Filmmakers in North Africa have been preoccupied by radical Islam

As part of our series examining the origins of Africa's War of Terror, Jamal Bahmad analyses the social origins of Islamic militancy and terrorism in North and West Africa through its depiction in film.

Several North African filmmakers have explored the profound transformation of their societies under globalisation through the medium of celluloid. Since the 1980s, cinema has dwelt on everyday life and ordinary peoples' struggle for survival and historical agency. Youth, in particular, has preoccupied film directors. This is probably due to the predominance of this age group in the region. This strategic investment in the everyday life of ordinary youth has garnered broad audience interest in national cinema as a critical mirror of rapidly changing societies. Socio-economic problems and the existential anxiety of young North Africans have been predominant themes on the silver screen. Another intertwined theme is the rise of radical Islam across the region. Besides retelling the story of the Algerian civil war, film makers have turned their cameras to the often ignored role of poverty and disaffected youth in the advent of militant Islam as a powerful ideology. The inner cities of North Africa from the *bidonvilles* (shanty towns) of Casablanca to the *'ashwaiyyat* districts of Cairo have produced young radical Islamists and terrorist attacks in North Africa and beyond.

Still from the 2012 film Horses of God

We can identify trends and currents in North African cinema's articulation of the origins of youth radicalisation over the last few decades. Film directors have largely situated the rise of radical Islam in the aftermath of the failure of secular nationalism to produce just and prosperous postcolonial societies. Neocolonialism has also been foregrounded as a contributing factor in the rise of radical Islam. The diversity of approach and impact of the cinematic articulations of terror are best understood with specific examples.

In recent years, two films made headlines in Morocco and abroad for their approach to radical Islam. Laila Marrakchi's *Marock* (2005) relates adolescent experience among upper-class youth in Casablanca in the late 1990s. It was attacked by Islamists and the conservative press for its representation of Islam. Between conservative criticism and the silence of intellectuals on the Left, *Marock* touched a nerve about Morocco in the early 21st century by depicting the existential insecurity of an upper class isolated by wealth and its idioms in exclusive suburbs. Inadvertently, it also unveils the spectral resistance of large masses dispossessed by the IMF structural adjustment policies.

A few scenes into the film, Rita's brother Mao returns from London. He has become a new man. Mao is now an Islamist. We soon learn that his conversion to hardline Islam is not just a consequence of potential encounters with radicalised youth among Britain's post-colonial immigrant communities. His fundamentalist turn is an attempt to right the moral wrong of having killed a poor kid in Casablanca while drunk behind the wheel. His affluent family bribed the police to avoid him being sent to jail. Instead, he was sent to a London university. This character gives us

insight into the social history of terrorism in the city, particularly the 2003 suicide bombings. The attacks were committed by youth from the infamous Sidi Moumen *bidonville*. Mao's switch to fundamentalism is a reflection of how the spectre of terrorism travels from the city's *bidonvilles* into the heart of the exclusive communities of the wealthy and powerful few.

Marrakchi blames the identity crisis of privileged youth on increasing community divisions between the Muslim majority and a Jewish minority in Casablanca. However, Mao's metamorphosis is evidence to the contrary revealing that youth's existential insecurity essentially arises from class conflict. The rise of radical Islam is rooted in an entire society transformed by decades of neoliberal market "reforms" which have created a large underclass of urban youth. The tranquility of Casablanca's suburbs is a deceptive appearance. The truth is that—as is revealed by Rita's family tensions and Mao's embrace of conservative Islam—the domestic world of this community is permeated by the violence of the city behind the high class walls of French and gated communities.

Adapted from Mahi Binebine's novel *Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen* (2010), Nabil Ayouch's *Horses of God* (2012) goes where Marrakchi dared not venture by providing a cine-sociological interpretation of radical Islam. The film tells the story of the suicide bombers behind the 16 May 2003 attacks in Casablanca. It situates the origins of fundamentalist martyrdom in a combination of poverty and the Islamist indoctrination of shanty town adolescents. The social divisions and their associated spatial practices are here clearly blamed for the 2003 tragedy. Marrakchi's French-mission-educated youth and Ayouch's impoverished horses of God live in the same city but the twain never meet. The only time they do is through bloody bombings by poor radicalised youth against what they deem to be the wealthy remnant of colonial occupation and neocolonial wars against the Muslim world.

Despite its occasional spectacularisation of poverty and exoticisation of the *bidonville*, *Horses of God* succeeds in drawing attention to a grave phenomenon in his city and society. Much like the novel itself, the film implicitly argues that only a just society and genuinely postcolonial world could eliminate terrorism. The world seemed to be shocked by the return of Salafism into the public sphere in the second phase of the "Arab Spring" saga. Filmmakers across North Africa seem to have foreseen this reality by drawing attention to the little known story of large youth populations in North Africa who, despite their university degrees, are often condemned to unemployment, political repression and existential anxiety.

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