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Morocco: Islam and Politics



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A Research Paper

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NESA 83-10042
February 1983

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Morocco: Islam and Politics



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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by [redacted] the
Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis. It was
coordinated with the National Intelligence Council
and the Directorate of Operations. Comments and
queries are welcome and may be directed to the
Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESA, [redacted]

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Morocco:
Islam and Politics

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Summary

*Information available
as of 14 February 1983
was used in this report.*

Islamic consciousness has increased in Morocco since the Iranian revolution in 1979. But this revivalist sentiment has not seriously challenged the dominant political-religious system—which is already conservative in practice—nor have there been broad demands for radical reform. In the near term, King Hassan should be able to control Islamic extremism.

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A small number of militant fundamentalist groups have formed in the past several years, primarily in the major cities where the stress of modernization and recent economic hardships have been felt most acutely. Some extremists seek to wipe the slate clean and establish a “true” Islamic state through violence. Revivalist sentiment seems to have a certain attraction for the country’s many young people, and it is possible that they will gravitate in greater numbers toward Islamic extremism should they become significantly dissatisfied with the government’s handling of key domestic and foreign policies. Closer US-Moroccan ties, initially well received in Morocco, may eventually become the focus of attack from fundamentalists who strongly oppose Western influence.

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The traditions of Morocco and particularly the religious nature of the monarchy will continue to be bulwarks against Islamic extremists. King Hassan’s dual role as religious and secular leader of the country gives Islam and the King preeminence in Moroccan life, making it difficult to challenge the King without seeming to attack Islam itself. Moreover, the tradition of tolerance found in Moroccan Islam, which allows for a wide variety of religious practice within the faith, makes it difficult for extremists to find a rallying cry with widespread appeal.

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Morocco’s traditional religious establishment is closely associated with the monarchy, gives strong support to King Hassan, and is not likely in the foreseeable future to challenge the government. Moroccan religious leaders (ulama) have strong ties to the palace and are often employed in government institutions, which has enabled the King to co-opt and control them. More importantly, Hassan consults the ulama frequently and visibly, allowing religious leaders a voice in matters of policy. This has kept the religious establishment content and has enabled the King to present himself to the public as an observant Muslim.

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Hassan has also used his considerable political skills to keep religious critics off balance. The King, apparently trying to draw Muslim fundamentalists out rather than driving them into clandestine organizations, has thus far elected to deal less harshly with them than with secular critics on the left. To counter religious militancy, the government is encouraging a revival of some of the traditional Muslim brotherhoods and has established government-sponsored religious groups to provide controlled outlets for increased religiosity. The government's ability to co-opt the fundamentalists greatly reduces the potential threat posed by radical Muslim elements.

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It is questionable, however, whether King Hassan's designated successor, 19-year-old Prince Sidi Mohammed, has the political astuteness of his father that would allow him to manage religious detractors or other opponents with much deftness. Should heightened religious sentiments persist in Morocco through a succession from Hassan to his son, a variety of exploitable issues might develop which would play into the hands of extremists. Moreover, the King, like the late President Sadat, could fall victim to a religious fanatic. On balance, however, a serious challenge from religious extremists does not appear likely in the foreseeable future.

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**Morocco:
Islam and Politics**



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The discussion and judgments in this paper are based in part on the experience and knowledge of the author and others who have lived and worked in Morocco and on a variety of recently published works on Islam. Information on the current status of the fundamentalist movement and on the Moroccan Government's response to the revivalist sentiment comes from the US Embassy



This somewhat unique development of Islam in Morocco has contributed to a relatively tolerant attitude toward other religions. Morocco, for example, is one of the few Islamic countries in which Jews have felt safe; a Jewish community of about 19,000 is under the official protection of the King, who quietly approves of the community's ties with the World Jewish Congress. About 40,000 Roman Catholics, most of them foreigners, also reside in the country. This official protection and tolerance of other religions and the diversity within the Islamic community seems to bespeak a national self-confidence that would tend to inhibit the spread of religious extremism in Morocco.

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Since the seventh century Morocco's history has been intimately associated with the development of Islam. To a large extent Islam has shaped the society's political and economic institutions and determined its social relationships and values.

The heightened religiosity in the Islamic world—spurred by the religious revolutionaries in Iran—has affected some Moroccans, particularly young people who are groping for ways to bridge the gap between the traditions of the past and the demands and seeming spiritual emptiness of modernity. This religious sentiment does not have the virulent political character of the fundamentalist movement in Iran nor has it at this point developed the activism and following found in some eastern Arab countries. This is due in part to the nature of Moroccan society and its history. It is probably also a result of Morocco's geographic and political distance from the events and issues that have stirred political and religious passions elsewhere in the Arab world. In such matters King Hassan has tried to steer a careful course, emphasizing both his historical role as preeminent protector of Islam and his efforts to pursue the Arab tradition of mediator as an honest broker on Arab-Israeli issues.

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As in other areas of North Africa, Islam in Morocco often blended with preexisting local religions rather than supplanting them completely. Thus, today there is a fairly broad spectrum of religious practices and a relatively tolerant attitude toward religious deviations compared to eastern Arab countries.

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Most Moroccans are Sunnis who adhere to the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence.¹ Sunnis have traditionally been willing to accept a greater diversity of opinion than the Shias, drawing the line only at those actions that appear to deny either the oneness of God or the finality of the revelations to Muhammad as recorded in the Quran. Within this diversity, however, there is a broadly held perception that Islam is supreme, that it guides the nation through its King, and that the population is sufficiently devout and true to Islamic dictates.

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Islamic Fundamentalism

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, there has been an increase in Islamic consciousness within the largely devout Moroccan Muslim community. Mosque

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¹ Among Sunni Muslims four schools of Islamic law are considered orthodox—the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, and Hanbali. The Maliki school places greater stress on using the traditions of the Prophet (hadiths) for legal interpretations than on the Quran and is more liberal than the Shafii and Hanbali schools, but more conservative than the Hanafi school.

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Observance of Islam has heightened in Morocco. Mosque attendance has increased. [redacted]

Moroccan Ministry of Information

attendance has increased, and during the recent month of fasting (Ramadan) the spirit of observance was unusually devout, according to US Embassy sources. [redacted]

The heightened sense of religiosity has especially affected Morocco's younger generation—over half of Morocco's population is under 25 years old—whose members often lack an adequate religious education. Their attitudes toward Islam are influenced by foreign "reform" literature written by militant Muslims whose observations have been formed in an often politically tumultuous social environment different from that of Morocco. This information has had a significant impact upon Moroccan students who have studied in Muslim countries with centers that foster militant Islamic philosophies. In addition, according to a knowledgeable Embassy source, radical Islamic material is received clandestinely from Libya, Pakistan, Iran, and Egypt. [redacted]

Socialist party leaders in Morocco have observed that as a result of their inability to organize more meaningful political opposition, Muslim fundamentalists are making significant inroads among disadvantaged elements of the population, especially among the youth, [redacted]

Mosques have sprung up in the slums of Casablanca, where Muslim groups blame the government for deteriorating economic conditions and the King for allowing too much Western influence to penetrate Morocco. One socialist leader has stated that the party leaders believe that the Islamic fundamentalists are capturing the support of young dissidents who in most circumstances would have flocked to the left. [redacted]

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[redacted] a consensus for an "authentic" Islamic society is strongly evident in the religious fervor of his students, despite their relative ignorance of Islam. Many students criticize the government as non-Muslim and call for its overthrow. Nevertheless, after four years of university education, the majority of students abandon the violent approach to social reform as they assume teaching and other jobs throughout the country. [redacted]

Although estimates vary, perhaps 5 percent of Morocco's students formally belong to fundamentalist groups that subscribe to some form of militant theological doctrine. There are also small Islamic groups in the military and other segments of society. [redacted] there are 15 different fundamentalist groups in Rabat alone, [redacted] this as an entirely new phenomenon in Morocco. [redacted] the growth of these organizations to the existence of a political vacuum and the suppression by government authorities of other forms of student political activity. [redacted]

[redacted] there are about 45,000 dedicated members of Islamic fundamentalist groups belonging to 70 or 80 organizations operating in Morocco. A few groups are formally recognized by the government, but the majority have no official status. Most of these groups are small, and, [redacted] they lack cohesion and coordination.

Morocco has not witnessed a large amount of violence committed in the name of Islam. [redacted]

[redacted]

Another indication of how strongly some Moroccans feel about enhancing the Islamic nature of their society was revealed in the antigovernment demonstration on 22 January 1982 in Tangier. About 800 Muslim worshipers were stirred to a frenzy over the government's dismissal of their prayer leader for criticizing the King and replacing him with a government man. Security forces put down the demonstration but not before a liquor store was destroyed by the fundamentalists. [redacted]

Islamic Youth Movement

Morocco's largest militant fundamentalist group, the Islamic Youth Movement, was founded in 1972 and is associated with the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood.³ The government recognized the Movement at its inception as a legitimate religious youth organization to teach Islam. The Movement's covert aim, with government approval, was to counter leftist influence. Its opposition to Morocco's socialist party, the Union of Socialist and Popular Forces, eventually led to the assassination in 1975 of a prominent socialist leader by the Movement's "shock brigade." [redacted]

After the assassination the Moroccan Government disowned the Movement, imprisoned some leaders, and closed its headquarters in Casablanca. Some of the Movement's leaders fled into exile; the group, however, continues to function as a semiclandestine organization, allegedly thoroughly penetrated by Moroccan security personnel, according to a US Embassy report. [redacted]

The Islamic Youth Movement, according to US Embassy sources, has several thousand members and is strongest in major Moroccan cities. The leadership is composed of secular professionals—teachers, engineers, lawyers, and student leaders—as well as poorly educated religious teachers and mosque preachers. The Movement's militant doctrine appeals to youth, particularly those disillusioned about their future. [redacted]

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The Movement's leaders espouse violence as the sole means of "purifying" Muslim society. The organization does not adhere to the Maliki school of Islamic law or the fundamentalist tenets of the Salafiya movement, which greatly influenced Moroccan religious thought and nationalistic sentiments prior to independence. [redacted]

[redacted] the Casablanca and Tangier militants describe themselves as "Kharijites" (those who went out) in the tradition of the first-century Hegira followers of Ali who broke with Sunni tradition and whose movement evolved into Shia Islam. Identification with Kharijite doctrine best symbolizes the Movement's break with Moroccan Islam as presently interpreted by the King and the religious establishment. [redacted]

The Movement's members propagate a dogma based on strict loyalty to fundamentalist tenets as they define them. They reject as nonbelievers Moroccans who oppose their interpretation of Islamic tenets. Those scorned reportedly include government officials and political party leaders who, according to the militants, encourage divisive allegiances through Western political institutions. In their desire to remove all foreign influence from Morocco, they also reject the Moroccan constitution and legal code even though it is rooted in Islamic law. [redacted]



Mohammed Basri, exiled opposition leader, often uses religious themes to criticize the King. [redacted]

[redacted]

Mohammed Basri, in exile since the early 1960s, also uses religious themes to criticize the Moroccan Government and the King. Although his connections in Morocco are mainly with leftists, Basri enjoys some support in militant Islamic circles and, like Moti, has ties to Libya. Nevertheless, neither Basri nor Moti, in our view, has sufficient power bases in Morocco to be a serious threat to the regime. They could attempt, however, to increase subversive activities, but Moroccan security officials are likely to detect such a move in its early stages. [redacted]

The Religious Supremacy of the King—A Bulwark Against Extremism

Since the arrival of Islam, a central figure in Moroccan society has been the warrior-saint. Idris II, the ninth-century builder of Fez and the country's first important King, was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, a vigorous military leader, and a dedicated religious purifier. When the centralized political

* The Salafiya reform movement sought to eliminate heterodox religious practices by encouraging a return to orthodox Islamic principles. King Hassan's father identified with the reformers along with Istiqlal (Independence) Party leaders, giving importance to the movement. [redacted]

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order collapsed in the 15th century, it was followed by the so-called Maraboutic Crisis when local holy men (marabouts), descendants of the Prophet (shurfa) and leaders of Sufi brotherhoods, made a bid for power in different regions of the country. In the 17th century a reform-minded descendant of Muhammad emerged to establish the current ruling Alaouite dynasty. The deeply held belief among the majority of Moroccans that their King is both a religious and political leader with the former mandate linked historically to the Prophet Muhammad is perhaps King Hassan's greatest asset in limiting fundamentalist challenges. [redacted]

King Hassan II dominates Morocco's political system, manipulating both religious and dynastic symbols to enhance his position and legitimize his rule. The King is, at the same time, the chief executive of the government and the supreme commander of the armed forces. Further strengthening the King's position is the belief that he possesses *baraka*, an aura of holiness that is considered the manifestation of divine grace transmitted through the Prophet's descendants, enhancing the mystical regard that thousands of poorly educated Moroccans have for the monarchy. [redacted]

As head of the Muslim community, the King is responsible for ensuring respect for Islam, defending it against external threats, and protecting public morality. Although these duties are performed both in domestic and international affairs through the exercise of temporal power, the authority for their accomplishment rests basically in the King's religious mandate. [redacted]

The King relies on traditionalism and fealty to offset popular dissatisfaction with Morocco's political elite. Hassan has concluded that it is safer to enlarge his political base by allying with the rural elite—primarily Berbers—to resist demands of the urban middle class and political pressure groups. Thus far his bet has paid off. This de facto alliance affects the monarch's use of Islamic symbols since his most faithful clients are religious conservatives. A widely held belief in the religious authority of the King as Commander of the Faithful has tended to keep some Moroccans away from political battles for power. [redacted]



King Hassan II, Commander of the Faithful, rides to Friday prayers. [redacted]

Moroccan Ministry of Information

Hassan systematically seeks to mobilize mass support through the manipulation of religious values and by reaffirming direct ties between himself and his people. This may be in symbolic terms as leader of important religious ceremonies or reading the Quran on national television from the palace. For the "Green March" in 1975, Hassan—exploiting strong popular feeling that the Western Sahara is historically part of Morocco—mobilized an army of several hundred thousand civilians armed only with copies of the Quran and traditional Islamic banners to consolidate his claim to the territory. [redacted]

As a corollary to his domestic Islamic credentials, Hassan espouses a strong identification with Arab causes, especially the struggle to recover Palestine—an issue that has important religious overtones. Hassan, for example, was host to an Arab summit in 1974

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"Green March" participants, armed with the Quran and banners, march into Western Sahara on King Hassan's orders. [redacted]

Moroccan Ministry of Information

that laid the groundwork for Islamic bloc votes in the United Nations in favor of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and he contributed troops to the Arab-Israeli war in 1973. The King is currently chairman of the Arab League and heads its Fez Middle East peace committee. Hassan also chairs the Islamic Conference Organization's Jerusalem committee. Hassan, however, is careful not to overtax his credentials as an Arab leader or to get too far in front of his Moroccan constituents. [redacted]

Other Key Institutions

Ulama. Supporting the King's conservative point of view on religion is the League of Moroccan Ulama, founded in 1961 and consisting of several hundred Islamic scholars organized into national and regional councils. The League's avowed purpose is to strengthen Muslim religious life, combat moral and social decay, and sponsor religious instruction. [redacted]

[redacted] Hassan, aware of growing Islamic fundamentalism in Morocco, met with the Ulama in mid-1982 to ask their assistance in curbing trends toward extremism and in urging religious leaders to stay away from political issues. [redacted]

We believe the Moroccan Ulama is co-opted by the King and follows his lead on most matters. The League has made pronouncements against the excesses of Iranian Shiites and Libyan leader Qadhafi's interpretation of Islam. The Ulama is represented by two members on the 13-man Regency Council appointed by the King. The League, technically a nongovernmental body, occasionally has taken stands at variance with official policy—for example, with regard to family planning and Arabization. [redacted]

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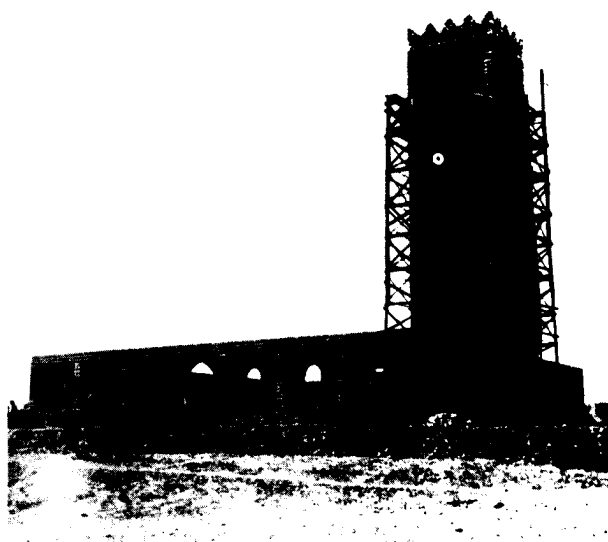
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Sheikh Nekki Naciri, head of the Rabat-Sale Council of Ulama, is a member of the Regency Council along with the Secretary General of the League of Moroccan Ulama, Abdullah Guennoun. [redacted]



Mosque construction is funded by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs. [redacted]

Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs. This Ministry is the focal point for official Islamic trusts in Morocco. Through it religious education is controlled, Quranic schools are staffed, and it helps ensure that Friday sermons preached in Morocco's 20,000 mosques accord with the decrees of higher authority. The Ministry manages extensive urban and agricultural properties for the benefit of Islamic education, mosque construction, and publishing. [redacted]

The formal structure of the Islamic establishment facilitates political communications. Friday sermons, which deal with social as well as religious themes, are often prepared by the Ministry and are always given in the name of the King. They provide a dialogue between the prayer leader and the congregation and establish links between national authority and the people. The people's views are passed up to the Ministry, while criticisms of the King are identified to security forces. Questions of religious doctrine are passed to the regional council of the Ulama. [redacted]

At the local level, the formal complex of Islamic institutions centers around mosques and Quranic

schools—generally associated with them are religious endowments established by believers' bequests to support their activities—and the religious courts. In recent years the Islamic courts have been restricted to adjudicating questions of personal status—divorce, guardianship, inheritance, and certain land transactions. This institutional complex is shared by the entire Muslim community, while many Moroccans consider religious brotherhoods and the clientele associated with marabouts (saints) as distinct from the formal institutions because their support comes from a designated membership. [redacted]

Marabouts and Sufi Brotherhoods—A Revival

While orthodox Islam emphasizes formal belief, ritual, and a knowledge of the Quran, folk Islam, whose beliefs and practices often reflect the pre-Islamic heritage, serves a mainly illiterate rural and poor urban population among whom animistic beliefs are still prominent and Islamic ritual is often only casually observed. Its practitioners, nevertheless, consider

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themselves pious Muslims and see no contradiction between their indigenous beliefs and those of orthodox Islam. Folk Islamists see the physical world as populated by spirits, both good and evil, and rely on the power of magical personalities or objects to ward off evil ones. [redacted]

In Morocco there are men, and sometimes women, who have gained a reputation for possessing supernatural powers and have come to be venerated as saints, and most towns and regions have patron saints who are believed able to intercede and perform miracles. Marabout or saint cults can be centered around a living or dead person or some place or object associated with him, and followers of some saints have created centers of devotion that include religious lodges and regular pilgrimages to the marabout's tomb. The government does not discourage saint cults, and they have been incorporated into popular Moroccan belief. [redacted]

Historically, Sufi or mystic brotherhoods, whose origins in some cases date back to the 12th century, have played an important religious and at times political role in Morocco. They helped spread a popular version of Islam and provided a sense of unity through a network of religious lodges. Some brotherhoods or orders provided a nucleus for resistance to early French and Spanish encroachments. Later, some orders collaborated with the Protectorate regime that encouraged their antinationalist tendencies. The French, however, unwittingly reduced the importance of the brotherhoods by centralizing the government, reducing their regional roles. [redacted]

The brotherhoods were further weakened by the Salafiya reform movement, which sought a return to orthodox Islamic principles. Mohammed V, the current King's father, identified himself with the reformers and in 1946 forbade the establishment of new brotherhoods or the formation of religious lodges without royal permission. [redacted]

The orders resisted and were used by the Protectorate in its efforts to replace Mohammed V with a more pliable ruler. The French defeat in this ill-considered move drew disgrace upon the brotherhoods. With the orders in decline by the late 1950s, the Salafiya

movement also lost much of its force, but its ideals still infuse the pronouncements of Istiqlal Party leaders and others concerned with the preservation of national and religious values. [redacted]

[redacted] the Moroccan regime is attempting to revive the Sufi brotherhoods to counter the radical fundamentalist trend, and press reports indicate that some brotherhoods have regained popularity in recent years. The brotherhoods and marabout cults serve primarily as social and religious outlets, but as in the past they could come to play a political role. Some politicians [redacted] see the revival of Sufi brotherhoods as a potential threat and are making plans to counter the increased importance of these religious orders. [redacted]

Government Response to Increased Fundamentalism

Although the threat to the established order from fundamentalist groups is still small and has been controlled, the history of Morocco suggests that dynasties are changed through events born of such groups. Moroccan officials appear to be very aware of the current Islamic revival, according to US Embassy reports. Local media frequently identify the King with Islam and its causes, such as Hassan's recent reminder to Moroccan magistrates that their judgments be guided by Islamic tenets. The government's emphasis on the need for its officials to understand Islam thoroughly was the message the Interior Minister delivered to police cadets last year, and he ordered the police academy to teach future police officers orthodox Islam. [redacted]

The religious establishment and some lay leaders seek to curb trends toward radical Islam through standardized religious education in secular schools. This "gradualist" approach to reform through education is also evident in the semiofficial Islamic newspaper, *N'nook*. Its conservative articles constitute one of the few Moroccan attempts to challenge fundamentalist literature coming in from abroad. [redacted]

³ Moroccan political parties are secular, but the Istiqlal claims to be an orthodox Islamic party. [redacted]

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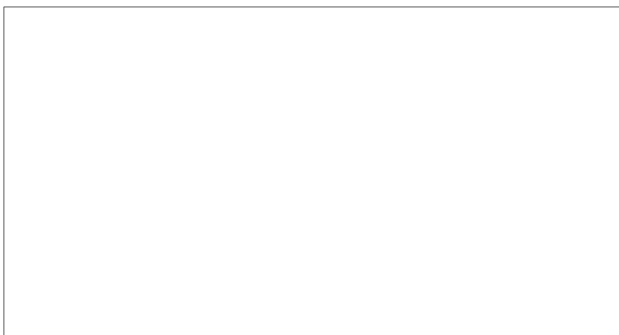
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Ministry of Education officials and other members of the Westernized elite differ with the religious establishment's approach and desire to retain Western, mainly European, influences and institutions. The ulama and lay scholars instead desire to remove Western influences gradually from Moroccan society. These competing views could nullify each other and make it easier for radical and militant Islamic doctrines to spread. [redacted]

In a more direct response to the growing challenge of radical fundamentalism, the government sanctioned last year the creation of the Popular Islamic Renaissance Movement. This group, supported by the King, hopes to divert the appeal of more radical fundamentalist organizations and provide a legitimate political channel for popular religious sentiments. [redacted]



Outlook

Although radical Islamic fundamentalism has emerged in major Moroccan cities in the past few years, we believe the movement is not a serious threat to the monarchy at this time because it is small and split among isolated and competing factions. The fundamentalists, however, almost certainly will continue to seek a larger role in the political process. [redacted]

The current economic malaise, nearly 30 percent unemployment in the cities, and rising expectations among a burgeoning and youthful population are key sources of discontent, and militant fundamentalists are likely to use these secular issues to further their Islamic causes. Closer US-Moroccan ties, initially well received in Morocco, may eventually become the focus of attack from fundamentalists who strongly

oppose Western influence. They are also likely to condemn the United States for supporting what they perceive as a corrupt monarchy. [redacted]

The government has dealt with opposition from Muslim fundamentalists less harshly than with secular critics, although some activists have been arrested. Avoiding repressive measures and attempting to co-opt the fundamentalists in government-sponsored organizations or through Sufi brotherhoods, the government is likely to meet with some success in defusing a potentially dangerous threat by providing an outlet for pent-up pressures from Islamic groups. [redacted]

In addition, Morocco has a fairly effective internal security establishment, under the direction of the tough and efficient Interior Minister Driss Basri, monitoring and controlling the more militant Muslim elements. The accidental death early this year of Gen. Ahmed Dlimi, the most trusted intelligence and military adviser to the King and only military member of the Regency Council, is unlikely to affect internal security in the near term. Hassan, however, had counted on Dlimi as a key guarantor of the survival of the monarchy should the King die before the 19-year-old Crown Prince is ready to take full control. [redacted]

It is questionable whether King Hassan's designated successor, Prince Sidi Mohammed, has the political astuteness of his father that would allow him to manage religious detractors or other opponents with much deftness. The Crown Prince has been groomed since childhood to ascend the throne and, like his father, is often identified with religious functions in public. Should heightened religious sentiment persist in Morocco through a succession from Hassan to his son, a variety of exploitable issues might develop which would play into the hands of extremists, who would be emboldened by Sidi Mohammed's weakness. Moreover, King Hassan, like the late President Sadat and a host of Arab leaders before him, could fall victim to a religious fanatic. On balance, however, a serious challenge from religious extremists does not appear likely in the foreseeable future. [redacted]

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