

American Foreign Policy Council

MOROCCO

QUICK FACTS

Population: 31,627,428

Area: 446,550 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab-Berber 99.1%,
other 0.7%, Jewish 0.2%

Religions: Muslim 98.7%,
Christian 1.1%, Jewish 0.2%

Government Type: Constitutional
monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$91.84 billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)

Unique among Muslim states, Morocco is a society that has enticed Islamist political movements to become full-fledged political parties, yet has been subjected to jihadist attacks and tolerates an Islamist movement that openly calls for the overthrow of the monarchy and creation of an Islamic state. Facing the dilemma of whether to co-opt Islamists or outlaw their activities, Moroccan ruler King Mohammed has pursued a two-track strategy of encouraging Islamists who oppose violence and support the monarchy to participate in politics, while arresting adherents to Salafist ideology. Whether this strategy will succeed in defusing the Islamist threat to the Moroccan state, however, is still an open question.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

A number of Islamist groups and movements, either indigenous

or foreign, are currently active in Morocco. Unlike other Muslim nations, however, Islamism in Morocco is quite fragmented.

At-Tawhid

At-Tawhid was created in 1996 by the senior leaders of ash-Shabiba al-Islamiya, which itself was a secretive militant Islamist movement started in the 1960s and subsequently implicated in several acts of violence including the assassination of Umar Bin Jallun, a famous Moroccan leftist leader.¹ Its goal was to ultimately gain legitimacy and become a political force in its own right. However, due to continued internal disagreement and refusal by the King to recognize its political legitimacy, between 1996 and 1997 At-Tawhid negotiated an arrangement with the Democratic Constitutional Movement (DCM) that ultimately integrated it into the DCM. The latter ultimately changed its name in 1998 to the Party for Justice and Development (PJD).² Today, the original leadership of At-Tawhid considers the PJD to represent its so-called “political wing.”³ (A full description of the PJD follows below)

Justice and Charity

Justice and Charity, formed in 1988, has been the most virulent Islamist political and religious movement in Morocco. Considered illegitimate and barely tolerated by the Moroccan government, JC has gained adherents though its role as the sole indigenous Islamist movement challenging the monarchy (including advocating its overthrow), and through its extensive social and charitable organizational network. The Moroccan government refuses to recognize JC as a political party.⁴

JC advocates a restoration of Islamic law (*sharia*), but asserts allegiance to democratic principles in order to differentiate itself as a political movement that opposes Morocco’s autocratic political system. Since the 1970s, its leader and founder, Sheikh Abdesalam Yassine, has openly challenged the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy. For this, he was tried in 1984, and sentenced to house arrest—a sentence that remained in force until 1989.⁵ The following year, JC was officially outlawed pursuant to a ban that would endure until modified by the current king, Mohammed VI, in 2004. Sheikh Yassine’s daughter, Nadia Yassine, at present is the

movement's chief political organizational leader.

JC is committed to the dissolution of Morocco's current constitutional system and the elimination of the monarchy. In its place, JC advocates the creation of an Islamic republic in Morocco. JC is openly critical of King Mohammed VI, and has placed itself in permanent conflict with Morocco's government. Nevertheless, JC opposes the use of violence and armed struggle, preferring to rely on civil disobedience to achieve its goals. The magnitude of support for JC is a closely guarded secret, both by the organization itself and by the Moroccan government, although most observers consider its support substantial given its extensive charitable and social network.⁶

Given the Moroccan government's intense opposition to JC internally, the group's leadership decided to "export" the JC movement to Europe, beginning roughly in 1996, through the creation of the Muslim Participation and Spirituality (MPS) Association.⁷ MPS has established chapters in major capitals throughout Europe, headed by JC Islamist activists who have fled Morocco. The goal of MPS is to generate opposition to Morocco's king and government through political activities in order to win legal status for the JC inside Morocco.⁸ The French and Belgian MPS branches regularly organize demonstrations against Morocco. Ms. Yassine also visits France regularly to denounce the repression of JC, and on June 17, 2006 she created the "New Europe-Morocco Friendship"—an association based in Belgium which convened a conference on the theme "Human Rights Flouted in Morocco."⁹ In recent years, Ms. Yassine has undertaken several tours of Europe to strengthen the presence of MPS on the Continent.

The Party of Justice and Development (PJD)

In order to co-opt Islamist movements in Morocco, King Hassan II permitted the emergence of a new political movements that incorporated Islamist orientations – the most significant being Justice and Development Party (PJD), which draws on Islamic values and inspiration from Turkey's Justice and Development Party (although there is no official connection between the two parties).

Formed in 1967 and originally named the Constitutional and Democratic Popular Movement (MPDC), the PJD changed its

name to the Justice and Development Party in 1998.¹⁰ That year, the movement formally coalesced from a coalition of small, moderate Islamist organizations, including conservative Islamist pro-monarchical political figures. In contrast to JC, PJD is a political party that has competed in Morocco's parliamentary elections since 1997 (when it did so as the MPDC).

In 2002, PJD became the country's leading opposition party, having won 42 of 325 seats in Morocco's parliament, making it the third-largest group in the national legislature. In the legislative elections of 2007 (Morocco's last parliamentary elections), the PJD won the largest percentage of the popular vote (10.9 percent on local, and 13.4 percent on the national lists). As a result, the PJD gained 46 seats overall in the Chamber of Representatives, increasing its overall representation by four seats over the 2002 election.¹¹

Unlike JC, PJD is non-revolutionary and pro-monarchist, and does not question Morocco's constitutional system. Nor does it advocate the creation of an Islamist state, or caliphate, in Morocco. Indeed, the PJD intentionally downplays any religious agenda. Nevertheless, it views itself as the guardian of Morocco's Muslim identity and conservative religious traditions, and opposes any effort that would compromise Morocco's Islamic character. Thus it opposes further westernization of Moroccan society, but it pragmatically recognizes the importance of Morocco's ties to the West. The PJD also regards itself as a bulwark against radical Islamic groups such as JC.

Contesting elections since 1997, PJD has gradually gained popular support throughout Morocco, and has become quite entrenched in Morocco's political process – balancing its participation in legislative affairs with its adherence to an Islamic political agenda. In recent years, PJD legislatures have focused their attention on ameliorating Morocco's significant social and economic challenges. Because it is in the opposition, however, the party's ability to influence actual policy is limited, with only marginal ability to translate its agenda into meaningful programs that would obtain greater popular support.

Moreover, the intentional ambiguity by which it approaches questions of Islam and religion has raised questions about whether the PJD's goal is to serve as a front for more extremist Islamic incli-

nations. Indeed, a 2006 report by the Congressional Research Service questioned PJD's agenda and asserted:

...like many Islamist groups across the globe, it is difficult to discern the PJD's true goals and objectives over the long run. Some believe that, although the party has agreed to work within the current political system, it remains committed to establishing an Islamic state in Morocco with Islamic law, or *Sharia*, as the basis for legislation.¹²

PJD's agenda in parliament has occasionally taken it into pure *sharia* territory—calling for prohibition against alcohol consumption and distribution, and challenging media that it views as defacing Islamic principles. On other occasions, however, the PJD has trended in the opposite direction. In 2005, for example, the party actively participated in the adoption of a new, more liberal version of the country's code regulating marriage and family life, known as the *Mudawana*.¹³ The revision of the *Mudawana* greatly improved the social status of women in Morocco, and was ridiculed by more conservative Islamists. PJD's leader, Saad Eddine Othmani, defended the PJD's approval of the code's revision, asserting in 2006 that it had been approved by religious leaders, aided families, and was consistent with Islamic traditions.

Salafist Jihadism

Morocco has “numerous small ‘grassroots’ extremist groups”¹⁴ that collectively adhere to Salafi-*jihadi* ideology. Indeed, Spanish anti-terror judge Baltazar Garzon has stated that “Morocco is the worst terrorist threat to Europe.”¹⁵ He estimated that al-Qaeda-linked cells in Morocco number more than 100 and that at least 1,000 terrorists are now being actively sought by Moroccan authorities.¹⁶ Al-Qaeda's regional offshoot, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has made recent efforts to bring these disparate groups (which number less than 50 members per grouping, on average) under its umbrella.

AQIM, like its counterpart al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), constitutes a potent regional terrorist threat not only to Morocco but to Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Tunisia. Formed

when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) reconstituted itself into AQIM in early 2007, its goal has been to integrate all of the North African radical movements, including the Moroccan GICM (Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group).

Salafist *jihadis* as a whole remain a potent threat to Morocco and the West. Scores of young Moroccans traveled to Iraq and Afghanistan to fight Americans and there are continuing arrests of extremists.¹⁷ Salafis also represent a challenge to the Moroccan state, as a number of recent incidents have underscored. On May 16, 2003, terrorists claiming to be members of the GICM launched a series of five coordinated suicide attacks in Casablanca, killing more than 40 people and wounding more than 100. In April 2007, a series of suicide bomb attacks occurred in central Casablanca, one taking place near the U.S. Consulate and one near the American Language Center. In February 2008, Moroccan authorities arrested nearly 40 members of an alleged terrorist network, led by Abdelkader Belliraj, a Belgian-Moroccan suspected of committing multiple assassinations in addition to arms smuggling and money laundering for al-Qaeda.¹⁸ Press reports have at times asserted that more than 100 al-Qaeda-linked cells exist in Morocco, and that Moroccan police have either imprisoned or placed under house arrest/police surveillance over 1,000 Salafist *jihadists* either openly sympathetic to AQIM or part of other hard-core underground Islamist movements.¹⁹

In the past two years alone, Islamist activity has generated scores of arrests. In July 2008, Moroccan security services arrested 35 members of an alleged terrorist network specializing in the recruitment of volunteers for Iraq.²⁰ In August of the same year, another 15-person network calling itself “Fath al-Andalus” was reportedly disbanded in Layoune, the capital of the Western Sahara, for planning attacks on the UN peacekeeping force there.²¹ There also have been reports of considerable numbers of Moroccans traveling to Mali and Algeria to receive training from AQIM elements.²²

The impoverished slums in Morocco’s inner cities and northern regions have produced many of these extremists, and many of the Moroccan extremist groupings are composed of family members and friends from the same towns and villages. Indeed, the north of Morocco has become especially fertile ground for Salafists who favored Saudi Wahhabism over Morocco’s more tolerant ver-

sion of Islam.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Under Moroccan law, the monarch is revered as the “Commander of the Faithful” and traces his lineage to the Prophet Mohammad. Consequently, the majority of Moroccans take great pride in their nation’s embrace of moderate, tolerant Islam. But segments of the nation’s rural regions are populated by adherents to Wahhabism. This is especially true in the northern parts of Morocco, where the wearing of the *niqab*, or full face veil, is far more common than in Morocco’s urban centers.

Social conditions also play a role in Islamist sentiment. Given Morocco’s high unemployment rate, year after year thousands of Moroccans risk their lives attempting to illegally immigrate to Europe across the Straits of Gibraltar.²³ Many, however, are left behind, transforming cities like Tangier, Tetouan or Al Houcema into smuggling centers feeding criminal elements and opponents of the regime.

Despite the King’s efforts to promote a legislative agenda to modernize Islamic laws governing civil society in Morocco (detailed below), the continued growth of political parties such as the PJD, and the continued political activities by the JC both inside Morocco and in Europe point to the fractures in Morocco’s society between those who favor a more moderate, tolerant Islam and significant elements of Morocco’s populace which prefer stronger Islamic control over the nation’s society and its political system.

Morocco’s urban slums and rural north continue to be fertile ground for extremism and its recruiters to AQIM. Indeed, scores, if not hundreds, of Moroccans have volunteered to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan against the United States.²⁴ Morocco’s north, especially cities such as Tetouan and the surrounding Rif Mountain villages have become centers of *jihadist* agitation. It is in Morocco’s north that Wahhabism has taken strongest root, as a result of institutional neglect. Following a Berber rebellion against his rule in the early 1980s, King Hassan II largely abandoned the northern tier of

Morocco to its own devices. The King rarely visited the north during his reign, and consequently, government services were severely cut, and Islamists filled the void with a social and charitable network offering food and medical treatment to the population. While King Mohammed has reversed his father's policy of abandonment of the north (and even conducted an ancient traditional ceremony of mutual allegiance there²⁵), the region is still severely impoverished and deeply dependent on Wahhabi and *jihadi* charitable networks for services not provided by the government.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the Moroccan government focused increasing attention on modernizing Islamic teaching and Islamic infrastructure and adopted laws liberalizing civil marriage and the role of women in Morocco's society. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs was provided new funding and authority to train more moderate Islamic clerics and to expand its educational programs in Morocco's educational system.

In 2005, partially as a retort to the Casablanca bombings, King Mohammed unveiled an unprecedented revision to the code regulating marriage and family life (the *Mudawana*).²⁶ The revision of the *Mudawana* greatly improved the social status of women, among other innovations. Although hailed by many as courageous effort, the revisions to the *Mudawana* provoked mass demonstrations before they were enacted.

One incident in particular points to Morocco's more aggressive stance against ultra-conservative Muslim clerics who oppose the government's efforts to modernize Morocco's Islamic infrastructure and its religious teachings. In September 2008, Sheikh Mohamed Ben Abderrahman Al Maghraoui issued a highly provocative *fatwa* legitimizing the marriage of underage women as young as nine years old.²⁷ The Moroccan government sought to discredit the *fatwa* and ordered the immediate closure of 60 Koranic schools under his control. The government also launched an inquiry into Sheikh Al Maghraoui's competence as an Islamic scholar, and the public prosecutor's office initiated a criminal case against him for encouraging

pedophilia.²⁸

Following the incident, King Mohammed unveiled his “proximity strategy,” which represented a modernization program for Islamic institutions in Morocco. Under the program, 3,180 mosques were designated to be “modernized,” (essentially a wholesale replacement of *imams* deemed by the regime to be opponents of moderate Islamic principles). Thirty-three thousand new *imams* were to be trained and the number of regional *ulama* councils (charged with overseeing Islamic teaching and the competency of *imams*) was increased from 30 to 70. Moreover, the King ordered the acceleration of a pioneering experiment of training and using women as spiritual guides in order to propagate religious tolerance.²⁹

The aborted terrorist plot in 2007 and the continuing threat of *jihadi* sentiment in the country’s north have had a negative effect on the pace of King Mohammed’s reform agenda. In order to avoid antagonizing conservative Moroccans further, King Mohammed decided to slow the reforms governing the rights of women and the judiciary. Additionally, unlike his father, the King has refrained from playing an activist role in Middle East diplomacy.

For many years Morocco has permitted mainstream Islamic political parties that do not condone extremism and violence to exist and indeed, to participate in elections, although it continues to deny legal status to the JD. Since the Casablanca bombings in 2003, Moroccan authorities have maintained a vigilant and aggressive stance against any *jihadist* movement. Moroccan authorities currently have almost 1,000 prisoners considered to be Islamic radicals in jail.³⁰ And in July 2007, Moroccan authorities jailed six Islamist politicians who were accused of complicity in a major terrorist plot.³¹ On the other hand, the Moroccan government has rewarded Islamic parties that have embraced more moderate Islamic principles, such as the PJD. Notwithstanding the ever-present scourge of *jihadi* operatives in Morocco, the Moroccan government has demonstrated ingenuity in its “divide and conquer” strategy against Islamists who challenge the state. In addition to adopting the above-referenced “proximity strategy” to replace recalcitrant *imams*,

authorities have established a grassroots police operation to report on any suspicious activities by Islamists.³²

The Moroccan government has also implemented a concerted social development program to combat the existence of Islamist-oriented charities that have nurtured radicalism. In the largest “bidonvilles” (shantytowns) in Morocco’s cities, significant social welfare, health and education programs have been instituted and many families have been relocated to new affordable housing units.³³

ENDNOTES

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[30] Erlanger and Mekhennet, "Islamic Radicalism Slows Moroccan Reforms."

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[33] Ibid.