

COMMENTARY

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Soccer fan support for the Islamic State: Protest or a new generation of jihadists?

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At face value, a recent one minute video clip on You Tube leaves little doubt about support for the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, among supporters of storied Moroccan soccer club Raja Club Athletic.

The clip released by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) shows fans of the Casablanca club that prides itself on its nationalist credentials dating back to opposition to colonial French rule and its reputation as the team of ordinary Moroccans chanting: “Daesh, Daesh,” the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State, and “God is Great, let’s go on jihad.”

The clip appeared to reaffirm the Islamic State’s widespread emotional appeal to youth across the Middle East and North Africa rather than a willingness to actually become a foreign fighter in Syria or Iraq notwithstanding last week’s arrest of nine people in Morocco as well as a Spanish enclave in the country on suspicion of links to the Islamic State and the fact that an estimated 1,500 Moroccan nationals are believed to have joined the group.

The Islamic State despite its brutality and severe enforcement of a puritan form of Islam symbolizes successful resistance for many in the Middle East and North Africa disillusioned by the failure of popular revolts in various countries even though they toppled four Arab leaders; the collapse and/or intransigence of autocratic regimes that fail to live up to their people’s aspirations; the lack of prospects for economic advancement and political change; and the West’s refusal to empower rebel groups opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as well as its perceived strengthening of Assad with its coalition against the foremost opposition to a regime that matches the jihadists in brutality.

“We have a high rate of unemployment. Young people want politicians to think about them... Some of them can’t understand... They are too impatient,” Moncef Mazrouki, the president of Tunisia, the Arab country with the largest number of Arab foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, said in an interview with Al Jazeera.

While Raja Athletic’s management failed to respond to the video on its official website and Facebook page that has more than 1.7 million followers, supporters of the club sought to minimize the clip’s significance. Writing on their Facebook page with its 118,830 likes, supporters quipped: “We are terrorists... Our goal is to bomb other clubs. We do not want land or oil, we want titles” below a mock picture of Islamic State fighters with the inscription, “Raja’s Volunteer Championship.”

The supporters asserted elsewhere on their Facebook page that “we will not start to argue and beg people to believe that this is a sarcastic action and a joke.” Some supporters dismissed the video as a public relations stunt. They insisted that they were demanding reform not radical change. To emphasize the point, the supporters posted two days after the appearance of the video an image of Osama Bin Laden with the words: “Rest in Pieces M*****.”

The Islamic State’s appeal as a symbol for Moroccan youth is rooted in the gap in perceptions of King Mohammad VI. The monarch, unlike most of the region’s rulers, neutralized anti-government protests in 2011 by endorsing a new constitution that brought limited change but kept the country’s basic political structure in place. As a result, foreign media have described Mohammed VI as the King of Cool. Moroccans however have seen little change in their economic, social and political prospects while journalists and activists face increased repression.

Mouad Belghouat, a prominent dissident rapper better known as Al Haqed, was arrested in May on charges of having scalped game tickets as he was entering a stadium to watch a soccer match. The arrest occurred a day after he had mocked the King on Facebook because he passed a performing group of musicians on his way to Friday prayers. “In Islam, this would be highly disrespectful given the spiritual solemnity of Jumuah prayer, and an even bigger mistake to be made by the ‘Commander of the Faithful’ who claims part of the legitimacy of his rule from his religious status,” wrote Moroccan blogger Zineb Belmkaddem at the time.

“Hope for a more democratic Morocco is fading, as the makhzen (the ruling group around the king) went back to relying on its old ways, reassured by the 'success' of its systematic crackdown that is responsible for disorganizing groups of protestors through repression and propaganda. Slowly dismantling the 20 February protest movement over the past years, the regime seems to have learned nothing and has chosen to walk backwards to its dysfunctional comfort zone,” Belmkaddem added.

Speaking to Freemuse after having served a four month prison sentence, Al Haqed voiced widespread distrust of the government, including law enforcement and the judiciary, as he discussed the pending appeal against his conviction. “I don’t expect very much from the Moroccan judiciary. The Moroccan judge is not independent. The king is the highest authority in the Moroccan judicial process. There are no laws that guarantee that the judge will truly look into a case,” Al Haqed said.

Al Haqed’s music like the chanting of pro-Islamic State slogans reflects growing popular discontent and an increased willingness to challenge the government whom many see as having backed down on its promises for true political and economic reform.

Speaking to The New York Times earlier this year, activist Maouanne Morabit warned that “a major part of the political class refused to discuss in public real issues concerning the ills of our society, namely the role of the monarchy, respect for human rights, the distribution of wealth, and the separation of powers... The kingdom discredited the left, trade unions, civil society and now the Islamists. It will soon face a direct confrontation with the people, and it will no longer have any safety valves.”

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author’s permission. Web link:

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