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The Limits of Morocco's Attempt to Comprehensively Counter Violent Extremism

Mohammed Masbah

In the final days of 2017, a young Moroccan named Achraf Jouied was killed in Syria by a missile fired by one of the members of the Global Coalition Against Daesh.¹ Before radicalizing and joining the Syrian armed opposition in mid-2013, Jouied had been an active member of non-violent Islamist organizations in Morocco and had supported the election of moderate Islamists.² He is just one example among hundreds of young Moroccans who have radicalized despite the Moroccan government's implementation of a wide-ranging "Countering Violent Extremism" (CVE) strategy since 2003. The rise of this new generation of Moroccan Jihadis points to the limitations of the current CVE strategy, both in halting the ongoing radicalization process and in deradicalizing Jihadis during their prison terms.

When Morocco launched its CVE strategy after the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks, it was intended to be comprehensive, combining implementation of traditional security measures with improvement of socioeconomic conditions and increased state control over the religious sphere. In the narrow security realm, this strategy seems to have been effective, as it destroyed terrorist infrastructure and hindered Jihadi groups from operating inside the country. Yet, as measured by the hundreds of Moroccans who have joined Jihadi groups fighting abroad, the broader CVE approach, focusing both on preventing other Moroccans from becoming Jihadis and on deradicalizing imprisoned Jihadis, has in some respects failed. What explains the continued prevalence of Jihadi

militancy in Morocco despite its having initiated a comprehensive CVE effort that is praised and emulated abroad?

This Brief argues that, despite its intention to tackle the roots of radicalization, Morocco's efforts to counter radicalization have overemphasized security imperatives at the expense of its asserted broad-based approach. Owing to the nature of terrorist threats, the security sector was positioned at the epicenter of Morocco's CVE policy: Security agencies have utterly dominated matters related to terrorism and radicalization since the implementation of the policy. As a result, the non-security aspects of the strategy—which also suffered from being too broad, unfocused, and lacking in complementarity—were sidelined. The Brief additionally asserts that efforts to prevent radicalization are likely to fail without a comprehensive deradicalization program that involves civil society and also ensures effective coordination between government agencies.

The Brief begins with an overview of Morocco's current CVE policy, followed by an assessment of its effectiveness, including both elements of success as well as gaps between the policy's asserted objectives and the reality. Finally, the Brief will discuss the issue of the rehabilitation of Jihadis and how the deprioritization of that objective in the CVE policy could jeopardize the whole effort.

Morocco's CVE Policy: An Overview

Until 2003, the authorities in Rabat were largely indifferent to the activities of Salafi activists, as long as they did not pose an imminent security threat. But after the Casablanca suicide bombings of May 16, 2003—which simultaneously targeted several tourist and Jewish cultural sites, killing 45 people, including the 12 suicide bombers—Morocco adopted several measures to deal with the challenge of violent extremism. These measures focused primarily on security-related issues but also tackled socioeconomic inequality, the state's oversight of the religious sector, and the inclusion of moderate Islamists in the political sphere.

Less than two weeks after the attacks, the Moroccan parliament adopted a wide-ranging and controversial anti-terrorism law, facilitating the arrest and sentencing of 3,000 individuals between 2003 and 2017³. Some of them were subsequently sentenced to death or imprisoned for long periods. Morocco also undertook a set of reforms to modernize and professionalize its security agencies in order to increase their effectiveness, including their capacity to conduct counter-terrorism operations.

While Morocco relied on tight security actions to deal with radical groups, it also adopted non-security measures. In 2005, King Mohammed VI launched the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH),⁴ which was based on the premise that poverty and social inequality constitute serious problems with respect to maintaining political stability and social cohesion. Rabat believed that poverty was a factor that fed radicalization, since all the terrorists in the 2003 attacks originated from the impoverished shantytowns of Sidi Moumen in Casablanca.

Officials in Rabat also believed that state control over the religious sphere could be another effective tool to combat radicalization. King Mohammed VI insisted that the promotion of a moderate version of Islam would provide an effective antidote to radical ideologies.⁵ Accordingly, the King's 2004 project to reform the religious sector⁶ was designed to enhance the Ministry of Religious Affairs' power over

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mosques and religious schools and to unify religious discourse by promoting a moderate version of Islam based on Sunni Maliki doctrine and Sufism.

Finally, Morocco's efforts to tackle radicalization extended to the inclusion of moderate Islamists in formal politics. This aspect of the policy was not explicitly included in official announcements of the state's strategy, but it was evident from the regime's conduct. Already in the mid-1990s, the Moroccan government had begun to include moderate Islamists within its ranks, and, despite the 2003 terrorist attacks, it remained committed to their inclusion as part of its efforts to tackle radicalization. The logic was that keeping moderate Islamists involved in the legal political sphere would allow the government to focus its resources on fighting radicals, whereas excluding moderates would lead some of their supporters to turn to radicalization.

The Palace's commitment to keep moderate Islamists in the legal political sphere was likewise clear when the King refused to ban the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) in the aftermath of the 2003 terrorist attacks, despite the argument made by some secular parties that the PJD was a breeding ground for hate speech and terrorism. These secular parties accused the PJD of moral responsibility for the Casablanca terrorist attacks and called for its dissolution.⁷ But the Palace rejected that demand and permitted the PJD to remain a legal political party,⁸ and to compete in the 2011 parliamentary elections. The PJD won a plurality of seats in those elections and as a result was propelled to the helm of government in a coalition with secular parties. Since 2015, the PJD has also controlled the mayoralties of almost all large- and medium-sized cities in Morocco.

Moreover, the Palace also tolerated the PJD's strategic ally, the Movement of Unification and Reform (MUR), allowing it to become active in civil society. The Rabat authorities appointed some MUR-affiliated preachers to local Ulema Councils or as preachers of Friday mosque sermons, integrating them into state-controlled religious institutions and using them to fight radicalization.

Taken together, these components constituted, in theory, what many analysts consider to be an ideal CVE policy: Morocco was seen as believing—and acting on this belief—that an effective response to terrorism must not only address its symptoms but also tackle its root causes. So its strategy comprised, along with anti-terrorism activities, efforts to improve the socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable populations, control the religious sphere, and incorporate moderate Islamists in formal politics. In adopting such a policy, Morocco

claimed to be a model for how to comprehensively fight terrorism and radicalization.

And this approach won considerable international praise, especially from the U.S. Thus, in 2004, then president George W. Bush designated Morocco as a Major Non-NATO Ally and made it a beneficiary of U.S. regional aid programs, such as a five-year, \$697.5 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact.⁹ In 2006, the U.S. also signed a free trade agreement with Morocco, framed by Robert Zoellick, who signed the agreement on behalf of the U.S. government, in the name of fighting terrorism.¹⁰ Zoellick also said that Morocco's young leaders are “struggling for the soul of Islam. It is a battle of leaders who embrace tolerance against extremists who thrive on hatred.” He argued that through free-trade agreements, the U.S. “can embrace reforming states, encouraging their transformation and bolstering their chances for success even as we open new markets for American goods and services.”¹¹

The Key Achievements of Morocco's CVE Policy

From a purely domestic counter-terrorism perspective, Morocco's policy seems to have proven effective. Except for a few small terrorist attacks in 2007 and 2011, Morocco has successfully prevented the occurrence of deadly terrorist attacks on its soil since the 2003 bombings. This success is largely due to the country's political stability and the professionalization of its security services, especially in the counter-terrorism realm. According to the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior, this pre-emptive security approach has succeeded in dismantling more than 160 terrorist cells since 2003, leading to the arrest of 2,963 people and allegedly averting 341 terrorist attempts.¹² It should be noted, however, that the low number of terrorist attacks in Morocco is due not only to the efforts of its security services but also to the fact that Morocco is not a priority for jihadist groups, who view it as a reservoir for recruitment rather than as a priority target.¹³

Morocco has gradually adopted a series of administrative changes within its security agencies, enhancing the effectiveness of their counter-terrorism activities. Between 2003 and 2018, these changes included increasing staff numbers and salaries¹⁴ and obtaining mass surveillance technology enabling them to monitor radicals—as well as, sometimes, activists and journalists.¹⁵ The government also created mechanisms of coordination between different internal security services,¹⁶ as with the appointment of Abdellatif

Hammouchi as head both of the national security office (DGSN) and of internal intelligence (DGST)¹⁷—the first time that the same individual was appointed to lead both organizations simultaneously—and the creation of the Bureau Central d’Investigation Judiciaire (BCIJ, labeled in the local media “FBI-Morocco”), which assumed a leading role in countering terrorism in the country.¹⁸

Morocco’s military forces also began to play a larger role in counter-terrorism efforts. This included tightening control over the country’s borders with Algeria and Mauritania—especially after the 2014 Libya crisis, when ISIS confiscated weapons and allegedly seized aircraft. Morocco built a 100-kilometer fence along its border with Algeria¹⁹ and deployed anti-missile weaponry near airports and strategic areas. It also launched operation “Hadar” (Vigilance): patrols conducted jointly by the police, the Royal Armed Forces, the Royal Gendarmerie, and auxiliary forces at tourist locations throughout Morocco.²⁰

The reform of the religious sector also seems to have achieved its main objective, which was to increase the Palace’s influence in the religious sphere and to set up means for imposing its version of religious reform. The King asserted his power to appoint all top religious officials, including the Minister of Religious Affairs and the members of the Supreme Ulema Council—a government body that, in theory, has exclusive legal authority to issue fatwas, commenting upon and overseeing all matters of religion. In 2004, he also ordered the enlargement of the Supreme Ulema Council to include women and increased the staff and budget of local Ulema Councils. In addition, the Ministry of Religious Affairs created two new departments: the Department for Mosques, to supervise mosques, control Friday sermons, and hire imams; and the Department for Traditional Education, which supervises the content of religious education. These measures allowed the Ministry of Religious Affairs, through a close partnership with the Ministry of the Interior, to more thoroughly supervise the 50,000 mosques in the country and the hundreds of religious schools, and to vet religious staff in the mosques. This partnership has led to the suspension from their positions of many imams who were deemed extremists, and to the closing of tens of Salafi-controlled mosques and Quranic schools.

The Moroccan authorities also initiated a training program for thousands of imams and preachers. Even beyond admitting women to the Supreme Ulema Council, the inclusion of more women in the religious sphere was an important part of Morocco’s reform efforts. Since 2006, women have been admitted to

local Ulema Councils as well as to the Supreme Ulema Council, and cohorts of *murshidat* (women religious counselors) graduated from a program sponsored by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.²¹

The Limits of the Current CVE Policy

Despite its declared intention of developing a holistic and multi-level approach to countering violent extremism, Morocco’s current CVE policy does not, in fact, constitute a comprehensive strategy for fighting radicalization, for several reasons. First, the strategy remained at the level of political discourse and was never articulated in the form of a written, detailed program of action. Second, although a measure of greater coordination was achieved, no single body was created to coordinate all efforts of the main government agencies involved in CVE activities—the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the General Commission for the Management of Prisons and Reintegration (DGAPR)—and to involve other relevant ministries and agencies in the effort. The Ministry of Family and Social Integration was not included in these efforts, for example, despite the potential role it might play in the social reintegration of former radicals and the counseling of their families; and DGAPR indeed does not have a clear vision of how to deal with Jihadis after they leave prison. This failure is not the result of an inherent structural inability on the part of the Moroccan government to coordinate: Other government programs successfully coordinate several actors, such as employment efforts that involve the Ministry of Employment, the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises, the National Agency to Promote Employment and Skills, and labor unions. Finally, the government’s approach did not include civil society organizations in efforts to prevent radicalization.

Driven by security concerns that hindered the development of non-security measures, Morocco’s CVE policy failed to keep many former Jihadis from rejoining the fight after being released from prison—nor did it prevent the emergence of a new generation of radicals. Most of the Moroccans fighting abroad radicalized years after the CVE policy was announced in 2003; in fact, the number of Moroccans who have joined armed groups in the Middle East since 2011 surpasses the number who did so between 1980 and 2011. And the policy failed to prevent many former Jihadis from joining fights abroad after being released from prison. Among the 1,500 Moroccans who joined Jihadist groups fighting in Syria since 2012, at least 220 were former Jihadis who had served time in Moroccan prisons.²² Many of them went

to Syria as a result of poor prospects in Morocco for socioeconomic reintegration, while others left because of police harassment and surveillance.²³ Morocco is now considered among the main exporters of foreign fighters in the Middle East.

Morocco also has no clear policy for dealing with early signs of radicalization. The current approach entails the prosecution of anyone who publishes or shares content on social media that might be interpreted as “praising terrorism.” But many individuals who disseminate such material are not radicals per se but are, rather, at an early stage of radicalization. So instead of offering dialogue and social counseling, authorities prosecute them, sometimes leading to long prison sentences. Once in prison, many of them may become “hard-core” radicals.²⁴

And Morocco has thus far been unsuccessful in tackling the socioeconomic roots of radicalization. Despite a total expenditure of 40 billion MAD (about 4.25 billion in USD) between 2005 and 2015,²⁵ the Ministry of the Interior poorly managed the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH). As critics have pointed out, the results of INDH are mixed, more than a decade after its launching in 2005.²⁶ While the initiative created some 8,800 income-generating activities benefiting 132,000 individuals,²⁷ it seems to have failed to make sufficient progress in achieving its broader objective of fighting poverty and social exclusion.

The fact that the Ministry of the Interior was tasked with managing a socioeconomic program also suggests that the program was dictated by a security agenda rather than in furtherance of citizens’ well-being. Centralization and lack of transparency seem to have been additional obstacles in the achievement of its goals. According to a report by the National Observatory of Human Development (ONDH), a semi-governmental organization, around 54 percent of the NGOs benefiting from National Initiative for Human Development funding do not possess an accounting management system compatible with Morocco’s regulations.²⁸ The INDH also failed to target the country’s most vulnerable populations, so there is a weak correlation between INDH allocations and the geography of poverty.²⁹ Middle-class families have thereby benefited at the expense of poorer Moroccans.

Despite Moroccan official recognition of the links between poverty and radicalization, the INDH did not allocate the necessary funding for deradicalization programs to rehabilitate and reintegrate former Jihadis in society after their release from prison. Although some families of Jihadi prisoners benefited from housing

programs, this was not part of a broad rehabilitation program; they benefited only because they were living in areas where the INDH was operating.

Perhaps most importantly, Morocco’s CVE policy has been weakened by the absence of a comprehensive state-sponsored deradicalization and rehabilitation program for Jihadis in prison and after they complete serving their sentences: Most such deradicalization efforts have been unfocused and scattered. When some moderate Islamists in 2006, for example, voiced their readiness to engage in ideological dialogues with Jihadis in prison to try to convince them to renounce violence, the Supreme Ulema Council refused their offer.³⁰ Even when some radicals expressed their readiness to engage moderates in dialogue, authorities ignored their overtures.³¹

A decade later, in 2016, authorities launched a dialogue program with Jihadis called “*Moussalaha*” (Reconciliation), which was drafted jointly by the General Commission for the Management of Prisons and Reintegration (DGAPR) and the Mohammadia League of Ulama (Al-Rabita al-Mohammadia lil-Ulama), an official religious organization. The program selects Jihadi prisoners who are willing to participate in a three-to-four-month intensive training program. The courses revolve around themes of moderate Islam, Sufism, reconciliation, and other topics. Although it is too early to gauge the effectiveness of this training program, it is unlikely that it will succeed, because it is very selective: So far only 35 out of approximately 1,000 Jihadis in Moroccan prisons have taken part in it. The program attracts only those who intend to deradicalize, and hence neglects the vast majority of radical Jihadis, most of whom are supporters of ISIS.

The program also lacks continuity after the prison experience. When deradicalized Jihadis leave prison, they find it difficult to reintegrate into society—not only because of social stigma, but also because they lack the economic resources and social skills needed to be part of society. The *Moussalaha* program is focused mainly on the ideological component of rehabilitation and includes some aspects related to the development of social skills, but economic reintegration and support for families are still lacking. One example is the need to clear released Jihadis’ criminal records, since employers will not hire a person who was convicted under the existing anti-terrorism law.

According to one human rights activist who defends Salafi prisoners, many former Jihadis expressed their dissatisfaction with how authorities neglected them after their release from prison. According to this activist,

all of the released Jihadis need “psychological counseling after their traumatic experience in prison, as well as economic support to start up new businesses.”³² Those who self-deradicalize also suffer from daily scrutiny from the security services, which makes it more difficult for them to reintegrate into society.

The need for reform of the religious sector demonstrates another shortcoming in Morocco’s fight against radicalization. The concentration of religious authority in the hands of the Ministry of Religious Affairs restricted not only radicals but all other non-state religious actors who diverged from the official version of Islam. Authorities fired several imams from preaching in mosques not because they were radicals but because they criticized some aspects of the official version of Islam as dictated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

While authorities did achieve a higher degree of control over religious discourse in mosques, this often came at the expense of the credibility of the official imams among many citizens, especially the youth. And the newly radicalized generation does not learn tenets of Jihadism in the mosques in any case, but rather on the internet.³³ The recent efforts by the Mohammadia League of Ulama to counter online Jihadi propaganda have been ineffective in deterring young people from radicalization. Moreover, Salafis and Jihadis alike view the current Sufi Minister of Religious Affairs as a secularist who aims to contaminate “true Islam” by encouraging the worship of saints, a practice renounced by orthodox Muslims.

Last but not least important is the absence of the local community and of civil society engagement in CVE efforts. There are some Moroccan NGOs working on CVE, but their efforts are mainly dedicated to countering Jihadi propaganda online. There are few if any NGOs working with local communities to cultivate resiliency against radicalization and provide social and psychological support to former Jihadis and their families. This can partly be attributed to a hesitancy among civil society activists to engage in CVE out of fear of being accused of supporting terrorism. As a secular human rights activist pointed out, “we used to defend some former Jihadi prisoners from a human rights perspective, but since many of them left to Syria—including the spokesperson for former Jihadi detainees—it became harder for us to continue that support— because former Jihadis might misuse our efforts, and because we were under criticism because of that.”³⁴

Conclusion

Morocco’s “comprehensive” CVE policy, instituted in 2003, seems to have been successful in preventing and deterring terrorist groups from carrying out attacks on Moroccan soil. But the challenge of radicalization in the country continues to grow, as evidenced by the increasing number of Jihadis, especially among a new generation of radicals.

Some 15 years after the launching of Morocco’s CVE strategy, its results seem mixed. Because the security services were regarded as the main pillar of the policy, other components of the response to radicalization were marginalized. Socioeconomic development and religious reforms were broad but not cohesive, and they failed to fully consider the requirements of rehabilitation and reintegration for former Jihadis released from prison.

After the progress that has been achieved in military campaigns against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, it is expected that many of the approximately 700 remaining Moroccan foreign fighters will return home. Tens of them already have returned and been arrested and imprisoned; some have even already completed their sentences and been released into Moroccan society. And while the current security-oriented approach has been effective in preventing domestic terrorism, the lesson of Morocco’s CVE experience is that security measures alone are insufficient to tackle the roots of radicalization. Consequently, in the absence of a comprehensive reintegration program for Jihadis after their prison experience, it is likely that many former Jihadis could reradicalize, feeding a new cycle of radicalization and violence.

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