Managing religious discourse in the mosque: the end of extremist rhetoric during the Friday sermon

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The goal of this article is to examine the different types of sermons delivered in Moroccan mosques and how their content and orientation have changed drastically since 2003 as a result of government intervention in the rhetorical practices of imams during the Friday prayer. In addition to discussing the impact of the religious and political rhetorics of imams while delivering their Friday sermons and the types of rhetorical strategies used by each imam to persuade the congregation and move them to action, the article also discusses the Moroccan state’s recent involvement in the religious practices of its subjects in an effort to control and manage religious discourse in the country, and the extent to which it has been successful at curbing extremist discourse in the mosque. The article argues that the state has managed to achieve this goal by having recourse to some innovative and ingenious methods, including the establishment of a new imam school that trains new imams and murshidats (female religious leaders) in moderate religious discourse and community outreach, broadcasting religious homilies via close-circuit television, building new mosques and Qur’anic schools and renovating old ones, etc. The article attempts to shed some light on the effectiveness of these methods and how they have been received by the average citizen in Morocco.

Keywords: Rhetoric; Islamist discourse; Morocco; imam; sermon

In the Muslim tradition, the Friday noon prayer is one of Islam’s most important rituals. The Muslim community (umma) gathers in the mosque to pray in unison and, more importantly, to listen to the imam’s Friday sermon (khutba). Throughout the history of Islam, the Friday sermon has played a prominent role in the spiritual lives of Muslims around the world; furthermore, it has been a useful public forum for channeling religious, political and social announcements that impact on the way members of the congregation conduct themselves on a day-to-day basis. The Friday sermon is thus concerned with the discursive practices in the everyday lives of Muslims and what is at stake in the Muslim community. As such, it is a rhetorical discourse par excellence, for its aim is to reform through persuasion that eventually leads to action.
But do these discursive practices include the political arena, or are they confined to the religious and social spheres of the Muslims’ daily lives? In other words, is the role of the imam limited to reminding the congregation of their religious and moral obligations and urging them to follow the path to salvation? Or is the pulpit (Al Mihrab) also used to deliver political commentary?

Although most Islamic states would nowadays argue that the mosque’s pulpit should be used exclusively to transmit religious homilies, the history of Islam is proof that the imam’s role has always extended beyond simply delivering a sermon focused on reforming and saving souls, as religion and politics have been inextricably linked since the birth of this faith. The first Imam was the Prophet Muhammad, who was not just a Prophet but also a statesman,

and as the first Muslim preacher he enunciated public policy as well as the call for salvation in the Friday congregational sermon delivered in the mosque . . . Moreover, beginning with his emigration (hijra) to Medina in AD 622, attendance at the Friday sermon was a political as well as a religious act since it marked adherence to the newly formed umma or Muslim community. (Antoun 1989, p. 186)

The Prophet thus became the model preacher (Khatib) for Muslims; his sermons had to be injected with both moral and socio-political content since the fledging Muslim state needed to expand both geographically and in number. In addition to its obvious religious function, religious rhetoric served a political purpose in the early stages of the Muslim faith, for its aim was to strengthen the new Islamic state by converting the non-believers and the idolaters (with the sword if need be) and propagating the principles of the new religion, Islam. Therefore, oratory and eloquence (al khatabah wa al fasahah) have always been celebrated as a useful skill in Arab-Islamic culture, and the rhetorical culture during the inception of the Islamic State placed a high value on eloquence, which extended to the mosque’s pulpit (Gaffney 1994).

To this day, socio-political concerns continue to be an important part of the Friday sermon. An immediate outcome of the Friday sermon is represented by the demonstrations that still take place immediately following the Friday prayer in many parts of the world. The 14 August 2009 armed battle between Hamas and the radical group Jund Ansar Allah (Soldiers of the Companions of God) in the Gaza Strip, in which more than a dozen were killed, is a good case in point. The battle took place immediately after the Friday sermon and was the result of the radical imam’s sermon in which he declared the Palestinian territory an Islamic emirate and blamed Hamas for maintaining a ceasefire with Israel and for not being strict enough in observing Islamic laws.

With the beginning of the twenty-first century, and following the September 11 events, Islamic states found themselves in a quandary, especially when terrorist events began to unfold on their own soil. Morocco, a moderate Islamic state, found itself in the same predicament after the Casablanca terrorist events of 16 May 2003. Prior to these events, radical imams in Moroccan mosques were free to preach their gospel because their rhetoric was seen as ‘empty’ by the state. But one of the direct outcomes of the May 2003 Casablanca attacks was the unequivocal decision of the Moroccan state to intervene in what takes place in the mosque and, in particular, in the type of sermon delivered in mosques around the country.

The Friday sermon: the radical versus the state-sponsored sermon

The Friday sermon is delivered by a symbolic power figure, both political and social, who speaks on behalf of the congregation using the uncontestable sources on which the Muslim faith is based (the Qur’an, Hadith and Sunnah). Anyone who dares challenge or question the authority of these
sources is not welcomed, especially in the mosque. Thus, there seems to be an implicit understanding among all Muslims that the purpose of going to mosque on Friday is to listen and learn, not to challenge and question. In this public space, the pulpit assumes an important symbolic function that translates not only into religious authority but also in political and social influence. The relationship between the imam and the congregation is one of domination which is visibly played out in the mosque where the imam is above the rest, literally and symbolically. In fact, by ascending the pulpit, the imam automatically assumes the role of religious and political leader, and the congregation is called upon to acknowledge such a leadership role by making an effort to internalise the message and obey by showing passive submission to the imam’s message since it is based on the Qur’an, Hadith and Sunnah. At this point, one could argue that, contrary to the claim that Islam has no clergy, the imam might be seen here as an example of a clergy who acts as a medium between God and his flock, at least during the delivery of the sermon. His dress, demeanor and disposition clearly epitomise that role.

The stress on obedience to the imam is an important component of any rhetorical style. Saint Augustine (1996) argues that to be an effective preacher, one needs to speak both wisely and eloquently and have the words of the scriptures at his fingertips. Furthermore, any preacher who is capable of invoking the grand style will be able to command his audience’s obedience. 1

This stress on obedience in the Christian faith is also found in Islam: According to Qutb (2000),

There must be obedience on the part of those who are ruled. ‘O you who have believed, obey Allah, and obey the Messenger of Allah and those who hold authority among you.’ (4:62). The fact that this verse groups together Allah, the Messenger, and those who hold authority means that it clarifies the nature and the limits of this obedience. Obedience to one who holds authority is derived from obedience to Allah and the Messenger. (p. 121)

The prophet is also credited with the statement, ‘He who dies without an imam dies a pagan death’. Obedience to those with authority is derived from obedience to Allah and his Messenger. Such a concept is especially significant for what Antoun (1989) terms government Islam, the brand of Islam that serves government interests, as we shall see later. It is important at this juncture to point out that at least in the Moroccan context, the term imam stands not only for the mosque preacher but also for the king, who, in addition to his political function, also commands obedience by virtue of his being the religious leader of the nation as well.

The fact that the Friday sermon in general is often introduced through a verse from the Qur’an or hadith is significant, for early on the congregation is warned by the imam that what is to follow is based on the Qur’an, the primary source of Islamic jurisprudence, or on the hadith or Sunnah, the second source of the Islamic faith, both of which are seen as indispensable to the practice of Islam. Thus, at the start of the sermon, we are introduced to a very important requisite of this religious discourse: there is no room for deliberation or debate in a public sphere such as the mosque when the public discourse is based on these two religious sources. Hence, the Friday sermon is not deliberative, nor is it dialogic, contrary to the Da’wa (literally the Call, meaning the call to reform or convert to Islam) for instance, where the contents of a sermon on a tape or compact disk can be discussed and their interpretation debated, as Charles Hirschkind (2001) clearly demonstrates. During the Friday sermon in a government mosque, whether one listens to the sermon with understanding and pleasure is not as important as listening with obedience.

In Morocco, three kinds of Friday sermons can be identified: State-sponsored sermons geared towards praising the regime and validating government policy by stressing Islam’s insistence on
political obedience to the umma’s leader, the King, who assumes the role of God’s shadow on earth – also referred to as Commander of the Faithful (ameer al-mumineen). Such rendition is often challenged by the second kind of sermon, which is militant in tone and content. In such a sermon, religion and politics are inextricably connected, and as such its aim is to condemn foreign intervention in the Muslim way of life, denounce the Arab leaders for betraying their subjects, and exhort the Muslim community to unite against these corrupt influences and return to the more authentic form of Islam as it was practiced during the times of the Prophet, an era often referred to as the Golden Age of Islam. Thus, while the state-sponsored imam’s role is to serve the state, the Islamist imam’s role is to turn people against it.

Between these two extremes stands a moderate sermon still practiced in many mosques in Morocco. This type of sermon tends to be less controversial, for it is often grounded in moderate religious discourse more than in politics. Such a sermon focuses on the salvation of the congregation by stressing moral conduct and fear of God as the ultimate paths to salvation. This moderate sermon usually shuns direct criticism of the state or its institutions. Still, regardless of what kind of sermon the congregation attends, salvation is presented as a conditional goal: to be saved, one must act, although acting can take different forms depending on the type of sermon one is listening to. Following the right path that leads to salvation can be understood in different ways by different people who attend different mosques and are exposed to different sermons. Nonetheless, the imam of each kind of mosque is after the souls of his congregation, and rhetoric is the only means to achieve this goal.

The goal of this paper is to examine the two extreme types of sermons, the one delivered by state-sponsored imams who promote government Islam and the ones delivered by extremist imams who advocate political militancy and the establishment of an Islamic State. Two sermon excerpts, one representing each type of sermon, will be discussed for this purpose. The two sermons were delivered in two different mosques in Morocco between 2002 and 2003.2

These two disparate sermons are born out of two distinct types of Islam: what might be called government Islam on the one hand, and militant Islam on the other (Antoun 1989). The state-sponsored sermon is either dispatched by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to imams who simply read it to their congregations or is pre-approved by the same agency before it is delivered in the mosque. In this sermon, the imam, who is often a religious scholar (‘Alim) employed by the state, is called upon to acknowledge the ruling dynasty and address any current issues from a pro-government perspective. The imam in this case functions as the mouthpiece of the government’s official agenda that must be propagated among the masses in all corners of the country, a practice that has been in place for centuries now. This is the kind of sermon often broadcast on national radio and television on Friday, and whose effect is mostly important in rural areas, where these types of media play an essential role in ensuring loyalty to the state. On the other hand, the Islamist sermon can be seen as the antithesis to the government-sponsored sermon, for it relies extensively on the imam’s intellectual ability (ijtihad) to interpret the Qur’an and Hadith in a way that corroborates a purely Islamist agenda.

These two sermons may be fundamentally distinct in content, but they more or less follow the same traditional format of the Friday sermon, which is quite formal and rigid. The opening of the sermon usually sets the tone as well as the theme of what is to follow, although such an opening can often be exploited for various rhetorical effects. A good case in point is the opening of a state-sponsored sermon, which was broadcast on government radio in Morocco during the second week of May 2003 (a few days before the attacks on Casablanca).3 The imam opens his speech by invoking two verses (sura) from the Qur’an, the first one about the importance of being blessed with children and money: \textit{al malu wal banun zinatu al hayat addunya}
(Money and children are life’s embellishment). He then uses his authority to interpret this verse by stating that to be blessed with a ‘boy is the greatest gift from God almighty bestowed only on his most favoured servants who are models of great virtues, and those are the prophets’. This interpretation is immediately followed by the second verse, in which God addresses his Prophet Muhammad, *wa lakad arsalna rusulan min kablika was jaalna lahum azwajan wa durriyatun* (And we have sent prophets before you and blessed them with spouses and children), which the imam again interprets as indicative of the sacred message (*amana*) entrusted to the males, who are responsible for transmitting it from generation to generation.

Upon hearing this opening, one would expect the sermon to be about God’s many blessings, and above all the blessing of His subjects with children. However, the imam subverts the meaning of these verses, for his ultimate goal is far from the blessing of the populace with children. The imam’s objective in this opening is to announce the birth of the new Crown Prince, a baby boy who, according to the imam, is already entrusted with the *amana* (sacred message) of the dynasty he is born into. The newborn is introduced to the congregation as a blessing from God, for he is entrusted to carry on the rule of the dynasty that God has chosen to rule the country. This birth therefore acquires a religious stance; it becomes a sacred and holy event worth announcing in the mosque, and the congregation and the listeners are implicitly, yet forcefully by means of the Qur’anic references above, called upon to pledge their allegiance to the Future King only a few days after his birth. It is important that the continuity as well as the stability of the ruling dynasty be maintained and solidified through allegiance to the future ruler. Being a descendant of Prophet Muhammad, the newborn is compared to a prophet on whose shoulders falls the burden of the whole *umma*, a responsibility that he cannot refuse since it is decreed from above. And the task of the imam is to use the Friday sermon to persuade the congregation to adopt the same stance by pledging their allegiance.

Thus, immediately after his birth, the Crown Prince is introduced by the imam to the country as an ordained religious figure who is to become *the Commander of the Faithful*, following in the footsteps of his ancestors. The imam then goes on to suggest that ‘in light of all the above verses and their meanings [the imam’s interpretation], the whole nation is joyful and delighted at the arrival of the Crown Prince because the people of this country are pleased by what pleases their imam’. The imam here refers to the King of Morocco, whose leadership assumes religious significance. Not only is he the imam or leader of the faithful, but he is also the leader of the nation as a whole. It is important to note here that every king of the Alawite Dynasty has claimed to be a direct descendent of the Prophet, which entitles him to become the *Commander of the Faithful*, a title that clearly indicates political as well as religious authority, which is not to be challenged or criticised (in fact, it is a crime to criticise the King or the royal family in Morocco). Furthermore, the fact that the term ‘imam’ includes not only the mosque preacher but also the ruler is a clear indication of the political role that imams have always played in Muslim society, which makes the separation of state and mosque all the more difficult, as we shall see later.

One can argue at this juncture that when the state-sponsored imam imposes his interpretation on the congregation, he seems to be taking advantage of his hierarchy and authority in the mosque to sway the congregation in a sphere where argument and deliberation are not allowed.

The same thing can be said of the Islamist imam. Contrary to the state-sponsored sermon, the Islamist sermon is anti-government and often marked by a fierce rhetoric aimed at openly condemning and denouncing everyone and everything deemed non-Islamic from a fundamentalist perspective. This type of sermon does not simply teach or remind the congregation of the path to salvation; it aims to address current events from a purely religious and political perspective,
and attempts to provide answers and guiding principles as to how such events should be understood and dealt with according to a literal understanding and interpretation of the Qur’an and the Hadith/Sunnah.

The function of the Islamist imam is to exhort and admonish the congregation against the evil ways of the West, denounce the enemies of Islam, namely the Jews and the United States, who are seen as waging a crusade against Muslims and the Islamic faith as a whole. Arab and Muslim leaders are not exempted from this condemnation since they are accused of having betrayed the amana (sacred message) by allowing Jewish and American hegemony to take place in the first place and for continuously proving too weak to stand up to ‘the unbelievers’. Therefore, through this sermon, the congregation is called upon to mobilise against foreign domination and influence, as well as against their rulers who are seen as pawns who serve their personal interests and those of the infidels.

Any potential psychological barriers between the Islamist imam and his congregation are eliminated thanks to the authority, power and charm of the voice of the imam. According to Nadia Lamlili (2007), sociologists argue that such imams entertain a rapport of domination with the masses, especially since they play on the affective aspect of their faith, which allows little room for reason and argument. In this manner, their message subtly and insidiously reaches its target. One of the most effective methods of achieving such effect is through the wailing and crying that takes place during many Islamist sermons. By engaging in such practices themselves, the imams implicitly invite the congregation to join them and give free rein to their raw feelings. The congregation members are especially receptive to such behaviour when the imam is preaching on such sensitive themes as paradise, hell and death. In so doing, the imam exercises his control over the congregation by directly speaking to their feelings of fear, inferiority and guilt. Such practices take on a different dimension when tied to current political events, especially those that deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as we shall see later.

The Islamist sermon is action-oriented in the sense that its aim is to move the congregation to action by moving religious ideology out of the mosque and onto the streets, homes, factories and coffeehouses through the agency of mosque-goers as well as through sermon recordings (Hirschkind 2001). Rhetorical practices of fundamentalist imams are best illustrated through the following typical excerpt of a sermon that was delivered in a mosque in Fez, Morocco, in April 2002 following one of the most publicised Israeli incursions in the Palestinian territories:4

Dear Muslim brothers, it is the Jewish Crusades that have targeted Muslims and the Muslim faith in every corner of the world . . . a fierce war that one day targets Afghani land, one day Yemen, and another day on the land of the Philippines, but today this war targets the Sacred Land of Palestine, the Palestine of Jihad and martyrdom, the Palestine of Isra’ and Mi’raj, the Palestine of the Aqsa Mosque [the third holiest shrine for Muslims after Mecca and Medina]. The Palestine of the sacred Jerusalem is in pain; its wailing is heard under the assault of the descendants of pigs.6

(The imam then goes on to describe in graphic detail the atrocities that the Israelis committed against the defenseless Palestinians during this week of violence.)

They (the Israelis) have used the most technologically advanced weaponry, killing and maiming innocent civilians in the sanctity of their homes, not allowing food and medicine and blocking ambulances from reaching the sick and the dying, randomly firing missiles and bombs that do not distinguish between young and old, between a young baby and an elderly man. What is this that’s happening on the land of Palestine? What is this that’s happening on the land of Palestine? Reply you the-one-billion-Muslim community (Ajibou ya ummata al miliar), reply you the umma of
jihad and martyrdom, reply you the umma created to be the chosen umma (khayra umatin ukhrijat li nass). Weren’t you moved by those horrific pictures? Didn’t you feel pain on seeing those atrocious pictures? Didn’t your hearts ache when you saw that 64-year-old woman, when the Jews broke into her house and emptied 18 bullets into her and her son? The two remained dead inside their home for 27 hours without a decent burial.

Didn’t you hear the shriek of that Muslim baby who cried his heart out for a sip of milk that the Jews refused to let him have? You are right God; you are right when you said: ‘we have cursed them for their hearts are cruel’, ‘we have cursed them for their hearts are cruel’ (Laalnahum wa jaalna qulubahum kasiah). These are the Jews; these are the Jews (the pitch of the imam’s voice goes higher when he repeats the ‘Jews’); their evil ways should not come as a surprise to us. But what hurts the most, what hurts the most is this despicable reluctance to support our brothers on the land of Isra’ and Mi’raj. Where are you, you spies, you traitors, you the scum of the Arabs (Reference to Arab rulers)? You have sold your people; you have sold all the causes of the Muslim community (umma), even the Palestinian cause...

(The imam then goes on to lash out at the Arab leaders for betraying the Palestinian cause and for serving as agents of the Americans and the Jews.)

One should immediately hasten to note that the above translation in no way does justice to the original text in Arabic. The rhetorical aspects of the Arabic language and the role it plays in making the message appealing and persuasive is fundamental and cannot be overstated. Translating the sermon from Arabic immediately results in the loss of many stylistic features, such as rhythm, internal rhyme, alliteration and onomatopoeia, which are abundant in the original Arabic text. Islamic discourse and Classical Arabic are inseparable; in fact, many have pointed out that there could be no Islam without Classical Arabic, and there would probably be no Classical Arabic without Islam (Haeri 2003).
the congregation, and as such rhetoric becomes a crucial means in accomplishing this feat. The sermon excerpt above is clearly abundant in emotional rhetoric, and the ornate and lofty nature of the language used by the imam makes it all the more moving and persuasive. The rhyming prose and poetic magnificence is also quite striking, features that most Arabs insist make their language the purest and finest of all languages. Such a claim is reinforced by the Islamist view, which links the superiority of a language to the superiority of its culture. Hence, they go as far as to insist that Arab and Muslim culture and civilization have a higher moral ground and are far more superior to Western culture and civilization, which they accuse of being too materialistic and void of any moral values.

What is unmistakable about the sermon excerpt is the sensational and violent tone of its message. The imam sets out to persuade the congregation of the lawfulness and righteousness of the Palestinian cause and to rally his listeners not only by condemning the Jews, the Americans and the Arab leaders, but also by openly appealing to the congregation to act in order to save Islam from Jewish assaults, which he explicitly compares to the Crusades. Drawing such a comparison makes Islam seem the target of all non-Muslims, who are described as being intent on destroying it and its followers; therefore, the imam’s implicit call for jihad against these infidels is seen justified here.

The imam attempts to accomplish his persuasive call for action through several rhetorical elements in his speech. First, it is immediately noticeable that this excerpt is marked by the excessive repetitions of certain words and phrases that are essential to the rhetorical effect the imam is attempting to bring forth. The purpose of repeating specific details is to reinforce the call to action and make sure the message is ingrained in the memory of the congregation. The loudness of the voice and the beseeching and imploring tone of the sermon are also powerful rhetorical tools that put the congregation in a precarious emotional state. Such a state produced as a direct result of a rhetorical speech is reminiscent of Gorgias’ depiction of rhetoric as a drug (Leitch et al. 2001). In a way, the congregation is prone to be drugged by this powerfully persuasive sermon that calls for action against the infidels because of their continuous assaults against Muslims, which the imam lists in gruesome detail. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that most demonstrations in the Arab and Muslim world take place following the Friday sermon. The sermon infuses the crowds with passion, excitement and fury to a point where taking their raw emotions outside the mosque becomes the congregation’s only way to find expression for these feelings.

The imam cleverly personalises Palestine in the above sermon excerpt to have the maximum effect on the congregation: he compares it to a wailing, frail woman who is vulnerable and in need of help and protection but the Jews, to whom he refers as ‘pigs,’ are described as too inhumane and too cruel to hear her pain. Furthermore, we notice a considerable rise in pitch every time a repetition occurs in order to achieve maximum effect, hence the repetition of ‘These are the Jews’; with more stress placed on ‘Jews’ it is meant to persuade his listeners that action against them is necessary and justified.

In addition, the text is full of a great deal of alliteration, onomatopoeia, internal rhyming phrases and hyperbolic adjectives with similar meanings that are stringed together to drive the point home. In other words, the imam’s goal here is to convey the urgency of the situation and the need for immediate action. The imam makes extensive use of minute details to the point of nauseating the audience as a way of urging them to take notice of the conditions that the Palestinians are subjected to at the hands of the Jews: the 64-year-old woman who was shot with ‘18 bullets,’ and had to lie dead for ‘27 hours,’ and ‘the Muslim baby who cried for a sip of milk that the Jews refused him’ are all disturbing details meant to infuriate the congregation and fill them with rage and hatred towards the Jews, who are constantly referred to as callous and pitiless
Therefore, it is the Muslims’ moral and religious obligation to declare jihad against them. And to lend authority and legitimacy to his statements, the imam ends this section of the sermon by a quote from the Qur’an: ‘We have cursed them, for their hearts are cruel’. The imam does not express any surprise at what the Jews are capable of doing, and in doing so the pitch of his voice goes down in resignation. And he clearly expects the same reaction from the congregation. In fact, when his pitch falls, his tone becomes rather solemn and sarcastic, especially when he closes his condemnation of the Jews by stating that ‘their evil ways should not come as a surprise to us’.

Another important rhetorical device that this and many other Islamist imams use frequently is to directly address the congregation through rhetorical questions, implicitly imploring them to deeply and seriously ponder the meaning of the questions. In other words, instead of replying with Amen or Yes, as is often the case in many Christian traditions, the Muslim congregation is called upon to reflect on and think about the imam’s propositions. Inviting the congregation to consider the issues he is raising is persuasive in that it encourages critical reflection that is meant to lead to action. These rhetorical questions are harshest when directed towards the Jews and the US government; they are also mocking and undignified towards the Arab rulers, whom the imam accuses of being accomplices who continue to betray their own people through their silence and inertia.

The imam does not stop at merely asking these rhetorical questions but he goes further daring the congregation to reply to his questions. ‘Reply, you the one-billion Muslim community’, he says as a way of emphasising the immediacy and urgency of the Palestinian predicament, and at the same time making the congregation feel the guilt of their complicity and inaction, for he knows they have no reply. The congregation is tacitly made to feel cowardly, for they have betrayed the calling of the Sacred Land. But then, the imam shifts from the accusatory tone to a reconciliatory one by absolving the congregation of any blame for not acting. Instead, he turns against the Arab rulers, whom he holds responsible for the injustices that Palestine and the Palestinians are subjected to. At this juncture, the imam’s tone become sarcastic, indicating that there is no need to name these rulers, who have sold the Palestinian cause and aligned themselves with the Jews and the Americans, for everyone knows exactly to whom he is referring.

By holding the congregation responsible for the plight of Palestine and then absolving them of any blame and instead holding the Arab rulers responsible, the imam is indirectly calling upon the congregation to at least act against their rulers who have transgressed and violated the sacred promise (amana). In other words, in his condemnation of these secular rulers, the imam is calling for jihad not only against the Jews and the United States, but also against the Arab rulers. He implicitly suggests that this is not his call personally, but the call of their religion, which they must obey if they are to be considered real Muslims. The congregation is called upon to demand change by acting on the sermon, by acting to change anything deemed wrong or evil, following one of the Prophet’s sayings: ‘He who sees an evil act should change it with his hands; if unable then by his tongue; if unable then by his heart, and that is the least a Muslim should do’ (man raa minkum munkaran falyughayirhu...).

What is important to emphasise at this point is that all the grievances that the imam lists in his sermon are but a way to prove the inefficacy of secularism and the failure of the modern Arab state. The major objective from the emotional rhetoric that characterises this sermon is to sway the people and persuade them that a return to the so-called authentic precepts of Islam is the only solution to the deplorable state of affairs in the Arab and Muslim world. Islam is the solution according to fundamentalist thinking, and any action that can guarantee such an outcome
should be considered legal and justified even if it involved violence (Qutb 2000). In so doing, Islamist imams seem to follow the path traced for them by

[t]he early Islamists – men like Hassan Al-Banna, the former founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sayyid Qutb, Islamism’s most radical and arguably most influential theorist – [who] were motivated in large part by the apparent collapse of the Islamic order in the period after World War I. They wanted first and foremost to restore Islamic society to its rightful place in the world. Because they diagnosed the failure of Islamic society to have been caused by the abandonment of religion itself, they sought to return Islam to a central life-role in order to improve the overall condition of Muslim society. (Feldman 2008, p. 107)

According to Qutb (2000), ‘Political theory in Islam rests on the basis of justice on the part of the rulers, obedience on the part of the ruled, and consultation between ruler and ruled’ (p. 120), hence the consultative nature of Islamic rule, which is one of the fundamental tenets on which true Islam is built. Once it is violated, reconnection to Islamic ideals becomes a necessary goal that must be achieved regardless of the means used to achieve it. Islamist preachers appear to subscribe to this theory and feel that it is their duty to implicitly remind their congregation of their obligation vis-à-vis their rulers. Thus, it seems that

‘[f]undamentalists usually have a Manichaean worldview. They often seem obsessed by hatred of their foes. Their rhetoric tends to have a shrill ranting tone rather than a religious one. Religion becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself, a stick with which to beat the enemy rather than a source of spiritual solace.’ (Munson 1993, p. 152)

Thus, with a few exceptions and until recently, Friday sermons in Moroccan mosques in general fell into two categories: firstly, an Islamist discourse that preached for action against the infidels, including Arab and Muslim rulers who have betrayed their umma, and called for a return to a true form of Islam as it was practiced in the so-called Golden Age of Islam. In contrast to this type of sermon stands the second category, the state-sponsored sermon, which propagates the government agenda and interests as a way to preserve the status quo, stability and continuity.

Managing religious discourse through government intervention

Due to the rise of Islamist ideology, which promotes radical changes, many Muslim states have been trying to drive politics out of the mosque, as they think it should be used for conducting religious rituals not politics. Such attempts have not been very successful because the mosque has been known throughout Islamic history to be a site of both religion and politics; in fact, it is precisely this public nature of the mosque that reinforces the claim made by many Islamists that Islam and politics cannot be separated. Because this public sphere in Morocco and in the Arab world continues to be dominated by both religion and politics, it would be next to impossible to conjure up a separation between the mosque and the state, especially when the state itself continues to interfere in religion.

In fact, the Islamists argue that the separation of mosque, church or synagogue and state is nothing but an ideal, if not a fanciful illusion that no state can achieve, regardless of what faith its citizens adhere to (Crone 2004). A good case in point that Islamists like to point out as evidence of this argument is the role that religion continues to play in American and Israeli policies towards the Arab and Muslim world. These two states are accused of waging a religious war against Muslims all over the world. Therefore, fundamentalist Islam feels the need to respond in religious terms; Jihad becomes a justified act that the Islamist Friday sermon openly advocates as a response to the constant assaults on Muslims and Islam, not
only by foreign forces such as the USA and Israel, but also by so-called Islamic and Arab states that do not adopt the Islamist agenda.

Contrary to the failed approaches adopted by many Muslim and Arab states in their attempt to combat the rise of Islamist ideology and extremist beliefs, the Moroccan state has taken a different approach that has so far proven to be quite effective. As such, the starting point has been mosque reform because of the important role it plays in people’s daily lives on the one hand, and because of the extremist discourse of the Friday sermon, which had become a thorn in the government’s side.

Containing radical discourse in the mosque in an attempt to preserve political order became a priority for the Moroccan state on the eve of the May 2003 Casablanca attacks. Prior to this date, Islamist imams enjoyed the status of rock stars in their mosques (Lamlili 2007). They had the freedom to engage in any topic they deemed relevant to their agenda, and they enjoyed their status thanks to the large numbers of followers who packed their mosques every Friday to listen to their sermons. Every city and town had its own star imam, but the message was consistent and uniform: to preach against foreign intervention and influence, and to expose the inefficacy of the modern Muslim and Arab state, to call for its total overhaul and its replacement by an state based on the model of the Islamic State of the Golden Age. The imam’s discourse did not represent a threat to government stability at the time as it was viewed as empty and ineffective, and as such the imams’ sermons were largely left unregulated. However, immediately following the Casablanca attacks of May 2003, new policies were enacted to regulate and oversee religious discourse and its potentially dangerous effects on the populace and, in turn, on the state’s legitimacy and survival.

One of the first steps to contain the Islamist discourse in the mosque was the call for mosque and imam reform. The sacking of all non-authorised imams that used to preach freely in government mosques as well as in private mosques built and managed by generous donors followed. Furthermore, given the sensitive time that followed the Casablanca attacks and the government’s crackdown on civil liberties and freedom of speech, opposing voices were quickly silenced, which allowed the state to pursue its plan of taking charge of religion.

The boldest step the Moroccan state has taken in its attempt to counter the rise of the Islamist discourse of the Friday sermon, however, is the establishment of an imam school in Rabat. The main goal of this school is to train new recruits in the moderate brand of ‘Moroccan’ Islam and then assign them as imams to mosques around the country where they can preach and promote a restrained form of Islam. In addition to admitting young males to the new imam school, females are also welcomed, although their training consists of preparing them to become spiritual guides (Murshidat), rather than imams, since only males are expected and allowed to lead the Friday prayers delivered at the Friday sermon.

**Le nouveau imam: roles and responsibilities**

Imams and Murshidat are trained not only in religious affairs but also in how to partake in other social activities. In fact, in addition to explaining religious queries, one of their major responsibilities, according to the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs, is to strengthen the foundation of ‘Moroccan’ Islam by providing direction and guidance to the public in and out of the mosque through homilies, sermons and group lessons. Some of the Murshidat’s responsibilities include teaching illiterate women to read and write, advising future pilgrims and providing after-school programmes in mosques. They also work as counsellors to single mothers, prisoners and hospital patients.
By taking control of the mosque, the Moroccan government wanted to exercise control over religious discourse in the public sphere. Therefore, one would think that the role of the new imams assigned to preach in these mosques would be limited to preaching about the path to redemption instead of tackling political issues as well. On the contrary, a new form of politics has emerged as a result of indoctrinating these new imams in ‘government Islam’ (Antoun 1989). In addition to preaching about salvation, the new imam is also expected to continue to maintain and promote government policy, which entails allegiance to the current status quo and condemnation of any religious influences that are foreign to the brand of Islam long practiced in Morocco.

Furthermore, the roles and responsibilities of the new imam now extend far beyond the pulpit. Outreach is the name of the game. The new imam has assumed an important role within his community, that of the social worker and religious scholar who is called upon to manage the daily social and religious needs of Moroccan citizens. In fact, part of the imams and Murshidat’s training involves courses in public communication and social work, which helps them make contributions to a number of social institutions in an effort to educate, raise awareness and restore moderate religion to the populace. Patrick Gaffney argues that the role of the imam has never been limited to the mosque only. And as such, this role cannot be adequately described by any single model drawn from classical socioreligious theory. Attempts to reduce this role to what is arguably its historic norm, its primitive prototype, or putative cross-cultural equivalents are only partially satisfying. Similarly, efforts to define one master category as the basis for all others have also tended to elude or ignore the remarkable variety of social structures and ritual patterns that constitute this continuity and simultaneity of forms. (Gaffney 1994, p. 183)

Regardless of their socio-religious contexts, these roles and responsibilities have always extended far beyond the pulpit to cover socio-political concerns of the community. The imam in Morocco has always had a role to play in such contexts due to his position in society where his moral authority is perceived as much higher than that of the judge or any agent representing government authority. That is why the state has taken advantage of this situation and made the new imam assume more socio-political responsibilities involving more outreach programmes carrying a government stamp.

According to the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs (2007), the mosque plays an important role in unifying the nation and protecting it from foreign influences that might do away with Morocco’s unique brand of Islam, which is known for being moderate and deeply embedded in Moroccan cultural traditions (Popular Islam, as opposed to Orthodox Islam, as argued by Gellner 1981). The Ministry goes on to argue that the state’s intervention in the religious practices of its subjects will eventually help Moroccans return to the firm roots of Islamic shari’a, which are uniquely Moroccan due to the influences of Moroccan cultural traditions on people’s religious practices (Munson 1993; Rosen 2002). It further argues that a return to the Moroccan brand of Islam (Popular Islam) has always been the hallmark of the spiritual peace and stability, which have characterised Morocco throughout its long history, and has therefore made Morocco an exceptionally stable and peaceful country in the Arab and Muslim world.

Thus, through the new imams’ project, the Moroccan state is attempting to contain a brand of extremist Islam that it argues is foreign and incompatible with the Moroccan moderate brand of Moroccan Islam. In doing so, the State seems to have recognised that what used to be viewed as the people’s faith has turned into a powerful political tool capable of destabilising its existence. As a result, the state has felt the need to intervene in order to preserve the status quo – stability and its existence.
Another important step that the Moroccan state has taken to combat the rise of Islamist ideology in the mosque is the launch of a television channel – the Mohammed VI Channel – broadcasting exclusively religious programmes. Such programming has two goals: firstly, the continuous education of imams and secondly the broadcasting of homilies and religious lectures for the public. According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the goal of this project is to help Muslims acquire an accurate understanding of their religion through the explanation or interpretation (tafseer) of the Qur’an and Hadith. Now, instead of seeking advice on religious matters from outside, possibly through extremists, these lectures encourage people to seek advice and guidance in the mosque through qualified religious scholars using simplified Arabic (in other words, Moroccan dialect) that can help people of different abilities understand the moderate message of Islam.

Reviving old Qur’anic schools (msid), which until recently used to be the kindergartens of all Moroccans, is yet another step undertaken by the state to combat the rise of Islamism in Morocco. Contrary to the idea that building more religious schools results in the rise of fundamentalist Islam, the Moroccan state sees the building and restoration of Qur’anic schools as a means to provide the populace with a regulated sphere where they can practice their religion in the open. Such a move shows the government in a positive light. For religious Moroccans government efforts to restore crumbling schools and build new ones where they can send their children to memorise the Qur’an and their wives to learn to read and write are commendable. For the state, this is a win-win situation since it is able to gain its subjects’ trust and support, while controlling the rise of underground extremist discourse, and most importantly regulating religion from afar.

Conclusion

The Moroccan state has managed to beat the Islamists at their own game, with the same weapons they tried to use against it. It has achieved this feat by strengthening the presence of Islamic institutions in urban and rural areas and by using modern media to spread its message of religious moderation and tolerance, hence taking control of the religious discourse away from the Islamists, at least temporarily. The outcome of these steps is that open radical discourse has completely vanished from all mosques in Morocco. Instead, it has been replaced by a much more moderate discourse that preaches mainly on religious and social matters that fall within the boundaries of government Islam. The new imam may have been co-opted to serve the interests of the state, which guarantees that the status quo (that can also be called stability, legitimacy or survival) is maintained. But as long as government interests include a guarantee of peace and stability for the people, then the majority of Moroccans will continue to support government action against the Islamists. This public support is widely recognised and continues to be disseminated through government-controlled media (Societe Nationale de Radio/fusion et de Television, 2M, Le Matin, etc.). In fact, even non-government media outlets in Morocco (Telquel, Al-Bayane, Al-Itihad Al-Ichtiraki, etc.) cannot help but articulate the general public opinion that largely supports government action against the Islamists. Moroccans in general are apprehensive of the Algerian experience of the past two decades, and this fear continues to serve as a strong reminder of the role that the government can play to guarantee the safety and stability of its citizens, hence Moroccans’ unconditional support of the state in its struggle to quell radicalism.

As long as the state continues to call attention to the peace and stability that it has guaranteed its subjects in these uncertain times, it is expected to continue to count on its citizens’ support in the fight against religious extremism in Morocco.
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Notes

1. Cicero divides rhetorical styles into three categories: the plain (which makes the audience listen with understanding), the moderate (which makes the audience listen with pleasure), and the grand (which makes the audience listen with obedience). According to Cicero, the last one tends to be the most effective.
2. Both sermons were delivered in the city of Fez between 2002 and 2003.
3. Friday sermon, delivered on 9 May 2003, 12:30 pm.
5. Reference to Muhammad’s ascent to Heaven from the Aqsa Mosque.
6. Reference to Jews.
7. Allusion to aljazeera TV.
8. Praxis.

References
