

The Islamic State Goes After Morocco's Islamists

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By criticizing Morocco's various nonviolent Islamist factions online, ISIS/IS members are attempting to plant the seeds of emboldened violent opposition in the kingdom.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) recently declared itself simply "the Islamic State" (IS), announcing a "return to the caliphate." And despite its nominal focus on the Levant and Mashreq, it clearly has its sights set on the Maghreb too. In a video released earlier this month, various members of the group denounced key Moroccan Islamist figures, highlighting the potentially far-reaching ripple effects of the crises in Iraq and Syria.

WHO WAS TARGETED, AND WHY

Surprisingly, King Muhammad VI, a perennial target of jihadist rhetoric -- most recently by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) -- was not mentioned in the IS video sermon. Yet the Moroccans who were chosen for reproach are hardly a surprise.

The first was Omar Haddouchi, formerly of the Moroccan group Salafia Jihadia. Over the past several years, in a bid to integrate radical Salafists, the king has shown clemency to imprisoned Salafists implicated in the 2003 Casablanca bombings, including Haddouchi. In turn, these Salafists have relaxed -- even reversed -- their criticism of the monarch (for more on this trend, see ["Are Morocco's Political Salafists Committed to Peace?"](#)). Haddouchi, in newly monarchist fashion, has often spoken out against young Moroccans' involvement in the "jihad in Syria." And on July 1, to demonstrate the illegitimacy of any allegiance made to IS "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he also quoted a hadith of the Prophet that says "anyone pledging allegiance to a stranger without approval from, or consultation with, the entire Muslim community, is eligible for the death penalty."

In response, the IS video severely censured Haddouchi for joining the king in discouraging youths from joining the fight -- particularly when countering extremism and stemming Moroccan recruitment to Syria has been somewhat of a soapbox issue for the monarch on the regional stage. The video also complained that Haddouchi preferred to support "his democratic brothers and aid them in their distress" instead of backing "the initiatives of real jihadists." Two other Salafia Jihadia leaders -- Abu Hafs and Hassan al-Kettani -- were singled out for criticism as well.

In addition, the IS video inveighed against Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD), an opposition-cum-monarchist Islamist faction, referring to party member and Moroccan justice minister Mustafa Ramid as the "Minister of Injustice." This too comes as little surprise -- while the PJD has roots in the clandestine, antiestablishment group Shabiba Islamiyah, its members have abandoned discourse on an "Islamic State" and even sharia in favor of political participation, presumably under the conviction that they can take Islamic "small steps" from within. For his part, Ramid -- once a virulently anti-king figure -- has made various palace-aligned decisions as justice minister. A famous example came at the peak of the 2011 uprisings and government crackdown, when he sought to cover up torture by palace agents and publicly denied the existence of political prisoners in the country.

Another target of the IS video was the late Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, supreme guide of the banned Islamist group al-Adl wal-Ihsan (AWI, or Justice and Charity). Formerly a ranking member of a Moroccan Sufi *zawiyah* (religious school/monastery), he was described in the video as inauthentic and as a "polytheist." This is a rather common accusation leveled against Sufis, many of whom seek blessings from local saints. This saint-reverence and pilgrimage to mausoleums has bled into mainstream Moroccan ritual, much to the chagrin of Salafists and other domestic extremists. It has also provided fuel to transnational Islamist groups seeking to discredit Moroccan Islam. Most important, Moroccan Sufis -- including Yassine, who sought to slowly Islamize the country -- have typically been unsympathetic and impervious to the literalist Quranic approaches of jihadist groups. As such, the decision to target Yassine is also unsurprising: although he was (and AWI remains) staunchly anti-king, believing that any monarchy contravenes Islam, even this stance is not sufficient for the IS.

THREATENING MOROCCO

Following the comments against Yassine and the other Islamists, eight Moroccan IS members appeared in the video. Speaking a mix of Arabic and Moroccan dialect (Darija), they warned that they "intend to bring jihad to Moroccan soil," adding that they are glad "to be in a capacity to aid the caliphate" and that they are "prepared to

install this system of rule in Morocco."

Such messages are particularly significant for two reasons: (1) they confirm the group's exclusionary approach to Islam and Islamic governance -- while AQIM has primarily gone after the non-Islamist, "modern" Moroccan monarch, ISIS/IS has leveled criticism against Islamists first, portraying them as insufficient, inauthentic, even *kuffar* (infidels); and (2) they elaborate the threat that the IS poses to the Moroccan state and the broader Maghreb. For example, Oumou Adam Fatiha Mejjati, a well-known female Moroccan Salafite figure known as the "Black Widow of al-Qaeda," tweeted her pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi on June 29, recognizing him as caliph and conferring on him the title of Amir al-Mouminin (commander of the faithful) -- a label reserved, in Morocco, for the king. Some other local Salafites have followed suit. On July 9, Mejjati tweeted that she had moved to Syria to join ISIS -- a disturbing and telling development. Her husband, Karim Mejjati, was the late founder of the infamous Moroccan Islamic Combat Group (MICG) and was killed in Saudi Arabia. Figures such as these and their potential to influence other followers are likely what drove Haddouchi, a new palace counterweight against extreme Salafite forces, to speak out against the IS caliphate announcement.

While mainstream Moroccans have not been visibly moved by ISIS/IS, the group has covered all bases by attacking a broad range of local Islamist figures: according to its narrative, no type of Islam or Islamism in Morocco is *haqiqi* (authentic). The video clarified the group's intentions in the Maghreb and sought to turn Moroccan youths away from the many nonviolent Islamic/Islamist options in their country, be it the latest pro-king Salafite trend, the PJD's political route, or AWI's activist route. Citizens have already been recruited into several extremist groups fighting in Syria, including the majority-Moroccan battalion Harakat Sham al-Islam, al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and the IS, which boasts nearly a thousand Moroccan members (for more on such recruitment, see "[Weathering Morocco's Syria Returnees](#)").

The palace has yet to issue a statement on the IS video itself. The king's response will be telling on two fronts: how Rabat positions itself as a regional political authority, and whether it deepens its use of symbolic/rhetorical tools in countering recruitment and extremism at home. The king's recent decision to bar religious leaders from participating in any form of political or union activity may be indicative of the latter.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Given ongoing regional trends -- with dynamics in the Levant frequently rippling to the Maghreb over time, and instability plaguing the Sahel -- Morocco must brace itself for the possibility of an emboldened violent opposition in years to come. The Islamic State is increasingly operating on the hubristic assumption that a large swathe of the world's Muslims support its cause, further encouraging the group to expand recruitment in the Maghreb. Extremist groups have also burrowed into pockets of various countries in the region, and into the ungoverned spaces of the vast Sahel.

Maghreb countries hold strategic importance for the United States largely due to their relative stability in an unsteady region, their commitment to friendship with Washington, and their dedication to stemming AQIM's growing influence. Morocco, a key ally in this regard, is not terribly afflicted by domestic terrorism for the time being, but its citizens are being recruited to violent movements with disconcerting regularity. The number of Moroccans in Iraq and Syria has skyrocketed in the past year alone.

As such, while the IS footprint on this region may not become obvious today or tomorrow, current developments inside and around Morocco highlight the need for speedy action. In particular, Washington and Rabat must ramp up intelligence sharing on recruitment into armed extremist groups. The United States should also continue to assist Morocco and other Maghrebi governments on counterradicalization and other important preemptive initiatives, as well as on questioning arrestees about factors that pushed them to leave Morocco and pulled them into the Syria war. In addition, the palace could 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. Finally, as recruitment is occurring primarily among radical youths, Washington could encourage the Moroccan government to boost voices like Haddouchi's, which might be used to drown out those of figures such as Mejjati.

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