

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 humans 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.