

Shiite Community Becoming More Vocal in Morocco

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Jan 14, 2014

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Articles & Testimony

North African Shiites are growing in number, forming organizations, and mobilizing around Syria and other causes, refuting the popular belief that Morocco is removed from the dynamics of the Gulf and Levant.

As the US war drums beat in the run-up to the military strike on Syria that never happened, the Moroccan Shiite Union (Risali Maghribiya) put out a communique condemning the proposed intervention. In justifying its position, the Union stressed that the fate of Syria should be determined by Syrians and not outside powers, that US intervention would strengthen Al-Qaeda, and that Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's response to a military strike would almost certainly be to increase the violence committed against his own citizens.

Going further, the Union -- which represents Morocco's very small Shiite community -- addressed the Moroccan stance on the issue, saying that any cooperation with or participation in the strike would be "illegitimate and unjustified" unless it was grounded in a UN resolution, and adding that even the mere talk of an attack on Syria should have been postponed until after the UN report on the chemical attacks in Ghouta had been published. In the words of the Union's members, it was "ironic" that the US position had changed so much it could be on the side of Sunni jihadists and Takfirist militants.

This new brand of politically active Shiite is a relatively new phenomenon in Morocco, and those Shiites have tended to take up the faith after returning from education or migrant work in the Levant. Across the Maghreb, the faith's followers have long kept their faith a secret, and it is difficult to collect reliable figures about their numbers, though estimates go as high as 7,000 in Morocco. But it is clear that they feel pressure to keep their identity a secret due to ever-increasing anti-Shiite sentiment. They also clearly worry about the number of Moroccans joining the ranks of the Syrian rebellion. On the other side, the Moroccan government tends to distinguish between those Shiites who convert out of a sense of religious conviction and those Shiites who (in the government's eyes) adopt the faith in support of transnational Shiite causes. This has been evidenced in the relative latitude granted to preeminent Moroccan Shiite leaders, including Driss Hani, compared with the close surveillance of ordinary Moroccans

expressing an interest in Shiism.

In an interview with a Moroccan French-language newspaper last June, Hani said that if Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane and "his brothers," as well as the leaders of Tawhid wal Islah (the Sunni religious and social movement affiliated with the governing Justice and Development Party), were sincere in their condemnation of the Assad regime, they ought to send their children to participate in the "jihad" in Syria. In defending Hezbollah's interests in Syria, Hani attributed US wishes to intervene to what he called the "American-Zionist project." Otherwise soft-spoken and refined, Hani even went as far as to compare Tawhid wal Islah's negative characterization of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to the "bray of a donkey."

The increasingly vociferous political views of Shiite religious leaders are beginning to blur the aforementioned distinction between purely religious Shiites -- whom the state is more inclined to overlook -- and those who support Hezbollah or Iran. Even more, the shift from relative quietism to a more vocal opposition of state policies represents a change in the relationship of Shiites to Morocco's larger civil society, including the authorities. The next challenge for the Moroccan state's relations with its Shiite citizens will be contending with this growing political interest.

Indeed, Moroccan Shiites were not the first religious minority in the Arab world who were opposed to foreign military intervention in Syria, nor are they the only group in North Africa concerned by the rising death toll in the Syrian war. Their position is that these issues are linked to even broader problems: the slowing expansion of the "Shiite crescent," Hezbollah's reach, and the potential threat of Israel. Moroccan Shiites assert that their country's increasingly cool relationship with Iran stems both from an alliance with the EU and the United States, as well as a fear of a coherent and unified Moroccan Shiite community, particularly in Casablanca and Tangier. Indeed, Morocco cut ties with Iran in 2009, when it accused the Islamic Republic of spreading Shia Islam inside Morocco in an attempt to destabilize its internal religious unity. It was also a response to the Iran-Bahrain border dispute, although some critics argue it is a mere pretext for the outspoken positions taken.

Algerian and Tunisian Shiites, similarly limited in number, share a similar predicament. In the case of Algeria, the state fears the spread of Shiism, as is evident from the warnings among Algerian scholars and imams against sending Algerians to study in the Levant or Iran, as they might return holding Shiite beliefs. However, Algeria's non-interventionist foreign policy and its reluctance to support anything that might resemble a breach of Syrian sovereignty leave the state's interests with regards to Syria not too different from those of the religious minority it hopes to contain. In the case of Tunisia, most Tunisian Shiites appear to believe that the state has deliberately turned a blind eye to the growing Salafist strain in an effort to counter a Shiite wave, as well as to the more than 800 Tunisian Islamists in the Free Syrian Army ranks, a number that continues to swell.

Ultimately, Morocco's Shiite minority continues to be a community on the fringes of society, with little popular sway and even less political representation. To be sure, they are not a sizable constituency. Nevertheless, Shiites are growing in number, forming organizations, and mobilizing around a set of causes in an area once believed to be homogeneously Sunni. This presents each government in the Maghreb with concerns that will only grow in importance, informing each countries' policies and public opinion towards Syria and Iran. Even more, this trend clearly refutes the popular belief that Morocco is removed from the dynamics of the Gulf and Levant.

Vish Sakthivel is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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