



PolicyWatch 2254

Morocco's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism

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May 16, 2014

A Moroccan statesman discusses efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism in one of the most stable parts of the region.

On May 12, 2014, Mohamed Salah Tamek addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The current delegate-general of Morocco's Penitentiary and Reintegration Administration, Tamek has also served as a provincial governor, chief of staff to the interior minister, and head of the security portion of the U.S.-Morocco Strategic Dialogue, among other posts. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Morocco has had a largely successful record of countering violent extremism within its

borders, including the dismantling of numerous cells linked to al-Qaeda core or its North African offshoot, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Thousands of suspects have been arrested for perpetrating assassinations, assaults, and robberies; huge caches of heavy weapons have been confiscated; and authorities have foiled many attempts to attack security services, tourist attractions, diplomatic delegations, and places of worship for Christians and Jews. In addition, two channels of recruitment for jihadists in Mali were dismantled in late 2012, and two months ago, Moroccan and Spanish security forces jointly dismantled a transnational cell recruiting fighters for Syria and Mali.

The difficulty of countering terrorist violence across the Sahara and Sahel lies in the vast, multinational networks that have arisen there, facilitated by porous borders. These networks have close ties with local communities, allowing smugglers, drug dealers, and transnational criminal organizations to thrive there. For example, AQIM has survived and even increased its guerrilla activities despite huge losses suffered during the French operation in Mali. Its network of alliances extends to Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and al-Shabab in Somalia. These groups threaten government and military sites in African capitals as well as Western delegations across the region.

BOLSTERING REGIONAL COUNTERTERROR EFFORTS

Establishing effective counterterror policies across the Muslim world requires strengthening democratic movements, preventing the rise of local and regional al-Qaeda affiliates, and encouraging moderation and tolerance in education. Toward these ends, Western partners should provide technical assistance and substantial development aid to vulnerable governments across the Sahara and Sahel. Intelligence, logistical support, and special forces training must be paired with economic and social investments to ensure that counterterrorism programs can be successfully implemented.

For its part, Morocco is working with regional partners to counter violent extremism at the political, religious, economic, and security levels. These efforts include maintaining political stability and territorial integrity in Sahara and Sahel countries by bolstering democracy, human rights, and diplomacy; combatting the forces of radicalization by expanding educational programs that promote moderation, cultural relativism, and critical thinking; reevaluating direct aid that often funnels money to corrupt leaders; and strengthening neighbors through technical support and capacity building in order to combat illegal trafficking and the spread of terrorist groups.

King Muhammad VI has demonstrated his commitment to deeper cooperation with neighboring countries by embarking on several state visits and signing an unprecedented number of economic partnership conventions. He has also expressed support for joint efforts to combat radicalization, and officials from Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, Tunisia, and Guinea have indicated a willingness to train their imams in Morocco.

REPERCUSSIONS OF THE SYRIA WAR

Like many European and Arab countries, Morocco is attempting to stem the recruitment of Syria-bound jihadists and prevent them from engaging in terrorist activities when they return from the war with newfound capabilities. Roughly a thousand Moroccans have left to fight thus far; once in Syria, most of them have joined Harakat Sham al-Islam, an opposition faction formed by a Moroccan jihadist. This group seeks to train recruits in

bombmaking and heavy weapons before sending them back to fight in Morocco. The kingdom has jailed 199 such jihadists thus far, including 182 who were arrested while attempting to leave for Syria and 17 who were captured upon returning from the war.

The United States has joined European and North African countries in addressing the problem of foreign fighters heading to and from Syria, and a conference on the matter will be held in Morocco in June. Indeed, Rabat enjoys very strong cooperation with European countries facing the same threat of jihadist returnees, including France, Spain, and Belgium. Yet Morocco has virtually no security cooperation with Algeria despite the common threats they face -- a situation that undermines prospects for intelligence sharing and efficient coordination on the jihadist issue. Furthermore, current conditions in Libya pose a significant threat to the Maghreb countries, as there are no strong state institutions or armed forces to counter the growing power of extremist militants there.

DERADICALIZATION AND CVE

Deradicalization efforts worldwide seek to roll back religious extremism by tackling the underlying factors that motivate individuals to join terrorist groups. Some states have increasingly embraced deradicalization as an alternative to repression, since the latter has not always been effective in addressing the threat. Rabat adopted deradicalization at an early stage as part of its multidimensional approach to countering regional extremism. Its strategy is framed by religious traditions that emphasize flexibility and moderation as opposed to extremism.

In Morocco, the king is recognized as commander of the faithful and enjoys a monopoly on domestic religious authority that shuts out radical proponents of political Islam. This means that the Moroccan state has more spiritual credibility than many other regional governments, even those in the Persian Gulf, and its religious institutions are respected by its neighbors. Moreover, Morocco sees itself as a model democratic society that must be based on tolerant, open, and moderate Islam.

One essential component of Morocco's counterradicalization strategy is reorganization of the state's religious structures to protect citizens from invasive, extreme forms of Islam. This program has included publishing an official bulletin of imams; creating a Directorate of Religious Education within the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and decentralizing the ministry's operations; reviewing laws governing Muslim places of worship; establishing a religious council in Europe for the Moroccan diaspora; using radio and television to promote moderate teachings; and reviewing textbooks and syllabi to eliminate radical exhortations to violence. These and other efforts are particularly important given that Morocco has around 50,000 imams.

Alongside religious initiatives, Rabat's counterradicalization strategy includes the political reforms embraced by the latest constitutional amendments and the "Advanced Regionalization" program; steps to increase respect for human rights and the rule of law; and development efforts to prevent the marginalization of individuals and communities. These and other efforts can be used as a model for counter- and deradicalization in other countries, as seen in Morocco's training of foreign imams at schools of religious moderation.

In Morocco's prison system, deradicalization is accomplished through religious supervision

carried out by authorities from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and members of regional and local religious councils. In 2013 alone, these officials visited roughly 5,000 incarcerated offenders. Today, detained extremists represent about 1 percent of Morocco's prison population, or 600 out of 74,000 total prisoners. After a failed experiment in isolating these radicalized convicts, they are now intermingled with the general prison population in over half of the country's penitentiaries.

Another crucial element of prisoner deradicalization is successful reintegration into society. Moroccan prisoners are therefore being offered opportunities to study toward university degrees. Additionally, the government is partnering with private companies to provide them with work, training, and eventual employment upon release. These public-private partnerships are critical to reintegration because employment and skill development reduce recidivism, and the government cannot get every prisoner a job on its own.

A powerful example of these deradicalization efforts is the government's rapprochement with former radical Salafist icon Mohamed Fizazi -- part of a wider effort to pardon reformed Salafists in the wake of "Arab Spring"-inspired protests that emerged in 2011. Many such Salafists were willing to genuinely break from radicalism when presented with an opportunity for political integration. For his part, Fizazi was imprisoned years ago for preaching violence against foreigners and for his ties to the 2003 Casablanca bombings, yet he exhibited sufficient transformation upon his release that he was asked to lead Friday prayers in front of the king.

This summary was prepared by Jeremy Brinster.