

Morocco's hidden Christians see Pope trip as chance to push for freedom

– Ahmed Eliechtimi

– Reuters (22.03.2019) – <https://reut.rs/2YlpFXt>– Moroccan converts to Christianity, a tiny minority in an overwhelmingly Muslim country, are looking to Pope Francis' visit next week as an chance to press their demands for religious freedom.

Francis will spend two days in Rabat on his first trip to the North African country from March 30-31 – the first visit there by any pope in nearly 35 years.

He will spend time with Roman Catholics – most of them expatriate Europeans, mainly French, and sub-Saharan African migrants – who are free to worship in churches such as the capital's art deco St. Peter's Cathedral.

But unlike those “foreign Christians”, Moroccan converts say they are forced to worship at home, in secret. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is banned – as it is in many Muslim countries – and proselytizing is punishable by up to three years in prison.

One group backing them – the Moroccan Association for Religious Rights and Freedoms – has already written to the Vatican, raising its concerns, and it is planning a sit-in outside a church in Rabat on the eve of the visit.

“We want laws that protect religious minorities in the country on an equal footing,” the head of the association, Jawad El Hamidy, said.

“We will seize the pope’s visit to put more pressure on the state to protect religious freedoms.”

“NO DISCRIMINATION”

Morocco has marketed itself as an oasis of religious tolerance in a region torn by militancy – and has offered training to Muslim preachers from Africa and Europe on what it describes as moderate Islam.

Government spokesman Mustapha El Khalfi said the authorities did not violate religious freedoms. “There is no persecution in Morocco and there is no discrimination on the basis of faith,” he told reporters when asked about the accusations.

But converts point to the constitution, which formally recognizes the existence of Moroccan Muslims and Jews – but not of Moroccan Christians. They also point to their day-to-day experience.

“When I went to a church to declare my faith, I was told that I was prohibited to do so by Moroccan law,” said a 40-year-old Moroccan Christian who gave his name as Emmanuel and asked not be shown while filmed.

“We call on Moroccan authorities and the Holy Father to seize the opportunity offered by this papal visit to launch a sincere dialogue on religious freedom for Moroccan citizens,” the Coordination of Moroccan Christians, a local lobby group, said.

There are no official statistics, but leaders say there are about 50,000 Moroccan Christians, most of them from the Protestant Evangelical tradition – outnumbering the estimated 30,000 Roman Catholics in the country.

There was no immediate response from the Vatican to the Association’s letter. But the most senior Roman Catholic in Morocco – the Archbishop of Rabat, Cristobal Lopez Romero –

offered his support.

“We as Catholic Christians appreciate that we fully enjoy the freedom of faith but we will be happier if the Moroccan people could also enjoy that,” the Spanish cleric told reporters.

“I would love to be able to become Moroccan without having to change my religion.”

Moroccan court acquits man accused of proselytizing

– Man charged with ‘shaking the faith of a Muslim,’ an offence ‘related to the practice of religion’

– By Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner

– La Croix International (22.03.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2U17nvj>– A Moroccan, Y.G., gave “books of the Gospel,” possibly a copy of the New Testament, to a friend and fellow Moroccan. His friend, a Muslim, filed a complaint, “considering this act an attempt to incite him to convert to Christianity.”

The prosecution decided to charge Y.G. with “shaking the faith of a Muslim,” an offence “related to the practice of religion” enshrined in Article 220 of the Moroccan Penal Code, the news site Media24 reported.

Under Article 220, anyone who “uses means of seduction to shake the faith of a Muslim” or who “employs incitements ... to make him convert to another religion, will incur a sentence

ranging from six months' to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (€20 to 50)."

This penalty is also applicable when the suspect tries to convert the other party by exploiting his weakness or needs, or by using educational or health institutions, shelters or orphanages, according to the Moroccan Penal Code.

Released on appeal

On March 28, 2018, Y.G. was acquitted by the local court in Taza, Northwest Morocco. The Royal Prosecutor appealed, and the Court of Appeal handed down its verdict on November 22, 2018, surprising many by upholding the decision of the lower court.

The decision was published in the latter part of February 2019 by the Moroccan media. "Freedom of religion: an important decision by the Taza Court of Appeal," ran the headline on the site of Media24 on Feb. 19.

"Taza Court acquits man charged with proselytising," was the headline a day later in the newspaper *TelQuel*, whose reporter was also able to consult the ruling.

The Appeal Court's decision mentioned the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, signed by Morocco, which guarantees "freedom to manifest one's religion or convictions."

The mention in the 2011 Constitution of the international conventions signed by the country, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is a form of recognition of freedom of conscience, one local observer stressed.

"Due to the very firm opposition of two political parties, it could not be formally included in the text of the Constitution adopted in 2001, but in the final analysis, it is present, all

the same, in this way," he explained.

The Gospel, a 'celestial book'

The Appeal Court noted "the absence of any material or moral element" that could constitute an infraction, adding that "the facts show that the accused showed no desire to cast doubt on the faith of a Muslim or to incite him to change his religion," according to the Moroccan press.

And "nothing proves that the accused undertook, in a structured and organized manner, to invite the plaintiff to convert to Christianity," it added.

Moreover, the judge further justified his decision by stating that "Muslims believe in the Gospel," which is one of the "celestial books." The matter falls within the framework of the word of God: "We have made you nations and tribes that you may get to know one another," he concluded, citing the Quran.

A local observer said that in this "spectacular and ambiguous (ruling) one senses a gradual awareness that freedom of conscience is an important right, that it is not because a Christian gives a Bible that he endangers the entire community".

He also noted that a store in the capital, Rabat, sells copies of the Bible in Arabic, albeit under surveillance, but in a perfectly legal manner.

MOROCCO: Towards a new

approach of violent extremism after the murder of two Scandinavian women?

– HRWF (06.01.2019) – In the aftermath of the brutal murder of two young Scandinavian women in the Atlas mountains a few weeks ago, several journalists and intellectuals in Morocco have questioned the efficiency of Rabat’s anti-extremist policy. On 25 December 2018, Morocco World News published an interesting article of Youssef El Kaidi, a PhD candidate at the University of Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdelah Fez, entitled “Terrorism in Morocco, a drastic approach needed now” (<https://bit.ly/2Vzw8wg>). See hereafter large excerpts of his paper (the titles in the text are those of HRWF).

“Morocco has invested significant efforts in both the security and religious fields in order to build its reputation as a peaceful, welcoming, and tolerant country in the otherwise turbulent region of North Africa and the Middle East. Those efforts were consistent and serious, leading ultimately to very positive effects worldwide.(...)”

About the murder of the two Scandinavian women in the Atlas and the prevention of violent religious extremism

The proactive measures taken by Morocco’s intelligence and security services have made the country impenetrable ever since the inception of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or so it seemed. Does this crime indicate that Morocco has finally been penetrated? Is this terrorist act an indication of more terrorist activity taking place in our country in the coming days? Were the security and religious approaches

implemented by the government to fight religious extremism really enough? What measures can be taken next to spare the country from other harsh incidents?

The above questions are pressing and should be thoroughly contemplated and addressed before any strategic move in the fight against religious extremism is made in the future. The religious and security approaches that Morocco has relied upon so far were very instrumental and should not be underestimated or belittled.

The strategic national policy initiated by King Mohammed VI in the aftermath of the 2003 Casablanca attacks to monitor and manage the religious field through the control of mosques, the training of moderate religious scholars and preachers, and the control of *fatwas* by appointing the Supreme Scientific Council were all very successful. Moroccan intelligence and security services have also managed, since 2002, to dismantle more than 183 terrorist cells across the country, according to the Central Bureau of Judiciary Investigations ([BCIJ](#)).

The recent murder of two Scandinavian tourists, however, has raised concerns about Morocco's counterterrorism approach, which had previously inspired many countries at the regional and international levels. The dismantling of dozens of terrorist cells every year should have been seen as an indicator of the strong existence of the terrorist ideology in Morocco. The successful and decisive intervention of Morocco's intelligence services before those terrorist cells could translate their ideology into brutality and bloodshed does not change the fact that the mechanisms by which that ideology works and spreads are still operating.

Therefore, terrorists and religious extremists could even be around us anywhere on any day, in private and public places, waiting for the right time and the right place to put their radical beliefs into action. The claim made by one of the arrested suspects in a video declaring his allegiance to ISIS

prior to the murder of the Scandinavian tourists should be taken seriously. He said, addressing the leader of ISIS, Abu-Bakar Al-Baghdadi: "You should know that only God knows of the exact number of the followers you have in Morocco." How can we track down and prevent those followers? What about those who firmly hold the ideology but do not belong to organized terrorist cells?

Fighting against the roots of violent religious extremism

We need to understand that religious extremism is an ideology and the fight against it should be at the intellectual and educational levels first and foremost. Morocco, despite the efforts that have been made, was remarkably lenient with the discourses of hate, intolerance, and bigotry which surface in schools, the media, and public spaces.

We have repeatedly seen videos circulating on social media by prominent Wahhabi leaders in Morocco demonizing and threatening intellectuals such as Ahmed Assid, Rachid Aylal, and others by accusing them of heresy. Somehow, those people were never arrested or tried (*). Perhaps the pressures by Islamic forces (Islamic parties, Islamic groups, conservative civil society, etc.) in the country put the state in a difficult and complicated position. Those conservative forces have always fiercely objected to reforms interpreting them as secular and anti-Islam, starting from the *Modawana* (family code) in 2003 to the Islamic education school curriculum reform in 2018.

The recent terrorist attack near the tranquil and peaceful village of Imlil in the High Atlas Mountains awakens us to the bitter truth that terrorism is a constantly looming threat for Morocco. Thus, a more drastic and comprehensive approach should be implemented with zero tolerance to bigots, extremists, and the advocates of hate and terror in the name of religion.

Morocco should address the conditions conducive to the emergence and spread of terrorism by fighting poverty and social disparity in the country. Moreover, strengthening the educational system and building students' cultural awareness, promoting the culture of peace and coexistence through educational programs and curricula, ensuring human rights and the rule of law, and promoting the universal values of peace, justice, co-existence, integrity, love, and cross-cultural dialogue would be a few steps in the right direction.

May the souls of Louisa Vesterager Jespersen and Maren Ueland rest in peace, and may peace, love, and prosperity prevail in the world."

(*) HRWF comments

A few days ago, Sheikh Kettani, an Islamist preacher, heavily criticized Moroccan channel 2M for airing on New Year's Eve a comedy show allegedly degrading Qadi Ayyad, an Islamist scholar in the 11th and 12th century. He also called on Ulama council's scholars and intellectuals to condemn and raise voices against this act. Sheikh Kettani was a former political prisoner. In September 2003, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for alleged connections to the Casablanca bombings in 2003. Eight years later, Kettani was granted a royal pardon due to efforts of his lawyer, Mustapha Ramid, who also obtained the pardon of other Islamists along with promises to renounce violence and extremism. In 2012, Ramid became Morocco's Minister of Justice as a member of the Party of Development and Justice (PJD) advocating Islamism. The PJD is the main party in the government with almost 1/3 of the seats in the parliament.

In 2017, another *controversial cleric*, Sheikh [Abdellah Annahari](#), stirred up controversy once again on social media by claiming that celebrating New Year's Eve was "undoubtedly Haram." In a video shared on his Facebook account, the Salafist preacher declared that celebrating the New Year would

be an “unforgivable sin” and that all New Year’s commercial activities should be strictly prohibited. “Whoever celebrates the New Year is no different from Christians and their religion of debauchery,” Annahari said. “Buying or selling the fir tree is Haram, taking a picture next to Santa Claus is Haram, partying is Haram and even sending New Year wishes is Haram,” he shouted while violently stumping his cane. Annahari also claimed that celebrating any non-Muslim festivity will lead to imitation of the “infidels’ creeds”. The Oujda-based cleric, who is well known for his provocative statements, went as far as describing as “zebras” Moroccans who exchange hugs during their celebrations. (More about Annahari on Morocco World News: <https://bit.ly/2Re40W6>– <https://bit.ly/2VswULL>)

The Islamist ideology is alive and well in politics and society in Morocco.

Morocco’s policy against radicalisation and the EU

– EU Observer (27.12.2018) –
<https://euobserver.com/opinion/143795>– Just before Christmas, two young Scandinavian women were brutally murdered in the Atlas mountains where they were hiking.

Four men said to commit the murder were quickly arrested.

They had videoed their murder and decapitation of the two women and posted the video to the internet.

One of them has a criminal record and since 2013 has been known to the police for his extremist views. He is said to

have instilled violent jihadist beliefs into the three other suspects, according to Boubker Sabik, spokesperson of the General Directorate of National Security and Territorial Surveillance (DGSN).

As many other Muslim-majority countries, Morocco has been infiltrated by the Salafist ideology in recent decades.

Morocco's formal response to terror threats began after the 2003 Casablanca bombings, which killed 33 people and wounded over 100 others.

The aftermath of an April 2011 terrorist attack in Marrakesh that killed 17 people saw enhanced prevention efforts.

During the past 15 years, Morocco's government tightened its security apparatus, increased control of its borders, asserted authority over the religious sphere, revised religious education at school and created an institute for the training of imams.

To tighten security, Morocco launched its own version of the FBI, the Bureau Central d'Investigation Judiciaire (BCJI).

Since its creation in 2015, it reportedly uncovered 40 terrorist cells, including a ten-women IS group, arrested almost 600 people and helped several EU countries to arrest suspects with ties to terrorism.

Official sources list 1,692 Moroccans as fighting with ISIS in the Middle East and Rabat arrested 242 fighters on their return home.

Returnees typically receive sentences ranging from 10 to 15 years in prison.

Safer than most EU states

To place this all in context, the recently published Global Terrorism Index 2018 listed Morocco at 132 out of 163 (the

higher the number the lower the impact of terrorism).

This puts the North African country among the nations least affected by terrorism, safer than most EU countries.

In an effort to prevent the salafisation of its youth, Morocco began 10 years ago to educate its own imams.

In 2015, the country opened the Mohammed VI Institute in Rabat where imams from all over the world can study and teach moderate Islam.

The school currently hosts 250 Moroccans (100 of whom are women) and 675 students from Mali, the Ivory Coast, France, Niger and French Guinea.

With the same goal, the ministries of national education and vocational training and the religious endowments and affairs reviewed school materials to promote education on the Islamic values of tolerance and coexistence with other cultures and to encourage openness to the modern era.

The Salafist movement resisted the changes in education materials when members learned that "Islamic education" would become "religious education."

Some Salafist groups also criticised one of the pictures on the cover of a new textbook, which shows boys and girls of different races holding hands in front of the sun.

Bilateral security cooperation is central to Morocco's relationships with European countries.

In recent years, Morocco established partnerships with many EU member states to prevent terrorism.

These are beneficial to both sides. France, Spain, Germany, the UK and other European countries have made particular effort to reinforce their security cooperation with Rabat.

Morocco's domestic security is a key element of human security in Europe.

Anti-terrorist cooperation between vulnerable EU member states and the north African kingdom needs to be further developed.

Willy Fautre is director of Human Rights Without Frontiers in Brussels