

COVID-19 and the Failure to Radicalize Young Men in Morocco –
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It is entirely normal for pandemics to be marked with a dramatic increase in religiosity. Morocco is [not different from other societies](#) in this respect. This increase in religiosity is not necessarily correlated with an increase in support for extremism or religious radicalism. Nevertheless, pandemics provide an opportunity for extremist movements and organizations to seize the initiative and try to use the disease, or the procedures used against it, to discredit the established order.

The implementation of a medical state of emergency was quickly followed by protests. Mostly young men, associated with several preachers who rejected the medical state of emergency, protested against it and the closing of mosques. Their leadership was trying to [exploit the pandemic](#) to attack the state in Morocco, as the protests were clearly [coordinated nationwide](#), occurring at the same time with the protesters repeating the same slogans.

Even before the protests started, a Salafi preacher called Abou Naim along with others were arrested for condemning the Mosque closure. Such arrests can be seen in the context of the greater effort against violent extremists, and the work of interdicting terrorists is continuing unabated by COVID-19. Morocco and Spain worked together to [shut down a cell in Barcelona](#) which had been established years ago. In short, the tempo of counterterrorism operations appears unaffected by COVID-19, despite the attempts to use the medical emergency to radicalize youth.

The protests [failed to gain further traction](#) despite their sophisticated level of organization. Subsequent protests were weak; the protests were condemned by academics, organized professional groups, political parties, and by a large number of ordinary Moroccans online; the state received support from [two movements](#) that have been bitterly opposed to it, the *Rif Hiraq* Movement and the Islamist *Adl wa Ihsan* Group; and finally, Moroccans overwhelmingly [rejected the idea](#) of Mosques having to be open at all costs, and that particular position had the support of the clerical establishment and of the society in general.

The current Moroccan administration is led by the Party of Justice and Development, which has an Islamist orientation overall. And while the emergency has reduced the role of the democratically elected legislature and the cabinet headed by the Government President (Prime Minister) in favour of royal authority, the presence of an Islamist leadership in Parliament and in the cabinet, which supports the medical state of emergency, makes it harder for movements such those in the protests to mobilize against the regime. However, when the difficult process of recovery begins, the country will have to address weaknesses in the healthcare and social welfare systems. Hopefully, the challenge posed by these problems will not be compounded with COVID-19 driven radicalization of young men.