

Community Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism: *Morocco as a Case Study*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The threat posed by violent extremism, from groups such as Daesh¹ and al-Qaeda affiliates as well as right wing extremists in the West, requires a multi-pronged and sustainable response. Both types of extremist groups desire a world divided into existential fault lines. Both have inflicted thousands of casualties and caused senseless deaths. Prevention of violent extremism (PVE) needs to move beyond military and aggressive security measures. Unless the root causes of violent extremism are adequately addressed, violent ideologies will continue to metastasize via online and offline networks. A long-term solution requires a complex approach that addresses violent extremism in all its forms.

Despite territorial losses in Iraq and Syria, Daesh continues to evolve its tactical and propaganda strategies to draw recruits and to further its political agenda. Through its innovative and media-savvy techniques, Daesh has offered youths an outlet for their grievances and dreams. Existing PVE programming has failed because of its one-size-fits-all approach

and overemphasis on ideology. Effective programs must be community-led and designed to respond to the strengths and challenges of local circumstances. Policies to prevent violent extremism should anchor women as frontline decision makers and youths as active

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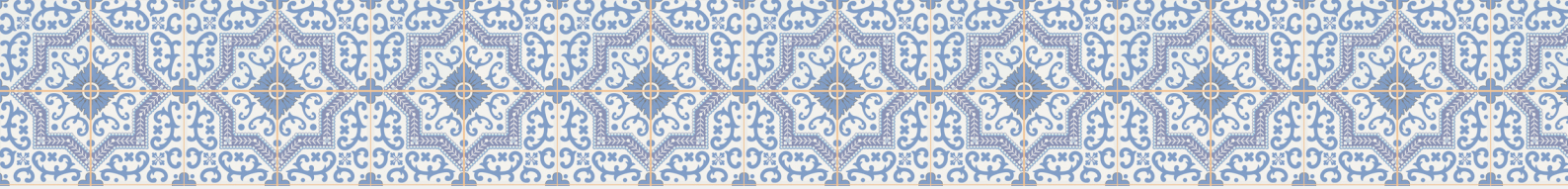
partners in peacebuilding. From a communication perspective, policy makers must reduce the emotional and rational appeals of all violent extremist groups. Based on Daesh recruitment propaganda analysis and extensive fieldwork in Morocco, this policy brief enriches established understandings of PVE and outlines recommendations and lessons learned for PVE practitioners and grassroots leaders on future programs seeking effective community approaches to peacebuilding in the region.



A STUDY IN RECRUITMENT

Violent extremism poses one of the major threats to global peace and security. It cuts across ideological, political, and ethnic divides. The rise of Daesh is one of the most visible manifestations of this threat, and it has had an immensely destructive effect in the MENA region. Daesh capitalized on the political vacuum created by failed states and exploited grievances and the lack of political will to address the underlying causes of extremism. Discussions concerning how best to deal with Daesh's violent ideology have been undercut by an overreliance on military solutions and short-term strategies. Policymakers' failure to adequately define, study and analyze Daesh has contributed to increasingly aggressive security measures and Islamophobia.

According to the U.N. Development Program, 38,000 foreign fighters have traveled from 120 countries to join Daesh; of these, 40 countries have witnessed at least one terrorist attack, and another 59 countries are at risk of instability. While studies show that a wide series of international pathways lead people from a host of backgrounds to Daesh,² we also know that many Daesh fighters have very little knowledge of Islam and no prior connection to Syria. Many are in search of personal meaning, social identity and belonging – a way of understanding their place in the world. Daesh succeeds by offering marginalized youths a platform for sharing their grievances, hopes and dreams. PVE policymakers must come to understand



In the wake of the fear and emotion surrounding 9/11, discussions concerning how best to respond to violent extremism have been simplistic and shortsighted, focusing on security and military solutions and breeding Islamophobia.

the radicalization of these youths fully; this requires a nuanced understanding of the rational and emotional appeals Daesh uses for recruitment. As this study will show, Daesh systematically misrepresents religious doctrine and manipulates political grievances to legitimize violence and attract new recruits.

A critical failure of existing Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programming is the lack of a context, which has led to a one-size-fits-all approach to eliminating Daesh. In the wake of the fear and emotion surrounding 9/11, discussions

It is vitally important to engage religious actors from the outset and recognize their role in providing psychological and social support to those vulnerable to recruitment. The importance of the role of religious and community leaders cannot be overstated; addressing the problem of violent extremism requires partnership with religious actors who hold positions of authority and have credibility and ties with local communities.

concerning how best to respond to violent extremism have been simplistic and shortsighted, focusing on security and military solutions and breeding Islamophobia. In the words of U.N. Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Bureau for Policy and Program Support Magdy Martinez-Soliman, "When security authorities need to respond, we have in fact already failed in our long-ing for peaceful coexistence. When the sole means to deal with radicalization is through security measures, one can argue, that is the failure to address the factors that lead first from alienation to radicalization and then from radicalization to acts of mass violence." Without the political will to end marginalization, recruitment toward violent extremism will continue to flourish.

In eliminating Daesh where it takes root, policymakers must cultivate community-based, community-led programs designed to respond to the violent extremism in its locality. It is vitally important to engage religious actors from the outset and recognize their role in providing psychological and social support to those vulnerable to recruitment. The importance of the role of religious and community leaders cannot be overstated; addressing the problem of violent extremism requires partnership with religious actors who hold positions of authority and have credibility and ties with local communities.



Their meaningful engagement can prevent the further entrenching of the security-related approaches to PVE.

This policy brief identifies important lessons for PVE practitioners and grassroots religious and community leaders, based on extensive fieldwork in Morocco. It is a critical examination of Daesh's online and offline recruitment propaganda and identifies key findings from capacity-building workshops with religious and community leaders. This brief enriches established understandings of PVE by examining the specificities of Moroccan PVE development. As it examines the various challenges and opportunities facing Morocco, this report outlines crucial lessons that emphasize the role of

credible religious and community leaders in preventing violent extremism. Such an approach not only allows for greater understanding of violent extremism in Morocco; it also provides insights for future programs seeking effective community approaches to peacebuilding in the region.

To better understand the drivers of violent extremism and mobilize effective multi-stakeholder interventions, this study relied upon three distinct but complementary methods of data collection and analysis: (1) online Daesh recruitment propaganda; (2) fieldwork interviews; and (3) examining capacity-building workshops with faith-based and community leaders.

Online Recruitment Propaganda Data Collection and Analysis

The research team at the Carter Center has engaged in ongoing collection and analysis of Daesh online recruitment propaganda. A detailed qualitative and quantitative coding methodology has been developed to track and analyze 31 variables in Daesh online recruitment strategy, including the use of master narratives, religious texts, language, regional appeals, symbols, geography, and image composition. This coding methodology allows for tracking of Daesh online recruitment strategy by region and over time, among other factors.

Material analyzed for this report includes the following:

- **Videos:** 437 videos released by official Daesh media outlets³ between August 2013 and January 2017 have been collected, coded, and analyzed.
- ***Dabiq*:** All 12 issues of Daesh's English-language recruitment magazine, *Dabiq*, have been collected, coded, and analyzed.
- ***Rumiyah*:** In September of 2016, *Dabiq* was discontinued and replaced by a new online English-language recruitment magazine, *Rumiyah*. As of the writing of this report, six issues have been released. All six have been collected and analyzed for this report.

- *An-Naba*: As of the writing of this report, 71 issues have been released. All issues of *an-Naba* from January 2016 to the present have been reviewed for (1) specific appeals to Moroccan youth, and (2) general reference to Morocco or current Moroccans in Daesh's ranks.
- *Dar al-Islam*: As of the writing of this report, 10 issues have been released. This collection has been reviewed for (1) specific appeals to Moroccan youth, and (2) general reference to Morocco or current Moroccans in Daesh's ranks.

Interviews in Northern Morocco

This study had unprecedented access to very close-knit and exclusive networks of Salafi groups, former foreign fighters, ex-detainees, and their families.⁴ I

conducted 51 structured interviews in the northern regions of Morocco, October 9-16, 2016, and December 7-13, 2016. Interview sites spanned six cities with high





flows of foreign fighters joining Daesh in Syria and Iraq: Rabat, Salé, Tangier, Ceuta, Tetouan, and Martil. Interview subjects included religious leaders, religious-community activists, at-risk youth in marginalized neighborhoods, ex-foreign fighters and ex-detainees, female chaplains, journalists, and the families of those who have been detained on terrorism-related charges or who have lost children to Daesh recruitment.

Three general themes emerged across multiple interviews: (1) the Moroccan government's approach to religious extremism and the impact it has on Daesh's recruitment appeals; (2) gendered approaches to violence and their socioeconomic cost in marginal communities; and (3) the politicization of terrorism and its impact on PVE programming.

Capacity Building Workshops with Religious and Community leaders

This study was informed by discussions, findings and training of religious and community leaders in the Carter Center's Inclusive Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism Project. Responding to the increasing flow of foreign fighters into Syria, in 2015, I designed and directed a three-year locally tailored grassroots project that worked with community and faith-based leaders from North Africa, Europe, and the United States to develop practical applications to prevent and address all forms of violent extremism. The project's approach proceeded along two interrelated lines: (1) action-oriented research; and, (2) building capacity, empowering, and amplifying locally credible voices. From September 2016

through March 2017, we convened four reiterative workshops with religious and community leaders who are on the front lines of efforts to prevent violent extremism in their local communities. Interlocutors include both women and men, mainstream and conservative religious leaders, academics, activists, and ex-foreign fighters. As a direct outcome of the trainings, workshop participants developed and launched 59 projects across multiple sectors, including media initiatives, religious outreach, youth engagement, and gender programming. In addition, they expanded their local networks to work across political, gender, and ideological divides.⁵



RECRUITMENT IN MOROCCO

Although Daesh lost significant geopolitical territory, it has continued drawing recruits from North Africa. A series of religio-political factors, outlined here, have left some communities particularly vulnerable to violent extremism. Intense security environments, sociopolitical grievances, higher illiteracy rates, and a state monopoly on religious discourse have made Morocco vulnerable to Daesh recruitment.

From 2015 to 2016, Daesh has recruited an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 individual Moroccans for the Syrian conflict.⁶ Peak flow occurred with the arrival of over 900 Moroccans in June-December 2013.⁷ Even so, a firm accounting of foreign fighter flows from Morocco to Syria is difficult, and current estimates are likely conservative due to underreporting. For example, in September 2014, the United Nations adopted Resolution 2178 under Chapter VII requiring all member states to submit information regarding foreign fighter flows out of their own countries.⁸ The numbers of foreign fighters are often underreported, if reported at all.⁹ While Morocco reported the exportation of 1,200 fighters, third parties estimate as many as 3,000 foreign fighters of Moroccan origin.¹⁰

Interviews collected for this study indicate that the number of foreign fighters from Morocco exceeds the numbers

reported. An interview with a traditional Salafi activist who provides families of terrorism suspects with legal counsel revealed that as many as 600 individuals from Salé alone traveled to join Daesh just in late 2016.¹¹ Another interviewee, a traditional Salafi religious leader who organizes outreach to the families of domestic terrorism detainees, estimated that roughly 30 individuals migrated to Daesh territory from the Rabat area in November 2016.¹²

Within Syria, Moroccan foreign fighters do not fight under Daesh exclusively; there are records of Moroccans joining Hayat Tahrir al Sham, Liwa al Aqsa, and Jaish al Nasr. This phenomenon attests to the fluid nature of foreign fighters; they appear and participate in multiple conflicts within and across national borders.¹³ Some of these militants were veteran fighters from Iraq who migrate seasonally and fight for different groups. In the case of Jabhat al Nusra, a prominent Sunni militant jihadist organization, the highest flow of Moroccan foreign fighters occurred from 2012 to mid-2013.¹⁴ By 2013, many Moroccans had defected to Harakat al Sham, becoming the largest nationality within the group, estimated at 500-700 fighters. In the wake of the June 2014 establishment of the so-called Islamic State, many Moroccans from Harakat al Sham and other jihadist groups joined Daesh.



DAESH PROPAGANDA IN MOROCCO: A MEETING OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Daesh has relied heavily on social media platforms to recruit and spread its messages of terrorism. It used digital communication to build a multifaceted, charismatic, modern, and sophisticated brand. For Daesh, the virtual media battlefield is as important as the physical battlefield. Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al Qaeda Central, stated in 2005, “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the heart and minds of our ummah.”¹⁵ Through its social media engagements, Daesh projects an image of acceptance in which all are united under the banner of Islam regardless of race, socio-economic barrier, physical disability, and country of origin. Daesh media strategies vary by region, race, and gender, but these are some of the following elements:

- the appropriation of Western media conventions and platforms
- the use of multiple languages with subtitles
- appeals to local grievances and other hyperlocal contexts

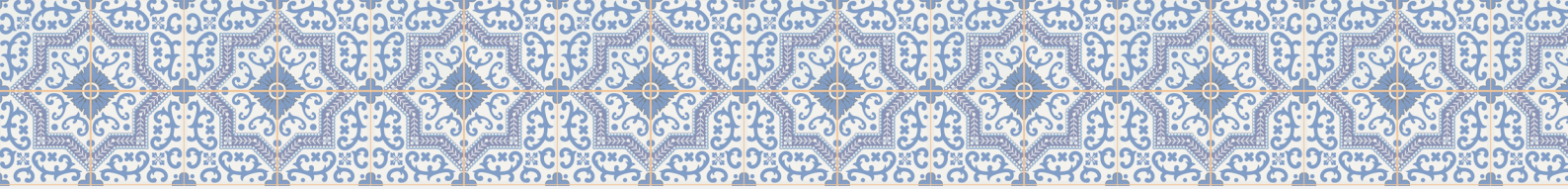
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- toxic masculinity
- the narratives of Daesh converts
- humor
- provides tangible alternatives
- simple messages and easy to understand
- appealing to emotions

Daesh's print and visual media are evolving to serve, in part, as more than a recruitment tool: media has become a virtual training ground.

While online recruitment plays an important role in Daesh propaganda, it is crucial not to ignore offline relational networks, which are equally important. The convergence of Daesh online and offline media strategies as they work upon potential recruits in particular communities is of particular concern as we work to develop effective counter-media strategies in both contexts.

With its loss of territory in 2018, Daesh is aggressively adopting new strategies to assert its power in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The organization is increasingly focusing on simple, appealing messages and calling for homegrown attacks. Daesh propaganda now includes how-to videos and articles for



homegrown terrorists. For instance, articles from its social magazine, *Rumiyah*, describe when and how a large-scale attack could be executed and what types of weapons to use. Daesh videos are more violent and gruesome than before. Daesh's print and visual media are evolving to serve, in part, as more than a recruitment tool: media has become a virtual training ground.

Multiple interlocutors reported that while video, print, and audio propaganda are being circulated in multiple forms, the content itself comes from core Daesh areas in Syria-Iraq or other Daesh strongholds. A Salafi veteran of

the Afghan war and reformed jihadist confirmed that there are no Daesh media outlets in Morocco producing propaganda content for a Moroccan audience or for the wider region.¹⁶ The lack of Morocco-based Daesh propaganda was universally confirmed from Salafi networks and religious or community leaders who work with youth from marginalized and impoverished neighborhoods. When asked about the primary media for recruitment to Daesh, several interviewees cited televised broadcast news. A civil society actor near Tangier said, "Isn't watching Aleppo burn enough?"¹⁷

Online Media

The Daesh propaganda material that circulates in Morocco does so primarily via social media on cell phones. One interviewee, a journalist who specializes in Moroccan Salafi groups and was jailed on terrorism-related charges, reported that Daesh videos are circulated primarily through social media channels, including Facebook Messenger, Telegram, and WhatsApp.¹⁸ He also reported that Daesh's radio channel, *idha'at al-Bayan*, is accessible to potential recruits, as are propaganda magazines like *an-Naba*, *Dabiq*, and *Dar al-Islam* (Daesh's French-language magazine). In the case of *Dabiq*, Daesh's first official recruitment English e-magazine, select articles by Daesh sympathizers and

fighters are translated into Arabic and circulated offline. Two civil society actors who work on issues related to religious extremism in the coastal city of Martil reported that Facebook Messenger is the primary channel for the circulation of Daesh recruitment propaganda, as well as for individual contact between Daesh members in Syria-Iraq and networks in northern Morocco.¹⁹ A former detainee in Morocco who now works with the families of terrorism detainees reported that cell phones play a dominant role in the circulation of Daesh propaganda and recruitment; USB thumb drives containing Daesh videos and other materials reportedly are less commonly circulated among recruitment networks.²⁰



Offline Networks

Offline Daesh recruitment networks are active and present in Morocco. The three primary target demographics for offline recruitment are insular and marginalized Salafi communities, networks within the prison system, and economically marginalized youth with limited prospects for social advancement and sense of alienation. Offline networks facilitate travel after online recruitment has taken place, and ensure the distribution of Daesh material — including political and theological tracts — in Moroccan prisons. One interviewee who is a specialist on terrorism in Morocco reported that as much as 10 percent of the Moroccan prison

Among already radicalized populations, Daesh recruitment relies more on dense theological tracts containing military jihadist ideology than it does on digital media.

population is affiliated with Daesh; these prisoners are actively recruiting among other prisoners.²¹ The Afghan War veteran confirmed the extent of prison recruitment and provided examples of the type of theological texts circulated in these networks.²² This shows that, among already radicalized populations, Daesh recruitment relies more on dense theological tracts containing military jihadist ideology than it does on digital media.

The Interaction of Online and Offline

Rarely does recruitment to Daesh's ranks rely solely on either online or offline networks; generally, these two elements drive recruitment in tandem, and Daesh communication strategies rely on both for efficacy. In addition, before being able to enter Daesh territory, interviewees stated that foreign fighters have to go through *Tazkiyah*, meaning that someone from Daesh has to vouch for him or her personally.

A mother from Ceuta, Spain, interviewed for this study describes how her son and daughter were both recruited by Daesh in 2014-2015 and subsequently migrated to Daesh territory.²³ She described how

both online and offline networks played a role in their recruitment. The family, residents of the impoverished neighborhood of Princip II, was poor and the son had trouble finishing school. He enrolled in a vocational program, where he fell in with a group of boys from various cities in Morocco, including Martil and Tetouan. It was here that his recruitment began and progressed over the course of a year.²⁴ His mother reported that he grew increasingly religious and respectful — cleaning up at home and attending mosque regularly. She was initially pleased but grew concerned when he began discussing the war in Syria. She discouraged these conver-

sations, whereas her children desperately wanted to understand.

One Friday, he did not appear at the mosque, or at all that day. He contacted his family only when he arrived in Turkey, on his way to join Daesh in Syria.²⁵ Because his family effectively disowned him, his twin sister was not allowed to talk about him or about the humanitarian disaster in Syria. Yet she refused to give up on her brother and would spend late nights in her room, on her phone, plying social media sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram for news of him. She contacted a young boy from Martil, across the Moroccan border, who knew her brother and who was also planning to go to Syria. They struck up an online love affair and a marriage. They only met when she arrived in Syria. She got pregnant and had a son, Yunus, the first Spanish national to be born in Daesh territory.

In the impoverished coastal city of Martil, a lawyer who works on extremism

related the story of Cochito, the young husband of the girl from Ceuta.²⁶ Cochito was later made famous in a Daesh recruitment video for carrying seven severed heads. Before immigrating to Syria to join, Cochito was nothing in the town of Martil, according to our interlocutor. The product of a weak and stilted educational system with no prospects for employment, higher education, or marriage, Cochito became a hero to local youth for joining Daesh and avenging the death of a very popular local Salafi activist who had joined Daesh after experiencing consistent harassment from local security services. Cochito became even more famous after his own death, and the constant circulation of his image on television news only elevated his fame, driving further recruitment from his neighborhood. In both of these cases, offline community or familial networks interacted with online recruitment propaganda and social media to facilitate recruitment to Daesh territory in Syria and Iraq.

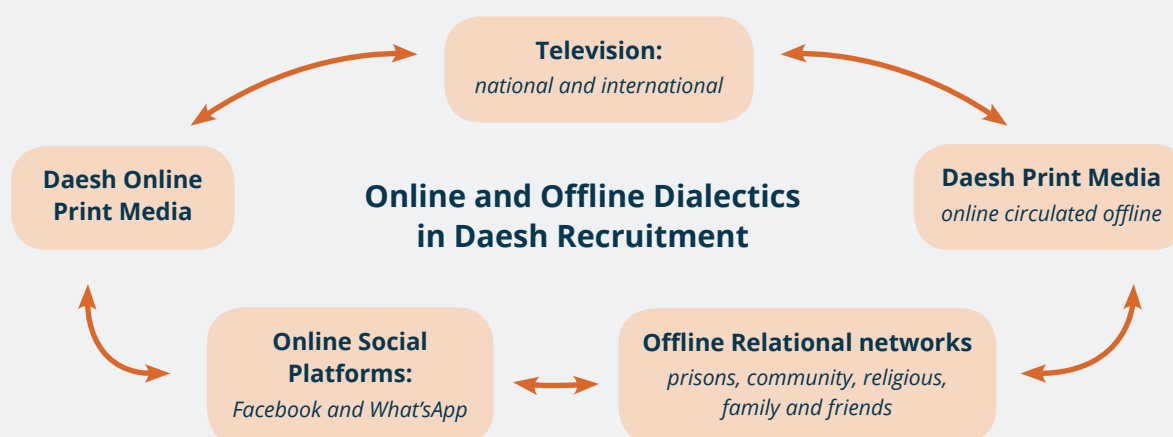


Figure 1. Recruitment Dialectics in Morocco.



Daesh's Communication Strategy and Appeals to Moroccan Demographics

Rarely does Daesh target Morocco and Moroccans alone with propaganda content released from its central media offices. However, specific appeals to Moroccans do occasionally appear in Daesh print and video propaganda. *Dar al-Islam* Issue 4 cites the Moroccan Amazigh Almohads Caliphate (an austere movement that founded an Islamic state in the 12th century) as precedent for their own political project,²⁷ and Issue 10 directly criticizes Moroccan Salafi imam Abdelwahab al-Rafiqi (Abu Hafs) — clearly an appeal to Moroccan Salafi communities.²⁸ Several high-profile Moroccan Salafi leaders, some of whom were implicated in terrorism charges, have joined mainline political parties or have been co-opted by the state, removing any legitimacy these leaders had with grassroots Salafi groups.²⁹ According to one ex-foreign fighter, an elderly Moroccan Salafi who fought in Afghanistan, these religious leaders retain no legitimacy with the majority of Salafis in Morocco because they lack the leadership legitimacy within Salafi circles.³⁰

Of the 72 issues of *an-Naba* reviewed for this study, Daesh writers reference Morocco or Moroccans directly 19

times as examples. Twelve mentions were historical references to medieval Muslim religious or political figures like Ibn Tashfin or Ibn Tumart, who fought against Christian forces in al-Andalus; five were of Moroccan fighters in Daesh territory or operations abroad; and two were non-specific calls for fighters in the region (Morocco, Libya, and Egypt) to join Daesh in Syria-Iraq. Three of the 437 videos coded for this study make specific reference to Morocco; all three feature images of Moroccan King Muhammad VI. Each video criticizes the Moroccan regime for its wealth and lack of adherence to religion. The videos also criticize Moroccan cultural institutions on religious grounds, such as the Marrakesh film festival, the Moroccan Association for the Defense of Gay Rights, and the annual musical festival, *Mawazine*.

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GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO MOROCCAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Prior to 2014, the Moroccan government took a less forceful stance on foreign fighter migration, as most of the fighters were battling the Assad regime. However, Daesh's use of social media to recruit and terrorize through its ruthlessness and abhorrent violence raised its public profile. After Daesh's 2014 public execution of journalists, the international community became increasingly concerned about the group and the potential for the return of foreign fighters.

Morocco reversed its policy, intensified the security aspects of its counterterrorism efforts, modified criminal charges, began reform of the religious apparatus and counter-narrative programs, and collaborated with regional and European allies to track and apprehend terrorist cells.³¹ It has strengthened its

counterterrorism approach by criminalizing the joining of terrorist groups and giving its national courts universal jurisdiction over citizens involved in terrorist crimes within or outside Morocco.³² By December 2016, Moroccan courts had tried 200 cases brought against individuals who joined or attempted to join terrorist groups, recruited potential fighters, or incited violence. Of these 200 cases, 194 defendants were convicted, two received suspended sentences, and four were acquitted.³³ Today, all returning foreign fighters are sentenced, and punishments for joining a domestic or transnational extremist group are five to 15 years in prison paired with heavy fines.³⁴ Since early 2016, due to events in Iraq and Syria and to changes in circumstances in Morocco, the number of Daesh recruits from Morocco has decreased.³⁵

CHALLENGES TO PVE

Numerous community and religious leaders who were interviewed for this study, including capacity-building workshop participants, expressed concern over the effects of the security approach on marginalized communities and the families of those arrested on terrorism-related charges. Despite a lack of Daesh operational presence in Morocco, on a regular basis, alleged Daesh-related terrorist

cells are dismantled. Interviewees from conservative religious communities expressed concern that religiosity is being criminalized. According to one Salafi religious leader whose organization works with detainees, mass arrests are "designed to scare and oppress Salafi groups."³⁶ The same elderly ex-foreign fighter explained that the arrest of the all-female alleged Daesh cell on October

3, 2016 – the first to target women exclusively – was designed to show the power and the reach of security services. He described it as a provocation by the Moroccan security services against Salafi activists, and it had the effect of worsening tensions between Salafis and the state. This sentiment that the arrests are unjust or unwarranted, whether real or perceived, breeds further grievances and provides an opening for Daesh recruitment propaganda that is often populated with hyper-masculine images designed to lure young men to fight for the so-called protection of their religion and families.

Those arrested on terrorism charges leave prisons burdened with social stigma and significant debt, making

reintegration into society difficult. In 2016, the Moroccan delegation for Prison Administration and Reintegration launched the Moussalaha program (rehabilitation program) in partnership with Rabita Mohammadiyya and the National Council for Human Rights to rehabilitate individuals convicted under terrorism charges.³⁷ While it is too early to evaluate its impact, structural and programmatic issues remain, such as:

- Post-prison integration to deal with community stigma
- Lack of financial independence upon prison release
- Lack of legitimacy of “ideological de-radicalization” conducted by official institutions targeting Salafi-jihadists





- Civil society organizations' inability and limited role to work on these issues due to the security environment
- Absence of independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

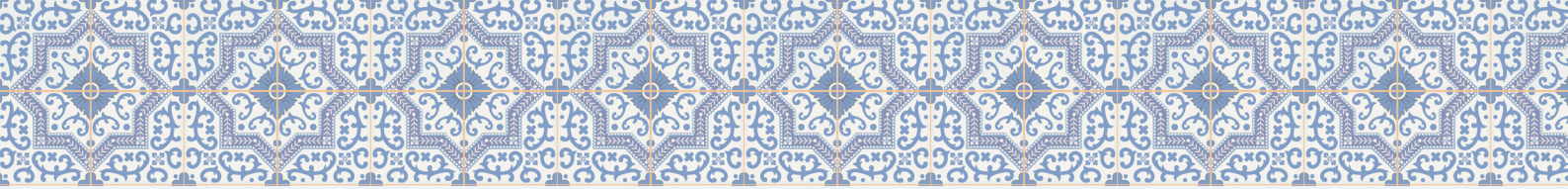
One interviewee, who was released from prison after finishing his time for terrorist charges, stated that while he repented and wants to feel part of society, he is burdened financially, feels like an outcast, and feels that there are intelligence officials continuously observing him. To him, suicide, if it were permissible by his faith, was a better option. The burden of support is placed exclusively on families and insular Salafi networks, creating significant financial stress on these groups, breeding further resentment against the government, and preventing effective reintegration for offenders. In an interview, an ex-foreign fighter stated that the "real punishment" for the families and communities of those involved with extremist groups is "the stigma that comes from arrest and detention. It is a real problem for those not even connected to radical circles; they go to prison and become radicalized there."³⁸ Aggressive programs of arrest and surveillance only exacerbate these problems.

Interviews with religious and community leaders across the religious-political spectrum reveal that a primary driver of Daesh recruitment in Morocco is a pervasive sense that being overtly observant is ill perceived. For instance,

To him, suicide, if it were permissible by his faith, was a better option. The burden of support is placed exclusively on families and insular Salafi networks, creating significant financial stress on these groups, breeding further resentment against the government, and preventing effective reintegration for offenders.

some of the interviewees reported that the state equates outward conservative expressions of religiosity, including praying the *salat al-fajr* (dawn prayer)³⁹, and the donning of Afghani garments, with extremism; these religious practices resulted at times in arbitrary interrogation. In parallel, there is little trust between marginalized communities and the police; this is true for both the religiously marginalized (Salafis) and economically marginalized (especially the urban poor).⁴⁰ In one of the marginalized neighborhoods of Tangier, Benimakada, a religious leader shared that the state provided no social services. This neighborhood suffered from a lack of quality health care and education. Poverty is also rampant. The police were

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not able to provide security in some of those areas. In turn, community leaders found themselves struggling to mediate between impoverished communities and the police.

Some civil rights activists believe that the government's excessive surveillance and counterterrorism laws are used to also silence and crush dissent. Mass arrests, at times without due process, have generated feelings of injustice and resentment. Interviewees expressed frustration and fear over the government's lack of consistency in the application of terrorism laws and worry that the security approach has "poisoned" public discourse around these issues.⁴¹ Civil rights proponents fear that this will not only generate grievances that further feed radicalization but also constrain the type of activities they engage in. This has inhibited PVE work, including rehabilitation and reintegration, in communities that have become hotbeds of Salafi-jihadi and Takfiri ideology.

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While local civil society organizations and religious actors conduct community PVE work indirectly, their capacity to be effective is uncertain due to imposed limitations. More robust intervention programs with sustained engagement

models are needed across the region. Although the Moroccan government claims a comprehensive response to Daesh recruitment, interviews with a variety of interlocutors indicate that state-run programs are flawed; similar critiques have been forwarded by other regional leaders.⁴² Additionally, the Moroccan government's de-radicalization efforts, such as imam trainings, diplomatic initiatives and campaigns in U.S. and EU capitals, may be highly publicized, but it is unclear if these dialogues made a difference. In fact, leaders are concerned that these efforts are not being directed to the places that need them most — the marginalized areas and outer city slums.⁴³ Interviews among both mainstream imams and Salafi religious leaders indicate that the imam-training programs are limited in their effectiveness because large segments of the Moroccan population do not see the government as holding religious credibility.⁴⁴ Civil society groups that work with the Moroccan government in prisons report that, while progress has been made, it must be met with more training of prison "proximity workers," including staff and wardens, as well as a reorientation of the religious sensibilities that inhibit this progress.⁴⁵

All interlocutors, whether religious leaders or civil society organization stakeholders, across the ideological spectrum agreed that working directly on preventing violent extremism is extremely difficult outside of official government discourse and channels. While



there are several local civil society groups doing good work, they are constantly threatened by a lack of independence. Furthermore, multiple interlocutors expressed that many interventions lack

a consistent methodology and sufficient evaluation mechanisms. Additional training is desperately needed to build capacity around effective program design, monitoring, and evaluation.

CURRENT PVE SHORTCOMINGS

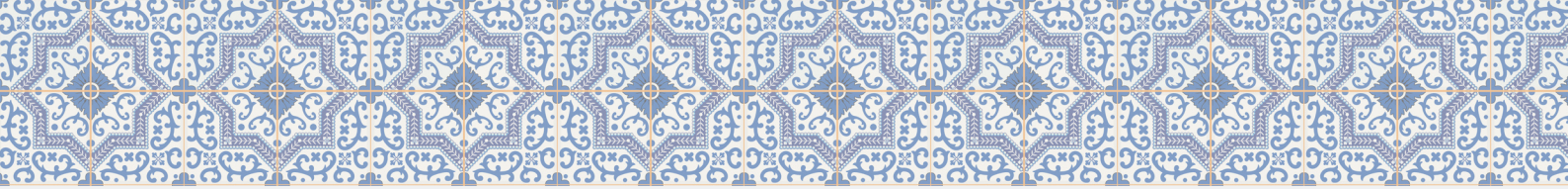
While credible community and religious leaders are making progress immunizing their local communities against violent extremism, they have relied on traditional forms of communication, lack of understanding of Daesh propaganda, minimal resources, and fear of the state's aggressive security approaches. Religious and community leaders I have worked with noted that they want better training in technology and communication to expand their reach. They have not been populating the online sphere and competing with "Sheikh/Imam Google." Their responses have focused entirely on rational appeals, devoid of the emotional manipulation that makes recruitment efforts so powerful. Due to a national

security approach, they are unfamiliar with Daesh recruitment practices in the local context. Out of religious leaders engaged for this study, 95% had no concept of Daesh recruitment practices. Most PVE counter-recruitment messaging has been traditional and unable to account for the convergence of digital and traditional media forms; as such, the counter-message has been ineffective. These leaders' perceptions correspond with responses received from interviewees; families of children who joined Daesh or who were charged with terrorism stated across the board that their children learn religion from the internet and not from traditional state-sanctioned leaders or institutions.

COMMUNITY APPROACHES TO PEACEBUILDING

There is a dire need for a sustainable, community-based approach in preventing violent extremism. A national PVE strategy based solely on aggressive security approaches is not only ineffective,

but also places additional pressures on existing marginalized and at-risk communities. Military power alone cannot defeat the violent ideologies or address grievances that gave rise to Daesh in the



first place. Instead, grassroots organizing promises to change the power relationship needed to bring much-needed progress. A PVE counter-messaging campaign must reduce the emotional appeals Daesh uses and confront the romantic image of these extremists. There is no single path to radicalization, so there is no one-size-fits-all response strategy. Drivers and enablers of violent extremism are context-driven and hyperlocal, complex and diverse; interventions should reflect these realities.

A national PVE strategy based solely on aggressive security approaches is not only ineffective, but also places additional pressures on existing marginalized and at-risk communities.

PVE interventions should include three dimensions: (1) emotional appeals; (2) cognitive appeals; and, (3) altering behavior.

Toward a New PVE Model

Religious and community leaders across the ideological and political spectrum play a crucial role in preventing violent extremism. Any national PVE strategy must engage religious leaders from the outset and recognize their role as social actors who have legitimacy, credibility, and strong ties with their local

communities. In the selection process of religious leaders, efforts must be made to avoid glamorous “celebrity imams” that have limited legitimacy among grassroots communities. Too often, traditional PVE programs partner with such leaders who articulate views aligned with official government policies, which disconnects

them from their communities. Unlike “celebrity imams,” credible community religious leaders understand the local circumstances extremely well and provide psychological and social support to those vulnerable to recruitment. Due to their established, trusting community relationships, local religious leaders can challenge their communities on difficult issues and exert enormous influence on public opinion. They are the only ones who

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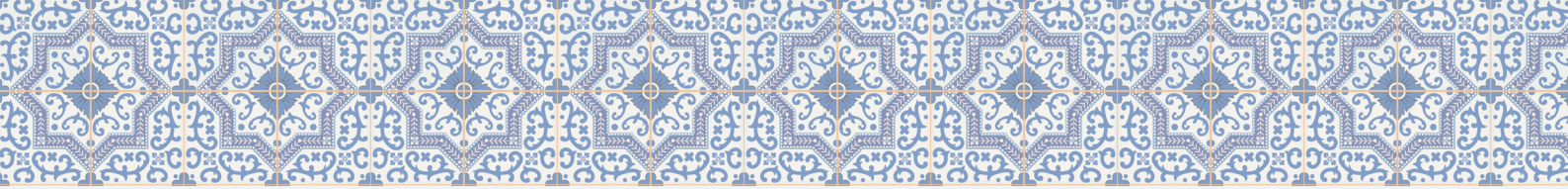
Comprehensive PVE programs that seek to immunize against Daesh recruitment over the long term must also engage religious leaders across ideological and political divides. Specifically, intra-Muslim dialogue is crucial. Most official intra-faith activities focus primarily on Sunni-Shiite dialogue or between Islamists and secular-minded individuals. While these two intra-faith activities are important, there is a dire need to have difficult conversations among the various factions of Sunni groups, including Salafis and non-Salafis. These interventions need to address the gaps between Salafi communities and the government religious apparatus and between Salafis and non-Salafi religious leaders. The continued marginalization of Salafi communities, or the devaluation of their beliefs and practices, will increase resentment and encourage recruitment to terrorist causes.

One of the most rewarding outcomes of our workshops was the development of working coalitions between Muslim religious leaders across political, social, gender, and ideological divides. There were religious leaders from the same country who knew of each other but never spoke to each other due to perceptions

and biases. Extremism thrives on division; the strongest weapon against violent extremism is unity. To this end, sustainable long-term community interventions should develop interventions that will mitigate communication and gender gaps between mainstream and conservative religious-community leaders.

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Besides the effects of an overemphasis on security, women involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts face many challenges, including violence against women, lack of training, structural inequalities, a deteriorating security situation and human rights issues. Most discussions on the role of women in Daesh have been superficial and reductionist⁴⁶. Yet any approach that ignores the many factors behind women's participation in terrorist organizations and rejects women's vital role as key partners in PVE is incomplete and counterproductive. There is a need to employ a gender-conscious agenda that aims to engage women and girls as active agents for sustainable change and community resilience. Women not only have the insight to respond to the gender-specific vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist groups like Daesh, but, given their social capital, local knowledge and



intimate networks, they are an important asset in shaping the overall discourse on PVE.

Women not only have the insight to respond to the gender-specific vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist groups like Daesh, but, given their social capital, local knowledge and intimate networks, they are an important asset in shaping the overall discourse on PVE.

In the PVE workshops I led, 40% of participants were women. This enriched the conversations and challenged male colleagues to think critically from different perspectives and define security more broadly, with a focus on community and relational networks. The workshops included discussions about the gendered dynamic of lived religion and the religious sphere, which is still dominated by men. The inclusion of women in the religious sphere is integral to achieving long-term peace and security.

Youth in the MENA region are more educated, mobile and globally connected than ever before. However, against the backdrop of exclusion, protracted conflict, and marginalization, PVE experts need to ask: Why are some of our youths dreaming of dying instead of living? What does citizenship mean to them? Is the social contract between the state and society meaningful anymore? Despite

their boisterous contributions in the “Arab Spring,” youths were sidelined in the post-uprising phase of “democratization.” Interview subjects repeatedly cited a lack of social and psychological services, especially for at-risk youths. A human rights activist and former parole officer in the larger Tangier-Tetouan region reported that he was the only youth parole officer in the region for many years. Caseloads are too high, and outreach to troubled youth is minimal.⁴⁷

As PVE strategists develop solutions to violent extremism, they must consider ways to anchor youths as partners in peacebuilding – not to lead the world of tomorrow but of today as well. In order to prevent extremism from taking root, youths must have opportunities to lead projects from inception, particularly those aimed at youths themselves. The outreach should focus not only on city youths but also on training youth leaders from marginal areas. To that end, the focus on PVE interventions needs to shift to providing positive alternatives to violence and empowering youths to find agency in advocating for local change.

Project design, implementing it and evaluating the entire process is crucial. In order to be successful, training projects for PVE interventions must include follow-up opportunities and local ownership. In the case of the PVE project, workshop participants were expected to develop a tailor-made PVE intervention, adapted to their local context, based on workshop trainings⁴⁸. As the



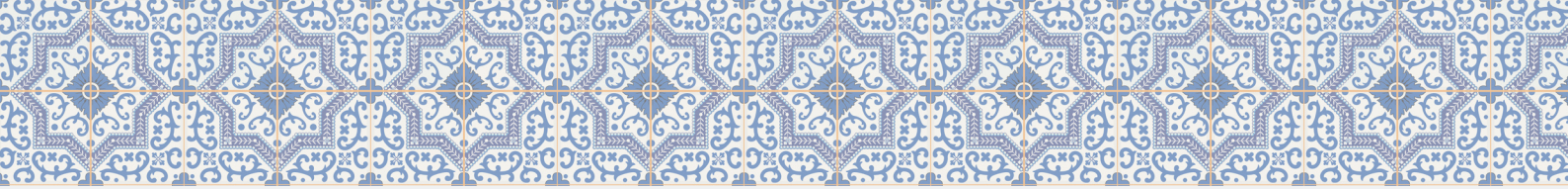
project progresses, trained workshop participants will act as mentors to the new groups of religious leaders as they maintain their own projects. This model

will encourage trainings to scale, sustainability, and locally adapted PVE initiatives within a network of religious and community leaders.

Participatory Media: Reclaiming the Narrative

Mastering innovative and media-savvy methods to populate the online space is crucial in the overall fight against all forms of violent extremism. Participatory media has significant implication for flow of information across national borders. It breaks the monopoly of state-led religious programming, connects with youth, and changes the ways in which

interpretations and decisions are made. It has the potential to empower individuals and increase collective societal consciousness. PVE planners must strengthen credible Muslim voices in the media and at the local grassroots level. Planners should develop hyperlocal media strategies that include emotional and rational appeals. The local media



strategies should be in local vernaculars; in the case of Morocco, religious leaders should use Darija and not only classical Arabic. This is especially important in countries with high illiteracy rates. For effective modalities of resistance, offline organization, mobilization, and political participation must supplement online efforts.

Well-crafted and localized counter-messaging is an important tool in the fight

against violent extremism; however, it is insufficient in and of itself. Government counter-messaging programs need to partner up with legitimate civil society organizations and religious institutions to have greater impact. Trust is the most valuable currency in effective PVE work and in the credibility of counter-narratives. There is a need to move beyond counter-messaging and instead offer alternatives for addressing local grievances at a granular level.

Developing Reintegration and Rehabilitation Models

With the collapse of Daesh's territorial base, Morocco is facing complex and pressing challenges in responding to returnees or foreign fighters. Efforts to develop rehabilitation and reintegration programs are severely inhibited by the politicizing of terrorism-related issues. Policy makers and activists noted that an exclusive reliance on aggressive security policies could intensify the risk of terrorist recidivism. Increasing attention should be placed on creating comprehensive, rights-based approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration programs that include a wide variety of practices, such as prison-based programs that address prison radicalization; engagement with credible religious leaders; access to education; job placement opportunities, and partnerships with communities and civil society organizations. Reintegration efforts need to focus on addressing root causes that triggered the fighters' departure in the first place.

Though Morocco's efforts at de-radicalization and rehabilitation are often described as comprehensive and incorporating mentoring and employment services after release,⁴⁹ interviews with former detainees offer a very different picture. De-radicalization in prisons is done under religious supervision and through representatives of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and members of local religious councils. However, government-trained and -sanctioned imams have no religious credibility within the Salafi prison populations they are trying to reach. Ideological de-radicalization must be carried out instead in cooperation with religious and community leaders with grassroots credibility.⁵⁰ Prisons continue to act as breeding grounds for recruitment and circulation of violent extremist ideologies. There is an indoctrination and formation of tight networks. Prisoners enduring harsh treatment are accessible to Daesh recruiters and can



be convinced to join Daesh's "just" cause for the promise of a better future. The failure of rehabilitation programs inside and outside of prisons remains a major security concern and unexamined area for PVE monitoring and evaluation.

According to interviews with former detainees, prison de-radicalization is devolving into individual nonviolent Salafi imams working outside of the governmental apparatus, or on the shoulders of informal community organizations with little institutional support. In a religious contestation of the meaning of Salafism, these nonviolent Salafis develop programs seeking to turn others

from the Takfirism practiced by Daesh.⁵¹ Such programs are, at present, informal and untested. However, nonviolent Salafi religious leaders have religious credibility with radicalized prison populations that government-sanctioned imams do not have. In this light, engaging with conservative Salafi groups around de-radicalization and rehabilitation is a necessity. Without sustained efforts toward disengagement by trusted authorities, prison only deepens radicalization. The return of foreign fighters to Morocco is likely to become an acute issue, and comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs are of immediate necessity.

CONCLUSION

Military means alone cannot defeat violent ideologies or address grievances that gave rise to Daesh in the first place. Real or perceived perceptions of social injustice, socio-economic development, identity politics, and socio-economic marginalization are at the heart of Daesh recruitment propaganda. The national PVE strategy needs a multi-modal, community-based approach that surpasses Daesh's imagination and its effective use of media to recruit and spread violent ideologies. If preventing violent extremism is to be successful, governments and civil society need to begin with addressing the root causes of grievances. Only then can strategies prevent the next generation of extremists from joining

and marginalized communities gain resilience.

Effective and sustainable community PVE initiatives should be based on local research and nuanced understanding of the contextual push and pull factors. There is an urgent need for a concerted effort to build and amplify the capacity of civil society organizations and religious leaders. These parties find work in PVE difficult because of government interference and aggressive security approaches. Specific investment should be made in providing actors already on the ground with training in media usage and civic engagement and on violent extremist groups. Similarly, religious

actors are social actors who hold credibility and legitimacy within their local communities. Engaging with religious leaders across ideological and political divide is key. Intra-Muslim dialogue is needed to address the gaps between

Salafi communities and the government religious apparatus and end the marginalization of Salafi communities that could increase resentment and encourage recruitment.





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Dr. Houda Abadi is the founder and executive director of Transformative Peace, a consulting firm that specializes in inclusive peace processes; women, peace and security; human rights-based approaches in preventing violent extremism; and civic engagement.

Dr. Abadi has more than 15 years of extensive experience designing and implementing peacebuilding programs in MENA region. She has successfully led international capacity building workshops; has developed programs to foster women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes; has facilitated collaboration between policymakers and grassroots leaders across political and religious divides; and has empowered community leaders to be positive agents of change.



Additionally, Dr. Abadi also has also designed and implemented monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, managed multi-million-dollar budgets, overseen robust teams of national and international staff, and has provided high-level policy analysis and recommendations.

Prior to establishing Transformative Peace, Dr. Abadi served as the associate director of the Conflict Resolution Program at the Carter Center from 2014-2019. While working on the Syrian and the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, she designed and directed a locally tailored grassroots project that works with community and faith-based leaders from North Africa, Europe, and the United States to develop practical applications to prevent and address all forms of violent extremism.

Dr. Abadi also served as program director in two conflict transformation organizations that worked with Jewish and Muslim youth through experiential and political education. She also worked on curriculum development, civic engagement, youth empowerment, and conflict transformation - as well as serving as an international gender research consultant.

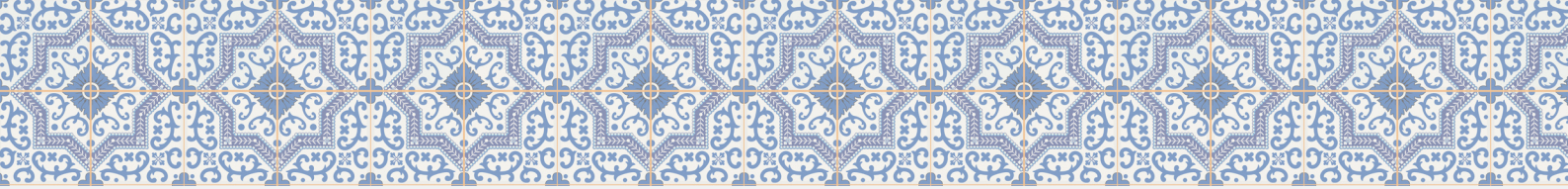
She has received numerous awards and honors, including the Luther College Young Alumni Award, Georgia State University Transcultural Conflict and Violence Presidential Fellowship, and the Atlanta Institute for Diplomatic leadership 2018 Peace builder Award. She currently serves as a council member in the RESOLVE's Research Advisory Board. Dr. Abadi has published scholarly articles and taught at Georgia State University and University of North Carolina.

Dr. Abadi divides her time between Morocco and the United States. She speaks English, French, Arabic, and Spanish.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ The name ISIS has a detailed development. Initially, the title was the Islamic State of Iraq, then changed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or more commonly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Today the group refers to itself as the 'Islamic State,' a "caliphate," based on its expansions to North Africa and Europe. Daesh is the acronym for the group's original name in Arabic, "al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham." The term Daesh deprives the organization of any legitimate claim of an Islamic identity or the status of an established caliphate state. For more on the term Daesh, please see: <http://blog.cartercenter.org/2016/08/02/war-of-words-helping-muslim-leaders-fight-terrorist-propaganda/>
- ² For more on Daesh's target audience and its recruitment narratives, please see: https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/narratives-report-final-02june2017.pdf
- ³ Daesh released video content from 44 provincial media outlets in 14 countries, as well as six transnational media outlets
- ⁴ For example, on October 3, 2016, the Moroccan police and security services conducted a raid that arrested 10 suspected members of a Daesh recruitment cell in Morocco. All 10 were women; one of them was a minor. I interviewed three of the arrestees' families, as well as a family in Ceuta that had two of their children (twins — a boy and a girl) join Daesh in Syria, and seven ex-foreign fighters.
- ⁵ For more on the project, see: https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/pve-phase-1-workshop-outcomes.pdf
- ⁶ Ibid
- ⁷ Lang and Al Wari, 2016
- ⁸ United Nations. United Nations Security Council. 2014. Resolution 2178. http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%202178_2014_EN.pdf
- ⁹ Alex P. Schmid, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates: Conceptual and Data Issues," *International Center for Counter-Terrorism*, October 2015, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighter-Estimates-Conceptual-and-Data-Issues-October20152.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Ibid
- ¹¹ This number was confirmed the following day by another interviewee, a Moroccan ex-foreign fighter and veteran of the Afghan war who returned to Morocco and spent almost a decade in prison on terrorism charges. Interview with author on October 11, 2016
- ¹² Interview with author on December 12, 2016
- ¹³ Masbah, 2015
- ¹⁴ Mohammed Masbah, "Moroccan Foreign Fighters in Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 10, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada?fa=55313>

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- ¹⁵ Letter from Ayman al Zawahiri to Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi where he advocates his strategy policy in Iraq and methods to foster unity among AQ and recruit new followers. Combatting terrorism Center at West Point. "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi," <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>
- ¹⁶ Interview with author, October 11, 2016
- ¹⁷ Interview with author, October 11, 2016
- ¹⁸ Interview with author, October 11, 2016
- ¹⁹ Interview with author, December 09, 2016
- ²⁰ Interview with author, December 11, 2016
- ²¹ Interview with author, October 11, 2016
- ²² Interview with author, October 11, 2016
- ²³ Interview with author, October 14, 2016
- ²⁴ Other interviews confirm that radicalization and recruitment can happen very quickly. An imam in Beni Makada related to the author that rapid radicalization is common among young boys with little knowledge of religion, or a history with trouble with the law, and no prospects for social advancement. Interview with author, October 13, 2016
- ²⁵ He made it to Syria to join Daesh but was killed shortly thereafter
- ²⁶ Interview with author, December 9, 2016
- ²⁷ *Dar al-Islam*, Issue 4, p. 8
- ²⁸ *Dar al-Islam*, Issue 10, p. 6
- ²⁹ Imad Stitou, "How Morocco plans to contain its Salafists," *Al-Monitor*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/morocco-salafist-sheikhs-regime-isis.html>
- ³⁰ Interview with author, October 11, 2016
- ³¹ Mona Ennaji, "Recruitment of foreign male and female fighters to Jihad: Morocco's multifaceted counter-terror strategy," *International Review of Sociology* 26, no. 3 (2016): 546-557
- ³² Lang and Al Wari, 2016; U.S. Library of Congress, *Global Legal Monitor*, "Morocco: Bill to Amend Counterterrorism Law," <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/morocco-bill-to-amend-counterterrorism-law/>
- ³³ Tanya Mehra, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics, and Policy Responses," *International Center for Counterterrorism*, 2016, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ICCT-Mehra-FTF-Dec2016-2.pdf>
- ³⁴ Lang and Al Wari, 2016
- ³⁵ Ennaji, 2016
- ³⁶ Interview with author, October 9, 2016
- ³⁷ Delegation generale a l'administration Penitentiare et a la reinserction, "Rapport d'Activites 2017", 2017, <http://www.dgapr.gov.ma/Documents/rapp2017frv2.pdf>
- ³⁸ Interview with author, October 11, 2016



- ³⁹ A female Muslim religious scholar reported that her house helper asked her if it was permissible to pray the dawn prayer—she feared it would draw the attention of security services. Interview with author, October 13, 2016
- ⁴⁰ Interview with author, October 13, 2016
- ⁴¹ Interview with author, October 13, 2016
- ⁴² Karina Piser, “How Serious A Threat Does ISIS Pose to Morocco, A Counterterror ‘Leader?’”. *Worldpoliticsreview.com*, March 1, 2017, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/18780/how-serious-a-threat-does-isis-pose-to-morocco-a-counterterror-leader>. Piser describes it as “a short-term and flawed fix to homegrown radicalism that brushes aside grievances that drive radicalization. Jihadis on Rabat’s radar who return home are immediately jailed, with little follow-up.”
- ⁴³ Vish Sakthivel, “Taking Stock of U.S. Policy Options in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, September 2, 2016, <http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/09/taking-stock-u-s-policy-options-algeria-morocco-tunisia/>
- ⁴⁴ Based upon interviews indicating that this is particularly true among Moroccan youth. The government and state-appointed imams are viewed with suspicion. More extensive research on models of religious authority among Moroccan youth is needed.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with author, December 7, 2016
- ⁴⁶ For more on the role of women in prevention and recruitment, please see: https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/women-in-daesh.pdf
- ⁴⁷ Interview with author, December 8, 2016
- ⁴⁸ For more on The Carter Center workshop outcomes, please see: https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/pve-phase-1-workshop-outcomes.pdf
- ⁴⁹ Mohamed Salah Tamek, “Morocco’s Approach to Countering Violent Extremism,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 16, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/moroccos-approach-to-countering-violent-extremism>
- ⁵⁰ Emerging research indicates that state-directed ideological de-radicalization often does not work. See Charles Lister, “Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?” *Brookings Doha Center Policy Brief*, August 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/returning-foreign-fighters-criminalization-or-reintegration/>
- ⁵¹ Interview with author, December 12, 2016



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