How Morocco's Religious Rehabilitation Model Could Help Gaza

by Salma Annasse **(/experts/salma-annasse)**

Jul 1, 2026

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Although local religious and social differences would present some obstacles, the proven exportability of Rabat's deradicalization machinery and the kingdom's good working relations with the Israeli government make it an intriguing candidate for inclusion in the wider Gaza stabilization effort.

With the U.S.-led Board of Peace convening in Cyprus this week to discuss postwar governance and stabilization in Gaza, attention is increasingly shifting from military operations to implementation of the Trump administration's **twenty-point plan (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-trumps-20-point-proposal-to-end-the-war-in-gaza)** . One unresolved question is which regional partners can realistically help rebuild and rehabilitate the territory's institutions after years of Hamas rule. Morocco's experience with deradicalization programming suggests it could play a role.

Over the past two decades, Rabat has developed a state-led religious system that combines closely regulated clerical training and community outreach. These two programs—housed within one bureaucratic structure and overseen by government officials—merit consideration for Gaza because they address both the rehabilitation of violent religious extremists and a wide array of necessary administrative and training functions. Moreover, Morocco has substantial experience coordinating with the Israeli government and engaging with local Palestinian actors. Given Rabat's strategic relationships with Washington and Jerusalem and its demonstrated experience dealing with extremism, it may have a useful role to play in implementing a critical plank of the U.S. plan.

Why Morocco Built This System

The kingdom's current religious framework grew out of the 2003 Casablanca bombings. After those attacks, officials traced the bombers to extremist Salafi jihadist preachers in impoverished districts. Authorities concluded that weak government oversight had allowed extremist preachers and al-Qaeda-linked networks to spread their messages through mosques and religious schools, gain influence over local religious institutions, recruit vulnerable young people, and foment conflict.

In response, Rabat moved quickly to enhance state involvement in this sector. Authorities placed all mosques under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, which now appoints and licenses all imams and controls mosque funding and religious endowment revenue. Before 2003, many imams had been chosen locally or informally; today, every preacher must complete a government-sponsored training program and pass an official exam. The government also rewrote school Quran classes and sermon guides to focus on Morocco's Maliki Islamic tradition of tolerance and national unity, rather than on scriptural passages that could be twisted toward violence. In 2015, the king opened the Mohammed VI Institute in Rabat to train hundreds of imams and religious guides under this unified, moderate curriculum.

The institute has also become an important implementation arm of Morocco's counterradicalization work in West Africa and the Sahel. As jihadist violence increased across those regions, several local governments sought help training religious officials to counter extremist messages in mosques and communities. Morocco's newly centralized religious system, standardized curriculum, and large pool of state-trained instructors made it well-suited to meet that demand. Through the institute, foreign imams receive training in Islamic theology, Maliki jurisprudence, community outreach, counseling, and communication skills, thereby expanding the number of moderate religious voices abroad and reducing the risk of any single extremist movement dominating local messaging.

In addition to the institute, Rabat operates a separate but connected program focusing on *mourchidines* and *mourchidates*—state-certified male and female religious guides who work in mosques, schools, prisons, and local communities. They meet with families, counsel young people, answer religious questions, and promote interpretations of Islam that reject violence and other extremist ideas.

Gauging Effectiveness

Hard evidence on the long-term effects and general efficacy of these programs remains limited—most public metrics focus on enrollment, partnerships, and renewal of training agreements rather than long-term outcomes, and there is little independent data showing whether Moroccan-trained clerics have reduced extremist recruitment or influence after returning to their home countries. Yet the institutional scale and durability of Morocco's system, coupled with continued foreign demand for its programs, suggest that at least some benefits are being felt. According to the most recent available figures (from late 2022), the Mohammed VI Institute had trained more than 2,798 foreign clerics across Africa and Europe. Bilateral agreements have continued to expand as well, including a July 2025 memorandum covering 400 additional Malian imams.

Morocco has also demonstrated the ability to adapt its programs to local contexts beyond Africa, including Israel and the West Bank. Its religious training work in Jerusalem is carried out by the Bayt Mal al-Quds Asharif Agency—an entity established by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 1998 to protect the city's heritage and help local Palestinians. Notably, the agency is chaired by King Mohammed VI and funded primarily by Morocco, enabling Rabat to partner with Palestinian universities, municipal councils, hospitals, and charities in order to fund humanitarian and civic projects (e.g., schools, clinics, orphan support, cultural initiatives)—efforts that cannot be pursued via military or counterterrorism organs. The agency's core mandate is East Jerusalem, but since October 2023 it has extended operations directly into Gaza, distributing food to displaced families in Khan Yunis, Gaza City, and Bureij camp with financial help from the Moroccan Association for Supporting Reconstruction in Palestine. It has also sustained preexisting educational support to Al-Azhar University in Gaza, delivering cloud infrastructure and scholarships for students to continue their studies in Morocco.

Across its work in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, Rabat has built extensive experience coordinating with Israeli authorities for permits and access. The continued flow of Moroccan projects and funding during the Gaza crisis shows that Rabat has managed to keep both Palestinian partners and Israeli officials on board.

Why Morocco's Programs Are Relevant to Gaza

Past polls have long indicated that religion is central to Gaza's social and political life, including a 2019 Arab Barometer (https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/palestine-report-public-opinion-2019.pdf) survey in which 59 percent of local respondents supported sharia-based law. Indeed, Hamas has tightly fused its rule with religious authority since 2007, governing under a strict sharia framework (e.g., policing (https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/what-hamas) women's dress and gender segregation) while detaining those who defy its interpretations. It has also used the Ministry of Religious Affairs to vet and appoint clerics loyal to the movement, standardize Friday sermons, and steer mosque messaging and community events to reinforce its political objectives and recruitment.

Post-Hamas governance cannot simply remove religion from public life; Gaza remains overwhelmingly Muslim, and Palestinian Basic Law names Islam as the state religion (https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/usdos/2013/91560#:~:text=violate%20public%20order%20or%20morality,liberties%20that%20shall%20be%20protected). Yet it can constrain officials' use of religion as a political weapon—which is exactly what Morocco's model is built to do, and why its experience is potentially useful here. Of particular value is the administrative machinery behind its model: a clerical licensing system, a standardized curriculum that emphasizes tolerance and moderation, a sermon-vetting process, and a training pipeline. The kingdom's role would be to train Palestinian clerics and administrators to run the system themselves—the same "train the trainer" approach Rabat already uses with clergy in Tunisia and Mali. Palestinians, not Moroccans, would deliver the licensing, curriculum, and sermons, which would keep the system from coming across as externally imposed.

The legal content of the kingdom's system would not transfer wholesale, though. Morocco's curriculum is built on Maliki jurisprudence, while Gaza religious life follows the Shafi'i and Hanafi traditions, so Palestinian trainers would need to adapt the content to their own tradition. Yet the ready-to-go machinery of Morocco's model is valuable in and of itself, especially given the lack of other easily transferable Arab or even Palestinian models. The Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Awqaf (Endowments) has not had a presence in Gaza since 2007, while Egypt's religious authority rests on the inherited legitimacy of a single, centuries-old institution (al-Azhar) rather than a modern, exportable bureaucratic system.

Authorities would also need to account for other limits to Morocco's suitability as a religious mentor in Gaza. First, there is no deep historical relationship between the Moroccan and Palestinian Muslim communities, and Moroccan religious authority carries none of the pan-Islamic scholarly weight that institutions like al-Azhar do—its legitimacy is tied specifically to the monarchy, which has no Palestinian equivalent. Second, Morocco's close ties to Israel and the West could arouse suspicion among Palestinians wary of outside influence, so visible neutrality would be key. Third, Morocco's record on reintegrating its own extremist elements is mixed. The kingdom has repatriated only a few hundred of the estimated 1,667 Moroccans who joined the jihad in Syria and Iraq beginning in 2012, and it moved slowly on that front for years before recent international pressure forced it into action. Fourth, Morocco's counter-extremism programs were developed with a focus on Salafi jihadist networks; Hamas derives its authority from Muslim Brotherhood ideology, a different tradition requiring its own doctrinal approach. None of this rules Morocco out, but it does argue for a cautious, carefully scoped role.

Any attempt to import the Moroccan system would also depend on Palestinians being willing to staff and run it, not just receive it. A May 2025 poll (https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/997) showed rising Gazan frustration with Hamas governance, growing support for anti-Hamas protests, and a strong focus on reconstruction and stability—evidence of an appetite for change rather than a population locked into the status quo. But interest alone cannot accomplish much without an institution able to act on it.

The National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG)—a Palestinian technocratic body vetted by Israel and supervised by the Board of Peace under UN Security Council Resolution 2803—includes a religious affairs commission intended to regulate mosque services and manage Islamic endowments. The commission is still in its early stages, so its operational attention has so far been focused on more immediate needs like health, water, and sanitation. This gap is also an opening, however: whichever partner helps build out the commission will necessarily play a role in shaping how religious authority in Gaza works going forward, rather than having to reform it later. Morocco is well positioned to do just that by training the body's future clerics and administrators. But many questions would need to be answered first, including whether NCAG will prioritize this function, who will fund it, what can be done to keep Hamas from obstructing this clear threat to its own grip on religious authority, and whether Israel and the Board of Peace will accept Morocco in this role.

On the latter front, authorities should bear in mind Rabat's major practical advantage beyond the content of its programming: namely, a working relationship with Israel through the Abraham Accords, which could greatly ease coordination with authorities on all sides. Still, Morocco's contribution would only be one element of the solution—long-term success will also depend on good governance, education, economic recovery, and a credible political horizon. Rabat's programs will have the greatest impact when treated as part of a larger stabilization framework, not as a standalone fix.

Salma Annasse is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Moroccan policy research, Middle East security, civil society engagement, and Track II diplomacy. ❖

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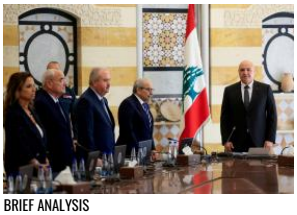

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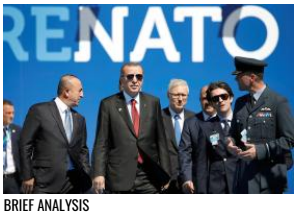

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