

Weathering Morocco's Syria Returnees

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The Moroccan government should be encouraged to adopt policies that preempt citizens from joining the Syrian jihad and deradicalize eventual returnees.

Last week, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) released a video titled "Morocco: The Kingdom of Corruption and Tyranny." In addition to pushing young Moroccans to join the jihad, the video inveighs against King Muhammad VI -- one of several public communiques in what appears to be an escalating campaign against the ruler. The timing of the video could not be more unsettling. A week before its release, against the backdrop of an increasingly insecure Sahel region, the government arrested several jihadist operatives in the northern cities of Fes, Meknes, and Taounate and the southern coastal town of Tiznit. Meanwhile, Moroccan fighters are traveling to Syria in greater numbers and forming their own jihadist groups, raising concerns about what they might do once they return home.

VIDEO AND RESPONSE

The video released by al-Andalus, AQIM's media network, begins by outlining the king's alleged profiteering and corruption, citing WikiLeaks and the nonfiction book *Le Roi Predateur* by Catherine Graciet and Eric Laurent. It then moves to the king's close friends Mounir Majidi and Fouad Ali el-Himma, accusing them of perpetuating monopolies and patronage networks that impoverish the country while allowing the king to become one of world's richest monarchs. The producers drive this point home by juxtaposing images of Moroccan slums with details from a 2009 *Forbes* article describing his vast wealth.

The video then attacks the palace's relations with Israel over the last several decades under King Muhammad and his late father. It also condemns Morocco's participation in the U.S.-led war on terror, Rabat's imprisonment of transferred Guantanamo Bay detainees, and the closure of Salafist sheikh Mohamed al-Maghraoui's Quranic schools in Marrakesh, claiming that the palace represses Islamists. It ends with images and testimonies of Maghrebi

harragas (individuals who attempt to emigrate to Europe illegally on makeshift boats, often dying in the process), juxtaposing them with AQIM training scenes and a call by Algerian AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukkel to "migrate to God rather than to Europe."

Overall, the video is evidence of an alarming campaign against the monarch and should be handled at its root. Yet the government's response thus far has been untargeted and reactive. The video is no longer available in mainstream Moroccan online media, and a secular, leftist journalist charged with linking to it in an article has been arrested and accused of conspiring with extremists. The arrest has drawn more public attention than the video itself while doing nothing to address the underlying national security issues. The palace's reaction likely reflects its fears (and perhaps surprise) over the number of Moroccans joining the fight in Syria, since the kingdom was thought to be relatively insulated from the issue of foreign fighters and jihadist returnees.

GROWING POCKETS OF EXTREMISM

Foreigners comprise an increasing portion of the Syrian opposition, including the Salafist group Kataib Ahrar al-Sham, the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra, and the mainstream Free Syrian Army. Moroccan and Algerian fighters are on the rise, Tunisian fighters number in the several hundreds, and former Libyan rebels have long taken up the Syrian opposition's cause. Although exact figures are difficult to corroborate, between 50 and 100 Moroccan fighters are believed to be in Syria today.

In Algeria, Tunisia, and other Maghrebi states, extremism is on the rise, with many jihadists maintaining strongholds in parts of their home countries while others ship off to Syria. In Morocco, however, the jihadist presence has been comparatively minimal because of the government's zero tolerance policy against such movements, enforced via high arrest and imprisonment rates. This has spurred Moroccan extremists to seek haven elsewhere, such as Algeria and Syria.

Last month, Brahim Benchekroun (a.k.a. Abu Ahmed al-Muhajer) -- a former Moroccan Guantanamo detainee now based in Syria -- announced the creation of Harakat Sham al-Islam, a new, fully Moroccan jihadist organization. According to expert Abdullah al-Rami, the group's goal is not only to recruit fighters for the Syria war, but also to establish a jihadist organization within Morocco itself: "Although the [group's] name refers to Syria and its theater is Syria, the majority of group members are Moroccans. The group's creation was also announced in the Rif Latakia, where most Moroccan jihadists who go to Syria are based." Indeed, Benchekroun is exploiting his position in Syria -- both his presence on the battlefield and his links to major terrorist groups in the area -- to emerge as leader of the Moroccan Salafi jihadist movement. At some point, he will likely seek to apply the lessons he has learned and the networks he has generated in Syria back home in Morocco.

Several other Moroccan fighters have been killed or arrested in Syria in recent months. Former Guantanamo detainee Muhammad al-Alami (a.k.a. Abu Hamza al-Maghrebi) was first recruited to the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group before joining Kataib Ahrar al-Sham and then Benchekroun's group; he was killed in action in August. Earlier this month, eleven FSA fighters from Morocco's al-Haouz province were killed in a clash with pro-regime forces. They had joined the FSA in May; one of them was the son of a former Moroccan official. In another incident, three Moroccan youths were arrested on the Syria-Turkey border and sent back home after attempting to join the jihad; they are currently being investigated by the National Brigade of Judicial Police.

The fallout in Syria will have further consequences for Maghrebi security when extremist fighters return home. Some of these returnees will likely attempt to generate new cells in Morocco, recruit within its urban slums, move on to projects in the Sahel, or recruit in Western Sahara or refugee camps in southwest Algeria. Many native Syrian rebels will no doubt encourage this exodus, since they tend to dislike the sharply conservative views espoused by foreign fighters and are concerned about their potentially powerful influence if the Assad regime falls.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To help stem this growing problem, Washington should encourage Morocco to formulate policies for deradicalizing returning fighters. This means gathering data on Harakat Sham al-Islam and other nascent jihadist movements, as well as questioning arrestees on factors that pushed them to leave Morocco and pulled them into the Syria war. The palace could also offer incentives to convince the swelling but still-manageable number of returning jihadists to abandon their lifestyle, countering the push factors that led to their departure. Those who appear truly willing to return to normal life should be provided some degree of amnesty, even if they are kept under clandestine surveillance.

At the same time, the Moroccan government should avoid taking draconian action against returnees, such as indefinite detention, torture, or banishment to "black sites." Two observations provide justification for discouraging such measures. First, parts of the Salafia Jihadia movement -- once implicated in the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks -- have been brought into the political fold through an agreement between the monarchy and the Renaissance and Virtue Party (PRV), a moderate Islamist faction. Thus far, the arrangement has proven effective in deradicalizing them. Second, some of the current Moroccan jihadists were once Guantanamo detainees, so their grievances are at least partly shaped by that experience.

Washington should also nudge Morocco and Algeria toward cooperating on border security. In particular, they should exchange best practices and intelligence on their respective Syria returnees -- an issue that could be addressed without bringing up their longstanding dispute over another key security issue, the Polisario rebel movement in Western Sahara.

Finally, although last week's AQIM video is surely alarming to the king, Washington should advise the palace to focus its time, resources, thinly stretched budget, and limited political capital on the actual problem instead of arresting journalists. The number of Moroccan fighters in Syria is low compared to Algeria and Tunisia, so the government still has time to nip the problem in the bud and pursue preemptive and creative strategies for minimizing terrorism within its borders and among its citizens.

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

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