

## Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study

# Morocco

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UM5R

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This case study is part of a series of in-depth reports on religiously motivated violent radicalisation - and resilience to it - in 12 countries. The series examines periods in which religious radicalisation and violence has escalated and analyses relevant policy and political discourses surrounding them. While seeking to identify factors that drove radicalisation and violence in each country, the case studies also critically assess programmes of prevention and resilience-building, identifying good practices. This series was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

### **Countries covered in this series:**

Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eui.eu>



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**The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.**

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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## Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to explore radicalisation attributable to religion in Morocco to understand how it has gradually developed since the end of the last century. It's also to examine the Moroccan state's reaction after having tolerated it for a while.

Morocco is an interesting case for analysis in the sense that it's a monarchy of divine right, led by a king – actually Mohamed VI, according to a hereditary system that has lasted for three-and-a-half centuries – who holds all the powers, including the supreme religious title as he is referred to as the 'Prince of the Believers' (Amir al-Mouminine). It is also, geo-strategically speaking, an important country, located in the far west of the Arab-Muslim world, at the junction between Africa and Europe. Thus, it's situated between two continents that experience extremely contrasting economic and demographic situations and often refer to contradictory individual and collective values and principles of life. Among the Arab-Muslim countries, it has the largest migrant community living abroad, especially in Europe (about five million persons, of which two-thirds are in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, and Germany).

However, within the Arab world, Morocco does not appear to be the country most-affected by terrorist activities. In fact, between 2003 and 2018, it experienced *only* – if that can be said – five attacks. The deadliest took place in May 2003 and caused 42 deaths. The most recent occurred in 2018 and resulted in the beheading of two young Scandinavian tourists, a Norwegian and a Dane. This terrorist crime, carried out on the eve of the festivities of Christmas and New Year's day, aimed in particular to strike a blow to Morocco's tourism sector at a time of the year when tens of thousands of tourists are present in the country, especially in the region of the famed city of Marrakech.

The point is that even though the first action caused a stir domestically and led to the arrest of over 2,000 Islamist militants, none of the five actions were ever claimed and none targeted public institutions or a state symbol.

However, when analysing Morocco as a case study, it is more important to consider the number of Moroccan foreign fighters present until 2015 in the theatres of war in the Middle East or the number of migrant Moroccans involved in terrorist attacks in Europe, primarily in 2015, 2016, and 2017.

## Methodology

This paper builds on critical analysis of literature and diverse documents, including official publications such as the Constitution and legal statutes. It is also based on material collected from Moroccan researchers, political activists, NGOs, and policymakers or from public conferences organized in Morocco around questions close to the theme of the GREASE project.

It is illustrated by the most recent demographic, economic, and social data provided, in particular, by the High Commission for Planning, which is the competent authority for this information. We also used data produced by international entities such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for comparisons of the Human Development Index, which is the main qualitative indicator of a given country's development.

As regards other statistical data, especially regarding terrorist acts committed in the country or perpetrated by Moroccans outside Morocco, this information was either

obtained from official Moroccan sources or drawn from newspapers and other credible media, such as the French newspaper *Le Monde* or the BBC website.

### Conceptualisation of radicalisation

Within the community of Moroccan researchers interested in questions of extremism and violence inspired by religion, it is often considered necessary to examine the genesis of the phenomenon of radicalisation - explained by religious motives - as it has been perceived in the roughly three decades since it has emerged.

The reflection is essentially focused on a fact accepted as almost an historical truth: religious radicalisation, as a social and political phenomenon, has been integrated, for many years, into the imaginary/perception and the discourse of many researchers and politicians as well as by large segments of our societies as a phenomenon that would have always existed. In addition, it would be something almost totally attached today to Islam.

In fact, contemporary history shows that religious extremism and radicalisation, as generally analysed today, date back to the late 1970s as manifestations of 'political violence' in reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan by the army of the former USSR in December 1979. The invasion, desired behind the scenes by the US as a kind of Russian 'Vietnam War',<sup>1</sup> was presented as a communist threat against both the Free World and Islam. Hence the very rapid involvement of the Pakistanis, and especially the Saudis, who supported and financed the activities of the first 'Moujahedeens/Jihadists' against the Russian forces, with the full political support of the US and European Union.

On another level - and for many of these researchers - poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy are just some of the seeds of social conservatism helping maintain long-standing political structures in many countries as they provide a sort of guarantee of sustainability for governments lacking a democratic foundation and without economic, social, or even historical legitimacy. Such a combination, moreover, represents one of the main factors that have allowed many regimes to remain in place in the Arab world, without any change in nature, since the decolonisation movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly - with the exception of incidents linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Lebanon - the MENA region, comprising the Middle East and North Africa, had not experienced any significant act of religious violence until the end of the 1980s (with the exception of Egypt during the 1970s). However, the murderous acts of violence that occurred in western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, in Germany, Italy or Ireland, in particular, were linked to extremist groups such as the Baader-Meinhof Group in Germany,<sup>2</sup> the Red Brigades in Italy,<sup>3</sup> and the Irish Republican Army (IRA)<sup>4</sup> in Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Yes, the CIA entered Afghanistan before the Russians ...' by Zbigniew Brzezinski. *GÉOPOLITIQUE* 27.mai.2017 // Les Crises  
<https://www.les-theses.fr/oui-la-cia-est-entree-en-afghanistan-avant-les-russes-par-zbigniew-brzezinski/>

<sup>2</sup> Heinz Abosch, 'La «bande à Baader» a été anéantie... mais les problèmes qui lui avaient donné naissance restent intacts'. *Le Monde Diplomatique* (mensuel français), Juillet 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Carole Beebe Tarantelli, 'The Italian red brigades and the structure and dynamics of terrorist groups'. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Volume 91, 2010 - Issue 3.

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Guelke, 'Irish Republican Terrorism: Learning from and Teaching Other Countries'. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Volume 40, 2017 - Issue 7.

In Morocco, radicalisation on a religious basis began appearing from the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. It first started to be visible in the university and student sphere, where the Islamising language gradually took the place of socialist and modernist discourses. Then, it gradually spread to the whole of society with - in terms of clothing - the appearance of the burka instead of the traditional female dress, which is the Jellaba, and Saudi or Afghan attire for men. On the social level, this was expressed in the imposition of an increasingly strong distancing in the public sphere between men and women; the strengthening of religious rituals linked to the observance of Ramadan or to collective prayers; or, again, the beginning of the mobilisations of Islamist militants from all sides to go and fight the 'enemies of Islam' in Afghanistan, the Balkans - in particular in Bosnia-Herzegovina - and finally in the Middle East by 2011-2015. These mobilisations were at least tolerated, if not often encouraged, by the Moroccan government.

Thus, according to an interviewee, a former Salafist who left for Afghanistan at a very young age, 'Morocco's approach to Jihad in Afghanistan stuck, until the end of the last century, with that of the West. The latter was considering at that time, in large part, the Arab Jihadists in Afghanistan as "fighters for freedom". And this is why the Moroccan authorities have contributed to the journey of many Moroccans to this country through an officially recognized association called Moroccan Association for the Support of Afghan Jihad. Similarly, they had no problem with the return of Moroccan veterans in Afghanistan to Morocco'.

This trend had been desired and endorsed by the former King Hassan II as part of the strengthening of his relations with the rulers of Saudi Arabia in order to counter the supposed influence of Iran after the Khomeinist revolution of February 1979. But it began to shift, politically, after the September 11, 2001, attacks on American soil and the engagement of the international coalition in Afghanistan, which since then has been led by the US. It also shifted, especially at the legal level, after the May 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, the deadliest ever committed in the country. This resulted in Morocco's adoption of its first law criminalizing terrorism, although it concerned only 'internal attacks on public security' without reference to any religious terminology.<sup>5</sup> However, 12 years later, following the turn of events in Iraq and Syria and the proclamation of the Islamic State, Morocco's fight against terrorism was expanded to include Moroccan citizens in zones of war (or jihad) in the Middle East and North Africa, but again without referencing any religious.

## Country Background

Located the north-west of Africa, Morocco is the Arab country closest to Europe, from which it is only separated by the Strait of Gibraltar, or about 14 kms. It is also the last Arab and African country that still knows a direct and physical European presence, with two Spanish cities in the north of its territory, Ceuta and Melilla. This is not unrelated to the diverse relationships, particularly human and political, between Moroccans and Spaniards.

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<sup>5</sup> Law 03-03. Bulletin Officiel n° 5114, Tuesday 5 June 2003. Rabat, Morocco  
<http://adala.justice.gov.ma/production/legislation/fr/penal/luttecontreterrorisme.htm>

Morocco's population, estimated at 36 million in early 2020, is cited as being almost completely Muslim, although there is no census and there have never been any field surveys on ethnic or religious background. According to the most widely-accepted estimates, 99 per cent of Moroccans are 'Sunni Muslims', religiously or culturally. The Jewish minority has decreased significantly since the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948. Today there are about 3,000 Moroccan Jews inside the country. There is also a small, but apparently growing, minority of Moroccan Christians comprised of local Moroccan converts. There is also a small community of 'Shiaa' Muslim converts and Bahaïs, but of unknown numbers.

The question of religious governance by Moroccan authorities thus arises more in terms of the administration of (and control over) the affairs of the majority of the population rather than in accompanying or protecting Jewish or Christian or other religious minorities.

Among the Arab world, Morocco is generally considered a democracy (Pollock, 2013; Guigou, 2012), with a 'multi-party system', local and national elections, and a Parliament officially functioning since the early 1960s, albeit with little significant power. The real power in the country is held by the King ('Malik' or Sultan in literal Arabic), who is not subject to election or held politically responsible even in any of his *ex officio* posts, such as Chief Commander of the Army, Head of the Ministers Council, the head of the Justice Authority, and the head of National security Council, and so on.

The monarchy is very old in Morocco and founded on an historical and very strong religious legitimacy, which represents a very important difference from other Arab republics and monarchies where the leaders do not consider themselves the embodiment of religious power.

The king is called 'Prince of believers' (Amir Al Mouminine) and for some of the Moroccan population is the 'Representative of God on earth'. In the same sense, he is a 'Cherif', a descendant of the Prophet. These qualities cannot be found in any other Arab or Muslim head of state.

These considerations ensured that the generally conservative and weakly educated middle class and poor did not join the protests of the so-called Arab Spring, and that some segments of the Islamist movements not only didn't walk with the protesters, but supported the King and condemned the uprisings. This is particularly the case of the PJD (The Party for Justice and Development, the brother of the Tunisian movement Ennahda and Turkish, AKP) which has headed the government in Rabat since the beginning of 2012. It also the case of the 'Boutchichi' association, a very strong Sufi organisation based in eastern Morocco that organized a large street demonstration against the '20 February' movement in support of the Constitutional reform proposed by the King in June 2011.

However, these same considerations have not prevented the appearance during the last three decades of radicalised Islamist currents, most often close to the 'Saudi Wahhabists' or the 'Muslim Brotherhood'. But, at that stage, the opposition mounted by these radical movements was (and is still) directed more towards 'social and religious deviations' and some impious foreign powers or governments than towards the monarchic system and the King himself, whom most of these movements consider the 'Protector of Islam'. Even the economic and social problems affecting large parts of society are attributed to the actions of the government and the king's entourage rather than to the monarch.

However, we view that the reinforcement of the conservative character at the religious level of large components of Moroccan society and the appearance of radical groups among them are intimately linked to the aggravation of these problems. Furthermore, opposition of a socialist or progressive nature has been thwarted in favour of opposition of a religious nature. Both are linked to several factors of foreign origin such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the different wars in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and the Middle East.

**Drivers of religiously-inspired radicalisation and assessment**

Without referring back to the autocratic character of the Moroccan system of government, as indicated above, and the potential effects of such a system in strengthening radical political and ideological currents, it is possible to advance here two levels of motives, internal and external, that moved in the direction of a progressive radicalisation of a segment of Moroccan youth by the late 1990s.

**Internal drivers of radicalisation, demographic and socio-economic background**

The Moroccan population multiplied almost three-fold between 1961 and 2019,<sup>6</sup> as shown in Table 1, growing from 11.89 million to 35.67 million over less than six decades.

Table 1: Evolution of the Moroccan official population by area of residence (1960-2019):

Year	Total	Urban	Rural	Urban population/Total %
1961	11.897	3.547	8.350	29.81
1971	15.379	5.409	9.969	35.17
1982	20.419	8.730	11.689	42.75
1994	26.073	13.407	12.665	51.42
2004	29.891	16.463	13.428	55.07
2014	33.848	20.432	13.415	60.36
2019	35.675°	22.439	13.236	62.9

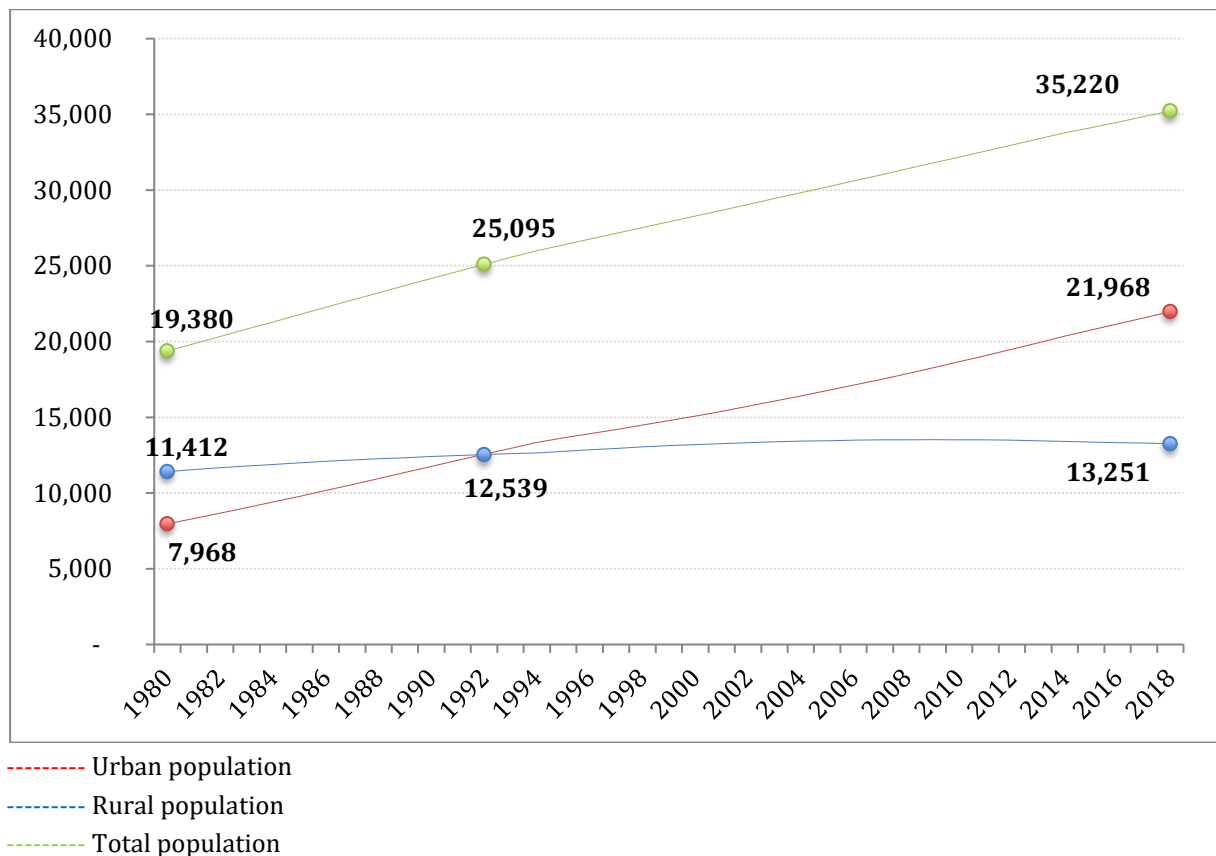
Source : Haut Commissariat au Plan, Rabat, Morocco.  
[https://www.hcp.ma/Population-du-Maroc-par-annee-civile-en-milliers-et-au-milieu-de-l-annee-par-milieu-de-residence-1960-2050\\_a677.html](https://www.hcp.ma/Population-du-Maroc-par-annee-civile-en-milliers-et-au-milieu-de-l-annee-par-milieu-de-residence-1960-2050_a677.html)

The birth rate, after peaking at over 2.7 per cent between 1969 and 1972, has started to decline since then. Today it is 1.25 per cent, one of the lowest birth rates in Africa. However, if the growth rate of the population as a whole has slowed, the urban population has risen, leading to the multiplication by 6.32 times of the latter's number, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. It should also be noted that, like most Arab countries and developing countries in general, Morocco is demographically young, with almost 45 per cent of the population under the age of 24.

<sup>6</sup> The data for 1961 and 2014 are from a reverse projection based on the results of the general census of population and housing of 1961, 1971, 1982, 1994, 2004 and 2014. From 2014 onwards, it is the updated population projections based on the results of the 2014 census.



Figure 1: The evolution of urban and rural populations (1980-2018):



Source : Haut Commissariat au Plan /High Commission for Planning, Rabat, Morocco. [www.hcp.ma](http://www.hcp.ma)

This means that issues of primary importance such as housing, unemployment, security, or migratory pressure are now concentrated in the cities.

Among the major challenges posed by the Moroccan population's structure, that is to say mainly its youth, are combatting unemployment, the low level of national income, and high levels of adult illiteracy. Available socio-economic data indicate that Morocco and its population can be considered in a situation of relative poverty, including within the Arab world. Indeed, with a total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 103.61 billion US\$ (2018, estimated), per capita income equals 2,832 US\$.<sup>7</sup>

On the UN Index of Human Development (IDH), in 2018 Morocco ranked at 123 among 189 countries, down from 122 in 2016. Thus, Morocco places in the 'medium' range in human development, with an HDI of 0.667 out of 1 (0.598 for women and 0.713 for men) after Egypt (at number 115), Palestine (119), and Iraq (120). By comparison, Algeria was at number 85, with 'high' levels of human development and an HDI of 0.754; Lebanon came in at number 80 on the index, Tunisia and Jordan both at 95, and, its conflict notwithstanding, Libya at 105 also rated 'high' on HDI.

This ranking also takes into account Morocco's high illiteracy rate – almost 32 per cent of the adult population and one of the highest rates in the Arab world.

<sup>7</sup> <https://malijet.com/actualite-internationale/210510-classement-des-pays-africains-par-pib-en-2018.html>

Looking at the labour market, the highest unemployment rates are still among youth, women, and graduates living in urban areas, according to the High Planning Commission. Indicatively, in 2017, the unemployment rate stood at 26.5 per cent overall but reached 43.2 per cent

among youth aged 15 to 24 years and urban dwellers in the same age group. Unemployment rises with the level of qualification. Thus, it varies from 3.4 per cent among those with no qualifications to 17.2 per cent for graduates.

Such a configuration of the labour market naturally creates strong dissatisfaction among the concerned populations as well as great social tension. This, among other things, led to a rise in migratory pressure among young Moroccans but also fuelled their dislike of their society and its economic and political system as a whole – a sentiment that for some time has been one of the surest paths to radicalisation.

All the elements mentioned above – which are linked to younger population segments and concentrated in urban areas – objectively represent a real basis for religious radicalisation in the absence of other modes of political expression aimed at improving access to a better standard of living for those at the lowest economic and social rungs.

### **External drivers of radicalisation in Morocco**

The main external factors significantly influencing the radicalisation of a large number of persons in Morocco include those for which Moroccans, as Arabs and Muslims, have a very strong sensitivity.

In this regard, it is possible to evoke the wars of Afghanistan, from the 1970s until today. The war in Afghanistan against the former USSR was initially seen as a war between Islam and communism. From 2001 onwards and the American intervention there, the Afghan wars will be seen as a confrontation between Islam and the West, represented by the US.

The Bosnian War began in 1992, and by its end in 1995 accounted for the deaths of around 100,000 civilians and soldiers, among them at least 25,000 Bosnian Muslims. Within this war, the massacre at Srebrenica (11/16 July 1995) and its 8,372 dead, all Bosnian civilians, had an immense impact in the Arab-Muslim world, including Morocco.

To the effects of these wars one must add the consequences on Arab (and Muslim) public opinion of the Intifidas of 1987 and 2000 in the occupied Palestinian territories as well as the wars in Iraq (from 2003) and in Syria (from 2011).

These external events will be amplified inside Morocco (as in several Arab-Muslim countries) by the conjunction of socio-economic and political elements, making a large part of the population, and especially young people, more sensitive to the arguments of the supporters of 'Political Islam', for whom everything suffered by Muslims is attributable to their distance from the 'true values of Islam' and to the hatred of Westerners towards them. Among those elements, it is possible to identify economic and social factors such as a large-scale poverty and a great imbalance in the distribution of national wealth, youth unemployment, a high level of illiteracy, and inadequacies in the health system. These are compounded by qualitative, intangible, cultural and political factors, such as education's failure and the progressive weakening of 'traditional' political parties, including left-wing parties.

In the 1980s and 1990s, their cumulative effect was to strengthen Radical Islamist currents, under the influence of trends related to 'Saudi Wahhabism' and the 'Muslim Brotherhood'. Subsequently, young Moroccans would become involved in or commit various terrorist actions in Morocco and in Europe, while hundreds joined the battlefields in the Middle East, starting especially from 2011 (see Section 6, Crisis case studies).

### **Moroccan approach to counter religious radicalisation and violence and build resilience**

The Moroccan approach to managing the religious sphere, and therefore also with a view to combating radicalisation, is first of all public policy. Thus, the Moroccan state considers that such management, both in terms of its design and its execution, follows its own cogs. Additionally, non-state actors have no role to play in this as the state considers such a role would infringe upon its authority and security. This is especially sensitive as a segment of Moroccan civil society believes that the country's development and evolution towards the establishment of a democratic political system requires the separation of state and religion.

#### **The state's approach**

The state approach to countering radicalisation in Morocco comprises, overall, three components. An institutional component, in the broad sense; an educational one, and a legal and operational component.

#### **The institutional component of the state's approach**

Under the king's umbrella – considered by the Constitution, and in fact, as the holder and organiser of powers in religious matters in Morocco – the government, represented in this by the Ministry of Habouss and Islamic Affairs, has adopted an approach based on four complementary objectives in religious matters. One of these aims more specifically at combatting radicalisation. Thus, the main goals for the management, as closely as possible, of the religious sphere by the state in Morocco can be summarized as follows:

- A search for political and social legitimacy. Thus, the preservation of the king's authority and, therefore, of the royal system's sustainability does not depend on elections, a parliamentary vote, or any other designation's system as having the main responsibility for the state, but on the supposed cohesion of the population's majority. And this is fundamentally linked in Morocco to the widespread belief<sup>8</sup> in the king's

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, in Morocco there has never been an opinion survey on the attachment to the king or his popularity, or the effectiveness of his activities. As with any autocratic system – and in a social configuration where precariousness and a high level of illiteracy dominate – the majority of the population seems to adapt to the king's different roles, especially those in the religious and political spheres. An illustration of this is the percentage of votes cast in support of the last Constitution proposed by the king in 2011: 98 per cent, with a participation rate of almost 74 per cent compared to less than 45 per cent participation in legislative or local elections. See Le Monde (French newspaper), 2 July 2011. [https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/07/02/victoire-du-oui-au-referendum-constitutionnel-au-maroc\\_1543794\\_3218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/07/02/victoire-du-oui-au-referendum-constitutionnel-au-maroc_1543794_3218.html)

prominent religious role which responds to a strong demand for serenity and moral security in the absence of material well-being and economic and social order.

- To counter, in the field, political and union opposition as that has already happened in the last three decades of the twentieth century with the Left political socialist and communist opposition, and more recently following the protests triggered by the Arab Spring since 2011.
- To face, since the late 1970s, both the rise in power of Shiite Islam in Morocco, supposedly parallel to the increased Iranian influence in the Maghreb and the Middle East, and the religious radicalisation of a part of the society, as a result of external events linked to the wars in Afghanistan and the Balkans, or to the repression by the Israeli security forces since 2000, in particular, against the Palestinian population in the occupied territories, Gaza, and Lebanon.
- To support Moroccan diplomacy, especially in certain sub-Saharan African countries politically close to Morocco such as Mali, Senegal, and Guinea Conakry. One of the reasons for creating the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Scholars resides at this level. This foundation is based on a set of goals among which 'to unify and coordinate the efforts of Muslim scholars, both in Morocco and in the rest of the African countries, to define, spread, and consolidate the tolerant values of Islam on the basis of the unity of [Islamic] doctrine'.

### **The action of the Minister of Habouss and Islamic affairs (MHIA)**

Achieving these objectives is within the role of MHIA, which is responsible for the management of the religious sphere by implementing significant measures with financial, institutional and human resources.

'One manifestation of the intensive work that has been carried out with the stated aim of dealing with particularly the phenomenon of radicalization is the immense body of regulatory legislative texts, and the tenfold increase within one decade of State budget allocated to religious services. These include the following, in particular, the construction, renovation and equipment of mosques; looking after imams and taking care of their material and social needs; holding in-service training of imams under the supervision of the religious scholars; training young imams from among university graduates; training spiritual guides from among female university graduates who would provide guidance to women and men in mosques and in other institutions, such as schools, hospitals and prisons; enacting laws that regulate relations with the caretakers of religion and between the State and the individuals who wish to contribute to building mosques and to their upkeep in such a way as not to allow their intervention to interfere with the fundamentals or to disseminate extremist ideology or political exploitation of religion in any form or shape; providing administrative supervision that can closely follow the local management of religious affairs and structuralizing religious education.' (Toufik, 2014).

## **The High Council of Ulemas**

The same role of ensuring that youth and the population as a whole follow the ‘right path’ is fulfilled by the Council of Ulemas.<sup>9</sup> Chaired by the King and placed under the authority of the Minister of Habous and Islamic Affairs, as indicated above, the High Council of Ulemas has legal authority to orient and control ‘the religious scholars in a number of domains, such as implementing the fundamentals of religion, especially in mosques, the intellectual enhancement of the care-takers of religion and of the general public, which would definitely curb negative phenomena such as terrorism’. Its role includes ‘providing guidance and in directing people’s behaviour includes the dignity of the individual, the Divine Decrees and human rights in general, a role they perform in accordance with the traditions of the Sunna and the acts of the founding fathers. They exercise it within the sphere of freedom and legality, and their educational roles are in conformity with the great principle known in Islam as “enjoining good and forbidding evil.” More often than not terrorism abuses this principle to disturb public life in societies and to contest the legitimacy of the ruler’ (Toufik, 2014).

## **Traditional religious education**

The MHIA seems to especially target the ‘training of Imams’ and education components given that they influence the minds of younger generations by trying to put, and then keep, them on the ‘right’ path.

At this level, Islamic education, introduced into public education system in the mid-1970s, represented a significant change in teaching religion in Moroccan public schools. Through the political instrumentalization of Islam, it was deliberately intended to counteract the rise of secular political and ideological streams, particularly among the educated youth in high schools and universities. From then on, Moroccan youth would become the privileged target of a systematic action of Islamisation carried out both by the state, under the supervision of the MHIA, and by the emerging Islamist organizations. In fact, the implementation of this policy of youth Islamisation in schools and universities began in the mid-1960s, following the demonstrations of 1965, and continued ever-more significantly in subsequent years. The goal was to eradicate secular (socialist/Marxist) ideologies in schools and universities. The government thus believed it would be able to contain protests, as the opposition at the time was spearheaded by the youth.

The religious policy inaugurated at that time responded to the monarchy’s strategy of hegemony that had made the conquest of school youth one of its main objectives. The emerging traditional Islamist forces had naturally also made Islamisation of schools one of their strategic goals. The field of education has always been under pressure from their side to review educational programs in order to Islamise content. The traditional clerics organized in the League of Moroccan Ulemas have never ceased to petition public authorities to change the curriculum in the same way. Some political parties had also pushed for the same purpose. Istiqlal (Independence), the centre-right nationalist party of the old reformist leader Allal Al-Fassi, was among these forces. Its executives, strongly present in positions of responsibility within the Ministry of National Education, have

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<sup>9</sup> See also, Mission permanente du Maroc à Genève : “L’expérience du Royaume du Maroc dans la Prévention et la Lutte contre l’Extrémisme Violent”. (Document in French. Undated). <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/RuleOfLaw/PCVE/Morocco.pdf>

always worked for this cause, guided in their choice by the Salafist ideology of the party and its doctrine in the field of education. The new directions in the field of education during the 1970s and 1980s would strengthen this trend, particularly in terms of the Arabisation of education. This Arabisation went hand-in-hand with the Islamisation of the curriculum and became more concrete as the authorities began to follow this path. The Istiqlal party could only rejoice at this turn of events and jumped to participate in the implementation of this 'Arabisation-Islamisation' of education under the combined effect of the party's own religious reformism (Salafism) and the religious fundamentalism of the monarchy, mainly interested by its sustainability.

The MHIA also plays a central role within this traditional, religion-led system of education, as it does in general public education. Indeed, it totally controls five key areas, in addition to the Mohammed VI Foundation of African Ulemas. These include the structures of religious education covering Koranic education, called renovated education, of which the ministry has been in charge since 1964, and schools said to be traditional. These are former centres of religious learning, scattered throughout Morocco, and whose mission is to train junior clerics such as preachers, muezzins, and imams. According to the MHIA census conducted in the school year 2017-2018, there are 286 traditional schools: 50 per cent are located in the regions of Souss-Massa (the birth place of the current prime minister) and Tangier-Tetouan-Al Huceima (the region from which many Moroccan fighters left for Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016); 99.56 per cent of these schools are annexed to a mosque and 71.68 per cent are run by associations.

Other key areas controlled by the MHIA are the religious science Chairs held by the Ulemas (religious scholars) appointed by the ministry in the country's main mosques and an Islamic centre for training religious managers. The latter was founded in 1974, and was autonomous before being taken under the wings of the MHIA in 1985. The MHIA also oversees the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morshidin (male religious counselors), and Morshidat (female religious counselors) in Rabat. This institute was founded in 2004 and opened its doors to foreign students in 2015. In 2019, it had more than 1,300 students from 11 countries, including 150 women, alongside Moroccan students. Foreign students come mainly from sub-Saharan African countries, including Mali, Guinea Conakry, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Chad, and Niger. In accordance with an official French-Moroccan agreement signed in 2016, about 50 French students join the institute each year. These students follow a three-year course devoted to Islamic sciences, humanities, Jewish culture, and the introduction to Christianity.

## **The legal and operational component**

### **The legal component**

Two important laws stand out among the legislative arsenal Morocco has adopted in its fight against terrorism over the past 20 years. These are Law 03-03 and Law 86-14.

#### **Law 03-03**

Morocco adopted its first anti-terrorism law on 16 May 2003, just a few days after the five simultaneous terrorist attacks – never claimed – in Casablanca. Under Article 2018-

1,<sup>10</sup> actions 'Constitute acts of terrorism, when they are intentionally in relation to an individual or collective enterprise with the aim of seriously undermining public order by intimidation, terror or violence, the following main offenses: Deliberate attack on the life of persons or their integrity, or their freedoms, the kidnapping or sequestration of persons; counterfeiting or falsification of currencies; destruction, damage or deterioration; hijacking, degradation of aircraft or ships or any other means of transport, degradation of air, sea and land navigation facilities and destruction, degradation or deterioration of means of communication; theft and extortion of property; illegal manufacture, possession, transport, release or use of weapons, explosives or ammunition and participation in an association formed or in an agreement established for the preparation or commission of one of the acts of terrorism'.

Article 218-2 adds that also '...punished by imprisonment of two to six years and a fine of 10,000 to 200,000 dirhams (1,000 to 20,000 \$) [is] anyone who defends acts constituting terrorism offenses, by speeches, cries or threats uttered in public places or meetings or by writing, etc.'

As for the acts provided in the first paragraph, they are punished by 10 to 20 years in prison, or life if the acts of terrorism resulted in mutilation, amputation, or deprivation of the use of a limb, blindness, loss of an eye or any other permanent infirmity for one or more people.

The perpetrator is punished with death when an act leads to the death of one or more people.

It is under the terms of this law that nearly 2,000 people were convicted of terrorist acts, following the attacks of 2003. This law does not mention international terrorism, i.e., the participation of Moroccans in terrorist acts of the same nature outside Morocco.

### **Law 86-14**

This law, adopted in 2015, expanded Law 03-03 to Moroccan foreign fighters and acts considered terrorist committed outside Morocco. This addition followed the proclamation of the creation of the Islamic State (ISIL) in Mosul on 29 June 2014 and complete shift in the position of the 'international community' led by the US as from August 2014. It was also precipitated by Morocco's vote the same month for UN Security Council Resolution 2170, which 'reaffirms that terrorism, including the actions of ISIL, cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, or civilization' and, among others, 'calls upon all Member States to take national measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to, and bring to justice, in accordance with applicable international law, foreign terrorist fighters of, ISIL, ANF (Front al-Nosra or Jabhat al-Nosra, which operates essentially in Syria) and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, reiterates further the obligation of Member States to prevent the movement of terrorists or terrorist groups, in accordance with applicable international law, by, inter alia, effective border controls, and, in this context, to exchange information expeditiously, improve cooperation among competent authorities to prevent the movement of terrorists and terrorist groups to and from their

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<sup>10</sup> Dahir of 28 May 2003 promulgating the Law No. 03-03 on the fight against terrorism. Official Bulletin n° 5114 of Thursday, 5 June 2003

<http://adala.justice.gov.ma/production/legislation/fr/penal/luttecontreterrorisme.htm>

territories, the supply of weapons for terrorists and financing that would support terrorists<sup>11</sup>. More than that, Morocco will engage militarily with the international coalition against Daesh from September 2014<sup>12</sup>, which automatically implies that it will henceforth consider the combatants on Syrian and Iraqi lands as enemies’.

Since then, and because of concern over the local repercussions of these policy changes and the prospect of the return of defeated but war-hardened radicals, Morocco has adopted a more focused approach on security.

Thus, according to Law 86-14,<sup>13</sup> the following acts constitute offenses of terrorism:

- ‘the fact of joining or attempting to join together individually or collectively, in an organized or unorganized framework, in entities, organizations, bands or groups, terrorists, whatever their form, their object, or the place where they are located, even if the terrorist acts are not intended to harm the Kingdom of Morocco or its interests;
- ‘the fact of receiving or attempting to receive training or training whatever its form, nature or duration inside or outside the Kingdom of Morocco, with a view to committing an act of terrorism to the inside or outside the Kingdom regardless of the occurrence of such an act;
- ‘the fact of enlisting by any means whatsoever, of training or of training or of attempting to enlist, train or train one or more people, in view of their rallying to entities, organizations, bands or groups, terrorists inside or outside the terrorism of the Kingdom of Morocco’.

These acts are punishable with imprisonment of five to 15 years and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 dirhams (about 5,000 to 50,000\$). Similarly, anyone who, by any means whatsoever, persuades, incites, or provokes others to commit one of the offenses provided for under these articles is punished with imprisonment of five to 15 years and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 dirhams.

### **The operational/security component**

The legal arsenal thus presented was simultaneously supported by the creation of a new operational security structure, the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation, (French acronym BCIJ), qualified by certain observers of the Moroccan FBI.

The BCIJ is a high-level Moroccan security service, founded by a king's decree in early 2015.<sup>14</sup> Its establishment comes as part of the strengthening of good security governance in accordance with the changes in the international and regional situation, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, and at a time marked by surge in terrorist acts around the world.

The Bureau reports, hierarchically, to the General Directorate of Territorial Surveillance. In this sense, it’s responsible for handling, under the supervision of the public

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations, Security Council, Resolution 2170 (2014) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7242nd meeting, on 15 August 2014

<sup>12</sup> See “Le Maroc envoie ses F-16 en Irak contre l’État islamique”. Jeune Afrique (16 December 2014). <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/37536/politique/le-maroc-envoie-ses-f-16-en-irak-contre-l-tat-islamique/>

<sup>13</sup> Law No. 86.14, amending and supplementing the provisions of the penal code and penal procedure relating to the fight against terrorism. <http://adala.justice.gov.ma/production/legislation/fr/Nouveautes/code%20penal.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://aujourd'hui.ma/actualite/le-bcij-demantele-une-cellule-terroriste-117320#.VRxIFDvz0So>



prosecutor, the crimes and offenses provided for under Article 108 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, in particular banditry, drug trafficking, arms and explosives trafficking, terrorism, attacks on the security of the state, and counterfeiting. This new structure includes elite police forces who have received quality training in legal and professional matters, and its office is equipped with advanced technical and technological logistics.

In July 2019, i.e., a little more than four years after its creation, the BCIJ had dismantled nearly 70 terrorist cells in Morocco.<sup>15</sup> Between 2015 and 2018, it had dismantled 57 terrorist cells, including 51 linked to Daesh. Its agents also arrested 902 people, including 14 women and 29 minors. In addition, according to its chief, the total number of terrorist cells dissolved in Morocco since 2002 has risen to 183, while the number of people arrested for terrorist activities stands at 3,129.<sup>16</sup>

### **Non-state, societal led approaches**

In the fight against religious-inspired radicalisation and violence motivations, and as indicated above, the various state institutions and services – including the MHIS and security departments - act without ever having recourse to the support or advice of civil society, whatever its nature. Even religious associations never seem to be consulted on this matter.

However, some NGOs, human rights or cultural, are nonetheless involved at different levels in facing the phenomenon of radicalisation within Moroccan society, working either with prisoners or in the school environment. This is particularly the case with the Centre for the Rights of the People (in French, *Centre des droits des gens*, CDG), or of small associations like the Moroccan Association of Arts and Development and 'Al hayat', the Moroccan Association of Victims of Terrorism.

The activities of these associations can just as easily be mentioned in the section devoted to good practices, but we felt - given their marginalisation by public policies of prevention and fight against radicalisation - that it was more useful to discuss them in this section, given what we believe should be the engagement of society as a whole in dealing with the phenomenon of religious radicalisation.

The CDG<sup>17</sup> was founded in 1999 by a group of human rights activists and originally aimed to create a national network for the defence and education around human rights as a means of political and social intervention. Women, children, teachers, legal and health personnel have been given priority in its activities for human rights education. The Governing Body – on which women are widely represented – sits in Fez and has 240 sections spread throughout the country.

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<sup>15</sup> L'Opinion.fr (France), 29/7/2019

<https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/comment-maroc-a-structure-services-lutte-contre-terrorisme-192938>

<sup>16</sup> Tel Quel, Casablanca, 12/10/2018

<https://telquel.ma/2018/10/12/nombre-de-cellules-demantelees-personnes-arretees-attentats-dejoues-le-patron-du-bcij-fait-le-point-1614135>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Centre-des-Droits-des-GensMaroc-437678076292123/>

The CDG, which operates with the financial support of local and international partners, offers support and legal guidance to the target population. Specialists provide individual and confidential consultation to people who are victims of human rights violations and attacks on their physical integrity. At the same time, and since the number of people convicted of terrorist activities began to grow, the CDG has stepped up its activities in prisons around the country (67). This is increasingly aimed at the reintegration into society of prisoners for terrorist motives and is based on lessons related to the culture of human rights as well as on teaching painting, drama, or dance. CDG officials estimate that the programme has enabled 86 former terrorism convicts, released in 2018, to return to normal life.

The Moroccan Association of Arts and Development was created in 2016 in Salé, near the Moroccan capital Rabat. From the beginning, it aimed to contribute to reintegration activities for prisoners organized by the Prison Administration. However, it was soon asked by the same administration to also participate in activities to benefit Salafist inmates at two prisons in the region of Rabat, Al Arjate in Salé (men) and Tiflet1 (women's jail).

The first activity introduced the detainees to Arabic Calligraphy. One of the greatest calligraphers in the country, Mr. Karmad, led the sessions. He began by teaching the prisoners calligraphy using the words of the Koran. The association understood that it was not necessary to start directly by learning to draw and paint because dogmatic Islamists do not like to reproduce human faces and bodies (Haram). In a second stage, the association began to meet with the prisoners to make them aware of a different vision of life that would facilitate their integration into society. Dialogue at roundtables continued twice a week until officials felt the change in participants' behaviour. They were then chosen to participate in painting exhibitions organized on the occasion of national holidays. The inmates were regulars at the Painting Learning Workshops. Their first participation in 2018 was with drawings representing the anniversary of 'the Green March' and they were subsequently invited to take part in the 'National Detainee Day' organized at the Mohammed V Theatre in Rabat in 2019. Banque Al Maghrib organized an exclusive exhibition for their works.

Thus, the Association was able to convince 14 radicalised male prisoners and 10 female prisoners, whom it was able to mobilise inside the prisons, to change attitude, and even mentality. These inmates were all released from prison and were able to reintegrate into social life. The association has maintained contact with them and invites them to its various activities. It associates them with the 'Spring and Autumn Universities' organized by the Prison Administration in Agadir (Aït Melloul), Meknes (Toulal), and Béni Mellal (4 December 2019). In addition, the prison administration has reproduced all the pictorial works created by radicalised former inmates in its official documents and reviews as well as in the documents of the Ministry of Justice.

Alongside these two civil society groups, there are other associations intervening sporadically or locally, but their action is so limited and little-known that is only marginally meaningful. This is mainly the case of an NGO created in 2018, 'Al Hayat' (Life), for education in the values of tolerance and the prevention of extremism. This association is leading an extremism-prevention project in Ait Ourir,<sup>18</sup> a small town

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<sup>18</sup> <https://ma.ambafrance.org/Alhayat-pour-l-education-aux-valeurs-de-la-tolerance-et-la-prevention-de-l>

in the Marrakech-Safi region, from which several young people have left since 2011 for Syria and Libya.

This initiative, taken at the regional level, aims to respond to the problem of the spread of radicalisation and all forms of extremism in the province. In this context, the association has chosen as its primary goal to form clubs to educate young people in the values of tolerance; thus far two high schools and three colleges in the city are involved in the project. But its interest lies above all in the fact that it is supported by the French Embassy in Morocco through a program called Innovative Projects of Civil Societies and Coalitions of Actors (PISCCA), which technically and financially supports Innovative Projects of Civil Society and Coalitions of Actors and concerns associations established under Moroccan law in rural and peri-urban areas that rarely have access to international funding.

The last NGO discussed here is the Moroccan Association of Victims of Terrorism (AMVT). It is chaired by a woman, Souad Begdoury El Khammal,<sup>19</sup> who lost her husband and son during the attacks of 16 May 2003, in Casablanca. This association is above all commemorative, and every May since 2004 has organized an event intended to raise awareness 'so that such a tragic event does not occur in our country'.

### **Crisis case study**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Morocco has experienced security crises of a terrorist nature at three levels. These crises, particularly those linked to domestic terrorism, were on a much smaller scale compared to other Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, or even Tunisia and Egypt. But those attacks involving migrants and sons of Moroccan migrants in Europe in 2004, and especially between 2015 and 2017 and those linked to the presence of Moroccan fighters in the Middle East and Libya (since 2011/2015), represent a greater source of political and security concerns, for both the Moroccan authorities and many European countries.

#### **Security crisis inside Morocco:**

Domestically, Morocco experienced a series of five attacks between 2003 and 2018. The deadliest took place in Casablanca in 2003 and the most widely-publicized were in Marrakech and its environs in 2011 and 2018 because they targeted mainly foreign tourists:

- On 16 May 2003, the Casablanca suicide bombings struck five places in the Moroccan economic metropolis, with a heavy toll: 33 dead in addition to the 12 suicide bombers. Salafia Jihadia, linked to Al Qaeda, was the sponsor of these attacks; 2,000 radical Islamists arrested following these attacks.
- On 12 March 2007, an attack on a Casablanca cybercafé resulted in one death and four injuries; 30 people were arrested and tried in the courts of several cities in Morocco.
- On 14 April 2007, two kamikaze brothers detonated explosive belts near an American cultural centre in downtown Casablanca.
- On 28 April 2011 in Marrakech, an attack, known as the Argana coffee bombing, left 17 dead and 20 wounded of various nationalities. The perpetrator of the attack – which took place in Jamaâ El F'na, a tourist centre – was from Safi, a city that has lost much of its once-flourishing sardine canning industry and is now marked by a high level of unemployment. He belonged to the Salafist movement and was sentenced to death.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/en/node/5181>

- On 17 December 2018, in the village of Imlil, in the region of Marrakech, two young tourists, a Norwegian and a Dane, were murdered in their sleep. This terrorist crime, carried out on the eve of the festivities of Christmas and New Year's Day, aimed to strike Morocco's tourism sector, particularly in this region overrun at that time of year by thousands of tourists from both Europe and Morocco.

With an average of one attack every three years, this series of terrorist acts, never claimed - as reported elsewhere - killed a total 67 people, among them 14 suicide bombers. Compared to the Arab region, or even to Spain or France, the human losses suffered by Morocco seem relatively limited. This is most certainly to the credit of the various Moroccan security forces, particularly the BCIJ action. But that does not necessarily mean that the terrorist risk inside Moroccan territory remains high. The indicator is the number of cells dismantled by this same office, as mentioned earlier - 70 between March 2015 and July 2019, and therefore an average of 1.6 cell per month.

### **Attacks on European soil**

Regarding acts of a terrorist nature committed by Moroccans, migrants or children of Moroccan migrants outside Morocco, especially in Europe, it is possible to cite those that have occurred since 2015:

- The Paris attacks (13 November 2015) that killed 130 people and wounded hundreds more;<sup>20</sup>
- The Brussels Airport and Metro attacks (22 April 2016), when 32 people were killed and many more injured;<sup>21</sup>
- The Barcelona and Cambrils (Spain) attacks (17/18 August 2017), where a driver, within a group of 12 Jihadists, killed 16 people and injured more than 100.<sup>22</sup>

Moroccans (migrants or children of migrants) had been involved in other attacks earlier, notably, the train bombings in Madrid (11 March, 2004) that killed 191 people and wounded 1,841.<sup>23</sup> This was the largest massacre of civilians ever committed in Spain and one of the most serious to have ever been perpetrated in Europe in modern history.

In the Netherlands, a 26-year-old man, with dual Dutch and Moroccan nationality, killed Theo van Gogh, a Dutch filmmaker, in November 2004 over of his film about Islamic violence against women.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to creating a climate of tension and stigmatization against the Arab community, and the Maghrebian in particular, in Europe, these acts triggered, in part, the change of government in Spain, following the electoral victory of the Socialist Party (PSOE) on 14 March 2004, i.e., three days after the attacks in Madrid. As for the death of the Dutch filmmaker, it led to a radical change in Dutch society's attitude<sup>25</sup> towards

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48784476>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35869985>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40964242>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-14666717/2004-madrid-train-attacks>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/03/film.filmnews>

<sup>25</sup> The Netherlands have lost their innocence. Our country has suddenly become the target of international terrorism', declared the prosecutor during the trial of the murderer of Theo Van Gogh, organized in July 2005. <https://www.dw.com/en/van-gogh-murderer-sentenced-to-life/a-1659337>

migrants, more particularly Moroccan, causing tension in diplomatic relations between Morocco and the Netherlands that still remains.

### **The Moroccan Foreign Fighters and their return**

The Moroccan approach to the question of terrorism at the international level, as mentioned above, is practically in conformity, from a political point of view, with what is agreed by the countries that Morocco considers to be its friends and its external allies, notably, the US and France, as well as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Thus, with the exception of the occupied Palestinian territories and Lebanon, in all areas of war or presence of armed groups in the Middle East such as Afghanistan, Libya, and various African countries south of the Sahara (Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina-Faso, among others) and all conflicts supported by the Americans and other Moroccan allies are also seen as such by the Moroccans. Accordingly, all those who lead armed movements that the North Americans classify as terrorist are similarly viewed by Morocco.

Thus, during the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-1989), the 'mujahedeens' were considered freedom fighters, and it is in this context that Morocco had no issue with the presence of Moroccan fighters there until the US started their own war in Afghanistan, in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on American soil when the same 'mujahedeens', including the foreign fighters on the Afghan scene, became terrorists in the eyes of the Americans and their allies, including the Moroccans.

Likewise, for as long as the movements seeking to overthrow President Bashar El Assad in Syria had the support of the international coalition led by the US, Morocco considered that actions carried out against the Assad regime were legitimate. This intensified after Morocco became an active member of the group created in 2012, the 'Group of Friends of Syria', and was asked to host the fourth meeting in Marrakech in December 2012 – the year when the PJD, which has links to the Muslim Brotherhood, rose to power as the majority party. The state continued to turn a blind eye to the departure of large numbers of young Moroccans to join the fighting against the regular Syrian army, alongside many other foreigners such as the Saudis, Jordanians, Tunisians, or even Russians flocking to the civil war zones in the Middle East. A Moroccan researcher notes that 'recruitment of Moroccan foreign fighters increased and reached its peak between June and December 2013. During that period of six months, more than 900 joined the fight in Syria – an average of around 150 fighters per month. According to Moroccan security officials, the estimated overall number reached 1,122 fighters in June 2014, and 1,350 by July 2015, of which at least 254 had died in the fighting. If Europeans of Moroccan origin are included, the number increases to somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 fighters in total. After Syria, Libya has become the second most important destination for Moroccan jihadis. Reportedly, some 300 Moroccan fighters have followed the call by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for North Africans to join the group's self-proclaimed Emirate in Libya' (Masbah, 2015).

But this shifted after the summer of 2014, as discussed earlier, following the military engagement of the international coalition, the vote on UN Resolution 2170. Following the reversal of Morocco's position, the Moroccan foreign fighters began returning to Morocco as ISIL's defeat on the ground began to take shape in late 2015, with the entry

of Russian air forces into Syrian skies that September.<sup>26</sup> In fact, according to the head of the BCIJ, more than 200 returnees were arrested and brought to justice in mid-2018.<sup>27</sup> Prior to that, by another estimate, in April 2017, 198 of the 1,623 Moroccan fighters who left for Syria had returned to their country of origin, while 500 remained on the ground (Barret, 2017).

The risks attached to the return of Moroccan foreign fighters include that they may

- carry out attacks, individually or in groups, in Morocco, even without having received a direct order to do so;
- reconstitute jihadist cells, with national connections or in connection with groups abroad;
- disseminate radical and jihadist ideologies, particularly among young people.

These different risks are even more important given that most Moroccan jihadists come from neighbourhoods and towns (especially small and medium-sized ones) that are relatively poor compared to the national average, with a high prevalence of unemployment and marginalization and low availability of basic social services (school, dispensaries, health centres, etc.). This should be seen in relation to the various drivers of radicalisation as presented above.

What the Moroccan authorities fear most today is indeed the possible connections between radicalized cells or individuals and certain groups within society who are unhappy with their economic and social situation. Such a posture, which could have become explosive and totally out of control during the protest movements recorded in the Rif region, in northern Morocco, between 2016 and 2017, could recur thanks to the great social crisis linked to the Covid-19 health crisis that Morocco is experiencing - like most countries around the world - since March 2020 (Lahlou, 2020).

## **Best practices and conclusions**

### **The Moussalaha programme – Reconciliation, a sort of good official practice**

In summer 2017, the General Delegation for Prison Administration and Reintegration (DGAPR) launched a programme called Moussalaha/Reconciliation for detainees involved in extremism and terrorism. This programme was set up to provide the best conditions for a participative reintegration of people who have been sentenced to prison for extremism and terrorism. According to Prison Administration officials, this programme should be based on a scientific approach and strike at the foundations of terrorism with monitoring and a long-term vision aimed at protecting Moroccan society from this phenomenon. Initially launched by the DGAPR in partnership with Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas, the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH), and the Mohammed VI Foundation for the reintegration of prisoners, since 2018 the programme has also been supported by the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of State for Human Rights, the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs, the Presidency of the Public

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<sup>26</sup> Le Monde (French Newspaper) with AFP and Reuters, 7 October 2015.

[https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2015/10/07/moscou-pourrait-coordonner-ses-bombardements-en-syrie-avec-washington\\_4783939\\_3218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2015/10/07/moscou-pourrait-coordonner-ses-bombardements-en-syrie-avec-washington_4783939_3218.html)

<sup>27</sup> L'Orien-Le Jour (Beyrouth) & AFP, February 13, 2019.

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1157213/retour-de-jihadistes-politique-proactive-a-rabat-mesures-preventives-a-alger.html>

Prosecutor's Office (Public Prosecutor's Office), and the High Council of the Judicial Power.

The key word of Moussalaha is 'Reconciliation'. This revolves around three axes, namely: to be reconciled with oneself, to be reconciled with the text of the Koran, and, finally, to be reconciled with society. The courses offered within its framework are intended to monitor people imprisoned for acts of terrorism. The objective is applicants' psychological rehabilitation by allowing them to behave in an appropriate manner within society and ultimately to assure their smooth social reintegration at the end of their prison sentence.

For this, the qualifying methodology adopted by the programme has the following dimensions:

1. Qualification and psychological support: provide prisoners with cognitive and behavioural skills to immunise them against extremist discourse and promote their positive integration after their release.
2. Intellectual and religious qualification: deconstruction of extremist discourse, correction of certain concepts, identification of the flaws contained in extremist discourse, provision of keys allowing inmates to decipher the codes of fanatic discourse to avoid intellectual withdrawal from religious extremism and the behaviour it generates.
3. Judicial qualification: helping prisoners understand and assimilate the legal framework organizing the relationship of individuals with society and the state according to the dialectic of rights and duties and the principle of positive citizenship.
4. Socio-economic qualification for reintegration: provide prisoners with the necessary skills and capacities enabling them to make the best use of their scientific and craft skills and qualifications to build a personal or societal project which is not only aimed at achieving socio-economic independence but also uses personal capacities to serve society and be reconciled with it.

With a view to protecting convicts from the dangers of extremist ideology, ordinary prisoners are also trained in prison establishments to coach their fellow prisoners and make them return to better feelings towards their fellow believers. After these various qualifying phases, a 'scientific' evaluation is organized with each candidate to determine his progress and, especially, to note his assimilation or not of the standards relating to the understanding of the Koran and to life and coexistence in society.

Despite the collaboration of 10 public institutions and a number outside experts in the Moussalaha programme, it has had very limited success in terms of the number of target people who would have benefited. This number, according to the Moroccan press agency MAP,<sup>28</sup> is only 68.

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<sup>28</sup> AP-Express. <http://www.mapexpress.ma/actualite/societe-et-regions/rabat-ceremonie-daccueil-10-ex-detenu-beneficiaires-du-programme-moussalaha/> February 6, 2020.

Given the resources invested in this programme for three years and the small number of those who have effectively benefitted compared to the nearly 1,000 Moroccans serving prison sentences for terrorism, it is frankly difficult to consider the Moussalaha/Reconciliation programme a success. Of course, it is possible that its results in the medium and long term are more convincing but that requires waiting a few more years since changing minds is a long-term project. Nor is it easy to know more about the modalities of this programme's implementation in prisons. For the rest, many other actions are carried out by Moroccan civil society regarding the same objectives of the Moussalaha programme, which it will be possible to present and discuss in another phase of the GREASE project.

## **Conclusion**

The range of actions carried out by the MHIA as well as by many public institutions didn't eliminate the threats contained in the phenomena of radicalisation and violence of religious essence, as the latter remains significant in Morocco and among some Moroccans living abroad.

These threats remain recurrent despite:

- the role of Commander of the Believers devolved by the Constitution to the King;
- the legislative arsenal seeking to 'protect' Moroccan society against religious radicalisation;
- the political discourse seeking to accredit the idea of a moderate and open Moroccan Islam on its international humanist environment;
- the control exercised by the MHIA - a real state within the state - on the majority of mosques in the country and on large parts of the education system;
- the political (and often financial) control over public and private media.

However, if the reality on the ground on the radicalisation front does not seem to correspond to what the Moroccan rulers want, it is because powerful factors are still acting inside Moroccan society. At this level, it is possible to mention:

- The strengthening of conservative currents within society, in cities and rural areas, in relation to the reforms introduced in the Moroccan education system since the 1970s. This has also been fostered by the penetration of Arab satellite television stations since the 1990s, easily accessible to illiterate women as well as to the most-disadvantaged social strata as this is one of very few distractions available to them. The MHIA's activities, including, in particular, the acceleration of the construction of mosques throughout the national territory over the past few years, is another factor reinforcing conservative social currents. At this level, it seems that the official management of the religious sphere in Morocco suffers from a certain wait-and-see attitude and great contradictions from period to period. Thus, in the mid-1970s the former King Hassan II had used his religious function to strengthen the most conservative Islamist currents in order to weaken socialist and leftist ideologies. The current king found himself faced with a leg of political Islam that he has only begun to contain, only to face since 2003 – and especially since 2014 – terrorist attacks, such as the one on Casablanca. In the same vein, the changes in Morocco's international policy



and its declared or tacit alliance with the US and Saudi Arabia pitted jihadist groups against it and gave them the necessary arguments to strengthen an Islamist movement, radical and violent, among part of the population. Moreover, many persons in this movement believed themselves authorized to go fight in the Middle East and Afghanistan with the consent of the Moroccan government.

- The socio-economic situation, as presented succinctly above, marked by a high level of unemployment among young people and graduates in particular, a high precariousness of a large part of the population as well as the difficulties of access to basic public services (such as school, healthcare, water, and sanitation). This became clear, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic which Morocco has been experiencing since March 2020. As a recent illustration of the above, nearly 25 million Moroccans, or about two-thirds of the Moroccan population, had to resort to state aid or support from NGOs and individuals in order to face the consequences of the health crisis on their lives.

- The high level of illiteracy still prevalent among the population and the fact that the official and private media play no role in the education of society and in its possible openness to the principles and universal human values;

- The difficulties of organisation and expression in (normal) political parties and also the impossibility of controlling the economic or political decisions engaging society - which will be dealt with later, in a synthetic document. This gives rise to a fatalistic approach by many people, especially the poorest, who rely on God to solve their problems. Hence the great effectiveness of the slogan 'Islam is the solution', very often heard during demonstrations organized by Islamist currents.

Recently, the efforts undertaken by the country in the security dimension, especially the creation in 2015 of the BCIJ, and the adoption of the law on the criminalisation of the departures of Moroccan fighters abroad, seem to have borne fruit since Morocco has recorded only one terrorist act since 2011. But the risks remain, especially with the return of Jihadists from the Middle East and Libya, and the possible existence of terrorist sleeper cells awaiting a relative release to commit new attacks. This risk also remains should the economic and social situation of the majority of the population continue unchanged, and if, moreover, the education system is maintained as it is today. However, these are two of the main factors for strengthening conservatism in society. They are thus two engines driving the trend towards radicalisation alongside the use of religion as an instrument for legitimising political power.

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