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**Resisting Extremist Ideologies: Counterterrorism, Women,  
and Religious Reform in Morocco**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines Morocco's manifest and latent use of women in its counterterrorism strategy. The first section provides an overview of terrorism and counterterrorism in Morocco, with a special focus on the escalation of women's involvement in Islamic terrorist organizations. The second section examines the restructuring of the Moroccan religious sphere as a gendered response to local, regional, and global processes and discourses surrounding the relationship between Islam and terrorism. The third presents a thematic analysis and argues that Morocco's gendered counterterrorism strategy is effective in using a localized inclusion of women in religious roles of authority. This strategy offers a valuable counter narrative that challenges the patriarchal fundamentalist discourses and centralizes the role of women in the prevention of terrorism. However, as progressive as these policies are for women's rights and counterterrorism policy, the paper also argues that these strategies are designed to consolidate the monarch's religious legitimacy and increase Morocco's regional and international soft power claims.

**Keywords:** counterterrorism, Islamic extremism, North Africa, Morocco, counter violent extremism.

**Introduction**

In the post-Arab spring, the Kingdom of Morocco stands as one of the few countries that remains unscathed by terrorism, political instability, revolutions, and the armed conflicts that have afflicted the region. As terrorist attacks intensified with the proliferation of groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, terrorism in the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Libya) also escalated. According to statistics from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), between 2011 and 2014 there was an increase of 15 to 1,105 attacks across the Maghreb with only one terrorist attack in Morocco (Reinares, 2015); a trend that has continued until the present. Unfortunately, the counterterrorism success has not reached the Moroccan community living in Europe. Close to a thousand European Moroccan men and women have travelled to Iraq, Syria, and Libya to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Feuer & Pollock, 2017) and most of the high-profile terrorist attacks in Spain, Belgium,

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England, France, and Finland involved members of the Moroccan diaspora. The clear distinction between the monarchy's counterterrorism success when compared to the frequent attacks perpetrated by Moroccan expatriates across Europe (Thompson & McCants, 2013; Charai; 2014; Alaoui, 2017; Feuer & Pollock, 2017; Dworkin & El Malki, 2018) can be attributed to its multifaceted strategy that includes law enforcement/security, socio-economic development related to the country's high levels of poverty/lack of opportunities, and religious reform to counter extremist ideology (Kalpakian, 2008; Thompson & McCants, 2013; Rezrazi, 2018).

Along with the traditional counterterrorism tactics, Morocco's integrated strategy utilizes innovative approaches that emphasize a moderate and tolerant form of Islam that centers on the Maliki School of thought, the Ash'ari creed, and the Sufi path of Imam Junaid As-Salik (United States Department of State, 2018). The combination of these interpretations of Islamic law, creed, and spirituality reinforce the monarchy's role as Commander of the Faithful (*amir al-mu'mineen*) with the legitimacy to unequivocally control Morocco's religious institutions. Rezrazi (2018) describes Morocco's counter-terrorism strategy as one that "deconstructs extremist discourse...refutes extremist thinking and removes extreme content from curriculum, places of worship, and media outlets...and provides training for religious scholars to improve their ability to confront extremist ideology" (p. 82). The most apparent feature of Morocco's deconstruction and refutation of the extremist discourse is the inclusion and repositioning of women in the religious sphere. Ever since the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attack, the government has made a concerted endeavor to challenge the masculinities of the Moroccan war on terror (Enloe, 2004) by incorporating and engaging women and gender.

The following paper will examine Morocco's manifest and latent use of women as *'alimat* (scholars), *mourchidat* (spiritual guides), *da'iyat* (preachers), and *'adoul* (religious notaries) in its counterterrorism strategy. The analysis is divided into three different parts. The first will provide an overview of terrorism and counterterrorism in Morocco and discuss the growing role of women in terrorism with a special focus on the escalation of women's involvement in Islamic extremism and terrorist organizations. The second will examine the restructuring of the Moroccan religious sphere as a gendered response to local, regional, and global processes and discourses surrounding the relationship between Islam and terrorism. The third presents the analysis of such programs. This section argues that Morocco's gendered counterterrorism strategy is effective in using a localized inclusion of women in religious roles of authority since it offers a valuable counter narrative that challenges the patriarchal fundamentalist discourses and centralizes the role of women in the prevention of terrorism. However, as progressive as these policies are for women's rights and counterterrorism policy, the paper will also argue that these strategies are designed to consolidate the monarch's religious legitimacy and increase Morocco's regional and international soft power claims.

### **The Specter of Terrorism in Morocco**

Morocco's contemporary history has extensive encounters with the specter of terrorism. During the Cold War, the region's monarchies were concerned about the possibility of leftist terrorism and political revolutions because of the coup d'états in Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. With the fear of communism and pan-Arabism, the Moroccan monarchy pursued policies that firmly supported Islamist groups as a countermeasure against left-wing movements and ideologies. Consequently, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the Moroccan government permitted hundreds of Islamist fighters to travel through Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to join the Afghan *mujahideen* against the Soviet Union (Alonso & Garcia Rey, 2007). By the end of the war, veterans of the Afghan jihad returned to the Maghreb with a renewed zeal for Salafi-Jihadism. Moreover, in neighboring Algeria, the civil war between the government and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) led to nearly a hundred thousand deaths and initiated the ensuing struggles against al-Qaeda and other extremist groups across the Maghreb (Hafez, 2000).

The Casablanca suicide bombings in 2003 was the catalyst for reform across the Moroccan body politic. Morocco's deadliest terrorist attacks occurred when suicide bombers from Casablanca's shanty towns detonated their bombs across four different locations in the city killing 45 people and injuring dozens more (START, 2018). In the aftermath, the government passed new anti-terrorism legislation and arrested 2,000 to 5,000 Islamist suspects who had Wahhabi-Salafist leanings that human rights organizations claimed were illegally detained, tortured, ill-treated, and denied their due process rights (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The Moroccan government has made tremendous strides to improve the national prevention, detection, and response to terrorism. Since the 2003 Casablanca attacks, Morocco has experienced only two major terrorist attacks: one in Marrakesh's Jemaa el-Fnaa square on 2011 that killed 17 people, the other was the 2018 brutal murders of two Scandinavian tourists in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains by terrorists that pledged their allegiance to ISIS. Although Morocco has only experienced a couple of terrorist incidents in the last 14 years, the government is always concerns about religious extremism as close to 1,500 Moroccans left to join ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and Libya (Masbah, 2015) including many who have leadership positions within the organization (Alaoui 2017).

To counter the terrorist threats to the kingdom, the government has used a comprehensive approach that includes both traditional and innovative counterterrorism measures. In the law enforcement realm, the Moroccan government has effectively used the legal system along with conventional police measures and intelligence to prevent major terrorist attacks. Since 2002, the Moroccan government reported that it prevented 352 attacks, dismantled 174 terrorist cells along with 44 ISIS linked cells (Dworkin & El Maliki, 2018). Moroccan intelligence credits this success to its collaboration with Western, regional, and international governments. Domestically, the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ), the National Brigade of the Judiciary Police (BNPJ), the General Direction of National Security (DGSN), the General Directorate of

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Territorial Surveillance (DGST), the Royal Armed Forces, the Royal Gendarmerie, the Ministry of Interior's auxiliary forces have synchronized to work in a centralized coordinated manner to secure the monarchy from terrorist threats (U.S. Department of State, 2015). These police forces continue to target recruiters, participants, their financiers, and weapons (Rezrazi, 2018) through a wide-range of law enforcement strategies that also include the more than 50,000 *mqadmin* or auxiliary agents that act as informants for the security apparatus (Dworkin & El Maliki, 2018).

Along with traditional law enforcement, the government has directly addressed religious reforms as part of its inclusive strategy to tackle the structural causes of violent extremism (Idris & Abdelaziz, 2017). In the context of the Cold War, the Moroccan government facilitated the presence of Saudi Arabian religious institutions and missionaries to counter frame the presence and perceived threat of left-wing ideological forms. This ostensibly allowed Saudi Salafism and Wahhabism to infiltrate Moroccan households via sermons in Saudi built mosques, satellite television, and the sending of a generation of students to Saudi Arabian universities to receive religious training. This was concerning to the state as the rhetorical strategies and framing of movements like al Qaeda incorporate the religious formulations postulated by Wahhabism (Abou El Fadl, 2007). In response, the government sought to completely control and reconfigure the religious sphere, eradicate radical interpretations that legitimize violence, and challenge the monarchy's religious legitimacy. In establishing the Maliki School of jurisprudence, the Ash'ari creed, and the Sufi path of Imam Junaid As-Salik, the monarchy directly confronts and opposes Wahhabis/ Salafists who concomitantly view these traditional interpretations as misguided and un-Islamic. This traditional brand of Moroccan Islam also solidifies the monarchy's four-hundred-year rule and legitimacy through the status of the King's direct lineage to the Prophet Mohammed (*sharif*), his title as Commander of the Faithful (*amir al mu'mineen*), and his mystic blessing (*baraka*) in Sufism (Daadaoui, 2010).

Moreover, the government has made a concerted effort to limit any public space for extremists through the direct supervision of education, religious institutions, and the media. Unlike Imams in the past that had limited formal religious training, the Moroccan government has built a \$20 million International Imam Training Facility in Rabat to prepare, educate, and professionalize the next generation of Imams and religious leaders including women (Alaoui, 2015; Berman, 2016). To limit extremist interpretations, the government formed a Fatwa Council as the only authentic source for edicts (*fatawa*) and provided toll free phone lines for religious counseling (Kalpakian, 2008). Meanwhile, the media has become an effective medium for countering extremist ideology. The government has launched numerous Islamic radio and television channels in addition to cultural and religious conferences like the Fes World Sacred Music Festival and the Marrakesh Conference on minorities' rights in Islam that publicly repudiate extremist ideologies. However, in the discussion on Moroccan efforts to countering violent extremism the most innovative response is the inclusion of women in positions of Islamic authority to use "gender as a marker of political shifts at the level of the

state and as a site for the positioning of local actors within the context of the war on terrorism” (Salime 2007, p. 20).

### **Women’s Roles in Islamic Extremism**

There is growing interest in the participation of women in terrorist activities with estimates that women make up about 30% of the world’s terrorist organizations (Weinberg & Eubank, 2011; Lavina, 2015; Nacos, 2016). From the examples of Tashfeen Malik of the San Bernardino shootings to the jihadi brides in Syria and Iraq, women involved in terrorist activities have consistently made headline news. Jackson et al. (2011) argue that women join terrorist organizations for a variety of complex reasons. Further research by Mahan and Griset (2008) typologized women in terrorist organizations as either *sympathizers* that provide support through money, time a safe haven, and sexual relations; *spies* that collect intelligence, pass messages, and work as decoys; *warriors* that fight alongside with the men; and finally, *dominant forces* that contribute to the terrorist organization’s ideology and strategy as leaders. In the warrior typology for example, Bloom (2011) reported that women perpetrated 257 suicide attacks between 1985 and 2010. In more recent research Wood and Thomas (2017), argue that political ideology determines women’s participation with terrorist organizations. They found that organizations that were ideologically leftist tend to have more women participants, while Islamist organizations had an inverse relationship.

In the current wave of terrorism from Islamic extremists, women serve an essential role as sympathizers, recruiters, collaborators, and active operatives in many of the conflicts. There is a rising trend for Islamic terrorist organizations to use women in their activities even when their own religious ideologies prevented women’s participation in terrorism in the past (Ness, 2007). Women in these organizations generally contribute to gendered work that is consistent with jihadist ideologies as recruiters, supporters, educators, and motivators rather than fighters on the battlefield (Peresin & Cervone, 2015; Winter, 2015). One of the earliest examples was a Moroccan born female Malika al-Aroud who used the internet to promote and recruit for al-Qaeda in Belgium (Sciolino & Mekhennet, 2008). In recent years, the propaganda wing of ISIS has actively appealed to its female supporters to migrate from their home countries to ISIS held territory. Khelghat-Doost (2017) argues that unlike previous Islamic extremist groups, ISIS has incorporated women into their organization through ‘gender-segregated parallel institutions’ offering an alternative narrative of women’s emancipation. Members of some of these Islamic extremist groups pervasively push their female members beyond the fixed roles of raising future followers, preparing meals, or providing medical care but are now directly involved with terrorist operations. The most well-known examples were the Black Widows of Chechnya, female suicide bombers of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, and Boko Haram and recently with ISIS in their fight against the Iraqi military in Mosul. In trying to tackle the different roles women play in contemporary Islamic radical movement mobilization and ideology

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construction, the Moroccan government have gendered terrorism (Jiwani, 2004) by challenging patriarchal, authoritative practices of fundamentalist organizations and re-appropriating the narratives and structures that drive them to violence.

### **Morocco's Gendered Response**

After the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the Moroccan government positioned women front and center in its counterterrorism policy with broad political goals and implications. In one of the first shifts towards religious reform, the monarchy formed a commission to reinterpret and update the *Moudawana*; the Moroccan Maliki Islamic laws that regulate inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody, and other matters concerning family law (Zoglin, 2009). Through the King's direction, judges, lawyers, religious scholars, and civil society activists worked with politicians to pass these laws that raised the age of marriage to 18, strictly regulated polygamy, permitted self-guardianship, and the equal right to divorce, amongst many other new provisions that progressed women's rights. These reforms in women's rights, family law, and religion is an innovative effective counterterrorism strategy that Couture (2014, p. 30) argues "affords women a more robust standing in the family to address issues that have the potential to materialize into catalysts of radicalization." These policies strategically situate the Moroccan government to offset gendered orientalism in the context of the war on terror (Jiwani, 2004; Khalid, 2011). This was the government's first step to establishing religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) that encouraged flexibility, openness, and tolerance. The use of women in the modernization strategy is a condemnation and direct response to the Wahhabi/ Salafist interpretation of the Islamic tradition whom perceive the current monarch as illegitimate. The promotion of gender equality through an Islamic legal framework forcibly opened space in the religious sphere to women which, "enabled them to carve out new spaces of empowerment and access points to the state" (Salime, 2007, p.20) and society. Women are recognized as a valuable resource and a strategic apparatus that can both challenge extremist interpretations through state sanctioned methods that reinforce the monarchy's narrative. Moreover, it disseminates the position that Morocco is a moderate Islamic nation that is actively dismantling extremist interpretations of Islam and the status of women while concurrently reclaiming a glorious past where women were actively engaged in public life. This rich historical narrative includes scholarly women like Aisha, the Prophet Mohammed's wife, the Sufi mystic Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, and Fatima al-Fihriya the founder of al-Qarawiyyin University, the world's first university located in Fes, Morocco. The government's response was widely accepted in Morocco and divided ultra-conservative Islamic groups. Mohammed Fizazi, one of the most popular leaders of Salafists in Morocco publically supported the state's reform initiatives (Sakthivel 2013). Other Salafist preachers that include Hassan Kettani called these religious reforms an "absurdity" and "pure secular hogwash" (Tniouni, 2018) while others argued that the government was "feminising what cannot be feminised" (The New Arab, 2018).

### **Restructuring the religious Sphere**

Following the *Moudawana* in 2004, the government started to recruit and train women in positions of religious authority that were traditionally reserved for men. The strategy was conceived by the monarch and his advisers as a means to undermine all religious interpretations that countered the state's official narrative. Raja' Naji el-Mekkaoui, a professor of law in Rabat and one of the women behind these reforms described the state's strategy as one that provides women access to the religious sphere and frustrates extremist attempts to control the religious narrative (Wainscott, 2017). Along with controlling the more extremist spectrum of Islamists the monarchy was reining in the more moderate Islamic groups that include the *Jamaa't Al-'Adl Wa Al-Ihsan* or the Justice and Excellence Organization. This Islamic movement led by Nadia Yassine, the founder's daughter has successfully recruited thousands of women through a structured hierarchy that involved members participating in everyday religious life. Since the movement symbolically challenged the seat of the monarchy, the government sought to directly manage the religious sphere and only include women that are willing to reinforce the state's official religious narrative.

The first of these positions was opened in 2004 to the '*alimat* or female religious scholars. Religious scholars are a powerful entity that historically performed a crucial role in advising government entities. The Moroccan Constitution states that the Supreme Religious Council consisting of close to 50 scholars headed by the King himself is the only institution that can officially issue fatwas. For the first time in Morocco's modern history, after a yearlong selection process 36 female scholars were accepted into various councils across the country (El Haitami, 2012). Through the ensuing years more women were incorporated in others. The '*alimat* are responsible for teaching the public Morocco's *wasatiyyah* doctrine and contribute to legal/religious scholarship. This allowed female Islamic scholars and activists alike to define their identities "as the embodiment of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and sites for enacting a politics of mediation" (Salime, 2007, p.18) in the age of terror. The diverse academic and religious training of these scholars and their corresponding interpretations of religious texts and culture (El Haitami, 2012) reflected the interests and standpoints of women while also constructing Islamic jurisprudence that delegitimizes extremist narratives. More importantly, the '*alimat* are the overseers of the *mourchidat* (spiritual guides) and *dai'yat* (preachers) positions that interact more directly with the public and serve to prevent violent extremism and radicalization (Calfas, 2016).

The position of *mourchidat* or spiritual guides is the position that was designed specifically to overcome and prevent extremist ideologies. In 2005, the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs approved programs that certified women as spiritual guides working as the female equivalent of an imam. Their primary job is to identify and counter extremist ideologies through dialogue that promotes tolerance and the practice of *wasatiyyah* in religious matters. Candidates have to go through a demanding process for the position. *Mourchidat* need a bachelor's degree from a university, substantial knowledge on the Quran and its recitation,

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an exam and an oral interview just to enter the two-year program that includes studies on a wide range of topics including the social sciences (Williams, 2008). Once the training is complete, *mourchidat* work with schools, mosques, communities, and prisons as the first responders to help with questions of religion and counter extremist ideologies through religious counseling, interpersonal interactions, and direct supervision. Through her interviews with *mourchidat*, Couture (2014) characterizes their roles as religious social workers that work with the public to identify the disenfranchised and guide them away from possible terrorist recruitment. Moreover, their ability to work within the communities they serve produces greater outreach to disaffected youth and adults.

*Da'iyat* or female preachers (also known as *wa'idhat*) are another position that has formed in the last decade and a half. Women that become *da'iyat* preach to women in mosques around the country. Unlike the *mourchidat*, *da'iyat* are volunteers that have less requirements and are trained by the *'alimat* that preside over various local councils. According to Waincott (2017), *da'iyat* focus on a deep understanding of Maliki jurisprudence, doctrinal disputes, especially the issues that pertain to women. Meanwhile, *da'iyat* just like the previous positions focus on refuting extremist ideologies in their talks and lectures at local mosques and homes. The *da'iyat* ensure that gender specific discussions and lectures are given to ensure religious narratives appeal to local communities. In doing so, the *da'iyat* become the localized emissaries of the state reflecting the regional, cultural, and linguistic differences in contemporary Morocco to ensure the *wasatiyyah* doctrine is mainstreamed.

The most recent counterterrorism effort towards religious reform has been the inclusion of women in the role of *'adoul* or religious notaries. In the beginning of 2018, the King Mohammed VI along with the state religious council made the decision to grant women the right to apply for the position of *'adoul*, a gendered role that has always been held by men. A few months after the proclamation, thousands took the exam and the results showed that 299 or 37 % of the candidates that passed the examination were women (Elhassani, 2018). The position is a public notary for judges that has legal and religious functions centered on drafting contracts for marriage, divorce, wills, and inheritance along with many other tasks. The *'adoul* comes from the religious term *shahid 'adl* or just witness and was always perceived as a religious position since their services are commonly used for religious ceremonies, which entails the person must be perceived by societal members as righteous and upstanding. The opening of the *'adoul* position to women empowers their status economically but also directly shapes the framework and religious structure of Moroccan society. Moreover, it raises the status and voice of women in Moroccan society as producers of Islamic knowledge as opposed to consumers of Islamic knowledge and thus provides agency and legitimacy by the state to identify and resist radical interpretations.

In the use of *'alimat*, *mourchidat*, *da'iyat*, and *'adoul* in counterterrorism, the Moroccan monarchy is acknowledging that the real struggle against Islamic extremism is one that converges around competing religious interpretations of the

Islamic faith. The problem of terrorism and extremist violence in the Muslim world is one that is rooted in ideology and therefore needs an alternative approach (El-Said, 2015). One of the clear outcomes from this counter-narrative is the refutation of the extremist interpretations that advocate for terrorism as a means to establishing their version of Islam. Morocco's religious reform and the placement of women in positions of authority counters that narrative. Moderation in religion or *wasatiyyah*, introduces a middle option between the perceived secular, Western path to empowerment and that of the religious extremists that are now including women in terrorist operations. The religious positions of authority will have an easier time conveying *wasatiyyah* to the public more effectively since religious figures in Morocco are respected more than politicians, police officers, and other representatives of the government. Moreover, the perspective of the *wasatiyyah* is often framed in gendered terms as Salime (2007) found with her respondents who, "defined motherhood according to the Koranic concept of the *wassat* (middle path)" (p.17) and thus become mediators who wield significant power and influence on society. Thus, beyond viewing women as minders and informers (Ni Aolain, 2015) for the state, the Moroccan governments restructuring of the religious sphere empowers women to becoming effective agents in counter terrorism ideology. As the director of the Mohamed VI institute El Azaar states, "In recent years, we've relied on the military to combat terrorism on its own.....Now we're fighting this on two fronts—the military and the ideological," as "women are uniquely placed to spread moderate messages in a way that imams and fathers can't, and we're focusing on that" (Temple-Raston, 2018).

### **Morocco's Manifest and Latent Objectives**

Just as terrorist organizations use women for their operations, women are a critical resource for counterterrorism strategies. Morocco's use of women in counterterrorism is an appealing prospect when compared to the traditional practices of counterterrorism in the region. Systematic torture, arbitrary arrests, and the disappearance of those accused of terrorism still haunts the citizens that live in other countries in North Africa (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The Moroccan government's gendered view of women's strategic position as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and partners are considered the front line in the prevention of radicalization and terrorism. Through their participation in the religious restructuring process, women wield enormous power in policing their communities by detecting and reacting to religious extremism and spreading the state's religious narrative to the younger generation of citizens who may be susceptible to radicalization (Chowdhury Fink, Barakat, & Shetret, 2013).

The *'alimat*, *mourchidat*, *da'iyat*, and *'adoul* positions mainstreams women and promotes gender equality by raising their status and personhood within their families and communities. The capacity built by the state to support women in these positions allows the fight against extremist ideologies to be resisted in each household, "at the level of the sidewalks – and at individual mosques" (Temple-Raston, 2018). However, the reality remains that these reforms have been

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primarily a masculine project that challenge the masculinities of the war on terror only when there is some sort of benefit for the state. In the analysis of these reforms, there are clear manifest and latent functions regarding the inclusion of women in these counterterrorism strategies.

### **Localized counterterrorism**

The government's combination of Islamic interpretations (Maliki jurisprudence, Ash'ari creed, and Sufism) that fall within the traditional deeply-rooted Moroccan framework legitimizes its efforts against extremist ideology and terrorist activity. The localized approach to counterterrorism is perceived as a subtle method that uses the local culture and ecology. As a conservative society, these efforts allow local women to connect together and have access to religious knowledge that they would otherwise not have since male scholars can't reach many of these women in institutions that are traditionally segregated by gender. More importantly a localized approach to counterterrorism directly builds on religious reform that is familiar to Moroccan society based on centuries of Moroccan history, culture, traditions, and scholarship. This form of Islam is not perceived as foreign but rather reflects the culture and reinforces the King's position as the sole religious authority in Morocco. As the King himself asks, "Is it necessary for the Moroccan people, empowered by the unity of its religious rite and the authenticity of its civilization, to import foreign ritualistic rites to its own traditions?" (Ministry of Communication, 2003). Women in this context are seen as the conduits of the state's counter framing of extremist's ideology as they are able to mobilize large swaths of Moroccan society away from foreign ideologies and "doctrines [that] are incompatible with Moroccan identity" (Ministry of Communication, 2003). As El Azaar states, "we've found over the years that if we have women organize something at the mosque, 450 people show up. If the men are put in charge, they're lucky if 25 guys make the effort" (Temple-Raston, 2018). This localized approach focuses on communities and families to understand the specific factors that draw Moroccan citizens to violent extremism including the role of external ideologies and influences that are foreign from the localized Islamic traditions. This allows the network of female Islamic preachers and activist to engage, mediate, minister, and heal families and communities that are susceptible to extremism and 'foreign ploys.' As Couture states, "there is no better long-term, sustainable deterrent against terrorism and radicalization than educated, prosperous, safe, resilient and empowered communities" (Couture, 2014, p. 50).

### **Progressive Ideas that Align with the State**

The centrality of women in Islamic fundamentalist discourse has centered the female body in their framing and memorial practices. Women's bodies are the focus of regimes like the Taliban and ISIS whose patriarchal interpretations center the women as confined to an enclosed physical and symbolic space whose bodies and voices should be unseen at home and in society. In fact, the female subject in Islamic extremist discourse is seen as a *fitnah* (a problem) who if not controlled and regulated by the father, husband, and brother can potentially bring negative

harm and disruption to society. The gendered reforms in the religious structure sought to challenge this narrative by objectively placing women in the forefront of the Moroccan states counter terrorism efforts. This contests the narratives of their interpretive frames surrounding Islam, especially as the state has now institutionalized the presence of women in traditionally official religious positions. Authority over Islamic discourse legitimizes the critique of extremist narratives while institutionalizing women in contemporary Islamic scholarship. Moreover, in empowering women to occupy space in the public sphere in both official and unofficial capacities, the state is challenging fundamentalist rhetorical strategies that seek to deny women any space in society. The use of *ijtihad* (legal reasoning) to ensure Islam is not used as tool for regressive religious and political projects emanating from the Arab Gulf was addressed by the King when he said, “we will not tolerate these, the more so as these doctrines are incompatible with the specific Moroccan identity. To those who think to make themselves mouthpieces of a rite foreign to Our people, We will oppose them with a vigor that is dictated by the task to preserve the uniqueness of the rite of the Moroccans, reaffirming Our will to defend our choice of the Maliki rite” (Ministry of Communication, 2003). For the state and its accompanying religious institutions, pursuing progressive positions from within the Islamic tradition relating to Islamic reform and women’s rights becomes an act of resistance to extremist ideologies and movements in Morocco and abroad.

In situating himself as the symbolic authority of the Islamic tradition, the monarchy’s directive for bringing women into the religious sphere forces conservatives, Salafists and Wahhabis to engage the policy and reevaluate their positions or be seen as hypothetically in opposition to the monarchy. The monarch’s inclusion of Salafists and Wahhabis in the Moroccan political sphere allowed for the state to co-opt these movements while encouraging ideological moderation in response to the Moroccan state’s Islamic objectives (Masbah, 2017). The leading Salafi-jihadi leaders who went to prison after the Casablanca bombings for supporting terrorism and violent extremism have abandoned their radical views especially pertaining to their relationship with Moroccan religious authorities and institutions in which the King is the ultimate head. One of the leading figures of this movement known in Morocco and the Arab world was Mohammed al Fizazi, an Islamist scholar who was sentenced to thirty years condoning extremist violence and released after the King pardoned him in 2011 (Masbah 2017). Fizazi’s reform along with other imprisoned Salafist leaders has been widely covered by the media, intellectuals, and Islamic activists especially for their support of the government’s policies regarding the role of women in positions of religious authority and the recent ban on the sale of the burqa in Morocco (Masbah 2017). This moderating effect on Salafi-jihadists reflects the power and authority that the monarchy and the state have in defining and enforcing the Moroccan Islamic tradition. The power of the state to reinforce the status and empowerment of women in the religious sphere changes how violent extremists interpret the role of women in Islam but also are forced to reevaluate their ‘foreign’ position in relation to Moroccan Islam.

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### **Display of Soft Power for Regional and International Audiences**

Finally, these religious reforms have been a way for the Moroccan government to flex its soft power regionally and globally. Not only is the Moroccan government resisting the spread of radical-jihadist ideologies in the Moroccan context they are also training Imams, *'alimat*, and *mourchidate* from across Africa and Europe (Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands etc.). The reactions from neighboring Muslim-majority countries have been largely positive with Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Libya, Mali, Senegal, and Tunisia sending their citizens to the Imam academy in Rabat (Boum, 2016; Waincott, 2017). The training of men and women in the Islamic sciences and methodologies in which the monarchy is seen as the sole authority reinforces Moroccan soft power claims in neighboring African countries who have been destabilized by the radical-jihadist movements and networks. The expansion of Salafist and Wahhabi interpretations in these circumstances have led to the creation of movements like Boko Haram and al Qaeda in North Africa and ISIS inspired attacks across Europe. The collective effort to present a moderate Islamic tradition that reinforces the participation of women in the religious sphere is seen by the Moroccan government and local and regional allies as key to reforming the extremist ideologies that have found a home in these contexts.

The counter-terrorism strategies of the Moroccan state have created an opportunity for the regime to brand itself as a moderate Muslim nation and out of the cross hairs of the American and European war on terror. Especially since Muslim women have been central in the hegemonic ideologies behind the war on terror and thus used “gender to position itself as a modern player on the international scene” (Salime 2007, p. 20). In putting women in the forefront of this battle against radicalization and fundamentalism the monarchy expanded space for women in society, challenged the underlying premises of the extremist movements, and has repositioned Morocco in the eyes of the international community as a moderate Muslim nation (Salime, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

Since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, governments have generally countered terrorism through conventional methods that include law enforcement and the legislation of counterterrorism laws. Along with these approaches, Morocco's comprehensive response embraces a gendered reformation of the religious sphere as a strategy that refutes the narratives put forth by al Qaeda, ISIS, and other terrorist organizations. The direct refutation of extremist ideologies is centered on a legitimately Islamic methodology that empowers women as producers of knowledge and actors in the war on terror. The Moroccan response has broad policy implications for counterterrorism. Although there is no empirical evidence collected on the strategy's success or failure, the use of *'alimat*, *mourchidat*, *da'iyat*, and *'adoul* is one that addresses both the push and pull factors of terrorism recruitment that has haunted Morocco in the past few decades. As Islamic

extremists are actively recruiting women into their organizations, governments are becoming more aware of women's role as preventers of terrorism. The Moroccan approach will likely proliferate in the Muslim world and have long term implications on counterterrorism in the region. The gendered response to terrorism directly confronts extremist interpretations and provides women with unmediated access to the religious sphere in the Muslim world. This empowerment of women in the religious and counterterrorism sphere will benefit both the region's governments and their societies. This innovative counterterrorism strategy is being examined by numerous countries in Africa and Europe and has generated interest as a women driven counter-narrative that builds 'spiritual security' (Harrington, 2013).

Nevertheless in Morocco, the latent function of this approach clearly reinforces the monarchy's position as *amir al mu'mineen* and expands his soft power regionally and globally. Through the concept of *wasatiyyah*, women are repositioned to counter extremist ideologies to define, expand, and reinforce Moroccan Islam both ideologically and on the ground.

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