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“Combating” Violent Radicalism in the Moroccan Context: When the State Monopolizes the Religious

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Abstract: Since the 2003 attacks in Casablanca, the Moroccan state has embarked on a new strategy to guarantee national security from any violent threat. The implementation of these strategies has required the involvement of actors from different fields: political, religious, economic and human rights promoters. A range of studies has also been conducted on Salafist movements to present an explanation of “terrorism and violent extremism”. Our research is based on another political framework. We will present an analysis of the discourse of different state actors and decision-makers in Morocco with whom we conducted in-depth interviews, to analyze the different strategies that Morocco has found to fight and combat violent extremism (VE). It is about analyzing the political and religious storytelling of this new strategy led by the state and how the latter monopolizes this issue. Our research presents a new sociological reflection around the implementation of political strategy on the VE on the one hand, and the ability to access a “sensitive” field of research despite the difficulties of this work. The results presented in this article pave the way for sociologists to open up other new questions related to VE, namely, the reintegration of “ex-radicals” and prevention against the phenomenon.

Keywords: extremism, violence, strategy, prevention, actor, Morocco

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Introduction

Since the attacks of September 11 in the United States, Morocco has not been excluded from the risk of terrorism particularly in the wake of the attacks on May 16, 2003, in Casablanca. This international challenge has become a central pillar of state policy, which has taken a new course towards the transformation of different areas, namely the legal, social, and, predominantly, religious frameworks.

In this area, King Mohammed VI set up a new strategy with the purpose of reforming the religious field and establishing an *Islam Wasati* open to modern values (Mouna et al. 2020). The policy of reforming the religious field has been accompanied by the transformation of other areas, such as the personal statute of the woman, by introducing major advances in the rights of women, like the acquisition of nationality by the mother, and the right to give her family name for the child conceived of a relation out of marriage. However, the reform faces challenges marked by the pressure of Islamist movements, which continue to undermine the reforming capacity of the state in the religious field (Mouaqit 2020).

Based on the analysis of institutional discourse, this article focuses on two issues. We will explore the typology of institutional interactions in treating violent extremism, where the state has monopolized the religious field. The second aspect presents a critical approach to state strategies for combating violent extremism in order to highlight the limits of their implementation.

The goal is to understand how the Moroccan institutional framework develops strategies for the fight against violent extremism (VE) through the adoption of two major approaches: the security approach and religious policy. Our initial purpose is to answer the following questions: How does the state deal with the issue of violent radicalism? What are the limits of state intervention in the fight against VE? What are the limits of its interventions about the course of the radical speeches and practices? What are the new challenges linked to violent extremism in Morocco? Through a macro-sociological analysis and discourse analysis, we focus on the presence of state power in the fight against violent extremism. This analysis enables us to identify the mechanisms that promote the monopolization of the religious field in Morocco: institutionalization, training, and mediatization to the establishment of *Islam Wasati*.

In this article, we will proceed as follows: the first section is devoted to the conceptual definition of violent extremism in political science and sociology, and some of the work carried out in this field of research. The second section focuses on the literature on the issue of radicalism and violent extremism, and examines its various angles of analysis; we then go on to present a few studies carried out in the Moroccan context. The third section presents our research methodology and data collection tools.

In the analytical phase, we focus on three aspects. Firstly, the identification of the drivers of violent extremism and state intervention in this sense; we, therefore, want to present how the different actors build their discourse around violent extremism through seven drivers: economic deprivation, cultural exclusion, politics, territorial dynamics, religion, education, and digitalization (cf. Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025). Secondly, the nature of the strategies established by the state to "combat violent extremism" in Morocco, and its implementation mechanisms. Thirdly, we present the new political challenges facing Morocco, reflecting the limits of the state approach on the one side, and new perspectives on the other side.

Radicality or Violent Extremism: A Question of Definition

Although Morocco has put in place in the last period, notably after the Arab Spring, a form of religious policy that tries to promote an open Islam, it still faces a major obstacle, that of defining extremism or radicalism. We discard here the term radicalization which in our sense is a term polluted by a form of politicization that makes it lose all its meaning, in the same way that the term has become an administrative category, to take up here the definition that Bonelli and Carrié give in their book *La fabrique de la radicalité: Une sociologie des jeunes djihadistes français* (Bonelli and Carrié 2018). Radicality is not an intrinsic concept but rather a relational one that reflects different social logics that reflect the tensions within a society. We also assume that the difference between radicalism and extremism is difficult to maintain because in radicalism, there is extremism, and in extremism, there is radicality. In common sense, the state appears as fighting against Islam when the latter presents itself to society with its program of fight against radicalism. Violent radicalism poses several challenges. First, the difficulty in grasping a definition of the concept, the multiplication of the angles of analysis, as well as the determinants of the phenomenon in various social contexts. The emergence of violence and violent extremism in the Moroccan context is not new. Among the important elements in the treatment of the issue of violent radicalism, we can mention: the social categories attached to the phenomenon, and the state or non-state institutions involved in the processes of "de-radicality" through prevention strategies.

Radicality in this sense is a complex concept to define. It is more a form of political reading and administrative classification, an interpretation that takes several dimensions to arrive at a clear definition. Attempts to give a precise definition have been ideologically charged and mediatized since the 2001 attacks in the US, and the definitions focus on the contextual determinants of each study, as well as their relationship to other concepts such as the notion of violence. Farhad Khosrokhavar considered that the phenomenon of radicalization represents a process built by the interaction of multiple factors, first at the level of the individual, then by the discourse mobilized around individuals and groups reinforced by the image given by the media (Khosrokhavar 2017).

Meanwhile, we can advance that radicality is linked to the processes of socialization, which are considered a channel of the circulation of speeches, which lead individuals to develop ideas and radical ideologies. It is about a form of rupture with a model or a cultural or religious reference to see politically. But this radicality is only perceived in reality from the point of view of the other, because one is the radical of someone.

In the Moroccan context, violent radicality is linked to the term *jihad*, which circulates in the discourse of the Salafist movement, and which is determined as an element that signifies the death of different others, and which is obligatory in the planning of terrorist acts. However, we distance ourselves from this use of radicality, because *jihad* as a conceptual category takes on a very different meaning depending on the socio-cultural and religious context in which *jihad* is made and reinvents itself. Radicality can thus incorporate a form of anger against the values of a group or society, a form of response given.¹ In the same context, radicality has a relationship with other notions such as commitment, political activism (Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020), exclusion, marginality, etc., which does not distance itself from the theses that try to build a profile of the radical, because radicality can only be grasped in the local context of society.

Violent Extremism: A Subject for Study in the Social Sciences

The subject of violent extremism is not restricted to the sociological domain; in the wake of the 2001 attacks, terrorism has taken on a central role in institutional investigations for security purposes. The increase in the number of “terrorist” acts in various countries has allowed researchers to reflect on how to explain the phenomenon. In this context, studies carried out in various scientific fields focus on a variety of approaches, including political, psychological, criminological, and sociological. Research has begun, particularly in the West, intending to explain the factors that drive individuals to engage in violent acts against their societies. This questioning gave rise to many empirical studies presenting complementary analyses of violent extremism. In this section, we present relevant literature on the subject of violent extremism to highlight the different theoretical and methodological approaches that have addressed the issue in various contexts of study.

Research began in the West, in particular, to explain why individuals engage in violent acts against their societies (Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020). This question has given rise to several empirical studies presenting complementary analyses of violent extremism.

In the field of political studies, violent extremism has come to the fore, either through the analysis of dimensions linked to political violence or from a criminological point of view. Within this framework, the VE process is impacted by a variety of social situations

1 Concept of radicalism (see Kallen 1935).

(LaFree et al. 2018). The process of political radicalization has also been analyzed as other phenomena fall within the field of criminology, in this sense, criminology specialists consider that the analysis of individuals' socio-economic factors requires the integration of psychological approaches and other disciplines to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon involved, given that terrorism is "a dynamic and evolving phenomenon" (LaFree et al. 2018). The process of violent extremism is also constructed in carceral spaces. Prison also constitutes a whole sphere for the construction of identities, which gives it a character of spaces where individuals create their starting point to find a path toward violent radicalism (LaFree, Jiang, and Porter 2020). Another space that has taken on great importance in literature is virtual space. New media does not represent themselves far from the fact of VE, radicals constitute digital space as a virtual mobilization sphere for extremist discourses (Scrivens 2023).

From a psychological perspective, Fathi Benslama has tried to analyze radicality in a relationship between the analysis resulting from clinical observation and the political framework. He explains radicality is based on a distinction between the phenomenon as a threat and as a symptom, which will build a paradigm of "psychè polis". This definition provides the genesis for reflecting on the notion of violence to establish a theoretical framework for "anti-violence" (Mozafari 2010), which first and foremost takes on a political dimension. Psychological approaches focus on explaining violent extremism by interpreting the individual causes leading to violent engagement. In this sense, violent extremism from a psychological point of view is defined as "motivated deviance from general behavioral norms" (Kruglanski et al. 2017). The analysis of extremist facts is part of the psychology of deviance, which interprets the behaviors and attitudes of radicals. Using a comparative approach, one of the studies in psychology addressed the issue of violent extremism in various contexts (Kruglanski et al. 2017); the results show that the phenomenon of VE takes on three dimensions: individual level, in this sense, individuals need personal signification; at the community level, these individuals pursue ideological narratives that represent a tool for justifying violence, and how these individuals give meaning to their violent acts; and at the community level, these individuals follow ideological narratives that represent a tool for justifying violence. This is how these individuals give meaning to their violent acts. And at the third level, where individuals join networks of people who share the same narrative, violence becomes legitimate. Based on this research, we can understand that the act of violence requires community integration, which reinforces the extremist ideology and legitimizes the violence.

In the methodological approach, several quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the VE analyses: in-depth interviews, digital content analysis, documentation, and life-course analysis.

In the Moroccan context, studies on violent extremism have focused on the problem of Salafism and its associated movements. In this sense, they have been marked by a descriptive approach, which describes both the Moroccan exception in the management of the religious field, which consists in spreading the image of a tolerant Islam. We can

also see that these studies are essentially based on a political approach and journalistic investigation.

A study conducted by Masbah in 2019 investigated the motivations of violent extremism through the individual experiences of Moroccan fighters. It identified three types of motivations that are related to the major phases of recruitment: psychological, ideological, and attitudinal motivations (Masbah 2019). In his investigative research in 2017, Sammouni conducted a study on religious radicalism in Morocco using a journalistic investigation approach. He focused on the religious aspect that encourages young Moroccans to develop a jihadist attitude. He also described some specific characteristics of the spaces and participants as well as some life paths of ex-jihadists after their return from conflict zones. He was able to show the changing social situations of Moroccan jihadists. The cases cited in this study show that the perception of the faith of the youths plays an important role in the passage to violent action. Similarly, the refusal of some young Salafists of the cultural rituals in their Amazigh region, and the development of a conflicting link with their own cultural referential. Sammouni (2017) suggests that the radical interpretation of religion can impact the way these young people perceive their culture and create a space for conflict with the community of origin.

Regarding the gender approach, we found the thesis work of Najat Bassou (Bassou 2019) that addressed the issue of radicalization among young girls in both Moroccan and French contexts. The researcher conducted her study based on the life trajectories through which her daughters became involved, she indicates that radicalization among young girls is based on three projects: radicalization as a mechanism for girls seeking a social position through the construction of a strong personality, radicalization as an altruistic attitude, and finally radicalization as a love experience that girl seeks to experience through a marriage project.

Many of the studies related to radicalization have been carried out by research entities, i.e. "Country Reports" (Bureau of Counterterrorism 2020). But in Morocco, other studies have been carried out by public structures such as the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) or the Rabita Mohammadia, as a public research structure on the religious phenomenon. Research on religion in Morocco has been dominated mainly by studies on Islamist movements such as Adl Wal-Ihssan and Islah-Watajdid. We believe that access to the field has been a determining factor in choosing subjects. Former jihadists are often forbidden by the authorities to talk to researchers and the media. This was observed during our fieldwork with jihadists returning from Syria, and it took a whole network of contacts to gain access to this population who sometimes asked us for guarantees to maintain their anonymity. After serving a prison sentence they remain under surveillance by the authorities. We can see that the work on extremism has focused on three main factors: religious, socio-political, and psychological.

Studies in psychology and political science in particular have attempted to present an approach to violent extremism based on the identification of a few micro-sociological

dimensions focusing on indicators and factors linked to individuals. But the issue of violent extremism requires us to go beyond this individual approach and to create a global macro-sociological analysis model. In this article we present an analysis of the factors leading to VE through the analysis of official and institutional discourse. The aim of this analysis is not simply to explain the phenomenon, but to describe how the monopolization of the religious field in Morocco had an impact on the construction of a "strategy to combat violent extremism", based on the identification of the seven explanatory factors of VE, previously presented in the literature: religion, territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, politics, transnational dynamics, digitalization, and cultural opportunities. Our aim is therefore to question the implementation of state policies, where power plays a key role, on the one hand, and their limits in the field of violent extremism and their adaptation to the social and economic context of young people, on the other hand.

Methodology²

As a data collection technique, we used semi-structured interviews with various state institutions in the religious field, such as the Rabita Mohamadia des Oulémas, some members of the Council of Ulemas (Al Majlis Al Ilmi), and one of the religious advisors from a mosque. We also worked on the documentation of state and non-state institutions, notably their activity reports and some of the works published on their official websites³. Other actors interviewed during our research included political parties and NGOs active in the fight against violent extremism, as well as the coordination of activists defending the rights of Moroccan fighters stranded in Syria and Iraq. The interviews were conducted face to face; some of them were online as our fieldwork took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted a total of 13 interviews with male and female actors. Following data collection, we transcribed the interviews and reread the documentation collected. This qualitative method enabled us to shed light on the nature of the discourse mobilized by the institutions founded during the reform of the religious field in Morocco. This phase represents a key stage in the political change in Morocco, particularly after the Casablanca bombings in 2003.

The analysis of official discourse and the discourse of non-official institutions represents one of the processes by which we can address the cleavages created by the state and visualize the process of expanding state power beyond the remnants of social, economic, and cultural structures. In the interview grid, we asked each actor questions on three main aspects: the definition of violent extremism, how the institution deals with this is-

2 Given the sensitive nature of the subject, and to respect the ethical standards of scientific research, we have prepared a charter of ethics to allow us to have the data of participants in our survey and to record the interviews after seeing their agreement.

3 The documentary work enabled us to discover how institutions deal with other issues linked to young people in Morocco; in particular, the "Dafatir Tafkik" notebooks published by the Rabita Mohamadia des Oulémas on the deconstruction of extremist discourse in religious terms.

sue, and the interpretation of the seven factors of VE. We also fed our questions by the nature of relations with other institutions to see the dimensions of the state as part of a logic of synergy with non-state institutions for the implementation of a strategy to combat radicalism.

The State Approach Between Security Logic and Economic Integration

Violent radicalism is not a new problem for states; it is configured today in a new conception and definition in a context marked by the acceleration of violent acts, particularly in the so-called post-Arab Spring period. On the legal level, Morocco has been building a security policy to fight terrorism since the first attacks in 2003 in Casablanca. This policy was first a legal response through the adoption of Law 03-03, which penalizes anyone who joins a terrorist group or participates in the planning of violent acts. In 2015, the parliament passed Law 86.14 which promulgates criminal law in the fight against terrorism. Despite the presence of this law, several violent cells have emerged differently in various spaces in Morocco; the number of cells that have been arrested and declared by the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations has decreased in the period from “21 in 2015 (date of the creation of the BCIJ) to 19 in 2016 and then to 9 in 2017”⁴.

The number of people who left for areas of conflict and tension, namely Syria and Iraq, is 1,651 to join either “Daesh, Acham Movement, Jabhat Nosra, and others”⁵. Most Moroccans who left for Syria in the period of 2013–2019 were recruited by a Moroccan founder of a jihadist group in Syrian territory (Interview 1, March 2020).

As part of the fight against terrorism in Morocco, the State has created Law 03-03 as a first stage. Several international organizations exert pressure and control over state actions in monitoring strategies to fight against people involved in so-called terrorist acts. In this regard, the questions we asked are related to the institutional work and treatment of prisoners in prisons and the approach mobilized to prevent their return to radical commitment. The country presents itself as a model that combines security control and religious reform, but also as a state that respects international legal standards from the detention of members of terrorist cells to the treatment phase within the prison space. This control is carried out by the CNDH and international organizations, notably the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. We had difficulty understanding the state strategy in the prison system, which remains an official institution managed by the state with no data reporting in this regard.

4 We analyzed the interview with Abdelhak Khiam (Al Aoula TV 2020).

5 We have based on the mediatic statistics because it is not possible to receive the security information from the official institutes in Morocco.

In 2017, the state applied the Mousalaha program for prisoners who "have the will to change radical ideas". We asked the question about the criteria for the section of this category. It is an integration and de-radicalization program that affects only those active members who have expressed the will to change their radical ideology (Interview 2, April 2021). One of our interlocutors from his experience with prisoners and their legal proceedings, confirmed that despite the formalization of this program within the prisons, the risk of radicalizing other people in the prison is very likely. "A radical prisoner can form a group within the prison" (Interview 3, January 2021), says our interlocutor, which means that the legal approach is insufficient to limit the emergence of radical ideas. On the one hand, the development of the penal law was a state response to an emergency; on the other hand, the process that pushes individuals towards violence goes beyond religion and can become a reaction to other social and political situations.

The social, psychological, and cultural aspects of the Mousalaha program remain ambiguous in the absence of an evaluation that allows us to understand the limits of the socio-cultural follow-up of the prisoners. In the absence of visibility and communication on the subject, civil society has become the representative of counter-power. Contrary to the state, which has based its logic on the development of penal laws with an essentially security approach, civil society presents itself as the spokesperson of these prisoners. The state attempts to keep its deradicalization process a secret and confidential, with an opening for experience sharing under the title of "cooperation" and piloting on an international scale. This sharing refers precisely to proposing the Moroccan model to other states as a success.

The state is aware of the limits of the security approach and is trying to limit the factors that lead to radicalism. The economic situation of young people remains unfavorable, with a very high rate of unemployment, particularly in urban areas and among individuals aged 15–34. The High Commission for Planning of Morocco (HCP)⁶ says that nearly 3 out of 10 unemployed (29.7%) are young people. It indicates that nearly 3 out of 4 unemployed young people (75.8%) reside in urban areas (67.3% are men and 90.1% are graduates). The unemployment rate has, for its part, reached 31.8% for young people aged 15 to 24 years at the national level, against 13.7% for people aged 25 to 44 years and 3.8% for people aged 45 years or more (Interview 4, April 2022). The state is thus trying to remedy this problem of social integration through the implementation of economic and social projects in the different areas that reflect territorial inequalities. We have noted that the INDH⁷ project launched on May 18, 2005, for example, aims at socio-economic development and the fight against marginality, but it has not targeted the issue of violent radicalism directly. It is a program that did not consider the long-term issues at stake. From a critical reading of the established state programs in the fight against VE, we say that the management of the Mousalaha program remains restricted within prisons which guides us to ask the question

6 The High Commission for Planning of Morocco (HCP): The institution designated for statistical production in Morocco. Haut-Commissariat au Plan (fr.) available at: <https://www.hcp.ma/>.

7 INDH: National Human Development Initiative.

about fighters who are not benefiting from its programs: How the state manages what may be called a gap between “*de-radicalization* within prisons and outside this institution”?

The Religious Approach of the State

Morocco's first reaction after the Casablanca attacks (2003) was to initiate a reform of the religious field at the institutional level through the foundation of several institutions. First, the Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas, which works on the fight against violent radical discourse to increase a moderate and tolerant Islam. The work of this institution is divided into two stages: the theoretical aspect represented in an encyclopedia of deconstruction of the radical discourse (Dafatir Atafkik), and the level of training of youths through the peer technique (Interview 5, February 2021). This institution has participated in cooperation work with some social organizations working in the field of youth, particularly through organizing workshops for the benefit of young people. This action is limited to specific geographical areas such as the cities of Tetouan, Rabat, and Fez without generalizing it to other regions.

At the level of cooperation, the Rabita represents itself as the main actor in the approach of Mousalaha within the prisons through the sessions of prediction and religious orientation on the values of tolerant Islam, and the follow-up of what it calls “*Mourajaa Fikrya*” i.e., the change of ideology and radical ideas towards the values of tolerance and peace. This is in addition to other branches of this initiative such as the psychological and social aspects.

After monitoring the work that the Rabita has done at the religious level, we found that the books disseminated by the Rabita are characterized by the complexity of the language used to deconstruct the radical discourse. It is a traditional style based on the production of speeches against radicalism that does not take into account the modes of recruitment of radicalized groups as confirmed by one of our interlocutors: “I think it is very important to focus on the virtual world and you know that the majority of recruitment takes place in the virtual world and not in the real-world of mosques or other spaces” (Interview 6, January 2021). The second aspect is the centralization of training activities in some regions of Morocco such as the northern region, which shows the territorial inequalities in terms of prevention strategies against violent extremism.

Since 2003, the work of Majliss Ilmi (Council of Ulemas) has focused on the permanent control of religious spaces such as mosques, and all religious preaching activities and lessons organized within theological structures either in rural or urban areas. This control does not give the possibility to organize religious activities outside the state religious framework which has revalued the role of the religious institution as an actor in the direction of religious affairs. The dynamics of its institutions that started in 2005 have given advantageous effects in limiting the emergence of violent radical groups and the circulation

of radical discourses. But in the current period we can point out some points of weakness in the implementation of state strategies:

1. Firstly, the delay in the development of a digital domain on the theme of religious activities. Except for some initiations during the pandemic which showed the cleavage between the work of its institutions and the accelerated activity of radical groups in the different digital platforms, the virtual sphere plays a primordial role in the emergence of violence and the membership of radical groups as our interviewee underlined "the digital culture always influences the youth and produces violent extremism" (Interview 7, January 2021).
2. The second point is the absence of cooperation with social organizations to prepare projects for Moroccan youth in terms of VE confirmed by our interlocutor: "State institutions must listen to the proposals of civil society and interact with the work on the cases" (Interview 7, January 2021).
3. The third point is the absence of an opening to other structures in frequent ways such as public and private schools.

The impact of religious dynamics has played the role of control but with the evolution of radicalized organizations at the regional level. Religious actors do not adapt to the new evolution and renewal of impact spaces and with the new typology of the mobilized discourse especially when "radical networks create new methods of propaganda" (Interview 8, March 2022). The foundation of religious institutions does not respond to technological changes. The discourse that institutions disseminate remains classic and complicated to understand by young people as well as the tools used by predators are absent in the virtual space, the space where the young are permanently present.

Institutional Reports on the Fight Against Violent Radicalism

From our field data, we have noted that the treatment of the issue of violent extremism in the Moroccan context faces a fragmentation between state institutions and those of civil society. We can demonstrate this by the state's occupation of this field as a space of expertise and competition and specifically the priority that the state gives to it. This state position sidelines other civil society institutions, which marginalizes civil society and makes its role optional in terms of working on the emergence of violent radicalism in Morocco. The role of civil society is accompanied by the role of international NGOs and donors who work not only in the Moroccan field but also in different territories of the world under a global vision. It must be said that the activities of donors are characterized by the implementation of the same devices in different territories without considering the geographical and cultural characteristics of each society (Interview 9, March 2022). The

divide between the state and civil society represents an absence of a social and cultural approach in the path of deradicalization against this phenomenon. This result can reduce the chances of integration of marginal categories in some regions and allows the extension of the number of individual radicals (lone wolves) which has become a present model in Morocco. The exclusion of social actors and the lack of a participatory approach in the structuring of strategies influence the pace of implementation especially when it comes to the penetration of external social actors and the isolation of local organizations that are somehow familiar with the context of each region and the different problems that young people face.

We can distinguish two institutional environments in Morocco in terms of the fight against violent extremism: a security and religious environment occupied by the state, and a socio-cultural environment occupied by social institutions which do not constitute a force for suggesting laws and political strategies. The state has made its security and religious approach a field of expertise for years. However, the social sphere has become a secondary aspect in the overall strategy to fight and prevent violent radicalism. We can consider that the state approach is executed on two stages: the local level (Moroccan context), and the regional level through the presence of the country as a main actor in Africa through the Mohamed VI Institute of Training of Imams from Sahel countries.

The Seven Drivers of Violent Extremism in the Moroccan Context

In our empirical work, as expressed in the literature section, we focus on the seven drivers of violent extremism and see whether these factors are taken into account in state practice in the fight against VE and explain how the state interprets these drivers particularly those that are present in the process of building violent radicalism – that it is built on three levels: macro, meso, and micro. In this section, we analyze its factors from a macro-sociological approach by which we have conducted this research since the beginning.

Religion

On the religious front, the creation of religious institutions by the state was seen as an intervention against violent extremism. But the objective is precisely the control of the discourses circulated within the spaces of worship under the direction of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs which obliged the imams to speak to the state in all the Friday sermons. According to one of our interlocutors, activities of a religious nature are always directed by the Ulama Council which shows that other bodies are still under the control of state institutions: “The Oulèmas Council is the only institution that can steer the work of other organizations on the issue of violent extremism. The Oulèmas Council has been present in «conference» events organized by research structures with Rabita Mohamadia” (Inter-

view 10, September 2020). In this aspect, the state has followed a mechanism of institutionalization through which it circulates a religious discourse that reflects the reference of the political system.

The religious intervention of the state is limited to the creation of institutions, the monitoring of activities in spaces of worship, and the creation of programs on television such as the establishment of the channel Mohamed VI of Qoran. These interventions do not follow the new dynamic of young people in the virtual space and do not create awareness programs in social networks. One of the Murchidates⁸ interviewed (Interview 11, March 2025) expressed the view that the subject of violent extremism is dealt with in their mission within the mosques but in an indirect way. Despite the religious courses given in the program established by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Murchidines have to integrate the discourse of peace and acceptance of the other into their orientations without an official program. After analyzing the encyclopedia published by the Rabita Mohamadia des Oulémas, we found that the subjects covered in these notebooks are complex for young people to understand and that the choice of subjects and the Arabic language in which these works are written do not represent a clear discourse aimed at young people and teenagers.

Economic Deprivation and Territorial Inequities

On the economic front, King Mohamed VI started the National Human Development Initiative in 2005 to improve the social and economic situation of different categories, namely young people and people with disabilities. However, this policy does not necessarily meet the needs of Moroccans in fragile and marginal spaces. We interviewed one of the representatives of the institutions (Interview 12, September 2020) "development," and confirmed that the INDH does not have an action plan that aims to directly prevent violent extremism. As well as rural areas and some cities remain marginalized compared to the big cities, where economic activities are centralized, like the big region of Casablanca and Tangier. During a discussion group (Focus group, November 2021) with young people in the Fez-Meknes region, the participants expressed their position of socio-economic exclusion and the absence of their economic integration through their sense of inequality compared to young people in large cities. These participants show that this situation of exclusion is one of the factors that can push young people to radicalize.

8 The Murchidates in Morocco are women who act as religious guides and teachers of literacy in mosques. They work within the framework of the religious program after the reform of the religious field by the State.

Political Grievances

According to our interlocutors, the political engine is represented in the emergence of foreign ideologies as well as the lack of political participation of Moroccan youths in local political actions. One of the interviewees (Interview 13, September 2020) stated that their party takes associative activities as a tool for integrating young people into the activities they organize. In the same framework, political participation in his opinion is a way of expression and of the struggle against extremism. Our interlocutor considers that the political participation of young people is a “good method” to educate them on the principles of freedom and citizenship.

Digitalization

In the words of the participants in our survey, we found that the online space is an important factor in the construction of violent extremism as confirmed by one of our interviewees: “After 2005, and with the birth of social media networks, mosques became the last spaces targeted by radical organizations and they give no importance to mosques, but social media networks have become places to attract people, to spread messages and traditional media tools have no importance at present. Each organization has created its channel on social media and the impact the organization has through its networks. And the high number of people joining Daesh reflects this reality” (Interview 14, March 2022).

Education System

Education and school programs are seen as important aspects leading to violent extremism. The participants (Interview 15, January 2021) in this research have confirmed that school programs in Morocco contain errors in terms of expression around values, human rights. As well as textbooks such as the Arabic language and Islamic education, this presents the issue of the division between religion and philosophy. These aspects show that the content of school curricula does not have any impact on critical thinking among students; they become unable to evaluate or distinguish any violent speech.

Transnational Dynamics

Despite the action of the Moroccan state on the exchange on two levels: migration policy and security cooperation, its international policies do not represent a positive impact on the fight against violence or against local socio-economic development, or the promotion of the position of Moroccan youth. Another point in this element is that the members of the coordination of Moroccans stranded in Syria and Iraq express that, the lack of political communication between Morocco and countries in conflict situations represents a dilemma for Moroccan citizens.

Morocco Faces Current Problems

Despite Morocco's position in the African continent, conflicts in the region have posed new security and legal challenges. After 2019, the retreat of the Islamic State in Syria left many Moroccan families under control in the conflict territories which posed an obstacle for women and children who accompanied the men to the conflict lands to return to Morocco. The families who remained within the Alhoul and Ruj camps in Syria posed two problems to the Moroccan state: first, a legal problem because Morocco does not have agreements with Syria for the return of detainees of Moroccan nationality, and the question of determining the nationality of children whose mothers were married to other jihadists people who are of various nationalities.

The second problem is the possibility of penalizing women who accompanied their husbands and the difficulty of specifying their responsibilities within the warring parties. This category poses a security complication after their return to Moroccan territory, particularly since the majority of Moroccans who left for Syria joined the Harakat Cham Al Islam group led by the Moroccan Ibrahim Ben Chakroune.⁹ Moroccan officials have stated the difficulty of finding a solution in the absence of a comprehensive approach to dealing with these two categories. The work of cooperation with activists began after several protests organized by the national coordination that defended the rights of detainees in Syria and Iraq with the participation of the families of the detainees blocked, to find the possibility of access and update their socio-economic and legal situation. The absence of an initiative until today due to the lack of accurate data on the number and demographics of the detainees in the prisons, and the difficulty to grasp the situation of women and children in the camps of Alhoul and Ruj, has redoubled the suffering of these people.

The initiative of the political actors to make a diagnosis on the returnees and detainees was limited in the report of the parliamentary commission with some non-precise statistics which refers to the difficulty of the state to put in place a clear strategy to prepare the necessary resources (human and material) to solve the new problems.

We found that the families of the detainees presented direct criticism of the state's actions. In their opinion, the state is unable to solve the problem of detainees in Syria and it has not taken the example of other states in the return of their detainees. Through several attempts they asked to facilitate the return through the application of the law. Mohamed Masbah, a specialist in Morocco pointed out that the Moroccan state has tried to dismiss civil society – especially the organizations that are active in the field of human rights – to keep all the issues related to terrorism in the security box. And on the justification of these organizations, he considers that this strategy put obstacles in front of the implementation of a national policy to fight against terrorism. The political actors did not build a policy for the returnees and former Moroccan jihadists and the problem remains stagnant because of the legal and political gap of the Moroccan state (Masbah 2021).

9 A Moroccan prisoner in Guantánamo, he conducted a jihadist group in Syria in 2013.

Conclusion

From our empirical work on policies to combat violent extremism in Morocco, we find that concerning the “fight against violent extremism”, the state is conducting a strategy of repression. In this sense, the state put forward a policy of monopolization of the religious field through the creation of institutions and the promotion of programs that are part of an official religious framework. On the other hand, we see that the state has conducted what it calls a “strategy to combat terrorism and violent extremism”. From the analysis of the interviews conducted, we find that the relationship between the state and the other actors exposes two different logics. The first logic of the state actor who exposes its policy at the local and international level, while other organizations stay away from this political game. The approaches that the state has followed in the context of the “fight against extremism” remain limited to two types: security and religious. The implementation of this strategy is focused on the religious area. So other areas such as the promotion of cultural structure and economic policies are excluded. The importance of these lies in the socio-economic integration of young people into society. The absence of an integral strategy is explained by seven factors which are explanatory drivers of violent extremism at the micro and macro sociological levels. The third observation is that the international dynamics and the pandemic are factors that promote issues related to women and children in the two camps (Al-houl and A-Rouj) in Syria, while this file represents a legal block for the Moroccan state.

To conclude, despite the success of the religious policy applied in the African space, the monarchic institution has always known how to keep its monopoly on the religious questions in the Moroccan political scene for reasons, among others, related to the nature of the political regime and its historical legitimacy. Violent radicalism in Morocco is always in a process of acceleration, which takes two main dimensions: political and religious. But this fact has produced several types of internal conflicts. First, the interaction between state and non-state institutions. The new conflicts between the state and the activists who demand to apply the law of detention from the point of view of the protection of rights have emerged following the protests of the families of the detainees, especially after the communication on the violence exerted on these detainees within the prisons in Syria. It can be said that Morocco needs a new approach that takes into consideration the new issues related to radicalism, such as territorial inequalities, the evolution of the digital system, and the situations of poverty and precariousness. This requires a strategy planning on the model of successive actions to guarantee the sustainability and effectiveness of security protection and social integration of marginal categories.

In the Moroccan context, the issue of violent extremism is becoming linked to new issues such as the proximity of jihadist cells in the Sahel which can be seen as the basis for a *new generation* of fighters. Other avenues for social science research arise such as the question of the integration of ex-detainees accused by terrorism law and the creation of strategies to integrate young people in situations of vulnerability.

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