

RELIGIOUS WOMEN MENTORS: THE MOROCCO VERSION**¹G.Ye. Nadirova, ²J.R.Seytmetova****ABSTRACT**

Since 2005, the Moroccan authorities have decided to reform the country's mosques' religious policy and leadership structure. To this end, several strategies have been initiated. One of them was the creation of training programs for imams, male mentors, and female mentors of the new generation for active work among the population, in particular, to curb the radicalization of youth, especially in rural areas. These programs were short-term but quite effective for this purpose, and their specific feature was the involvement of women in the role of mentors. Most importantly, these are well-educated young women whose intellectual level allowed them to carry out creative preaching work in modern conditions. These programs were attached to the Mohammed VI Institute, and the contingent of students quickly became international, so imams and mentors were trained for several foreign, mainly African states. This practice allowed, on the one hand, to remove social-religious tension within the country and, on the other hand, to significantly increase the authority of the Kingdom of Morocco as an international religious educational center. The purpose of this article is to analyze the implementation of the religious policy of Morocco in recent years in the field of using the «female factor» to solve the social problems of modern Muslim society.

Key words: Islam, Female Mentors, Morocco, Religious Education, Educational Program.

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Діни әйел-тәлімгерлер: Марокко нұсқасы

Аңдатпа. 2005 жылдан бері Марокко билігі елдегі мешіттердің діни саясаты мен басшылық құрылымын реформалау туралы шешім қабылдады. Осы мақсатта бірқатар стратегиялар қолға алынды. Соның бірі – халық арасында белсенді жұмыс істеуге бағытталған, әсіресе ауылдық жерлерде жастардың радикалдануына жол бермеу үшін жаңа буын имамдарды, тәлімгерлерді оқыту бағдарламасын дайындау болды. Бұл бағдарламалар қысқа мерзімді болғанымен, аталған мақсат үшін айтарлықтай тиімді екенін көрсетті. Бұл бағдарламалардың ерекшелігі тәлімгерлікке әйелдерді тарту болды. Ең бастысы, бұл интеллектуалдық деңгейі қазіргі заманға сай шығармашылық уағыз-насихат жұмыстарын жүргізуге қабілетті білімді жас әйелдер тартылды. Бұл бағдарламалар Мұхаммед VI Институтына бекітілді және студенттер құрамы тезарада халықаралық болды, өйткені имамдар мен тәлімгерлер бірнеше шетелдік, негізінен Африка мемлекеттері үшін дайындалды. Бұл тәжірибе, бір жағынан, ел ішіндегі әлеуметтік діни шиеленісті жоюға, екінші жағынан, халықаралық діни білім беру орталығы ретінде Марокко Корольдігінің беделін айтарлықтай арттыруға мүмкіндік берді. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты – қазіргі мұсылман қоғамының әлеуметтік мәселелерін шешу үшін «әйел факторын» қолдану саласында Марокконың соңғы жылдардағы діни саясатының жүзеге асырылуын талдау.

Түйін сөздер: ислам, әйел тәлімгерлер, Марокко, діни білім, білім беру бағдарламасы.

Религиозные женщины-наставницы: версия Марокко

Аннотация. С 2005 года власти Марокко решили реформировать религиозную политику и структуру руководства мечетями страны. Для этого был инициирован ряд стратегий. Одной

из них стало создание программы подготовки имамов, наставников и наставниц нового поколения для активной работы среди населения, в частности, для пресечения радикализации молодежи, особенно в сельской местности. Эти программы были краткосрочными, однако вполне эффективными для указанной цели, и специфической чертой их стало привлечение женщин к роли наставниц. Что очень важно, при этом речь идет о хорошо образованных молодых женщинах, чей интеллектуальный уровень позволял им вести креативную проповедническую деятельность в современных условиях. Данные программы были прикреплены к Институту Мухаммеда VI, а контингент учащихся стал быстро интернациональным, так как осуществлялась подготовка имамов и наставников для нескольких зарубежных, преимущественно африканских государств. Эта практика позволила, с одной стороны, снять социальную религиозную напряженность внутри страны, с другой стороны, значительно повысить авторитет Королевства Марокко, как международного религиозного образовательного центра. Целью данной статьи является анализ реализации религиозной политики Марокко последних лет в сфере использования «женского фактора» для решения социальных задач современного мусульманского общества.

Ключевые слова: ислам, женщины-наставницы, Марокко, религиозное обучение, образовательная программа.

Introduction

For many years, there has been a practice in Morocco of training female religious preachers known as "murshidat", Arabic for "mentors". These women are taught to spread the message of tolerance and moderation in mosques, prisons, and other public institutions and places to counter extremism in the kingdom. This topic is extremely sensitive both in academic and non-academic social circles, including youth and women groups. In addition, it intersects with national security issues in the field of countering the spread of fundamentalist views.

The main role of the "murshidat" is to fight extreme ideas among the youth, using dialogue and explanations of the dangers of violence and terrorism. In many Arab countries, "jihadist" recruitment among certain groups, such as vulnerable young people, has become a major problem since the Arab Spring. According to the expert, Moha al-Naji, the idea of murshidat in Morocco arose after the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003, which killed 45 people and injured dozens. Radical religious movements are typically characterized by a strong emphasis on the strict interpretation and implementation of religious doctrine, often in a way that challenges the established norms and beliefs of Moroccan society. The first thesis of radical religious movements is often a call for a return to the fundamental principles of religion. This is usually accompanied by a rejection of modern or

secular values that are seen as incompatible with the true teachings of the religion. The purity of the religious community call for a separation from the larger society, as well as a struggle against the regime, which is seen as corrupt or decadent - these theses seek to challenge and even overthrow established social norms and values. The Moroccan government has taken a multi-pronged approach that combines security measures, socio-economic development, and religious education to address the root causes of radicalization and counter extremist ideologies. An important aspect of Morocco's response to radical religious movements has been the promotion of moderate Islam. The government has established various initiatives, such as the Mohammed VI Institute, which provides religious education and training to imams and preachers to promote a moderate interpretation of Islam. The government has worked with religious leaders and institutions to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance, and to counter extremist propaganda. Subsequently, the government decided to reform the religious policy and leadership structure of the country's mosques [1]. The expert reports that since 2006, fifty female religious mentors have graduated each year, receiving both Islamic and modern education that meets the latest trends in society and takes into account the mentality of young people influenced by advanced technologies and "open space". The authors of the article aim to review and analyze the process of implementing

the religious policy of Morocco in the field of preparing "murshidat" to solve the social problems of modern Muslim society.

According to Moroccan researcher Dr. Mohammed al-Zahrawi, the involvement of women in preaching is a pioneering program in the Arab and Islamic world [2]. He is confident in the effectiveness of this government strategy to restructure the religious sector, in part to limit the spread of "jihadist" ideology and contain extremist groups. As a result of this program, women have been assigned a more important role according to their competence in religious affairs, and many sensitive women's issues are no longer taboo. This, in particular, is mentioned in the works of Karima Dirèche, Meryem al-Haytami, Driss Magrawi, Margaret Rausch, Massoda Bano, and Hilary Kalmbach [3; 4; 5; 6; 7]. Thus, Karima Dirèche believes that introduced by the religious authorities as a result of a desire to feminize the religious field, the murshidat should have been the subject of wide publicity, especially in the international press, which was too hasty to present them as female imams. This publicity is reflected nationwide in controversy. Accused by some Ulama of wanting to lead the prayer in the mosque in the same way as the Imams, they are the subject of a clear fatwa adopted (May 26, 2005) by the Supreme Council of the "Ulamas": "The rite of Maliki and Islamic jurisprudence unanimously forbids a woman to lead the prayer of men". Neither in the history of Morocco nor among its "ulama" has it ever been proven that a woman led the prayers of men or women in a mosque. Dirèche notes the promptness of the publication of the text and its extreme rigor, which finally decides the question of the "imamate" in Morocco [2].

The mobilization of an ultra-conservative discourse on women and the deployment of a traditional legal system illustrates the difficulties of managing the major balances in Moroccan society, in which the predominantly conservative religion calls to order anyone who tries to question it. And many religious leaders of the Sunni world expressed their disapproval of this, arguing that only a man can be an imam.

Recall that Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, an influential Islamic scholar in Egypt, the Grand Mufti and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar until he died in 2010, stated that if a female imam prays in front of men, they will be distracted, and the spirituality of this moment of communion with God will disappear.

A kind of provocation that caused all these "fatwas" were Amina Wadud's holding a mixed prayer in March 2005 at the invitation of the Muslim Awakening Association in a New York Mosque [8]. The same thing was done in Italy in April 2005 by a Moroccan-born nurse, Naima Guhai, who led a prayer in the Siena area. These actions, which conservative circles considered illegal, raised the question of the reform of Islam and the reform of women as religious authorities. By the way, it was Amina Wadud who first expressed the idea of an anti-sexist jihad.

In Amel Brahmi's article "A quiet revolution: the female imams taking over an LA mosque", the author describes a similar situation, but again in an American context, which itself is less rigid about the presence of women in mosques and the expansion of their role in religious service. She details the bold attempts by Muslim American women to diversify religiously permitted activities and sermon content for female audiences, and the reaction of this audience to the proposed innovations. While many have misinterpreted the hadeeth that women cannot enter the mosque, these women illuminate in their sermons progressive topics such as sexual violence, abortion, miscarriage, and domestic violence [9]. Muslim feminists who advocate for a female imamate in mixed and unmixed communities point to Umm Waraqa, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, who led prayers in her home. Muhammad is said to have asked Umm Waraqa to turn her house into a mosque, thereby legitimizing the practice of being a female imam today. For some, however, this is not a convincing argument. The controversy continues. However, according to the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), a female imamate is perfectly acceptable in women-only mosques. Despite the debate that

has unfolded around this topic, Moroccan state structures are coping with the wave of religious conservatism that has swept the kingdom and reaffirmed their monopoly on control over the national religious sphere.

Methodology

We analyzed media and academic articles on the peculiar situation in Morocco, where Islam is the official religion of the state, and the king is the head of the Muslims, thus keeping political and religious forces in his hands. Based on the analysis of secondary literature on studies of special professional religious education and international relations of a given country, the authors of the article consider religious politics and religious diplomacy. The main idea of the article is that the state uses its strategy to strengthen moderate Islam in its domestic and foreign policy to increase its regional and global influence and accumulate power. A study is being carried out on how the religious training of female mentors is instrumentalized in achieving the relevant goals of domestic and foreign policy.

Main part ***The Newly Proposed Type of Education***

The traditional notion that mosques are the exclusive place for men when it comes to preaching and leadership was overcome, and it should be noted that murshidat attracted large groups of women, especially in villages. Back in 2005, the initiators of this movement stated that the murshidat would lead religious discussions, give lessons in Islam, provide moral support to people in trouble, and guide believers to tolerant Islam. In particular, they will work with women and children in poor ghettos, which are considered fertile ground for extremist recruiters [2]. Moroccan female mentors play a critical role in countering radical religious movements by promoting a moderate interpretation of Islam and by teaching critical thinking skills to their students, especially girls. Moreover, female teachers in Morocco can also serve as role models for girls and young women,

encouraging them to pursue education and careers outside of traditional gender roles. This can help to counter the narrative of radical religious groups that seek to limit women's roles and opportunities.

Some religious female mentors offer an interpretation of Islamic teachings that is compatible with modern understanding and values. One such approach is known as Islamic feminism, which advocates for gender equality and emphasizes the role of women in Islam. This approach seeks to reconcile Islamic teachings with modern values and principles of human rights. They argue that the Quranic principles of justice, compassion, and equality support women's rights such as the right to education, the right to work, and the right to participate in public life and empowerment. They also point out that Islam has a long tradition of female scholarship and leadership, and that women have played important roles in the history of Islam. They also emphasize the importance of women's spiritual development and encourage women to take an active role in their communities. They seek to promote a more inclusive and equitable understanding of the faith.

Over time, the initial project took the organizational form of the Mohammed VI Institute for the training of imams, murshidin, and murshidat (male and female mentors), which has been operating since 2015. Its main goal is to fight against extremist interpretations of Islam, but gradually it has also turned into a strategic tool for promoting the country's foreign policy, the purpose of which is to present the Kingdom of Morocco as an advanced spiritual center [10, p. 23-24].

This institute is not a fully higher educational institution, but rather a professional academy for people who already have diplomas of education. Religious training here is a short process that does not exceed a year or at most two years. It is interactive and aims at acquiring practical knowledge and developing the technical and operational skills needed to perform the prayer, deliver sermons, and perform other religious functions. Thus, religious instruction at the Mohammed VI Institute can be seen as a bridge

between the academic training provided in universities and specific training: it aims to offer practical training for the functions of imams and religious teachers.

By 2005, and possibly earlier, it was discovered that the intellectual level of imams in Morocco was extremely heterogeneous. The religious thinking of some of them remained very elementary and inadequate in the face of the many changes taking place in the country at social, political, and cultural levels. This made it necessary to urgently intervene in this category to educate it from a cognitive point of view and give it an awareness of the facts and problems generated by the reality in which it is immersed both nationally and internationally. That is why the newly proposed type of education has become extremely relevant and in demand to eliminate shortcomings in the religious sphere, in which there were not enough people able to respond fully to the new religious policy and achieve its goals. This program aimed to "rejuvenate" the intellectual resources of mosques by selecting younger religious mentors and equipping them with skills and qualifications that were appropriate for the times. The medium and long-term goal was to create a reserve of human resources in the field of religious practice.

At the same time, this program aims to integrate the female element into the religious sphere, traditionally monopolized by men in most Muslim-majority countries. This will mean a qualitative leap in terms of the distribution and democratization of religious power, thereby helping to break the hegemony of masculine, conservative interpretations.

Some analysts see this policy as an official attempt by the political regime to move towards what some call "Moroccan modernism" [11, p. 59]. "The ultimate goal of modernism is to create a new generation of imams capable of "rethinking the relationship of Muslims with the modern world [...] and adapting to the era of globalization [...]; imams capable of speaking the language of religious modernity within reach of ordinary Muslims" [12, p. 31-32].

Initially, the training program for imams, "murshidin", and "murshidat" was

limited to the local level and housed in the modest premises of the Supreme Scientific Council of the Alim Section in Rabat. In 2013, it evolved into an equivalent program but specifically for imams in Mali, following an agreement between the latter and Morocco that provided for the training of about 500 imams. Subsequently, many other African and European countries expressed their desire to benefit from the same experience. This prompted the state to incorporate the experience into a foreign-oriented institutional structure that could be aimed at providing "modern and constantly updated" scientific training [13, p.246]. The Mohammed VI Institute opened in March 2015, and in June of the same year, it was administratively attached (along with other religious institutions) to the Karawi University by the royal decree on the creation of a reorganization of the latter [10]. For Morocco, such international cooperation was a clear qualitative leap from national goals (which were decisive in the first version of the program) to regional strategic ambitions and interests.

On the one hand, this trend can be interpreted as an attempt by the Kingdom to point out the uniqueness and superiority of the Moroccan experience in governing the religious sphere, which may at least partially explain Morocco's security and stability in a troubled and threatened regional environment. In many countries of the Arab and African world today there are various forms of tension and conflict. On the other hand, there is a clear intention to disseminate it internationally as a successful model. Indeed, by turning this program into an international training institution, the kingdom aims to establish itself as an avant-garde regional spiritual center. With some observed decline in the rankings of prestigious institutions such as al-Azhar and al-Zaytuna, Morocco has begun to present itself as a flexible regional force, a "bastion of moderation and religious coexistence" able, through its experience in training religious leaders, to provide assistance and support to neighboring countries (especially African) in preventing and combating transnational dangers that threaten security and stability.

An Emerging Regional Power

To date, more than ten countries have actively joined the program, including Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Guinea, Gambia, and Senegal, as well as Tunisia, Gabon, Chad, and France. Other countries have made requests or entered into agreements that, however, have not yet entered into force, as in the case of Libya, the Maldives, and Somalia. What these countries have in common is that many of them are experiencing political and security turmoil associated with growing religious extremism (Mali, Libya, and Tunisia); riddled with ethnic or sectarian conflicts involving minority groups (Nigeria), experiencing a disturbing spiritual void, or characterized by religious illiteracy and unstable patterns of religiosity (e.g. Maldives and Guinea-Conakry). Thus, this cooperation is a way to protect and preserve their religious discourse from the specter of extremist infiltration coming from the border countries and generated by the regional situation. Morocco, through this program, seeks to support its strategic vision as an emerging regional power in Africa, strengthening its bilateral political and economic partnership with sub-Saharan Africa on a cultural and spiritual basis.

The study is open to young men and women under the age of 45 who have a degree in any subject from a Moroccan university or an equivalent institution of higher education. Candidates for this course must meet certain conditions: to know by heart the entire Quran in the case of Imams or at least half of the suras of the Quran in the case of murshidat, to enjoy civil rights, to have appropriate personal attitudes and to be in good physical condition.

For Moroccans, basic training lasts one year (divided into two semesters), while for imams of other African states, it lasts two years, and for French imams, it can be up to three years. The first semester starts in the first week of January and the second in June. In addition to the usual basic training intended for both Moroccans and foreigners, the Institute offers additional courses such as continuing education programs or specialization courses,

practical courses, and practical exercises [10]. Continuing education programs are a kind of special short program, which can be distinguished from the usual basic training by its detail and the required time: from three to six months. Until now, they have been used by groups of ulama, sheikhs, and adult imams from Guinea, Chad, and Nigeria. It can also take the form of a one-day or two-day course, similar to the one attended by some Moroccan imams in Temara (Rabat) in 2018.

Foreign students undergo a form of education that is largely similar to that provided for Moroccan imams, although minor adjustments are agreed upon with the authorities of the respective foreign country to adapt the education they receive to the realities of their country of origin and bring them into line with the general student level. However, the study program for Moroccans is more advanced, varied, and complete than that for foreign students, especially Africans. Indeed, the level of the latter is extremely variable both in terms of knowledge and in terms of diplomas obtained and proficiency in Arabic (the main language in which education is offered).

The institute follows an intensive training program that includes various subjects and combines theoretical studies with practical studies. Looking at the programs, it seems appropriate to distinguish three groups of disciplines: Sharia, linguistic and communicative, as well as humanitarian and social. Sharia sciences dominate, accounting for more than 50% of the approximately 1,250 hours per year provided for this training. Sharia subjects include the Qur'an and its related sciences, the Sunnah and its related sciences, Islamic law, the life of the Prophet, the basic principles of the Maliki school of law, the jurisprudence governing the office of Imam (which is replaced by "the jurisprudence governing women" for murshidat), creed (aqida) and Sufism. These subjects are taught throughout the year in all groups, both Moroccan and foreign, and can be considered "basic" subjects due to the number of hours devoted to them and the value assigned

to them in calculating the final overall examination average. Of the 26 weekly teaching hours, 14 are devoted to Sharia subjects, and the remaining number is distributed between the humanities and social sciences, as well as linguistics. The humanities include Moroccan history, Jewish tradition, psychology, Islamic philosophy, logic, modern intellectual currents, and national institutions. In addition, there are applied subjects such as Arabic, sermons, communications, and media studies, as well as hours devoted to the Qur'an and the memorization of some texts, which form a fixed part of the weekly program for most students.

In the second semester, the course "International Institutions and human rights" replaces the course on national institutions, and the course on the history of Islamic law or the history of Islam replaces (for foreigners) the course on Moroccan history. Two new subjects are added to them: research methodology, geography, and astronomy. It is interesting to note that the study program for Moroccans does not include the study of any foreign language.

The increase in recent years in the enrollment of students in the institute (the number has increased to 14 classes) raised the question of the range of subjects studied and the content differentiation between classes. To solve this problem, in 2016 the institute began to consider the idea of unifying curricula. The heads of the institute instructed some teachers to compile lecture material, which was to be accepted as textbooks, by specific instructions. Two and a half years later, the Institute published about 20 lecture kits (all in Arabic except one in French), which were distributed to Moroccan and international students in May 2018.

In parallel with theoretical studies and practical studies, the management of the institute plans several related activities of an intellectual, recreational, or sports nature to support the learning that Moroccan and foreign students receive. They take the form of a series of seminars, study days, and conferences on religious and scientific topics organized, for example, by ulama participating in lectures

given in the presence of the king during the month of Ramadan. In addition, the three-month training program includes optional physical education classes, which take place in the gym attached to the institute building. Finally, the Institute organizes a series of recreational activities every year. These include, for example, art evenings, cultural competitions, and visits to certain historical, religious, and tourist sites in the Kingdom for the educational purpose of encouraging "openness and integration, as well as encouraging a spirit of tolerance and constructive dialogue" between students and the leadership of the institute [13, p. 250].

Conclusion

According to outside observers and program participants alike, the experiment with the "murshidat" training program has been successful both in terms of teaching Moroccan men and women a moderate version of the religion and in combating illiteracy among women. In addition, the role of Morocco as a center of religious education for African countries has significantly increased, while this center does not duplicate and does not compete with al-Azhar University, but has its specifics, its educational programs, and a more modern approach to the forms and content of education. By creating short-term professional programs, it is more than other religious educational institutions focused on students representing various Muslim countries.

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