MOROCCO: ISLAM AS THE FOUNDATION OF POWER

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Toward the end of the 1980s, the late King Hassan II of Morocco famously declared that he was an Islamic “fundamentalist.” It was a strange statement from an Arab leader who was so closely linked with the Western alliance. Hassan II was responding to the growing popularity of religiously inspired political opposition forces that threatened his monopoly on power. His declaration reflected a strategy to enlist religion as a tool to outflank his rivals—both secular and religious. If Islamists were popular, Hassan II would establish himself as even more Islamist than his political foes. Armed with his title, amir al-mu’minin (commander of the faithful), he fiercely defended his claim to religious authority.

It was a tumultuous period in the Arab-Muslim world. Extremists in Saudi Arabia overran Mecca’s Grand Mosque (1979); Iran’s 1979 Islamic revolution was inspiring Islamic political movements; Egyptian President Anwar Sadat had been assassinated by violent Islamists (1981); and the seeds of al Qaeda were germinating in Afghanistan. Over the next decade, Morocco strengthened its ties with


2. King Hassan II also allowed Islamists greater freedom as a way to undermine the appeal of leftist forces that posed the primary challenge to his rule in the 1970s and 1980s.
Saudi Arabia, allowing salafi and Wahhabi preachers greater influence in Moroccan society, education, and religious life. This Gulf-inspired practice largely came at the expense of Sufism, which was popular across Morocco. Satellite television from the Gulf brought charismatic Wahhabi preachers into the homes of Moroccans, further strengthening salafism’s hold in the country.

Two decades later, King Mohammed VI faced a more complex series of threats. Marginalized youth attracted to jihadi-salafism launched a series of deadly bombings across Casablanca in 2003, killing 45 people. The attacks occurred during another turbulent and violent period facing the Arab-Muslim world which was grappling with al Qaeda’s rise, the 9/11 attacks, and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Shifts in mass communications, access to information, demographic trends, and human mobility intersected to create new sources of political opposition and protest that challenged the core of Morocco’s power structure.

Mohammed VI responded to these evolving threats by launching a comprehensive strategy to reorganize Morocco’s religious landscape. He spoke about creating “pious citizens” and worked to promote a distinctly Moroccan Islamic identity to address the new confluence of threats facing the country’s political-religious sphere.

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3. Saudi religious influence grew in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa during the 1980s as a response to the 1979 Iranian revolution and heightened Islamic political activism.


5. The nationalist Istiqlal Party, which led Morocco’s independence movement, incorporated salafi Islamic thought into its nationalist project.

6. The total death toll includes 12 suicide bombers.

7. The king used the phrase *muwatin salih*, which can also be translated as “virtuous citizen.” In the speech the phrase is used in between points about citizens needing to adhere to religious rites and the importance of “faith,” but it also discusses how to be a good citizen in general, including caring for family and community and being aware of national identity.

The strategy had several core objectives, from developing a Moroccan alternative narrative to counter violent jihadi-salafi discourse to reinforcing the king's religious legitimacy and authority in order to undermine political threats to his rule. Unlike Hassan II's religious policy which leaned toward Gulf-inspired salafism, Mohammed VI's Islamic identity rejected salafism in favor of a uniquely Moroccan form of Islam.

The guiding logic was that salafism breeds a narrow and exclusionary Islamic narrative that can be easily manipulated to justify violence. More than 1,600 young Moroccans joined the Islamic State group (ISG) after 2011, proving that violent salafism still attracts young Moroccans. Only by educating Moroccans about their faith from a Moroccan perspective would the state be able to stop what it saw as violent religious interpretations that preyed on ignorance. Moroccan officials began speaking of spreading a “tolerant” and “moderate” Islamic interpretation that was compatible with universal values of human rights. In this way, Morocco’s efforts sought to replace narrow Wahhabi and salafi inspired interpretations with a Moroccan religious identity and practice based on the Maliki school of jurisprudence popular in the Maghreb,10 Ashari theology, Sufism,11

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9. More than 1,600 Moroccan citizens reportedly joined the ISG. Still, terrorism has been rare in Morocco, largely as a result of extensive law enforcement activity. See Mohammed Guenfoudi, “Where do the Moroccan Jihadists Come from and Who do they Affileate With?” Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, June 29, 2018, https://mipa.institute/5748.

10. Moroccan Islamic identity promoted by the state is based on the Maliki madhab (school of law) and Ashari doctrine, which Morocco’s religious bureaucracy has fully mobilized in promoting its activities. The Maliki school is based on the teachings of Imam Malik ibn Anas (d. 795). Malikism prioritizes the hadiths of the Medinan period and the “companions of the Prophet” over other parts of the Sunnah. More importantly, it accepts that the context of time and place must be part of the process of ijtihad (interpretation) for issues not directly addressed in the Qur’an and Hadith. For a detailed description see N. Cottart, “Mālikīyya,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd, ed. P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (Brill Online, 2014), http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/malikiyya-COM_0652.

11. Moroccan Islamic identity includes a strong Sufi tradition. Senior officials in the religious establishment, including the minister of religious affairs, are members of the Boudchichia Sufi order, which asserts indirect influence over shaping state religious doctrine. The Sufi structure, with its hierarchical leadership, helps
and most importantly, respect for the king’s unique role as commander of the faithful.

Morocco has built an impressive and strategic network to regulate religious affairs and paid close attention to how Islam is taught, preached, and organized. But to be effective over the long-term, it will need to ensure that Islam not only serves the needs of the state and monarchy, but that its doctrine resonates with and serves the needs of the country’s youth, whose priorities lay primarily beyond the religious realm.

**THE POWER STRUCTURE: GOD, THE NATION, AND THE KING**

Morocco’s king claims the title commander of the faithful, a role that is enshrined in the constitution and bestows the highest religious authority in the country.\(^{12}\) This title is reinforced by the king’s claim as a sharif, or descendent of the Prophet Muhammad.\(^{13}\) The king’s religious legitimacy is critical because it is the foundation of the monarchy’s political authority. These pillars reinforce each other. The king and the institutions he controls work constantly to shape the boundaries of Moroccan Islamic identity as a way of protecting the monarchy’s unique role within the power structure and undermining potential sources of opposition. Moroccan politics for the last half century and earlier have been defined by this

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12. By adopting this title, Morocco’s monarchy evokes the sacred Islamic institution of the caliphate. The interchangeable titles of caliph (successor) and amir al-mu'minin were created after the death of Muhammad in 632 AD as a means of maintaining the prophet’s leadership role, with the goal of protecting Islam and exercising political power. The ruler’s responsibilities include governing the community’s spiritual and worldly affairs and ensuring the observance of religious principles outlined in the sharia. In return, the ruler is entitled to the community’s loyalty and obedience. This is a tenuous pact, however, and debates over caliphal legitimacy and succession have continued for as long as the office has existed.

13. The king’s family is part of the Alouaite dynasty, which has ruled Morocco since the sixteenth century. It is currently one of the longest serving dynasties still ruling.
duality and the struggle between the monarchy and opposition forces.

In precolonial times, tribes in the hinterland constantly challenged the king’s temporal authority. While the tribes challenged the king’s efforts to assert his authority by raising taxes and recruiting conscripts into the royal army, they largely recognized him as sultan and sharif, with all the religious significance the titles bestowed. Thus, the conflict was not about whether a king should exist but the extent of his powers.

Since independence in 1956, this struggle evolved into a modern political contest between the monarchy and political opposition forces to define the king’s executive privileges and the balance of power between elected and unelected officials. The religious establishment was critical to this struggle. Hassan II used his religious status and a combination of incentives and coercion to rein in the ulema (religious scholars). During one highly choreographed Ramadan exchange, Hassan II famously lectured Islamic scholars on his religious interpretation of a particular exegesis while the ulema sat listening. The episode illustrates how Hassan II was able to co-opt and neutralize the ulema as a threat to his monopoly on power, while reinforcing himself as the highest religious authority in the land. Simultaneously, he established new scholarly institutions, such as the Dar Hassaniya, which served several objectives: they ensured that a new group of scholars answered directly to the king, guaranteed that the new institution would depend on royal sponsorship and funds, and moved the center of scholarship to Rabat and away from its traditional stronghold in Fez. Reinforcing his religious credentials strengthened the king’s claim to political authority.

As the state asserted its control over the ulema and created new religious institutions, it further marginalized the traditional

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ulema associated with the al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez.\(^{15}\) Al-Qarawiyyin was initially brought under the nominal administration of the Ministry of Education following independence, but the state chose to let it languish rather than attempt to assert outright control.\(^{16}\)

Over time, the challenges to the monarchy’s powers multiplied and evolved. Political opposition forces that participate within parliamentary politics seek to gradually erode the monarchy’s executive powers in favor of elected officials; grassroots movements seek to distribute resources more equitably; others reject the idea of a monarchy altogether; and a host of Islamic-inspired movements call for a new political and social order based on idiosyncratic interpretations of Islam. A minority of opposition groups advocate violence to undermine the Moroccan power structure and impose their vision of an Islamic state and society. Morocco’s past, including its modern history, is replete with challenges to the power structure. But access to information, mass communication, mobility, and varied nature of opposition create unprecedented challenges.

In response to these multilayered challenges, the monarchy works through the state to deploy vast resources and mobilize numerous institutions to maintain this delicate balance and ensure the monarchy’s primacy. At the core of its strategy to maintain power is a drive to shape a uniquely Moroccan Islamic identity. This includes monitoring and regulating mosques, religious institutions, and preachers; promoting intellectual and legal interpretations of Islam compatible with state religious doctrine; reshaping religious education in the school systems; and developing uniquely Moroccan religious media and broadcasting content. To various degrees, efforts to control the religious sphere have been going on since independence through a series of initiatives, reforms, and bureaucratic organizations.

\(^{15}\) Al-Qarawiyyin was established in the middle of the ninth century and is recognized by UNESCO as the world’s oldest university. See “Medina of Fez,” UNESCO World Heritage List, http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/170.

\(^{16}\) Sarah Feuer, *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* (University of Cambridge Press, 2018), 82.
KEY COMPONENTS OF STRATEGY

Morocco has a vast network of mosques, scholarly organizations, and educational institutions that make up its religious ecosystem. The monarchy seeks to oversee and shape this ecosystem to advance its various policy objectives. These activities largely fall into three main categories: preaching and mosque activity, religious scholarship and fatwas (legal rulings), and religious education.

Each of the institutions in these three areas has different mandates, functions, objectives, and target audiences. While there is overlap, there is also a bureaucratic division of labor, as well as competition and rivalry. Any one of these institutions in isolation would be impressive for its scope and mandate; taken as a whole, they make up a staggering network of the state’s religious bureaucracy.

Part of the strategy has been to fragment the religious landscape and institutions in order to control them. By creating numerous and sometimes overlapping bodies, asserting control of mosques, and dominating public religious space, the monarchy is leaving little space for outside religious activity not sanctioned by the state. In the process, it is constraining the ulema’s margin of independent action while offering incentives to join the state bureaucracy through salaries and other privileges. As scholar Malika Zeghal has pointed out, the monarchy had to weaken the ulema by dividing them, but at the same time it had to draw them closer around the monarch to control them.17

The monarchy’s strategy has several core objectives. First, it seeks to develop a Moroccan narrative to counter violent jihadi-salafi discourse that targets young people. Second, it aims to dominate the religious landscape in order to marginalize salafism and other nonviolent Islamic narratives that had gained inroads across the country. Third, it intends to reinforce the king’s religious legitimacy and authority in order to undermine political threats to his rule. Finally, religious regulation and imam training have become a

soft power tool to spread Morocco’s Islamic narrative to sub-Saharan Africa\textsuperscript{18} and countries with large Moroccan diaspora populations.\textsuperscript{19}

Equipped with these tools, state religious institutions set about defining the boundaries of being a good Moroccan Muslim: someone who knows and practices his or her faith based on the Maliki school of law, respects the authority of state religious institutions, and recognizes the monarch’s unique religious role as commander of the faithful. As one senior leader within Morocco’s religious bureaucracy explained when discussing the efforts of the state religious apparatus, “We don’t want our citizens to be theologians,”\textsuperscript{20} meaning that people should not try to interpret religious law, doctrine, and theology for themselves. Rather it should be left to properly trained and educated scholars and preachers sanctioned by the state.

\textit{Preaching and Mosque Activity}

Morocco has an estimated 50,000 mosques that are overseen and licensed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments (Habous), which is arguably one of the most powerful ministries.\textsuperscript{21} It answers directly to the king and, unlike most other ministries, its budget is not subject to government oversight. The ministry is tasked with ensuring that Morocco’s preachers, who are government employees, follow the state’s Maliki-Ashari legal and theological doctrine and preach respect for the monarchy as the highest religious authority. As part of this mandate, the ministry distributes the Friday sermon, which is read in the king’s name, and issues

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\textsuperscript{18} Much of Morocco’s soft power strategy in Africa, including economic, security, and diplomatic initiatives, has focused on building support for its position on Western Sahara. In January 2017, Morocco returned to the African Union (AU) after leaving the AU’s predecessor the Organization for African Unity (OAU) in 1984 after the body recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.


\textsuperscript{20} Interview with senior state religious official, Rabat, July 13, 2017.

\textsuperscript{21} For a list of institutions managed by the ministry and an illustration of its structure, see Ann Marie Wainscott, \textit{Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror} (Cambridge University Press: 2017), 102–104.
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training manuals for imams, which include guidelines prohibiting political activity or membership in political parties. The ministry also serves in an advisory capacity on a wide range of state initiatives including public education, public broadcasting, and religious programming, meaning that it works closely with other ministries. This has largely been a bureaucratic effort of organization, oversight, and implementation.

Much of the ministry’s approach to retraining imams stems from an assessment that the role of imams has to change in order for the religious class to remain relevant. As one senior official at the Ministry of Religious Affairs stated, “Today people are asking questions about non-religious issues and imams have to be able to deal with a wide range of social issues and questions.” Moreover, internal surveys by Moroccan religious officials found that the quality and depth of religious training was insufficient to meet new challenges and demands.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has supervised the highly publicized Mohammed VI Institute for Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates (female spiritual guides) since 2013. The training institute’s primary goal is to equip imams with the knowledge required to respond to a wide range of spiritual and practical questions. At the same time, the institute promotes Morocco’s state religious doctrine of Malikism and the centrality of the king as commander of the faithful. So far, the institute has trained nearly 4,000 imams, including more than 1,100 foreign imams from

22. Interview with director of Mohammed VI Institute for Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates, Rabat, September 25, 2018.
23. The position of morchida, created in 2006, allows women to train as spiritual guides. Their role is similar to that of their male counterparts, but they are not authorized to lead prayer. As Wainscott explains, the development of the position “serves a dual purpose for the state: underscoring its public relations campaign of Morocco as a ‘moderate country’ and regulating women’s religious beliefs.” See Wainscott, Bureaucratizing Islam, 212.
sub-Saharan Africa, Tunisia, France, and elsewhere. The Moroccan imams enrolled in the school are required to have completed a BA and memorized the Qur’an. Those that complete the training course are placed in mosques across the country and, according to officials at the institute, participate in annual follow-up workshops. After foreign graduates return to their home countries, Morocco keeps in contact with them through the Mohammed VI Foundation of Scholars in Africa, which is based in Fez and has branches across Africa. It is a potentially valuable tool for spreading Morocco’s soft power and influence abroad.

Morocco is also active in spreading its doctrine across the country’s media landscape. In 2005, it launched Assadissa (Channel 6), which broadcasts Moroccan religious programming, and a radio station that airs Qur’anic recitation and Sufi chants. Assadissa’s programs range from Moroccan Islamic scholars discussing tafsir (exegesis) to Qur’anic recitation shows. Other programs specifically target women audiences.

25. Religious ties between Morocco and West Africa are strong due to the role of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood, which is centered in Fez and has tens of millions of followers across West Africa. For a more detailed analysis of Morocco’s relations with sub-Saharan Africa, see Haim Malka, “Morocco’s Rediscovery of Africa,” CSIS, July 2013, http://csis.org/files/publication/130731_Malka_MoroccoAfrica_Web_1.pdf.


27. Interview with director of Mohammed VI Institute for Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates, Rabat, September 25, 2018.

28. While foreign imams are chosen by their respective governments, Morocco covers the costs of lodging, food, basic medical care, travel home, and a 2,000 Moroccan dirham monthly stipend per student.


30. Other programs focus on the preservation of Morocco’s culture and environment, and some cover issues like family and education. One program, Ma’ al-Utra (With the Family), has an episode that teaches families how to instill the habit of praying in their children and another episode on how to create positive relationships between teachers and students. See “Positive Relations between the Professor
Religious Scholarship and Legal Rulings

In addition to regulating mosques and preachers, the Moroccan state mobilizes religious scholars to promote state religious doctrine and grant intellectual legitimacy to policy reforms and initiatives. These scholars are an important partner to the monarchy as it tries to find a balance between a national identity that is both modern and traditional. Since the king claims religious legitimacy and authority, the stamp of approval from respected scholars is important for promoting state-led initiatives and reforms, such as the *moudawana* (family code) of 2004, which was undertaken with religious approval.31

At the forefront of this intellectual effort is the Rabita Mohammedia des Ulemas (Mohammedia League of Scholars), a group of interdisciplinary scholars charged with finding the intellectual balance between Islamic orthodoxy and the modern ideals and values espoused through the state's religious policy. The Rabita answers directly to the king. The league's experts are trained in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and other disciplines, as well as religious studies. It is a widely respected institution that is comprised of 25 academic units researching a wide range of topics, including deconstructing radical discourse.32 One of its priorities is reaching young audiences through books, graphic novels, media, and different forms of online entertainment. Rather than explicitly projecting religious concepts and principles, the Rabita's work attempts to address ideological or behavioral tendencies such as

31. Debates on other sensitive issues, especially in the personal status realm like abortion, equal inheritance, and women's rights, would also require religious sanction. These issues are not currently targeted for reform but could be at some point in the future.

32. Many Moroccan intellectuals, including those who are critical of the monarchy's extensive executive powers and may have reservations about the state's religious policy, view the Rabita as an important and professional organization that is engaged in important intellectual work. For more on the Rabita, see Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam*, 119–124.
addiction and petty crime that could lead to radicalization among youth.33

The Rabita’s approach and objective is to clarify orthodox Sunni Islam for the masses in a way that resonates and undermines non-Moroccan interpretations, most importantly salafism. According to the league’s secretary general, Dr. Ahmed Abbadi, it is the responsibility of religious scholars “to give people clarity, not ask them to be scholars.”34 In other words, boil down the essence for people without the burden or the opportunity to analyze texts for themselves, which could lead to misinterpreting religious teachings in dangerous ways. Part of the approach is to convey how vast and complex Islamic texts are, and that only trained scholars should be allowed to interpret them.

The Rabita also works with al-Majlis al-`Ilmi al-A’la (the Supreme Scientific Council), which is responsible for issuing fatwas. The establishment of this council was intended to centralize the issuance of fatwas and prevent multiple and contradictory religious rulings, giving the state the sole right to interpret Islamic law. The council also provides guidance on all matters to imams. In this way, the state has attempted to control and regulate religious legal opinions and ensure that they comply with the state’s religious doctrine. Unlike the Rabita, which does not work directly in mosques, the council conveys its rulings and guidelines through the network of state imams who then preach those ideas throughout the system of state-sanctioned mosques.

Religious Education

The third main pillar of the state’s religious strategy is reforming Islamic education in the school system. While the state religious bureaucracy has largely consolidated control over mosques and

33. The Rabita leadership also works directly with the country’s head of the penitentiary and reintegration administration on a dialogue program with incarcerated violent salafists.
34. Author discussion with Dr. Ahmed Abbadi, secretary general of the Rabita Mohammedia des Oulemas, Rabat, July 13, 2017.
monitors the content of Friday sermons, the public education sphere is a far greater challenge and arguably the most important. Morocco’s public education system is in crisis. Many students lack access to education in rural areas, classrooms are overcrowded, and students are not taught skills for the job market. Religious education, which is mandatory, is one area of particular concern for state authorities.35

According to one scholar, Morocco’s “religious curriculum puts forward two pedagogical objectives: the systematic elaboration of Islamic principles in harmony with a Moroccan dynastic heritage and the thesis that Islam features centrally in all facets of modern life.”36 In the past, religious courses in the school system were allowed to comment on and provide Islamic interpretations on nonreligious subjects, such as science and economics. This was particularly problematic and seen by state officials as unnecessary religious interference in nonreligious areas of education.37 Moreover, religious educational discourse tends to be rigid, by emphasizing what is permitted or forbidden, dividing people between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between right and wrong. Though Islamic scholarship in North Africa has a strong tradition of legal reasoning, education over the last several decades has focused on rigid and exclusionary narratives.

In 2015, Morocco launched an overhaul of religious education taught in primary and secondary schools to address many of these shortcomings. The effort was spearheaded by the Ministry of Education working with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and aimed at redefining religious education as a subject with clear pedagogical objectives.38 Religious education reforms also applied to semiprivate and private schools, which are required to teach Islam.

According to Ministry of Education officials, the goal of the new religious education curriculum is to incorporate human rights and

35. Most middle-class and upper middle-class families send their children to semiprivate schools if they can afford it.
37. Author interview with senior Ministry of Education official, Rabat, September 26, 2018.
38. Ibid.
tolerance with Islamic values. King Mohammed VI addressed this in a speech marking the Pope’s visit in March 2019, where he highlighted that the solution to radicalism is education. During his address, the king stated, “My plea for education is an indictment of ignorance. It is binary conceptions and the fact of not knowing one another well enough that are threatening our civilizations; it is certainly not religion. That is why, as commander of the faithful, I am advocating today that we give back to religion its rightful place in education.”

The religious education students receive is intended to help them understand the requirements of their religion while preparing them to operate in the modern world, where they will have to interact with people of other faiths or live in non-Muslim majority societies. In other words, being open minded enough to interact with other religions and societies while knowing and practicing one’s faith in a way that is compatible with the state doctrine. According to Ministry of Education officials, the curriculum is guided by five broad themes: freedom, integrity and ethics, *ihsan* (solidarity), love, and monotheism. These themes are repeated throughout different courses in the religious curriculum.

An often overlooked but critical piece in the education debate is the role of the Arabic language. As the holy language of the Qur’an and Islam, Arabic links Morocco to its traditional sources of Arab-Muslim identity. Since independence, the state has attempted to

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39. For examples of how the Ministry of Education incorporated these lessons into its curricula, see Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam*, 173–177.
41. Author interview with senior Ministry of Education official, Rabat, September 26, 2018.
42. *Ihsan* is a concept related to faith. It has been described as “spiritual excellence” or showing solidarity with other Muslims through charity, for example.
43. Author interview with senior Ministry of Education official, Rabat, September 26, 2018.
44. One of the central goals of the postindependence state has been to impose Arabic on the indigenous Amazigh population. Political Islamists and nationalists
impose the Arabic language on all schools, which implicitly reinforces Moroccan nationalism and Islamic identity. Students are taught *fusha* (Modern Standard Arabic) in first grade, while French is introduced in secondary school and is used for instruction in the sciences. French—and increasingly English—has become the language of modernity, science, technology, and, ultimately, job opportunities. Arabic, in contrast, remains the language of tradition and the social sciences, where fewer jobs exist. As one scholar has noted, this dichotomy between Arabic and French has created socioeconomic gaps with political ramifications.

NONSTATE RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

Because of Islam’s status as a potent and credible political vehicle, the monarchy has worked hard to constrain efforts by political actors to merge religion and politics, while maintaining that unique privilege for itself. Two key tenets shape the formal political system. First, political parties that compete in elections must recognize the king’s religious authority as commander of the faithful. Second, no political party can be formed solely on religion, ethnicity, or identity. In this way, the monarchy seeks to exclude any political party from challenging its religious authority or claiming religious legitimacy.

often advocate for Arabic language instruction given its important link to Islam and Arab identity.

45. A recent controversy erupted over the draft law 51.17, which calls for foreign languages to be used in instruction “for scientific and technical specializations.” Some members of parliament see this as a threat to Morocco’s Arab and Islamic identity. For more on the debate over this law, see “The Moroccan ‘Istiqlal’ Calls for the Removal of the Government over ‘French-izing Education,’” *Arabi 21*, April 4, 2019, https://bit.ly/2UlITkX.

46. According to Charis Boutieri, “the threats to orthodoxy that [the state] faces today emerged out of its own foregrounding of Arabic literacy as necessary to moral cultivation. Nonetheless possession of these very skills in moral deliberation condemns these students in market, social, and political terms. In short, these students face a situation where the linguistic and moral values of their state education do not coincide with other types of empowerment and fulfillment.” Boutieri, *Learning in Morocco*, 136.
Despite these stipulations, by the late 1990s the monarchy allowed the socially conservative Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party (PJD) to participate in elections. By allowing Islamists to participate in politics under certain conditions, the monarchy created an outlet for Islamist political activity that could be constrained by formal politics.

The PJD evolved from an Islamic political movement, but it denies that it is an Islamic political party and claims that Islam is its “reference.” Since 2011, the PJD has consistently won the largest number of parliamentary seats and has headed successive coalition governments. The PJD is in an awkward position of both heading a government with constrained powers and effectively operating as a loyal opposition to the monarchy. Despite this duality, the party has consistently, and at times vociferously, defended the king’s religious legitimacy despite its broader strategy to slowly strengthen the powers of elected officials and political parties at the expense of the monarchy.

According to one scholar, the PJD tries “to mitigate the authoritarian effects of the state on society while pressing for accountability based on Islamic moral teachings for justice and social solidarity.” Judging by its electoral successes, this approach appeals to many Moroccan voters. Indeed, the PJD’s religious orientation has been a source of credibility that has distinguished it from other political parties.

Civil Society

Given restrictions on mixing religion and politics, Islamic organizations have found opportunities for activism in civil society. They

47. The PJD’s detractors accuse the party of affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, though party officials deny this claim. Instead, PJD officials compare their party to Germany’s Christian Democratic Union Party.
operate across a vast field of religious charities, NGOs, and civil society organizations, providing welfare, charity, and social services. Moroccan law generally places few legal restrictions on forming associations, which have been an important space for social and political activism given the historic weakness of political parties.49

Despite a prohibition on political parties engaging in religious activities, the PJD has been able to influence religious space at the grassroots level by nominally splitting off from its affiliated movement, the Unification and Reform Movement (MUR), which has a strong presence in civil society and on college campuses.50 In 2014, one leader of the MUR described the movement’s relationship to the PJD as “strategic” and “complementary.”51 The MUR’s activities emphasize proselytizing and religious education, including public awareness campaigns on a range of social and moral issues.52 The movement convenes conferences on topics such as the role of the Arabic language in education and the Palestinian issue. It also sponsors numerous activities including blood drives, iftars, reading contests, and film competitions. The MUR has an affiliated student group that is active on university campuses and organizes training events to develop communications and other skills for social-political activity.

The civil society sphere also allows Islamic movements that don’t participate in formal politics to engage the public. Foremost among them is al-Adl wal-Ihsan, or the Justice and Charity Movement.

50. Harakat al-Tawhid wal-Islah.
What sets the Justice and Charity Movement apart from other social-political movements is its rejection of the king’s title of command of the faithful. It has been one of the most organized social-political forces calling for revolutionary change in Morocco and opposing the monarchy. Over the last several years, it has debated whether to form a political party and compete in elections, but so far it has rejected the political cost of entering formal politics.

The movement operates at a grassroots level, focusing its activities on spiritual outreach and proselytizing. Like many Islamist social movements, it understands the limits of existing power dynamics and its own weakness vis-à-vis the monarchy. Rather than confronting the regime directly, it seeks to Islamize from below in order to prepare people to accept its vision of a Muslim society. Much of the movement’s direct activity on religious issues occurs outside of the public sphere, in private homes and study circles of its members.

The Justice and Charity Movement is also active on college campuses, where it has ties with teachers’ unions and student associations and participates in student elections. More broadly, its public activities include organizing protests on nonreligious issues such as Palestinian rights, U.S. foreign policy, economics, corruption, and unemployment. The movement participated with leftists and other groups in the early part of the February 20 protest movement in 2011, but ideological differences prevented cooperation and the


54. The movement also has affiliated women’s associations and social organizations providing a range of services, including distributing food during Ramadan and holidays, providing counseling and health campaigns, legal rights campaigns, and other services. According to one Moroccan scholar, part of the movement’s appeal stems from the social welfare services it provides to Moroccans in urban and rural areas. For more on the movement’s grassroots efforts, see Daadaoui, “Islamism and the State in Morocco,” 106.

movement quickly ended its formal participation in the loose protest coalition.

In 2017, several Moroccan government ministries launched a nationwide campaign to oust Justice and Charity Movement members from public positions. The members dismissed from their positions included dozens of teachers, government inspectors, public guards, and advisers. More recently, leading figures within the movement claim that they have had their homes broken into and sealed by security services without legal orders. The leaders were accused of turning "places of residence into mosques not subject to the oversight of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and which changed their design [structure] without a permit."

Morocco also has a small salafi movement, which is primarily apolitical and focused on spiritual outreach and proselytizing. Moroccan salafis did gain some political leverage after 2011, when many participated in the February 20 movement. As Moroccan scholar Mohammed Masbah has noted, the politicization of some salafi factions has led to the weakening of the group as a whole.

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60. Fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2014 by MIPA shows that "Salafi attitudes differ from the traditional perception of their departure from the political sphere and their indifference to the electoral process. According to the results of the research, about half of the surveyed Salafis are registered in electoral lists. However, only 37% had participated in the legislative elections of November 2011, while nearly two-thirds did not participate at all." Mohammed Masbah, "How Do Moroccan ‘Quietist’ Salafis Think?," MIPA, May 10, 2019, https://mipa.institute/6750.
One prominent Moroccan salafi figure, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdurrahman al-Maghrawi, originally promoted an apolitical salafism that focused on Islamic studies and the establishment of centers for learning the Qur’an. A number of these “Qur’anic houses” were shut down in 2013 by the Ministry of Religious Affairs for operating outside of the state’s official curricula.

Like other regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, the state has occasionally engaged in dialogue with salafis, including jihadi-salafists who were jailed after the 2003 Casablanca bombings. Some of this dialogue has been quiet, while some has been high profile and publicized through the media. One highly publicized case was the king’s meeting at Friday prayers with Mohammed Fizazi, a preacher who had been sentenced to 30 years in prison after the Casablanca bombings. The meeting came after dialogue between state officials and Fizazi and the preacher’s declaration of support for the king as commander of the faithful.

LOOKING FORWARD

Morocco represents a state that is actively trying to reshape religious discourse to pursue multiple objectives. Its distinct power structure and role of the king make it a unique case, but its successes or failures will have far-reaching ramifications for other Arab-Muslim countries grappling with similar challenges.

The monarchy has asserted its control over formal religious institutions and bureaucracies in a comprehensive and systematic way. In

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the process, it is fragmenting Islamic movements that pose a potential political challenge; constraining space for independent religious rulings, preaching, and activity; co-opting the state’s ulema; and introducing a new religious education curriculum into the school system.

While these steps have been successful in regulating the religious bureaucracy and asserting state presence in these areas, effectively undermining the threat of violent Islamic interpretations and political challenges to the monarchy’s rule requires ongoing efforts that can adapt to changing threats. More importantly, while violent extremists and Islamists attract media attention, it is non-violent political forces and grassroots protests that pose the bigger challenge to the monarchy’s monopoly on power and Morocco’s power structure.

The deeper problem is that Morocco’s sociopolitical trajectory and youth dynamics—and that of North Africa more generally—increasingly emphasize challenging the status quo, which preserves injustice, perceived or real. These grievances not only drive recruitment by jihadi-salafi groups but fuel illegal immigration, criminality, and political protest by some youth who make up nearly 60 percent of the country’s population. Thus, religious policy is sending a message of tolerance and respect for authority, while many Moroccans feel they face ongoing injustice by an unjust power structure. Promoting religious-based policies to address radicalization and protest without systematically addressing the socioeconomic and political grievances of Morocco’s citizens fundamentally undermines and limits the strategy’s impact.

Despite these challenges, and in comparison to many of its neighbors, Morocco has the advantage of leadership willing to devote significant resources to its religious initiatives. This advantage may not be enough, however. Looking forward, the strategy faces several important limitations.

Religious education in the school system is one of the most important areas the state is trying to influence. Educational reform is centered on trying to demonstrate that Islamic texts are compatible with modernity and universal values of human rights. The focus is on
changing the image and perceptions of Islam, not changing or reforming Islamic law or doctrine. This effort is important, but it would be more effective in parallel to a significant improvement of overall education. As long as Morocco’s education system fails to prepare students for the job market, young people will look for alternatives to the state narrative of respect for authority and tolerance.

Morocco’s state religious apparatus is preaching tolerance, moderation, and respect for authority, while many Moroccans are protesting for greater political freedoms, accountability, and socioeconomic opportunity. Morocco’s protest movements that emerged since early 2011 are calling for change. Moreover, many public demands center on the notion of justice, a central theme in Islam. Yet, corruption, ongoing human rights abuses, limits on freedom of speech, and growing economic gaps fuel a perception of an unjust system. Thus, an environment of socioeconomic injustice and inequality undermines the state’s claim of moral and religious authority—two concepts that are inexorably linked. As long as young people feel they live in an unjust society, it will be difficult for the state’s message of tolerance and respect for authority to resonate.

Morocco’s comprehensive religious policy raises the question of whether too much state intervention can undermine the objectives of religious regulation in the first place. In the religious sphere, the credibility of imams has declined not only because they are seen as state functionaries but because they avoid speaking about sensitive subjects like corruption, unemployment, and illegal migration that resonate with young people. It is too soon to determine whether a new generation of better-trained imams will successfully connect with youth; but without addressing the issues that people care about, it will be difficult to rebuild the credibility of imams and the state more broadly.

While Morocco’s efforts have been strategic and far reaching across the religious field, outcomes will depend on implementation and the cooperation of the religious bureaucrats, imams, and teachers who are charged with implementing the policy. The first internal assessment of outcomes is scheduled to take place in 2022, which could provide additional lessons to analyze.
Finally, the state’s biggest challenge is creating an alternative Islamic identity that resonates with youth, undermines extremist discourse, and reinforces respect for authority, including the principle of the commander of the faithful. Whether the state’s alternative will resonate with young people, who have high aspirations, is unclear.

Given Islam’s importance to Moroccan identity and the power structure, the monarchy has little choice but to regulate the religious landscape. It does so not only to project a Moroccan Islamic identity that promotes the king’s religious credentials but as a way to contain Islamic narratives that challenge monarchical rule through violent or nonviolent means. If the state doesn’t establish its presence across the religious landscape, other Islamic narratives and interpretations will fill the void.

The inseparable link between the monarchy and Islam ensures that the religious field will continue to be contested and the monarchy will continue devoting resources and energy to defining the contours of Moroccan Islamic identity. The choices Moroccan leaders made in the past have shaped the country’s current political and religious environment. Striking the right balance today between the extent and type of religious engagement is critical. Too much intervention risks undermining the very objectives the monarchy has prioritized. Too little engagement threatens to leave a vacuum that will be filled with competing narratives. Finding a pragmatic balance will require the courage of ongoing self-reflection, assessment, and adaptation.