



U.S. History and Global Studies: Classroom topics and resources related to the [American Legation in Tangier](#), Morocco

1) The start of U.S.-Moroccan relations, pre-Legation

Related topics: U.S. diplomatic history, history of U.S. relations in the Middle East and North Africa; U.S. trade and shipping concerns in the late 18th century.

Morocco was one of the first countries in the world — possibly the very first — to recognize the United States. Morocco took this step following America’s declared independence, and even before the end of the American Revolution.

According to the [U.S. Embassy website](#) in Morocco:

“The Sultan [Mohammed ben Abdallah, or Mohammed III] issued a declaration on December 20, 1777, announcing that all vessels sailing under the American flag could freely enter Moroccan ports. The Sultan stated that orders had been given to his corsairs to let the ship “des Americains” and those of other European states with which Morocco had no treaties - Russia, Malta, Sardinia, Prussia, Naples, Hungary, Leghorn, Genoa, and Germany - pass freely into Moroccan ports. There they could “take refreshments” and provisions and enjoy the same privileges as other nations that had treaties with Morocco.

This action, under the diplomatic practice of Morocco at the end of the 18th century, put the United States on an equal footing with all other nations with which the Sultan had treaties. By issuing this declaration, Morocco became one of the first states to acknowledge publicly the independence of the American Republic.”

Questions for students to explore:

[Elementary School level \(ES\):](#)

What is an Embassy? Why would a country want to have embassies in other countries? What is an Ambassador?

Where is Morocco on the map? How close is it to Europe? How close to the United States? Can you find the Straits of Gibraltar? In the late 1700s, why would the United States have been interested in friendship with a country that controlled these Straits?

Middle School level (MS)

What is the difference between an Embassy, a Consulate, and a Legation?
(Hint: Legations don't really exist anymore, they were more a historical entity.)

In the past, rulers of Morocco were sometimes called Sultans and sometimes called Emperors. What are the definitions of these terms? What is the head of the Moroccan government called now?

The Straits of Gibraltar have been described as an important strategic location, and therefore important to many countries — not just those located near to the Straits. Why would these Straits be strategically important? What are some other spots around the world that are considered strategically important?

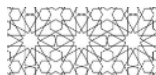
Morocco lies between Europe and West Africa. In the 1700s and early 1800s, pirates from Morocco, Algeria, and Libya operated from various North African ports to raid commercial ships. Why would this have been a problem for the U.S. at that time? What kinds of commercial trade existed between the U.S., Europe, and Africa?

High School level (HS)

Ships and boats have long been one of the major means by which goods were transported around the world. Before the invention of the railroad, ocean and river shipping was even more important. Why would Morocco, especially the northern zone around Tangier, have been important to global shipping? Why would the rulers of Morocco have wanted to promote shipping in and out of its own ports?

What was the view of Morocco's rulers on the pirates that operated from their territory in the 1700s and 1800s?

What is Morocco's role today in global shipping? Name two major ports in Morocco, and describe what happens to the goods that are shipped there.



2) The first U.S.-Moroccan treaty, signed in 1787

Related topics: U.S. diplomatic history, U.S. relations in North Africa, U.S. role in relation to European colonial expansion, impact of “Barbary Pirates” conflict on trade and shipping

Morocco’s Sultan Mohammed Bin Abdallah reached out to the new United States several times between 1777 and 1786, with the intention of establishing agreements on trade and shipping. Growing impatient, he seized a U.S. ship to gain the attention of the United States (while treating its crew very well, and communicating carefully about his intentions). He got the attention he wanted: the U.S. sent its representative to negotiate a treaty, which was signed in 1786 and ratified by Congress in 1787. These events took place against a wider background of threats to foreign shipping from the “Barbary pirates,” efforts by European powers to gain a foothold, if not control, in North Africa, and allegations by Morocco that the Europeans were exaggerating the pirate threat for their own purposes.

Details from the Mount Vernon Historian:

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/morocco/>

More on the letters between President George Washington and Emperor (or Sultan) Mohammed ben Abdallah:

<https://legation.org/letter-from-gw-to-sultan-mohammed-1789/>

Questions for students to explore:

ES:

What is a Treaty? In United States law, who signs treaties between the U.S. and other countries, and who ratifies (or confirms) them?

What are some reasons that countries might want to sign treaties with each other?

MS and HS:

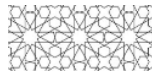
Based on the questions and ideas in the last section, why might the U.S. have wanted to sign a treaty of friendship with Morocco right after we gained our independence?

What do you know about the role and importance of ships in global commercial trade in the 18th and 19th centuries? Why would the United States have been very focused on protecting its shipping to and from Europe? To and from West and Central Africa?

Why did it take George Washington so long to respond to the Sultan of Morocco's first letter asking for a treaty? What did the Sultan do to get George Washington's attention? Are you surprised at the American reaction when the Moroccans took that step?

What do you know about the "Barbary pirates"? Where did they operate, and who did they attack? What were the European countries (e.g. France, Britain) doing about the problem, and did the United States want to join them?

In the U.S. Marines' Hymn, there is a line "from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" — how does "the shores of Tripoli" relate to the Barbary pirates?



3) Overview of Legation history

Related topics: *U.S. diplomatic history, U.S. relations with North Africa, the Civil War, World War II*

Sultan Suleiman bin Mohammed, the son of Mohammed ben Abdallah, continued to encourage trade with the U.S. into the early decades of the 19th century.

In 1821, he gave the U.S. Government a building in the old city of Tangier, in northern Morocco, to use as a diplomatic and commercial outpost — in other words, a Legation.

This excellent article by Graham Cornwell in the Smithsonian Magazine summarizes the Legation's 200-year role in U.S. history: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/two-hundred-years-tangier-legislation-180977742/>

The Legation still exists, and is the [only property](#) on the U.S. national register of historic places that is located outside the United States.

The American Legation in Tangier launched its [bicentennial celebrations in 2021](#), commemorating the Sultan's gift to the United States to promote trade, commerce, and diplomatic engagement.

Questions for students to explore:

ES & MS:

Why is it important to preserve (some) old buildings? What are some of the ways that preserved historic buildings continue to be used?

What is the U.S. national register of historic places? What are some of the sites in your town or city or state that are in this national register?

Can you find pictures online of the American Legation building in Tangier, Morocco? Which pictures interest you the most?

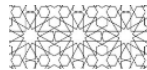
Before the invention of the telephone, much less the Internet, how would American diplomats overseas have communicated with their bosses in Washington DC?

When would the first telegram communication have been possible between Morocco and the United States?

HS:

Reading Graham Cornwell's article about 200 years of Legation history, what do you think are the most interesting pieces of information? What surprises you? Have you ever thought about a career in diplomacy or international relations? Why or why not?

What do you think it would have been like to live and work in the American Legation in Tangier, back in the 1800s? What were the pros and cons compared to Washington DC at that time?



4) Early years of the Legation: Problems caused by unusual gifts!

Related topics: U.S.-Moroccan relations, U.S. diplomatic history, cross-cultural challenges; U.S. government rules against gifts and “emoluments”

*The story of these unusual gifts (**live lions!**) is a good way to introduce younger students to the concept of diplomacy, and the different ways countries have related to each other in different times and places.*

Sultan Suleiman bin Mohammed's nephew, Abd-el-Rahman ben Hisham, became the new Sultan in 1822. Seeking to advance his country's relations with the United States, he initiated a series of dramatic gifts to the President and Congress. Two different U.S. Consuls struggled to cope with his gifts of lions.

More details, including some primary sources, can be found here:

<https://legation.org/the-return-of-the-legation-lions/>

Questions for students to explore:

ES and MS:

Why do heads of countries give each other gifts? Does this still happen? (Here's a relevant article about remarkable gifts given to presidents that mentions the Legation lions, in passing:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/07/13/an-edible-token-esteem-pound-cheese-given-thomas-jefferson/>)

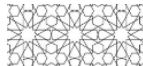
Based on the "Return of the Legation Lions" article as well as the Washington Post articles linked here, what eventually happened to the lions that were given to the U.S. at the Legation? Why did it take a long time to resolve the question of what to do with the lions?

HS:

Here is a long article from the Washington Post that talks about Presidential "emoluments" and the gifts that rulers of one country give to another that can cause ethical and legal problems. It also talks about the Legation lions, of course!

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/07/22/move-over-trump-this-presidents-two-lions-were-the-center-of-the-greatest-emoluments-debate/>

What do you think about current U.S. laws governing such gifts? Should they be stricter? More lenient? What have our courts said on this topic over the years?



5) The Legation in the Civil War

Related topics: U.S.-European relations during the Civil War; Moroccan support for the Union side

Here is Graham Cornwell's terrific article in Smithsonian Magazine on this little-known but fascinating incident:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/diplomatic-intrigue-gave-morocco-cameo-appearance-us-civil-war-180974015/>

Questions for students to explore:

MS

The European countries did not all support the Union in the American Civil War, especially not at the beginning. What can you find out about the reaction of France and Britain, specifically, to the conflict, and what actions they took? What problems did these countries cause for President Lincoln?

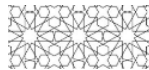
HS

Based on Graham Cornwell's article in the Smithsonian about an event that took place in the Civil War:

Did the U.S. Consul in Tangier have the legal right to capture and detain the Confederate ship officers? What upset the European diplomats most about his actions — was it the violation of diplomatic norms, or their desire to maintain ties to both North and South in the U.S. civil war?

Why might Morocco have wanted to support the Consul's action? Why would Morocco have wanted to placate the Europeans at the same time?

(Answers to these questions are not entirely knowable, but interesting to think about, in the context of the article.)



6) President Theodore Roosevelt and the Legation

Related topics: Teddy Roosevelt's "big stick" policy. Also, the influence of dramatic global events — whether real, manufactured, or somewhere in between — on U.S. domestic politics.

<https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-perdicaris-affair> — “The 1904 kidnapping of businessman Ion Perdicaris [in Tangier, Morocco] demonstrated President Theodore Roosevelt's display and use of force. This [Library of Congress] guide provides access to materials related to the ‘Perdicaris Affair’ in the Chronicling America digital collection of historic newspapers.” *Excellent for primary source projects!*

The Legation's role: U.S. Consul Samuel F. Gummeré, then head of the American Consulate in Tangier, played a key role in negotiating the release of Perdicaris.

Note: Sean Connery and Candace Bergen starred in a [movie](#) loosely based on these events. Unlike in the film version, U.S. Marines did not actually invade Tangier, and Ion Perdicaris was not a beautiful blonde woman. Still, the film effectively portrays the U.S. media circus around this crisis during Teddy Roosevelt's 1904 re-election campaign.

More about the Perdicaris Affair from the Legation's collection: <https://legation.org/dear-mrs-perdicaris/>

Questions for students to explore:

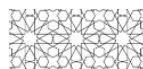
ES & MS:

The blog article “Dear Mrs. Perdicaris” includes primary sources — letters from around the world sent by people who had read about the Perdicaris kidnapping in the newspaper. What international news stories have grabbed the attention of ordinary people lately, here in the U.S.?

HS:

Raisuli, the so-called “bandit” in the Perdicaris Affair, was a feudal chieftain in Morocco's northern Rif area who some considered a fighter against a corrupt central government. This article describes the history of Rif rebellions, up to today: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/28/opinion/morocco-protest-monarchy.html> After reading this article, do you see the Perdicaris Affair differently? If so, how?

“Wag the Dog” is a movie about a fictional U.S. Administration ginning up a foreign policy crisis in order to win an election. Are there real-life examples where American politicians have been accused of exploiting (if not creating) foreign policy crises to boost their image?



7) World War II: Operation Torch, the Allied Invasion of North Africa

Related topics: The role of North Africa in World War II; the Office of Strategic Services, precursor to the CIA

Operation Torch, the allied invasion of Vichy French North Africa in 1942, enabled the Allies to control North Africa. It played a key role in preparing the way for the Normandy invasion more than a year later. Here is an overview: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Torch

The U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was the intelligence service of the United States during the later part of World War II. It was set up in June 1942, working closely with the British.

One of its first roles was to plan and pave the way for Operation Torch, working under the greatest secrecy. And an OSS team operated out of a tiny, hidden room at the American Legation in Tangier!

Apparently the U.S. Consul General at the time — who lived and worked in the Legation building — did not even know that the OSS office was there.

Here is one dramatic story of the OSS's Tangier-based role:

<https://legation.org/oss-diplomatic-courier-gordon-brownes-fateful-pouch-run/>

In November 2022, the American Legation set up a museum display in the old OSS space, recreating how it would have looked in 1942. You can see some photos of the exhibit here: <https://legation.org/exhibit-on-operation-torch/>

Questions for Students to Explore:

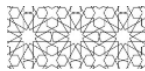
ES and/or MS:

Why did the OSS have to operate from a secret hidden office in the Legation? What might have happened if news of their work had leaked out?

HS:

What do you know about the history of intelligence and espionage services of the United States, in wartime and peacetime?

Why would Operation Torch have “paved the way” in a vitally important way for the later Normandy Invasion of Europe?



8) More about the Legation during World War II: A Role in Helping Jews Escape Hitler?

Related topic: The Holocaust and Jewish refugees from Europe

The U.S. Consul General in Tangier during the World War II era, J. Rives Childs, was a complex person with some great intellectual skills and some notable flaws. This fascinating profile of Childs describes, among many other things, his role in assisting Jewish refugees to escape Hitler through Tangier: <https://legation.org/j-rives-childs/>

Those who have seen the movie *Casablanca* will know that Morocco, in World War II, was a kind of chaotic transitional place where Jewish refugees from Hitler could find some level of safety, but not yet be sure of getting completely away — and where all sides were spying on each other. Quite a few people think the film *Casablanca* is really a more accurate portrayal of Tangier before and during the war.

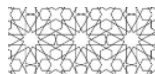
A lively article on this subject is “When Tangier was Casablanca: Rick’s Café and Dean’s Bar” <https://legation.org/when-tangier-was-casablanca-ricks-cafe-deans-bar/>

Questions for Students to Explore:

MS and HS:

After reading the biography of J. Rives Childs, what is your opinion of him? What were his successes, and what were his failures? Do you think he was a good Ambassador for the United States?

Do you think you would have liked to work for him?



9) The Tangier International Zone, and the unusual powers it gave to the U.S. Consulate

Related topic: International zones

The International Zone around Tangier existed from 1924 until its reintegration into independent Morocco in 1956. The International Zone was governed jointly by several European countries, except for a period during which Spain was in charge.

Diplomatic entities in the International Zone, including the U.S. Consulate (housed in the Legation building), held unusual powers, including judicial powers.

The Consulate had the power to conduct trials — such as in the famous case of “Nylon Sid”: <https://legation.org/american-pirate-case-of-nylon-sid/>

It also had the power to conduct marriages (<https://legation.org/the-legations-last-wedding/>).

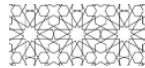
Normally an Embassy or Consulate cannot do either one!

Questions for students to explore:

HS

For over 30 years, European powers controlled the northern International Zone of Morocco. For more than 70 years, the U.S. controlled the Panama Canal Zone. The French and British jointly administered the Suez Canal for almost a century.

What were the factors leading up to the creation of each zone? Who benefited from the zone, and how did foreign control hurt or help the “host” country? How did the zones differ from each other? What happened to end the foreign control of each of these zones?



10) U.S. views on Moroccan Independence

Related topics: New countries emerging in the 1950s; end of European colonialism

Morocco had been a French “protectorate” since the 1800s (except for the International Zone from 1924 to 1956). In other words, it was under French control, but there was also technically a Moroccan government.

After World War II, Morocco’s ruler Sultan Mohammed V led a growing independence movement, which eventually caused the French to exile him in 1953. He returned when Morocco gained its independence in 1956, and became King Mohammed V.

The United States pursued a policy of encouraging Moroccan independence while not opposing French colonialism too strongly. This blog article provides much more detail: <https://legation.org/the-sultans-declaration-of-independence/>, including how U.S. diplomats may have given assistance to the Sultan’s famous pro-independence speech in Tangier in 1947.

Questions for Students to Explore:

ES and MS:

What does “colonization” mean? Which countries did France conquer and colonize in the 1700s and 1800s? Did Morocco fight a war to gain its independence?

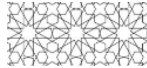
What about Britain — was it also a colonial power? What were some of its colonies?

Was the United States a colonial power? If so, where?

HS:

Based on your reading of the linked article above (The Sultan’s Declaration of Independence), how strongly do you think the United States was encouraging Morocco’s independence? What steps did it take, and how public were they?

What are some other examples of the U.S. supporting the independence of countries that were formerly colonized? (Hint: JFK speech in 1962 in the Senate; U.S. position on the Suez Canal crisis). What other examples can you find?)



11) The Beat Generation: American Artists and Musicians come to Tangier

Related topics: The Beat Generation writers; 1950s America as a place from which “avant grade” artists and writers, wanted to escape

Several famous “Beat Generation” writers including William Burroughs, Allan Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, as well as playwright Tennessee Williams, gravitated to Tangier in the late 1950s and early 1960s because of its growing reputation as a cultural crossroads with relaxed social restrictions. To an extent, these visiting writers and musicians were drawn to a vision of Tangier that had been shaped by writer and musicologist Paul Bowles and his wife, the writer Jane Auer Bowles, who moved there in 1947.

TALIM has created a special Paul Bowles Wing in the Legation Museum, devoted not only to Bowles’ writing but also to his remarkable effort to record Moroccan traditional music from the far corners of the country, music that he felt was disappearing rapidly.

Here are two links with more information about Bowles, music preservation, the beat writers, and more:

<https://legation.org/paul-bowles-saving-moroccos-music/#more-53>

<https://legation.org/bowles-kerouac-and-the-legation/>

Questions for Students to Explore:

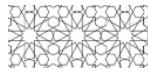
HS: Tangier's reputation as a bohemian place with relaxed social restrictions began to grow during the International Zone era — not while Morocco was a sovereign state with power over Tangier. Today, Morocco remains a socially conservative country in many ways, but its economy also depends substantially on tourism.

What do you think are some of the issues facing a country / society when it has an outside reputation that doesn't always fit its internal reality? What are the ethical obligations of visitors or outside observers?

Here are two articles that are interesting to read from this perspective:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/20/world-cup-qatar-qataris-welcome-visitors-but-enraged-by-western-coverage>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/16/t-magazine/ethical-travel-reporting.html>



12) Marine Guards at the Legation — another first

Last but not least, the American Legation building in Tangier was the first U.S. diplomatic building to receive a Marine Security Guard detachment — now standard at all U.S. Embassies and many of our Consulates around the world.

Here is a fun and fascinating article on the history of Marines at the Legation: <https://legation.org/dress-blues-on-america-street/>