

## Moroccan foreign fighters: evolution of a phenomenon, promotive factors, and the limits of hardline policies

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## Moroccan Foreign Fighters

Evolution of the Phenomenon, Promotive Factors, and the Limits of Hardline Policies  
*Mohammed Masbah*

With a contingent of around 1,500 fighters, Morocco is considered one of the main exporters of foreign fighters to Syria. Until 2014, Moroccan authorities, who were content to see their own jihadis leave and add to the pressure on Bashar al-Assad, mostly turned a blind eye to networks of recruitment. Since the dramatic rise of the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS, concern over local repercussions and the return of war-hardened radicals has prompted Rabat to adopt a hardline, security-oriented approach instead. Repression, however, is unlikely to uproot these networks. Instead, a comprehensive strategy for de-radicalization should aim to rehabilitate and reintegrate returning fighters, and use their example to dissuade others from violent militancy.

The phenomenon of Moroccan fighters joining militant jihadi groups abroad is not new. During the 1980s, dozens of Moroccans from different Islamic ideological backgrounds traveled to Afghanistan to participate in the insurgency against the Soviet domination of that country. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, an organization called Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain was formed to represent former fighters of Moroccan origin who had settled in Afghanistan, but also to plan for attacks in Morocco at a later stage. Yet, the lack of strategy and leadership left this group an empty shell. After 2003, the American invasion of Iraq helped bring a new generation of foreign fighters to the fore. Moroccan authorities quickly tightened their grip on those who intended to join Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq

(AQI) and prevented hundreds from joining this new theater of war. Nevertheless, around 200–300 Moroccans managed to join the fight in Iraq, most of whom ended up killed or jailed there. According to records of al-Qaeda's internal organization captured by the US army in the Iraqi town of Sinjar in the fall of 2007, Moroccans constituted at least 6 percent (36 individuals) of a total of 700 foreign fighters with AQI.

### The Syrian revolution as a trigger

Since early 2012, the militarization of the Syrian and Libyan revolutions has shifted the phenomenon of foreign fighters to new arenas. Recruitment of Moroccan foreign fighters increased and reached its peak between June and December 2013. During that period of six months, more than 900

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joined the fight in Syria – an average of around 150 fighters per month. According to Moroccan security officials, the estimated overall number reached 1,122 fighters in June 2014, and 1,350 by July 2015, of which at least 254 had died in the fighting. If Europeans of Moroccan origin are included, the number increases to somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 fighters in total.

After Syria, Libya has become the second most important destination for Moroccan jihadis. Reportedly, some 300 Moroccan fighters have followed the call by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for North Africans to join the group's self-proclaimed Emirate in Libya. Even more have been using Libya as a passageway to Syria to avoid heightened security monitoring of the "traditional" route through Turkey.

### **The second generation of jihadis**

Recruits to the fight in Syria do not form a monolithic group. Most are recent converts from either non-religious or non-violent Islamic background to the jihadist line of Salafism (which promotes militant struggle to restore Islam to the alleged purity of its early forms), with only loose ideological commitment to the jihadi ideology. According to official Moroccan statistics, 88 percent have no prior criminal records. However, in the training camps in Syria and Libya, these recruits are converted into hardened jihadis through a process of systematic indoctrination. This includes theological instruction that is based on *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and condemns non-religious forms of rule and existing nation states as symbols of Western domination. It promotes instead the model of ISIS: the resurrection of the Caliphate to be established through militant struggle (*jihad*). Training on weapons and for actual combat is introduced gradually according to seniority in the organization.

Indeed, the involvement in the military conflicts in Syria and Libya has already led to the emergence of a new generation of Moroccan jihadis, whose extremist views –

for example, justifying the burning alive and decapitation of prisoners practiced by ISIS – make traditional Salafi leaders in Morocco fear that they are "corrupting" the very concept of jihad. Yet, how large the proportion of this ultra-radical generation is within the ranks of Moroccan foreign fighters in Syria is difficult to ascertain.

### **Recruitment process**

In general, recruitment is mainly based on personal relations. Yet, social media has become a new channel of recruitment, and – according to a local Moroccan NGO – around 60 percent of Moroccans who joined the fighting in Syria are today recruited via social networks, whereas the rest are recruited face-to-face.

There are also notable differences in the degree to which new recruits have control over the process of their affiliation with the armed struggle, including even the decision as to which group they will join. In general, those with a certain level of education, access to media, and experience in international travel are better positioned to manage their own journeys and avoid police monitoring. Others travel in small groups of ex-prisoners or friends at work and rely on logistic and sometimes financial support from transnational terrorist networks, which in turn steer them toward specific groups and areas. There are numerous reports of friends who, after leaving Morocco together, found themselves in different groups, and sometimes ended up fighting each other.

### **Push and pull factors**

To understand why so many Moroccans join the Syrian battlefield, it is important to highlight the interrelated push and pull factors that account for the influx of fighters from Morocco to Syria and Libya: they are of a political, logistical, sociological, and ideological nature.

### **Political factors**

Up to 2013, the inaction bordering on tacit encouragement displayed by the Moroccan authorities constituted an important push factor that facilitated the travel of jihadis. This policy was clearly driven by the desire to get rid of them and reduce the burden of controlling and containing the local Salafi-jihadi scene, within as well as outside the prison system. In addition, Morocco was a member country in the Group of Friends of the Syrian People and hosted its fourth meeting in Marrakech in December 2012, where the Syrian National Coalition was recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. In jihadi milieus, this position was interpreted as an official endorsement of the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime, and hence implicitly legitimized armed struggle against it.

Unlike other countries of the region, such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, in Morocco the events of 2011 did not lead to a security vacuum that would have weakened the central government, leading to areas without state control. Rather, Morocco has maintained an effective border management system and cooperates with the EU on this account. It has also modernized its security sector to be more professional and effective. Nevertheless, hundreds of jihadis succeeded in reaching Syria in 2013 virtually unimpeded. That year, only five cells that exported jihadis to Syria were dismantled, whereas the number grew subsequently to at least 27 cells being dismantled by May 2015. The authorities also issued passports to notorious jihadis and allowed them to leave the country. The cases of Anass Haloui, the spokesman of former jihadi detainees, and Fatiha Hassani, the widow of the al-Qaeda leader Karim Mejjati (killed in Saudi Arabia in April 2005) are prominent examples. Despite their records and close monitoring by security services, both traveled unchallenged through Casablanca airport to Syria.

This laxity of the authorities stands in stark contrast to their firm reactions on earlier occasions, when the same phenom-

enon ran counter to – rather than supporting – Morocco’s policy choices: between 2003 and 2007, Moroccan authorities cracked down on those who intended to travel to Iraq to fight the American occupation forces or join al-Qaeda, and succeeded in dismantling more than 30 cells active in recruiting young Moroccans to Iraq.

### **Logistical factors**

The second pull-factor is logistical. Surprisingly, traveling to Syria appears to be relatively safe, easy, and cheap. The cost of a trip does not exceed US\$1,000 and is funded either by the fighter himself or the recruiter. So far, most Moroccans have joined the fight in Syria through the “traditional” route: a regular airline flight from Casablanca airport to Istanbul, then onwards by bus to Gaziantep in southern Turkey, or Jarablus, which is just across the Syrian border. It worth mentioning here that Moroccans do not need a visa to travel to Turkey and Tunisia. When the authorities tightened their control on Casablanca airport and closely screened travelers, jihadis who looked for alternative routes chose stopovers in Tunisia by flight or made their way informally through Algerian territory into Libya, before traveling on to Syria.

### **Sociological factors**

There is a clear correlation between the recruitment of foreign fighters and social marginalization. According to a study released in November 2014 by the Observatoire du Nord des droits de l’homme (a local Moroccan NGO) on fighters stemming from the northern cities of Morocco, two-thirds were under the age of 25, and three-quarters belonged to deprived strata that live in the slums of big and medium-sized cities such as Casablanca, Salé (the significantly poorer sister city of the capital Rabat), and Tangier, a milieu which already generated the type of radicalism that led to the Casablanca bombings of 2003. Less than one-quarter qualify as middle class.

Cities in the northwest of Morocco export more fighters than other cities. For example, by 2014 the town of Fnideq (70,000 inhabitants) had exported around 200 fighters to Syria, which is around 13 percent of the total number of Moroccan foreign fighters. According to statistics provided by the Directorate General of National Security, the two northern cities of Tangier and Tetouan (with a combined population of around 1.5 million) contribute around 30 percent of Moroccan jihadis traveling to Syria – roughly the same share as the country’s two biggest cities, Casablanca and Fes, which together have three times the population.

Among the major reasons for this prevalence of foreign fighters stemming from the northwestern cities is the massive and largely uncontrolled process of urbanization that occurred in these areas during the last decades, resulting in, among other factors, a high level of youth unemployment. Although unemployment, in particular of youth, is also rampant in the slums of Casablanca, the north also suffers from a traditional parallel economy fed by drug cultivation. On the one hand, the laundering of drug money has resulted in an artificially inflated demand for real estate, which in turn drives up the cost of living for local communities. Poverty and the lack of alternatives, on the other hand, have pushed youths into informal or illicit activities, such as street vending and smuggling. For quite a few, traveling to Syria is just another option to escape a social reality that offers limited prospects for a decent living, and constitutes an almost seamless transition from one type of illicit activity to another.

Moreover, their prior involvement in illegal activities facilitates contact to seasoned smugglers based in the two Spanish-controlled cities of Ceuta and Melilla, 50 percent of whose population is of Muslim-Moroccan origin. Although formally Spanish citizens, these people are marginalized in comparison to Christian-Spanish residents. This has helped to create networks of illicit activity

that are similar to – and cooperate with – those in Morocco. It has also fueled sentiments of exclusion that facilitate jihadist propaganda. As a result, Ceuta and Melilla alone accounted for around 70 percent of the Spanish jihadis arrested in Spain between 2013 and mid-2015. For instance, El Príncipe, a poor quarter of Ceuta, is a hotspot for the recruitment of jihadist groups and a refuge for drug traffickers alike. Thus, the two types of illegal networks overlap and sustain each other, allowing jihadis to communicate and coordinate their efforts to evade the control of both Moroccan and Spanish authorities.

### **Ideological factors**

Although all of these factors have been in place for a while, the conflict in Syria created a new boost to jihadi ideology, which had been in decline after a number of prominent radicals of the prior decade had reversed their positions. In Morocco, local sheikhs started to echo *fatwas* (binding legal opinions) of global jihadis against the Assad regime and vociferously called for the support of “Sunnis” in Syria.

Jihadis have built the rhetoric supporting their recruitment on both religious and non-religious arguments. According to the former, Syria constitutes the place where the final battle between believers and non-believers will take place, bringing about the end of time. They have also emphasized the Assad regimes’ crimes against the Syrian people, and Arab and Western failure to prevent or contain them. Through this discourse, Moroccan jihadis have succeeded in appealing to disaffected youth, many of whom had already been deeply affected by images of the brutal assault on Syrians circulated through social media and transnational satellite TV stations such as Al Jazeera.

The process accelerated after a conference in Cairo was organized by several organizations of Sunni scholars in June 2013, during which time a *fatwa* was issued that called for Muslims all over the world to

support the Syrian people by “all means”. This *fatwa* boosted recruitment further and legitimized the phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria. Recruiters have also been able to draw upon local Salafi structures, in particular in the northwest, which had been built in a decentralized fashion, and hence survived the security crackdowns conducted by the Moroccan authorities, in particular in the wake of the 2003 Casablanca attacks. Finally, some members of the younger generation turned away from their ideological forebearers, judging them to be too soft and not committed to the fight.

Still, many Moroccans joined the fighting in Syria for reasons that are less related to ideology than to their frustrations with the corrupt and semi-authoritarian environment they endure in their own country, which leaves little room for the active political role they aspire to. The case of Abdel Aziz El Mehdali (aka Abu Usama al-Maghribi) is a good example. Born in 1986, El Mehdali worked as a street vendor in the city of Tetouan, struggling daily with local authorities and police who extracted bribes in exchange for tolerating his activities. Before joining the fighting in Syria, he participated in the 2011 protests that demanded substantial political and social reforms and was active in defending Islamist detainees. Once he joined the jihad in Syria, he became a hero in the eyes of the youth of his city, inspiring others to follow his example.

### **The road to ISIS**

Moroccan fighters joined several armed groups in Syria, with a number of them changing their loyalties in the course of the conflict, adding to the difficulty of classifying them accurately. Generally speaking, the most prominent groups to attract them have been Jabhat al-Nusra (the official Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate), ISIS and Harakat Sham al-Islam. The first wave of fighters joined Jabhat al-Nusra in early 2012 until mid-2013. Most of them had been fighters with AQI before, and their numbers were limited, reaching a few hundred by early

2013. Moroccans fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra were known for suicide attacks on behalf of the group.

### **Harakat Sham al-Islam**

By mid-2013, many of the Moroccans who originally joined the Nusra group defected to other groups. A new dynamic occurred among the Moroccan fighters in Syria when Brahim Benchechroun – a veteran Afghanisthan fighter and ex-Guantanamo detainee (2002–2004) – created Harakat Sham al-Islam. In 2005, Benchechroun had been transferred to Morocco, where he was imprisoned between 2005 and 2011. After his release, he left for Mauritania, where he joined the fighting in Syria. Known for his personal charisma, he succeeded in attracting Moroccan Salafi fighters who, like him, had been detained in Moroccan prisons.

The organization he established is a Salafi-jihadi group that claims organizational independence from – but embraces the ideology of – al-Qaida, and was designated a terrorist group by the US State Department in 2014. By the end of 2013, the new movement served as an umbrella for Moroccan foreign fighters in Syria, who, with some 500–700 fighters, formed a clear majority in the group. Yet, some non-Moroccans were also part of its leadership, for example the head of its Sharia committee was a Saudi, and its military commander was an Egyptian.

When fighting broke out between ISIS and other rebel groups in January 2014, Harakat Sham al-Islam kept neutral at first. It also rejected the US-led coalition against ISIS, but later criticized ISIS for its dictatorship and exclusion of other groups. At the same time, the group was involved in active combat against the Syrian regime and lost many fighters in clashes in Latakia, where it was based, during March and April 2014, including its leader, Benchechroun.

Without its founder, the group was weakened considerably. Although the Shura Council elected a new leader (a former soldier in the Moroccan army by the name of

Mohammed Mehdi, alias: Abu Talha Mehdi Slaoui), the new leader lacks the charisma of his predecessor as well as a Salafi-jihadi ideological background. Hence, Harakat Sham al-Islam entered into an alliance with four other Islamist groups in the Latakia region in July 2014 to form the so-called Jabhat Ansar al-Din (The Front of the Supporters of the Religion) to offset its losses. Yet, without Benchekroun, Harakat Sham al-Islam has lost much of its attraction.

### **ISIS**

With the proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014, and the establishment of the US-led coalition against it in September that year, the attraction of ISIS received a considerable boost. As a result, many Moroccans from Harakat Sham al-Islam and other groups defected and joined ISIS. Today, ISIS is considered the first address for Moroccan fighters in Syria, and there is a growing tendency to pledge allegiance to its leader, al-Baghdadi, including among Salafi-jihadis still imprisoned in Morocco.

The reasons for this support are threefold. First, the ultra-radical and trans-national ideology of ISIS is attractive in comparison to other groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, who are more Syrian-nationalist in orientation and more pragmatic in their tactics, including alliances with non-jihadi groups. Second, ISIS provides salaries (around US\$400/month) and other incentives, such as houses and cars, and arranges marriages, sometimes with enslaved women, all of which attract youth to join its ranks. Thus, for many despairing youth who used to dream of immigration to Europe, Syria became the “worldly paradise” that provides good opportunities for the underprivileged. Finally, the military achievements of ISIS – in particular the capture of Mosul and wide swathes of territory in Iraq throughout the summer of 2014 – enticed Moroccan as well as other foreign fighters to join the organization in droves.

Nevertheless, most Moroccans fighting with ISIS are foot soldiers, and only a few of

them have moved up to second-level ranks of the group. For instance, El Mehdali, who had left Morocco in 2012 and initially joined Jabhat al-Nusra, became a field commander in Aleppo and its surroundings after defecting to ISIS by mid-2013. Ironically, he was killed, alongside 20 fighters, by Jabhat al-Nusra during clashes between the two groups in March 2014.

According to Moroccan officials, there are at least three other Moroccans occupying high-ranking positions in ISIS, including the position as judge of the city of Mosul, the head of the communications department, and the governor of the Turkmen mountains. Beyond that, there is no conclusive information about Moroccans achieving senior levels within ISIS.

### **The government response: A hardline policy**

Since the rise of ISIS, the Moroccan authorities – growing more concerned about the return of Moroccan foreign fighters – have reversed their formerly lenient attitude toward Salafi-jihadis traveling to Syria. Preventive measures have included modifications to the 2003 anti-terrorism law to contain provisions that sanction Moroccans participating in combat outside the country as well as tightened controls at strategic locations such as airports and along the eastern and southeastern borders with Algeria and Mauritania. Yet, the efforts to deal with the phenomenon have been inconsistent and are hampered by the overemphasis on security approaches.

### **The security approach**

Moroccan authorities have increasingly adopted a “zero tolerance” approach to jihadis, inside as well as outside the country. The Royal Armed Forces joined the US-led coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria in September 2014. Its security services have been a source of valuable intelligence about transnational jihadi networks for several Western countries, especially Spain,

and later France. Both have recognized Moroccan efforts in terms of anti-terrorism cooperation.

In addition, networks and cells for the recruitment of foreign fighters have been targeted out of concern that these structures may facilitate attacks against the kingdom in the future. This has prevented more than 500 potential travelers from reaching Syria. At the same time, there are concerns that ISIS returnees could perpetrate attacks against the kingdom, especially after its self-proclaimed Caliph, al-Baghdadi, singled out Morocco as a potential target in a speech in summer 2014. Authorities have since arrested dozens of radicals who pledged allegiance to ISIS and allegedly prepared for terrorist attacks against the kingdom. This includes, among others, a network of 13 persons captured in March 2015 in different Moroccan cities for allegedly obtaining a large quantity of weapons in preparation for attacks against political figures and tourist sites.

Prevention has also been enhanced by a new security mechanism called *Hadar* (vigilance), which includes deployment of armed elements of the Royal Armed Forces, the Royal Gendarmerie, the police, and auxiliary forces in main strategic locations such as airports, train stations, administrative buildings, tourist areas, etc. Moreover, the Moroccan army has for the first time deployed heavy weapons near sensitive areas along the Algerian border and at airports in order to prevent any possible terrorist attack. At the same time, and despite al-Baghdadi's rhetoric, it remains doubtful that Morocco really faces an imminent threat from ISIS, given its geographic distance from the group's main sites of operation, its strong security sector, and the challenges that ISIS has faced recently in Syria and Iraq.

### **Legal framework**

The second pillar of the authorities' response to the ISIS threat is a host of new anti-terrorism laws. In September 2014 the parliament

adopted a new version of the anti-terrorism law of 2003. Proposed by the Ministry of Justice and Liberties, which is led by the moderate Islamist PJD (Parti de la Justice et du Développement), the amendments provided for heavy penalties from five to fifteen years in prison and fines up to 500,000 Moroccan Dirham (ca. €45,000) for any Moroccan who joins or tries to join any type of non-state armed organization, whether inside or outside Morocco.

The security approach has, however, fueled discourses that tend to exaggerate and politicize terrorist threats. Voices that are critical of the regime, including non-Islamist organizations – in particular human rights organizations such as the Association Marocaine des Droits Humains – are struggling with restrictions on the freedom of expression. The Ministry of Interior has banned numerous activities of the association and other human rights NGOs over the last year, arguing that the organizations' criticism of the security sector and its practices were discrediting the "fight against terrorism."

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

To turn the current one-dimensional approach to the phenomenon of Moroccan foreign fighters with its focus on security into a sustainable long-term strategy, the root causes of radicalization have to be tackled. This would require a multidimensional approach that operates on the macro and micro levels.

At the macro level, Moroccan authorities have done a good job in countering violent extremism. Measures such as monitoring radical discourses in mosques and programs that combat social marginalization such as the Initiative Nationale pour le Développement Humain supplement the security-based approach. These are strong points on the side of Moroccan authorities, and Germany and Europe should encourage and support them to continue to fight the marginalization of youth as a root cause of radicalization.



The main gap occurs when dealing directly with current and former radicals. Here, Europeans should work closely with Moroccan authorities and local civil society organizations to implement a comprehensive micro-level de-radicalization program that aims at ideological revision as well as social and economic integration. One of the examples that can provide valuable insights is the Danish experience in designing a program that aims to rehabilitate and reintegrate foreign fighters. Such a program may include, inter alia, the establishment of an independent organization that works closely with national and local authorities, religious organizations, human rights NGOs, ex-detainees, and families of detainees in order to facilitate the reintegration of former foreign fighters who are ready to reconsider their ideological choices. In this context, qualified religious scholars should be recruited who encourage and mentor processes of ideological review.

There is also a need to engage in the social environment of foreign fighters as well as Salafi detainees – and, in particular, with their families – to contain the spread of radicalization and to create a supportive environment for those who choose to distance themselves from radical ideas. More specifically, authorities should support the families with legal and psychological counsel, and offer support for economic and social integration.

In addition, there is a need for post-prison programs to reintegrate ex-radicals in the legal economy. Hence, Europeans should also encourage Moroccan authorities to engage with local elected bodies, the business community, NGOs, and religious-based organizations in the implementation of the de-radicalization program by providing jobs, training, and psychological treatment for ex-radicals.

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