In 2003, after a series of suicide attacks in Casablanca, the King of Morocco Mohammed VI declared war on extremist teachings “from the East” that had infiltrated his country’s religious institutions. Since then the Moroccan government has been evolving a comprehensive strategy to roll back and defeat Islamist radicalism. This has involved intensified policing among susceptible populations as well as a suite of other “soft” measures including community-driven development initiatives, governance and security sector reform, and new anti-corruption efforts. Importantly, the government’s campaign has also focused explicitly on the ideological dimensions of Islamism, and it has aimed to counter extremism through education and the renewal of Morocco’s indigenous traditions of toleration, Sufi piety, and Maliki religious law. One of the leaders in this effort has been the theologian Dr. Ahmed Abbadi, the Secretary General of the League of Mohammedan Scholars based in Rabat. What follows is a transcript of remarks that Dr. Abbadi gave at Hudson Institute on November 16, 2016. The transcript has been edited for clarity, and additions made by Current Trends have been placed in brackets.

The Islamic State—ISIS or, as I prefer to refer to it, “Daesh”—understands the usefulness of complexity as a mode of organization and in waging asymmetric warfare. Instead of developing a hierarchical organization with a linear approach that can be easily understood by outsiders, Daesh is more like a puzzle with different people responsible for the different pieces. The group takes advantage of new technologies, spreads out in several countries and with a small number of people creates what might be described as powerful “magnetisms”—attractive ideas that then inspire people into acting without necessarily being inducted into a centralized organization.

The dream of Muslim unity is the first of four “magnetisms” espoused by Daesh. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire vanquished any prospect of a central authority for Sunni Islam. Even at its height, the Ottoman Caliphate did not reflect the idealized “Islamic” State often spoken of in Islamic literature. It was, however, a symbol for an idea—the idea of all Muslims as a single nation, speaking different tongues and belonging to different races and ethnicities. It provided a focal point for settling disputes and making rules and decisions for disparate communities that practiced Islam and had not entirely embraced modern Western ideas.

The founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, announced while abolishing the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 that the various subjects of the Caliphate were now on their own. Turkey was to be restricted to Anatolia—a choice that was made by the Turkish leader and one for which he took full responsibility and which also had the support of the Turkish people. This move benefitted Turkey and led to its modernization but it left others in the region as “orphans.” From Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, to Egypt, modern day Iraq and what is today Jordan and even as far away as Tunisia, Algeria, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, several regions were suddenly cut off from what used to be their central decision-making authority.
Decisions were taken by the Caliph’s advisors in Constantinople – now Istanbul – and implemented by the Pashas for the primary benefit of the Ottoman caliphate but secondary benefit to the local leaders. These local leaders were not taught and did not know how to make decisions. They were rulers in small matters and acted as implementers of decisions made by the Ottomans in major matters. The end of the Caliphate marked the end of an entrenched way of life and led to a feeling of loss that has, in part, endured to this day.

People in the Ottoman Empire’s non-Turk regions faced difficult questions such as national identity and evolving indigenous political systems. Rather than confronting the new challenges, it was easier for some to embrace the belief that the resurrection of the caliphate and restoration of the pre-Western “Islamic” way of life was a panacea. The idea of a caliphate is seductive because it replaces that feeling of loss that resulted with the end of the Ottoman Caliphate.

Over the decades several scholars and ideologues like Sheikh Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Hassan al-Banna (1906-49) and Muhammad Taqi al Din al Nabhani (1909-77) advanced the view of the Muslim Ummah’s unity and the centrality of the institution of Caliphate.¹

The Muslims in the region desire unity and they have tried for it both through religion and through ideologies. Parallel to the attempt by Hizb ut Tahrir to set up a caliphate there were also attempts at unity through Pan Arabism, Pan Socialism and Pan Communism, but none of these succeeded. It has been almost a century since the caliphate was abolished, but the vacuum is still there in the Muslim world.

Daesh came in offering “the divine way to implement al-Khalifa [the Caliphate].” Young Muslims all over are attracted to Daesh because of its offer of unity and sense of belonging to something greater, a sense that is lacking in their current lives. Whether they live in Egypt or in Europe, these young people do not feel a part of the society into which they are born. They may be employed or unemployed, educated or uneducated, married or single, but they lack a sense of belonging—the promise of the Ummah—that is central to their faith. Daesh offers them this dream. That is why we see men and women from the age of 16 to 40 who have joined Daesh.

The second appeal at the heart of Daesh is the dream of dignity. The Quran states that Muslims are the best (ideal) people before God, that God is Adil (just) and Muslims are supposed to do good and avoid doing wrong (Amr bil maruf wa nahy an al munkar). The state was supposed to ensure this, but in most countries this did not happen. Today, most young Muslims living in the Middle East and North Africa face a lack of educational opportunities, unemployment and often no future. Again, the modern state was supposed to help create these opportunities, but in most countries this has not happened. So the Muslim Brotherhood and other such organizations stepped into the vacuum left by the state and offered to provide education, ensure justice and create an Islamic society.

Daesh stepped in and said: “You're wifeless? Come to me. I'll marry you to the most pious, beautiful lady in the world. You're husbandless? Come to me. I'll marry you to a handsome jihadi. You are jobless? Come to me and I will give you a job in the Islamic State as head of intelligence or secretary of state, whatever you would like. You are willing to be a scholar, a true scholar of Islam? Come to me. I will give you the shorthand training required to make you a
scholar in five days. If you die don’t worry you will go to paradise and have 72 virgins as a reward.” Joining Daesh gives you the opportunity to go from being nothing to becoming something, “from zero to hero.” This dream is magnetic.

The only way to counter this dream offered by Daesh is to offer an alternative vision to these young people. If we do not succeed in doing that we will be beaten in this arena of Morpheus (Greek god of dreams).

The third dream is the dream of purity. Right from the earliest times there have been Muslims who believed that pure Islam is one without any dilution or bid’ah (innovation) and who have sought uniformity in Muslim practices, dress, cuisine and beliefs from the Middle East to South and East Asia. During the 19th century, Salafists sought to propagate this belief across the Muslim world [and to remove any local or indigenous influences on Islam].

Daesh ‘hijacked’ this dream by stating that only their version of Islam is true and pure because this is how the Prophet practiced Islam. [They have laid down codes for everything from war to slavery, from marriage to inheritance, from cuisine to dress and from education to economy].

The final dream is that of salvation. [Muslims believe in the Day of Judgment and that you will be held accountable for all your past deeds, good and bad. Many ideologues and movements over the years have promised that if Muslims live their lives in accordance with this particular version of Islam, they will find salvation on that day].

Daesh has come in to offer a way to eternal salvation or immediate damnation. What they say is: “This is the end of time, and we have the ark of Noah. If you want to save your soul, come to us. Take a seat in the ark. Otherwise, you will perish like the rest.”

This belief that the best in Islam lies in the past and not in the future is extremely powerful, and appears to have taken hold of the vast majority of Muslims. I believe we need to look around us, believe in ourselves and understand that the best is still ahead of us.

The challenge we face is that we as leaders and governments have neglected this arena of ideas and dreams and instead have had a formal, functional and operational relationship with our people. [We do not have anything to offer them that they can believe in, that unites them and makes them feel part of something bigger than themselves]. We speak in a wooden language, whereas what they are looking for is something exciting and appealing spoken in the language of their dreams and hopes.

Daesh has done just that. When we analyze their discourse and their material, what we see is they have used every medium possible – internet or print, audio or visual – to provide their messages. Their messages make the adrenalin of these young people flow, through subliminal messaging using music, imaging and words.

The people at Daesh who do this are not super-humans; they are like you and me. It is just that they use the tools and technology that is available much better than what we have been able to do so far. Furthermore, they have a narrative; they know what they are arguing for.
I have met great minds at Google, Facebook and Twitter who are ready to help us. What they need is the counter-narrative. The good news is that there are no less than 5 million Islamic scholars in the world. The bad news is that they do not have a clear mission. No one has cared to empower them, build their capacity, teach them how to use these new technologies and tools so that they can counter the Daesh narrative.

I personally have been challenging my own team to come up with ways to counter what Daesh says. I gave them one tweet by Daesh and asked them to shape a counter-narrative that would not go beyond 140 characters. In the first attempt, my team failed. But they also soon realized that what is required is not to use Daesh’s narrative, but to produce a unique and independent counter-narrative.

We need to shape our own narratives. Otherwise, we will be trapped inside the other’s narrative and will simply keep producing counter-narratives. The other [in this case Daesh] will continue to lead as long as we let them do so.

What if we take only 1 million from among those 5 million Muslim scholars and craft a training guide—a toolkit—and use new technologies that are present to create platforms through which these scholars can interact. We can use videos to speak to young people. Video screens and electronic gadgets are cheap today. For a few hundred dollars you can obtain the highest quality technological gadgets with the latest configurations.

We need to build such capacities and empower these scholars for whom this is their full-time job. What these scholars need is a structure and training in diverse strategies of communication. I believe this is something within the realm of possibility. The people who crafted Daesh’s narrative are not gods of these new technologies. They can be very easily defeated, and I am not exaggerating when I say “very.”

Our problem is that we are putting rabbits in front of tigers. Why am I using the word rabbits? The reason is that if you place what I call a passionless functionary, someone without conviction, who is just doing the work to receive a wage at the end of the month, you will not achieve your goal. You cannot face Daesh and those like Daesh with people who do not have within them a flame of passion. In order to face them, we need the changes I have spoken about above. We need people with passion.

How do we achieve these goals? I will give you an example from today. This morning, I felt thirsty and purchased a bottle of water. There were many brands, and one of those brands was called Smart Water. I’m not promoting this brand, but there was a reason why I bought this particular bottle. I read what was written and it claimed that water becomes sweat, evaporates and they can recapture it. Then they put it in a bottle, add some aromas and other ingredients and it becomes delicious water. What this advertisement said – what made it different from the rest – was that this is liquid was coming from the sky not from underground like spring water. The minds who shaped this message were brilliant. These are the kinds of minds we need.
Let us turn to the world of comics and animation. We need minds like Stan Lee [American comic book writer and chairman of Marvel comics] who created many Marvel heroes like Spider Man today. Isn’t it Stan Lee who said “With great power comes great responsibility” – a quote attributed also to Voltaire. We need to face Daesh with what he said. We need entertainment because youngsters are not to be preached or lectured to. They must be entertained and engaged in something that is dynamic and would appeal to them. Otherwise they will not remain interested.

We need to create this passion amongst our scholars when we ask them to build the counter-narrative and a new narrative. In order to create passion among our scholars, they must be exposed to the facts. They must be told if you do not act, you will be held responsible for what will happen to the world. If you do not act, your children will be recruited. If you do not act, your daughters will be recruited.

What is my complicated approach and how do we avoid those touchy-feely approaches, those hasty and quick approaches in which we are currently trapped? How do we avoid antagonisms, such as hard power versus soft power, governments versus civil society and intellectuals versus politicians?

Notions of otherness generate antagonism. When they align with our actions, they create a complementarity. We need everyone to step up and help. However, we first need to adopt a comprehensive strategy. This strategy has to be shaped by all of us. We face Daesh in the arena of dreams, but we also face it in the arenas of politics, human rights and the texts that they claim mastery of.

Daesh pretend they are the ones who have mastered our texts. To counter this we need to reinvent new authorities. I believe those authorities are already in place. Here I am referring to institutions such as Al Azhar [Egypt], Al Quaraouiyine [Morocco], Zaytuna [Tunisia] and Yarim [Yemen]. I am also referring to all the ancient schools throughout the greater Muslim world in Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries.

What we need is empowerment of these institutions so that they regain their authority. They have faced a lot over the decades as they have been subject to the deconstruction of religious authority by Salafists, by modernists, by successive Muslim Brotherhood waves, by other Islamists. They have also been stagnant and not done enough innovation and renovation within their own schools.

Once again, it is both a matter of empowerment and the need for these authorities to understand that they can do all these things. They need to realize that they are not alone, that there are millions like them around the world. If each one of these millions of scholars does his/her own share of the work it can be done.

This comprehensive strategy also needs to take into account what makes the discourse of Daesh influential: grievances. We have deconstructed Daesh’s [and other Islamist’s] discourse and extracted the 10 main grievances that lie at the heart of what is articulated.
The first grievance is belief that the West—the United States, Europe, Commonwealth countries or any other Western country—has been conspiring against the Muslim world and wants Muslims to remain weak and broken up into separate countries. “They are denying us the right to unite and dream of unity, and our governors, kings are not doing anything about it. We need to step up and do it for ourselves and for you. Moreover, we are ready to give ourselves, our lives as martyrs for you, the sake of honor, and for a better future. We're here to serve you.” How can we counter such discourse if we do not think outside the box—like the Smart Water people did?

The second grievance is colonialism. “Those countries factually murdered millions of you here in the region, and no damage reparations or reconciliation were conducted to turn the page. They do not even send you a message that they have the will to do reconciliation movements globally and resolve the matter. Our governors, kings, presidents do nothing in this direction. We now oblige them to think about damage repair.” What is the counter narrative we have for this?

Third is the issue of Israel and the fourth, the issue of double standards in international affairs.

Fifth, is the issue of humiliation in the entertainment business, whether the print or electronic media or the film industry. The argument made is about how the Muslim is portrayed negatively and how the governments of the Muslim countries are not doing anything about this.

Sixth, the Muslim world is a “Molotov cocktail” from Iraq to Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina to Central Africa to even Burma. There are conflicts all over the Muslim world and this ensures there are enough problems that can be taken advantage of by groups like Daesh and others.

Seventh is the issue of Iran’s expansion into the region and the catastrophe in Syria.

Eighth is the belief that the West has infiltrated the traditional value system of the Muslims. [And resulted in their losing touch with their values, norms and belief. Daesh offers a way to go back to what they argue are the true Islamic beliefs and values.]

Ninth is the falsification of history and geography. “History,” [as seen by the world today], they say, “jumps over 1,000 years of Islamic inventions and reconnects directly with the Greco-Roman period and era without saying a word about you.” What a denial. “We are restoring it. As to geography, look at Africa and Asia. They seem smaller than Europe in the Mercator map. And north is up, which means that there is an egocentrism.” I would ask: Why don't you admit that when the Orient was ahead in earlier centuries that too was egocentrism? It is amazing that they are using such arguments [and that people are agreeing with them.]

The final grievance is the insulting of the prophets and the burning of the Quran.

These are some of the grievances that are in the air but they don’t exist individually or in groups. The Kingdom of Morocco is trying to come up with ways to counter the narrative behind these grievances. First, we have identified the underlying reasons why people are susceptible to Daesh’s magnetic message and, using messaging tools, we have tried to find ways to engage with them and respond.
Second, there are around 25 arguments based on the Sharia that Daesh and its supporters articulate. They look like the effect of a rifle in the brains of youngsters because the people who are shaped in such discourses wear the turban of scholars and knowledgeable people, and they act as the leaders of the masses suffering from injustice. [Just as a rifle in the possession of a young kid does not make him or her a good shooter unless they have obtained training, similarly these Daesh ideologues may wear the turbans of scholars and believe they are equal to them, but they are not.]

Third, we must not forget how swiftly and subtly the education system in countries changed after de-colonization and independence. We need to revisit what we are putting in the minds of our children, not just in the Muslim world, but outside as well. For the sake of our [young and easily susceptible] minds we need to reform the curricula to set up a safe and secure education system.

Here, I'm talking about the responsibility of the state. The aggressively secularist-laicist systems of education implemented by many modern Middle Eastern states have aimed to suppress religious freedom rather than try to work with religion. This needs to be re-evaluated. Religion has a responsibility to the state and society, and the state has the responsibility to guarantee the security of all its citizens. If states do not ensure security, including for the religious, then those citizens will pray for tigers once again. [And groups like Daesh will gain popularity.]

What Morocco is now doing is to bear in mind that a linear approach—that is, a top-down, authoritarian approach—will not do. We need reform to be horizontal—that is, multi-disciplinary, intersectional, egalitarian, and transversal—and to also be complementary between all forms of actions: political action, human rights action, educational action, soft-power actions. You name it, we need to have it.

Moreover, one of the biggest problems we face in Morocco—and throughout the world—is the fact that there is no structure to take care of problems on a daily basis in governments. What we have instead is a cacophony. Everyone “takes care of it,” but that means that no one takes care of it as they forget about it at the end of the day. There are no structures or systems or cultures of accountability that guarantee that the issue will be effectively taken care of by the end of the day. We need checks and balances, and political responsibility.

How do we change this? We need to ask important questions relating to government accountability, questions that will help to embed a culture of accountability in society: Will someone be held accountable before the Parliament, the House and Senate or the Congress? To whom should we would ask questions about what has been done? How did you [public official] spend public money? What is the output? Yes, there has been some but was it the most optimal output? Again, to whom are we going to ask such questions?

This is particularly important for governments to remember as they deal with the long-term struggle against Daesh. Of course, in the neuro-linguistic realm, we know that when you pronounce ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, or Daesh, things turn red. Everyone gets hyper-excited and we lose our capacity to think calmly and efficiently about the matter. People are even willing to give away their freedom. They are willing to give away their money. They are willing to give away everything, just to get rid of those evil people. “Kill them all and we are yours.”
We must remember that throughout history, we have had times in which human rights and values are eroded on the pretext that the community or people are under siege and the state must be protected. We have had people who took over and deprived their co-citizens of their freedoms in the name of security and protection. There is, to be sure, a need for vigilance, and this is why we need structures, checks and balances, and responsibility to ensure states are accountable to citizens.

To evaluate our progress in the struggle against Daesh, we need better measurements. This is why in Morocco we have been trying to deconstruct this notion of an “Islamic State” in order to demystify the ideology that Daesh is spreading. What does an “Islamic State” mean?

We have been diving deep into books of a scholastic nature and we have derived six great characteristics that need to be observed to have what you can properly call an “Islamic State.”

First is the preservation of life. This is the role of any religion, to preserve lives. “Do not kill.” In every religion, you find this commandment. But this can be expanded into criteria, indicators and indices to allow measurement: what does the preservation of life mean? It means medical studies. It means training doctors and nurses. It means developing a pharmaceutical industry. It means security on roads. It means security in cities. To each of these, you would assign a grade and a certain amount of points. Then you would calculate if there is, in fact, a guarantee of preservation of life. Sweden has scored way better than Daesh in preservation of life.

What do you mean by the Islamic State? Let us look at, aside from preservation of life, the remaining five pillars: Preservation of religiosity, preservation of dignity, preservation of descendants and the species, preservation of intellect and rationality, and the preservation of property. We have analyzed Daesh along these six pillars and it has scored poorly in each of them, including in the protection of religion category.

However, we need people that deal with these issues on a daily basis. If it is simply a lecture here or there in which we occasionally tackle the issue and then just forget about it for weeks, then it will not work. We need to be aware of the facts, at least in my country.

There are hordes of people that are out to make money because they know there is money being given in order to counter violent extremism. So, everyone thinks, why not me? It is a lot of money. How can I get it? How can I build up an NGO, a structure and a research center that would take care of extremists? This is why we have witnessed the creation of hundreds, even thousands, of centers claiming to take care of such business.

I am saying this to point out the fact that measurement and demystification is one of the most efficient tools to dismantle the magnetism of Daesh. In Morocco we tried to incorporate members of the civil society, but there is a cacophony. Everyone claims that she/he is taking care of violent extremism and developing CVE [countering violent extremism] programs.

What is the role of states in integrating these highly needed efforts without denigrating the energy and dynamism needed to cure their societies? We need these people and their passion, but
we also need clear and transparent indices to evaluate, measure and point out their main responsibilities and tasks as part of the larger global strategy. We need to take every team and every crew and hold them accountable and in a clear way evaluate and measure their efforts. We must make it clear that money will be given for these goals and they will be held accountable.

The last issue I would like to share with you is that we have a crucial need today to rebuild authorities in Islamic countries. [This is not a new process it has happened over years.] This is a result of what has happened starting from the 1950s with Abd al Karim Qasim (1914-63) and Muhammad Najib ar Rubai (1904-65) in Iraq, Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-70) in Egypt and Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) in Turkey. All these people claimed to be socialists and neglected religious authorities of the state. Religion was thus not taken care of in an ideologically efficient and structured manner, thereby leaving a vacuum.

This vacuum was filled first by Islamists, then by Salafists, then by jihadi Salafists, and then what we know today as Daesh, al-Qaeda, and other such groups. Daesh initially found recruits in areas like Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Iraq. They brought former jihadists into their ranks, and with all their knowhow and expertise they gave birth to four new sets of characters: the initiator, the mercenary, the naive and the firewood.

The initiators are people like the self-proclaimed caliph Baghdadi and his ilk. Soon afterwards, the second group, the mercenaries, took over and swallowed the initiators, who disappeared. No one listens to Baghdadi anymore, only occasionally when they feel the need to bring in these individuals’ names again.

The third character in this cast is the naïve do-gooder, people such as the doctors who are willing to build up the Islamic State and other such professionals. Last but not least is the firewood for the oven: those youngsters who are brought in to die in the arenas of battle.

There is nothing we can say to redeem the first two groups, but we must talk to and influence the third and the fourth.

We need to shape new messages aimed at those people, to try and bring them in, similar to what is done with addicts. Like in the case of addictions, former addicts are the best counter. However, we need to make sure that the recovery is real.

For this, we have to change not just school curricula but many other aspects of society, including, for example, reforming prisons. Actions must be seen in all arenas, from schools to cartoons. For example, the end result should be colorful and joyful video games self-produced by former violent extremists. We in Morocco have been working on curricula. We have also been working in the domain of scholarship and history so that we make may clear what is to be derived and reinvented. We have been working on religious texts so that we can respond to those 25 quotes from the Sharia that are often cited by Daesh.

There are other items that need to be tackled and addressed as well. We have been working in the realm of dreams, competing with Morpheus, and trying to produce greater, genuine dreams. In
Morocco, we also have been tackling the dimension of governance to make this sustainable, measurable and efficient.

1 Rida was a Syrian Islamic scholar who launched Al-Manar (The Lighthouse), a theological journal in Arabic that focused on Quranic commentary. Al Banna was the founder of the Jamaat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen or the Society of Muslim Brothers or the Muslim Brotherhood as it is better known. Al Nabhani founded the Hizb ut Tahrir (Party of Liberation) that has advocated the resurrection of the Caliphate since the 1950s.