Engaging Salafi Religious Actors in Morocco

The Role of Inclusion in Countering Violent Extremism

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Other Reports in the Series


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I. Preface

Over the past two decades, the Kingdom of Morocco has undertaken dramatic shifts in the religious sector, from the expansion of the religious bureaucracy to the establishment of new institutions for research, public messaging, and education. These efforts have been, in no small part, aimed at mitigating the influence of the violent extremist organizations that have radicalized thousands of Moroccans. Though the religious sector programs are just one piece of a larger national strategy to counter violent extremism (CVE), they provide a valuable case study for international policymakers and civil society practitioners who hope to strengthen the contributions of religious actors in CVE.

This report unpacks local perspectives on the capacity and significance of the Moroccan religious sector in CVE, with a particular focus on the inclusion of influential religious actors who are not part of the official religious establishment, such as Salafi leaders. Religious fundamentalists who oppose violent extremism – including many Salafis – can play a pivotal role in either fueling or preventing radicalization, and thus represent a critical consideration in any strategy to engage the religious sector in CVE. However, very little research, globally or in Morocco, has been devoted to determining how best to engage constructively with these actors, while significant attention has been given to promoting “moderate” religious voices.

To address this need, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD), in partnership with the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA), conducted a mixed-methods study of the perspectives of Moroccan Salafis, Islamists, and other religious actors. The study represents one piece of ICRD’s ongoing, multi-country series to develop actionable lessons for effectively engaging Salafi and other fundamentalist groups in the practice of CVE.
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II. Executive Summary

Respondents in this study expressed mixed assessments of the Moroccan state’s approach to CVE, with particular concern being raised that the state has not approached the issue holistically enough to address the structural grievances that fuel radicalization. Overall impressions of the contributions of the religious sector were more positive – religious actors were generally perceived to be capable and active in countering extremism.

That impression, however, is complicated upon deeper inspection. In the eyes of the Salafi and Islamist respondents, official religious actors – those who hold state-sponsored positions – are less locally influential than independent or even foreign religious actors. In their speech and activity, official religious actors are seen as restrained, irrelevant, and archaic, which limits their ability to impact those with extremist sympathies.

Given this potential limitation, it is important to ensure that CVE efforts are inclusive of those religious actors who exercise influence among the populations at greatest risk of radicalization, which includes Salafi figures. While the state has taken some notable steps to engage with independent Salafi leaders, the Salafi respondents tended to view the state as an antagonist.

The relationship between Salafi communities and other potential CVE stakeholders is similarly tense. Salafi respondents expressed suspicion about the values and capacities of non-religious civil society organizations (CSOs), though there were some indicators of marginal improvement in the contact between the Salafis and CSOs. Concerns over differences in religious identity were coupled with unease at the involvement of the international community in CVE, with respondents strongly preferring support from Muslim-majority countries over that from the West.

In light of these findings, ICRD offers the following observations to improve engagement with religious actors on issues of CVE:

1. If national religious institutions provide more specialized training for religious actors on direct community engagement and addressing sensitive theological issues, they could better adapt their discourse to be more relevant to at-risk populations.

2. If official religious actors constructively connect with independent or informal religious actors, they would likely strengthen the influence and credibility of their CVE messaging among certain subsets of their community.

3. If government officials and agencies allow or encourage human rights organizations to engage with Salafis’ about their lingering grievances, and use these insights as the basis for ongoing dialogue, it would likely lessen tensions with the Salafi population.

4. If organizations working on CVE – both at the community and national levels – were to create more space for independent religious actors to play a meaningful role in forming and implementing programs, these programs may have a greater impact on certain insular communities.

5. Facilitating greater technical support and collaboration in CVE from appropriate Muslim-majority countries or multi-lateral Muslim organizations could enable more CVE practitioners to build constructive bridges to Salafi communities.

6. CVE practitioners – whether governmental or non-governmental – may be hesitant to collaborate with Salafis in addressing sensitive ideological issues, and may be better served by focusing on social programs that leverage their capacity as community influencers.
III. Theory of the Study

In this research series, ICRD takes a critical look at the existing paradigms for engaging religious actors in CVE. Considering the access and influence that conservative religious actors maintain in communities where there are demonstrably higher risks of radicalization to violence, ICRD seeks to identify good practices for fostering the constructive inclusion of non-violent, fundamentalist religious actors in CVE.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that while policymakers and practitioners should strive to be inclusive as a principle, there are always different risks and advantages associated with engaging certain individuals or groups, which should be carefully assessed for each distinct context. ICRD’s goal in this study is not to elevate one ideological group above others, but to challenge CVE implementers to think critically about having a broad lens of constructive engagement in order to maximize the impact of CVE initiatives.

Very often, only a limited number of religious actors are included in the development or implementation of CVE policies and programs, and those are largely limited to representatives of the ideological “center,” or those who hold official state-sanctioned positions. While these actors do play a critical role in shaping the religious landscape, there are also many religious voices who do not meet these criteria but nonetheless possess singular credibility among the populations most vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment.

Because these vulnerable populations often feel isolated from social and political institutions, religious actors who are seen to be associated with the state or the status quo may inherently lack credibility in their eyes, while those religious actors who exist outside the mainstream may be more trusted. In Morocco and other similar contexts, the Salafi movement represents one of the most significant religious alternatives outside the mainstream.

Why Include Salafis?

Over the past two decades, various governmental and non-governmental programs have engaged Salafi actors – or other non-violent fundamentalists – as partners in CVE. London police, for example, collaborated with Salafi religious communities in the mid-2000s to prevent youth radicalization, and government agencies in Indonesia worked with Salafi clerics who spoke out against extremism. ICRD’s own programming has engaged fundamentalist educators in Pakistan to enhance critical thinking and challenge extremist narratives in religious schools.

In many other countries, whether for ideological or pragmatic reasons, Salafi leaders and organizations have been vocal critics of Jihadi-Salafism and have lent their support to state-run CVE messaging. This includes, for example, Khatib Idrisi in Tunisia, Mohammed Maghraoui in Morocco, or al-Nour Party in Egypt.

- Since non-violent Salafis share many common ideological references with Jihadi-Salafis, they may be the most capable of speaking in terms that resonate with those who are sympathetic to Jihadi-Salafism.
- Salafi religious leaders are better suited to influence the extremist sympathizers within their own communities, which tend to be deeply insular and suspicious of others.
- In some contexts, Salafi actors play a role in popularizing or normalizing incendiary or prejudicial ideas, and it is critical to attempt to positively transform their rhetoric.
Conversely, efforts to exclude and stigmatize Salafi communities can reinforce the isolation of those communities or foster hostility toward the state and civil society. This can make it more difficult for CVE implementers to reach Salafi communities and prejudice those communities against CVE initiatives that they may perceive as singling them out for persecution. Increasing social isolation can also push members of a given group to adopt ever more extreme beliefs, as group members remain stuck in an echo chamber. As expressed by one independent Moroccan religious scholar, “if you close the door on dialogue [with Salafis], you will open the door of recruitment.”

**Risks and Limitations**

Despite these positive incentives for engagement, analysts and implementers have also raised important concerns about the risks and efficacy of working with Salafis:

- Though Salafi actors share religious reference points with Jihadi-Salafi groups, they may not be as credible as some analysts presume when engaging with hardcore extremists because of certain ideological schisms. Specifically, many Salafi actors are apolitical and are often seen to care only about issues of ritual, ignoring the misdeeds of political leaders. One respondent claimed, for example, that “Salafi groups call Jihadi-Salafis wrong doers [fasiq] or rule that Jihadi-Salafis are apostates [murtad]. Jihadi-Salafis excommunicate Salafis and label them as worshippers of idols or political leaders [taghut].”

- Even if non-violent Salafis reject Jihadi-Salafism, allowing Salafis to preach or operate more freely may cause greater general social hostility. The core fear, according to Mandaville and Nozell, is that “CVE practitioners would be indirectly promoting the intolerant, anti-pluralist, and misogynistic positions many of them hold.”

While “contact theory” suggests that engagement should have a moderating effect on intergroup prejudices, it is essential to recognize that collaboration with Salafi or other fundamentalist religious actors may provide them with a platform to become more widely influential or endow the intolerant elements of their ideology with greater legitimacy. Acknowledging these concerns and the potential limitations of its efficacy, rejecting all forms of engagement outright almost certainly limits the reach and impact of CVE efforts and deepens the isolation of communities in which isolation itself can be a radicalizing factor. This study, therefore, aims to chart a constructive path forward.

**IV. Methodology**

The findings and analysis in this report are based on mixed-methods field research, conducted by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA) between October 2017 and January 2018. Data were gathered from the following sources:

- Semi-structured interviews with 21 religious scholars, educators, and activists from across the ideological spectrum, including former Jihadi-Salafis.

- Structured surveys with 105 Salafi and Islamist religious actors. Respondents either self-identified as such, or had a stated affiliation with a Salafi community or Islamist association. Respondents were identified through a snowball sampling method, in order to leverage relationships of trust to gain access to closed religious communities.

Survey respondents represented a mix of different formal and informal religious roles, including Islamic studies teachers, members of Islamist organizations, students, and active members of a Salafi religious community. In particular, this included activists associated with the primary Islamist party, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD or Hizb al Adala wa Tannia), as well as its religious wing, the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR or Harakat al-Islah wa at-Tawhid).
With few exceptions, these respondents were predominately “independent” religious actors, as opposed to “official” actors. The term “official” is used here to describe individuals who hold a formal position associated with the Moroccan state, which may include employees of the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) or local imams, who are paid and supervised by the MEIA. By comparison, “independent” actors may include street preachers, activists in religious organizations, teachers in private religious schools, or others who do not have a position or affiliation with the state.

### Geographic Demographics by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rabat-Salé-Kénitra</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Souss-Massa</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fès-Meknès</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drâa-Tafilalet</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Religious Identity

- 35% Islamist
- 65% Salafi

### Gender*

- 95% Male
- 5% Female

### Level of Education

- Post Graduate ... 12%
- University ... 64%
- High School ... 10%
- Middle School ... 10%
- Primary School ... 5%
- Informal School ... 0%
- Never Attended ... 0%

*The low rate of inclusion of women reflects both the under-representation of women in formal or informal positions of religious authority among more conservative communities, and the social barriers that keep women in these communities generally more isolated than their male counterparts and therefore harder for researchers to access. While the resources available for this study did not permit it, ICRD recommends that a future program endeavor to engage specifically with women from these communities, in order to understand how perceptions coincide or conflict across genders.
V. Background

In the 1990s, several small Jihadi-Salafi groups emerged in conjunction with the return of Moroccan participants in the Soviet-Afghanistan war, though these groups did not engage in substantial insurgent activity until the May 2003 restaurant and hotel suicide bombings in Casablanca. While no single group claimed responsibility for the attack, several of perpetrators were linked to Jihadi-Salafi groups like the Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain (GICM). Over the next ten years, terrorist activity in Morocco was largely limited to two more attacks in Casablanca (2007) and Marrakech (2011).

This violent extremist activity can largely be characterized as decentralized and informal – kept alive through local cells connected to trans-national networks like al-Qaeda or ISIS. In March 2015, for example, authorities arrested 13 individuals in nine cities that formed an operational network that had been in close contact with ISIS and had named itself “The Islamic State in the Western Maghreb.”

Though the level of domestic terrorism has been somewhat limited, Moroccan involvement in extremist activities abroad has been more prominent. The 2004 Madrid bombings, for instance, were primarily orchestrated by GICM, with five of the seven main plotters originating from the slums of Tetuan in northern Morocco. By 2014, the number of Moroccans involved in international terrorism had reached 1,623 – or 46 per million inhabitants. With the rise of ISIS and other extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, Morocco has also experienced a substantial outflow of between 1200-1500 citizens joining terrorist groups abroad. While Morocco has largely stemmed the flow of these fighters in recent years, the scope of this exodus illustrates that radicalization and recruitment to extremist groups remains a critical risk.

State Responses to Violent Extremism

In the months and years following the Casablanca attacks, the Moroccan state instituted a multi-pronged strategy to both prevent the spread of radicalization and counter the violent extremist movements that were gaining a foothold. This approach included four distinct elements:

- Instituting new legal frameworks and enhancing the counter-terrorism capacity of law enforcement.
- Conducting de-radicalization programs with convicted extremists.
- Introducing targeted socio-economic programs.
- Reforming the religious sector.

Law Enforcement

In 2003, parliament passed the first anti-terrorism law (Law 03-03), which set penalties for direct or indirect participation in terrorism and provided authorities with the legal authority to gather information on and prosecute terrorism-related offenses. Under this law, the government arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced several thousand people for terrorism-related crimes. In 2015, the law was amended to address the threat of foreign terrorist fighters, by expanding the definition of terrorist offenses to include joining a terrorist group and participating in recruitment or training activities.
In addition, the government expanded the counter-terrorism capacity of law enforcement. In 2014, under Operation Hadar (Vigilance), Morocco deployed military and police officers in major cities to protect potential targets of terrorist attacks. The next year, the Moroccan Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) was established with the exclusive task of addressing the threat of terrorism and Jihadi-Salafism. Morocco’s security forces have demonstrated their ability to effectively disrupt terrorist plots and dismantle cells. Despite evidence of ongoing extremist radicalization and various attempted attacks, there have been no successful attacks in Morocco committed by ISIS-inspired groups.

De-Radicalization of Prisoners

The increased focus on counter-terrorism led to a wave of mass arrests following the 2003 attacks, specifically cracking down on Jihadi-Salafi activists and ideologues. These ideological prisoners represented a challenge for the penal system, both because of their capacity to influence others in prison and because they would eventually return to society. In an effort to contain the spread of violent extremist ideology, the state began a program to de-radicalize and reintegrate prisoners who were deemed not to represent a danger to public safety.

As part of this program, religious scholars affiliated with the MEIA would visit selected participants and offer religious instruction and counseling. Graduates of the program could be eligible for release, and were offered support for reintegrating into society through the Mohammed VI Foundation for the Rehabilitation of Prisoners, which facilitates education, employment training, and entrepreneurial initiatives for prisoners generally.

Aside from the immediate goal of transforming ideologies, this de-radicalization initiative served as a critical focal point for addressing growing concerns about the state’s approach to counter-terrorism. In the mid-2000s, many of these prisoners and their families began to mobilize in protest to the arrests and alleged abuses of human rights, which were reported by watchdog groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. As frustration with security forces escalated, a coalition of human rights organizations – including the PJD-affiliated Al Karama Forum and the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) – began a dialogue with prisoners, their families, and Salafi leaders.

Following a period of negotiation and the completion of religious counseling, the King granted amnesty to 190 prisoners in 2011, including some prominent preachers like Mohammed Fizazi and Abdelkerim Chadli. In subsequent years, periodic waves of Salafis were pardoned through the same process, though the total number of those released is not clear.

Though it is difficult to assess the impact of this program on any one individual’s ideology, a number of program graduates have since been vocal in their support for the King or in their opposition to extremist discourse. At the same time, there are also reasons for skepticism; more than 200 of the Moroccans who traveled abroad to fight in Syria and Iraq were former Jihadi-Salafi detainees.

One former detainee offered his thoughts on the flaws in this process:

“I am a Salafi; I was in prison for a while. I know what happens in prisons in detail... It is natural to buy one’s freedom; one can apply taqiyya [uttering lies but keeping faith in the heart] which is known in Islamic jurisprudence. So, I am not convinced with these recantations. I do not want to generalize, but most of them happened after putting those Salafis under pressure. They resort to threatening their families or other methods to get those Salafis to recant.”
**Socio-Economic Programs**

In addition to these responsive efforts, the state also recognized that it needed to take steps to mitigate the conditions that had driven Moroccans toward radicalization in the first place. In the 1990s, increasing rural-urban migration and worsening socio-economic conditions gave rise to slums on the outskirts of major cities, which would eventually become prime grounds for extremist recruitment. Notably, all twelve of the bombers in the 2003 attack on Casablanca came from one of the city’s poorest slums, Sidi Moumen. One former Jihadi-Salafi detainee noted that “90% of the people [he] met in prison from Casablanca, Fez, and Tangier all came from poor neighborhoods.” Similar factors help to explain the disproportionate number of Moroccan foreign fighters who originated from the northern cities of Fnideq, Tetouan, and Tangier, which have been politically and economically marginalized.

The 2003 attacks shone a national spotlight on the radicalizing impact of slums, leading Morocco to launch the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) in conjunction with the World Bank. This $1.2 billion project – which was expanded in 2011 – aimed at lowering national poverty statistics by reducing rural poverty and social exclusion in slums, and by strengthening governance and institutional capacity nationwide. Official reports from the World Bank indicate that, by 2012, the INDH had directly benefited almost 5.4 million individuals through 22,000 sub-projects. However, the impact of these projects on violent extremism has not been clearly substantiated.

**Religious Sector Reform**

Of particular relevance to this study, Morocco has also instituted a number of reform efforts aimed at undermining the appeal of the religious dimensions of extremist recruitment. The state sought to strengthen the role of the religious sector by:

- Further centralizing authority under the monarchy and the MEIA.
- Training and educating imams and religious guides.
- Promoting “Moroccan Islam” as a positive alternative to Jihadi-Salafism.

**Religious Authority and the Monarchy**

It is important to note that Islam in Morocco has long been closely intertwined with the state, which derives its legitimacy as a religious authority from the status of the monarchy. The ruling Alawite dynasty, which has been in power since 1631, claims to be the legitimate ruler of Muslim peoples, holding the title of Commander of the Faithful or Emir el-Mu’mineen. As such, the King acts not only as the chief political authority, but also the chief religious authority, a role that has been codified in the constitution and institutionalized in the political system. This authority is then administered through a major bureaucracy of institutions and officials.
Centralization

In 2003-4, King Mohammed VI issued several royal decrees to restructure the MEIA, which manages religious affairs and oversees imams and the religious scholars (ulema) who participate in national and regional councils. The MEIA was declared the only government body with the authority to recognize and control places of worship, endowing the Ministry with the exclusive power to define the role of Moroccan mosques and the teachings disseminated within them.

Additionally, over the next ten years, a number of new religious institutions and foundations were established to expand the role of the MEIA in areas ranging from social welfare to education. Most notably, in 2006, the King created the Mohammedan League of Religious Scholars (Ar-Rabita al-Mohammadiya lil Ulema or Rabita), an independent institution responsible for shaping national religious discourse through research and publications. To give some sense of scale to this growth, the public budget reveals that from 2003 to 2014, the number of MEIA employees increased from 451 to 4,081.

With this authority, the MEIA began to exercise stronger operational oversight over lower religious establishments, such as mosques and Qur’anic schools, as well as the primary centers of higher religious education – Dar al-Hadith al-Hassaniyya and Qarawiyyan University. These reforms sought to unify and refine the religious messaging and education that ordinary Moroccans encountered, to ensure that extremist teachings were not being disseminated.

In cases where local institutions were believed to deviate substantially from state guidelines, the MEIA or other Ministries shut them down. One of the most notable examples is the closing of a number of Quranic schools affiliated with the Salafi leader Muhammad Maghraoui, following some controversial religious rulings.

Training of Religious Actors

Complementary to these consolidation efforts, the state has worked to empower and professionalize local religious authorities across the country. In 2006, the MEIA launched several new programs to provide additional education and training to imams and other religious actors. This included an initiative to create both male and female religious “guides” (morchidines and morchidates) who provide education, counseling, and other forms of support to the general population.

In 2015, these programs were institutionalized through the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines and Morchidates, which is intended to reach all 50,000 imams in the country, as well as any interested religious actors from West Africa and Europe. These programs offered education on religious subjects and general fields of study (philosophy, psychology, geography, history, and politics), as well as vocational training - electrical engineering, agriculture, sewing, and computer use – that was geared toward those imams who need supplemental sources of income. At least in part, these programs were intended to ensure that religious actors are more active and prepared to counter extremist messaging and promote “Moroccan Islam.”

Promoting “Moroccan Islam”

To counter the proliferation of Jihadi-Salafi ideology through traditional and online media, the state has sought to foster a shared national religious identity – a “Moroccan Islam” – through a range of both academic and popular channels. While this shared identity builds on long-standing Moroccan traditions and reference points, these recent efforts represent a new step in articulating and unifying practice and belief.
This “Moroccan Islam” is generally defined by the following characteristics:

- It is Sunni and relies on the Ash'ari theological doctrine.
- It follows the Maliki school of jurisprudence, which many Moroccan scholars and officials describe as being notably moderate or flexible.
- It is inclusive of Sufism and Sufi orders (tariqa). This is not to say that all Moroccan Islam is fundamentally Sufi, but that the activities of certain Sufi orders are tolerated or even encouraged.

To promote this identity, the state has supported a number of religious literacy and public messaging initiatives. In 2006, for example, the MEIA published seventeen books on Islam and its role in society, which were used in religious literacy programs for 176,000 Moroccan students in mosques throughout the country. The website of the Rabita similarly supports religious education by providing online courses, peer group sessions, and live discussions. In addition, the state has licensed at least twenty-eight privately and publicly owned religious radio stations that broadcast discussions of Islamic values, jurisprudence, and social and family life. The King Muhammad VI TV channel (al-Sadisa) also specializes in religion and religious education, regularly broadcasting live question-and-answer programs as part of its daily ten-to-twelve-hour content.

VI. Assessing Current Policy and Practice

In semi-structured interviews, researchers asked various religious scholars and experts to assess Morocco’s current approach to CVE. While respondents generally noted the success of the security sector response, many argued that there has not been a clear or visible strategy to address the social, economic, or ideological aspects of violent extremism:

- “The security approach did, to a degree, stop the violence against the government and some individuals. But extremism as an idea, and the sources that feed it, are still there.”
- “The state’s policy is acutely deficient... it shows off when it arrests cell members, but the question remains, what radicalized those extremists?”
- “These approaches will only be effective if they complement each other. You cannot have only a religious and security approach without the social and economic approaches.”
- “[The state] does not have a clear strategy. They might have one on paper that is shared through international conferences, but we do not know if this strategy can be implemented on the ground, or if it is inclusive, or addresses the problem at its roots.”
- “The government’s approach is a limited security approach. It did not open up to outside activities and CSOs.”

Despite this criticism of the existing strategy as a whole, the Salafi and Islamist survey respondents expressed positive opinions on the current role of the religious sector in CVE. Respondents tended to believe that imams and preachers in Morocco are both qualified to engage in CVE (fig. 1) and active in doing so (fig. 2). In fact, respondents saw religious actors and institutions as more involved in CVE than even the Moroccan government, despite the range of law enforcement and socio-economic efforts undertaken by the state.
Imams and preachers in Morocco are well-prepared and qualified for countering violent extremism - agree or disagree? (Figure 1)

To what degree are each of the following groups involved in implementing programs to prevent extremism in Morocco? (Figure 2)

Who in your community is best positioned to prevent extremism? Select two options (Figure 3)

In this vein, religious actors were also seen to be the best-positioned figures in the community to help prevent the spread of extremism (fig. 3). The logic behind this high evaluation of the capacities of religious actors may be found, at least in part, in the respondents’ general understanding of the conditions giving rise to violent extremism. Beyond economic grievances or psychological factors, respondents saw the lack of religious education as the most important single factor in radicalization (figs. 4 and 5). Similarly, a plurality of respondents identified religious counseling as the most important element in rehabilitating extremist prisoners, even more important than establishing social or economic support systems (fig. 6).
What is the most important psychological or educational factor that makes someone more likely to become a violent extremist? (Figure 4)

How important are the following grievances in driving violent extremism in Morocco? (Figure 5)

If there were a program to rehabilitate people who have joined extremist organizations, what element should be considered the highest priority? (Figure 6)

While the precise rationale for this assessment was not unpacked in the survey, some possible justifications were articulated in semi-structured interviews. Respondents tended to perceive extremism in Morocco as manifesting in ideological adherence, rather than participation in the activities of extremist groups. In other words, as the threat from foreign extremist groups such as ISIS derives more frequently from intellectual and ideological influence, rather than physical attacks, the most effective response to that threat would be through education.
Respondents in semi-structured interviews shared varying justifications for the specific significance of religious education. Some argued that those who are religiously illiterate lack a strong moral compass on the whole and therefore may be more willing to engage in immoral and violent behavior. Others, however, presented a less moralistic argument: those who are religiously illiterate may be more easily swayed when extremist groups use religious references to legitimize their violent tactics and claim that their mission has a divine purpose.

As expressed by one Islamic studies teacher:
“[radicalized individuals] believe somehow that a group might actually hold the ultimate truth. So, they join that group without having the scientific tools to recognize and criticize the group’s ideas.”

Recognizing the perceived significance of religious understanding in preventing radicalization, it is worth noting that respondents tended to see Moroccan religious actors as more active in educational activities than in other traditional social roles (fig. 7). This perception helps to illustrate why religious actors are seen to be such significant figures in CVE.

**How active are imams, preachers, and religious actors in these areas? (Figure 7)**

*Identifying Gaps*

Despite the fact that Moroccan religious actors were seen to be active in CVE-relevant roles and generally well-equipped, respondents identified potential gaps in their capacity. First, though religious actors were considered to be the most active in educational activities, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that they should be more active (fig. 8). This finding suggests that the services provided by religious actors are not, as of yet, enough to address the needs of the public.

**Should religious actors in your community play a more or less active role in these areas? (Figure 8)**
Respondents also pointed to the need to improve religious actors’ knowledge of the contentious religious concepts that are employed in extremist messaging (fig. 9), as well as their ability to counsel others on these subjects (fig. 10). As suggested previously, individuals may have a more difficult time pushing back against extremist messaging if they are not prepared to critically assess their claims to sacred truth, which are often heavily informed by complex and controversial theological ideas (e.g., *jihad* or *takfir*). These concepts are not generally the fare of Friday sermons or other day-to-day religious discussions, and require a degree of specialized expertise that the average imam may not possess.

**Which of the following subjects do religious actors in Morocco need to learn more about to be able to fight extremist ideas? Select two options (Figure 9)**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents who believe each subject is important.](chart1)

- Sensitive religious topics (e.g., *jihad*, *takfir*, caliphate)
- Islamic theology or jurisprudence
- Conflict resolution and basic psychology
- Current social or political issues
- Don’t Know
- Other

**Which of the following skills do religious actors in Morocco need to be trained on to be able to fight extremism? Select two options (Figure 10)**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents who believe each skill is important.](chart2)

- Ability to engage in discussions of sensitive religious topics
- Youth Counseling
- Community Outreach
- Use of social media or modern communication tools
- Ability to collaborate with other leaders in the community
- Other
This issue was highlighted by one respondent who had formerly been imprisoned for extremist beliefs and released through the de-radicalization program. When his peers in the program challenged the interpretation of a particular hadith offered by the religious counselors, they were met with no response, and “when the detainees returned [to their cells] as the proud winning party... their belief in their ideas got stronger.”

He goes on to describe a larger confrontation between the state and these detainees:

“In 2007, the detainees wrote a letter called Sawa’iq Mursalah and sent it to the Supreme Council of Ulema... It was a way to challenge their authority... [and] the Council has not responded with a rebuttal to it... The authors asked the ulema to debate [sensitive theological topics] with them. The questions they had are still unanswered.”

VII. Expanding Beyond the Official Religious Sector

Beyond the gaps in specialization and capacity, respondents also expressed a more fundamental critique: official religious voices and institutions are simply not as credible or influential as their independent counterparts. While many respondents explicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the state in overseeing religious affairs, there was a widespread sentiment that the dominance of the state in the religious sector has weakened the credibility of official religious actors.

This perception is starkly illustrated in Figure 11, in which survey respondents identified official preachers as the least influential in their communities compared to independent preachers or preachers from abroad. Closer comparison of individual responses reveals that 55% of respondents marked official preachers with a less influential rating than independent preachers. This is a particularly noteworthy result given the significant investments that have been made in building up state institutions – and the scholars, imams, and guides that are supervised by these institutions – as principal agents of CVE.

In your community, how influential are each of the following? (Figure 11)
Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that respondents ascribed the greatest influence to foreign preachers; 59% of respondents marked foreign preachers with a higher rating of influence than official preachers in Morocco. Over the past few decades, more and more Moroccans have been exposed to foreign religious media through the spread of satellite television and the internet, both of which respondents identified as among the most influential sources of religious information in their community, far ahead of Friday sermons, local television, or radio (fig. 12). This presents a serious challenge for any effort to saturate the public with a unified vision of “Moroccan Islam.”

Which of the following are the most influential in your community when it comes to religious matters? Select two options (Figure 12)

These findings do not, necessarily, speak to the relative influence of specific individuals. When respondents were asked to name a favorite scholar, a number of them cited figures that have served in official positions or otherwise maintained good relations with the state, including Mustafa bin Hamza (President of the Ulema Council of Oujda) and Ahmed Raisouni (a prominent figure in the MUR). At the same time, however, many others chose individuals that had been criticized or sanctioned by the state, including Abdellah Nahari (a former preacher who was ousted by the MEIA) and the controversial Salafi scholar al-Magharoui.

The limitations of official influence can also be seen at the level of institutions. Only a minority of respondents identified state institutions as among the most influential religious entities in their community, and even mosques (which are backed by the state) were chosen less than religious CSOs (see fig. 13). These results may reflect the fact that state institutions operate on a national or administrative level, as opposed to mosques or CSOs that often have a more active local presence.
Which of the following religious institutions are most influential in your community? Select two options (Figure 13)

- Religious CSOs
- Mosques
- Islamic political parties
- State religious institutions
- Sufi orders
- Other
- Don’t Know

* It is also worth noting that the perspectives of the Salafi and Islamist respondents were divided over this question (see fig. 14). Islamist respondents – who were themselves mostly active members of a CSO or political party – tended to ascribe more influence to political parties or CSOs. However, even acknowledging this skew, it is still clear that few respondents saw state institutions as more influential than other religious entities.

Which of the following religious institutions are most influential in your community? Select two options (Figure 14)

- Religious CSOs
- Mosques
- Islamic political parties
- State religious institutions
- Sufi orders
- Other
- Don’t Know

Limits of Official Religious Discourse

While the reasons why official actors and institutions are not seen to be as influential may vary on a case-by-case basis, respondents highlighted a few common themes:

- The content and discourse used by official institutions or religious actors is dry, archaic, or irrelevant to contemporary daily life.

- Official religious actors are not believed to have the freedom to talk about sensitive issues or otherwise adapt their speech to the current context.
Several respondents reported that the tone and style used by scholars to speak about Islam does not resonate with the non-scholarly public. As articulated by one Islamic studies professor: “The tone of the official religious discourse has no spirit... It feels like it is a voice coming from archaic times.” This is not just a matter of appearing out-of-date, but also being comprehensible to the average person on the street: “Ordinary people that can barely analyze religious speech, if you start talking to them in formal Arabic (fusha) ... [they] feel like they have to rise to the level of the religious actor to understand them... but the non-official religious actors ... talk to them in a language they understand.”

On another level, survey respondents also expressed concern about the content that is generally addressed in Friday sermons, with some arguing that they often only cover the same traditional or customary (taqlidi) topics, such as prayer and fasting, rather than sensitive social or political issues. Though individual preachers maintain some discretion in shaping their sermons or public discourse, the close supervision by the state places some inherent constraints on what they can or cannot say.

In justifying their criticism, one respondent notes that “those preachers who want to say the truth are afraid of being blamed by someone.” In extreme cases, preachers could be removed from their position or even arrested for speaking on incendiary topics. Control and fear of retribution create taboos around the discussion of politically and socially relevant subjects, a condition with important implications for CVE.

As expressed by one independent religious scholar:

“The problem is that religious actors do not have enough freedom. They do not have freedom to express their ideas. And they do not have the freedom to share their open-minded views that might cross some red lines... For political and security-related considerations, it is not allowed to critically discuss [certain religious] ideas. We can only produce open-minded alternatives [to extremism], based on a new reading of religious texts, if we have the freedom to discuss those historical ideas critically.”

The constraints on official religious actors, whether real or imagined, undercut their ability to influence those at risk of radicalization. The perception that they are biased in favor of the state can make it difficult for them to build trust among those individuals who are already conditioned to be more critical of the political status quo. They are seen in sharp contrast with those “free” religious voices – whether Moroccan or foreign – that can express opinions that may be politically taboo. This includes extremist ideologues who appear to be more authentic sources of religious knowledge precisely because they are not beholden to the authorities.

One former extremist detainee reflected on the limits of the official scholars who attempted to de-radicalize his peers:

“[The extremist detainees] are not comfortable to discuss things with the official religious actors. They think those official religious actors do not have the freedom to discuss anything... If they were to meet a religious actor that has the freedom to talk to them, they would cling to him and consider him their sheikh.”
Inclusion of Independent Religious Actors

Though official religious actors could improve their ability to speak in a more engaging or relevant manner, they cannot easily remove the stigma that they are less credible because they have to operate within the bounds of the state. It is important, therefore, that other religious voices participate in CVE efforts.

As expressed by one respondent:

“The government has religious institutions, such as the Scientific Councils, that are directly under its provision. The government therefore thinks it does not need other religious institutions to collaborate with. This is a mistake. No matter how well-run your religious institutions are, those institutions remain government institutions. But there are other religious actors that are not part of the government and are more open and closer to the people. For a good CVE policy, an inclusive approach that engages all those groups is essential.”

Adopting an inclusive approach could entail collaboration with any number of non-state religious actors or groups. Respondents cited various religious entities that each have their own sphere of influence or capacity to work with those at-risk of radicalization, including the PJD, Al Adl wa Ihsan, and Salafi leaders. This report, however, focuses specifically on strategies for engaging with Salafi communities, though many of the broader principles are applicable to other conservative religious groups.

Recognizing the risks highlighted in Section III, nearly all religious actors who participated in semi-structured interviews saw value in engaging with Salafis:

- “You have to have dialogue with religious actors, even if they are extremist Salafis..., we cannot ignore [Salafis]. We should open channels of dialogue with them in order to create an agreement that allows us to live alongside each other.”
- “Including Salafis and adopting a discourse by the government that is more tolerant can help in CVE.”
- “[Salafi groups] attract many religious Moroccans. Because of that the state should engage them... This way we can help create a Moroccan Salafism that is not affiliated with other Salafis and allows them to feel the opposite of what they feel today.”

VIII. Barriers to Inclusion

Recognizing the potential value of including Salafis in CVE policy or practice, there remain certain obstacles to collaboration between Salafis and other stakeholders and implementers – whether that is the state, civil society organizations, or the international community.

Salafis and the State

Over the past decades, the Salafi community has maintained a dynamic relationship with the government – at times tolerated or even encouraged to participate in the public sphere, and at other times subject to harassment or exclusion.
Historical Context

In the 1980s and 1990s, Morocco experienced a wave of apolitical and rigorous Salafism, inspired by trends in Saudi Arabia. This movement grew in strength with the toleration of King Hassan II, who hoped that these Salafi preachers would undercut the influence of both leftist and Islamist critics. This support diminished in response to the growth of Jihadi-Salafism, as Salafi preachers were arrested and imprisoned, and Salafi schools were closed down. In the last ten years, however, the state has softened its approach, as illustrated by the pardoning of certain Salafi prisoners and the encouragement for Salafis to participate in the political process.

Survey respondents expressed mixed opinions about the current state of trust between Salafis and the state (see fig. 15), generally tending toward the negative. These opinions skew even more negative when only including Salafi respondents (see fig. 16). The most common rationale (expressed by around 20% of respondents) for the perceived lack of trust was that Salafis and government officials simply have different values, interests, or religious visions. As articulated by one such respondent, “Salafi sheikhs care about religious matters, and government officials care about political matters.”

Salafi leaders and government officials in Morocco trust one another - agree or disagree? (Figure 15)

Salafi leaders and government officials in Morocco trust one another - agree or disagree - disaggregated? (Figure 16)
Others, however, describe a relationship marked by hostility or repression from the state. These respondents asserted that Salafis have been restricted from conducting outreach (da’wa), speaking on TV, preaching in mosques, or participating in politics. In fact, a majority of respondents overall claimed that independent religious actors (including Salafis and Islamists) experience harassment from police or government authorities (see fig. 17). This perception is particularly prevalent among the Salafi respondents, as represented in Figure 18. Various respondents, for example, cited the closure of certain Quranic schools – such as those operated by Maghraoui – as a key source of tension with the Salafi community.

These results, however, should be caveated by the fact that only 16% of respondents claimed to have personally seen or experienced any such harassment (see fig. 19).

**How often do non-state religious actors (such as Salafis or Islamists) in your community experience harassment or persecution from the police or government authorities?**  
(Figure 17)

**How often do non-state religious actors (such as Salafis or Islamists) in your community experience harassment or persecution from the police or government authorities - disaggregated?**  
(Figure 18)
Despite the widespread perception of tension, there were some respondents who highlighted positive milestones in the relationship between the two parties. Nearly half of the respondents who agreed that Salafis and government officials trust one another, pointed to the fact that the state had previously pardoned Salafi prisoners. Others pointed to the fact that the state uses collaboration with Salafis to advance its own interests, and vice versa - “it is in the interest of Salafis to establish trust with the state so they can do their outreach (da’wa).”

Some respondents argued specifically that this relationship has improved in recent years. One former Salafi activist noted: “[some Salafi groups], such as the Maghraoui group, do not necessarily coordinate with the government directly, but they operate within the government-provided ceiling... the issues they used to reject in the past are no longer rejected. They have changed considerably.”

These responses suggest that there may be opportunities to strengthen the collaboration around CVE, if it is possible to surmount the mutual distrust and disengagement that seems to be the norm. Various semi-structured interview participants recommended that the state engage in dialogue with Salafi figures, to “bring to the attention of Salafis some of the issues they might have... and, hopefully, move them gradually to be more open-minded.” Through such dialogue, it may be possible to foster a more constructive relationship between Salafis and the state, and enable Salafi figures to serve as intermediaries between the state and more extremist actors.

However, this kind of collaboration requires the buy-in of both parties, which respondents suggest will not be likely with the state’s current approach: “the state approaches [dialogues with Salafis] thinking it is superior to other parties. Therefore, if [Salafi figures] participate in these dialogues, they might lose credibility in front of the Moroccan public.” There are obvious incentives for Salafis to improve their relationship with the state – to ensure greater freedom for their activities – but it is important to keep in mind that the influence of some Salafi figures is closely linked to their perceived independence from the state.

**Salafis and Civil Society**

While the relationship between Salafis and the state is marked by alternating tension and toleration, the interaction between Salafis and other civil society actors appears more consistently contentious. Salafi respondents tended to hold very critical views of non-religious CSOs, though some were able to point to opportunities to bridge this gap.

Only 10% of Salafi respondents (fig. 21) believed that there is trust between Salafis and non-religious CSOs. Of those who believe there is no trust, at least a third specifically noted that they saw animosity originating from CSOs:

- “Non-religious CSOs disagree with the topics and viewpoints of Salafi sheikhs.”
- “Secular organizations are not accepting of the religious sector.”
- “Those [civil society] organizations look at us contemptuously and they find us different.”
Salafi leaders and nonreligious civil society organizations in Morocco trust one another - agree or disagree? (Figure 20)

Salafi leaders and nonreligious civil society organizations in Morocco trust one another - agree or disagree - disaggregated? (Figure 21)

One reason for this mistrust, as cited by a plurality of those who claimed that trust was lacking, is that there is an ideological rift between the two: "their missions contradict each other." The tone of various Salafi respondents betrayed a deep-seated suspicion of CSOs and the belief that they are anti-religious or Western. One Salafi student, for example, when asked why he believed there was a lack of trust, asked rhetorically: "how can you trust those movements that call for atheism and following the West?" Another respondent, an Islamist student, argued that CSOs exclude Islam and impose secularism on people.

This suspicion is reinforced by the lack of opportunities for interaction and cooperation. Some Salafi respondents suggested that this was because Salafis have isolated themselves from civil society, while others said that no efforts have been made to initiate open dialogue between Salafis and civil society. Other respondents expressed seeing little value in working with CSOs at all. This notion is even more clearly illustrated by the findings in Figure 22, which suggests that respondents tended overwhelmingly to see non-religious entities as less capable of preventing extremism than religious actors.
Religious actors and organizations are better equipped to prevent extremism than nonreligious actors and organizations - agree or disagree? (Figure 22)

Not all respondents, however, expressed critical opinions of CSOs. Even among those who felt there was a lack of trust, one of the most common explanations was that there is simply mutual indifference. As expressed by one Islamist respondent, “Salafi leaders do not bother those CSOs and those CSOs do not bother them.”

A small number of respondents did express more positive opinions. According to some (notably mostly Islamists), there are indications that this relationship has begun to improve:

- “Salafis are open to civil society and now we see them in some civil initiatives like other citizens.”
- “Many [Salafi sheikhs] joined political parties. And that is a strong message that indicates the size of the trust between them and society.”
- “More than once we saw local organizations host Salafi sheikhs.”
- “There aren’t conflicts between those [Salafi sheikhs] and the CSOs that the sheikhs used to call disbelievers (kafir).”

As the first two quotations attest, one key factor in breaking down this divide has been the increased participation of Salafis in the public sphere. In the 2016 election cycle, for example, some prominent Salafi figures voiced their support for specific political parties and even ran for office. While this shift may have been driven by the state’s efforts to undercut political support for the PJD, it nonetheless decreased the insularity of the Salafi community.

Shared concerns over the state’s approach to CVE offered another window of opportunity to bridge the divide between Salafis and civil society. Following the post-2003 wave of arrests of Salafi figures, several CSOs – such as the PJD-affiliated Al Karama Forum – played a key role in mediating between the state and Salafi prisoners. According to one former detainee, the experience of working with human rights groups has helped some Salafis recognize common ground with civil society. While the Salafi community, on the whole, may remain suspicious of CSOs, these types of interactions can help to erode such suspicion and open new possibilities for collaboration around shared interests, including CVE.

**Salafis and the International Community**

The involvement of international actors - whether foreign governments or INGOs - in CVE activity further complicates prospects for engaging Salafi communities. In general, while respondents were not uniformly opposed to foreign involvement in CVE, they expressed a clear preference that external support come from Muslim-majority countries rather than Western ones.
Respondents tended to agree with the idea that Muslim-majority countries should provide financial or technical support to Moroccan communities to prevent extremism (fig. 23). In fact, a majority of respondents expressed unqualified support for CVE programs backed by Muslim-majority countries (see fig. 24), which suggests that the prospect of foreign assistance in CVE is not inherently distasteful to fundamentalist religious actors.

**Governments from Muslim-majority countries should be providing financial and technical support to Moroccan communities to help prevent extremism - agree or disagree? (Figure 23)**

![Bar chart showing respondents' attitudes towards financial and technical support from Muslim-majority countries.]

If there were a program to prevent extremism in your community that was supported by governments from Muslim-majority countries, how would you feel? (Figure 24)

![Bar chart showing respondents' feelings towards a CVE program supported by Muslim-majority countries.]

This attitude, however, does not translate to Western governments. Though respondents were somewhat divided, a solid majority believed that Western governments should not provide financial or technical support to Moroccan communities in the area of CVE (see fig. 25). This tendency was even more pronounced among the Salafi respondents, in contrast to the Islamists (see fig. 26). Similarly, very few Salafi respondents (14%) stated that they would support a CVE program that was funded by a Western government (see fig. 28).
Despite the fact that there was less support for Western involvement overall, it is important to note that responses were mixed. Only one-third of Salafi respondents expressed outright opposition to a CVE program supported by the West, and about the same number expressed that they would be indifferent (see fig. 28). Thus, while the specter of Western backing is not likely to enhance Salafi support for a given program, it may not necessarily foster opposition. Nonetheless, it is clear that, in the eyes of conservative religious actors, foreign support for CVE would be much more welcome coming from Muslim-majority countries.

**Western (US and Europe) governments should be providing financial and technical support to Moroccan communities to help prevent extremism - agree or disagree?**  
*(Figure 25)*

**Western (US and Europe) governments should be providing financial and technical support to Moroccan communities to help prevent extremism - agree or disagree - disaggregated? (Figure 26)*
If there were a program to prevent extremism in your community that was supported by Western governments, how would you feel? (Figure 27)

- I would support it
- I would have no feelings
- Depends on the program
- I would oppose it
- Don’t Know

If there were a program to prevent extremism in your community that was supported by Western governments, how would you feel? (Figure 28)

- I would support it
- I would have no feelings
- Depends on the program
- I would oppose it
- Don’t Know

Islamist Salafi
IX. Summary and Conclusion

Given the years of state-led efforts to strengthen the role of the religious sector in CVE, Morocco offers a unique case study for practitioners and policymakers. While some respondents expressed concern that the state has prioritized the security sector response and not done as much to tackle the economic or sociological conditions leading to radicalization, they all tended to agree that religious actors were capable and involved in CVE.

There are, however, perceived limitations to the capacity of official religious actors as it relates to preventing or countering violent extremism:

- They may not be sufficiently prepared to debate controversial theological topics that serve as the crux of extremist messaging.
- Their discourse is often seen to be archaic and heavily controlled by the state.
- They do not have the same degree of influence or credibility as independent or even foreign religious actors in the eyes of certain Moroccans.

These findings do not invalidate the importance of the official religious sector. Respondents highlighted various mainstream and official religious figures as some of the more trusted and influential sources of religious guidance. Additionally, many of the gaps identified above could be addressed by providing religious actors with more robust training on discussing sensitive theological subjects or adapting their style of engagement.

However, the data suggest that there are intrinsic limitations to any approach to CVE that is implemented solely through the official religious sector. Maintaining a clear affiliation with the state can undermine the credibility of religious actors in the eyes of those who are critical of the state’s policies or its legitimacy. Generally speaking, efforts to centralize or regulate public religious discourse may make it more difficult for official religious actors to be as relevant and engaging as the extremist ideologues one might find on the internet.

For all these reasons, it is important to ground CVE policy and practice in the principles of flexibility and inclusion. Religious actors should have the flexibility to tailor their language and activities to credibly engage radicalized individuals on their own terms. And CVE implementers – whether the state or civil society – should make a concerted effort to include a more diverse range of religious voices who might be more influential than their official counterparts. While these principles derive from the findings of this study in Morocco, they may be relevant considerations in any context where the religious community is grappling with the threat of violent extremism.

Taking a flexible and inclusive approach may require engaging with more hardline or fundamentalist religious actors – either because they are important influencers, or because doing so may be the most effective way to transform their incendiary rhetoric. Already, the Moroccan state has made some efforts to engage with Salafi communities, through prison de-radicalization or encouraging certain high-profile figures to preach against extremism. However, beyond the efforts of individual preachers, there have been few attempts to bring Salafi voices into CVE in a more holistic or systematic fashion. There remains a critical gulf between Salafi actors and other CVE stakeholders or implementers, and CVE efforts will likely benefit if this is addressed.
Engaging Non-Violent Salafi Voices

The State

Given that the Moroccan state sets the agenda for all formal activities in the religious sector – including CVE – it is almost inevitable that any effort to engage Salafi actors in CVE would involve the state in some capacity.

Working through the state, however, brings with it some critical considerations. Elevating Salafi voices through state-sponsored events or programs, for example, may confer a greater legitimacy upon all of their discourse or actions, not just those related to CVE. The state may be wary of legitimizing certain figures who may preach against the use of violence but still support intolerance or hardline exclusivist beliefs. Conversely, a visible affiliation with the state could also undercut the credibility of certain Salafi figures who have built a base of support precisely because they are not seen to be an agent of the state.

For these reasons, there may be value in maintaining some level of distance between Salafi communities and the religious establishment, while still working to foster a shared mission to address extremist ideology. As recommended by various respondents, opening constructive channels for dialogue between Salafis and official religious actors, while still permitting Salafis to operate independently, may be a critical step in this direction. There are already some signs that the state is interested in this approach; as exemplified, for instance, by the 2015 seminar on Salafism hosted by the MEIA.

Any prospect for constructive dialogue, though, must also address the Salafis’ deficit of trust in government officials. While the state has taken various steps to accommodate Salafi figures by issuing pardons and encouraging them to participate in politics, the centralization of the religious sector has also limited the operating space for Salafis, which has made some see the state as an antagonist. The state must remain sensitive to this perception, and the reality that a number of Salafis report personal experiences of being harassed by the state, if there is to be any prospect for building Salafi buy-in for a national CVE strategy.

Civil Society

While Moroccan CSOs do not exercise the same level of authority over the religious sector as the state, they may be better positioned to collaborate with Salafi actors. The relationship between Salafis and CSOs is characterized less by a historical legacy of hostility than by mutual suspicion or indifference. Salafi respondents expressed particularly critical views of non-religious organizations and those affiliated with Western agendas.

However, increased Salafi participation in the public sphere and interactions with CSOs may mitigate some of this suspicion. Despite clear ideological differences, there are areas in which non-Salafi CSOs may have overlapping interests with their Salafi neighbors. Identifying points of common ground will be a critical step in the right direction. Already, there have been instances of Salafis and human rights organizations working together to address the treatment of extremist prisoners. Salafi figures have also collaborated with the PJD and MUR in religious workshops and political mobilizing.

Engaging Salafi figures through civil society initiatives could be a more gradual and low-stakes approach than working through the state. Collaboration with CSOs does not carry with it the same high public profile and concerns over legitimization as participation in MEIA-backed programs. As such, it would be more viable to quietly and gradually work through the deep-seated suspicions that have made collaboration difficult so far.
CSOs can take critical steps forward in this process by intentionally creating opportunities for Salafis to play a role in CVE-relevant programming, which could include efforts ranging from public messaging to youth engagement to addressing socio-economic needs. In particular, such efforts might focus on Salafi youth – who may be more flexible in their thinking – rather than older religious leaders. While connecting with the right Salafi partners can be challenging, CSOs can look to intermediaries who maintain ongoing relationships in the Salafi community, which may include Islamist actors or prominent former Salafis.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that CSOs working on CVE include a broad range of focus areas and missions, and it is not necessarily relevant for all such organizations to foster relationships with religious actors. Even those organizations that do not explicitly work with the religious sector, however, may benefit from the access or influence of Salafi community leaders.

Foreign Governments

Cooperation between Moroccan CVE implementers and the West could potentially become a liability in efforts to engage with Salafi actors, who are concerned about secular influences. Western actors interested in supporting work in Morocco should remain cognizant of this concern, even despite the fact that respondents in this study were just as likely to be apathetic as explicitly opposed to Western involvement. Closer collaboration between Western actors and Moroccan civil society could potentially legitimize the perception that Moroccan CSOs have a Western agenda. Western states and INGOs may be able to mitigate this suspicion to some degree by fostering respectful partnerships with the Moroccan religious sector.

Recognizing this complication, it is important to note that there are other conduits for international support that would not necessarily carry the same risks. Respondents tended to see support from Muslim-majority countries as an asset, rather than a liability, and that inherent trust should be given due consideration. For those Western experts and funders interested in supporting CVE – especially for efforts that involve engaging the religious sector – that assistance may be more welcomed if channeled through partners from Muslim-majority contexts.

X. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

**Strengthening the Influence of Official Religious Actors**

While the respondents in this study raised concerns about the influence and capacity of official religious actors, there is no doubt that the official sector maintains a wide reach and active presence in Moroccan communities. Building the role of official religious actors will be an essential component of any holistic CVE strategy.

1. *If national religious institutions provide more specialized training for religious actors on direct community engagement and addressing sensitive theological issues, they could better adapt their discourse to be more relevant to at-risk populations.*

Though respondents considered foreign preachers and media outlets to be particularly influential, local religious actors have a unique advantage in their ability to connect with their communities through meaningful, interpersonal engagement. Encouraging this kind of engagement could position religious actors to better identify and intervene with individuals who are more vulnerable to radicalization. At the same time, as noted by respondents, additional specialized training on certain sensitive religious subjects would likely enable these religious actors to even more effectively counsel these vulnerable individuals.
At present, there are several institutions in Morocco that have the capacity to facilitate this kind of training and have already begun to work on these issues. However, there is still more that can be done to ensure that ordinary local religious actors – such as imams and religious guides – build specialized skills and knowledge in communication, outreach, and challenging extremist narratives.

If official religious actors constructively connect with independent or informal religious actors, they would likely strengthen the influence and credibility of their CVE messaging among certain subsets of their community.

Even with further training and support, official religious actors may still lack the capacity to reach or influence certain audiences who have come to trust other sources of religious authority. Some independent religious voices – whether they are Salafi or not – may be inherently more adept at employing diverse communication tools and speaking in an accessible style. Rather than aiming to silence or supplant these influencers, official religious actors could reach out to them to build relationships of trust. By fostering stronger partnerships at the community level, the state religious apparatus could potentially open new channels for CVE messaging.

Strengthening Partnerships and Trust within the Field of CVE

In the absence of relationships of trust with the state or civil society, the Salafi community will remain isolated and disengaged from many CVE activities. Trust-building measures are a critical first step toward building channels for constructive collaboration between Salafi and non-Salafi community leaders.

If government officials and agencies allow or encourage human rights organizations to engage with Salafis’ about their lingering grievances, and use these insights as the basis for ongoing dialogue, it would likely lessen tensions with the Salafi population.

As suggested by the responses of local Salafi actors, the legacy of distrust of the state will not be erased solely through the pardoning of prominent Salafi figures. Acknowledging the perceived harassment of Salafi communities and establishing a mechanism through which people can articulate their grievances and stories would be a powerful step in transforming attitudes toward the state and its CVE programs. However, given the existing skepticism directed at the state, this process would best be mediated through non-state organizations that can credibly interface with Salafi community leaders.

If organizations working on CVE – both at the community and national levels – were to create more space for independent religious actors to play a meaningful role in forming and implementing programs, these programs may have a greater impact on certain insular communities.

Respondents indicated that while there may be improvement in the engagement between Salafis and civil society, there is still skepticism or disinterest in non-religious CSOs on the part of the Salafi communities. This divide could limit the reach of civil society programs within Salafi communities and fuel mutual misperceptions. While many CSOs working on CVE, or CVE-relevant issues, may not maintain relationships with trusted Salafi partners, they may be able to build these connections through selected intermediaries with existing access to Salafi communities. This could include certain members of the PJD or MUR, respected former Jihadi-Salafis, or rights activists.
Facilitating greater technical support and collaboration in CVE from appropriate Muslim-majority countries or multi-lateral Muslim organizations could enable more CVE practitioners to build constructive bridges to Salafi communities.

Western governments and international NGOs should remain sensitive to the potentially negative impact of their involvement in a given CVE program in Morocco when securing buy-in among Salafi communities. Collaboration with Western actors could weaken the ability of Moroccan CVE practitioners to build partnerships with Salafi communities – though such opposition may not be universal. By contrast, respondents’ input suggests that collaboration with partners from Muslim-majority contexts may actually increase Salafi buy-in for a given program. Both international entities and local CVE practitioners should remain cognizant of these dynamics in the development of new programming.

**Identifying Viable Themes for Programs and Collaboration**

Adopting a more collaborative approach to CVE would necessitate careful identification of issue areas where engagement with Salafi communities would be most relevant and incur minimal risk.

CVE practitioners – whether governmental or non-governmental – may be hesitant to collaborate with Salafis in addressing sensitive ideological issues, and may be better served by focusing on social programs that leverage their capacity as community influencers.

Salafi respondents generally expressed that they saw ideological approaches to CVE as a significant need, which may indicate that the most fruitful areas of collaboration would be religious education or counseling. While engaging with Salafi influencers in these areas could potentially have an important impact on reducing the spread of extremist narratives, it could also incite further social conflict around the polarizing elements of Salafi ideology.

To mitigate this risk, CVE practitioners could prioritize engaging Salafi actors in addressing non-ideological drivers of radicalization, such as economic marginalization, which were also identified as significant concerns by respondents. CVE practitioners could cooperate with trusted leaders of Salafi communities in their capacity as social influencers, rather than as religious authorities, in order to integrate social or economic programs into more insular, conservative areas. This initial focus of engagement would foster trust-building, creating possibilities to address sensitive theological topics at a future time.
Endnotes

9. Interview with independent religious scholar in El Jadida (translated by ICRD).
10. Interview with former Salafi detainee (translated by ICRD).
14. A long-time opposition force, PJD has, since the 2011 elections, been the leading political party in parliament. Despite its Islamic frame of reference and prior criticisms of the state, the PJD does not voice criticism of the religious establishment, nor present itself as an alternative to the state’s vision of Islam. In fact, the PJD does not engage in explicitly religious activities – any missionary work is implemented by the MUR. Mohamed Daadaoui, Islamism and the State in Morocco (The Hudson Institute, April 2016).
21. Ibid.
24. While the increased security presence was initially welcomed by some, a significant portion of the population perceived it as a form of governmental overreach and a return to the more authoritarian policies of the past administration. See Erica Vasquez, *Morocco’s Counterterrorism Strategy: Implications for Western Sahara* (Middle East Institute, August 2015). Vish Sakthivel, *Adal wal-Ihsan: Inside Morocco’s Islamist Challenge* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2014).
37. Interview with Salafi researcher and author in Marrakech (translated by ICRD).
39. Interview with Salafi researcher and author in Marrakech (translated by ICRD).
46. El-Said, *De-Radicalising Islamists*.
47. Ibid.
48. Interview with member of Al Adl wa Ihsan (translated by ICRD).
49. Interview with independent religious scholar in El Jadida (translated by ICRD).
50. Interview with member of PJD in Marrakech (translated by ICRD).
51. Interview with Islamist activist in Rabat (translated by ICRD).
52. Interview with member of Al Adl wa Ihsan (translated by ICRD).
53. These results are not intended to detract from significance of socio-economic or political factors. In semi-structured interviews, most religious actor respondents identified the feeling of deprivation, lack of opportunity, and frustration with the current system as key conditions fueling radicalization. Several respondents specifically identified the feeling of hugra or humiliation and lack of dignity among the youth. One activist from al-Adl wa Ihsan noted: “The youth, especially poor ones [...] see all the doors closed on them and think they might not have a good life, they might not get married or buy a house. This fear for the future makes them an easy target for extremist ideas... ISIS might offer to the youth a guaranteed good life on earth.” (Translated by ICRD)
54. Interview with Islamists activist in Rabat.
55. Interview with Islamic studies teacher in Ait Melloul (translated by ICRD).
56. Interview with former Salafi detainee in Sale (translated by ICRD).
57. The respondent specifically mentions hakimiyya, wala’ and bara’, jihad, and amr bil ma’roof wa nahi ‘an munkar.
62. Interview with professor of Islamic education in Ait Melloul (translated by ICRD).
63. Interview with former Salafi detainee (translated by ICRD).
64. Interview with Islamist student in Salé, December 7, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
65. Interview with independent religious scholar in El Jadida (translated by ICRD).
66. This phenomenon is not unique to Morocco, as illustrated by Richard Nielsen’s study of jihadi clerics in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Richard Nielsen, “The Lonely Jihadist: Weak Networks and the Radicalization of Muslim Clerics” PhD diss., Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2013.
67. Interview with former Salafi detainee in Sale (translated by ICRD).
68. Interview with professor and member of Al Adl wa Ihsan (translated by ICRD).
69. Al Adl wal Ihsan was founded in 1987 by a Sufi-inspired religious scholar, Abdessalam Yassine, who gained public notoriety by questioning the religious legitimacy of King Hassan II and advocating for a theocratic state ruled by a Shura consultative council. Al Adl became popular in some circles thanks to the charismatic leadership of Yassine and its provision of social services to disenfranchised Moroccans. While Al Adl was offered the chance to integrate into the political system – in exchange for agreeing not to challenge the religious legitimacy of state – the group refused and has since operated on the margins of the Moroccan mainstream.
70. Interview with independent religious academic in El Jadida (translated by ICRD).
71. Interview with high school teacher and member of Al Adl wa Ihsan in El-Khamisat (translated by ICRD).
72. Interview with Islamic studies teacher in Casablanca (translated by ICRD).
75. Interview with Salafi private tutor in Rabat, December 7, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
76. Interview with member of the Movement of Unity and Reform in Fes, December 26, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
77. Interview with former Salafi activist in Casablanca (translated by ICRD).
78. Interview with Islamic studies teacher in Ait Melloul (translated by ICRD).
79. Interview with Islamist activist and teacher in Marrakech, January 15, 2018 (translated by ICRD).
80. Interview with Islamic studies teacher in Ait Melloul (translated by ICRD).
81. Interview with Salafi businessman in Sale, January 24, 2018 (translated by ICRD).
82. Interview with Sharia college student in Agadir, November 15, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
83. Interview with Salafi in Sale, November 24, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
84. Interview with Salafi student in Sale, December 24, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
85. Interview with student and Salafi actor in Rabat, December 29, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
86. Interview with Islamist activist and Sharia college student in Ait Meloul, November 15, 2017.
87. Interview with member of the Movement of Unity and Reform in Fes, December 23, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
88. Interview with member of the Movement of Unity and Reform in Fes, December 11, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
89. Interview with member of the Movement of Unity and Reform in Fes, November 28, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
90. Interview with member of the Movement of Unity and Reform in Fes, December 26, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
91. Interview with Salafi elementary school teacher in Fes, November 28, 2017 (translated by ICRD).
92. Interview with former Salafi detainee in Rabat.