**Examining Religious Television Channels in the Middle East**

**Moroccan Islamic Broadcasting in Response to Religious Extremism**

The past decade has seen the proliferation of largely extremist and sectarian 24-hour religious television channels throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Now exceeding 120 in number, they reach a collective viewership estimated in the tens of millions and play an outsized role in stoking violent conflict region-wide. Most efforts to counter the broadcasts, including the production of alternative religious programming, are still in a fledgling stage.

To help draw attention to this phenomenon and its implications for international efforts to combat extremism, AAM is launching a new initiative that will examine 24-hour religious television channels from the Middle East and issue reports on their activities. We begin the initiative with a proponent of coexistence and civil discourse, and will follow by examining a channel that has stoked sectarian warfare. Managing the research effort is AAM strategic advisor Joseph Braude, author of a forthcoming book on Arabic media.

Efforts to counter the broadcasts, including the production of alternative religious programming, are still in a fledgling stage. One experiment worth highlighting is the Kingdom of Morocco’s creation, via its Islamic affairs ministry, of round-the-clock Islamic broadcasting on radio and television: an Islamic satellite channel called *Al-Sadisa* (The Sixth, as in King Muhammad VI) and a national radio network, *Idha’at al-Qur’an al-Karim* (The Holy Qur’an Broadcast). Eleven years since its launch in 2005, the latter has attracted 19 percent of all radio listeners in Morocco — by far the most popular broadcast in the country. As for *Al-Sadisa*, it has been estimated to garner 85 percent of the Moroccan audience for religious television broadcasts, with the remaining 15 percent divided among the network’s 120-odd competitors. Conveying a carefully constructed, disciplined message of civility and tolerance through faith, it is widely credited inside the country for reviving and building on indigenous Moroccan religious traditions that extremists, for two generations, had worked to undermine.

The Moroccan Islamic broadcasting experience is no panacea for the problems of jihadist indoctrination and recruitment which continue to draw some young Moroccans to the ranks of ISIS and the like. Nor can it be evaluated in isolation, in a complex Arab Muslim society in which the state spreads “official Islam” not only through the media but also via schools and mosques — and family, friends, political parties, private media, and a range of other elements exercise a powerful influence too. Nonetheless, the broadcasts offer important lessons for other Arab countries as well as their Western
allies as they mull their own responses to jihadist media. And if some of the finer points of the “Moroccan model,” peculiar to the country, do not lend themselves to emulation, they at least serve to challenge the kingdom’s Arab neighbors to think more creatively about approaches that may uniquely suit their own, particular environments.

I. CONTEXT: A HOLISTIC RESPONSE TO EXTREMISM

Morocco’s two Islamic broadcasting initiatives predate ISIS by over a decade: Planning for the ventures began in 2003, as part of a broader, aggressive response to a triple suicide bombing in Casablanca perpetrated by Al-Qaeda affiliates which claimed 45 lives. King Mohammed VI pledged in a landmark speech to take staunch security measures against jihadists, eradicate the machinery of indoctrination that steers them, and address the underlying conditions in which extremist politics fester. In a thinly veiled reference to Salafi jihadist indoctrination through Moroccan mosques backed by Gulf petro-endowments, the king vowed to counter ideologies “from the East.” He pledged to purge the country’s mosques of foreign influence and resuscitate Morocco’s tolerant, indigenous Islamic traditions which had begun to fade. But whatever actions the state might take to reassert control over organized religion within its borders could not address the problem of incursions from the air: The pervasive influence of militant Islamist broadcasts “from the East” needed somehow to be counteracted as well. And so the kingdom vowed to accompany its ground campaign with an air campaign.

According to Hisham al-Halimi, now a fixture on both the radio network Idha’at al-Qur’an al-Karim and the TV channel Al-Sadisa, planning for the broadcasts began shortly after the king’s speech. A newly installed Islamic affairs minister recruited 12 employees of the ministry deemed to be especially talented writers and public speakers, to form the core team behind all broadcasting. They underwent a year of training by a combination of Moroccan and French experts in media communications. With support from university professors of Islamic studies and a cadre of imams, they began to develop the programming — on the basis of directives from on high to drive home specific messages repeatedly. Most of the content was to be in Arabic, Morocco’s official language. Additionally, to reach deep into rural and mountain areas, the Francophone stream of urban elites, and the large population of first- and second-generation Moroccan immigrants in France, additional programming would be delivered in Tashelhit, a Berber vernacular; and French.

II. CONTENT: A DISTINCTIVE SET OF THEMES

Both broadcast networks — sharing content, hosts, and guests — were consciously designed to differ radically from the many rival religious stations beamed in from outside the country. Programming ranges in subject matter and format from sermons
and fatwas to Western-style academic lectures; from Qur’an recitation and lessons in Islamic history to current affairs and arts and culture shows. This array of content, by and large, shares five related themes:

1. An Independent Narrative: Ideas and ideals conveyed on the channels are not defined in opposition to an extremist ideology. That is, rather than devote considerable airtime to refuting the narrative and ideological tenets of ISIS, for example — the so-called “counter-narrative” approach — programs articulate an independent, positive reading of Islam, the role of religion in society and state, and what it means for an individual to live according to Islamic principles. The worldview is not a child of yesterday, but rather rooted in longstanding Islamic traditions as historically practiced in Morocco, combining the quietist traditions of Maliki Islamic law with Moroccan-style Sufism, the mystical strand in Islam; together with reverence for the personage of the king — formally designated as “Amir al-Mu’minin” (Commander of the Faithful), the country’s supreme religious authority.

For a sense of how this narrative is articulated on the TV network Al-Sadisa, click here to watch a short excerpt from the lecture “Salafism: Realization of the Concept, Clarification of Its Content.”

2. Localization: In style as well as substance, programming makes maximal use of the inherent competitive advantage of a Moroccan network targeting an overwhelmingly Moroccan audience: the appeal of local guests, local landscapes, and the indigenous traditions and folklore that bind Moroccans together. Rather than communicate in Modern Standard Arabic — a formal construct used throughout the Arab region but unevenly understood across divides of literacy and class — all discussions are conducted in Darija, the Moroccan Arabic vernacular. Moroccans find the localization of Islamic programming to be novel and refreshing after two generations in which the clerical petro-endowments of the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, sought to standardize and homogenize every aspect of Islamic culture, from the style of Qur’an recitation to the structure of worship. In reviving the religious practices that make Morocco unique, the “localization” agenda also supports the effort to connect Islam and Moroccan nationalism — a potential antidote to the expansionist, transnational ideologies of extremist groups.

For an example of the “localization” phenomenon, click here to watch an excerpt from the program Qari’at min al-Maghreb (Female Reciters from Morocco). It is an “American Idol”-style talent competition in which young women from cities and towns across the kingdom chant excerpts from the Qur’an before a panel of judges. They do so exclusively in the time-honored style of recitation peculiar to Morocco. Moreover, in remarks by one of the judges following a reading by a talented 12-year-old, repeated
emphasis is placed on the nurturing role of the Moroccan family, itself a pillar of the struggle against extremism.

3. The embodiment of progressive Islamic values: In defiance of the more strident interpretations of Islamic law, programming features women. (Qari’at min al Maghreb, described above, provides one of the many obvious illustrations.) Some shows promote visual arts and musical traditions of praise to God — both firmly rejected as “bid’a” (forbidden innovations) by hardline ideologues. And in hosting civic actors and university professors from non-Islamic fields, programs manifest openness to learning and knowledge beyond the Islamic canon. One memorable example highlighting some of these principles is an episode of the weekly program Tarbiya wa Funun (Education and Arts), which celebrates the creative spirit of pious Moroccans for whom artistic excellence goes hand in hand with their love of Islam. The host, secular in appearance, visits a devout civil servant who prunes trees in the country’s public parks. Amid an array of ferns which he has trimmed to look like animals, he proudly displays a bush molded in the shape of an airplane. Along the body of the plane, he has twisted a vine to spell out the Arabic proverb, “Knowledge is light and ignorance is disgrace (Al ’Ilmu Nur wa ’l Jahlu Ar).”

4. An institutional approach rather than a cult of personality: Most extremist networks with which Al Sadisa competes feature either one or a handful of clerics — or the leader of an Islamist militia. They use their television platform to propagate not only an ideology but also their own cult of personality. By contrast, Al Sadisa features a seemingly endless parade of imams, scholars, and other functionaries of the country’s Islamic affairs ministry. The ministry’s vast human infrastructure, ideologically unified, spans the entire country — and reaches even beyond the kingdom’s borders to include mosques in Europe serving the Moroccan diaspora. Illustrative of the breadth of religious leadership are the camera pans of the audience during the lecture on “Moroccan Salafism” described above: Scores of imams in training, alongside an equal number of women, appear to be following the lecture earnestly. (The latter group of women are training to serve as Murshidat [Guides] — a new Moroccan designation — who partner with male clerics in the leadership of mosques.) The pageantry of personalities has the effect of training the focus on the ideas conveyed more than the individuals who espouse them. This “show of force” — a phalanx of religious and lay leaders sharing one message — implicitly overwhelms the viewer, making alternative Islamic programming seem weak, almost fly by night by comparison.

5. Personal responsibility: Extremist channels routinely paint a picture of Islam and Muslims under siege — targets of a global conspiracy to wipe them out. By contrast, Moroccan Islamic broadcasting calls on Muslims to take personal responsibility to improve their lives, accept doctrinal differences within the faith, and prepare the next
generation to interact civilly with one another as well as their non Muslim neighbors. Click here to watch this principle poignantly illustrated at a MoroccanB controlled mosque in Frankfurt, Germany, where concerns about the radicalization of Muslim youth run high. The scene is a conference of local worshippers and visiting imams titled “The Critical Situation of Muslims in the West: Whose Responsibility?” Lecturers come together around a clear answer: “I think Islamophobia is a reflection of the extremism of some Muslims,” one lecturer says, “especially youth who haven’t had an adequate opportunity to learn Islam’s true principles, origins, purposes, and rich heritage.” A cleric adds, “Muslims shouldn’t pin responsibility on others. They should bear responsibility themselves. They should labor and struggle in order to improve the state of the Muslim community. Even if part of the responsibility falls on non-Muslims, the greater responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Muslim community ... to change this critical situation for the better.”

III. LESSONS FOR OTHERS?

As noted earlier, the twin radio and television broadcasts have won exceptionally high ratings kingdom-wide: With its audience of 6.3 million in a country of 33 million, the radio station far eclipses news, pop music, and sports broadcasts, while the TV network has siphoned away 85 percent of the Moroccan audience for rival satellite channels pouring in from elsewhere. Moroccan information ministry officials, judging the two broadcasts worthy of further investment, credit them for helping to restore a tolerant Islamic ethos in the country which had been under assault for decades by hardline Islamist ideologies “from the East.” They also believe that the networks have lightened the load on the Moroccan security sector by making terrorist overtures less appealing to young people, and, along the way, bolstered the legitimacy of the monarchy itself.

As noted above, it is not possible to assess the impact of the broadcasts in isolation, given a complex Arab Muslim society in which the state spreads “official Islam” not only through the media but also via schools and mosques — and family, friends, political parties, private media, and a range of other elements exercise a powerful influence too. Moreover, the broadcasts may be as much a driver of moderate Islamic sensibilities as they are a reflection of sensibilities already ensconced in the country and many of its religious institutions. Nor have all the government’s efforts combined managed to rid the country of its jihadist strain: Terror plots continue, albeit mostly thwarted by police, and scores of Moroccan youth join ISIS and Al-Qaeda each year. Nonetheless, the kingdom remains the most stable and secure oil-poor country in its region, home to the largest surviving Jewish community in the Arab world, and a welcoming environment to people of all faiths who visit the country. The Islamic broadcasts, pervasive and captivating, clearly deserve some of the credit.
As other Arab countries and their Western allies seek their own solutions to the challenge of countering extremism on the airwaves, they can draw some lessons from the Moroccan model:

**The power of an independent narrative:** The programming does not fall into the trap of defining itself explicitly in opposition to a militant ideology, whether ISIS or any other. Instead, *Al-Sadisa* and its sister radio broadcast lay out a rich, independent narrative of Islamic practice on its own terms.

**The power of localization:** After decades in which Gulf petro-endowments sought to homogenize Islamic tenets and cultural norms, programming promotes Morocco’s own religious heritage instead — such as its centuries-old legal and spiritual traditions and unique style of Qur’an recitation, all conveyed through the country’s distinctive Arabic dialect. "Localization” attracts viewers and listeners away from the regional channels and strengthens the bond between Islam and Moroccan nationalism — a bulwark against trans-state jihadism.

**The power of “state Islam.”** Most extremist TV channels propagate not only a hardline ideology but also the cult of personality of a given cleric who espouses it. By contrast, *Al-Sadisa’s* programming and hosts are embedded within a larger framework of “state Islam” — built around an Islamic affairs ministry — that includes its own mosques, seminaries, and university faculties. Because these religious and lay leaders share a unified positive message that is well grounded in Islamic law and Moroccan tradition, the channel presents a compelling vision for the viewer that makes alternative Islamic programming seem weak, almost fly-by-night by comparison. While the extent of government involvement in religious affairs differs from the American experience, in many Arab countries, state Islam may offer the only mechanism for religious inculcation of sufficient size and scope to sustain an organized challenge to the well-oiled networks of trans-state jihadism.