

The Religious Approach to Combating Radicalism in Morocco

Dr. Abdelali EL MOUTAKI



* Faculty of Sharia

Ibn Zohr University - Agadir Morocco

a.elmoutaki@uiz.ac.ma

Dr. Mustapha AIT KHAROUACH



* College of Education and Arts

Lusail University, Qatar

mkharouach@lu.edu.qa

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ABSTRACT

The events known as “Black Tuesday” (September 11, 2001) marked a turning point in world politics that prompted an extensive worldwide mobilization to confront global terrorism. This global phenomenon had a profound impact on communities in both East and West. In response to this tragic event, the United States led an international military coalition to combat terrorism, launching military operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East. While these operations inflicted significant damage on terrorist groups, yet they failed to eradicate them entirely. Like many other nations, Morocco was deeply affected by terrorism internally and externally while reputed as a notable source of individuals affiliated with extremist groups. In light of these challenges, Morocco has sought to develop alternative strategies since 2003 to face religious radicalism by emphasizing a comprehensive religious approach.

This paper aims to explore the context, approaches, and mechanisms underpinning this strategy, and is divided into three sections. The first section examines the institutional and administrative approach. The second section focuses on the educational and training approach while the third section analyzes the media approach and its role in countering religious radicalism.

KEYWORDS:

Religious Approach; Radicalism; Rehabilitation; Radical Islam; Morocco.

المقاربة الدينية لمكافحة التطرف في المغرب

الدكتور مصطفى أيت خرواش
* كلية الآداب والتربية
جامعة لوسيل - قطر
mkharouach@lu.edu.qa

الدكتور عبد العالي المتقي
* كلية الشريعة
جامعة ابن زهر - أكادير المغرب
a.elmoutaki@uiz.ac.ma

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الملخص:

شهدت تداعيات ما يُعرف بـ "الثلاثاء الأسود" (11 سبتمبر 2001) تعبئة دولية من المجتمع العالمي لمواجهة الإرهاب الدولي الذي كان نشطاً على مستوى العالم وأثر بشكل كبير على المجتمع العالمي شرقاً وغرباً. ونتيجة لذلك، بدأ التحالف العسكري الدولي لمكافحة الإرهاب بقيادة الولايات المتحدة بتنفيذ عملياتها العسكرية في أفغانستان وفي الشرق الأوسط، ونجح جزئياً في إحداث أضرار كبيرة بالجماعات الإرهابية، إلا أنها لم تنجح في إنهاء وجودها. وكان المغرب من الدول التي تأثرت بالإرهاب، سواء من حيث عدد الهجمات الإرهابية التي تعرض لها، أو من حيث ذكره عالمياً كمصدر ملحوظ للأفراد المنتسبين للجماعات الإرهابية، واستناداً إلى هذا الواقع، عمل المغرب منذ عام 2003 على تطوير بدائل أخرى لمكافحة الراديكالية الدينية، من بينها المقاربة الدينية التي ستكشف الورقة عن سياقها ومداخلها وآليات اشتغالها. وقد سعينا إلى تناول هذه الإشكالية في هذه المقالة عبر ثلاثة مباحث. خصصنا المبحث الأول للمقاربة المؤسسية والإدارية، بينما تناولنا في المبحث الثاني المقاربة التربوية والتكوينية. وفي الأخير، اشتغلنا في المبحث الثالث على المقاربة الإعلامية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

المقاربة الدينية؛ الراديكالية؛ التأهيل؛ الإسلام الراديكالي؛ المغرب.

INTRODUCTION¹

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon with diverse causes and origins, where national socio-cultural and political contexts overlap with the international ones. This complexity requires a thorough understanding before addressing such a challenging issue. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, religious radicalism has become a primary global concern, as terrorist groups have continued to target countries worldwide, particularly in the MENA region, where they have established bases for their operations. The United States of America established an international coalition to combat religious terrorism, which soon evolved into a globalized narrative, by which each country advocated against various religious radical movements within its own borders.

In the aftermath of 2003 terrorist attacks, Morocco has adopted a multifaceted strategy to confront the threat of terrorism by building on intelligence-driven approach that aims to deter potential threats and proactively secure the country. It started with a thorough understanding of the terrorist acts, expanded the scope of international treaties related to this issue, targeted the disruption of financial sources, and ultimately capturing and apprehending terrorists who had joined the recruitment camps². Furthermore, Morocco has adopted an integrated policy in the religious field, with a clear agenda, specific actors, declared goals, and set of administrative measures.

This paper highlights the religious approach of Morocco to handle the risk of terrorism, which has been a central component of its counter-terrorism strategy since the beginning of

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عبد العالي المتقي؛ مصطفى أيت خرواش، المقاربة الدينية لمكافحة التطرف في المغرب، مجلة اجتهاد للدراسات الإسلامية والعربية، مركز اجتهاد للدراسات والتكوين، بلجيكا، مج. 1، ع. 2، ديسمبر 2024، 191-215.

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² Hassan Tariq, “*al-irhāb wa-al-qānūn: al-tashrī‘ al-amnī al-Maghribī li-mukāfahat al-irhāb*”, (Terrorism and Law The Moroccan Security Legislative to Counter Terrorism), in *Majallat Siyāsāt ‘Arabīyah*, May 20, 2016, p. 8.

the millennia. It outlines three key approaches: namely the institutional and managerial approach, the training approach, and finally the media approach.

INSTITUTIONAL AND MANAGERIAL APPROACH

The terrorist attacks of May 16, 2003 destabilized the theory of the ‘Moroccan exception’- the narrative that projected Morocco as a terrorism-free country in contrast to other MENA countries. This argument has significantly diminished since the emergence of new, unbridled religious movements, which alarmed official actors who recognized the seriousness of this shift. Consequently, Morocco started a religious reform initiating the largest rehabilitation in the history of the Kingdom, in terms of its form, content, and strategy¹.

Understanding the dimensions of this reform is challenging without considering the peculiarities of The Moroccan political system, particularly its religious character as embodied in the institution of *‘imāratu al-mu‘minīna*² (the emirate of Believers). In this system, the king represents the highest political and religious authority, with his rule founded on a basis of supreme religious legitimacy, which is both historical and transcendental. First, this legitimacy derives from a sacred origin linked to the prophet’s dynasty. Second, it embodies the civilizational and historical identity of the nation. Finally, it is anchored in a popular basis of allegiance³.

One Salient feature of the Moroccan political system is the Overlapping relationship between the religious and political aspects, which is deeply rooted in the history of Morocco. Recently, these two foundational aspects have been further reinforced within the framework of the so-called ‘restructuring of the religious field in Morocco’ through the official strategy⁴

¹ Rachid Jarmouni, “*Sūsiyūlūjiyā al-tahawwulāt al-dīniyah fī al-Maghrib: al-fā‘il al-Ṣūfī*” (Sociology of Religious Shifts in Morocco), in *Idafaat*, Num 29-30, Spring 2015, p. 113.

² We use the title “*‘imāratu al-mu‘minīna*” to refer to the religious system of kingship in which the king is the supreme leader of believers in Morocco.

³ Hussam Hab. “*Mu‘assasat Imārat al-Mu‘minīn*” (The Institution of Believers Emirate), in *Taqrir Al-Hala Al-Dinia Bi Al-Maghrib (2013-2014)*, Manshūrāt Markaz al-Maghrib al-Aqsā lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Abhāth”, 2004, p. 14.

⁴ It stands on the fact that terrorism should be addressed and fought from within the religious thought by developing a counter narrative to that of the hard lines on which Jihadists stand.

established to confront blasphemy and terrorism. As such, the two components of the Moroccan system have been constitutionalized in successive reforms between 1962 until 2011 whereby chapter 41 emphasizes the prominent role of *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna* (The Emirate of the Faithful) within which the king embodies very complex and intertwined roles:

- In the religious field: Through the consolidation of his religious identity, reformulated in the constitution as a system of *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna*.
- In the modern state: As a modern political commander purely distinct from the ancient regime type of the Caliphate.
- In the intersection of the religious field with the modern state: where the king plays a dual role, particularly in public affairs with a religious dimension¹.

The most significant transformation in the last constitution regarding the institution of *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna* is the division of article 19 into two sub-chapters, 41 and 42 that clearly separates the religious role of the king from his political role. The chapter stated that:

'The King, Commander of the Faithful *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna*, sees to the respect for Islam. He is the Guarantor of the free exercise of beliefs. He presides over the Superior Council of the Ulema [Conseil supérieur des Oulema], charged with the study of questions that He submits to it. The Council is the sole instance enabled to comment on the religious consultations (Fatwas) before being officially agreed to, on the questions to which it has been referred and this, on the basis of the tolerant principles, precepts and designs of Islam. The attributions, the composition, and the modalities of functioning of the Council are established by *'Dahir*'. The King exercises by *Dahirs* the religious prerogatives inherent in the institution of the *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna*, which are conferred on him in exclusive manner by this Article².

However, the monopoly over the religious field in Morocco has been used by the kingdom as a tool to manage conflicts with the counter-organizations and movements that derive their political legitimacy from the same source as the king. As such, and building on the supreme

¹ Ibid, p 18.

² Article 41, from the Moroccan constitution, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2EHmJep>

legitimacy established in the system of *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna*, the king holds the supreme right to subject any political or religious movement to his authority as *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna*¹ (supreme leader of the faithful). King Mohammed VI reaffirmed this supreme authority in his royal speech following the terrorist attacks of May 16, delivered on July 30, 2003, when he declared:

“We will never accept the manipulation or use of Islam for any potential leadership in the name of religion, nor will we tolerate acts of terrorism that tear apart the sectarian unity of the nation, blasphemy, or bloodshed. With equal strength, we affirm that the relationship between State and religion is firmly established in our country, as outlined in the constitution. The Kingdom of Morocco is an Islamic State, and the King is the supreme leader of believers, entrusted with the responsibility to protect the religion and guarantee freedoms, including the freedom to practice other religions. Moreover, since *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna* is the sole religious authority for the Moroccan nation, the existence of parties or groups claiming to speak on behalf of Islam, or its guardianship is unacceptable. religious functions are the responsibility of the supreme *imama* (religious leadership), a position entrusted to us with the support of a higher council and regional councils of *Oulemas* (Religious scholars) which we are in the process of promoting, renovating, and activating.”

Since then, the reform of the religious field has shown significant advancements in the institution of the *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna*, to the extent that every religious measure and practice happened in the kingdom -regardless of its sponsoring authority- has become a form of an authorized action, supported and confirmed by the system of *'imāratu ʔl-mu'minīna*².

¹ Abelilah Esseti, *Al-Malakīyah wa-al-Islāmīyūn fī al-Maghrib* (Monarchy and the Maghreb Islamists), in *Dafātir wihāt nazar* (25), Maṭba'at al-Najāh, 2012, p. 46.

² Mhamed Jabroun, *Ishkālīyat al-waṣīfah al-dīnīyah fī al-dawlah al-mu'āshirah : qirā'ah fī tajribat Ta'hīl al-ḥaql al-dīnī bi-al-Maghrib*, in: *Silsilat Korassat Alailmia*, Maktabat al-Iskandarīyah, Silsilat Kurrāsāt al-'Ilmīyah (4), Waḥdat al-Dirāsāt al-mustaqbalīyah, 2011, 21. (The Problem of Religious Function in the Contemporary State: A Reading of the Experience of Rehabilitating the Religious Field in Morocco). In *Silsilat Korassat Alailmia*, Maqtabat al-Askandariya, N. 4, Wahdat al-Dirasat al-mostaqbalia (2011), p. 21.

During its structural religious reform, Morocco established two new entities within the principal administration of the ministry of Religious Endowment and Islamic Affairs: The Directorate of Ancient Education and the Directorate of Mosques. In December 2003, the monarchy restructured the administrative framework of the ministry through a specific Dahir No. 1-3-139, issued on December 4, 2003¹, which formally incorporated these two new entities into the ministry.

One important mission assigned to the ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs by the new *Dahir* is to formulate State policy in the field of ancient education (also known as ancient school for studying the holy Quran and Islamic sciences), and to oversee and manage its affairs. To ensure an effective implementation and follow-up, the Directorate of Ancient Education has been granted extensive powers, including the development educational strategies for ancient education, preparing the national mapping of its institutions, establishing its own pedagogical system for teaching and examination, and granting licenses to open new branches across the kingdom while ensuring that their managers are qualified through continuous training².

For the effective monitoring of its projects, the directorate is conducting field visits in cooperation with local entities of the ministry of Religious Endowment and Islamic Affairs to inspect the compliance of both public and private sectors with the governing laws, particularly regarding the preservation of the Moroccan identity and doctrinal unity. The State has not only implemented a legal and administrative approach in nationalizing popular religious education, but it actively also guided its development to counter the growing influence of Salafist movement led by *Sheikh Mohammed Al Maghraoui*³ and its activities related to qur'anic studies. This strategy has resulted in two main approaches: the first is academic in nature, while the second involves enforcing laws. To implement the first approach, the king founded a new institution called the "The Mohammed VI Foundation for

¹ Published in the official journal, N. 5172, on March 25, 2003.

² Article 14 from Dahir N 1-3-193, December 2003, in terms of competences and management of the ministry of endowment and Islamic affairs, published in the official journal, N. 5172.

³ Abdelhakim Abolouz, *Al-Harakāt al-Salafīyah fī al-Maghrib {1971-2004} baḥth anthrbwlwjj sūsiyūljī* (The Salafist Movements in Morocco; an anthropological and Sociological Research), *Silsilat utrūhāt al-duktūrāh*, 79, Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabīyah, Bayrūt, Ed1 (2009), p. 345.

Readings and Quranic Studies”¹ by *Dahir* No. 50.13.1 issued on May 02, 2013. Affiliated to the Ministry of Religious Endowment and Islamic Affairs, the new institution aims to strengthen the institutional framework of *‘imāratu al-mu‘minīna*, which has significantly expanded its presence in all the areas of the religious field, compared to the reign of King Hassan II².

The ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs implemented also a legally mandated directive aimed at legalizing and regulating emerging religious popular schools. In this context, the ministry closed for the second time³ the Quranic schools affiliated to the Salafist association of *Adawa to Quran and Sunnah* in Marrakech in May 2013. The closure was justified, as stated in the ministry’s declaration, by the illegal activities conducted at these schools, which focused on lecturing the Quranic and religious sciences. The official statement issued by the ministry in July 2013 affirmed that ‘Every education dedicated to general audience and with a religious content – whether it is a memorization of the holy Quran or studying religious sciences- falls under the law of traditional education regardless of who is conducting it or where it takes place’⁴.

This decision, in fact, reflect the religious authority from the growing Salafi activities regarding the methodology they follow in teaching the Quranic and Islamic sciences, which is seen as contrary to the Moroccan historical experience in teaching the Quranic and Islamic sciences. This concern was clearly articulated in the Ministry of endowments and Islamic Affairs’ communiqué, which states: “The Kingdom of Morocco is not a country where

¹ Published in the Official Journal, N. 5153, 20 May 2013.

² Abderrahman *Al-Choairi*, *Al-Nukhbah al-dīniyah fi al-nasaq al-siyāsī al-Maghribī – al-‘ulamā’ nmwdhjā-{1999-2013}*, (The Religious Elite in the Moroccan Political System: Scholars as a Case Study), uṭrūḥat duktūrāh, Jāmi‘at al-Malik ‘Abd al-Malik al-Sa‘dī, Tiṭwān, 2012, p. 311.

³ In 2008, the State has closed down some 60 Koranic houses that legally classify as institutions of old education, claiming that they did not comply with the legal requirements. This is after having issued the fatwa of a Moroccan Wahhabi sheikh Mohammed al-Maghrawy, which proves the marriage of young girl of nine years old. The fact that is against the rules of the Kingdom of Morocco. In: *Taqir Halat Al Maghreb 2008-2009*, *Dafatir Wijhat Nadar; Silsilat Korassat Isttratijia*, No. 5, Al-Najah al-Jadida Press, 2009, pp. 104-105.

⁴ An excerpt from the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs' communiqué on its decision to close educational premises belonging to the Marrakesh Association issued on June 29, 2013, published on the official website of the Ministry, <http://www.habous.gov.ma>

teaching the holy Koran can be left without any foundational assets and methods, or without any official and educational program that fits within the general law”¹.

The Moroccan State manages and handles the mosques by setting up several legislations and regulations aimed at preventing the use of worship places for “improper purposes”². As a requirement, it is mandatory to obtain a permission from the official authorities before opening new mosques or places of worship. The State also holds the authority to name it according to certain cultural considerations. Furthermore, precise legal procedures were established to organize the duties of public speaking and religious leadership, connecting that to the responsibility of the ministry of Religious Endowment and Islamic Affairs and to its external subsidiaries. Even the educational and religious content to be delivered inside mosques is strictly organized by the Ministry, which provides a handbook entitled “Guide of *imam*, Orator and Preacher” distributed to imams for the sake of unifying oratory and preaching, serving the designated religious purposes and the supreme national interest³.

The restructuring and rehabilitation of this institution were legally framed through *Dahir* of April 22, 2004, which replaced the previous from 1989. The new *Dahir* has strengthened the institution of *ulema* (religious scholars) both nationally and locally, enhancing its administrative structure, its areas of expertise, and its geographical reach. To improve oversight of the religious sphere, King Mohammed VI announced -through a letter delivered in the city of Tetouan- a geographical redistribution plan for the local scientific councils, expanding them from 30 to 70 councils, with each council assigned to a specific regional territory. At this level, religious supervision aligns with the administrative framework, covering all parts of the Kingdom. This expansion reflects the official strategy to centralize State control over the religious domain and consolidate its various elements.

The significance of this reform lies not only in its administrative representation of the monarchy system across Morocco’s diverse regions and cities, but also in its function as an

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ *Dalyl alimam wa ‘al- khatib* (Guide for preachers and Imams), Publications of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (2007), p. 18.

effective oversight channel to monitor and ensure the implementation religious administrative adjustments in everyday practices, such as prayers. Moreover, this rhizomatic¹ strategy enables the state to safeguard the dissemination and consolidation of its official religious discourse, which is rooted in the principles of Maliki jurisprudence and *Ash'arī* theology, both officially values officially endorsed as embodiments of moderate Islam.

The establishment of the new institution, known as *al-rāqibata al-muḥammadiya lil'ulamā'* (An association of religious scholars) in 2004 was a key component of the State's official project to reconstruct the religious field. The institution replaced the former Moroccan Scholars Network, which had become largely initiating and influencing societal developments. Recognizing this stagnation, King Mohamed VI addressed the scholars of the High Scientific Council of ulema and the members of the local scientific councils in a speech delivered on April 30, 2004, in Casablanca, emphasizing the need to create a new institution. In the *Dahir* that formalized its establishment, the King stated:

“... In this regard, we decided that our reform will also encompass the ‘Moroccan Scholars Network’, aiming to revive it as an interactive body aligned with scientific councils. Through the issuance of a royal *Dahir*, we seek, organize and manage this institution , which we shall name *the al-rāqibata al-muḥammadiya lil'ulamā'*, comprised of distinguished scholars, who have earned our trust and favor”².

Since its creation, *al-rāqibata al-muḥammadiya lil'ulamā'* has been committed to promoting the values and principles of moderation while actively countering extremism. This mission is achieved through a series of publishing projects aimed at addressing and deconstructing extremist ideologies. Among these projects is the notable series entitled “Islam and the Modern Context”, which consists of scholarly booklets analysing religious terms and concepts often manipulated by extremist groups to justify narratives of hatred and violence. As part of this initiative, seven deconstructive studies have been published, including:

¹ Divergent as it combines and invokes various players.

² King Mohammed VI's speech on restructuring the religious field, on April 30, 2004 in Casablanca.

- *In Deconstructing the Speech of Extremism*, by Dr. Ahmed Elabadi.
- *In Deconstructing the Meaning of 'Jizya'*, by Dr. Ahmed Elabadi.
- *In Deconstructing the Meaning of 'Jihad'* by Dr. Ahmed Elabadi.
- *The Meaning of 'Ḥākimiyyah' Toward Transcending the Problematics of the Concept and the Ideological Employment* by Dr. Mohamed Ennasiri.
- *In the Fact of Fighting for the Sake of Allah and Supporting the Vulnerable Groups* by Dr. Mohamed Ennasiri.
- *From Khilāfah to State: Reading in the Context and deconstructing the concept* by Dr. Abdelsalam Taouil.
- *The Islamic State, Reviewing the conditions and statement of the Breakdown of extremism* by Dr. Khaled Mayara¹.

Alternatively, new bodies have been established, focusing primarily on constructing centers and institutes, along with other initiatives aimed at promoting moderation and combating extremism. Among these projects is the *Ajyal Center for Training and Social Protection*, created by *The al-rāqibata al-muḥammadiya lil 'ulamā'*.

During its inauguration, the Secretary-General of the Association emphasized the center's core mission: to develop and promote a moderate and constructive religious discourse among the youth. The center's name, "*Ajyāl*" (generations) reflects the significance of understanding Morocco's younger generations while also addressing the specific needs of the Moroccan diaspora's children. These young individuals, especially those living abroad, are seen as being in urgent need of grounding in Morocco's religious constants and traditions.

Over 2.5 million Moroccans reside in Western Europe, with the majority concentrated in countries such as France, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. Like other diaspora communities, they face a significant lack of religious supervision, which exposes their identity to the risks of erosion and heightened vulnerability to polarization by extremist movements. The movements, whether connected to Morocco or operating independently,

¹ See: <http://www.arrabita.ma/Article.aspx?C=107196>, September 28, 2018.

such as *al-qā'ida* (the Islamic state) and others, have increasingly target this community. The involvement of some Moroccans in terrorist activities worldwide has underscored the need for an earnest plan to address this Phenomenon. These circumstances have highlighted the pressing need for the enhancement of religious supervision for the Moroccan diaspora, extending beyond the temporary scholarly missions traditionally conducted during Ramadan. The establishment of the Moroccan Scientific Council abroad represents a key administrative initiative aimed at fulfilling this objective.

The Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs has expanded its operations to encompass diverse trans-regional and international arenas, including Africa, Russia, the Americas, and Europe. The Ministry has been active in international initiatives and has signed numerous agreements aimed at combating terrorism and strengthening Morocco's religious soft power abroad¹. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Morocco has strengthened its traditional religious ties with several countries through the establishment of the Higher Council of the Mohammed VI Foundation of African *ulema*. This initiative aligns with Morocco's broader African policy, which emphasizes economic and investment partnerships.² Furthermore, the Ministry has engaged in multilateral cooperation agreements focused on contributing to global efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism, particularly addressing the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters³.

THE FORMATION AND TRAINING APPROACH

In 2005, Morocco initiated the training of its first cohort of imams and mentors, comprising 150 imams and 50 mentors. This effort was undertaken to address the increasing social demand for qualified religious leaders (imams and mentors) and to replace undisciplined

¹ Salim Hmimnat. *Morocco's Religious "Soft Power" in Africa: As a strategy supporting Morocco's stretching in Africa*, Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (2018), accessed on July 1, 2020, <https://mipa.institute/5642>

² Speech of Minister of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, on the Occasion of the Establishment of the Higher Council of the Mohammed VI Foundation of African Oulema, accessed on June 30, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2NF8BY3>

³ See a cartography of the ministry of religious endowments and Islamic Affairs international treaties, <https://bit.ly/3g8USVR>, accessed on June 25, 2020.

imams who had received their education in institutions, either domestic or international, that did not adhere to the country's official religious policies. This project marked a historic milestone in Morocco, as it was the first time the State actively assumed for the training of imams and mentors, who had previously been educated independently¹. The primary objective of the initiative was to prepare a cadre of religious elites to fulfill the sensitive roles of religious and guidance, transforming *imāma* (religious leadership) into a recognized 'Profession' with clearly defined technical fundamentals and practical foundations. Over 12-month training period, imams and mentors are taught moral and educational principles a diverse curriculum of religious, social and cultural subjects².

The Scholars' charter plan, launched by King Mohammed VI during the inauguration of the 7th session of the Supreme Scientific Council on September 28, 2008 in Tetouan is another transformative change in the rehabilitation of official religious institutions and delineation of the core features of King Mohammed VI's strategy. This new phase of Institutional religious action is founded on the principle of proximity, aiming to closely guide the religious lives of citizens through a strategic and localized approach.

The King Mohammed IV outlined the core principles and objectives of the scholars' charter by emphasizing the role of scholars as his deputies. Their primary responsibilities include empowering the position of *imams* and providing comprehensive religious education to citizens in accordance with the principles of moderate Islam. In this regard, the king stated:

“In this context, we decided to usher in a new era of religious reform by launching a pioneering initiative: The Charter of Scholars. This model plan for awareness and enlightenment is founded on your exemplary commitment to the integrity of religious mentoring and preaching. It obliges religious scholars to prioritize the empowerment

¹ The Official Journal, No. 6268 of June 26, 2014, Dahir No. 1.14.103 issued on 20 Rajab 1435H (May 20, 2014) concerning the establishment of the Mohammed VI Institute for the formation of imams, religious guides and mentors.

² Mohamed Jebroun, p. 32.

and rehabilitation of mosque imams while expanding their efforts into towns and cities to educate the public and counter extremism”¹.

The charter of scholars reflects in fact the State’s commitment to revitalizing the role of ulema *within* its institutional framework. It aims to channel and mobilize their intellectual and educational efforts toward overseeing the doctrinal, spiritual, and political formation of imams and religious leaders in mosques. This is achieved in alignment with the principles of official Moroccan Islam, which is rooted in the *Ash‘arī* doctrine, Maliki jurisprudence, Sufism, and *imāma* (Religious leadership). Such measures are intended to fortify and safeguard the Moroccan religious sphere against extremism and sectarian discord.

To implement and activate these pillars, the Ministry of Religious Endowment and Islamic Affairs has scheduled two monthly meeting, supervised by an instructor appointed by the regional representative of the Ministry. This training program on four key dimensions:

1. Principal pillars that govern the commitment of the *imam* in the mosques of the Kingdom of Morocco.
2. Conditions of *imāma* in various prayers, and their evidence as portrayed by Maliki doctrine.
3. Teaching the Holy Quran, the requirements of preaching and guidance, and Friday sermon.
4. The behavior required to rebuild the spiritual and educational role of the imam in maintaining and developing of society².

The program for combating extremism among prisoners is a joint initiative carried out by the General Directorate of Prison Administration and Reintegration, in collaboration with the Association of Moroccan Scientists *al-rāqibīta al-muḥammadiya lil‘ulamā’* and supported by the Government of Japan, in coordination with the United Nations Development Program. This program is of the project "Supporting and Reforming of the

¹ Speech of King Mohammed VI at the opening session of the Higher Scientific Council in Tetouan 28 September 2008, Journal of the Council of the Supreme Council of Science, February 6, 2009.

² The Charter of the Scholars, the Framing of the Imams of the Kingdom's Mosques, Journal of the Council, July 7, 2009, p. 12.

Prison System: Toward Better Social Reintegration", which aims to immunize prisoners against the danger of extremist ideology by teaching them spiritual and religious matters.

As a first outcome of this program's implementation, more than forty prison staff members, along with a number of mentors and religious scholars, were trained to educate 220 peer-to-peer trained prisoners, who then became special instructors in 14 Moroccan prisons. These new instructors organized ten meetings with 20 prisoners in each group, reaching a total of about 22,000 prisoners benefiting from these educational courses. The operation was conducted under the supervision of prison directors and monitored by scholars from the Muhammadiyah Association of Scholars, with the aim of protecting prisoners from falling into the trap of extremism and terrorism.

The reconciliation program was jointly managed by the General Directorate of Prison Administration and Reintegration, the *al-rāqibata al-muḥammadiya lil'ulamā'*, the National Council for Human Rights, and specialized experts. It aims to reintegrate detainees convicted of extremism and terrorism by adopting a scientific approach aligned with the multidimensional efforts undertaken at the national level. Together, these efforts focus on combating terrorism and extremism through preemptive security measures, spiritual fortification, and social fragility.

Alternatively, this program was constructed around three main axes: reconciliation with the self, reconciliation with the religious text, and reconciliation with society. Twenty-five prisoners convicted of terrorism and extremism charges participated in the program, representing a variety of jihadist trends, and facing a range of accusations. All participants voluntarily expressed a strong desire to join the initiative. As a result, many Graduates of this de-radicalization program became eligible for release and were offered support for reintegration into society. Some of them even emerged as influencers in media, backed by the state as examples of its effective approach of de-radicalizing Moroccan Salafists and Jihadists.¹

¹ International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. *Engaging Salafi Religious Actors in Morocco: The Role of Inclusion in Countering Violent Extremism*, October 2018, accessed on July 1, 2020, file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/Morocco-Report-Full-10.16.2018.pdf

MEDIA APPROACH

Media outlets have been explored extensively by the government to implement its religious strategy in combating extremism by establishing an integrated media system that encompasses audio, visual, and digital tools. This system is primarily dedicated to engaging with public opinion, recognizing the significant role media plays in shaping perspectives and safeguarding citizens from the dangers of religious extremism. In line with this initiative, the ‘Mohammed IV Holy Quran Radio Station’ was launched on October 16, 2004 as the first national radio station in Morocco dedicated exclusively to religious programming.

In addition, a television channel known as ‘The Sixth’ was launched on November 02, 2005 through a collaborative effort involving the Ministry of Religious Endowment and Islamic Affairs, the Ministry of Communication, and the National Company for Radio and Television. The ‘sixth’ channel broadcasts a variety of programs that reflecting Morocco’s religious orientation, emphasizing unity of faith and doctrine, tolerance, and openness, as inspired by the teaching of the Holy Quran and the noble Sunnah¹. In the digital sphere, the Muhammadiyah Association of Scholars has developed several online platforms aimed at fighting extremism. A prominent example is the establishment of the online platform “*Arraid*” in 2015 that seeks to provide accessible and moderate religious knowledge within a contemporary and contextual framework, offering updated perspectives on religious issues both locally and globally. It mainly promotes critical thinking and balance by fostering creativity across disciplines and humanities as well as addressing the modern believer’s pressing questions in a rapidly changing world and encourages meaningful dialogue. Moreover, it serves as an alternative platform for Muslim youth, enhancing their engagement with religious sciences and equipping them with tools to navigate complex global challenges.

¹ The sixth channel, <http://www.assadissatv.ma/presentation.php?lang=ar>

Another platform is the website “*Chabab*” that launched on Thursday, January 12, 2017. It is specifically designed for youth and includes a portal featuring television and radio content. The platform is supervised by the Control Unit for Dangerous Behavior, a branch of the Center for Studies and Research in Values. The website aims to counter the discourse of extremist groups and disrupt the activities of those who exploit religion or distort its values and virtues. According to the *al-rāqibata al-muḥammadiya lil’ulamā’*, the website seeks to develop tools that empower youth to identify and respond early to risks by recognizing and understanding behaviors associated with hatred and violence, equipping them to address these issues swiftly and effectively. The platform also monitors data related to violent extremism rhetoric, analyzing its content, and deconstructing its concepts. It produces alternative narratives grounded in legitimate scientific and religious foundations. Additionally, ‘*Chabab*’ focuses on enhancing the abilities of young religious leaders, developing their skills, and strengthening their capacity to combating extremist ideologies.

Equally significant is that Morocco’s comprehensive strategy integrates its religious approach with notable legal adjustments to align with the broader systemic reforms. In this context, the kingdom has enacted specific anti-terrorism¹ laws designed to define and address acts of terrorism, assess their legal implications, and respond accordingly.

According to law 03-03 of 2003, an act of terrorism is defined as ‘any intentional action associated with an individual or collective enterprise aimed at disrupting public order through intimidation, terror or violence’.² Building on this general statement, the legislator continues to identify in detail the various offenses that may result from the above-mentioned general terrorist act, along with their legal punishment. This includes:

1. Voluntary harm to people's lives, physical integrity, or liberties, as well as kidnapping or forcible confinement of persons.

¹ See its full French version in the Official Journal, year 92, No. 514, 4 Rabii II 1424/ June 5, 2003, http://www.sgg.gov.ma/BO/fr/2003/bo_5114_fr.pdf.

² Ibid., Law No. 03-03, p. 416.

2. Counterfeiting or falsification of currencies, public credit effects, state seals and hallmarks, stamps and marks, or forgery or falsification referred to in articles 360, 361 and 362 of this code.
3. Destruction, damage or deterioration of property.
4. Hijacking or damage to aircraft, ships, or any other means of transport, degradation of air navigation facilities, maritime, or terrestrial facilities; and the destruction, degradation, or deterioration of means of communication.
5. Theft and extortion of property.
6. Manufacturing, holding, transporting, putting into circulation or the illegal use of weapons, explosives, or ammunition.
7. Offenses relating to automated processing systems.
8. Forgery or falsification concerning checks, or any other means of payment referred to in articles 316 and 331 trade code.
9. Participation in an association formed or an agreement established for the preparation or commission of a terrorism act.
10. Intentional concealment of a terrorist offense.¹

Yet, given its complexity and ambiguity, there has been a clash of interpretation between the normal judiciary and the new law of terrorism regarding the criteria used to determine whether crimes and offences should be judged under the civil penal code or the law of terrorism. In fact, several journalists have been penalized under the law of terrorism, including Ali Anouzla, the editor of the Arabic-language version of the news website *Lakome*. Anouzla was arrested and charged with terrorism after posting an article contained a link to a video released by Aal-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb².

¹ Ibid, Law No. 03-03, p. 416.

² Reporters Without Borders, *Website editor who referred to Al Qaeda video charged with terrorism*, September 26, 2013, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/52495bf34.html>, accessed on June 20, 2020.

Following the issuance of this new law, Amnesty International expressed concern about the broad definition of terrorism, warning that it could be subject to widely differing and arbitrary interpretations, thus creating the potential for abuse.¹

Needless to say, most human rights activists, following the arrests of certain dissidents and activists, have come to believe that the State abuses the use of power by invoking law of terrorism to silence critical voices. The clash between the state and social actors reflects, in essence, a broader global misunderstanding of the phenomena of terrorism. A misunderstanding that has persisted since the term gained prominence after the attacks of 11 September 2001. Locally, this global confusion overlaps with the ambiguities presented in laws and legislations enacted under the framework of combating terrorism.

In her analysis of the discourse on terrorism and its upshots in Morocco, Valentina Bartolucci employs critical discourse analysis to expose how the government appropriates the language of terrorism to advance domestic agendas and to target specific groups. Her findings suggest that the government strategically manipulates the narrative of terrorism to address ongoing issues in the country, such as ‘the danger of the Islamists and the dispute over the Western Sahara’.²

The implementation of the anti-terror legislation, however, has provided significant leverage to the state in curbing Islamist political movements and their conservative allies within society, particularly concerning contentious societal issues such as the family code *mudawana*, which was passed in the parliament in 2004 without opposition from the leading Islamist party, the PJD. Nonetheless, it is evident that Morocco, like many other countries, is capitalizing on the global discourse surrounding terrorism. By doing so, it demonstrates its adherence with international standards and secures its position as an accepted member of the international community.³ Most countries in the world, particularly those with

¹ Amnesty International, *Morocco: submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review*, November 2007, p. 2, accessed on June 30, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/68000/mde290122007en.pdf>

² Bartolucci, Valentina “Analyzing elite discourse on terrorism and its implications: the case of Morocco”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 3:1(2010) , pp. 119-135, p 131.

³ Turner, Bertram, “Islamic Activism and Anti-terrorism Legislation in Morocco” in Julia M. Eckert (Ed) *The Social Life of Anti-Terrorism Laws*, Aufl, 2008, p. 177, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839409640>.

authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, are exploiting the globally recognized narrative against terrorism to suppress their citizens and critics while imposing rules of exceptionalism and emergency. This has effectively suspended the civil state and the social contract by using intelligence agencies and deep-state apparatus to dominate the political sphere.

CONCLUSION

Morocco's religious strategy in combating terrorism is both avant-garde and proactive, setting a precedent in the African continent and the MENA region. Rethinking the traditional security-based strategies employed by most countries has become an urgent necessity to address the phenomena of terrorism in all its complexity. This requires a holistic approach to effectively confront it. Given that most radical terrorist groups derive their values and principles from religion, particularly Islam, it has become essential to challenge their ideologies from within the same source of inspiration. The goal is to reinterpret these principles to align with the modern values and ethics of moderation and tolerance. Morocco's unique approach to combat extremism through its studied religious strategy stands out in this regard. It offers a pioneering framework for understanding terrorism and developing effective methods to address it.

Yet, religion and religious beliefs are not always the principal factors behind terrorism as there has been limited empirical evidence to suggest that religion is the sole motivator for violent extremism. Many empirical insights have, however, developed other approaches to addressing terrorism by treating it as a social phenomenon. In this sense, radicalization is primarily a social issue that can reveal deeper, often less visible, drives.¹ It is important to note, accordingly, that Morocco's religious approach to fighting terrorism is incapable of definitively counter the threat without a multidimensional perspective that includes and involves various actors and institutions directly or indirectly engaged in the process. This is

¹ Eric Rosand, *In Strategies to Counter Violent Extremism, Politics Often Trump Evidence*, Georgetown University's Berkley Center on Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, May 3, 2019, accessed on June 30, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2YMvKON>.

why the societal outcomes of this approach remain limited and fall far short of the assigned objectives, especially concerning the significant numbers of Moroccan youth joining terrorist groups in Middle East. In this respect, Morocco was ranked the fourth country among those that exporting fighters to the ISIS group, with about 1,500 youth originating mainly from northern cities such as Tangier and Tetouan¹.

Furthermore, focusing solely on the structural and managerial perspective makes the religious approach very limited in matter of its practical outcomes. On the one hand, religion is a non-static phenomenon that changes evolving societal values that makes Morocco's religious policy unable to stand on a solid, forward-looking perspective. On the other hand, managing the religious institutions according to pre-determined patterns of thought will only lead to new, uncontrolled movements of rebellion among religious elites. This was evident when large groups of imams protested in 2011 following the implementation of the new official reform, which they considered as discriminatory and undemocratic especially as many of them were suspended for violating the newly assigned measures.

Nevertheless, the governments' approach to combat terrorism has neglected other significant factors beyond radicalism and terrorism, including the political ones: authoritarianism and dictatorships, corruption and oligarchy, inequality, and the lack of economic opportunities for youth, even in countries that claim to be rich in resources. Morocco has been aware of this crucial factor and has tried to address them by establishing national programs for economic development and sustainability. In 2006, the government launched *The National Human Development Initiative* (INDH), a project aimed to assist the government in improving inclusiveness, accountability and transparency in decision-making and implementation processes at the local level, in order to enhance the use of social and economic infrastructure and services by poor and vulnerable groups.² Yet the results very modest and did not achieved the assigned objectives, as admitted by both government

¹ According to a report released by the International Center for the Study of Extremism and Political Violence in London. See: <https://icsr.info/2015/01/26/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>

² See "National Initiative for Human Development Support Project (INDH)", <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P100026>, accessed on Jun 30, 2020.

officials and civil society alike. After only five years, the Arab Spring sparked its uprisings and revolts in many vulnerable Arab countries, including Morocco, where gatherings demanded social justice, democracy, and the rule of law.

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