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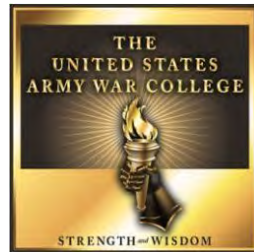
America First ≠ America Alone:
Morocco as Model Counterterrorism
Partner

by

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America First ≠ America Alone: Morocco as Model Counterterrorism Partner

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Morocco represents a model partner in the overall campaign to counter violent extremism (CVE) worldwide. Morocco's innovative CT and CVE policy is organized around three pillars: (1) enhancing security governance and CT legislation, (2) fighting social inequality and promoting human development, and (3) reforming the religious field. This policy has proven effective in limiting attacks on Moroccan soil and is already being exported to other countries in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East through an Imam training academy that promotes a moderate brand of Islam and other partnership building activities. Despite this impressive record of success, some valid criticisms exist such as alleged human rights abuses among the security services and lagging human development indicators within Morocco. Such challenges should be addressed to enhance the program's overall effectiveness. The United States should help Morocco propagate its effective programs to other potential partners in order to enable affordable and sustainable solutions to CT and CVE that will diminish the worldwide threat of terrorism.

America First ≠ America Alone: Morocco as Model Counterterrorism Partner

Introduction

On October 4, 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the release of President Trump's new National Strategy for Counterterrorism (NSCT). In the press release, Secretary Pompeo stated the "strategy emphasizes the importance of diplomacy and the role of international partnerships in combating the terrorist threats we face."¹ The first page of the NSCT includes the statement, "America First does not mean America alone," indicating America ultimately benefits when it supports and encourages international partners to embrace successful counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies, enabling these partners to eventually address the threat of radical Islamist terrorism independently.² The Kingdom of Morocco represents such a partner. In the years since 9/11, Morocco has built a model program for CT and CVE, leading U.S. Africa Command to label Morocco "Africa's premier security exporter."³ The success of Morocco's CT/CVE programs is indicated by the fact that it has experienced only two terrorist attacks since 2012—the fewest in North Africa by far.⁴

According to a 2014 United Nations speech by Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, Morocco's global strategy for CT is organized around three pillars: (1) enhancing security governance and upgrading CT legislation, (2) fighting social inequality and promoting human development, and (3) reforming the religious field.⁵ This strategy has proven effective in limiting attacks on Moroccan soil, and Morocco is already exporting elements of its program to other countries in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East through partnership building activities and an Imam training academy that

promotes Morocco's moderate version of Islam. Despite this impressive record of success, some valid criticisms exist such as alleged human rights abuses among the security services and lagging human development indicators within Morocco. This paper will examine the three pillars of Morocco's CT program, while addressing criticisms and making recommendations for improvement. Correspondingly, the paper will argue that the United States should reinforce its efforts to support Morocco's CT and CVE programs, showcase the country as a model CT partner, and help it to propagate its effective programs to other international partners. Doing so bolsters "America First" by enabling affordable and sustainable solutions to CT that will ultimately diminish the worldwide threat of radical Islamic extremism, while enhancing security and prosperity for America and the world.

Of note, countless studies have been conducted into the fields of CT and CVE. This paper will not attempt to conduct an exhaustive literature review of such studies but instead will focus more specifically on the three pillars of Morocco's CT program and Morocco's relations with the United States and other international partners.⁶

Background

Before examining Morocco's CT program in detail, some background information is useful. The Kingdom of Morocco is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy in which the King, Mohammed VI, enjoys substantial power. Often categorized as an "authoritarian" state (Morocco is rated "partly free" in Freedom House's annual index of "Freedom in the World"), the Kingdom did enact liberalizing reforms after Arab Spring uprisings of 2011.⁷ At that time the King devolved more powers to the Parliament and

reformed the country's constitution. Nevertheless, the King still retains near absolute authority over foreign affairs, the military, and religion.

The King's religious legitimacy stems from his constitutionally enshrined title as "Commander of the Faithful," and the fact that he traces his lineage to the Prophet Mohammed. It is this authority that allows the King and the state religious institutions he leads to institutionalize Morocco's more moderate and apolitical brand of Sunni Islam—an undertaking referred to as "bureaucratizing Islam" by author Ann Marie Wainscott.⁸ Morocco is 99% Sunni Muslim and is known for practicing the "moderate" Sufi, Maliki, and Ash'ari traditions of Sunni Islam which will be explored later in the paper.

Geostrategically located in northwest Africa, Morocco is the only African country bordering both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. As such, it represents a key gateway to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. This also makes it a key transit



Map of Morocco, CIA World Factbook

corridor for migration of economic refugees and terrorists—mostly from Africa to Europe—which is a security concern for the European Union. In fact, the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 and in Barcelona in 2017 had a Moroccan nexus. Despite this, European leaders have frequently commended Morocco for its security cooperation and assistance in apprehending terrorist suspects. In 2008, the European Union recognized

Morocco with an “advanced status agreement” reflecting a high level of political cooperation.

Separately, Morocco enjoys positive international relations as a “major Non-NATO ally,” a co-chair of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and a key military partner through its participation in the defeat-ISIS coalition. Additionally, Morocco hosts multinational exercises including U.S. Africa Command’s largest such exercise, AFRICAN LION.⁹ Morocco was readmitted into the African Union in 2017 after a 33-year absence caused by disagreements over the political control of the Western Sahara—a disputed region to the south of the internationally-recognized borders of the Kingdom of Morocco.

Morocco claimed sovereignty over the region following Spanish withdrawal from its former colony in 1975, sparking a conflict with the separatist Polisario Front. Following a ceasefire between Polisario and Morocco in 1991, the area has been monitored by a UN peacekeeping force. Morocco considers the defense of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara to be its number one foreign policy priority, and foreign recognition of the Polisario’s independence claims has led to significant rupture of relations with its neighbor to the east, Algeria, and with Iran among others.¹⁰

Despite the fact that the United States expresses no formal position on the status of Western Sahara, bilateral relations between the United States and Morocco are extremely positive. Morocco was the first country to recognize the United States by opening its ports to American ships in 1777. In 1786, Morocco and the United States formalized their diplomatic relationship by signing a treaty of peace and friendship, a document that represents the longest unbroken international partnership in U.S.

history.¹¹ This partnership continued through the Cold War during which Morocco remained aligned with the United States in contrast to its Soviet-aligned neighbor, Algeria.¹² Also Morocco is the only African country with which the United States has a bilateral free-trade agreement. Since entering into force in 2006, Moroccan exports to the United States have more than doubled, and U.S. exports to Morocco have more than quadrupled, representing a combined total of over \$3.4 billion in trade and positively impacting both nations' economies.¹³

During Mohammed VI's reign, the country's open, market-oriented economy has experienced steady growth and has embarked on impressive modernization initiatives including the world's largest solar energy farm and Africa's first high-speed rail network connecting Tangier and the country's commercial center in Casablanca.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Morocco suffers from significant youth unemployment and inequality, especially in urban areas.¹⁵ Such concerns have led to recurring protests since 2016 in Morocco's economically-disadvantaged Rif region in the northern part of the country. These protests began after a fishmonger was crushed to death in the back of a garbage truck after attempting to recover some of his goods that were confiscated by local authorities. The situation is strikingly similar to protests that ignited the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, when local fruit merchant Mohamad Bouazizi set himself on fire after local authorities confiscated his produce. Unlike in Tunisia, however, the Moroccan government preempted calls for regime change through limited government reform but also through mass arrests, lengthy prison sentences, and alleged security force abuses.¹⁶ Moroccan security forces also initially used heavy-handed tactics in response to the first terrorist attacks in Morocco following 9/11.

Morocco experienced a series of radical Islamist suicide bombings on May 16, 2003 in Casablanca, three suicide bombings in March and April 2007 in Casablanca, and a bombing at a café in Marrakech on April 28, 2011. Following the 2003 terrorist attacks, Morocco relied on a more coercive approach to CT, characterized by mass arrests and support to the U.S. program of rendition, torture, and “black site” prisons.¹⁷ Over time, however, Morocco focused less on coercion as exemplified by substantially fewer arrests after the terrorist attacks in 2007 and 2011 and its increased use of collaborative approaches to security such as participation in regional and international fora such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and the Global Counterterrorism Forum.¹⁸ These approaches demonstrated success with only two reported incidents since 2012—a kidnapping/beating of an actress in 2015, and the beheading of two Scandinavian tourists in December 2018. While the former was arguably not a terrorist attack *per se*, the latter was attributed to four “lone-wolf” Moroccan terrorists inspired by the Islamic State who pledged their loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video posted online. All four were captured by Moroccan security services within days of the attack, demonstrating the relative efficiency of Moroccan investigative and police forces. Reforms to the security sector will be covered in detail in the section on the security pillar of Morocco’s CT strategy below.

Assessing the Three Pillars of Moroccan Counterterrorism Policy

I. Enhancing Security Governance and Counterterrorism Legislation.

While recognizing that “counterterrorism cannot be exclusively addressed through the security dimension,” Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita nonetheless

noted the importance of security as the first pillar of Moroccan CT policy.¹⁹ The U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism also recognizes the importance of enhancing security capabilities. One of the six lines of effort in the NSCT is to “strengthen the counterterrorism abilities of international partners,” which includes U.S. assistance to “professionalize the military, law enforcement, judicial, intelligence, and security services.”²⁰ The government of Morocco, with U.S. support, has made significant progress in professionalizing these key elements of its security pillar, while also reforming and strengthening its CT legislation to effectively confront the threats of a post-9/11 world.

Within two weeks of the May 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks, the Moroccan government issued broad CT legislation known as the Law to Combat Terror (Bill 03.03). The law contains a definition of terrorism and sets penalties for participation in terrorism including: a minimum 10-year sentence for terrorist activity, mandated life in prison for terrorist activity leading to injury, and the death sentence for terrorist activity leading to death.²¹ The law also allows for selective wiretapping, seizure of property used in terrorism, and a 12-day preventive detention (without legal recourse) for terrorist suspects.²² This legislation has played a significant role in the apprehension of terrorist cells, with the wiretapping provision proving effective in apprehending cells responsible for the 2003 attacks and rounding up Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb cells responsible for the attacks of March/April 2007.²³ Such authorities have also allowed Moroccan security services to disrupt terrorist cells and prevent attacks, as will be described in the section on the criminal justice system later in the paper.

In 2015, recognizing the threat from groups such as the Islamic State, the Kingdom of Morocco amended the law to expand the definition of terrorism and specifically address the threat of foreign fighters on Moroccan soil. The amended legislation criminalizes attempts to join a foreign terrorist organization as well as recruitment and training activities such as attending training camps in regions of tension. It also allows prosecution of foreign nationals who commit crimes outside Morocco if apprehended on Moroccan soil.²⁴ According to the U.S. State Department, observers generally agree that the 2015 CT law is consistent with international standards.²⁵ Morocco's CT legislation, though, is certainly not without its critics.

Human rights organizations claim Morocco has frequently used the broad definition of terrorism as justification for imprisoning journalists and other critics of the government on charges of incitement to terrorism. For example, in July and August 2003, less than three months after passage of Bill 03.03, Morocco convicted four journalists under the law for publishing stories related to terrorism.²⁶ Additional examples of journalists or private citizens being imprisoned for incitement are plentiful in reports from human rights organizations.²⁷ Despite such charges, the Moroccan constitution and law does generally provide for the freedom of expression—with notable exceptions such as criminalizing criticism of Islam, the institution of the monarchy, and the government's position with regard to sovereignty over Western Sahara.²⁸ Additionally, a 2016 law passed by the parliament establishes a new press code that limits punishments of accredited journalists to fines only.²⁹ However, "unaccredited" journalists and private citizens can still face prison sentences. In comparison to the rest of North Africa, Morocco ranks second best out of five countries on a world press

freedom index, but 135th out of 180 countries overall, suggesting that there is still room for improvement.³⁰

Another criticism of the CT legislation is the fact that following the 2003 attack, Morocco used the legislation as the legal basis for mass arrests of terrorism suspects, eventually imprisoning as many as 5,000 people.³¹ More recently, however, Morocco is resorting less frequently to mass arrests in response to terror attacks, while using them more frequently in response to economic protests in the northern Rif region. For example, according to a lawyer for the protesters, 1,200 have been arrested since 2017 for participating in or supporting the protests online.³² Conversely, the 2007 Casablanca terrorist attacks resulted in just 45 arrests, and the 2011 Marrakech terrorist attack resulted in only 8 arrests.³³ The December 2018 attack on two Scandinavian tourists resulted in a total of 22 arrests.

The decreased use of mass arrests over the last decade contrasts with other countries in the region such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria—which have detained thousands and in some cases tens of thousands since the Arab Spring in 2011—and marks a shift of Moroccan CT strategy from a security-led (coercive) approach to more collaborative approaches to security including multinational CT partnerships and intelligence sharing.³⁴ These partnerships, such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, Global Counterterrorism Forum, and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, are linked to an overall professionalization of the security forces, which is the other key component of the security pillar.

Morocco's military, the Royal Armed Forces of Morocco, is one of the key reasons that U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has labeled Morocco as Africa's

premier exporter of security. Comprising 223,000 troops in all services (Army, Air Force, and Navy), Morocco's military is the third largest in Africa behind Egypt and Algeria. Morocco has invested heavily in military modernization by purchasing several hundred million dollars' worth of U.S. equipment including F-16 fighter jets, M1A1 Abrams tanks, and helicopters.³⁵ While the bulk of the Army is deployed within Western Sahara, the military still plays a large role in regional partnership building activities such as hosting USAFRICOM's largest multinational exercise, AFRICAN LION. Morocco's military conducts partnership building and professionalization activities with sub-Saharan militaries and trains over 1,000 sub-Saharan officers and NCOs annually in its military academies and technical schools.³⁶ As previously stated, Morocco participates in the defeat-ISIS coalition and committed its F-16s to combat operations in Syria and for anti-Houthi strikes in Yemen.³⁷ Morocco operates a field hospital in Jordan that has served over 1.5 million Syrian refugees and also provided a field hospital in response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.³⁸ Additionally, Morocco participates in peacekeeping missions with over 1,500 peacekeepers deployed to the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo.³⁹ As a major non-NATO ally and Mediterranean Dialogue partner, Morocco participates in the 5+5 Defense Initiative that brings together five European nations and five North African nations to promote security in the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ Together, these notable efforts contribute to the Moroccan armed forces' reputation as an experienced CT partner and "one of the most professional and capable militaries" in Africa.⁴¹

Morocco has similarly undertaken notable efforts to professionalize its criminal justice system, comprising the police forces, judiciary, and prisons. One of the most

important developments in the improvement of police forces was the 2015 creation of the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ). Labeled the “Moroccan FBI” by the media, the BCIJ is Morocco’s elite crime fighting organization and the primary law enforcement agency responsible for CT.⁴² As a measure of effectiveness, according to BCIJ data, the security services of Morocco have interdicted 183 terror cells since 2002, prevented 361 terrorist acts, and arrested over 3,129 terrorists.⁴³ Such actions have been instrumental in the fact that Morocco is a regional outlier with only four significant terrorist attacks since 9/11.

The BCIJ operates under the supervision of the public prosecutor of the Court of Appeals and reports to the General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance (DGST). DGST agents have the rank of judicial police officers and can conduct investigations, question suspects, and make arrests. They also conduct electronic tracking and eavesdropping upon receipt of written approval from the Court of Appeals. The Moroccan government has pledged to not use such authorities to deprive citizens of their individual rights, but as noted earlier, such wiretapping proved highly effective following the terror attacks of 2003 and 2007.⁴⁴ Since coming into existence, the BCIJ has reported a decreasing number of terrorist cells apprehended each year, possibly representing the success of deradicalization efforts, with 21 cells disrupted in 2015, 19 in 2016, 9 in 2017, and 8 in 2018 (as of October).⁴⁵

Another key component of the security forces is the General Directorate for National Security (DGSN) which is responsible for border security at Moroccan ports of entry to include Mohammed V Airport in Casablanca. Moroccan DGSN officials work closely with U.S. and other international partners to detect and deter terrorists or other

criminals from illegally transiting Morocco, which is a formidable task given its geographic position as the gateway to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Specifically, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection has worked with the DGSN to screen for fraudulent documents and identify individuals on the terrorist watchlist. Despite such cooperation, the DGSN still lacks biometric screening capabilities.⁴⁶ To address this vulnerability, the United States should urge Morocco to purchase biometric screening equipment, possibly through U.S. foreign military sales, as has proved successful in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, the United States and Morocco should share biometrics and a biometrically-enabled watchlist, as it has done in Afghanistan and Iraq, where such watchlists have led to the detention of numerous known and suspected terrorists.

Despite the lack of biometrics screening at Moroccan ports of entry, the U.S. FBI is providing Moroccan government officials training on facial recognition, intelligence analysis, and management.⁴⁷ Additionally, as part of the Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) Program, the United States is providing training for DGSN and Royal Gendarmerie in investigating terrorist incidents, post-blast investigations, cyber and crime scene forensics, and critical incident management.⁴⁸ The success of these programs has led to follow-on trilateral assistance programs in which the U.S. and Morocco train the security services of other regional countries on such techniques, professionalizing criminal justice across the region.

The U.S. lead for criminal justice system professionalization is the State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau (INL). To move the courts away from a confession-based to evidence-based prosecutions, INL has worked closely with Moroccan law enforcement on evidence chain of custody, storage, and

handling, thus ensuring that key evidence in criminal or terrorist investigations is admissible in court.⁴⁹ To this end, INL has partnered with Morocco to build and equip 23 evidence preservation centers throughout the country, professionalizing criminal prosecutions and enhancing the rule of law.⁵⁰

Morocco also works closely with INL in professionalizing and reforming its prison system. Since 2010, INL has worked with the Moroccan General Delegation of the Penitentiaries and Reinsertion Administration (DGAPR) on issues such as combating radicalization in prisons and facilitating reintegration for rehabilitated detainees.⁵¹ Specifically, INL has supported DGAPR in providing training in the United States to over 300 prison wardens and staff on prison management concepts.⁵² As a result, Morocco has seen success in modernizing prison management, ensuring terrorists are segregated from the rest of the prison population, and constructing newer and more secure facilities.⁵³ In fact, since 2008, DGAPR has built 31 new prisons (39% of total Moroccan prisons) to address problems of overcrowding and helping ensure that pretrial detainees can be held separately from convicted prisoners.⁵⁴

The Moroccan emphasis on rehabilitation and reintegration is an important element in the overall program of countering violent extremism (CVE). Morocco has worked through the royal Mohammedan League of Ulema—a group of Moroccan religious scholars—to engage with radicalized prisoners and help them understand the more moderate and peaceful teachings of Islam. Specifically, Morocco has engaged prominent radical Salafi clerics detained following terrorist attacks in 2003 but later released after the clerics agreed to renounce terrorism and support Moroccan CVE campaigns.⁵⁵ This practice of engaging with as opposed to shunning (or permanently

imprisoning) radical Islamists is the same thing prominent American Muslim scholars are calling for to address violent extremism in the United States. To correct the problem of self-radicalized terrorists whose only source for Islamic theology is online propaganda, Muslim scholars should seek out and engage such “lone-wolf” individuals to explain to them the theology of a peaceful and tolerant Islam.⁵⁶ As an example of this approach, in August 2017, King Mohammed VI pardoned 14 prisoners after they renounced terrorism and successfully completed the DGAPR rehabilitation program.⁵⁷

Despite these successes, as reported by human rights organizations, prisoners still suffer from harsh conditions including severe overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, inadequate healthcare, limited visiting rights, and in some cases harsh treatment and torture.⁵⁸ In October 2017, the Moroccan Minister of State for Human Rights Mustapha Ramid publicly acknowledged that torture has occurred in isolated cases but that it is no longer a systemic practice, and the government is working to eliminate it.⁵⁹ Likewise, in 2017 the Moroccan Council on Human Rights (CNDH) reported that it had received 22 allegations of torture by police or in prisons. The CNDH noted that this was a 32% decrease from the previous year and of these allegations, only 8 were substantiated, resulting in firing of prison directors where the abuse occurred and administrative sanction of other officials.⁶⁰ Separately, King Mohammed VI has ordered that all allegations of torture be specifically investigated. As a result, any detainee who claimed abuse would be afforded the opportunity to undergo a medical examination.⁶¹ Another concern is that suspects have allegedly been forced to make statements while in custody and without a lawyer present.⁶² The government of Morocco addressed this issue by passing a law that forbids judges to admit confessions made under duress or

torture, in particular in cases involving terrorists.⁶³ Such reforms reflect the overall trend of law enforcement professionalization that should be sustained to forestall the types of human rights abuses that can lead to radicalization.

Indeed, to avoid creating more terrorists and achieving tactical success at the expense of long-term strategic failure, Moroccans must redouble efforts to purge its security services of abuses. In line with recommendations from human rights organizations, Morocco should make every effort to investigate and prosecute as necessary any allegations of torture or inhumane treatment. The government should ensure that Moroccan judges adhere to the Penal Code that makes inadmissible any confessions that are obtained under duress. To improve accountability, DGAPR should ensure access to all Moroccan prisons or places of detention by national and international non-governmental organizations to observe conditions and monitor compliance with the law. Lastly, the legal parameters for the 12-day preventive detention established by Bill 03.03 should be enforced to allow for a visit from a lawyer at the midpoint of detention and to prevent arbitrary extensions of the confinement.⁶⁴

With an increased focus on collaborative approaches to CT/CVE as opposed to the coercive approaches following attacks in 2003, Morocco is generally following the proper trajectory with regard to human rights. Furthermore, with the exception of Tunisia, Morocco leads its neighbors in the region on overall scores of freedom and human rights.⁶⁵ The United States should capitalize on Morocco's efforts to liberalize and intensify its efforts to professionalize its criminal justice system by accepting compliance monitoring and verification. In this way, Morocco will bolster the security

pillar of its CT program and demonstrate its value as a model CT partner for other nations to emulate.

II. Fighting Against Social Inequalities and Promoting Human Development.

In his address to the UN Counterterrorism Committee, the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita noted that “the security response is indispensable but it is not sufficient,” and “frustration, ignorance, and poverty still provide...the most fertile recruitment grounds.”⁶⁶ As such, the Moroccan CT program’s second pillar of fighting inequality and promoting human development is just as critical as the first. Recent studies indicate the primary reason Moroccans join terrorist networks is economic—not ideological—factors.⁶⁷ In 2014, the Tetouan-based Northern Observatory for Human Rights interviewed 30 Moroccans who joined foreign terrorist organizations and found that 67% were under age 25 and 74% were from economically-disadvantaged social classes who had lived in “shanty towns” in northern Morocco. The average monthly salary for an ISIS fighter is \$1,400, while Moroccans typically earn less than \$200 a month (if they are employed at all).⁶⁸

Regarding unemployment, the CIA World Factbook lists overall Moroccan unemployment as 10.2%, with youth unemployment for ages 15 to 24 at 19.9%.⁶⁹ According to the U.S. Embassy in Rabat, the nation’s youth account for approximately 44% of the workforce, but suffer disproportionately from unemployment, with youth unemployment as high as 40% in urban areas.⁷⁰ A recent initiative that may partially address the challenge of youth unemployment is the reinstatement of conscription, approved in October 2018, instituting compulsory military service for all Moroccans (male and female) between 19 and 25 years old for a period of 12 months. Besides

addressing unemployment, the move may help address perceptions of inequality among Moroccan youth. King Mohammed VI seemed to suggest this when announcing his support for the measure by stating, “With regard to performing military service, it must be emphasized that all the Moroccan citizens concerned—without exception—are equal, regardless of social background, diploma or education.”⁷¹ The value of national service has also been touted in the United States by leaders such as retired General Stanley McChrystal who has argued national service legislation would generate a sense of common purpose and empowerment. Young Americans would “spend a service year with peers who are different from them...serving together to solve public problems” that would “build attachment to community and country, understanding among people who might otherwise be skeptical of one another and a new generation of leaders who can get things done.”⁷²

Another way that King Mohammed VI has attempted to address economic drivers of terrorism and extremism, was by launching in 2005 the National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD). This economic development program has invested over \$6 billion in its first 10 years of existence and has been lauded by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon as a model for Africa.⁷³ According to Moroccan government sources, NIHD has served at least 7 million people with over 34,000 projects targeting youth and women and providing affordable housing and loans.⁷⁴ Despite its popularity, NIHD has been criticized for lacking transparency and encouraging patronage due to centralization of decision making over funds disbursement. As such some have called for greater transparency and involvement of regional councils in program execution.⁷⁵

Additionally, critics have accused the NIHD program of disproportionately favoring large urban centers along the Atlantic coast, while neglecting the more disadvantaged communities in the north and east of the country such as the Rif region.⁷⁶ This region, which has seen significant unrest since the October 2016 death of a fishmonger, has been the source of at least 600 of the approximately 1,600 Moroccans who emigrated to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria.⁷⁷ For this reason, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) specifically targets many of its aid programs at these disadvantaged regions. For example, USAID partners with the Netherlands and the United Kingdom to implement a program called Favorable Opportunities to Reinforce Self-Advancement for Today's Youth (FORSATY). FORSATY is specifically focused on population centers in Morocco's north including Tangier, Tetouan, and Al Hoceima, and since 2013 has reached over 25,000 at-risk youth, providing education, life skills, and other services to curb drop-out rates and increase employability.⁷⁸

Another way that Morocco and its U.S. partners are addressing the roots of Islamic extremism is by improving education. A recent study indicates the majority of the 1,600 Moroccans who joined ISIS and affiliated groups did not have more than primary school education.⁷⁹ Primary and secondary school dropout rates remain high in Morocco (only 53% of middle school students continue to high school and less than 15% of first graders graduate high school), and national literacy rates of 55% are among the lowest in the region.⁸⁰ Low daily attendance rates and teacher absenteeism are also a significant cause of low literacy rates.⁸¹ In response, the USAID works with civil society organizations to enhance reading instruction and language teaching at the

primary school level. Through these programs USAID has reached nearly 12,000 first and second grade students with a phonetic-based reading curriculum as part of the “Reading for Success Program,” as well as 340 teachers trained on the reading instruction approach.⁸² In addition, USAID facilitated a five-year Millennium Challenge Corporation compact (grant) for \$450 million in 2017 to improve access to higher quality education, youth employability, and land productivity.⁸³

All of these efforts, both by the Moroccan government and those of the U.S. government and its partners, represent a substantial investment in promoting human development and countering social inequality. While significant challenges remain in fully meeting the needs of Morocco’s socially disadvantaged populations, the overall upward trajectory in Morocco’s economy suggests a reason for optimism that less Moroccans will be enticed to join terrorist organizations for financial gain. Continued emphasis is needed on these areas to address this significant driver of terrorism. As stated by Foreign Minister Bourita in his address to the UN, “socio-economic development must remain at the heart of any counterterrorism strategy seeking sustainable, long-term success.”⁸⁴

III. Reforming the Religious Field.

Drawing on his religious legitimacy as Commander of the Faithful, King Mohammed VI has worked to promote Morocco’s moderate, peaceful, and apolitical interpretation of Islam, comprising the Sunni, Maliki, Ash’ari, and Sufi schools of Islamic thought.⁸⁵ Partially as a response to the War on Terror, the state attempted to homogenize Moroccan Islam according to these doctrines to counter the more radical

and political versions of Shi'ism (principally emanating from Iran) and Salafism or Wahhabism (from Saudi Arabia).

The Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence is the version of Sunni Islam that Moroccans have embraced since the 11th century.⁸⁶ Maliki Islam allows for the integration of community practices and *maslaha* (public interest) into Islamic law as opposed to the Salafists who only recognize Islamic law that existed at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and draws almost exclusively from the Qur'an.⁸⁷ In other words, Maliki Islam is considered more moderate as it allows for new interpretations of Islamic law based on changes in society wrought by modernization or significant changes in geopolitical circumstances, as long as such interpretations do not fundamentally conflict with sacred texts.

Likewise, the Ash'ari doctrine of Moroccan Islam allows for consideration of human reason in Islamic law.⁸⁸ Additionally, according to Moroccan Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufiq, Ash'ari doctrine "does not excommunicate people, nor does it accept death sentences for transgressing the Divine Decrees, notwithstanding those subject to the judicial system," suggesting the more peaceful nature of Ash'ari Islam.⁸⁹

Sufism is another strand of Moroccan Islam with at least an eight-century tradition in Morocco.⁹⁰ It expands upon fundamentalist interpretations of the Qur'an through a belief in mystical spirituality that prioritizes one's personal relationship with God over other concerns. Sufism encourages devotion to temporal sheikhs or saints, a practice rejected by Salafists. This obedience to temporal authorities deters radicalization by reinforcing Moroccan obedience to authoritarian forms of governance and ultimately to the King in addition to spiritual authorities.⁹¹ In Morocco, the

government has promoted Sufism by subsidizing Sufi cultural events such as the Fes Festival of Sufi Culture and the Marrakesh World Festival of Sufi Music.⁹²

Cultural and music festivals are just one small example of Morocco's major investment in institutionalizing its state religion. A more prominent illustration of this is the expansion of the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA), which from 2003 to 2014 grew from 451 to over 4,000 employees with a corresponding budget increase of nearly 2,000 percent.⁹³ The MEIA partnered with state-run media to establish the Assadissa television station and "Mohammed VI Radio" to broadcast state-sanctioned religious messages. Both the TV and radio stations are among the most popular stations in the country.⁹⁴ Additionally these stations help to counter the otherwise popular Persian Gulf stations that broadcast more extremist Wahhabist principles.⁹⁵ In a slightly more heavy-handed approach, the MEIA monitors religious sermons throughout the country, providing approved topics for Friday sermons, in order to prevent preaching of extremist content.⁹⁶ Morocco also regulates fatwas (religious rulings) by requiring their issuance through a single religious authority—the Higher Scholastic Council.⁹⁷

Another state institution, the Mohammedan League of Ulema, previously described as countering prison radicalization, also promotes research in moderate Islam, ensuring conformity in Moroccan school curricula and conducting youth outreach.⁹⁸ Youth outreach is accomplished through the development of cartoons, video games, and interactive online content depicting progressive Islamic values and emphasizing personal responsibility instead of Persian Gulf narratives of a religion under attack.⁹⁹ To modernize the education system, the Moroccan state has increased

the focus on citizenship over the previous emphasis on memorizing Islamic texts.¹⁰⁰

The state also oversees higher education with graduate students taught to deconstruct extremist arguments helping them to deter attempts at proselytization by radical Islamists.¹⁰¹ Lastly, the League oversees religious credentialing, providing control over who can become part of the religious elite.¹⁰²

The Kingdom of Morocco has also used its brand of Islam as part of program of foreign external outreach and religious diplomacy to other countries across the Maghreb and western Africa, who also have historical and cultural ties to these doctrines. Indeed, Morocco has been successful in its religious diplomacy due to the shared sense of historical and cultural legitimacy that Morocco enjoys throughout the region. For example, in the 19th century the leader of one of West Africa's largest religious groups, the Sufi Tijaniyyah sect, lived in Morocco and died in Fes, inspiring sub-Saharan followers to conduct annual pilgrimages to Morocco.¹⁰³ In addition, a popular narrative exists that Morocco originally brought Islam to western Africa in the 11th century under the Almoravid Dynasty, and as such, Morocco is seen as a "religious father" to the region.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the religious legitimacy of the King as "Commander of the Faithful," can be said to extend to other countries in the region.

One of the most important ways that Morocco extends its religious influence throughout the region is through the institution of the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams in the capital Rabat. Referred to as the "crown jewel of Moroccan religious diplomacy," the Institute opened its doors for the first time in 2013 to foreign Imams, specifically to train 500 Imams from Mali after the country experienced a coup by radical Islamists.¹⁰⁵ The training was offered to help Mali prevent the spread of

radical Islamic sympathies.¹⁰⁶ Since that time, at least 18 other countries from across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia have requested to send their Imams to train in the Maliki, Ash'ari, and Sufi traditions along with over 50,000 Imams from Morocco.¹⁰⁷ This training academy is also noted for its training of female religious spiritual guides known as *mourchidate*. This innovation (“a first in Islamic history”), began in 2005, and since that time has trained hundreds of female religious scholars.¹⁰⁸ Besides being available for spiritual counseling of female Muslims, *mourchidate* help screen for extremist texts or thoughts that Moroccan women may have been exposed to during pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁹ The success of Morocco's program has led Turkey to launch a similar program of its own. The international popularity of these efforts is also underscored by a 2015 visit to the Mohammed VI Institute by French President Francois Hollande and an impending visit by Pope Francis to the institute from 30-31 March of this year.¹¹⁰

Morocco's external religious cooperation has led to cooperation in security, political, and economic fields as well. The goodwill generated by Morocco from its religious opening led to political successes such as Mali and Senegal recognizing Moroccan sovereignty in the Western Sahara. It also led to Morocco rejoining the African Union after a more-than three-decade absence caused by political differences over the status of Western Sahara. Despite the political opportunism apparent in Morocco's religious outreach, Morocco's training of moderate Islam helps otherwise secular countries to outsource their religious training to a country with a well-established tradition of moderation and countering extremism.¹¹¹

The attractiveness of the Moroccan version of Islam has led some to see it as a potential “third pole” of global Islamic influence in contrast to Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabism and Iran’s Shi’ism.¹¹² The significance of this idea should not be understated. Morocco’s religious legitimacy throughout the region and even in places beyond the region such as Europe, Russia, and China, indicate the significant potential that exists in using Morocco as an exemplar for other countries formulating their own CVE programs.

Critics argue that Morocco’s efforts to institutionalize and promote its specific brand of Islam amounts to an encroachment on freedom of religion. Indeed, some of the more authoritarian efforts such as monitoring Friday sermons and providing approved topics for teaching could be perceived as censorship and potentially backfire, creating Islamists who rebel against government-imposed homogenization of religion.¹¹³ However, such efforts need not be seen as overly oppressive and can be contextualized as similar to U.S. attempts to limit domestic hate speech. In her book, *Bureaucratizing Islam*, Ann Marie Waincott argues that the “relatively banal” version of Islam embraced by Morocco will likely fail to excite young people as much as the “media-savvy” Islamic State.¹¹⁴ Yet the continued popularity of Moroccan Islam—as evidenced by the significant international demand to send Imams to its training academy—and the relative scarcity of terrorist attacks in Morocco, provides some indications of its potential for continued success. Clearly some degree of state intervention to prevent militant Islam seems justified as a pragmatic way to address the catalysts for radicalization.

Also, such religious reforms are better undertaken by an actor seen to have legitimacy (such as Commander of the Faithful) and not by an external power such as

the United States which would have a greater chance of resulting in popular backlash. Notwithstanding America's long tradition of separating church and state, the United States must not view discussion of Islam as a "third rail"—not to be touched for fear of treading on religious establishment clauses. On the contrary, the United States should wholeheartedly embrace and promote modern and moderate Islamic voices.¹¹⁵ Holding up Morocco as exemplar for other countries in the region and as a possible "third pole" of global Islamic influence is a good place to start.

Conclusion

While the initial approach of most states to the American-led War on Terror was a security-focused crackdown on suspected terrorists or "radical Islamic extremists," it soon became accepted wisdom that a more long-term solution would be required—one that addressed the fundamental causes of the "disease" as opposed to merely attacking the "symptoms." In crafting its comprehensive counterterrorism policy, Morocco recognized that eradicating terrorism required complementing security-focused approaches with policies that address social inequalities, human development, and religious extremism. Taken together, the three pillars of Moroccan CT policy have proven effective, limiting attacks on Moroccan soil and attracting other countries throughout the region who want to learn from Morocco's success.

While addressing root causes of terrorism is essential, in this era of "America First," it is also evident that success in this long war will require sustainable and affordable solutions. Speaking at the Chiefs of Defense Conference on Countering Violent Extremist Organizations in October 2018, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, General Joseph Dunford stated, “violent extremism is a generational challenge that demands that we develop solutions that are politically, fiscally and militarily sustainable.”¹¹⁶ As specified in the U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism, one of the best ways of achieving this is by assisting our international partners so they can eventually address terrorist threats independently.¹¹⁷ As such, the United States should capitalize on its already strong and enduring relationship with Morocco, by fully embracing and supporting Morocco’s CT program by undertaking the following:

- Continue to showcase Morocco as Africa’s premier exporter of security by promoting Moroccan leadership in multinational partnership building activities
- Improve security through provision of biometric screening at ports of entry
- Continue to support modernization and reforms of prisons
- Continue financial support to programs that ameliorate social inequality and youth unemployment
- Help Morocco eradicate torture and inhumane treatment by increasing compliance monitoring and verification by international inspectors, NGOs, and civil society organizations
- Support Moroccan efforts to propagate its peaceful and moderate version of Islam by embracing and spotlighting modern and moderate Islamic voices

Doing these things will encourage other international partners to follow Morocco’s path to success, share the burden of the war on terror, diminish the threat of global terrorism, and promote the prosperity of America and the world. Such a strategy will convincingly demonstrate that America First does not equal America Alone.

Endnotes



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¹¹⁰ Nicole Winfield, "Pope to visit Moroccan imam school to boost moderate Islam," *The Washington Post*, (February 9, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/pope-to-visit-moroccan-imam-school-to-boost-moderate-islam/2019/02/09/38b46648-2c70-11e9-906e-9d55b6451eb4_story.html?utm_term=.0d8598ac81dc (accessed February 23, 2019).

¹¹¹ Wainscott, 211.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 235.

¹¹³ Interview with Abdullah Antepi and Wainscott, 239.

¹¹⁴ Wainscott, 241.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Dr. Abdselam E. M. Maghraoui, Associate Professor of The Practice of Political Science, Duke University Islamic Studies Center and Middle East Studies Center (Durham, NC: February 13, 2019).

¹¹⁶ Katie Lange, "Gen. Dunford on the Fight Against Violent Extremism," *DoD Live* (October 23, 2018), <http://www.dodlive.mil/2018/10/23/gen-dunford-on-the-fight-against-violent-extremism/> (accessed 6 Nov 18).

¹¹⁷ *NSCT*, I.