

MOHAMMED VI, KING OF MOROCCO, TAKES HIS COUNTRY IN A NEW DIRECTION

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Once again the North African country Morocco is in the news. In late May, 2007, Spanish police arrested 16 men in Barcelona, 14 of whom were Moroccans. In addition to recruiting and training jihadis for action in Iraq, these suspects were most likely connected to the Madrid training bombings on March 11, 2004 that killed 191 people. Earlier in January, 2006, 16 Moroccans were also arrested in connection with this atrocity.

Spanish police have been closely watching radical Muslims from North Africa for many years. Saudi national Mohammed Atta, mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, visited these terrorist cells twice and most of their funding comes from Saudi Arabia. In May of 2003, three Saudis were given ten-year sentences for starting an Al Qaeda cell in Morocco and planning to blow up ships in the Straits of Gibraltar. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has also proscribed the teaching of the fundamentalist Wahabi theology from Saudi Arabia.

As in most countries in the world, the Moroccan view of America, now 86 percent unfavorable, has become much more negative. This same 2006 University of Maryland poll asked what would improve Moroccan opinion of the U.S. Brokering peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians garnered 75 percent, and 50 percent said withdrawing from Iraq. On the general question of whether the killing of civilians is ever justified, 79 percent of Moroccans in the same poll said never, but on a more specific question about killing Americans in Iraq, 56 percent said that it was OK.

What is interesting, and not a little shocking, is that only 46 percent of Americans said never to the killing of civilians. With regard to the second question, it would be interesting to see how many Americans would think that it was OK to kill Muslims who had invaded a Christian country.

Morocco's king, Mohammed VI, has vigorously pursued policies that project a moderate image, that liberalize the economy, that reject radical Islam, and that move away from an earlier American alliance in which the CIA helped his father to liquidate alleged leftist sympathizers.

Mohammed VI has supported the Equity and Reconciliation Committee, which has investigated the deaths of thousands of political prisoners, some of whom disappeared in huge vats of acid in a detention center in Rabat, the capital city. The committee has recommended the abolition of the death penalty, which, it is argued, would make it easier for those involved in the extra-judicial killings to come forward and confess. If capital punishment is abolished, Morocco would join Turkey and Turkmenistan as the only Muslim nations to have done so.

In February, 2007, the king's wife gave birth to their first daughter and in honor of the occasion, he pardoned 9,000 prisoners, including 14 on death row. This has been taken as an indication that the king supports abolition, and the Moroccan Parliament is expected to pass a bill soon.

When Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999 at the age of 36, most of the world knew him as a flamboyant playboy. That image soon faded as he soon broke with tradition and decided not to reside in his father's palace with 40 concubines. The king has declared that he will have only one wife, and he and his bride were married in an unprecedented public wedding.

As both the head of government and religion, Mohammed VI has issued a decree that Moroccan men must limit themselves to two wives, down from the traditional limit of four. (Actually only two percent of Moroccan men have more than one wife.) He has also ruled that women have a right to divorce, a right to sign the marriage contract, and the right to approve of a second wife.

When I was in the beautiful Moroccan port city of Essaouira in April, 2007, there were dozens of banners with the king's portrait, and every curb was getting a fresh coat of red and white paint for a royal visit. All of us should hope that this popular young king can help change the face of the Muslim world and eliminate the conditions and beliefs that make the terrorist cause so attractive.