed-chtatou)
Dr. Mohamed Chtatou is a political analyst and professor of education science at the University of Rabat. Chtatou is a contributor to Fikra Forum.

Brief Analysis

As Morocco rebuilds the High Atlas Mountains, understanding the region's complex history and challenges is key for building a future for the region.

On the night of Friday September 8 at 11:11 pm, a terrible earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale struck the El Haouz province and was felt throughout Morocco and neighboring countries. According to historians, Morocco has not experienced such a disaster since the Agadir earthquake of 1960. While major urban centers like Marrakech were affected, it is the remote communities of the High Atlas that have faced the worst of the devastation.

Much of Morocco's central and southern regions were impacted, including Marrakech-Safi, Draa-Tafilet, Sous-Massa, and Beni Mellal-Khenifra. But El-Houaz (location of the epicenter) and the surrounding areas of Chichaoua, Taroudant, Ouarzazate and Azilal witnessed complete destruction. These provinces are predominantly rural and historically Amazigh (Berber), and where Amazigh languages such as Tamazight in the Middle Atlas and Tashelhit in the Sous are spoken.

Data from the European Observatory Copernicus show the extent of damage in eight of the country's communes. As of September 12, the Copernicus Emergency Management Service (CEMS) counted 1,416 damaged homes in the eight regions studied. Talat N'Yaaqoub and Amizmiz had the highest number of homes completely destroyed, with 208 and 121 respectively. According to the latest official toll, the El-Haouz earthquake killed 2,946 people and injured 5,674.

However, this region has faced significant challenges—both due to the isolated geography and lack of centralized services—that complicated life prior to the earthquake. Now that attention has been refocused on this area due to such a significant tragedy, there is a chance to build new opportunities for residents who have proved their

resilience time and again, and a chance to reconsider how these custodians of a key part of Morocco's heritage can be supported.

The High Atlas: Morocco's Forgotten Periphery

Morocco is a geographically diverse country, with a wide array of coasts, plains, plateaus, mountains, and deserts. The High Atlas region is one of the three Moroccan Atlas ranges, oriented southwest-northeast, and the mountain chain forms an immense geographical barrier–750 km long–between Oceanic and Mediterranean Morocco to the northwest and Saharan Morocco to the southeast.

The range itself is made up of three parts: the Western High Atlas is the oldest and highest massif, including Jebel Toubkal—Morocco's highest peak. These mountains are famous for their high plateaus, deep canyons, and stunning peaks. Yet while the rugged beauty of the region is undeniable, life is harsh for the people who call these mountains their home. The treacherous terrain and severe climate conditions are facts of life, shaping the customs and societal structures of the rural Amazigh communities that reside there.

These communities have been historically much poorer and less developed compared to Morocco 's urban centers. Incomes are low, productivity is lacking, illiteracy rates are high, and many fail to complete secondary school. This stark contrast between the country's urban and rural environments dates back centuries, when the French administration, during the protectorate era (1912-1956), divided the country in two: "useful" Morocco, urban and economically prosperous, and "useless" Morocco, an area neglected by the French colonists. Mostly rural, this "useless" area stretches diagonally from the town of Oujda in the northeast to Agadir on the Atlantic coast in the southwest.

This legacy of utter neglect, disdain, and marginalization of the Amazigh hinterland stems from the French colonial policy, which concentrated its efforts on the more economically productive coast. But in the decades since independence from French colonial rule, the rural-urban divide remains significant and income levels in the periphery have not caught up. In the province of El-Haouz, in particular, residents face low incomes along with limited access to education and healthcare. Housing is still traditionally designed, and therefore not always as solid as the more modern urban structures. Although tourist activities, especially ecotourism, have developed in recent years, these areas are far from being economic centers comparable to the famous "ochre city of Marrakesh."

In the Moroccan Atlas, the institutional architecture is highly complex , with legal matters being governed by a mixture of official rules and unofficial customs. The Amazigh populations simultaneously operate under the "modern" institutions of the state while continuing to live in a relatively autonomous community system. The juxtaposition of several systems of legal norms, including both positive law and customary law, along with a certain confusion over the responsibilities of local institutions, characterize most of the Moroccan mountains.

The High Atlas is especially known as a society that is still tribal in nature and philosophy. For example, access to and use of common resources are based on socio-spatial or ethno-territorial structures inherited from the tribal past. These enduring structures remain central to the construction of individual and group identities, and the Moroccan state has not actively discouraged these existing societal structures in lieu of a system more connected to the central government.

Within the central government itself, conflicting logics and interests prevent a cohesive policy towards these traditional tribal structures: (i) a security logic inherited from the past, which aims to maintain traditional community organization and exercise close control over it (via the Ministry of the Interior); (ii) a centralized, technocratic interventionist logic interested in disrupting these structures (via the Water and Forestry Administration); and (iii) finally, a liberal logic (via a liberal wing made up of Amazigh ministers) that seeks to disengage the State and promote civil society and local authorities in its stead.

In the difficult circumstances of mountain life, the Amazigh people have developed a local form of democracy based on the yearly election of the local council called *aith rab'în* that deals with arbitration of local conflicts, land disputes, water rights, and local public management. These local institutions function in parallel with the government institutions and often carry greater legitimacy within the community; official authorities call upon the councils to mediate disputes and manage difficult situations.

Another useful local Amazigh institution in the High Atlas Mountains is *Twiza*, essentially a collective solidarity common among the Amazigh people that has traditionally shaped local governance. This unofficial institution has been extremely useful in immediate search and rescue operations and first medical aid to the injured in the aftermath of the September 8 earthquake prior to government help.

Economic Potential and Challenges

While the Oceanic and Mediterranean regions are considered the economic, social, and cultural heartland of the kingdom, it is the High Atlas that provides Morocco's natural resources. The mountain range is the source of 70 percent of the country's water, 62 percent of its forests, and 80 percent of its endemic species.

Yet the region plays a very limited role in the country 's economic development, accounting for no more than 5 percent of GDP and 10 percent of national consumption. The region also lacks a formal, industrialized economy—young men will often migrate to Morocco's cities for work, sustaining their families with the wages they send back. Tourism is the local economy's other key sector, with local communities providing accommodations, food, and transport to domestic and international tourists attracted by the area's nascent eco-tourism industry.

The case of Anergui, one of the poorest areas in all of Morocco, is instructive. The inhabitants of the villages that make up the Commune of Anergui, in the High Atlas province of Azilal, as in many other villages in this mountainous region, have consequently been deprived of the basic infrastructure necessary to improve their harsh living conditions. In Anergui, there are no roads (only tracks and paths), electricity, or potable water networks. The building that serves as a medical dispensary that is not adequately stocked, and the nearest secondary school is 56 km away without boarding facilities–an impossible educational situation for the areas children, especially for girls. More than 60 years after Moroccan independence, generations of young mountain dwellers have faced discrimination in terms of vital infrastructure. In these territories, people can die from lack of medical care, the harsh cold, or raging floods.

Threats to Traditional Ways of Life

Despite the resilience of village customs throughout the years, new economic prospects—while positive in some respects—are threatening to erase many traditional professions. Pastoralism faces competition from other, more prestigious and lucrative jobs. It is being undermined by the spread of so-called modern lifestyles, brought about by the development of tourism, public action relayed by *douar* (Amazigh hamlet) development associations, integration of villages into the electrical grid and water supply, and construction of tracks and roads. The population of the High Atlas is developing new, entirely legitimate aspirations and is eager to benefit from these human development projects.

However, a sizable population still depends on transhumant herding, either by choice or for lack of alternatives. Although adhering to a traditional way of life, the population is dealing with the consequences of modernity. Climate change and new market constraints—products of urban, industrialized areas—have forced remote communities to adapt. At present, this population is still the custodian of an important part of the country's heritage. But should this class of herders cease to exist, much of the local culture could fade as well, as has occurred in other countries.

For instance, pastoralism in the High Atlas remains fundamentally marked by the mobility of herds and people on the one hand and by the supervision of vast territories for collective use on the other. Every spring, nomads from the

Saghro region of south-eastern Morocco leave their pastures with their herds of goats, sheep and camels, along with their entire families. The caravan sets off across the Dades plain and up the southern slopes of the Atlas Mountains at over 3,000m in altitude. They reach Lake Izourar and its high plateaus. Some of them settle there; the others continue up the northern slopes of the Atlas. The return journey takes place in September and follows the same route.

Recent changes in land tenure status are undermining the foundations of this tried and true collective system and instead promoting individual farming wherever possible. In some isolated regions, such as the Moroccan High Atlas, traditional institutions are thus gradually disappearing. Like many of the aforementioned societal institutions, nomadic herding in the High Atlas is governed by a blend of official regulations and less formal customary institutions. The formal regulations–although inspired by local practices–are codified in a charter and serve as the legal framework for authorities. In comparison, traditional institutions are typically unspoken or based on longstanding agreements among herders, and therefore less familiar to state authorities. These institutions are simple (e.g. the Agdal system of allowing seasonal land rest from grazing) but fragile, since they are based on a system that is not very egalitarian.

Residents work in traditional agriculture, local meager economic activities, or commute to an urban center to earn their daily bread. In the recent past they would migrate to Europe, mainly France and Belgium, to work in factories or mines. However, this avenue was closed by European authorities in 1990, leaving the local youth with little or no education to face an uncertain future and struggle to feed their families. The dire economic prospects and systematic neglect has unfortunately pushed some in the arms of violent Islamists.

The 2011 Constitution enshrined a sweeping array of new rights to Morocco's citizens. This constitutional reform also laid the foundations for advanced regionalization as the spearhead of territorial development. In view of social and spatial inequalities, particularly between urban and rural areas particularly in mountain areas, the public authorities, local leaders, and other relevant players will need to focus greater efforts on guaranteeing access to all to the new-generation fundamental rights stipulated in article 31 of the Kingdom's Constitution. According to this article, new elected Regional institutions are allotted funds by the government to develop rural areas by building roads, medical facilities, schools and investing in the creation of local business to provide jobs to the people of the village.

Adapting to a Post-Earthquake Environment

The recent earthquake has devastated the people of the High Atlas. It has killed loved ones, destroyed homes, impacted livelihoods, and interrupted lives already dealing with complex challenges. Recovery will be a long and arduous process, and the lives lost cannot be replaced. Yet life in the High Atlas has instilled a ruggedness in the affected communities, and they face the current situation with an amazing amount of resilience. While much of the physical aspects of these rural communities have been razed to the ground, the elements of their cultural heritage remain intact, and this will be instrumental in rebuilding for a better future.

A cultural trinity has stood the test of time, persisting through centuries of trials and tribulations. Their Tamazight language *awal* is alive and well, their sacred land *tamurt* –though rocked by the earthquake– remains, and their close-knit Amazigh community *tamunt* provides support and solidarity during these times of unimaginable grief. This resilience will be in full display as these communities rebuild, and now is an opportunity to support these communities both in facing the aftermath of the earthquake and in some of the systemic challenges they face.

These deep rooted institutions and ideals have not only proven instrumental in the recovery process, but they are essential aspects of Amazigh society that must be preserved. At the same time, High Atlas communities affected by the earthquake must be supported, and there must be investments in the region's development. Generations of

neglect and lacking infrastructure left these areas vulnerable to such a catastrophe and impeded aid efforts. Only through measured, meaningful, and comprehensive investment can this region build a better future for the region while respecting the traditions that help define life in the High Atlas. ❖

RECOMMENDED

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Beyond Gaza, the Confrontation with Iran

Oct 26, 2023

◆

Ehud Yaari

(/policy-analysis/beyond-gaza-confrontation-iran)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

A Second Palestinian Front:

Relative Quiet, Restlessness, and Waiting

Oct 26, 2023

◆

Neomi Neumann

(/policy-analysis/second-palestinian-front-relative-quiet-restlessness-and-waiting)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Combating Hamas's Networks of Illicit Finance and Terrorism

Oct 26, 2023

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/combating-hamass-networks-illicit-finance-and-terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)