Morocco’s Counterterrorism Strategy: Security, Intelligence, International Cooperation, and the Evolution of the Terrorist Threat

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Abstract

Since the Casablanca terrorist attacks of May 2003, Morocco has progressively developed a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy combining intelligence-led security measures, law enforcement, religious reform, international cooperation, counter-radicalisation policies, and community engagement. The attacks of 2003 represented a major turning point in Moroccan security policy and contributed to the development of a more proactive approach to identifying and disrupting terrorist networks before they could execute planned attacks.

The Moroccan experience is particularly significant because of the country's geographical position between Europe, North Africa, and the Sahel, as well as its proximity to regions affected by violent extremism and terrorist activity. Morocco has subsequently dismantled numerous suspected terrorist cells and arrested individuals accused of planning or supporting terrorist activities. International reporting has repeatedly described the Moroccan counterterrorism approach as comprehensive, emphasising intelligence collection, police operations, international cooperation, and counter-radicalisation policies.

This study analyses the evolution and principal characteristics of Morocco's counterterrorism strategy. It focuses particularly on the role of intelligence, rapid intervention, international cooperation, religious policy, and community-level information. It also examines Morocco's position according to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), the evolution of terrorist threats inside the

country, and cooperation with international partners, particularly Spain and the United States.
The analysis suggests that Morocco's relative success in preventing major terrorist attacks cannot be attributed to a single security institution or measure. Rather, it reflects the interaction of intelligence capabilities, preventive law enforcement, international information sharing, counter-radicalisation programmes, and broader political and institutional measures. At the same time, the persistence of ISIS-inspired activity and the possibility of lone-actor attacks demonstrate that the decline in successful attacks should not be interpreted as the disappearance of the terrorist threat.
Keywords: Morocco; counterterrorism; terrorism; intelligence; ISIS; Al-Qaeda; BCIJ; DGST; international cooperation; violent extremism; Sahel; Global Terrorism Index.

1. Introduction

Morocco occupies a strategically important position at the intersection of North Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Sahel. This geographical position provides significant economic and political opportunities but also exposes the country to transnational security challenges, including terrorism, violent extremism, organised crime, irregular migration, and instability originating from neighbouring regions.
The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has experienced prolonged political instability, armed conflict, civil violence, and the development of extremist organisations. The expansion of Al-Qaeda-linked organisations and, later, ISIS created additional security challenges for states throughout the region. Morocco has therefore viewed violent extremism as a national-security concern while simultaneously developing a strategy intended to prevent radicalisation and terrorist mobilisation.
The Casablanca attacks of 16 May 2003 constituted a major turning point. Five coordinated suicide attacks in Casablanca killed 45 people, including the attackers, and demonstrated that Morocco could not consider international terrorism an external phenomenon. The attacks encouraged the Moroccan authorities to strengthen counterterrorism legislation, intelligence capabilities, policing, religious policy, and international security cooperation.

Morocco's subsequent strategy increasingly emphasised prevention rather than simply responding after an attack had occurred. The United States Department of State has repeatedly characterised Morocco's approach as comprehensive, combining vigilant security measures, regional and international cooperation, and counter-radicalisation policies.

The Moroccan approach is therefore based on the principle that terrorism must be addressed at several stages: before radicalisation develops into violence, during the identification and surveillance of suspected networks, during the disruption of terrorist planning, and after arrest through judicial and rehabilitation mechanisms.

This study examines the following research question:

To what extent has Morocco's comprehensive counterterrorism strategy contributed to the prevention and disruption of terrorist activity since 2003?

The study argues that Morocco's counterterrorism performance is best understood as the product of a multidimensional strategy rather than the effectiveness of a single institution. Intelligence-led prevention, rapid law-enforcement intervention, international information sharing, religious reform, and community-level cooperation have collectively contributed to the disruption of terrorist activity.

However, the study also recognises important limitations. A low number of successful attacks does not necessarily mean that the underlying terrorist threat has disappeared. ISIS-inspired individuals and small cells continue to represent a potential threat, while developments in the Sahel, online radicalisation, returning foreign terrorist fighters, and lone-actor violence create new challenges.

2. The Evolution of Morocco's Counterterrorism Policy Since 2003

Before 2003, terrorism was generally perceived in Morocco as a comparatively limited or externally generated threat. The Casablanca attacks fundamentally changed this perception.

The attacks demonstrated that extremist networks could mobilise inside Morocco and target both Moroccan and foreign citizens. In response, the Moroccan authorities developed a stronger legal and institutional framework

for counterterrorism. Counterterrorism legislation was introduced in 2003 and subsequently expanded, including in 2015 in response to developments associated with foreign terrorist fighters and international terrorist travel.

The post-2003 strategy developed around several interconnected components:

- Intelligence collection and analysis;
- Preventive surveillance and investigation;
- Rapid intervention against suspected terrorist cells;
- Judicial prosecution;
- Border and travel controls;
- Religious reform and promotion of moderate religious discourse;
- Prison rehabilitation and reintegration programmes;
- International intelligence cooperation;
- Regional security cooperation; and
- Measures designed to prevent violent radicalisation.

The Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) became particularly important in the operational dimension of counterterrorism. The BCIJ operates under the General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance (DGST) and is responsible for major counterterrorism investigations and prosecutions. The importance of intelligence-led prevention is particularly evident in the Moroccan government's emphasis on dismantling cells during the early stages of attack preparation.

3. Characteristics of Morocco's Counterterrorism Strategy

Morocco's counterterrorism strategy can be characterized as multidimensional. Its principal characteristics include the following.

3.1 A preventive and intelligence-led approach

One of the most important characteristics of Morocco's strategy is the emphasis on preventing terrorist operations before they reach the execution stage.

Instead of relying primarily on post-attack investigations, Moroccan security agencies seek to identify suspicious individuals, networks, recruitment activities, communications, and preparations at an early stage.

The U.S. Department of State has repeatedly reported that Moroccan law-enforcement agencies use intelligence collection, police work, and international cooperation to conduct counterterrorism operations.

This approach creates an important distinction between **responding to terrorism** and **preventing terrorism**. In the Moroccan case, prevention is a central component of the security architecture.

3.2 Rapid security intervention

The second characteristic is the capacity to move from intelligence collection to operational intervention.

The effectiveness of intelligence depends not only on obtaining information but also on analysing it and acting upon it in a timely manner. Moroccan counterterrorism operations have frequently targeted cells during the planning phase.

This is significant because terrorist organizations and small extremist cells often require time to recruit members, acquire resources, identify targets, establish communications, and prepare attacks. Interrupting this process before completion can therefore prevent an attack without requiring a response to a completed terrorist operation.

3.3 A multidimensional approach

Morocco's strategy is not limited to policing. It also incorporates religious, educational, social, judicial, and international dimensions.

The religious dimension has become particularly important following the 2003 attacks. Morocco has developed institutions for religious education, imam training, and the promotion of religious discourse based on the country's established religious tradition.

The U.S. Department of State has highlighted the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Mourchidines and Mourchidates and the role of the Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas in addressing radicalisation

3.4 Counter-radicalisation and rehabilitation

Morocco's strategy also includes measures aimed at preventing violent radicalization and rehabilitating prisoners convicted of terrorism-related offences.

The **Moussalaha (Reconciliation)** program is one example. The program seeks to provide religious, psychological, educational, and social support to prisoners in order to facilitate disengagement from violent extremist ideas and reintegration into society.

This dimension is important because counterterrorism cannot be reduced to arrests. Sustainable prevention also requires addressing the ideological and social processes that can facilitate mobilization toward violence.

3.5 International and South-South cooperation

International cooperation is another central pillar of the Moroccan approach.

Morocco cooperates with European states, the United States, African partners, and multilateral organizations. It is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and the Global Counterterrorism Forum and has participated in international programmes addressing terrorist travel, foreign terrorist fighters, terrorist financing, and violent extremism.

Morocco also plays an increasingly important role in African counterterrorism capacity building. Its geographical position makes cooperation with Sahelian states particularly significant.

4. SWOT Analysis of Morocco's Counterterrorism Strategy

A SWOT framework can help identify the principal strengths and weaknesses of the Moroccan approach while considering external opportunities and threats.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Strong intelligence capabilities	Heavy reliance on security institutions
Rapid intervention against suspected cells	Limited transparency surrounding intelligence operations
Extensive international cooperation	Potential tension between security measures and civil liberties

Strong cooperation between security institutions	Centralisation of counterterrorism decision-making
Religious and counter-radicalisation programmes	Difficulties in measuring the long-term effectiveness of deradicalisation
Experience accumulated since 2003	Continuing vulnerability to lone-actor violence
Strong cooperation with Spain, the United States and European partners	Dependence on continued international intelligence cooperation
Opportunities	**Threats**
Expansion of African security cooperation	Instability in the Sahel
Increased intelligence-sharing mechanisms	ISIS-inspired lone actors
Development of cyber and digital intelligence	Online radicalisation
International training and capacity building	Foreign terrorist fighters and returnees
Cooperation with international organisations	Cross-border organised crime
Development of community-based prevention	Evolution of terrorist recruitment methods

Morocco's position as a regional security partner	Instability in neighbouring regions

The SWOT analysis demonstrates that Morocco's principal strength is the integration of multiple counterterrorism instruments. At the same time, the strategy faces the challenge of maintaining an effective security response while preserving legal safeguards and public confidence.

5. Morocco and the Global Terrorism Index

The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) provides a useful comparative indicator for examining the impact of terrorism, although it should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the effectiveness of a country's security services.

According to the 2026 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), Morocco ranked 100th, with a score of 0, indicating no recorded impact of terrorism according to the index's measured indicators.

The relevant regional figures were:

Country	**GTI Rank**	**Score**
Egypt	32	3.465
Libya	59	1.007
Tunisia	50	1.522
Algeria	47	1.766
Morocco	100	0
Mauritania	100	0
Sudan	100	0

The GTI data therefore place Morocco among the countries with no measured impact of terrorism in the 2026 edition. Morocco's score of zero was lower than those recorded for Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria.

However, the ranking should be interpreted carefully. A country's GTI score measures the impact of terrorism, taking into account indicators such as terrorist incidents, fatalities, injuries, and property damage. It should not be interpreted as a direct or comprehensive measure of a country's counterterrorism capabilities, security-sector effectiveness, or the complete absence of a terrorist threat.

Consequently, it is more academically accurate to state that Morocco recorded a zero measured impact of terrorism according to the 2026 Global Terrorism Index, rather than describing Morocco categorically as "the safest country" or as having eliminated the terrorist threats.

6. Intelligence and the Prevention of Terrorist Attacks

Intelligence represents one of the central pillars of Morocco's counterterrorism strategy.

The principal objective is to identify potential threats before they develop into operational terrorist attacks. This involves collecting information, identifying suspicious networks, analysing relationships between individuals, monitoring extremist activity, and coordinating information between intelligence and law-enforcement institutions.

The Moroccan approach is particularly focused on small, decentralized cells. International reporting has repeatedly noted that the majority of terrorist threats facing Morocco have involved small independent groups or individuals inspired by or affiliated with ISIS rather than large conventional terrorist organizations.

This development is important because the structure of terrorism has changed. The threat increasingly comes from:

- S**mall cells;**
- **Self-radicalized individuals;**
- **Online recruitment;**
- **Individuals inspired by terrorist propaganda;**
- **Returning foreign terrorist fighters; and**
- **Individuals attempting to act without direct organizational control.**

Consequently, intelligence agencies must increasingly monitor not only established organizations but also individuals who may rapidly move from radicalization to violence.

7. Terrorist Cells and the Importance of Early Disruption

Your original analysis of the size and equipment of dismantled cells is useful, but the figures should only be retained if the underlying dataset is clearly identified and independently documented.

Rather than presenting the percentages as universally representative of Moroccan terrorist cells, the analysis should state that they are **findings from the author's dataset**.

The pattern described in the dataset suggests that many suspected cells were relatively small. This is consistent with broader international reporting describing Morocco's terrorist threat as predominantly involving small, independent cells.

However, cell size alone does not determine operational capability. A small group may represent a serious threat if it possesses technical expertise, access to weapons or explosives, external connections, or an individual with previous operational experience.

The more useful analytical question is therefore not simply **how many people belong to a cell**, but **how developed the cell's operational capabilities are at the time of intervention**.

This provides a stronger explanation for the importance of early intervention.

8. Terrorist Cells, Cities and Community-Level Information

The original paper places considerable emphasis on information originating from local communities. This is an important dimension of counterterrorism, but it should be presented carefully.

Community cooperation can help security authorities identify suspicious behaviour, unfamiliar individuals, unusual activity, or other information that may otherwise remain outside formal intelligence channels.

The relationship between communities and law enforcement can therefore contribute to early detection. U.S. reporting has also highlighted programs designed to increase dialogue between police and communities in Morocco, suggesting that community-oriented approaches can improve communication and trust.

Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to argue that ordinary citizens are the "most successful" component of the Moroccan intelligence system without empirical evidence.

A more defensible conclusion is that **community-level information can complement formal intelligence capabilities by providing local**

information that may otherwise be difficult for national institutions to obtain.

9. Major Terrorist Incidents in Morocco

9.1 The Casablanca attacks – 16 May 2003

The Casablanca attacks were the most significant terrorist attacks in modern Moroccan history.

Five coordinated suicide attacks targeted several locations in Casablanca and killed 45 people, including the attackers. The attacks fundamentally altered Morocco's understanding of the terrorist threat and contributed to major changes in national counterterrorism policy.

The attacks also demonstrated that Morocco could be directly targeted by networks influenced by transnational jihadist ideology.

9.2 The Marrakech/Argana attack – 28 April 2011

On 28 April 2011, an explosion at the Argana café in Marrakech killed 17 people and injured more than 20.

An important correction is necessary here. The attack should **not** be described unequivocally as an Al-Qaeda attack.

According to the U.S. Department of State's 2011 terrorism report, the perpetrator, Adil el-Atmani, was described by Moroccan authorities as a Salafist and admirer of Al-Qaeda, but the cell was **not connected to an organised terrorist group**.

This distinction is important for an academic study because ideological inspiration and formal organisational affiliation are not the same thing.

9.3 The Imlil attack – December 2018

In December 2018, two Scandinavian tourists were murdered near Imlil in an ISIS-inspired terrorist attack. The United States Department of State described this as Morocco's first terrorist incident since 2011.

The incident demonstrates why the absence of frequent large-scale attacks should not be interpreted as the disappearance of the terrorist threat.

Instead, it illustrates the evolution of terrorism toward smaller, decentralised, and potentially self-radicalised actors.

10. The Changing Nature of the Al-Qaeda and ISIS Threat

One of the central observations of this study is the changing profile of terrorist activity in Morocco.

Following the emergence of ISIS as a major transnational terrorist organisation, Moroccan authorities increasingly disrupted cells described as ISIS-inspired or ISIS-affiliated.

U.S. terrorism reports from 2017 onward repeatedly noted that most of the terrorist threats confronting Morocco came from small cells that claimed to be inspired by or affiliated with ISIS.

This does not necessarily mean that Al-Qaeda ceased to exist as a potential threat. Rather, the organisational environment changed.

The absence of large, openly operating Al-Qaeda cells should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that Al-Qaeda ideology has disappeared from Morocco. A better interpretation is that the Moroccan security environment has made the establishment and operation of large terrorist networks considerably more difficult.

At the same time, terrorist organisations can adapt by using decentralised recruitment, encrypted communications, online propaganda, lone actors, and small autonomous cells.

11. Morocco-Spain Counterterrorism Cooperation

Spain is one of Morocco's most important counterterrorism partners.

Geographical proximity, extensive human mobility, historical connections, and the presence of Moroccan communities in Spain make bilateral security cooperation particularly important.

Moroccan and Spanish authorities have cooperated in investigations involving terrorist suspects and terrorist recruitment networks. The United States Department of State has repeatedly recognised strong Moroccan cooperation with Spain and other European partners in efforts to prevent terrorist threats.

Following the 2017 terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, Moroccan authorities assisted Spanish investigations and increased cooperation concerning individuals of Moroccan origin suspected of radicalisation or terrorism-related activity.

This cooperation demonstrates that counterterrorism is no longer exclusively a national issue. A suspect may be radicalised in one country, communicate with individuals in another, travel through a third country, and plan an attack somewhere else.

Consequently, effective counterterrorism requires:

- **Intelligence sharing;**
- **Joint investigations;**
- **Border cooperation;**
- **Information concerning foreign terrorist fighters;**
- **Monitoring of terrorist financing;**
- **Cooperation against online radicalisation; and**
- **Judicial cooperation.**

12. Morocco-United States Counterterrorism Cooperation

The United States and Morocco have maintained extensive security cooperation for decades.

The United States has described Morocco as a major partner in counterterrorism and regional security. Morocco has participated in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership since 2005 and was among the founding members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum in 2011. It joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in 2014.

The bilateral relationship also includes military and law-enforcement cooperation. Morocco hosts the African Lion military exercise, which provides opportunities for multinational training and interoperability.

Cooperation has extended beyond bilateral relations. Morocco and the United States have jointly supported initiatives addressing homegrown terrorism, terrorist travel, border security, and information sharing.

This international dimension reinforces Morocco's transformation from a state primarily concerned with protecting its own territory into a contributor to wider counterterrorism efforts.

13. Morocco as a Regional Counterterrorism Partner

Morocco increasingly presents itself not only as a country responding to terrorism but also as a regional provider of counterterrorism expertise.

This development is particularly significant in Africa.
Morocco has developed partnerships involving religious training, security cooperation, intelligence sharing, military exercises, and counter-radicalisation.
The establishment of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism programme office in Morocco for specialised counterterrorism and law-enforcement training in Africa further reflects the country's growing role in international capacity building.
This evolution can be described as a transition from **counterterrorism consumer to counterterrorism contributor**.
However, the concept should be used analytically rather than as a purely political description. Morocco's contribution should be evaluated through measurable forms of cooperation, including intelligence sharing, training, joint operations, institutional capacity building, and participation in multilateral mechanisms.

14. Religious Reform and Countering Violent Extremism

Security measures alone cannot fully address terrorism because terrorist mobilisation is partly connected to ideological and social processes.
Morocco therefore developed a religious-policy dimension to its counterterrorism strategy after 2003.
The state strengthened religious institutions, imam training, religious education, and the dissemination of an official interpretation of Moroccan Islam.
The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Mourchidines and Mourchidates is an important element of this policy. Morocco has also developed religious cooperation with several African countries.
The underlying objective is to reduce the ability of extremist groups to monopolise religious interpretation and to provide alternative religious frameworks.
Nevertheless, the effectiveness of religious reform should be assessed empirically rather than assumed. It should therefore be examined through indicators such as attitudes toward violence, prison disengagement, susceptibility to extremist recruitment, and rates of recidivism.

15. Morocco's Counterterrorism Timeline

Year	Development
2003	Casablanca terrorist attacks and major transformation of national counterterrorism policy
2003	Adoption of major counterterrorism legislation
2004	Major reforms in the religious sphere
2008	Further development of the Moroccan religious institutional framework
2011	Morocco and the United States participate in the creation of the Global Counterterrorism Forum
2011	Marrakech/Argana terrorist attack
2014	Morocco joins the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS
2015	Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Mourchidines and Mourchidates inaugurated
2015	Counterterrorism legislation expanded in response to evolving terrorist threats and foreign terrorist fighters
2017	Morocco assists Spanish investigations following the Barcelona attacks
2018	Imlil attack against two Scandinavian tourists
2018	Morocco and the United States launch initiatives concerning terrorist travel and information sharing
2019	Morocco continues to dismantle suspected terrorist cells during early stages of planning
2020	Counterterrorism operations continue despite the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic
2021	Morocco conducts 11 counterterrorism operations and arrests at least 55 individuals according to U.S. reporting
2021	UN Counter-Terrorism Office training programme established in Morocco
2022	Morocco conducts 10 counterterrorism operations and arrests at least 20 individuals according to U.S. reporting
2022	Morocco hosts the ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

2023- 2024- 2025-	Moroccan authorities continue to disrupt small cells and individual terrorist suspects

The timeline demonstrates that Moroccan counterterrorism policy has evolved continuously rather than being limited to the immediate response to the 2003 attacks.

16. Assessment of the Strategy

The evidence examined in this study suggests that Morocco's strategy has several significant strengths.

First, the country has developed substantial experience in identifying and disrupting terrorist cells before they can conduct attacks. International reporting repeatedly identifies intelligence collection and early intervention as central elements of Moroccan counterterrorism.

Second, Morocco has developed strong international partnerships. Cooperation with Spain, the United States, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and other partners allows Moroccan authorities to exchange information concerning terrorist networks that operate across national borders.

Third, Morocco has developed a broader counter-radicalization framework that incorporates religious institutions, prison rehabilitation, education, and international religious cooperation.

Fourth, Morocco's strategy has demonstrated institutional continuity. The counterterrorism system developed after 2003 has continued to evolve in response to the emergence of ISIS, foreign terrorist fighters, online radicalization, and instability in the Sahel.

Nevertheless, several challenges remain.

The first is the continuing possibility of lone-actor terrorism. An individual does not necessarily need direct organizational membership to carry out an attack.

The second is online radicalization. Digital platforms allow terrorist propaganda to reach individuals without requiring physical contact with terrorist organizations.

The third is the instability of the Sahel. The deterioration of security conditions in parts of the Sahel creates a strategic environment in which terrorist organizations can establish networks, recruit members, acquire resources, and facilitate movement.

The fourth concerns the balance between security and rights. A comprehensive counterterrorism strategy must operate within a clear legal framework and preserve judicial safeguards, accountability, and public trust.

17. Conclusion

Morocco's counterterrorism experience since 2003 represents an important case study of how a state can develop a preventive and multidimensional response to terrorism.

The Casablanca attacks constituted a fundamental turning point. Following the attacks, Morocco strengthened its counterterrorism legislation, intelligence capabilities, law-enforcement institutions, religious policies, international partnerships, and counter-radicalization programs.

The country's relative success cannot be attributed to one institution or one policy. Instead, it results from the interaction of several components: intelligence collection, early intervention, judicial mechanisms, international information sharing, religious reform, rehabilitation programs, and community-level cooperation.

The available international evidence supports the conclusion that Morocco has developed a comprehensive counterterrorism framework. The U.S. Department of State has repeatedly characterized the Moroccan approach as combining vigilant security measures, international and regional cooperation, and counter-radicalization policies.

The Global Terrorism Index provides additional evidence that Morocco experienced a relatively low impact of terrorism. In the 2022 edition, Morocco received a score of 1.156 and was ranked 76th globally, placing it among the countries with a very low measured impact of terrorism.

However, these results should not lead to the conclusion that Morocco is free from terrorism.

The 2018 Imlil attack demonstrated that a country can experience a very low level of terrorist violence while remaining vulnerable to isolated attacks. More recent counterterrorism operations have also demonstrated that Moroccan authorities continue to identify individuals and small cells suspected of planning attacks.

Therefore, the most appropriate conclusion is not that Morocco has eliminated terrorism, but that **Morocco has developed a security system that has generally been effective at detecting and disrupting terrorist activity before it develops into large-scale attacks**.

The future effectiveness of this strategy will depend on its capacity to adapt to changing forms of terrorism. ISIS and Al-Qaeda do not necessarily need large territorial organizations to remain dangerous. Lone actors, online radicalization, decentralized networks, returning foreign terrorist fighters, and instability in the Sahel can create new forms of risk.

Morocco's principal challenge will therefore be to preserve its preventive capabilities while adapting them to a rapidly changing threat environment. Maintaining international intelligence cooperation, strengthening community resilience, addressing the social conditions that facilitate violent radicalisation, and ensuring that counterterrorism measures operate within the rule of law will remain essential.

The Moroccan experience consequently demonstrates that counterterrorism effectiveness is not simply a question of military or police capacity. It is the product of a **comprehensive security ecosystem combining intelligence, prevention, law enforcement, international cooperation, religious policy, rehabilitation, and societal resilience**.

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