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Public Opinion on the Religious Authority of the Moroccan King

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INTRODUCTION

Morocco has worked to establish itself as a bulwark against religious extremism in recent years: the government trains women to serve as religious guides, or "*mourchidates*," to counteract violent messaging; since launching in 2015, the Imam Training Center has received hundreds of imams from Europe and Africa to study Moroccan Islam; in 2016, in response to ISIS atrocities against Yazidis, the king of Morocco gathered esteemed Muslim leaders to release The Marrakesh Declaration on the rights that Islam guarantees to non-Muslims. Such initiatives have contributed to Morocco's international reputation as a bastion of religious tolerance under state stewardship of religion.

But to what extent do Moroccans view such state leadership in religion favorably, or see head of state King Mohammed VI as a source of religious authority? According to a public opinion survey conducted by the Baker Institute in December 2017, Moroccan respondents view the king as a religious leader. The findings corroborate the king's claim to the title of the "Commander of the Faithful," and therefore appear to affirm his ability to use religious justifications to combat religious violence.

King Mohammed VI and the state religious establishment assert that Morocco embraces a combination of three Islamic traditions: the Maliki branch of Sunni jurisprudence, the Ash'ari doctrine of

rationalism, and the Sufi tradition of Imam Junayd.¹ According to the government narrative, these constitute a specifically Moroccan form of Islam that inoculates the kingdom against extremism. One of the most significant components of Moroccan Islam is the figure of the Commander of the Faithful or "*Amir al-Mu'mineen*," a status held by the Moroccan king, who claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad. The figure of the Commander of the Faithful is unique to Morocco; no other contemporary Muslim head of state holds a similar title.²

Morocco's efforts to counteract extremist forms of Islam, and military partnership with the U.S. and EU, have cemented the kingdom's reputation as a key ally in combatting terrorism. Yet while Mohammed VI's role as a religious figure is frequently noted in media coverage, few studies have sought to evaluate whether Moroccan citizens trust their king as an authority on religious matters.³ In general, the American policy establishment lacks mechanisms to interrogate claims of religious leadership, although the U.S. government has engaged with religious figures as important community stakeholders since the 1990s.⁴

Observers of the Middle East and North Africa tend to assume that state-led Islam lacks credibility, due to its affiliation with, and support for, authoritarian regimes. In contrast, public support for independent religious actors is seen as reflected in the widespread appeal of Islamist movements.



To what extent do Moroccans see head of state King Mohammed VI as a source of religious authority?

According to the assumption that state Islam lacks credibility, King Mohammed VI's claim to religious authority would be viewed with skepticism. Questioning the religious leadership of the king is taboo in Morocco, further complicating efforts to evaluate whether his status as the Commander of the Faithful gives him the religious standing to challenge extremist interpretations of Islam. Therefore, our public opinion survey provides insights into the Moroccan case, and also offers tools for how to evaluate the claims of other religious leaders.

SURVEY FINDINGS

A team of researchers worked with YouGov to implement an online public-opinion survey of respondents' trust in and approval of Moroccan and international Muslim religious figures in December 2017. A survey experiment using endorsement effects reinforced the validity of the survey results by increasing the likelihood that findings reflect respondents' sincerely held positions. The results of this survey of 2,990 Moroccans is described in detail in a previous country report (<https://bit.ly/2UPep3i>) published as part of a larger study on religious authority in the Middle East (<https://bit.ly/2WfoqXT>).

Briefly, the results overwhelmingly indicate that King Mohammed VI enjoys the highest religious authority of the Moroccan Islamic leaders named by the survey. The results of the survey experiment, although not the direct survey questions, reveal that the figure with the second-highest approval among Moroccans is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State. The implications of Moroccans' support for al-Baghdadi are discussed below, but these results strengthen the validity of the finding pertaining to King Mohammed VI's religious authority: if respondents felt concerned about being penalized for their responses, they would not likely have expressed support for al-Baghdadi. The results also reveal respondents' lack of familiarity with, or lack of trust in, the other Moroccan religious figures they were asked to evaluate.

When asked to select which of the six Moroccan religious figures named in the survey they approved, 48 percent of Moroccan respondents selected King Mohammed VI. The next most popular response was "I do not approve of religious leaders," at 25 percent. Approval of the other five figures was significantly lower than approval of the king, as the individual with the next highest approval was Prime Minister Othmani, at only 8 percent. Less than 2 percent or fewer respondents approved of the other individuals.

When respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in the religious authority of the Moroccan religious figures, responses demonstrated that King Mohammed VI represents the most trusted figure: 70 percent of respondents signaled that they "Trust" or "Completely trust" the king on religious matters. The individual that respondents trusted least was Prime Minister Othmani: 43 percent of respondents selected "Do not trust" when asked about the prime minister, while 24 percent indicated that they did trust him.

The most common response pertaining to the seven other religious figures named in the survey was "I do not know this person": over half of respondents indicated that they did not know Mohammed Abbad of al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan, Sufi Sheikh Sidi Jamal, Salafi preacher Umar al-Haddouchi, or Salafi cleric al-Maghraoui. The next most common response pertaining to these individuals, or one out of five, was "Do not trust at all," signaling that when respondents did know of these individuals, many mistrusted them.

Using endorsement effects, the survey experiment evaluated the extent to which a given individual's name, when associated with a statement, led to greater or lesser agreement with that statement. Moroccans were most likely to agree with a statement when it was affiliated with King Mohammed VI's name. The figure that generated the second highest agreement was that of IS leader Abu Baker al-Baghdadi. This finding held true for all 14 questions asked for the survey experiment component. In both the direct questions, and the survey experiment, the clearest finding indicates that King Mohammed VI is viewed as a trusted source of religious authority in Morocco.

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IMPLICATIONS

King Mohammed VI has sought to establish Moroccan Islam as an antidote to terrorism. However, for U.S. policymakers looking for Muslim allies with sufficient religious credibility to assist in delegitimizing extremist interpretations of Islam, evaluating the validity of claims made by figures like the king of Morocco is imperative for cultivating an effective counter-extremism strategy. Overall, while his status as both a religious and political leader is significant, the finding that King Mohammed VI enjoys high religious influence should be viewed as the result of state-led efforts to construct an image of authority grounded in long-standing tradition.

Our findings challenge the assumption that all state-affiliated religious figures lack credibility. According to the survey results, King Mohammed VI possesses the necessary spiritual capital to credibly promote Moroccan Islam, while discrediting interpretations of the religion that have been used to justify violence and intolerance. However, while American, European, and African policymakers have demonstrated their eagerness to engage with and support a religious figure who can plausibly discourage extremism, such partnerships should be undertaken cautiously in order to avoid jeopardizing the king's standing. The U.S. and EU in particular should exercise discretion when seeking to encourage Morocco's efforts to counter violent extremism. There exists sensitivity around perceived manipulation of Islam for political ends, especially by the U.S., and Moroccans are likely to protest American involvement in religious affairs.

The spiritual status of Morocco's Commander of the Faithful is not inviolable. Religious authority, like all authority, can be lost. King Mohammed VI's standing is largely grounded in his claim to uphold long-standing Moroccan religious traditions, such as serving as the Commander of the Faithful and promoting a Maliki/Ash'ari/Sufi form of state Islam. Yet like any tradition promoted by state institutions, these aspects of Moroccan Islam reflect strategic

choices, many of which were made in the modern era. Although these aspects of Moroccan Islam exist in the historical record, they are also curated to project a specific image, while other aspects of Moroccan religious tradition are not emphasized, such as the acts of anti-colonial violence carried out by Sufi tariqas (brotherhoods). The government's preferred version of Moroccan Islam carries utility under contemporary circumstances, when a tradition of religious tolerance constitutes a valuable commodity. King Mohammed VI's legitimacy lies in his alleged authenticity, which would be damaged by overt coordination with actors like the United States.

The finding from the survey experiment that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi represents the figure with the second-highest religious authority after King Mohammed VI is consistent with the high numbers of Moroccan individuals who traveled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State. After Jordan and Tunisia, Morocco was the third-highest nationality represented among IS fighters. Yet what explains the simultaneous trust in the religious authority of both King Mohammed VI and al-Baghdadi? It is possible that appeals to protect Sunni populations contributed to the desire of many Moroccans to fight for IS. Official religious discourse in Morocco is frequently anti-Shi'a, due to the government's concerns about Iranian interference. The state's pro-Sunni rhetoric may have caused the Islamic State's virulently Sunni messaging to resonate with some Moroccans. In addition, unemployment and a general lack of economic prospects face the majority of youth in Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia. The promise of excitement, meaningful action, a chance to defend embattled Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, as well as the prospect of possible wealth, represent an appealing combination for many young people frustrated with the status quo at home. While Moroccans may see King Mohammed VI as a religious leader, many were simultaneously wooed by the prospect of a just state ruled strictly according to Islamic tenets.

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The finding that few other Moroccan religious figures enjoy high trust and approval may partially reflect recent shifts in leadership at several of the religious organizations included in the survey. For example, the current prime minister, Saadeddine Othmani, was appointed by the king after the previous prime minister, Abdelilah Benkirane, failed to successfully form a government following the 2016 parliamentary elections. After the reforms of 2011 that permitted Benkirane to become prime minister, his party, the PJD, was hailed as an example of a moderate Islamist party operating according to the procedural parameters of parliament to pursue a reformist agenda. However, after the PJD again won a plurality of seats in the 2016 elections, observers have wondered if the king saw Benkirane's popularity as a threat, thereby prompting him to stymie the PJD's efforts to form a coalition. The king then stepped in to resolve the resulting deadlock, allowing him to play the role of operating above the fray of politics while appointing a monarchist. Othmani has been careful to avoid over-emphasizing the religious nature of the PJD and challenging the palace on religious grounds.⁵ Respondents' relatively dim view of Othmani may reflect suspicion that he benefitted at Benkirane's expense, or lack of confidence in his willingness to pursue real change.

Mohammed Abbadi, the current head of the banned Islamist group al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan (Justice and Charity), took over after the death of the group's founder, Abdessalam Yassine, in 2012. Prior to his death, the group was arguably the most powerful social movement in Morocco, with members estimated to number 200,000 in 2011. Although the movement previously presented a possible challenge to the religious authority of the king, al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan may find that without their charismatic founder, the group lacks direction and may have lost their potential for political relevance.

Unfamiliarity with Sheikh Sidi Jamal may correspond to the recency of his takeover at the time the survey was conducted. However, the lack of

awareness of the new Sufi leader may also suggest a decline in support for Sufism more broadly, although the Moroccan government has found it expedient to highlight Sufism as a moderate alternative to Salafi Islam in the "war on terror" context, as have other governments.⁶

Lack of support and unfamiliarity with the two Moroccan Salafi figures, al-Haddouchi and al-Maghraoui, is also significant, especially in the context of support for IS leader al-Baghdadi. It is possible that the state-led project of constructing the king's religious authority has been effective in discrediting local figures that might challenge the king's standing as a religious figure. By contrast, Moroccans might have felt they could more safely express support for al-Baghdadi, as he presents no immediate threat to the Moroccan monarchy, whereas local opposition figures may be deemed too risky to support, even within the context of an online survey.

CONCLUSION

The survey findings reveal King Mohammed VI as a figure of religious authority in Morocco who faces few significant challengers domestically. However, both the survey results and the high numbers of Moroccans who traveled to fight for the Islamic State demonstrate the appeal of alternative forms of religious leadership. In order to avoid possibly damaging the king's standing, the United States should avoid interfering in religious affairs in the kingdom. American policy in Morocco should instead focus on encouraging reforms to promote democratization and economic initiatives to address unemployment and corruption. From the perspective of U.S. policymakers, evaluating the landscape of religious influence in Morocco and across the Middle East and North Africa offers insights into which individuals and institutions can contribute to initiatives to counter violent extremism. However, the U.S. should also be cautious about appearing to support movements whose credibility may suffer as a result of U.S. affiliation.

ENDNOTES

1. For an in-depth discussion of Morocco's tripartite form of Islam, see Ann Marie Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 70–81.
2. The moniker “Amir al-Mumineen” has been used by Moroccan sultans since the 16th century AD. The king of Saudi Arabia, another monarch with a religious title, assumed the moniker “Protector of the Two Holy Mosques” in 1986.
3. In 2009, the palace banned the release of a poll on the king's popularity. See Agence France-Presse, “Sondage interdit sur la popularité de Mohammed VI” *Jeune Afrique*, August 3, 2009, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/158886/societe/sondage-interdit-sur-la-popularite-de-mohammed-vi/>.
4. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Losing Faith in Faith-based Outreach,” *Al Jazeera English*, September 24, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/24/faith-based-communityinitiativesstatedepartment.html>.
5. In an interview, Othmani stated, “I don't like the term ‘Islamist.’ I insist on ‘with Islamic references’ like the Christian democrats. We are liberal.” See Wendy Kristianasen, “Can Morocco's Islamists Check Al-Qaeda?” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2007.
6. Alix Philippon, “Positive Branding and Soft Power: The Promotion of Sufism in the War on Terror,” *The Brookings Institution Blog*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/12/13/positive-branding-and-soft-power-the-promotion-of-sufism-in-the-war-on-terror/>.

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