Morocco's Move in Mali

What Rabat Gained in the Battle Against Islamic Extremism

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Jan 14, 2014

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Articles & Testimony

Although Mali could become a satellite of another North African power, Morocco's involvement is the best chance to uproot extremism there, from the inside out.

At a meeting in Morocco last November, the foreign ministers of 19 states, including France, Libya, and Mali, agreed on a deal to create a joint border-security training facility, most likely in the Moroccan capital. Known as the Rabat Declaration, the agreement was the culmination of Morocco's extensive efforts to assert itself in security and counterterrorism operations in North Africa. Its new foreign policy unfolded with the unrest over the last two years in Mali, which had, until recently, been the domain of Morocco's much larger neighbor, Algeria.

In the throes of Mali's crisis -- a tribal rebellion followed by a military coup and a militant uprising that prompted French intervention -- policymakers and pundits focused on Algeria's opportunity to play a role in settling the conflict by wielding its considerable military and intelligence strength. But they were disappointed. Although the terrorist haven along the Mali-Algeria border is a legacy of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s, when armed Islamists were pushed from the country's more populous areas toward its southern, desert border and into northern Mali, Algeria stayed out of Mali's troubles, distracted by its own internal politics and interests. Algeria focused on securing its own borders against the spread of militant Islamism and on an ongoing internal power struggle between the powerful Department of Intelligence and Security, a longtime kingmaker, and the ruling elite of the FLN party, led by the septuagenarian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

By contrast, Morocco quickly joined in the French-led intervention in Mali. By picking up the slack, Morocco was able to gain an advantage in its battle with Algeria for regional clout. Things that were previously unattainable -- such as exerting influence and establishing bilateral ties with states in the Sahel without the involvement of Algeria -- are now within Morocco's grasp.

IN THE NAME OF THE KING

Morocco has found itself largely excluded from regional initiatives due to its long-standing rivalry with Algeria; for example, it is not a member of the Algeria-based Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, which coordinates counterterrorism operations between Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Morocco's exclusion only undermined prospects for more cohesive multilateral responses to extremism. As a result, Morocco has geostrategic, economic, and perhaps even expansionist reasons for boosting its profile in North Africa. But if its motivations are also security-based, to stop the spread of militant Islamism in the lawless border regions of the Sahel, Morocco has a unique card to play in dealing with radicals: religious authority.

The Moroccan monarchy, in power since the seventeenth century, derives its legitimacy from the king's purported direct lineage to the Prophet Muhammad, which Moroccans believe to be true. The king is the self-proclaimed "Commander of the Faithful" and the highest religious authority in the country. He enjoys arguably more legitimacy than any other Arab monarch, due to a confluence of factors, from the cautionary tale of the aftermath of the uprisings against secular autocrats in Egypt and Tunisia to the king's religious mantle and Morocco's religious homogeneity. The current monarch, King Muhammad VI, has positioned himself as a symbol of religious moderation and reform across the region through initiatives such as sending hundreds of imams (including women) to European cities with large Moroccan populations to preach against extremism.

Muhammad VI has extended some of his initiatives to Mali, offering religious scholarships at Moroccan universities to Malian students. Such training seeks to combat radical ideologies and foster tolerance of non-Muslims, but it also offers a broad university education on subjects from history and geography to government and human rights. These and other efforts should strengthen the comparably moderate Malikite school of Islam and with it, the hope of pre-empting, rather than just responding to, Islamist extremism. Sunni Islam has four schools of jurisprudence -- Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi'i -- and the Malikite school is the most pervasive in North Africa and the Sahel. The Malikite school often preaches deference to even secular authorities and is generally considered Islam's more moderate strain.

Muhammad VI has easily pursued his religious policies in Morocco, since the state asserts heavy control over religious life, dictating mosque hours, requiring ministry certification of all imams, and filtering out fatwas from foreign sources to limit the reach of international Islamism in the country. State control has limited the formation of Moroccan Salafist groups, particularly when compared with its neighbors, and allowed the government to work toward co-opting any elements of domestic Salafist leadership. State-run publishers have initiated a program to print copies of the Koran to distribute to mosques domestically, as well as to Europe and parts of West Africa.

RABAT'S REACH

Morocco now wants to transfer this state-led, standardized model of moderate religious practice to Mali and become an exporter of moderate Islam throughout North Africa. In September 2013, Mali and Morocco signed an agreement to bring 500 Malian imams to Morocco for religious training, which both governments hope will serve as a bulwark against hard-line Pakistani and Saudi preachers who have built madrasas and mosques in Mali. These fundamentalist Salafist and Wahhabi sensibilities have gradually supplanted the more quietist Sufi influence in Mali and across North Africa. In November, just before the two countries signed the regional security pact, Morocco and Mali reached a religious affairs accord. Through a partnership of their respective religious affairs ministries, they agreed to cooperate on Malikite jurisprudence and interpretation in order to promote moderation and fight hard-line ideologies.

With Morocco playing a type of mentor role, the accord will inevitably involve imposing Moroccan religious practices in Mali. But Malian religious practice already has a lot in common with religious practice in Morocco -- it is

overwhelmingly Maliki -- and Malian elites see potential Moroccan hegemony as, if anything, the lesser of two evils. If the initiative is successful, Morocco's influence in Mali and the wider Sahel could grow. But Morocco could still foster long-held, irredentist hopes for a Greater Morocco, encompassing the western desert edges of Algeria, all of Mauritania, northwest Mali, and the Western Sahara. The concept followed Moroccan independence in the 1950s, when Moroccan nationalists hoped to restore the Moroccan Sultanate's pre-colonial boundaries.

In addition to the security and religious agreements with Mali, oil- and resource-poor Morocco has also sought to boost its economic ties with its southern neighbors. It has set up branches of its banks in Mali and Senegal. One of them, Attijariwafa Bank, acquired a more than 50 percent stake in Mali's Banque Internationale. The state-owned Maroc Telecom bought communications firms in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, and has affiliates in Burkina Faso. Office Cherifien des Phosphates (OCP), the Moroccan state-run phosphates company, has intensified its phosphates exploration in eastern Mali (and promoted food security in Mali along the way). Mali has other natural resources that Moroccan industries could eye for extraction, such as gold, uranium, iron ore, and possibly diamonds.

FROM FEZ TO TIMBUKTU

Only time will tell whether Morocco's relationship with Mali will be that of an equal partner or a satellite. With all the leverage Morocco stands to gain over Mali, one must wonder whether Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's government could negotiate a just compensation agreement if, for example, Moroccan miners discover vast natural resource reserves in Mali.

And the shadow of Morocco's much larger neighbor, Algeria, still looms. If Algeria becomes less aloof and preoccupied with internal issues, or if increasing instability on its borders compels its government to finally look outward and take on a larger regional role, it could supplant Morocco's upstart, soft-power foreign policy. After all, Algeria remains the primary economic and security power in the region and has a long, permeable border with Mali. The sight of Moroccan interests growing just over that border could shock Algiers out of its complacency.

Yet Morocco has found its own special role as a regional religious mediator, something Algeria cannot supplant. Thanks to Mali and Morocco's historic religious ties -- Fez and Timbuktu were once the two major centers in the western Islamic world for Malikite jurisprudence and learning -- Morocco will not have a hard time selling its religious doctrine to moderate Malians, who likely will not see it as an invasive foreign oddity, unlike any protracted Western intervention. Of course, successful de-radicalization could take years. Many destabilizing forces have swooped in and out of Mali and left destruction in their path. But the country's long-term stability and success require a partner that understands its culture and religious identity and can reenergize a society that, despite its unrest, remains resistant to extremism and violent ideology. Although Mali could become a satellite of another North African power, Morocco's involvement signals the best chance to uproot extremism there, from the inside out.

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