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Printing as an Agent of Change in Morocco, 1864–1912

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Introduction

When we study the history of printing in Europe, we find conflicting views regarding the impact of the printing press. From the viewpoint of certain Renaissance scholars, the advent of printing came too late to be taken as the singular point of departure for the historical transition to modernity.¹ For historians of printing like Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, and Elizabeth Eisenstein, however, Gutenberg’s invention was an indispensable element in transforming European civilisation, as Europe lost its medieval aspect and assumed modern political, religious and social forms.² Although there are disagreements over quite how much agency should be attributed to the invention of printing, there is nonetheless a broad scholarly consensus that there was some fundamental connection between the rise of printing and European modernity.

In Morocco, the advent of printing in 1864 also appears to have marked the beginning of a new era, as the country gradually lost many of its medieval and Islamic characteristics. However, the connections between printing and this transition to modernity in Morocco are more difficult to establish than in the case of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. While the introduction of printing in Morocco undoubtedly led to more books and to the standardisation of type, low levels of literacy meant that the numbers of readers barely increased, and religious books such as the Bible and the Qur’an continued to be memorised, which limited the demand for printing machines. Furthermore, Moroccan society from the 1860s had no equivalent to the Renaissance or Industrial Revolution; rather, there were small and limited efforts at political reform, which were all driven by the reaction of Moroccans
to the mounting threats of European forces encroaching on Moroccan land. In other words, the major social, economic or political changes in Morocco between 1864 and 1912 were much more closely linked to Europe’s direct and indirect interference in Morocco’s internal affairs, rather than to printing technology. The influence of printing on social change in Morocco was further limited because the management and control of printing in this period remained in the hands of the traditional forces, the government officials, the ‘Ulama (Islamic scholars trained in Islamic law) and the notables.

This chapter charts the introduction of the printing press to Morocco in 1864, and then turns to the Moroccan government’s involvement in printing in 1865, to see what types of changes print technology brought to the country. Between 1865 and 1912, Moroccan involvement in printing on a government level went through four distinct phases. During the first phase, which lasted from 1865 to 1871, the government acted as the sole manager of printing. In its second and third phases, from 1871 to 1908, printing came under the management of the private sector, but the government continued to utilise printing on an occasional basis to serve the religious and political purposes of the Sultans, namely Hasan I and Abd al-Aziz. Indeed, the government became aware of printing as a formidable political tool and it moved to regulate printing and impose censorship. This set the stage for the final phase, starting in 1908–9 with Sultan Abd al-Hafiz, who reinstated total government control over printing. This discussion is limited to the period between 1864 and 1912 because at the end of this period Morocco came under French protection and management, and the direction of the country turned towards an abandonment of the Islamic educational system and the application of Islamic law.

**Introduction of the printing press in Morocco, 1864**

In 1864, Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Rudani brought into Morocco not only the country’s first printing machine, but also an Egyptian printer to operate it. Biographers of al-Rudani inform us that he came from the capital of the Southern Sous region, Rudanit, which is near the coastal port of al-Suwayrah. He seems to have come from a line of learned scholars, for his father and grandfather were ‘Ulama, who held the position of Qudat (that is, judges) in the region. Upon completion of his education, al-Rudani taught Arabic and Islamic sciences and followed his father by becoming a judge. Al-Rudani was evidently also a religious scholar and teacher with a noted philanthropic attitude.