



How Rabat Is Coping With ISIS Returnees

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Over the past decade, Morocco's extensive efforts to promote its brand of tolerant Islam as an antidote to the extremism of ISIS and other Islamic radicals has put the kingdom on the intellectual front lines of the "war of ideas" in the Muslim world. Less well known, however, are the country's domestic efforts to mitigate its own internal Islamist problem.

As of mid-2017, the International Crisis Group estimated that more than 1,500 Moroccan nationals had left the country to join the *jihād* in Iraq and Syria. The causes of this mobilization vary, but the consequence is clear; the issue of Islamist "returnees" has become a top concern for the kingdom, and prompted the country to adopt a dual response centered on isolation and rehabilitation.

The kingdom formally criminalized foreign fighter mobilization in 2015, pursuant to guidelines promulgated by the United Nations. Under Moroccan law, anyone who leaves the country to travel to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State is considered a criminal, and is incarcerated upon their return. Ostensibly, this penalty also applies to Islamists who join other extreme factions (such as al-Qaeda or Nigeria's Boko Haram). Prison terms for violators range from five to 18 years behind bars, depending on the role played in the extremist group in question.

To date, Morocco has apprehended less than 200 such returnees, all of whom have been jailed. However, authorities anticipate a surge of additional returning extremists in the weeks and months ahead, now that the Islamic State's *caliphate* in the Middle East has collapsed.

To deal with this flow, Morocco has erected a parallel prison system designed to segregate Islamic extremists from "general population" criminals and prevent their radical ideas from infecting others. Some 16 to 17 such prisons now operate within the kingdom, and the prisoners they contain are classified in three tiers. Religious hardliners, terror financiers or those involved in indoctrination are considered to be the most dangerous. Islamic extremists who exhibit signs of being "reconcilable" to moderate Islam are considered less so, while others (noncombatants, non-ideologues) are seen as comparatively unthreatening. The treatment received by these inmates differs depending on their classification. In all, the population of Morocco's Islamic penal system is currently estimated at between 800 and 820 inmates.

But officials in Rabat recognize that incarceration is not a permanent solution to the country's Islamist problem. As a result, the kingdom has turned its attention to the deradicalization of Islamists deemed capable of reform.

The product is a new program dubbed *Musalaha* ("reconciliation"). Administered by the country's General Delegation for Prison Administration and Reintegration (DGAPR) and designed to rehabilitate religious extremists, the program has a three-fold goal: to reconcile the prisoner with his own actions, with the Muslim faith, and with society at large. This is achieved through lectures and ideological discourse that debunk extremist Islamist ideas (carried out in cooperation with the Rabita Mohammedia des Oulemas, the country's top religious body), via vocational and theoretical training designed to provide employable and intellectual skills to prisoners, and by the promotion of human rights concepts.

Musalaha programs are two months in length, during which time participants are segregated from the regular prison population. Upon completion, the majority of participants (more than 50% of graduates so far) are granted amnesty, and have their sentences commuted. Participation in the program is entirely voluntary, and must be initiated by the inmates themselves.

Musalaha, however, is still strictly a pilot program. To date, just two rounds have been completed, with a third now underway. The initiative boasts only 75 graduates, with 37 inmates currently participating. Nevertheless, despite this small sample size, Moroccan officials maintain that the results have been extremely encouraging; the program has been in existence for three years, and so far no recidivism at all has occurred among its graduates.

Will Morocco's method of addressing the threat posed by ISIS returnees work? Only time will tell. But the kingdom's successes in this arena to date offer some valuable lessons for other regional states who are struggling with the same problem – or soon will be.

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