Morocco Deepens Anti-IS Gulf Ties, but Neglects Returning Jihadi Threat

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Even as Rabat sends delegations abroad to garner support for its security programs, the question remains: Why is Morocco one of the largest sources of IS fighters in the Arab world?

Last week, Morocco announced that it would increase intelligence and military support to the United Arab Emirates, ramping up its involvement in the coalition against the so-called Islamic State (IS). This should come as no surprise, as Morocco has been the target of threats by IS and is also keen to maintain its position as a reliable Arab partner and funding recipient for the United States and Gulf powers against terrorism. Morocco is technically part of the 60-nation U.S.-led coalition against IS, but is listed with the likes of Tunisia, Portugal, Mexico and others as having an unspecified commitment.

Beyond relations with the U.S., whose imprimatur has surely been placed on the Morocco-UAE agreement given its coordination with Gulf states against IS, the deal seems like a natural step given past economic and military agreements between Morocco and the Gulf. And in addition to financial links, Morocco has equally important ideological ties to the Gulf monarchies.

The military and intelligence pact comes after the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) invited its fellow Arab monarchies, Morocco and Jordan, to enter into a military alliance this past April. Morocco, Jordan and the GCC -- with the notable exception of Qatar -- have often quietly supported one another to stem domestic Muslim Brotherhood elements. The GCC, it seems, wants to evolve from a purely political and economic bloc to a Sunni royal axis. Last year, the GCC tried to get Morocco and Jordan to join, in a bid to cement relations among the only remaining Arab monarchies. In 2012, the GCC extended $5 billion aid packages to both countries, after having funneled economic assistance in 2011 following the Arab uprisings. While Sunni affinity and the preservation of fellow monarchies are often cited as drivers for mutual support, along with the rise of Iran and countering Shiite influence in the region, economic considerations seem increasingly relevant.

Moroccan King Mohammed VI toured GCC states in late 2012 to shore up support for Morocco's flagging economy. And while GCC aid is typically thought not to have the same explicit conditionality as Western aid, Morocco's growing role in the Gulf campaign against IS can be seen as a response to implicit conditions. The UAE and Qatar, in particular, have invested heavily in Morocco, particularly in real estate and tourism, although Rabat finds more common ground with Abu Dhabi on security and political concerns about the domestic traction of the Muslim Brotherhood than it does with Doha, with which it has had rocky relations over support for Islamist parties and disagreements over Al-Jazeera's coverage of Western Sahara.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has its own mix of cooperation and tension with Rabat. While perceived as aiding the rise of Salafi Wahhabism in Morocco and North Africa, Saudi Arabia has quietly supported the Moroccan monarchy's attempts to weaken the Justice and Development Party (PJD), the country's main Islamist political party that has headed the Moroccan parliament since November 2011. Saudi Arabia has long endowed Morocco with oil, investments and employment, helping Rabat curb its dependence on the European Union, especially France. Morocco has responded in kind to Saudi aid, most often through ideological and military support, as in 1992, for example, when it sent troops to Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Storm.

The Moroccan political establishment is predictably supportive of the latest Gulf security initiative against IS. While Islamist parties have historically been critical of Morocco's involvement in Western- or Gulf-led campaigns against terrorism, citing foreign hegemony, the PJD is unlikely to invoke any such sentiments, lest it be framed as a quiet IS supporter. The PJD has aligned itself with the monarchy in foreign policy positions since its bid to be legalized in the early 1990s and will surely push its followers and supporters to do the same.

In the short term, IS does not threaten to expand into Morocco. Instead, Morocco's real problem lies in the alarming number of Moroccans who have gone to fight for the group in Syria and Iraq. Intelligence sharing, therefore, is likely to be more useful than operational support or troop deployments to the UAE and the Gulf. According to the Moroccan Foreign Ministry, the UAE security agreement is not actually a new initiative, but falls under the banner of the government's pre-existing counterterrorism strategy known as Operation Hadar, which involves dispatching gendarmeries, police and military around the country to monitor, report and prevent potential domestic terrorist activity.

But Operation Hadar has many Moroccans expressing concern about the return of a sort of surveillance state that existed during the long rule of Mohammed VI's father, Hassan II. And despite the Moroccan government's low buy-in to the Gulf- and Western-led campaign against IS, many Moroccans perceive their country as bowing to foreign interests and are more unsettled by the sudden appearance of visibly armed officers on city streets than by a more distant notion of Moroccan IS recruits returning home. For them, state-led religious policy promoting "moderate Moroccan Islam" and zero-tolerance policies might curb domestic attacks, but fail to address the fundamental economic and social climate that has driven thousands of young men to ship off to fight in Iraq and Syria.

While Moroccan news coverage of the phenomenon often highlights the state's success at busting cells in places like Ceuta, Fes and Tangier, the government lacks a fundamental and comprehensive understanding of the motivations for jihadi recruitment. Many observers believe that it is not just ideology that drives Moroccans to join IS, but also the salary and other so-called trophies of war on offer, given widespread poverty and desperation. Yet hard empirical data on the catalysts of this sort of emigration is lacking.

Filling that knowledge gap on the appeal of militant Islam to Moroccans ought to be a priority for a government all too ready to fight terrorism aggressively at home and abroad. Understanding the drivers of discontent, including an economic climate that leads to such high emigration, is key to any enduring counterterrorism strategy. Even as Rabat sends delegations abroad to garner support for its security programs and present Morocco as immune to terrorism, the question remains: Why is Morocco the largest source of IS fighters in the Arab world after Saudi

Arabia and Tunisia? Moroccan officials are as yet unable to give a full answer.

Vish Sakthivel, an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute, is currently writing her dissertation at the University of Oxford on Islamism in the contemporary Maghreb.

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