

## Uncovering Extremist Violence in Morocco

By Alison Pargeter

LONG HAILED AS A bastion of stability in a region prone to radicalism, today Morocco is struggling hard to deal with the problem of Islamist militancy. The newspapers are filled with stories of arrests of terrorist suspects and of court cases in which sentences are being handed out to those accused of recruiting for Iraq, plotting to launch attacks in Morocco and abroad, or of being part of militant currents such as "Salafiyah-Jihadiya." In June 2008, for example, 29 individuals from the "Tetouan cell" were convicted of belonging to a terrorist group and of recruiting for Iraq, and in July 2008 35 people were arrested in a number of cities accused of recruiting for al-Qa`ida groups in Algeria and Iraq. As such, Morocco would appear to be a hotbed of militancy and terrorism.

For a kingdom that has long prided itself on the success of its containment strategy toward its Islamist opposition, not to mention the fact that the king's special role as "Emir al-Mumineen" (Commander of the Faithful) has inferred an almost unquestionable religious legitimacy upon the monarchy, the extent of the militancy that is now being uncovered has come as a real shock and has left the regime grappling for solutions. It is responding with a multipronged strategy, on the one hand trying to bolster Morocco's traditional Maliki school of Islam and the various Sufi tariqas that have been part of the country's complex Islamic identity for generations, while on the other hand employing a zero tolerance strategy of preemptive arrests to the extent that, according to one high-ranking Moroccan official, around 4,500 militants have been arrested since the Casablanca attacks of 2003 alone.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this approach looks unlikely to stem the appetite for radical rejectionist ideologies within the kingdom, and all the indications are that militancy will continue to be a problem for the foreseeable future.

### The Emergence of Militancy

This new wave of militancy has not materialized from thin air and has been brewing within the kingdom for many years. Indeed, in spite of the general assumption that the Moroccan state only woke up to the domestic threat after the Casablanca bombings of May 2003, in fact the realization that it had a problem came after 9/11. This realization coincided with the new king coming to power in 1999, a development that heralded a major security review within the kingdom. It was then that Morocco began wondering about the various Islamist currents active in its midst.

Yet, in spite of this recognition, the regime appears to be in a state of denial about the nature of this radicalism. Not only is it keen to hype links with international terrorism, blaming al-Qa`ida for the Casablanca bombings and the emergence of other militant cells, it is still insisting that this new breed of radicalism has been imported from abroad and is alien to the country's long tradition of tolerance and moderation. Much of the blame is being pinned on Saudi Arabia and more specifically on Wahhabism. The former Moroccan minister of *habous* (religious affairs), Dr. Abdelkebir Alaoui M'daghri, recently asserted that the former Interior Ministry chief, Driss Basri, who was ousted shortly after King Mohammed came to the throne, had sponsored the Wahhabist movement

for specific geopolitical reasons... and also for personal reasons connected to the intimate relations that existed between [Moroccan and Saudi] officials. This is the reason why Wahhabism was sponsored in our country in every part of the state.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the militancy evident today has been inspired by a range of outside influences that are far removed from the Maliki school. Yet, while these external factors are important, one cannot discount the role that the Moroccan state has played in fostering the local conditions in which such ideologies have been able to flourish. These conditions have arisen in part

from Morocco's Cold War alliances that placed it in the pro-Western camp of conservative monarchies. This meant that it not only gave its blessing to those volunteers who wanted to go to fight jihad in Afghanistan, Bosnia and other battlefields, but more importantly it permitted them to return. Although due primarily to the limited number of Moroccans who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s, these volunteers were not able to form a group that could seriously challenge the monarchy. These veterans were, however, able to spread their ideology and influence within the kingdom with relative ease. Indeed, it was only after the attacks of 9/11 that the Moroccan state began to seek out such individuals.

Furthermore, the Moroccan regime has always relied upon and taken refuge in Islam as a means of countering its opponents. The ruling elite, for example, bolstered the Islamist movement during the 1970s and 1980s to try to weaken the leftists. It encouraged the Islamists to dominate university campuses and abolished a number of university courses in the humanities, such as philosophy, that were deemed to be the bastion of the left-wing, replacing them with courses in Islamic studies. Such actions may have served to weaken the left, but they also helped foster a society in which religion came to play an increasingly important role in the public space.

The monarchy has also played one Islamist current off against another, thereby strengthening the king's position as "Commander of the Faithful." During the 1980s and 1990s, for example, it employed a strategy of countering its indigenous Islamist opposition, such as the banned but highly popular al-Adl wal-Ihsan movement, by promoting the Wahhabist trend. It encouraged Moroccan imams to study at Saudi universities and gave them pride of place when they returned to the country. Traditional religious scholars who had been trained at the Dar al-Hadith al-Hassania, the main school in Morocco for graduating imams in the Maliki tradition, were often passed over when it came to appointing teachers in Islamic studies in favor of those who had been trained in Saudi Arabia. Some of these Saudi trained individuals, such as the radical preachers Mohamed Fizazi or

1 Personal interview, senior Moroccan official, Rabat, April 2008.

2 Abdelkebir Alaoui M'daghri, *Al-Houkuma al-Multabiya* (Rabat: Dar al-Amman, 2006).

Hassan Kettani, were ultimately to have a strong influence in fostering support for a rejectionist ideology that dared to challenge the king's religious and political legitimacy. As such, Morocco cannot argue that this new militancy has simply been imported from the outside.

### The Militants

Morocco has also fostered certain socio-economic conditions that have proven ripe for radicalism. Although one cannot make the direct link between poverty and radicalization, these ideologies have certainly been able to thrive in Morocco's slums and shantytowns that were left to fester for years without any attention from the authorities. According to figures published in 2007, 4.5 million Moroccans live in indecent housing and there are more than 1,000 shantytowns in 70 cities, as well as more than 1,250 "arbitrary neighborhoods."<sup>3</sup> These slums are generally home to Moroccans who migrated from impoverished rural areas into the margins of the cities. It would seem that unlike the rural areas themselves, where the population is still steeped in local traditions of Islam that are locked into old patronage systems, these shantytowns have provided a particular mentality that is open to more militant ideologies, so much so that it is a common joke at the moment in Morocco to talk about these shanty neighborhoods as being the Kandahar of their respective cities.

Indeed, it was these shantytowns that were the domain of radical preachers such as Mohamed Fizazi during the 1990s and that became a natural recruiting ground for those seeking to bring others to the cause of jihad. It was out of these places that small groups of militants who created their own fiefdoms came to emerge, meting out punishments and even murders in the bid to impose their rigid ideology upon their own communities. The most famous example is Yousef Fikri, who killed his uncle for "un-Islamic" behavior, but his was not an isolated case. The cell led by Abdelwahab al-Reba'ah in Meknes, for example, was recently accused of killing a number of people they considered *kafirs* because they did not wear Afghan clothes, had married through official channels and because they prayed in

public mosques.<sup>4</sup>

These bands of young militants generally follow a similar pattern. They have tended to come from the same neighborhood, were often childhood friends and in many cases comprised siblings or members of the same family. Their education levels have for the most part been low, and they have tended to drift from job to job as street hawkers or petty traders hardly scratching a living. It is through militant Islam that these individuals seem to have discovered a form of salvation and self-esteem.

It was just such a group that carried out the Casablanca bombings in May 2003. Similarly, the cell that appeared in the spring of 2007, which included 23-year-old Abdelfattah Raydi, who blew himself up in a cyber café in Casablanca to avoid being captured by the police, had a similar profile. Raydi lived with his mother and six siblings in a tiny dilapidated room in the Dour Sekila shantytown. He and his brother, who was also part of the cell, both sold orange juice for a living. Raydi had

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already spent time in prison for his alleged linkage to the 2003 bombers before being released under an amnesty in 2005. According to an individual who knew him, Raydi was "fragile, and suffered from periodic bouts of epilepsy and complained of being harassed by the police even after his release from prison."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the fragile and inexperienced nature of these individuals is reflected in the fact that their attacks have for the most part been seemingly amateur or botched affairs, from the Casablanca bombings, where some of the bombers got lost and blew themselves up at the wrong target, to

Raydi exploding himself in a cyber café, to Hicham Doukali blowing himself up with a gas cylinder in Meknes in 2007 and only managing to injure himself. Indeed, none of these suicide bombers left notes or videos, reflecting perhaps their limited capacity and how they appear to be acting out of desperation as much as anything else.

### Solutions?

In their bid to eliminate this militancy, the Moroccan authorities have adopted a strategy of conducting mass arrests by picking up anyone who appears to have Salafist tendencies. Many of the families of those who have been convicted have complained that their loved ones were not involved with any militant group but were simply religiously "committed" and were arrested because of those convictions.<sup>6</sup> One young Salafist from Tangiers, for example, was reportedly taken from outside his home and spent 40 days in secret detention where he underwent extreme forms of torture as the authorities had considered him suspicious because he traveled twice a week between Tangiers and Mohamedia.<sup>7</sup> He was later released with an apology.

The regime is not taking any chances. The profiles of the majority of those who have been arrested in Morocco since the Casablanca bombings of 2003 are similar to those who have conducted attacks. For example, in a list of 204 prisoners arrested in Casablanca, 30% of those arrested had only attended primary school and 35% had managed only the first few years of secondary school.<sup>8</sup> Most were unemployed or working as street traders or in temporary employment. The vast majority of those who have been convicted have been accused of being part of "Salafiyah-Jihadiya." More than anything, however, this appears to be a label put upon these militants reflecting the fact that they do not belong to any particular formalized group. As such, "Salafiyah-Jihadiya" would seem to be a label invented by the Moroccan authorities to describe

<sup>3</sup> "The Triangle of Fear in Morocco," [www.moheet.com](http://www.moheet.com), November 26, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> "Morocco: The Investigative Judge Listens to al-Shatbi, One of the Nine Escapees from al-Kenitra Prison," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 10, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> "Le Retour de la Peur," *Telquel*, March 17-23, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Personal interviews, families of those convicted on terrorism charges, Ain Sebha, Casablanca, April 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Personal interview, Mohamed Darif, Moroccan academic, Casablanca, April 2008.

<sup>8</sup> List of prisoners on terrorism charges collected by Moroccan human rights group and acquired by author in 2008.

an ideological current. As the wife of one Moroccan convicted on terrorism charges explained, “We are so badly educated we couldn’t imagine even coming up with such a term.”<sup>9</sup>

Although this heavy-handed approach might resolve the immediate threat, it is unlikely to stem the support for such militant thinking. If anything, it is only likely to heighten resentment and to strengthen resolve against the state. To make matters worse, there have been repeated reports of Moroccan prisons becoming major radicalization centers on account of the large numbers of Salafist prisoners being held. Furthermore, the seemingly exaggerated numbers of arrests have given rise to the suggestion that Morocco is simply doing the bidding of the United States in the war on terrorism, especially in the case of those arrested for recruiting for the Iraqi jihad—an act considered by many Moroccans as a noble cause and religious duty. This, too, is only likely to increase frustration against the state.

Similarly, it seems difficult to imagine how the monarchy’s current reliance upon its old strategy of trying to counter one religious trend by strengthening another will have any real impact amidst the desperation of the shantytowns. Its recent bid to train women preachers (known as the *mourchidat*), for example, who can perform all the functions of a male imam except for leading prayers, with the aim that they will go into the community and promote more traditional Maliki Islam, is unlikely to have any far reaching effect. Similarly, the push to bolster traditional Sufi tariqas is likely to have limited impact given that such tariqas are viewed even by the more moderate Islamist currents as contravening what they consider to be “true Islam” and are regarded by those of a more militant nature as completely sacrilegious. It is true that these types of initiatives may enable the state to gain greater control over mosques and public religious spaces, yet the official religious discourse will struggle hard to compete with the satellite channels such as Iqraa that have become hugely popular in the shantytowns where, in spite of the poverty, satellite dishes still dominate the neighborhoods and

seem to provide the main source of entertainment.

Moreover, all the underlying conditions that fuel support for militancy are still very much present. In spite of some half-hearted development attempts, the poverty, lack of education, sense of alienation and social injustice will continue to feed an appetite for a simplistic rejectionist ideology that provides answers and a meaning to life. Of course, one should not overplay the threat in Morocco, as this current represents a minority of the population and any major Islamist uprising is unlikely. Yet, it would not be surprising if more cells appear in the future or if a bomb explodes in the heart of a tourist center such as Marrakech. Indeed, as far as militant Islam is concerned, Morocco can no longer claim to be the exception to the rule in North Africa.

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<sup>9</sup> Personal interview, wife of terrorism suspect, Ain Sebha, Casablanca, April 2008.