



NATO Foundation  
Defense College

Maghreb June 2016

### **Moderate Islam: Morocco's soft power in Africa**

The 14<sup>th</sup> of June the King of Morocco launched the Mohamed VI Foundation of the African Ulemas. Headquartered in the al-Qaraouiyine mosque of Fès; the Foundation will serve to promote a moderate version of Islam opposed to the extremism of terrorist groups. Its mission will be to ensure a religious coordination among more than 100 African theologians, without interfering in the internal affairs of their States. 31 countries are represented in the Foundation, which will be headed by King Mohamed VI himself, supported by the Moroccan Minister for Habous and Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufik.

The royal initiative is not the first of its kind. The Foundation is the natural prosecution of the successful Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, established by royal decree the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2015. Its goal is to ensure the professionalisation of religious education in Morocco. Aware of the threats posed by unauthorized radical preachers who have been responsible in diffusing extremism and violence through their incendiary sermons, authorities adopted official programmes and training courses for imams in order to promote a moderate version of Islam. The Institute represents a pillar of the counterterrorism strategy of Morocco, together with the security policy highlighted by the creation of the *Bureau centrale d'investigation judiciaire* (BCIJ – Central Office for Judicial Investigation), the powerful counterterrorism agency, in the same year.

The threat posed by terrorist groups in Morocco is relevant. In May 2016 the Islamic State terrorist organisation (DAESH) threatened to attack the kingdom through an audio statement sent to al-Jazeera. The message came from Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, previously leader of the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO - Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa) and later operative of the al-Mourabitoun (the Guardians) terrorist group of Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

The risk must not be underestimated. During the last months Moroccan security forces have carried out several arrests. In two cases the BCIJ allegedly foiled terrorist plots. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May a Chadian national was arrested at the Tangier airport. He was suspected of being an ISIS operative sent in the kingdom in order to create sleeping cells ready to attack high profile and soft targets. In February authorities dismantled a terrorist cell of 10 members, seizing chemical and biological products. The cell was ready to attack different targets in Rabat. Authorities estimate that around 1.500 Moroccan nationals have left to fight with armed groups in Syria and Iraq, the second largest contingent of foreign fighters following Tunisians.

However, in contrast with the counterterrorism policy implemented by security forces, education and religious policies could have important and relevant consequences in the long period. The Institute for the Training of Imams and the Foundation are considered a successful example and many countries seem interested in participating in their programs. Tunisian imams have visited the facilities and in March Russian officials showed their interest during King Mohammed VI's visit to Moscow.

Morocco's export of its own version of moderate Islam represents a successful instrument of soft power and could well contrast the expanding extremism in the region. Moreover, it is beyond doubt that the Imam academy is a powerful asset for the Kingdom's foreign policy in Africa. Morocco wants to play a major role in the continent following decades of isolation due to the Western Sahara issue. At the same time it is worth noting that this policy suits well to the kingdom, due to the uncontested religious authority of the King (a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammed), but could not find fertile ground in different and much more complex contexts.