



## ROYAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: MOROCCO'S "COMMANDER OF THE FAITHFUL"

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## Introduction

At the centennial of Armistice Day in November 2018, world leaders attended a ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe. Seated in the front row with the heads of state of France, Germany, Russia, Canada, Israel, and the United States was King Mohammed VI of Morocco.<sup>1</sup> The monarch's inclusion in the company of some of the world's most powerful individuals offered a visual representation of the king's international standing. Mohammed VI has developed partnerships with the EU and the U.S., particularly on the issues of combatting terrorism and preventing migrants from crossing into Europe from North Africa. Although he has cultivated the image of Morocco as a bastion of moderate Islam and of himself as a strategic partner, to what extent does his international reputation correspond to public opinion in Morocco? Evaluating the king's domestic standing has policy implications for the U.S., as the American government seeks to invest in allies that can support the strategic objective of countering violent extremism.

In addition to serving as head of state, Mohammed VI's domestic position is imbued with religious significance due to his title of "*Amir al-Mumineen*" or "Commander of the Faithful." A moniker historically associated with Moroccan sultans, the religious status was codified by King Hassan II in the 1962 constitution. Although Mohammed VI's role as a religious figure is frequently noted in media coverage, few studies have sought to evaluate whether Moroccan citizens view their king as having Islamic authority.<sup>2</sup> This report examines respondents' trust in Muslim religious figures. In addition to Mohammed VI, respondents answered questions about the leaders of Moroccan Islamist groups, political parties, and government officials, as well as non-Moroccan international figures. The survey was commissioned by the Baker Institute for Public Policy and administered by YouGov in 2017. The report also draws on interviews with Moroccan university students, religious officials, and U.S. embassy personnel conducted by the author in 2016.

The survey results indicate that of the individuals named by the survey, King Mohammed VI enjoys the highest religious authority. These findings may reflect a taboo against questioning his status as the Commander of the Faithful, but also indicate the crown's success in establishing the king's religious credentials through the process of state-sponsored religious messaging. The results also reveal respondents' lack of familiarity with some of the religious figures they were asked to evaluate. Due to recent shifts in leadership at many influential religious organizations, the field of spiritual leadership in contemporary Morocco is relatively sparse, although such figures persist in recent memory. Overall, although his status as both a religious and political leader is significant, the finding that King Mohammed VI enjoys high religious influence should be evaluated in the context of state-led efforts to bolster his authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Messoudi Rami, "Le Roi du Maroc et son Prince Héritier au Centenaire de l'Armistice" *MediaPart*, November 13, 2018, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/736546/blog/131118/le-roi-du-maroc-et-son-prince-heritier-au-centenaire-de-l-armistice>.

<sup>2</sup> 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-popularit-de-mohammed-vi/>.

This report proceeds by providing historical background on the construction of religious heritage in Morocco, specifically regarding the status of the monarch; government responses to the challenges raised by Islamist groups; and the policies adopted by the Moroccan religious establishment in the context of the "war on terror." Respondents' views of different individuals' religious leadership are discussed, especially regarding counter-terrorism and long-term regime stability. Although King Mohammed VI has sought to establish himself as a religious leader capable of counteracting religious extremism on a global scale, it is important to assess how Moroccans perceive their king, as well as other religious leaders. 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 credibly contribute to initiatives to counter violent extremism. However, the U.S. should also be cautious about appearing to support leaders whose credibility may suffer as a result of U.S. affiliation.

## History of Monarchical Religious Authority

The religious leadership of the Moroccan monarch reflects long-standing traditions, but also the influence of modern politics. Mohammed VI is a member of the Alaouite dynasty that has ruled Morocco since 1666 and claims descent from the Prophet Mohammad. However, the king's assertion of his status as the "amir al-mumineen" is also the result of colonization by France and choices made by Mohammed VI's father, Hassan II, rather than the continuation of historical practices.

In Sunni tradition, "amir al-mumineen" originally referred to Caliph Umar, a companion of the Prophet Mohammad and an early leader of the Muslim community; the designation was also used by subsequent caliphs, or religious leaders. In contrast, according to Shi'a tradition, the label refers exclusively to Caliph Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet. Various Sunni leaders have claimed the moniker, most recently Mullah Omar of the Taliban and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State;<sup>3</sup> however, no other current head of state assumes the title. In his capacity as a religious figure, the king of Morocco can lead congregational prayers, a role played by few Muslim political leaders.

The official narrative posits the king as the latest of an unbroken line of religio-political rulers. Yet by the early 1900s, the ruling Alaouite monarchy was seen as a puppet of European powers, and as a result their political and religious legitimacy had declined. From the perspective of Moroccan nationalists struggling to assert their country's independence, the position of Commander of the Faithful was a relic that would have little relevance in their coming republic. Yet Sultan Mohamed V benefitted from internal divisions in the nationalist movement, while earning the respect of his subjects and the ire of the French.<sup>4</sup> When colonial authorities exiled him in 1953, he became a symbol of the Moroccan nation, prompting widespread protests and demands for his return. With public

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<sup>3</sup> Lyse Doucet, "Mullah Omar: The Myth and the Movement," *BBC*, July 29, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33701790>.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Ethnographic State: France and the Invention of Moroccan Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

support behind him, Mohammed V negotiated Morocco's independence in 1956 and retained his position as head of state. He adopted the title of king in 1957, and upon his death in 1962, was succeeded by his son. Hassan II codified the king's status as the Commander of the Faithful in the 1962 constitution.

Morocco has long been a source of religious leadership in North Africa; the sultan historically inhabited a landscape crowded with rivals for spiritual authority, including Islamic scholars (*'ulama*) and Sufi sheikhs. Although various dynasties also established political capitals at Meknes, Marrakesh, and Rabat, Fez represented the spiritual center due in part to the *'ulama* associated with the university/mosque complex of Qarawiyyin. Established in 859, the works of figures like Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Maimonides, and Ibn Khaldun contributed to the city's prominence during the Islamic Golden Age. Later, during European colonization, Fez was often a center of resistance.<sup>5</sup> Yet following independence, the influence of the Fassi *'ulama* threatened the sovereignty of the monarch. Hassan II defunded Qarawiyyin and stripped it of the ability to convey the status of *'alim* on its graduates, requiring that would-be scholars complete advanced study of Islam in the administrative capital of Rabat at a state-run institute and to receive the approval of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.<sup>6</sup> Hassan II systematically disempowered other sources of Islamic guidance, including Sufi orders (*zarwiya*), seeking to centralize religious control in his government and himself.

Although Hassan II and his son Mohammed VI have worked to centralize religious authority in the person of the king, other sources of religious authority continue to compete with the Commander of the Faithful, including Islamist groups and political parties, as well as Sufi and Salafi religious leaders. Hassan II faced a particular challenge from the banned Islamist group al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan (Justice and Charity). Founded in 1973 by Abdessalam Yassine, the group rejected the political and religious legitimacy of the king, calling instead for Islamic government. When Mohammed VI took the throne in 1999, he released Yassine from his latest imprisonment; however, because of the group's popularity—estimated at 200,000 members in 2011—and its position that monarchy is forbidden by Islam (*la malik fil Islam*), the group remained a threat.<sup>7</sup> Yassine died in 2012, and although his daughter Nadia Yassine remains a symbol for the Islamist opposition, the new leader, Mohammed Abbad, lacks his predecessor's charisma.

Another source of competition comes from Morocco's most prominent Islamist political party, the PJD (*Parti de la justice et du développement*). The party was established in 1967 and permitted to participate in elections in 1997. Following reforms implemented by Mohammed VI in 2011 in response to the Arab Spring uprisings, the PJD was able to gain a

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<sup>5</sup> Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco: Religion, Authoritarianism, and Electoral Politics*, trans. George Holoch (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Dale Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Sarah Feuer, "State Islam in the Battle Against Extremism: Emerging Trends in Morocco and Tunisia" (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Avi Max Spiegel, *Young Islam: The New Politics of Religion in Morocco and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 207.

plurality of seats in parliament and Abdelilah Benkirane became Prime Minister. Moroccan election law prevents any party from winning a majority, necessitating coalition governments. Although the PJD successfully led a coalition between 2012 and 2016, Mohammed VI may have felt threatened by Benkirane's power, and the palace worked to prevent the PJD from forming a second government after the party again won a plurality in 2016.<sup>8</sup> After Benkirane failed to form a government for five months, the king appointed the PJD's Secretary General Saadeddine Othmani as prime minister, who formed a coalition. These events allowed the palace to discredit Benkirane's leadership and make the PJD look ineffective.

Another source of religious authority is tied to the Salafi movement, certain strands of which have been associated with acts of terrorism. After a bombing in Casablanca in 2003, the government expanded oversight of mosques and preachers, revised the content of religious curricula in schools, and began outreach to U.S. and EU partners on counter-terrorism efforts. An attack in Marrakesh in 2011 justified further state penetration of the religious arena, a pattern followed by many Arab governments in the "war on terror." Official religious discourse maintains that Moroccan Islam is incompatible with violence, and that Moroccan terrorists embrace foreign ideologies, a narrative maintained despite the hundreds of Moroccans who traveled to fight for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).<sup>9</sup> Like many Arab governments, the palace has periodically favored different strands of Islamism. Salafis were seen as a useful counterweight to Leftists during the mid-20th century; however, when they began to gain greater power and potentially present a threat, the government moved to reduce their influence.

Following 9/11, the government supported Sufism in hopes that it could serve as a counterbalance to extremist forms of Salafism;<sup>10</sup> since 2002, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has been led by Ahmed Toufiq, a member of the Boutchichiya Sufi order. Morocco's efforts to establish its reputation as a model of moderate Islam have included outreach to African countries, the training of female religious leaders (*mourchidates*), and sponsoring foreign imams to study Moroccan Islam at the Imam Training Center in Rabat.<sup>11</sup> The Marrakesh Declaration of 2016 proclaimed the Islamic basis for protecting religious minorities in response to ISIS targeting Yazidis and Christians. Mohammed VI has also reinforced Morocco's position as a source of religious leadership in Northwest Africa more broadly, through outreach to secular countries like Senegal and Mali that cannot legally regulate religion, yet wish to discourage the spread of extremism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Intissar Fakir, "Morocco's Islamist Party: Redefining Politics Under Pressure," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/12/28/morocco-s-islamist-party-redefining-politics-under-pressure-pub-75121>.

<sup>9</sup> *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Group, December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine, eds., *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics, and Society Under Mohamed VI* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco in the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Landscape of Moroccan Religious Authority

In order to examine the nature of religious authority and attitudes toward religious and religiously oriented leaders in the Middle East, the author and a team of researchers worked with the global polling firm YouGov to conduct an online public opinion survey in 12 countries across the region in December 2017. As an online survey, the YouGov sample is not representative at the national level: the respondents are disproportionately male, educated, and urban. However, the survey is representative in regard to various indicators of religiosity, which is one of the most important characteristics in our study of religious authority, in addition to indicators such as employment and marital status. For a discussion of the demographics of the survey sample and the advantages and disadvantages associated with this sample, see the Survey Appendix (<http://bit.ly/2TNDpdP>). This report presents the findings from the survey data collected from Morocco, which included 2,990 respondents.

Respondents were given a list of both Moroccan and international religious figures, and asked "Which of the following religious leaders do you approve of? Please select all that apply." Respondents were then instructed to rate their level of trust in a figure as an authority on matters of faith and practice on a 5-point scale, with 5 referring to "Totally trust" and 1 referring to "Do not trust at all." The list of religious leaders included representatives of the state as well as members of opposition groups and/or Islamist movements, and each name was accompanied by their institutional affiliation. The inclusion of the individuals' affiliation in the survey design was intended to gauge public perception of the spiritual clout of the individual as well as their affiliated institution.

Moroccan respondents were asked about their views on 13 religious leaders—six religious leaders from Morocco and seven religious figures from across the region that the survey asked about in all countries in the study. The Moroccan figures were selected to represent a range of different interpretations of Islam: that of the king, mainstream Islamist movements, and more fringe or extremist Islamist movements. King Mohammed VI's name was followed by his title, "Commander of the Faithful." Saadeddine Othmani, identified as "prime minister and leader of Party for Justice and Development," represents a figure affiliated both with the government and the mainstream Islamist party. Approval of Othmani could signal more general support for the PJD and the performance of the government, given his role as prime minister.

Mohammed Abbadi, identified as the "leader of al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan," represents an illegal and nonviolent Islamist movement that rejects the monarchy. Abbadi was previously imprisoned for his activism and has led the group since the death of its founder, Abdessalam Yassine, in 2012. Approval of Abbadi could be interpreted as indicating support for al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan.

Sheikh Sidi Jamal, "son of Sidi Hamza and leader of Qadriya Boutchichiya Sufi order," represents the Boutchichiya order, and potentially could be seen as representing Sufism more broadly. Sidi Jamal's father, Sidi Hamza, was one of the best-known Sufi figures in Morocco until his death in 2017. The government has emphasized Morocco's Sufi heritage

and key members of the religious bureaucracy are Sufi. Approval of Sidi Jamal could be interpreted as signaling support for Sufism.

Sheikh Umar al-Hadouchi, "Salafist preacher," was imprisoned for his association with the 2003 Casablanca bombing but pardoned in 2011. In 2013, he participated in a dialogue organized by an affiliate of the PJD intended to reduce ideological division.<sup>13</sup> He also issued a fatwa condemning Moroccans who traveled to fight for the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup> He represents a figure previously affiliated with terrorism, but who subsequently rejected violence. Approval of al-Hadouchi could be a sign of support for his earlier radical views or his more recent adoption of a less extreme position.

Mohammad Ben Abderrahman Al Maghraoui, "Salafist cleric," has expressed the view that Saudi Arabia represents true Islam, a tacit rejection of Moroccan Islam. In 2008, he issued a controversial fatwa supporting marriage with nine-year-old girls that prompted greater state oversight of religious institutions.<sup>15</sup> He does not call for violence, however his positions are deeply conservative. Indications of approval of al Maghraoui could signal support for a deeply conservative and/or Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

The questions included a survey experiment to evaluate the endorsement effects of attributing a given statement with different individuals. Respondents were asked about non-Moroccan Sunni Islamic leaders, including Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkish president and leader of the Islamist AK party; Yusuf Qaradawi, Islamic scholar; Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahdha leader; Amr Khaled, Egyptian televangelist; the Ahmed Tayeb, the imam of Al-Azhar in Egypt; and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State; and a Shi'a leader, Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Lebanese Hezbollah. The results of the survey experiment found that after King Mohamed VI, the figure with the second highest religious authority was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State.

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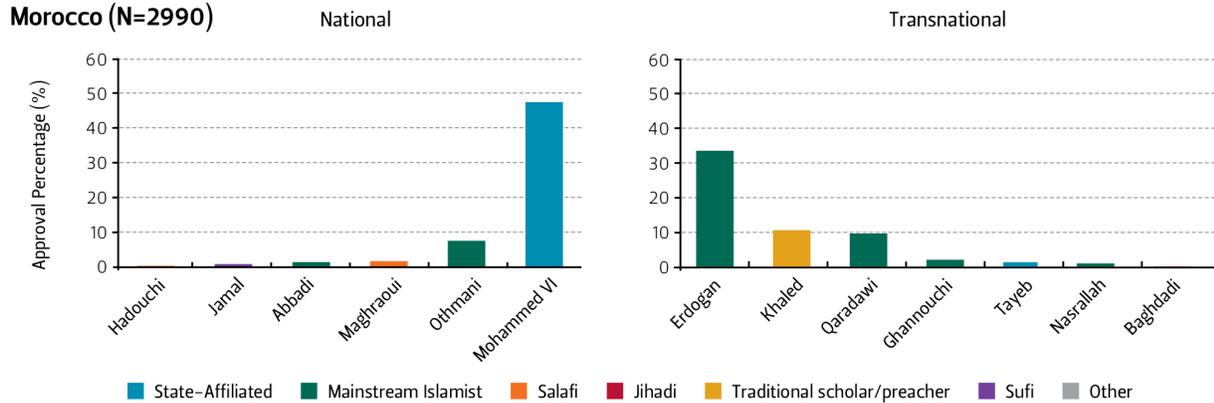
<sup>13</sup> Sanaa Karim, "Morocco's Salafis: In Search of a Comprehensive Solution," *Carnegie Sada* (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=51812>.

<sup>14</sup> "Le salafiste marocain El Haddouchi contre le jihad dans ce pays," *Ya Biladi*, November 22, 2013, <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/21129/syrie-salafiste-marocain-haddouchi-contre.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Ilan Berman, ed., *World Almanac of Islamism 2017: American Foreign Policy Council* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 270.

Responses to the question "Which of the following religious leaders do you approve of?" are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Approval of Religious Leaders

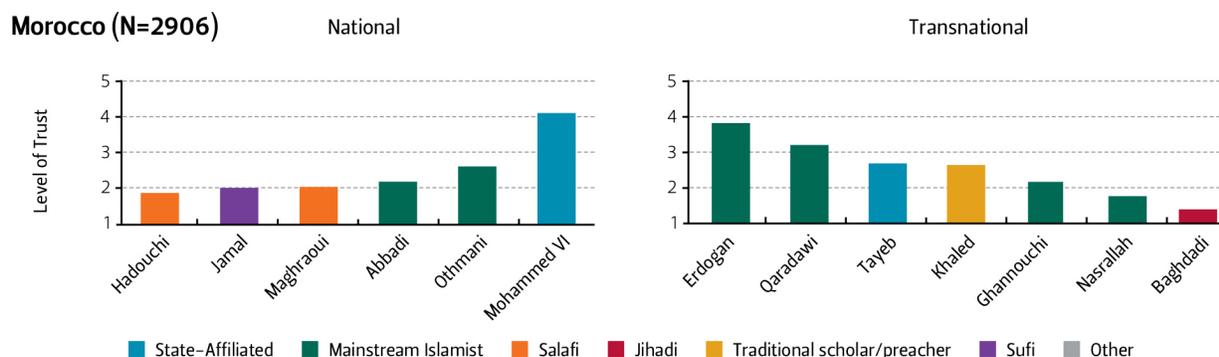


Note: The respondents were asked, "Which of the religious leaders below do you approve of? Please select all that apply." The approval percentage shows the share of respondents who approved the listed religious leaders in each country.

When asked to select which of the Moroccan religious figures they approved of, 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. Four percent selected the option of "Other" to imply that there was another religious figure they approved of more than those listed.

Responses to the scalar question on trust in an individual's religious authority are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Trust in Religious Leaders



Note: The respondents were asked, "On a scale of 1 to 5, please tell us how much you trust each of the following individuals as an authority on matters of faith and Islamic practice." The figures shown are the average ratings for each religious leader across all respondents in each country. Higher values indicate greater trust.

When respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in the religious authority of six Moroccan religious figures, responses demonstrated that King Mohamed 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.

The most common response pertaining to the other religious figures was "I do not know this person": 55 percent marked they did not know Mohammad Abbaadi of al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan; 58 percent indicated that they did not know Sufi Sheikh Sidi Jamal; 65 percent did not know Salafi preacher Umar al-Hadouchi; and 62 percent did not know Salafi cleric al-Maghraoui. The next most common response pertaining to these individuals was "Do not trust at all," signaling that when respondents did know of these individuals, between 20 and 22 percent of respondents mistrusted them. The survey's clearest finding indicates that the king is one of the premier sources of religious guidance in Morocco.

Respondents also answered questions pertaining to non-Moroccan individuals of global religious influence. Of these international figures, the religious leader who received the highest approval was Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with 34 percent signaling their approval of him, and 57 percent indicating that they "Trust" or "Completely trust" him as an authority on matters of faith and practice. The other individuals received low approval ratings: the leader with the next highest approval rating was Egyptian televangelist Amr Khaled at only 11 percent, followed by Yusuf Qaradawi at a 10 percent. The other figures all received less than 3 percent approval, with less than 1 percent

indicating approval of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State. In the scalar question, 54 percent of individuals stated that they did not trust al-Baghdadi at all, while the next most common response was lack of familiarity with him, at 34 percent.

However, in the survey experiment, statements attributed to al-Baghdadi received the second-highest agreement after Mohamed VI. Although Moroccan respondents would not directly affirm their trust in al-Baghdadi as a religious leader, when statements were attributed to him, they were significantly more likely to agree with them.

## Respondent Demographics and Views on Government

To provide greater context for interpreting their views of religious officials, survey respondents were asked to provide some personal information. In general, respondents were more male and better educated than the Moroccan population at large. The male to female ratio was almost 3 to 2, and almost half attended university. Only 2 percent of respondents identified as "not religious" while the rest self-identified as Muslim. Around five out of six identified as Sunni, and about the same number reported that they pray five times per day.

Respondents also answered questions about the importance of religion in their lives, their views on the primacy of Islam, openness to multiple interpretations of Islam, and government performance. The majority of Moroccan respondents saw Islam as personally important. Eighty-three percent of respondents selected 5, or "Very important" when asked about the importance of religion in their life. Acknowledging the high importance of religion is typical in the region.

The survey also sought to evaluate respondents' openness to other religions. When asked to select a scalar response to the question "My religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life," 82 percent of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement of Islamic primacy. Only 4 percent listed either "Disagree" or "Strongly disagree." Respondents' discomfort with their child marrying a non-Muslim was higher for daughters (64 percent said, "Not at all comfortable" or "Not too comfortable") than for sons (43 percent said, "Not at all comfortable" or "Not too comfortable"), in a pattern that reflects Moroccan social norms as well as laws regarding the passing of citizenship and religion through the father's side.

Although the Moroccan government seeks to monopolize the legitimate expression of Islam, radio, satellite television, and the internet provide access to many different interpretations. When asked to express their agreement with the statement "There is only one way to interpret the teachings of my religion," responses varied, without a strong affirmative or negative trend: 37 percent voiced agreement or strong agreement; 25 percent expressed disagreement or strong disagreement; 20 percent selected "I do not know"; and 17 percent said they neither agreed nor disagreed. Similarly, when participants were asked about interpreting Shariah, fifty-four percent indicated that Shariah is open to

multiple interpretations, and 30 percent expressed that there is only one correct interpretation, while 17 percent chose neither.

In addition to questions on religion, respondents were asked their views on government performance. Responses in Morocco were similar to responses elsewhere in the region in expressing concern about corruption. Sixty-two percent listed corruption as either a "very serious" or "moderate" concern. When asked about government performance, 75 percent of respondents described it as either "Poor" or "Fair." Moroccans' view of government performance was similar to that expressed by respondents of other nationalities, and reinforces previously conducted surveys regarding general lack of public satisfaction with governance in the Middle East and North Africa.

### **Interpreting the Religious Authority of the King**

One of the survey's strongest findings demonstrates widespread approval of the king as well as general trust in him as a religious leader. Yet another of the survey's strongest findings indicates that the majority of Moroccan respondents view government performance as sub-optimal and consider corruption to be of moderate or serious concern. The king maintains control of many aspects of governance in Morocco, therefore the finding may correspond to a split between views of the king as a religious leader as opposed to a political leader.

An alternative explanation could suggest that respondents' frustration with government but approval of the king reflects Mohammed VI's success in portraying himself as removed from politics. This explanation is supported by the finding that respondents mistrust Prime Minister Othmani; Moroccans may associate corruption with the government and specifically the ruling party but not necessarily with the palace. If this is the case, then the efforts by King Mohammed VI to weaken the position of the PJD seem to have been successful.

However, I would argue that Moroccans are under no illusion as to where power lies. The following anecdote demonstrates the power of the king: Morocco has publicly embraced certain environmentally friendly policies, such as building solar energy generators and hosting the COP22 conference on climate change in 2016. In keeping with these efforts, during Ramadan in 2016, the palace announced that free plastic bags would no longer be available in supermarkets. Overnight, I observed that plastic bags disappeared. Shoppers expressed dismay, but the king's ability to impose his will was evident. If Moroccans feel frustrated by corruption, they are likely also aware that the king could use his power to reduce it.

Yet given widespread approval of, and trust in, the king as a religious leader, it is likely that although Moroccans are aware of the king's control over government, his role as a political leader is detached from his status as a source of spiritual authority. The religious authority of the king is historic, but it has also been carefully cultivated through specific choices made by the crown, many of which were codified during the French colonial period. The construction of the religious authenticity of a specifically Moroccan form of Islam owes more to the early 20th century than to preceding centuries.

As discussed above, the Alaouite dynasty has ruled Morocco since the 17th century. When France colonized Morocco in the early 20th century, they chose a different strategy than had been employed in Algeria, where local institutions were decimated. Instead, the French sought to demonstrate to Moroccans that French rule had not fundamentally altered the sultanate, a fiction that was reinforced with visible symbols of tradition. The ritual of *bay'a*, or allegiance, where Moroccan notables gathered to pay their respects to the sultan, continued to be observed, along with specific symbolic objects, such as a royal parasol; these rituals and objects re-emerge each year for Morocco's throne day, July 30, which commemorates Mohammed VI's coronation.<sup>16</sup> French social scientists of the colonial period identified unique aspects of "Moroccan Islam," focusing specifically on the quasi-divine status of the sultan as both a political and spiritual leader.<sup>17</sup> By preserving the appearance of the sultan's continued rule, the French could argue that colonization had not fundamentally altered Morocco's government and society. By identifying Moroccan Islam as an object of study, the French reified and ossified a set of cultural and religious practices, such as the status of the Commander of the Faithful. After independence, Mohammed V maintained the symbols of royal religious authority identified by the French, which were subsequently expanded by his son, Hassan II, who vigorously marginalized other forms of religious authority and cemented himself as the pinnacle of Morocco's religious hierarchy. Mohammed VI has further expanded state control of religion, justified by the need to protect Moroccan Islam from outside influences, both Salafi and Shi'i.

An additional finding that complicates the king's apparent religious authority is respondents' trust in ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as revealed by a survey experiment. The fact that attributing a statement to either Mohamed VI or al-Baghdadi significantly increased the likelihood that a respondent would agree with it helps to validate the survey's finding that the king enjoys high religious authority, which might otherwise be interpreted as compelled by fear of reprisal. Yet how to explain both figures' simultaneous authority? One plausible explanation might assert that because al-Baghdadi also claims the title of "amir al-mumineen," and the Moroccan education system emphasizes the importance of this status, perhaps Moroccans saw both individuals as legitimate Commanders of the Faithful. However, I expect that it is more likely that the anti-Shi'a and pro-Sunni rhetoric deployed by the Islamic State may have resonated with a Moroccan public that has also been exposed to anti-Shi'a rhetoric by Moroccan media. Concerns about Iran meddling in Morocco have contributed to alarmism about Shi'a Muslims in general, and the Islamic State activated the fears of many Sunnis about Shi'a terrorizing Sunni families in Iraq, and the ruling Alawis murdering innocent Sunnis in Syria. For many individuals, the decision to travel to Iraq or Syria to fight for ISIS reflected a combination of sectarian loyalties, and a lack of meaningful economic and/or marital opportunities at home, which ISIS promised to provide.

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine, eds., *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics, and Society Under Mohamed VI*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 33.

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Ethnographic State*, 9.

Regarding the survey's finding on King Mohamed VI's high religious authority, interviews with university students conducted by the author in 2016 offer nuance. During a focus group, students corroborated the king's religious standing. They emphasized the power of the king over Islam in Morocco, contrasting it with their understanding of Jordan, where the monarch is also descended from the Prophet: "In Jordan, Islam is under the control of the country. Here, Islam is under the control of the king."<sup>18</sup> The students saw the king of Jordan as constrained by Islamic precepts, whereas in Morocco, the king's religious standing allowed him to use Islam to justify his choices. Although some students seemed to prefer the Jordanian model, they expressed agreement with many of the measures imposed by the king to prevent extremism, and saw his religious authority as contributing to his ability to do so. Due to concerns about political violence, the students recognized the utility of a ruler with sufficient religious authority to condemn extremism on theological grounds to protect the kingdom's "spiritual security."

The Islamic authority of the Moroccan king is arguably greater than that held by any other head of state. Only the king of Saudi Arabia takes a similar religious title, that of the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." However, the House of Saud was not descended from the Prophet Mohammed; although the Saudi kings enforce orthodox Islam, they do not claim to have traditional religious authority. The Hashemite dynasty of Jordan does claim descent from the Prophet, but their legitimating narrative is primarily based on having led the Great Arab Revolt of 1916 against the Ottomans. The Hashemites tend to avoid claims to religious authority and do not lead prayers. The king of Morocco is unique among Muslim heads of state for both asserting a claim to religious authority and positing it on the basis of adherence to tradition.

Moroccan survey respondents' assessments of the other religious figures also reinforce the authority of King Mohammed VI. Respondents' lack of trust in Prime Minister Saadeddine Othmani suggests the success of the palace's efforts to discredit the PJD. Although Othmani himself did not cause the political deadlock that followed the 2016 elections, he benefited from it. The ability of the palace to engineer the stalemate, resolve it by marginalizing a popular politician and replacing him with someone less popular, appears to demonstrate the astute political maneuvers of Mohamed VI and the *makhzen* (political elite).

The apparent lack of familiarity with moderate religious figures likely reflects the shifts in leadership experienced by al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan and the Boutchichiya Sufi order. Especially in the case of al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan, respondents appear either unimpressed by or unaware of the new leader. Like many groups led by a charismatic founder, al-'Adl wa al-Ihsan may find that without Yassine, the group lacks direction and momentum. Although previously the most popular Islamist movement in Morocco, the absence of leadership could threaten the continued relevance of the group.

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<sup>18</sup> Author interview with university student, Rabat, Morocco, August 3, 2016.

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,<sup>19</sup> self-identification as a Sufi appears less popular, although longitudinal data on this trend is scarce. Responses indicating unfamiliarity with the two Salafi figures likely signal that neither figure is particularly prominent or popular.

The Moroccan government has strenuously worked to ensure "spiritual security," and initiatives to promote state-led Islam have gone so far as to standardize Quranic printing and recitation in the *Warsh* style,<sup>20</sup> such that a Moroccan individual searching through Islamic television or radio channels can quickly identify the auditory cues to establish whether the programming is Moroccan or foreign. In another effort to regulate Islam, the Moroccan state has expanded its oversight of religious education: in "traditional schools," where students pursue Islamic studies, the state implemented additional training and compulsory exams for teachers, and stricter requirements for administrators between 2004 and 2008. Similarly, in 2003 the state implemented a new training program for imam educators, and later expanded the program to include instruction for female religious educators, or *mourchidates*.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, the program was expanded to include instruction for non-Moroccan imams, through the Mohammed VI Imam Training Institute. Such forms of training and control establish greater awareness about, and ostensibly compliance with, regime-condoned expression of Islam.

## Implications

One of the survey's key takeaways is the religious authority of the Moroccan king. Respondents indicated that their trust in Mohammed VI was significantly greater than in any of the other Moroccan religious leaders. However, this finding should be interpreted in the context of recent changes in leadership for the main Islamist political party, the main Islamist social movement, and an influential Sufi group.

The survey's findings raise additional questions. In particular, questions about figures that represent the spiritual establishment, such as the long-standing Minister of Religious Affairs, could help reveal whether respondents see official Islam as credible, or merely wished to refrain from questioning the authority of the king. Current affairs have elevated the value of traditional sources of religious authority. Understanding whether certain figures' role as

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<sup>19</sup> 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/>.

<sup>20</sup> One of two main styles of Quranic recitation, the *Warsh* style represents the tradition of Medina. For a discussion of the political implications of the *Warsh* style of recitation, see Ann Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco in the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 81-3.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Feuer, *Regulating Islam: Religion and the State in Contemporary Morocco and Tunisia* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 99-101.

sources of authority is persistent or fleeting will be important for influencing decisions made by U.S. policymakers who seek to counteract violent extremism.

The significance of Mohammed VI's religious authority goes beyond the religious sphere. It bolsters Morocco's soft power and strengthens strategic relationships with key allies. In the context of the war on terror, a demonstrable heritage of moderate Islam is a valuable commodity. From the U.S. perspective, supporting the king's initiative to promote moderate Islam requires subtlety, as overt American support may undermine Mohammed VI's religious standing, which would be counterproductive to U.S. security objectives.

As established by interviews with U.S. embassy officials,<sup>22</sup> the Americans wish to support leaders who encourage moderate Islam, but must avoid association with such efforts. Sensitivity to foreign manipulation of Islam is already high throughout much of the Middle East, and the Moroccan king's religious authority relies heavily on its presumed authenticity. One U.S. embassy official explained that the embassy had quietly helped to finance a popular play that had depicted the hypocrisy of an overtly religious man; the play illustrated how assertions of piety sometimes cover for immorality.<sup>23</sup> When trying to discourage extremist interpretations of Islam, the U.S. has little recourse other than to hope that domestic religious messaging and the king's authority can prevent terrorism. The survey's finding on the religious authority of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi further reinforces the potential fragility of King Mohamed VI's religious standing.

The palace's promotion of moderation contributes to its image of liberalizing while maintaining security and stability, making it an ideal partner in the eyes of the U.S. and EU. However, American and European governments should critically examine the partnerships they pursue, in order to reduce the possibility that their local partnerships intended to counter violent extremism do not have the opposite effect. In the effort to find sources of Muslim religious authority that can credibly delegitimize acts of violence in the name of Islam, the U.S. must avoid undermining the authority of the figures that might otherwise be able to provide religious arguments against extremism. U.S. policymakers should bear in mind that religious authority is itself constructed rather than inherent in a given individual or institution.

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<sup>22</sup> Author interview with U.S. embassy senior official, U.S. embassy, Rabat, Morocco, August 4, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Author interview with U.S. embassy official, U.S. embassy, Rabat, Morocco, August 4, 2016.