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BRIEFING PAPER:

MOROCCO / The *Salafiya* – a new movement in gestation

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Who could have imagined, eight years after the May 16th 2003 terrorist attacks on Casablanca, that the Salafiya Jihadia movement¹ would today be leading mass-demonstrations for freedom and democracy?

Ever since its first rallies, the '20th of February Movement' (the name given to the protest movement that first demonstrated on that date), has included in its demands freedom for all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, including those from Salafiya Jihadia. On Sunday 24 April, ten days after the royal pardon of 190 mostly Salafist prisoners², several protests were taken over by Islamists demanding the release of the rest of their comrades, the closure of the secret detention and torture centres, and the trials of those responsible for the police repression, abuses and excesses committed during Mohamed VI's first decade on the throne. In short, for a remedy to the serious damage caused by the poor handling of the entire Salafiya Jihadia dossier in the period since May 16th 2003.

At the outset of Mohamed VI's reign, while the country attempted to heal the wounds of the Years of Lead - a term used in Morocco to describe the repressive seventies and eighties - in what was for the Arab world an unprecedented act of courage, several sectors of the regime, especially those related with the state's security services, were busy opening a new wound, encouraged by the most hard-line anti-Islamist sectors and the blessing of the West, lead by the U.S. - the main sponsor of the "war on terrorism".

In the months following May 16th 2003, the Moroccan police arrested more than 4,500 suspected "terrorists", of which the Courts, assisted by the new anti-terrorism law enacted days after the attacks,³ processed about 2,000 people. Subsequently, intermittent but continuous reports of the dismantling of terrorist cells of varying degrees of danger served as an excuse to justify the selfsame repulsive and repressive behaviour of the Lead Years, and the creation of detention and torture centres, like the infamous and dreaded Temara.

In this way, the pursuit of terrorists belonging to extremist and violent cells of the Salafiya Jihadia network, led mostly by preachers of hate, violence and excommunication, swept before it the entire structure of Morocco's Salafiya ideological movement, some parts of which had been living peacefully alongside the rest of society for over a century, despite their conservative, fundamentalist and sometimes even retrograde beliefs.

The history of the Salafiya as an "ideological movement" in Morocco (ideological because it never existed as an organised movement), dates back to early last century when its reformist side came to form the ideological backdrop to a major part of the National Movement during the Protectorate period⁴, and

¹ According to the police: "We have not found a structure movement called Salafiya Jihadia, but instead several factions with a common doctrine widely disseminated by preachers and muftis from the East [...], by books and sermons given by Moroccans," "*Mabadi at-takfir wa-l-istihlal wa-l-yihad*" [principles of excommunication, infringement and jihad], *Al-Ayam*, n° 50, 05-11/09/2002.

² The pardon included, besides the six politicians convicted in the Belliraj Dossier, several Salafiya prisoners, including some of the ideologues of the movement such as Sheikh Mohamed Al-Fizazi, sentenced in 2003 to 30 years in prison. Some observers saw in the king's pardon a first step toward solving what was considered a poorly handled issue, while others are suspicious of the intentions behind the regime's pardon, given that in fact most of the prisoners were expected to complete their sentences in the next few months.

³ The country's hasty anti-terrorism law was approved "unanimously" by parliament just a few days after the attacks, despite having previously been rejected by both political parties and Human Rights organisations.

⁴ Here we refer to the reformist Salafiya of Jamal al-Din Afghani (1839-1897) and his disciples Mohamed Abduh (1849-1905) and Mohamed Rashid Reda (1865-1935), influential at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

especially the Istiqlal Party. Its more fundamentalist strand was established in the sixties, seventies and eighties, at the hands of ulemas from the faculties of Islamic theology in Saudi Arabia⁵. In those years, Hassan II's regime tried to harness the salafists - who after all showed no interest in invading politics or in questioning the legitimacy of the regime – as an ideological shield against radical and coup-mongering ideologies, both from the Marxist Left and political Islamism. Later, during the past two decades, Sheikh Mohamed Al-Maghraoui, via the Preaching of the Koran and Sunnah Association based in Marrakech, was responsible for transforming it into a pseudo-'ideological' movement, extended right across the country.

However, the change that this "ideological" movement undertook in the early nineties due to a number of factors⁶, is what was behind the radicalisation of several Moroccan Salafist sheikhs who began preaching the re-Islamization both of the regime and of society, not ruling out violence as an instrument of this change. It was not difficult for them to win adherents in the suburbs of the country's biggest cities, where illiteracy, poverty and a feeling of social injustice reign. Nor was it difficult for them to set up very small but highly dangerous cells.

The Moroccan regime's big mistake was to put all these different expressions of Salafiya in the same bag, and present them as a dangerous and evil movement, deserving of eradication. Many Salafists, without having committed crimes or acts of terrorism, and even many "innocents" unfamiliar with the world of the Salafiya, were swept up in the excesses and abuses of the regime's security-centred response. It was a mistake that caused irreparable damage to both those affected and their families. Furthermore, if nothing is done to solve it, the regime's response could lead to unnecessary hatred and desire for revenge. A further mistake was to mix "innocents" - or mere followers of the Salafi ideology - in prison with adherents of Salafiya Jihadia, which could evidently bring about a contamination effect, turning prisons into a breeding ground of terrorist ideology.

Morocco should avoid making the same mistakes that other countries did in the 20th century. It is well known that the Islamic radicalism of the sixties and seventies that gave birth to the different Jihadist movements, was conceived in the prisons of the oppressive regimes of Egypt and Syria. It is essential that the security forces work to pursue and arrest violent Salafists, bringing them before the Courts to ensure that the full weight of the law falls upon them. But it is just as important to avoid that people who simply hold a Salafi ideology be treated as terrorists.

Given the steps that are being taken towards a genuine democratic transition, closure in the issue of the Salafist prisoners is a priority. If not, the country runs the risk of seeing its Salafists transformed into a real "movement" that has already begun to form around the Support for Salafiya Prisoners

⁵ In this case we refer to the Salafiya Wahhabiya, in reference to its founder Mohamed Ibn Abdelwahhab (1703-1792). The Wahhabi Salafiya is a movement born in Arabia in the 18th century based on the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence and above all, on the interpretations of the eminent theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), renowned for the rigour of his work.

⁶ Such as the return of the "Arab Afghans" following the defeat of the USSR at the hands of the mujahideens in Afghanistan, with their ideas of installing a Taliban model in their respective countries of origin, or the idea that the West was hostile to Islam and Muslims because of its political and military involvement in the second Gulf War between Iraq and Kuwait – a conflict considered by some to be a purely intra-Muslim affair.

Association 'An-Nassir', and is now beginning to participate in demonstrations alongside other social and political stakeholders.

Postscript

Just as the present paper was being published, a terrorist attack took place in the heart of the tourist city of Marrakech on April 28th 2011, killing 18 people and wounding another 20. Every sector of Morocco's Islamist movement, both the political Islamists as well as noted Salafiya members and prisoners, quickly condemned the attack and expressed concern at its possible consequences, remembering the response of State security services following the Casablanca attacks of 2003. The attack will force certain elements of the regime to demonstrate their ability to fight violence and terrorism, be it Islamist or of some different kind, through the law and justice system, without violating the rights of innocent Moroccans or halting the march towards democracy.