



# BEYOND *the* CALIPHATE

Islamic State Activity Outside the Group's Defined Wilayat

MOROCCO



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# BEYOND THE CALIPHATE: ISLAMIC STATE ACTIVITY OUTSIDE THE GROUP'S DEFINED WILAYAT

## Morocco

BY ELLEN CHAPIN

Since bombs rocked Casablanca in 2003 and Marrakesh in 2011, Morocco has continually made concerted efforts to tighten its anti-terrorism laws, improve its intelligence capabilities, and address the root causes of radicalization. While Morocco has yet to see a terrorist attack by the Islamic State on its soil, future challenges loom for the government: returned foreign fighters, burgeoning jihadi cells, and increasingly complicated relationships with its counterterrorism partners in Europe and the Maghreb.

Such challenges have been highlighted in the course of recent events. In November 2015, a Belgian man of Berber-Moroccan origin was unveiled as the alleged mastermind behind the bombings that shook Paris that month, in addition to being a key member of an Islamic State cell in Brussels.<sup>1</sup> This year, catastrophic attacks in Barcelona, Spain, grabbed global headlines, and once again, it was revealed that many of the perpetrators were of Moroccan descent. Given the re-emergence of pre-existing jihadi networks in the region, the Maghreb will be simultaneously of key interest to the Islamic State and a critical piece of the puzzle for policymakers as they attempt to combat extremism.

Although no Islamic State attacks have taken place in Morocco at the time of this writing, there has been a sizable amount of activity. The following analysis employs an open source dataset of directly linked and conceptually inspired Islamic State plots and arrests in Morocco from

### KEY FINDINGS

- While there have been no attacks by the Islamic State in Morocco, 33 terrorist plots linked to or inspired by the group have been uncovered in Morocco since June 2014.
- Slightly more than 60% of plots had direct links to Islamic State operatives either based in Syria or Iraq, or within Morocco itself. In the majority of these cases, the Islamic State attempted to "remote-control" and provide operational guidance to local cells from afar.
- Given links between operatives of Moroccan descent and recent attacks in Europe, these plots serve as a warning that Morocco could become a stage for similar forms of violence.

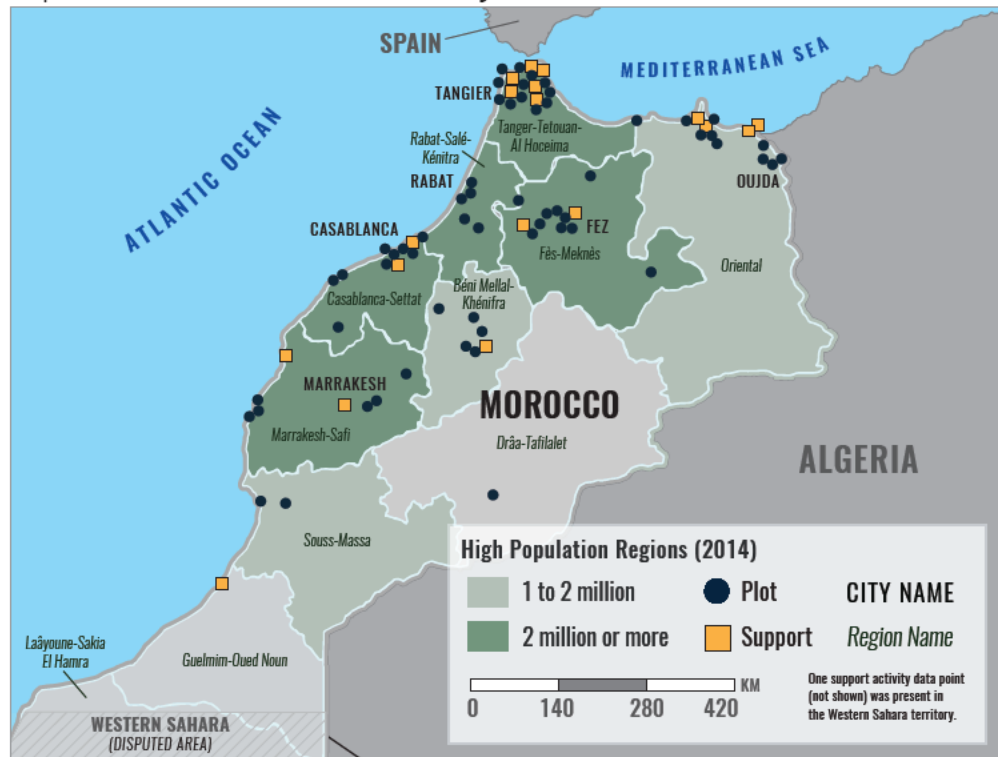
June 2014 through June 2017.<sup>2</sup> Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) researchers coded events as being linked to or inspired by the Islamic State only if government and/or credible media sources asserted that the Islamic State was responsible for or had inspired the event.<sup>3</sup>

### Geographic Overview

Despite the Islamic State's foothold elsewhere in North Africa, there have been no successful terrorist attacks inside Morocco's borders since 2011. However, since

1. "Aide du Maroc pour trouver le Belgo-Marocain Abaaoud, le roi reçu par Hollande," *Le Point International*, November 19, 2015.
2. Support, as defined in this study, is any type of assistance an individual provides the Islamic State that ends in an arrest, including but not limited to recruitment, facilitation of travel, monetary or material support, virtual support, or personnel support. For more information on all categories, see the CTC's Beyond the Caliphate project webpage at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/beyond-the-caliphate-2>
3. This dataset was coded by Marielle Ness. Without her work, and that of Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, this article would not be possible.

Map 1 **Islamic State Affiliated Activity in Morocco** JUNE 2014–JUNE 2017



Mapped by Brandon Mohr for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point; Service Layer Credits: Source: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS, USDA, USGS, AEX, Getmapping, Aerogrid, IGN, IGP, swisstopo, and the GIS User Community.

June 2014, 33 terrorist plots linked to or inspired by the Islamic State have been uncovered in Morocco, and there have been 12 separate arrests for support activity for the Islamic State in the country. As the map above illustrates, Islamic State activity in Morocco occurred primarily in urban, densely populated areas or along major travel routes.<sup>4</sup>

Morocco's success in preventing attacks at home is linked directly with its recent efforts in combating terrorism. After 2011, the government expanded its role in policing potential terrorists, including granting more powers to investigators when any inquiry

involves a "terrorist crime."<sup>5</sup> In September 2014, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry remarked on Morocco's leadership for developing "the first global set of good practices on stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters."<sup>6</sup> Reforms continued, and by 2015, a new government agency, the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (BCIJ), had been created to focus on counterterrorism and transnational crimes.<sup>7</sup> Given this recent and heightened sensitivity to extremism, many sources (including Human Rights Watch) report that Moroccan law enforcement often arrests individuals with any indication of sympathetic leanings toward the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup>

4. Other products released as part of the CTC's Beyond the Caliphate series have made similar findings. For example, see *Beyond the Caliphate: Turkey* at <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CTC-Turkey-Final.pdf>
5. Criminal Procedure Code, Dahir 1-58-261 of 1959, as amended to Oct. 27, 2011, available at <http://adala.justice.gov.ma/production/legislation/ar/Nouveautes/القانون%20السلطة%20الجناية> (in Arabic) (Morocco).
6. See "September 2014 Remarks at the Global Counterterrorism Forum," U.S. State Department, Remarks by Secretary Kerry, September 23, 2014.
7. For more information, see "State Department Country Reports on Terrorism 2015," U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, June 2016.
8. For example, the study omitted a case of a Frenchman being arrested for supporting the Islamic State. Although Moroccan authorities accused him of supporting the organization, there was little proof of this support, and groups like Human Rights Watch provided significant evidence to prove his innocence and ignorance of the situation. "Morocco: Convictions Based on Tainted 'Confessions,'" Human Rights Watch, November 21, 2016.



## Regional and Global Connections

### *Connections to Islamic State Central*

The majority of the 33 plots (61%) in Morocco were identified as being directly linked to Islamic State operatives who are either based in Syria and Iraq, or within Morocco itself. More specifically, such a link indicates that, at minimum, there is evidence that Islamic State operatives in Syria or Iraq directed, funded, or were in contact with underground groups and individuals in the region who were sympathetic to the Islamic State. However, the ways in which these plots are directly linked to the Islamic State are many. Much like

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other areas outside of the group's *wilayat*, attacks are not carried out exclusively by operatives deployed to Morocco by the Islamic State; there are also "remotely controlled" operations in which the Islamic State members coordinate strikes from afar.<sup>9</sup> True to this remotely controlled practice, of the 20 Moroccan plots directly linked to Islamic State operatives, 16 were actually being carried out by local cells that were in contact with Islamic State members located elsewhere. The other four plots were either carried out by operatives that the Islamic State had deployed to Morocco, or the specifics of their affiliation were unreported by the BCIJ.

Given the increasing discussion and debate about the combat roles of women in the Islamic State, it is

interesting to note that our dataset contains a number of cases that involve Moroccan women planning attacks on their home country. The BCIJ does not report the sex of the majority of arrested individuals,<sup>10</sup> but of the would-be attackers in Morocco with a reported sex in our dataset, 30% were women.<sup>11</sup> In particular, one disrupted plot from October 2016 found evidence that 10 women had created an "all-female Islamic State cell," which was "plotting attacks across the Kingdom of Morocco."<sup>12</sup> The women had links to Islamic State jihadis in Syria and Iraq, and were recruiting and training women in several parts of the country, including Tangiers and towns near Rabat.<sup>13</sup> If women and girls begin to play a more active role in operations, Moroccan security forces will need to continue to be on guard against plots involving male and female operatives.

### *Foreign Fighter Recruitment Areas and Local Activity—A Comparative View*

Morocco has served as much more than a recruitment and staging ground for fighters looking to travel to the Islamic State's core territories in Iraq and Syria. Since mid-2014, the group has widely announced its desire to expand influence locally in Morocco as well as in the larger North Africa region. While several videos released from the leadership in Iraq and Syria reference followers and soldiers in the Maghreb, one 2014 video targeted Morocco specifically. The video featured Moroccan foreign fighters in Syria who expressed the group's intent to bring jihad to Morocco and eventually incorporate the territory into the self-proclaimed caliphate.<sup>14</sup>

One aspect that may lead the local threat to become increasingly challenging is that Morocco has struggled with foreign fighters who leave the country to serve in combat in Syria and Iraq and subsequently

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9. Other products released as part of the CTC's Beyond the Caliphate series have made similar findings. For example, see *Beyond the Caliphate: Southeast Asia* at <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/CTC-Southeast-Asia.pdf>

10. Reports use the gender neutral term "suspect" to identify 69 of the 112 would-be attackers.

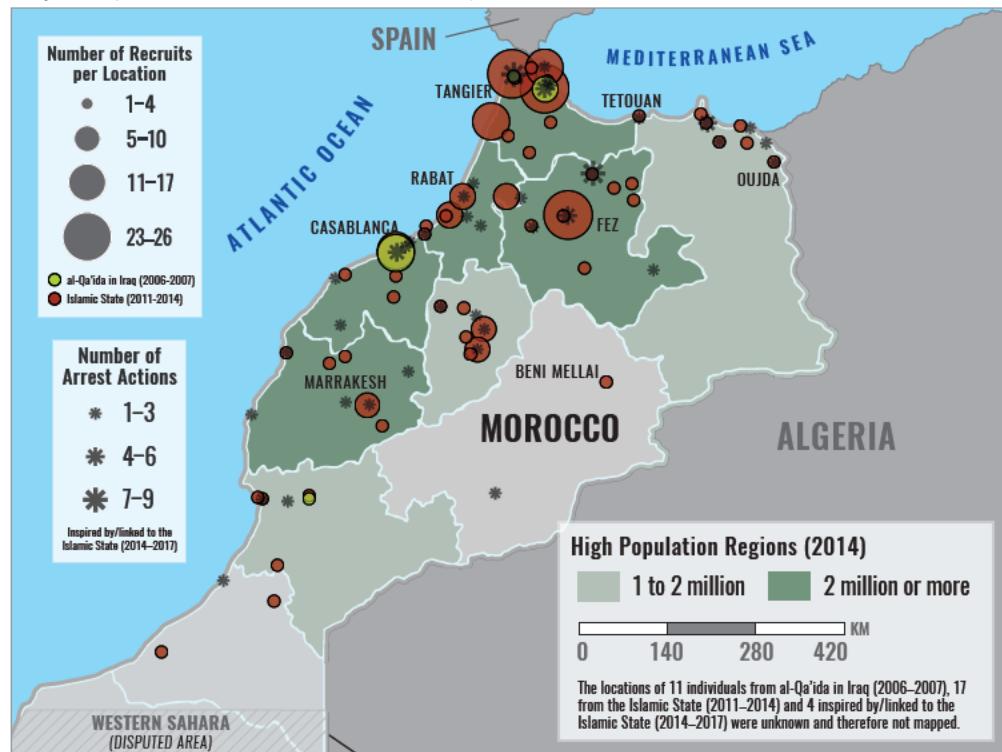
11. As a caveat, it is particularly important to note that there are, of course, inherent challenges in relying upon information from governments, which may have an incentive to magnify the threats they uncover.

12. Al-Hurra News. "The arrest of a women's cell in Morocco coordinated with a supporter to carry out bombings," 2016. <http://www.alhurra.com/a/morocco-women-isis-/325455.html>.

13. Ibid.

14. Vish Sakthivel, "The Islamic State Goes After Morocco's Islamists," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 15, 2014.

## Map 2 AQI and Islamic State Recruits, and Islamic State Affiliated Arrest Actions



This map shows the geolocation of Sinjar record (2006-2007) and Islamic State file (2011-2014) recruits and Islamic State-linked or -inspired arrest actions (June 2014-June 2017). Map created by Brandon Mohr, see Map 1 for credits.

return to expand the caliphate, or otherwise engage in destabilizing behavior. During a July 2014 interview, Morocco's Interior Minister Mohamed Hassad stated that 1,122 Moroccan nationals were currently affiliated with terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the minister estimated that "up to 2,000 citizens of Morocco or persons of Moroccan origin [residents in other countries] have fought in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts."<sup>16</sup> These movements have remained a potent concern for the government. In fact, the rising fear of foreign fighters returning to the

region has led the Moroccan government to tighten border control at many strategic locations.<sup>17</sup>

Leveraging two other datasets,<sup>18</sup> which map the make-up, scale, and scope of the Iraq and Syria-bound foreign fighters, the CTC has been able to assess the evolution of foreign fighter recruitment areas, and related outflows, in particular countries over time. The map above compares Moroccan foreign fighter participation in al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) (2006-2007) and the early Islamic State (2011-2014) to the June 2014-June 2017

15. The government has not provided any granularity on who these Moroccans were fighting alongside. Some may be fighting with Islamic State; others may have joined other terrorist organizations present in the region.
16. Hasnaa El Jamali and Laurent Vinatier, "There and Back: Trajectories of North African Foreign Fighters in Syria," *Small Arms Survey Issue Brief* 3 (2015).
17. Mohammed Masbah, "Moroccan foreign fighters: evolution of a phenomenon, promotive factors, and the limits of hardline policies," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, *SWP Comments* 46, October 2015.
18. This article uses, first, a dataset derived from a trove of AQI documents captured by coalition forces near Sinjar, Iraq, cited in the CTC report *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: al-Qa'ida's Road In and Out of Iraq*. The second is derived from a collection of 4,119 Islamic State personnel records of foreigners who joined the group over a 47-month period between 2011-2014, which a defector provided to NBC News and other media outlets.

arrest and activity data compiled for this report.<sup>19</sup> In such a comparison, clear trends emerge.<sup>20</sup>

Foreign fighter participation appears to be highest in more densely populated areas in Morocco, such as Casablanca, Fez, Beni Mellal, Tangier, and Tetouan. However, in the Oriental region (bordering Algeria), there has been increased activity over time.<sup>21</sup> Such a

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pattern could indicate that the Islamic State is spreading to new arenas; this would coincide with analysis from the International Crisis Group, which notes that several dismantled Islamic State cells were also reported in the southern region of Agadir.<sup>22</sup> If the Islamic State remains able to tap into existing networks, but also capable of expanding into new spaces, this could present additional challenges for Moroccan security services.

### **Operational Dynamics**

Because there have been no successful Islamic State-linked or -inspired attacks in Morocco to date, there is no way to assess the ultimate lethality or timing of its proposed attacks. In fact, assessing plots presents challenges all its own, given the number of unknowns in each scenario—Morocco’s law enforcement provides

few details about the plots that it uncovers. In some cases, this could be due to the BCIJ’s ability to thwart plots early, leaving the cell or attacker no opportunity to identify a target or acquire a weapon. Such an explanation is consistent with Morocco’s long-standing effort to stop terrorism before it begins, through proactive policing and closely held intelligence.

### **Weapons**

Given the lack of data on weaponry (or the lack reported to the public), the dataset is limited in its ability to reveal patterns in the group’s potential attack arsenal. Of the 33 disrupted plots, only 15 had an identified weapon that attackers planned to use. The majority of these identified weapons (53%) were explosive devices<sup>23</sup>—in particular, remotely controlled bombs and devices to be detonated.

These findings are consistent with our data on other areas outside of the Islamic State’s defined *wilayat*. In both Southeast Asia and Turkey, explosive devices were used in at least 30% of the Islamic State attacks in the region.<sup>24</sup> However, other weapons were much more popular in these contexts, with small arms being used in 35% of attacks in Southeast Asia and indirect fire weapons used in 30% of attacks in Turkey.<sup>25</sup> If the data on Moroccan weaponry is any indication, the heavy reliance on explosive devices could signal that suicide bombing may become more predominant in future Islamic State efforts in Morocco. Suicide attacks have become increasingly common in provinces of the Islamic State, particularly in territory controlled by Boko Haram, which uses women as bombers with high frequency.<sup>26</sup> If foreign fighters begin to return to the region (having learned from these

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19. It should be noted that the most recent data is largely limited to activity that occurred within Morocco, and does not reflect or speak to the travel of individuals outside of the country.

20. Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

21. Although these are comparing foreign fighters who successfully traveled to Syria or Iraq to Islamic State activity transpiring domestically in Morocco, this increase does indicate either an increase in activity and recruitment in the Oriental region from 2006 through 2017 or an increase in domestic security by Moroccan law enforcement agencies.

22. “How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb,” *Middle East and North Africa Report N°178*, International Crisis Group, July 24, 2017.

23. Explosive device is defined as anything that combusts, including but not limited to suicide vests, suicide vehicles, IEDs, and grenades.

24. See *Beyond the Caliphate: Southeast Asia* at <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/CTC-Southeast-Asia.pdf> and *Beyond the Caliphate: Turkey* at <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CTC-Turkey-Final.pdf>

25. Ibid.

26. Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2017).

tactics) and if there is a simultaneous rise in female jihadi recruitment in Morocco, Moroccan security services will need to re-examine previous suicide campaigns in Casablanca and beyond to determine how best to protect its government and citizens.

### *Targets*

Approximately 70% of uncovered plots did not have a specified target. Without a successful attack or more data on the group's intended victims, it is difficult to analyze targeting trends. However, of the 10 plots that did have assigned targets, five were planning to strike the government, albeit different sectors.<sup>27</sup> Only two plots planned to attack tourists. Intent aside, though, Moroccan governmental institutions are centered in densely populated areas that attract tourists. Thus, a successful attack on these spaces could serve dual purposes for the Islamic State.

### *Counterterrorism Cooperation and Transregional Linkages*

Morocco has cooperated with many countries on counterterrorism, but most frequently with France and Spain. Both countries have had recent terror attacks with links to Morocco. In particular, the Moroccan security forces played a key role in the investigation following the Bataclan attack in Paris and the subsequent raid in Saint-Denis. Similarly, in addition to the Barcelona attacks, the 'key connection' between al-Qa'ida's central leadership and the devastating 2004 Madrid bombings was Amer Azizi, a prominent operative who grew up in Tetouan in northern Morocco.<sup>28</sup>

Morocco's counterterrorism relationship with France is one that has evolved significantly over the years. While the two countries have long shared intelligence, they recently renewed their friendship and vowed to cooperate

on counterterrorism in May 2015.<sup>29</sup> Following a year-long diplomatic rift,<sup>30</sup> then President François Hollande and Moroccan Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane met at the Élysée Palace, and both agreed to prioritize efforts to combat violent extremism. Such agreement, in part, was driven by both countries' "deep concern" about the large numbers of citizens leaving their homes "to fight with the Islamic State."<sup>31</sup>

The reconciliation was well-timed. At the request of the French and Belgian authorities, Moroccan intelligence officers traveled to Paris and Brussels in November 2015 to assist in finding the perpetrators of the recent terror attacks.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, it was those Moroccan intelligence service officers who were able to locate the terrorists, which led to the killing of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the alleged leader of the attacks.<sup>33</sup> Since then, the countries

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have worked together frequently, so closely that new French President Emmanuel Macron's first trip abroad following his election victory was to Morocco to visit King Mohammed VI in Rabat. The meeting aimed to "strengthen the relationship between France and Morocco, including cooperation on security issues."<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the two leaders discussed France's military operation against Islamist extremists in Africa's Sahel region. As things stand, France and Morocco are key allies in the fight against the Islamic State in Europe and North Africa alike.

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27. The attacks were targeting diplomatic government spaces, military spaces, and police spaces.

28. Leela Jacinto, "Morocco's Outlaw Country Is the Heartland of Global Terrorism," *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2016.

29. "France and Morocco strengthen counterterrorism cooperation," Associated Press, May 29, 2015.

30. In 2014, French authorities sought to question the head of Morocco's domestic intelligence, Abdellatif Hammouchi, while he was in Paris. Hammouchi was facing lawsuits over alleged torture. The Moroccan government suspended cooperation agreements with France in protest until 2015. Since then, France has given its highest award, the Legion d'honneur, to Hammouchi. Aziz El Yaakoubi, "France to award Moroccan intelligence chief Legion d'honneur after row," Reuters, February 14, 2015.

31. "France and Morocco strengthen counterterrorism cooperation."

32. "Attentats de Paris : le rôle du Maroc dans la localisation d'Abdelhamid Abaaoud," France 24, November 20, 2015.

33. Ibid.

34. Nadine Achoui-lesage, "French president, in Morocco, urges dialogue over Qatar," Associated Press, June 14, 2017.



The cooperation between Morocco and Spain has similarly been driven by personnel and organizational links found between terror cells operating in both nations.<sup>35</sup> Both the Moroccan and Spanish governments have generally succeeded in disrupting Islamic State activity.<sup>36</sup> Joint operations between Morocco and Spain, as reported by the media, indicate an active and effective process of information-sharing between law enforcement and intelligence agencies. In particular, one example from our dataset highlighted this cooperation, which transcends borders. On August 25, 2015, the Spanish government reported that a joint effort with Moroccan security forces “arrested 14 people suspected of planning attacks and recruiting fighters to join Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.”<sup>37</sup> The joint operation was launched as a result of the two countries’ close collaboration. When Spanish police alleged that the leader of the group “had strong work and social links with Melilla, a Spanish enclave in Morocco,” the two countries were able to work in tandem to make arrests in both Morocco and Spain, and to prevent any successful attacks.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Morocco’s relationships with Spain and France are not perfect. Given the recent attacks in Nice, Normandy, and Barcelona, all countries will likely continue to adjust their collaboration to account for radicalized individuals who are citizens of one nation, but who also reside in or are a citizen of another country. The Islamic State activity in this region is a broader European problem. Morocco’s relationship with both France and Spain will be a crucial part of keeping both regions safe.

## Conclusion

In many ways, the Islamic State’s influence in Morocco presents a puzzle for the government. Despite efforts in recent years, data shows that the number of Moroccan

citizens who went to fight in Syria between 2011 and 2016 is the largest since the 1980s, when the first wave of Moroccan foreign fighters traveled to Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> This could be for a variety of reasons: terrorist organizations’ abilities to tap into existing jihadi networks, the expansion of territory ripe for extremism in Morocco, or the economic stresses on Morocco and its neighbors.

Rather than relaxing counterterrorism protocols because Morocco has not seen an attack on its soil, North Africa could view the lack of successful terrorist attacks paradoxically, as a further driver for radical leaders and combatants in the region. That is, the more that the government prides itself on its counterterrorism successes, the more likely it could be that the Islamic State increases its interest in striking what is commonly perceived as a safe space. If the Islamic State is able to strike within the borders of a state whose defense is viewed to be exceptional, such an attack may carry significant symbolic value—and such symbolism could have dangerous ripple effects.

If the Islamic State is able to strike Morocco’s government, even given its concerted efforts to prevent attacks at home, the region’s security could become increasingly precarious—especially given the current struggles for counterterrorism cooperation in the region and the ease of movement between Morocco and Europe. Given the Maghreb’s strategic location, these attempted plots serve as a warning to the international community—Morocco is not to be overlooked. The threat there is very real, albeit somewhat muted for now. As increasing numbers of communities within close proximity to Morocco see violence from actors linked to or inspired by the Islamic State, Morocco could very well become a stage for similar forms of violence.

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35. See Fernando Reinares, “The evidence of Al-Qa’ida’s Role in the 2004 Madrid Attack,” *CTC Sentinel* 5:3 (2012) and Fernando Reinares, *Al-Qaeda’s Revenge: The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

36. “Counterterrorism Efforts In Spain,” Weekend Edition Saturday, NPR, August 19, 2017.

37. “Spain, Morocco arrest 14 suspected of recruiting for Islamic State,” Reuters, August 25, 2015.

38. Ibid.

39. Crisis Group interview, researcher on Moroccan Islamists, Rabat, November 2016. “How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb,” <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/178-how-islamic-state-rose-fell-and-could-rise-again-maghreb>

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