

# Portrait: Reflections on Omar Himmi of Toubkal, Morocco, by Yossef Ben-Meir



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From Shield & Alert: [Reports of growing conflict between Prime Minister and Islamist party](#) Tu

[1171 issue: week ending 16 July 2020](#)

By Yossef Ben-Meir\* : Recently, I had a moment of self-reflection brought about by the passing of someone who made a difference in the trajectory of my life. Years ago, I lived in the home of Omar Himmi Ait Ommar in the village of Amsouzerte in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Sharing stories about



those two years (1993-1995) living in Omar's home and what followed, those stories of life, may be meaningful to others.

In the early 1990s, getting to this very distant village, caught between the provinces of Ouarzazate, Taroudant, and Al Haouz, was difficult. Of the five valleys surrounding Toubkal mountain, the tallest peak in North Africa, only one is on its south side: the Tifnoute. What is special about that fact is that about half of the Toubkal National Park is the summer pasturelands for the Tifnoute people's herds. Yet, until that time there had not been adequate communication between the park management and the Tifnoute community of 44 villages (about 12,000 people) because it is so remote that it takes 24 hours to get there due to having to circle around the Atlas Mountains in order to arrive, with the last 70 kilometers of which being unpaved paths. When, as Peace Corps Volunteers, we were assigned to the Toubkal park, we could choose to live anywhere among its valleys of villages, so when I heard that no one had gone to the Tifnoute, I said, "OK, I'll do it, I'll go." I traveled in segments, and it took me three days to get there that winter in 1993.

When people arrive in the Tifnoute, they would always be sent to Omar Himmi. No one knew I was coming, and there I was planning to stay for two years. I remember that the first meal I ate was an omelet, after which I immediately felt tired and sick from the long, cold journey. I was ill for two weeks, unable to leave my room and having terrifying hallucinations, which I had never had in my life. I decided early to watch the menacing



shapes in my mind like a spectator would a movie, and I even ended up missing them once they were gone. At night, I would feel Omar Himmi's hand on my head because he was genuinely worried. He would make sure I had hot soup and also tangerines for Vitamin C, which thankfully were in season in Morocco.



Omar Himmi Ait Omrar of Toubkal in 2017, holding a picture of himself with the author celebrating Eid al-Adha together in 1994 (photo by Hassan Ait Ouatouch).

After a few days, the local sheikh came to visit me, and I mustered enough energy to sit up, show my passport, and ask whether the people would be happy if an American lived among them for two years, to which he replied, "Yes." That was all. But it became more complicated because the Caid did not feel the same way. At that time, community

empowerment and participatory development were words that no one had heard of, and these ideas of organized change were not particularly trusted – and to think their implementation is now mandated in Morocco. That the Caid did not want an unexpected sojourner to live in the Tifnoute, yet that someone was sick and confined to bed (or rather the covered floor), presented a dilemma for Omar.

As I was still weak, Omar convinced me to go to a hospital, which was in Taroudant. I was not getting better, and I was not



really walking, nor did I have energy. I reluctantly agreed. But, when I arrived at the transit, I saw that all of my luggage was packed in the back of it. I knew that if I got in, it would be hard for me to come back. So, I refused. I turned around and went back to Omar's home. When I passed him on my way to my room, his face was like a stone because he knew that his way out of the conflicting situation had not been successful. But he accepted me.

That was our beginning. Very soon after that, we worked out an arrangement where I lived there and had breakfast and dinner with him. In this way, he had the biggest influence on my personal life during those years because he agreed to do that even though, at times, he was made to feel he ought not to.

Another story I recall, somewhat indicative of the times we lived in almost thirty years ago, occurred one night at dinner. It was always just me and him, in his 70s at the time, a grandfather who later became a great-grandfather and lived to the age of 103. One night, Omar and I were talking about the Tifnoute people, and we ended up talking about the sheikh, Haj Lehcen Ait Ouahman, a complicated and quite a thoughtful man, I would later learn. I asked Omar if he was friends with the sheikh, and he said to me, "Before he became sheikh, we were great friends!" And he laughed, which made me laugh. We laughed so hard that we cried.

The next day, I went down to the village store, the owner of which was a close friend of Omar, who was also there when I



entered. I walked in on Omar relating the story of the previous night's happy tears. When he got to the point where he had to refer to me, he did not want to call me "aghmoy"—the Tashelheit word for a foreigner or outsider—because it might have been considered a bit insensitive. Instead, he asked me my name. So, I had been living in his home for some months at that point, having breakfast and dinner with him every day, sitting together from about 4:00 in the afternoon when the sun went down behind the mountain, and talking, and he did not know my name! You can think about that in multiple ways, but can you imagine? We would talk about personal experiences: Omar told about when the Jewish people lived there, when his brother was sheikh and had a Jewish advisor. Every day, we would be talking and sharing, and there is a warmth to the fact that this went on without him knowing my name. There was a trust there to receive me in this way without asking to see my passport, without any formal contract, without concern for whether I would pay him on time or be able to be found. He really was just accepting and gave unconditional hospitality. That is how I came to feel about the relationship and what I learned in those early years here in Morocco.

Omar's older brother Mohammed, the sheikh (which is what bestows upon the family the title, Ait Ommar), had passed away in 1951 from poisoning. Can you imagine drinking a cup of coffee that has such destructive sickness that it turns your kidney into a liquid that you then regurgitate? It makes me realize the nature of poison.



People can quarrel, but we draw a line at poison because of the hiddenness of it—not just the treachery but the cowardly deceit of it. Why was he poisoned? Because, according to Omar, he would not permit the local men to marry more than one woman.

Around that time, he visited a village below Amsouzerte, had this cup of poisoned coffee, returned home, and lived only two more days. The day after his return, he asked Omar, “At what point is the sun?” Omar told him where it was. Gesturing, Mohammed said, “When it gets to [this point], I will be passed.”

I was greatly influenced by the ongoing conversations with Omar of all the stories and deeds and attitudes that he could remember about his brother and the people. As an example, one that has stuck with me all these years and was even part of my master’s thesis focus is the issue of water supply in that region. There is a water spring source there called Ouray that flows north instead of south, but it belongs to the southern Tifnoute community. They had been working on a project, digging into the mountain to reverse the direction of the water flow that would have changed the life course of fourteen villages, several thousands of people and their generations that followed. The project was stopped upon Sheikh Mohammed’s death all those years ago, and, to this day, they are still suffering without adequate water, having to pipe an insufficient amount from eight kilometers away rather than having their own source—an unsustainable remedy. Ouray became a project that I really wanted to work on during my service, still want to do, and for



which I continue to advocate. Living in Tifnoute, I would go into my room after these conversations with Omar, and I would write these stories in my journal. The stories of the past, like Ouray's, were brought alive again in the present as I tried to make good on the necessary work that was started many decades prior.

After the two years, when I was soon to leave, Omar brought to me the small tea kettle of silver that Sheikh Mohammed would drink tea from with his wife. Only the two of them would drink tea from that kettle—a family heirloom, a regional heirloom—and he gave it to me. This was a hugely thoughtful gift. I brought that tea kettle with me when I returned to New York. I showed it to my family, and I said, “This is the tea kettle of Sheikh Mohammed, and he would drink tea from it only with his wife.” I explained to them that he tried to do the right things, and he was murdered for it, that he was inclusive, and that the kettle was approaching a century old. To others, it was only an old, unpolished kettle from the mountains that they had little affinity for, and they seemed not particularly moved by the story. It became clear that that kettle was in entirely the wrong place. Its meaning lay in Toubkal. So, though it took some time, after a few years I returned to Omar, and I brought back the kettle. I said, “Omar, this kettle belongs here.” And fixing a wordless look on me, he understood, and he accepted it.

Jumping to the end, our last conversation, a few days before he passed away in May 2020, he could no longer speak. He could whisper to his grandson, Mohammed, who related to me what



Omar said. I would respond to Mohammed, who would convey my comments to his grandfather. The very last thing he said to me was, “This is your home,” meaning his home was a place I was always welcome to be. And, from time to time, over the course of thirty years, it has been a place where I have found myself. There was something there, whenever I was there, that was soothing as nowhere else.

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**Toubkal or  
Tubkal**

(Berber:

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*Tugg kal;*

Arabic: توبقال

*Tūbqāl*) is a

mountain

peak in

## Toubkal

توبقال

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*Tizi-n-Tubkal* from the summit ridge

### Highest point

**Elevation** 4,167 m (13,671 ft) <sup>[1]</sup>

**Prominence** 3,755 m (12,320 ft)

Ranked 36th

**Isolation** 2,078 km (1,291 mi) <sup>1</sup>

**Listing** Country high point



## List of Ultras of Africa

**Coordinates** [31°03′33″N 7°54′57″W](#)<sup>[1]</sup> Coordinates: [31°03′33″N 7°54′57″W](#)

### Geography



Morocco

**Parent range**

[Atlas Mountains](#)

**Topo map**

[Toubkal Massif Map and Guide](#)<sup>[2]</sup>

### Climbing

**First ascent**

12 June 1923 by the Marquis de Segonzac, V. Berger, and H. Dolbeau

**Easiest route**

South [cwm](#) (hike in summer)

southwestern [Morocco](#), located in the [Toubkal National Park](#). At 4,167 metres (13,671 ft), it is the highest peak in the [Atlas Mountains, Morocco, North Africa](#) and the [Arab World](#). Located 63 km (39 mi) south of the city of [Marrakesh](#), and visible from it, Toubkal is an [ultra prominent peak](#), the highest for over 2,000 km (1,200 mi). For climbers it is "the most popular mountain objective in the Atlas mountains"<sup>[3]</sup>

## GEOGRAPHY



Although much of the High Atlas consists of [sedimentary](#) rocks, the Toubkal massif is an area of volcanic rocks which have weathered into alpine crests, cut by deep, narrow valleys. To the south, the mountain drops steeply down for 1,800 metres (5,906 ft) to a small lake called Lac d'Ifni. To the west, the mountain's edge is marked by a pass, the Tizi n'Ouanoums at 3,664 metres (12,021 ft). From this pass, the mountain's W-S-W ridge rises up to Toubkal West, which forms a shoulder at 4,020 metres (13,189 ft) before continuing to the summit at 4,167 metres (13,671 ft).<sup>[3]</sup>

The north and western side of Toubkal drains down to the Mizane Valley, which has the passes of both Tizi n'Ouanoums and Tizi n'Ouagane at its head. Two hanging valleys on the western side of the mountain - the Ikhibi Nord and Ikhibi South provide ready access for trekkers and climbers to reach Toubkal's summit. At one time the northern valley provided the normal route of ascent, but the construction of a mountain hut by the [French Alpine Club](#) below Ikhibi Sud now encourages trekkers to ascent via the southern route instead.<sup>[3]</sup>

## ACCESS

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Toubkal is popular with trekkers and ski mountaineers, but less so with climbers, despite its ease of access and sunny climate.<sup>[3]</sup>

Trekkers usually approach the mountain from Marrakesh via the road-end village of [Imlil](#). Qualified guides can be hired, as well as porters, to carry equipment and food supplies higher into the mountains. Since 2018, guides are now required even for the

[\[citation needed\]](#)



normal route, <sup>[citation needed]</sup> due to recent events on the trail (murder and deadly slips). Otherwise it is a moderate hike and navigation is not a problem.

The normal route starts with an easy walk to the village of [Aroumd](#). Past Aroumd a [floodplain](#) is crossed and the route follows the left slope of the valley southwards. The valley bends to the east to the tiny settlement of Sidi Chamharouch, which has grown around a Muslim shrine. At Sidi Chamharouch, the path leads over the stream and runs steeply uphill to the right side of the Isougouane valley, which leads to two stone-built refuges (old Neltner Refuge and new Refuge du Toubkal) that are often used as base camp at 3,207 m (10,522 ft). It is possible to buy good meals in the Refuge du Toubkal. Tents can be pitched near the refuges for a small charge. <sup>[citation needed]</sup>



## ROUTES

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See also: [Tourism in Morocco](#)

The first recorded ascent was on 12 June 1923 by the Marquis de Segonzac, Vincent Berger and Hubert Dolbeau, but the mountain may well have been climbed before that date. <sup>[4]</sup> Toubkal's height was measured the following year, and determined as being 4,165 metres (13,665 ft) <sup>[3]</sup> Nowadays measured at 4,167 metres, the summit is crowned with a large pyramidal metal trigonometric marker,



The highest peak of Toubkal

and offers views taking in most of the Atlas and [Little Atlas](#) Mountains. It is possible to climb mountain Toubkal in two days - first day up to the refuge (around seven hours), second day to the summit (around five hours) and back to Imlil (up to five hours).

In summer the mountains can be very dry, but are sometimes subject to storms. Although the temperature should remain above zero during the day, freezing conditions are possible over 3,500m. In winter the mountains are covered in snow and ice, and can be prone to avalanches. Skiing is possible as the snow can lie to considerable depth and cover many rocky slopes. Information about the state of the route can be obtained at Marrakesh tourist offices or at Imlil.

1) Ikhibi Sud (normal route). From the Toubkal refuge, a path crosses the stream, climbs a steep [scree](#) slope to the east and enters a [hanging valley](#), then climbs another steep slope to reach a [col](#) (Tizi'n'Toubkal at 3,940m). At the col the route turns left (northwards) up easy slopes to the narrow summit crest of Jebel Toubkal.

The ascent during the summer (from May) is non-technical yet moderately difficult, only complicated by steep and slippery scree slopes and [altitude sickness](#). Sturdy boots and proper (windproof) clothing are required, and [trekking poles](#) are helpful on the scree. An [ice-axe](#) may be needed on the remaining snowfields in the early summer. The ascent during the end of the winter and spring (February/March) is more difficult; [crampons](#)



are necessary to ascend through the snow and - in some cases - ice. Ascent: 960 m (3,150 ft); 2.5 –3 hours. <sup>[3]</sup>

2) Ikhibi Nord Not as frequently ascended as Ikhibi Sud, but technically easier. The route starts some distance down the valley from the Toubkal refuge, and turns right (eastwards) to follow a track up through a hanging valley to a col on the north side of Toubkal. Ascent:1,000 metres (3,281 ft); 3–4 hours. The col also gives access to adjacent peaks of Imouzzer 4,010 m (13,156 ft) and Tibherine 3,887 m (12,753 ft) <sup>[3]</sup>

3) West-North-West Ridge (ONO Arete). (First ascent by J de Lepinay and party, 1936). Infrequently climbed, but a long and pleasant traverse containing many gaps and towers. Some difficulties can be avoided by means of an abseil. Grade III/IV; 7 hours.

On 17 December 2018, [two trekkers](#), from Denmark and Norway, were murdered close to the foot of the trail in a terror-related attack. <sup>[5]</sup>



360 degree panorama from the summit


## GALLERY



[Birds](#) soaring above the path to the summit

Jbel Toubkal in December 1930. Air photo taken by Swiss pilot and photographer [Walter Mittelholzer](#).

Hikers midway to the summit



Hiker on Toubkal



## SEE ALSO

- Nearby villages of [Asni](#), [Ikkiss](#), [Imlil](#) and [Tacheddirt](#).

## REFERENCES

1. ^ [a b](#) "[Africa Ultra-Prominences](#)" Peaklist.org. Retrieved 2012-01-14.
2. ^ [Toubkal Massif Map and Guide](#) (Map) (1st ed.). 1:160,000 with mountaineering information. High Atlas Mountains. Cartography by EWP. EWP and West Col Productions. 2008. ISBN 978-0-906227-98-5.
3. ^ [a b c d e f g](#) [Hamish Brown](#) (1998). "Jebel Toubkal". In Salkeld, Audrey (ed.). *World mountaineering : the world's great mountains by the world's great mountaineers*. Mitchell Beazley. pp. 272–275. ISBN 1845331427.
4. ^ Robin G. Collomb, *Atlas Mountains*, Goring: West Col, 1980
5. ^ O'Grady, Siobhán. "[Two tourists killed in Morocco – one of them beheaded – in likely terrorist attack](#)". *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post. Retrieved 22 December 2018.

## EXTERNAL LINKS

- [Routes up Mount Toubkal](#)
- [What to wear on Mount Toubkal in winter?](#)
- [Summitpost.org](#) page about Jbel Toubkal

- [Photo Gallery of Jebel Toubkal and the High Atlas](#)
- [Refuge information](#)
- [Useful information on climbing Toubkal](#)

## ■ Mountains of Morocco

### High Atlas

[Toubkal](#) (4167 m) • [Ouanoukrim](#) (4089 m) • [Ighil M'Goun](#) (4071 m) • [Afella](#) (4043 m) • (4001 m) • (3995 m) • (3910 m) • (3891 m) • (3882 m) • (3763 m) • (3753 m) • [Ayachi](#) (3664 m) • (3280 m) • (3200 m) • [Jebel Yagour](#) (2700 m) • [Tassemit](#) (2205 m)

### Middle Atlas

[Bou Naceur](#) (3340 m) • (3277 m) • [Bou Iblc](#) (3081 m) • (2250 m)

### Anti-Atlas

[Aklim](#) (2531 m) • [Jbel Kissane](#) (1485 m) • [S](#) (3304 m) • (2712 m) • (2592 m) • (2530 m) • [Mount Amchad](#) (1238 m) • [Mount Zagora](#) (1030 m) •

### Saharan Atlas

(1888 m) •

### Rif

[Colline du Charf](#) (93 m) • [Tidirhine](#) (2456 m) • [Kelti](#) (1912 m) • (1535 m) • (900 m) • [Jbel Musa](#) (851 m) • [Jebel Zem-Zem](#) (435 m) • [Zerhoun](#) (1025 m) •

### Other peaks & ranges

[Jbel Lakhdar](#) (893 m) • • • • [Jbel Saghro](#) • •

[Geography of Morocco](#) • [Atlas Mountains](#) • [Dadès Gorges](#) • [Kem Kem](#) • • [Oukaimeden](#) • [Tizguit Valley](#) • [Tizi-n-Test](#) • [Tizi n'Tichka](#) • [Todgha Gorge](#) •

source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toubkal>

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