



# GREASE

Religion, Diversity  
and Radicalisation

## POLICY BRIEF

### Preventing Religiously Inspired Violent Radicalisation Among Moroccan Youth: Barriers and Opportunities

#### Introduction

Starting with the Madrid train bombings in 2004, young men with roots in Morocco and other Maghreb countries have been implicated in numerous terrorist attacks across Europe. These include the attacks in Paris in January and November of 2015; in Brussels, Nice, and Berlin in 2016; and in Barcelona in 2017. Efforts to explain such attacks frequently point to external factors such as the conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. According to this thinking, terrorist attacks in Europe are carried out by radicalised individuals seeking revenge against Western countries for military involvement in those conflicts. Islamist extremists portray these conflicts as cases of 'infidels' waging war against Islam.

However, external factors alone do not explain the rise over the past two decades of religiously motivated violent radicalisation among young people with roots in the Maghreb. It is essential to also take into account long-term structural factors driving political and social deviation among conservative societies with strong economic and social imbalances and few political freedoms. Marginalisation, stigmatisation and xenophobia have severely affected young people in Maghreb countries. Such factors have significantly impacted many migrants and children of migrants in European Union countries such as France, Belgium and Spain as well.

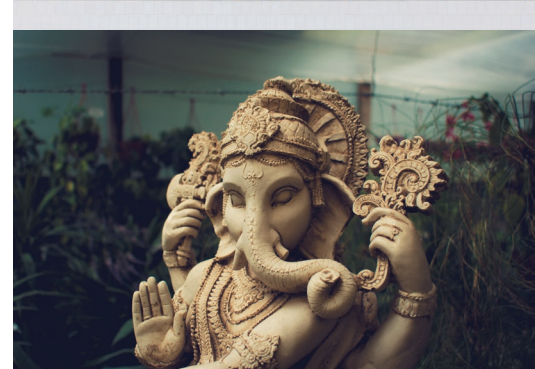
After reviewing steps taken to counter violent Islamist radicalisation in Morocco (institutional, legal, and operational), this policy brief argues that efforts should focus more on social and economic reforms targeting structural factors. While security cooperation can be valuable, greater emphasis should be placed on education, human rights, job creation, and poverty reduction.

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 770640.



EUI Issue 2022/13  
April 2022

[www.grease.eui.eu](http://www.grease.eui.eu)

## Structural Factors Driving Radicalisation

Key structural factors driving violent Islamist radicalisation among young people in recent decades include:

- Low educational attainment. Around a third of Moroccans between the ages of 20 and 29 have not been educated beyond primary level. Polls show a low percentage of young people read newspapers or books.
- Socio-cultural environments imbuing young people with increasingly conservative (religiously fundamentalist) values.
- Diminished attractiveness of traditional political parties (on both left and right) for young people.
- Proliferation of digital media - particularly social networks - exposing young people to misinformation and propaganda.

In addition, structural factors in European countries play a role, notably:

- Projects espousing fundamentalist religious ideologies such as Wahabism funded by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf countries in poor suburbs of large cities (including Paris, Brussels, and Barcelona).
- Manipulation of extremist political forces at local level, often for electoral purposes.
- Racism, xenophobia, and all forms of stigmatization negatively affecting identity and one's sense of belonging.

## Contradictions and Dilemmas

In addition to these structural factors, Moroccan authorities must contend with conflicting interests that pose dilemmas for the task of countering religiously inspired radicalisation. Among them:

- The Moroccan monarchy bases much of its legitimacy on religion (specifically Islam) and its role in protecting it. Indeed, the Moroccan state's identification with Islam is reflected in the National Constitution. Nonetheless, the state seeks to position the country internationally as democratic and modern.
- The pronounced Islamic character of the state means that much of social life - including the educational system from elementary level onwards - is strongly imbued with religion. This is true even though school is generally presented as

the path to scientific rationality and progress.

- The state has often used Islam to contain leftist or socialist opposition in the country and distract from the failure of its economic and social policies. Paradoxically, in the absence of rational political opposition, such policy failures have been among the main factors driving the population to become more conservative, and in some cases embrace radical Islamist ideologies.
- At the same time, the economic and financial difficulties that the country has experienced, especially during the external debt crisis in the 1980s, have led to increased dependence on international aid, particularly from Gulf monarchies. However, such aid was accompanied by a more or less strong alignment with radical religious ideologies associated with those same monarchies.

## Three Levels of Intervention

Moroccan authorities recognized that the country's image was being tarnished by the violent actions of some of its young people, a number of whom had become nationals of European countries or were born there. They also recognized that these violent actions - when committed in Morocco - represent a great danger for the economy and the political system. Hence, between 2003 and 2004 the authorities resolved to strengthen their fight against violent radicalisation. They did so through intervention on three levels: institutional, legal and operational.

### The Executive Level

Under the auspices of the king - who is constitutionally invested with powers over religious matters in Morocco - the government has adopted an approach based on four complementary objectives:

- Securing political and social legitimacy.* This manifests itself in a quest to preserve the king's authority so that the royal system's sustainability does not depend on elections, parliamentary support, or any system of delegation, but on the majority's supposed adhesion. This process is fundamentally linked to the belief among a large part of the society that authority lies in the king's prominent religious role, which meets the demand for stability and moral security in the absence of material well-being and general economic prosperity.

- b. *Countering political opposition*, as demonstrated between the 1970s and 90s against the socialist and communist opposition and more recently against the protests in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011.
- c. *Responding to the rise of Shiite Islam* in Morocco, which supposedly reflects increasing Iranian influence in the Maghreb and the Middle East. Other instances of religious radicalisation have been linked to the wars in Afghanistan and the Balkans as well as repression carried out by the Israeli security forces against the Palestinian population in the occupied territories.
- d. *Supporting Moroccan diplomacy*, especially in sub-Saharan African allies like Mali, Senegal, and Guinea-Conakry. This was one of the main reasons for the establishment of the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Scholars. The foundation is based on a set of goals which includes: 'To unify and coordinate the efforts of Muslim religious scholars in Morocco and the rest of African states, the purpose of which is to introduce the tolerant values of Islam and to disseminate and consolidate them'.

## The Legislative Level

Two laws have become essential parts of the legal arsenal that Morocco has established in its fight against terrorism over the past 20 years. These laws, summarized below, are referred to as 03-03 and 86-14.

### Law 03-03

On May 16, 2003, a few days after the unclaimed terrorist attacks in Morocco's largest city, Casablanca, the country enacted its first anti-terrorism law. This law identifies offenses that

'constitute acts of terrorism when they are intentionally in relation to an individual or collective enterprise with the aim of seriously undermining public order by intimidation, terror or violence'. Such offenses include: 'Deliberate attack on the life of persons or their integrity, or their freedoms, the kidnapping or sequestration of persons; counterfeiting or falsification of currencies; destruction, damage or deterioration; hijacking, degradation of aircraft or ships or any other means of transport, degradation of air, sea and land navigation facilities and destruction, degradation or deterioration of means of communication; theft and extortion of property; illegal manufacture, possession, transport, release or use of weapons, explosives or ammunition and

participation in an association formed or in an agreement established for the preparation or commission of one of the acts of terrorism.'

### Law 86-14

After the attacks in France of 2015, law 03-03 was amended to take into account Moroccan foreign fighters and crimes committed by them outside Morocco. The amendment was also a consequence of the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL) in Mosul on June 29, 2014, which altered the position of the international community led by the USA. That same month Morocco supported the UN Security Council in passing resolution 2170, which 'reaffirms that terrorism, including the actions of ISIL, cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, or civilization'. The resolution also

'calls upon all Member States to take national measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to, and bring to justice, in accordance with applicable international law, foreign terrorist fighters of, ISIL, ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida, reiterates further the obligation of Member States to prevent the movement of terrorists or terrorist groups, in accordance with applicable international law, by, inter alia, effective border controls, and, in this context, to exchange information expeditiously, improve cooperation among competent authorities to prevent the movement of terrorists and terrorist groups to and from their territories, the supply of weapons for terrorists and financing that would support terrorists.'

Moreover, Morocco committed itself to engage militarily with the international coalition against Islamic State from September 2014, which automatically implied that it would henceforth consider combatants on Syrian and Iraqi lands as enemies.

## The Operational Level

To help enforce these laws, Morocco created an operational security structure – the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (French acronym BCIJ) - in 2015. Sometimes referred to as a Moroccan FBI, this structure was created as part of an effort to strengthen security governance in response to international and regional developments between 2011 and 2015, particularly an upsurge in terrorist acts in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Bureau, which is under the supervision of the public prosecutor, reports to the General Director-

ate of Territorial Surveillance. It is responsible for pursuing crimes and offenses identified in Article 108 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, in particular banditry, drug trafficking, arms and explosives trafficking, terrorism, attacks on the security of the state, and currency forgery. This new structure includes an elite police service, which receives training in legal and professional matters. The office of this service is equipped with advanced technical and technological capabilities.

By July of 2019 - that is to say, a little more than four years after its creation - the BCIJ had dismantled nearly 70 terrorist cells in Morocco. Between 2015 and 2018, it dissolved 57 terrorist cells, including 51 related to Islamic State. Its agents also arrested 902 people, including 14 women and 29 minors. According to the head of this structure, the total number of terrorist cells dismantled in Morocco since 2002 has risen to 183 and the number of people arrested for terrorist activities stands at 3,129.

## Deradicalisation

In addition to the above, Morocco has implemented a deradicalisation program in its prisons. The program - called Moussalaha - started in 2017. It was set up to provide 'the best conditions for a participative reintegration of people who have been sentenced to prison for extremism and terrorism'. According to prison administration officials, the program strikes at the foundations of terrorism with monitoring activities and a long-term vision aimed at protecting Moroccan society from this phenomenon.

The key concept used in the Moussalaha deradicalisation program is 'Reconciliation'. This revolves around three axes: to be reconciled with oneself, to be reconciled with the text of the Koran, and to be reconciled with society. The courses facilitate the monitoring of people imprisoned for acts of terrorism. The objective is ultimately to assure their smooth integration into society at the end of their prison sentence.

However, despite the collaboration of 10 public institutions and multiple outside experts in this program, only a very limited number of people have benefited from it. As of 2019, that number (according to the Moroccan press agency MAP) was 68.

## Policy Assessment

Despite all efforts by the Moroccan government and public institutions described above, the threat of radicalisation and religiously motivated violence has not been significantly reduced. The threat of

the latter remains significant in Morocco as well as other countries hosting the Moroccan diaspora.

These threats persist even though:

- The king is constitutionally empowered to control religion.
- Multiple laws are in place intended to protect Moroccan society against religious radicalisation.
- Political discourse seeks to propagate the notion of Islam as part of a moderate and open Morocco providing an international humanist environment.
- The Ministry of Habous and Islamic affairs - a state within the state - exercises control over most mosques in the country and over large parts of the country's educational system.
- The state exercises political (and often financial) control over public and private media.

## Persistent Problems

Although Morocco has experienced only one terrorist attack since 2011, radicalisation remains a problem. This is attributable to multiple factors in Moroccan society, including:

- High levels of unemployment and/or marginalisation among young people and graduates in particular (figures 1 & 2).
- A high degree of precariousness expressed by low average per-capita income and imbalances in both income distribution and expenditure among large parts of the population.
- Lack of access to basic public services such as school, health, drinking water, and sanitation.
- High levels of illiteracy coupled with the failure of media to educate society and foster openness to universal human values. This makes large parts of society vulnerable to simplistic religious discourses suggesting all the country's difficulties stem from disrespecting Islam or plots by foreign forces who are portrayed as enemies of Islam. This is not, moreover, unrelated to the following point:
- The penetration of Morocco since the 1990s by many Arab satellite television broadcasters including fundamentalist religious satellite channels, often peddling radicalised ideology to illiterate people as well as to the most disadvantaged social strata. This should be observed in relation to the actions of the Ministry of Habous

and Islamic Affairs, including, in particular, the acceleration of the construction of mosques throughout the country over the past few years. Such mosques are being built with funds from this Ministry or thanks to contributions from individual Moroccan donors (benefactors).

- Barriers to organization and expression within (normal) political parties and disenfranchisement of economic or political decision making. This gives rise to a fatalistic approach by many people, especially the poorest, who then rely on spiritual intervention to solve their problems. Hence the great appeal of the slogan ‘Islam is the solution’, very often heard during the demonstrations organized by Islamist entities.

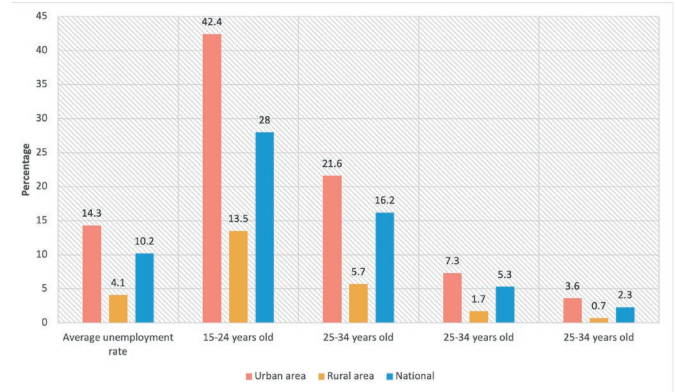
## Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at addressing both extreme conservatism and radicalisation:

1. Morocco should adopt economic and social reforms, supported by the EU, with the essential objectives of reducing poverty among its population and creating sufficient jobs for the benefit of its young people, including young graduates.
2. As it is difficult to quickly transform the nature of the Moroccan political system, the country should reform its educational system by adopting programs that are less based on religion and show greater respect for human rights, universal values, and gender equality. In other words, try to secularize the national education system.
3. Establish educational programs aimed at countering jihadist propaganda and ideologies. These programs can utilize remote learning possibilities such as those already initiated by the Rabitat of the Ulema of Morocco. Such programs should be developed in partnership with civil society as well as with relevant European institutions, since they would also be geared towards youth of Moroccan origin in Europe.
4. Ensure that funds flowing to Morocco and European countries from Saudi Arabia and Gulf States are disconnected from their political and ideological advocates. If necessary, try to do without them or at least control their use.
5. Strengthen collaboration between the various security services involved in the fight against violent radicalisation, while ensuring that this

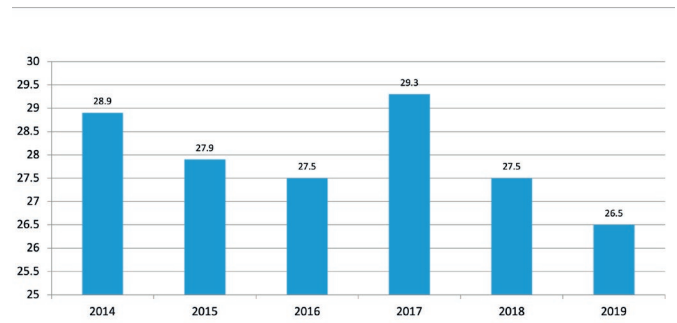
collaboration takes place with respect for human rights. Otherwise, it risks being counter-productive.

**Figure 1: Unemployment among Moroccans below age 35 (2019)**



Source: HCP, [www.hcp.ma](http://www.hcp.ma) (2019)

**Figure 2: Percentage of Moroccan youth (aged 15 to 24) that are not in education, employment or training**



Source: HCP, [www.hcp.ma](http://www.hcp.ma) (2019).

## About the GREASE Project

What can Europe learn from other parts of the world about governing religious diversity? The GREASE project has been finding out. Our consortium has brought together researchers and eminent scholars from Europe, South & Southeast Asia, Asia Pacific and the MENA region. Together we have investigated how religious diversity is governed in 24 countries. Comparing norms, laws and practices, we have sought to ascertain what is useful (or not useful) in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research has shed light on different societal approaches to accommodating religious minorities and migrants. GREASE aims to deepen our understanding of religious diversity governance, emphasizing insights for countering radicalisation.

The GREASE project is coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou and Dr. Tina Magazzini from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Lily Yakova from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia).

Project duration: October 2018 - September 2022

For more information on GREASE and to access resources produced as part of the project, visit the website: <http://grease.eui.eu>

This is part of the GREASE Policy Brief Series. Other briefs in the series include:

- Preventing Religiously Motivated Radicalisation: Lessons from Southeastern Europe
- The Power of Positive Connections: Western European Approaches to State-Religion Relations and Radicalisation
- Managing Religious Diversity and Radicalisation in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Published by

European University Institute (EUI)

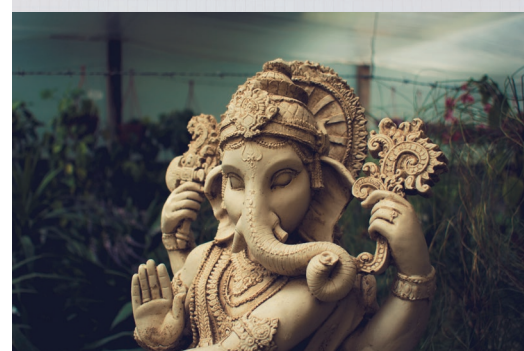
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doi:10.2870/056475  
ISBN:978-92-9466-152-4  
ISSN:2467-4540  
QM-AX-22-013-EN-N



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 770640.