

THE NEW GEOPOLITICS
MIDDLE EAST

NOVEMBER 2018

ISLAM AS STATECRAFT: HOW GOVERNMENTS USE RELIGION IN FOREIGN POLICY

**PETER MANDAVILLE
SHADI HAMID**

ISLAM AS STATECRAFT: HOW GOVERNMENTS USE RELIGION IN FOREIGN POLICY

PETER MANDAVILLE AND SHADI HAMID

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The discussion of Islam in world politics in recent years has tended to focus on how religion inspires or is used by a wide range of social movements, political parties, and militant groups. Less attention has been paid, however, to the question of how governments—particularly those in the Middle East—have incorporated Islam into their broader foreign policy conduct. Whether it is state support for transnational religious propagation, the promotion of religious interpretations that ensure regime survival, or competing visions of global religious leadership; these all embody what we term in this new report the “geopolitics of religious soft power.”

The paper explores the religious dimensions of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, looking at how the Islamic outreach strategies of the two governments have evolved in response to changing regional and global environments. We assess the much-discussed phenomenon of Saudi Arabia’s export of Wahhabism, arguing that the nature and effects of Saudi religious influence around the world are more complicated than we ordinarily think.

Meanwhile, since 9/11 and the rise of ISIS, the governments of several prominent Muslim-majority countries, among them Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt, have positioned themselves as the purveyors of a “moderate Islam” capable of blunting the narrative of extremist groups. We also look at Turkey and Indonesia as examples of emerging powers that, with somewhat less fanfare, have integrated elements of religious outreach into their broader soft power strategies across Asia and Africa.

Across these wide-ranging cases, the ways that states use Islam in their conduct abroad is often shaped by *domestic* considerations and, by the same token, the impact it has in target countries is frequently something other than intended due to the mediating effect of local actors and contexts.

We ultimately argue that while states are not always able to control the religious narrative or its effects, it is nonetheless important—and growing more important—to pay attention to the increased salience of culture, religion, and ideas in the context of an emerging “post-liberal” world order.

INTRODUCTION

Islam has been a major—some might even say obsessive—focus of scholarship and policy analysis over the past two decades. Most of this writing has focused on non-governmental organizations—social movements, political parties, militant groups—that define themselves in terms of Islam and whose activities reflect varying understandings of the relationship between religion and politics. From efforts by Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood to gain political influence through the ballot box to the violent radicalism of al-Qaida and ISIS, the dominant image of Islam in world politics has been one of non-state actors and transnational networks advocating for a more “Islamic” form of politics or seeking to undermine existing state structures.

Much less attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which a number of governments—including some that are frequently the focus or target of Islamist activism—have opted to deploy Islam as a component of their own foreign policy conduct. Think of Iran’s track record of public diplomacy outreach in countries with significant populations of Shia or of the various Saudi entities—including government agencies—that have spent billions of dollars on *da’wa* (Islamic propagation) activities around the world over the past half century. More recently, we have seen emerging powers such as Turkey and Indonesia pushing distinctive “brands” of Islam as part of the cultural diplomacy that accompanies their broader international efforts. Meanwhile, in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan, government-linked religious institutions have been promoted as purveyors of a so-called “moderate Islam” capable of defeating the ideology of groups like ISIS.

The purpose of this paper is to survey and analyze the various ways in which governments in the Middle East and elsewhere are incorporating Islam as a form of “religious soft power” into their foreign policy. In speaking about “Islam as statecraft,” we are referring to efforts by the state to harness the power of religious symbols and authority in the service of geopolitical objectives. We look, for example, at how religion becomes a space for expressing conventional geopolitical rivalries, such as competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as the use of religion as a proxy tool (such as Saudi Arabia’s view of Shia Islam as an avatar of Iran). We take stock of the recent trend by governments to promote “moderate Islam” as a way of appealing to Western nations and affirming their counterterrorism credentials even as other aspects of their behavior seem to increase the risk of extremism. And we look at Islam as part of the public diplomacy strategies of emerging powers as they seek to establish bedrocks of cultural familiarity and favorable attitudes in countries targeted for economic and security partnerships.¹

In nearly every Muslim-majority country that aspires to regional or global influence, Islam is an important and sometimes the only ideological currency that “mixes” effectively with more narrowly defined *realpolitik*. With the decline of pan-Arabism and socialism, the only real competing ideological orientation other than liberal democracy (obviously antithetical to local authoritarian governments) is nationalism, but, by definition, nationalism is difficult to “promote” outside one’s own nation.

1. While mostly outside the scope of the analysis we offer here, it is worth noting the efforts by some governments to project religious influence transnationally through their diasporas. These activities—as undertaken by, for example, the Moroccan and Algerian governments with respect to North African communities—are better viewed as an extension of domestic policy beyond state borders since the primary goal is usually to ensure that religious views (and Islamism in particular) are not “re-imported” to the sending country as a result of ongoing transnational ties.

One of our key conclusions is that governments' promotion of particular brands of Islam is rarely, if ever, an accident. While cynicism always features in foreign policy, we find that the different ways in which states use Islam in their conduct abroad is shaped by their *domestic* considerations of how Islam should relate to the state. In other words, one of our main arguments is that the transnational projection of religion—far from representing a monolithic and deliberate expression of foreign policy intent—often tells us a lot about the balance of power between competing social and political forces *within* the country from which it emanates.

This finding is important for several reasons. First, it means that the foreign policy of authoritarian states is even less insulated from domestic considerations than might be assumed. In other words, internal competition over the role of Islam and Islamism cannot be contained within a country's borders. This means that, even for those observers and policymakers with little interest in human rights, there remain important reasons—along strictly “national interest” lines—to pay attention to how regimes structure or suppress domestic political competition. While both of us have argued elsewhere that religion and religious motivations are significant drivers of political conflict within countries, here we argue that they are important—though not always immediately apparent—for understanding the foreign policy orientations of a diverse range of Muslim-majority states, including those that do not explicitly define themselves in Islamic terms.²

Because Islam is such a resonant political currency and resource, even governments that are viewed as more secularly oriented—such as Jordan, Morocco, or the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have a strong interest—and a strong *security* interest—in engaging with religious ideas. In almost every case analyzed here (with the notable exception of Turkey), the major opposition groups are Islamist. Once “Islam” is inserted into public debates, how citizens interpret their religion becomes, in effect, a matter of national security. If these governments didn't directly involve themselves in debates around the nature and purpose of Islam, they would be leaving an ideological vacuum that domestic challengers can take advantage of.

On the regional level, there is a temptation to reduce rivalries to sectarianism and geopolitical conflict. But if we look at key divides, say between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one hand and Qatar on the other, the question of Islam's relationship to the state and how Islam is deployed abroad is crucial. Because most of the countries under consideration are authoritarian, they tend to see regime survival as inextricably linked to religious legitimacy. As Gregory Gause notes regarding the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar: “The real underlying conflict is not about Iran but about very different understandings of how political Islam should relate to the state among the Sunni powers of the Middle East.”³

Saudi Arabia, as both an Islamist and monarchical regime, is especially sensitive to competing Islamist trends that challenge its religious legitimacy, which is why it has in recent years prioritized pushing back against Muslim Brotherhood and Brotherhood-inspired movements as well individuals—such as the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, killed in Istanbul by Saudi agents—who argue for the Brotherhood's inclusion in

2 See Peter Mandaville, *Islam and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2nd edition, 2014) and Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World* (New York: St. Martin's, 2017).

3 F. Gregory Gause, “What the Qatar crisis shows about the Middle East,” *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/27/what-the-qatar-crisis-shows-about-the-middle-east/?utm_term=.7b7310a8a4df.

political life. The Brotherhood is a double threat to Saudi Arabia since it challenges both pillars of the kingdom's internal legitimacy—the Islamist and the monarchical. Qatar, by contrast, has seen support of Brotherhood movements as a source of its distinctive foreign policy orientation, setting it apart in its long-running rivalry with Saudi Arabia. In addition, because the Brotherhood has historically been weaker within Qatar, the Qatari government has generally preferred to co-opt and absorb Brotherhood sentiment. The Qatari Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, began dissolving itself in 1999.⁴

Popular and elite perceptions of Islam and Islamic legitimacy are intimately tied to domestic security, but religion is also useful and effective abroad—regardless of whether its deployment is sincere. The vexing question of sincerity and motivation is one that we will address below, while at the same time pointing out that the sincerity behind foreign policy behavior has little bearing on actual effects and outcomes as experienced by those on the receiving end.

A related question is how Islam's growing prominence as a tool of statecraft came to be in the first place and how this fits into broader global trends. In light of the Arab Spring and its failures, questions around how to establish domestic legitimacy have become increasingly important. In much of the Middle East, divides over religion's role in public life have become paramount, whether on the part of the opposition groups that claim to be Islamic or on the part of regimes that hope to put forward their own alternative to Islamism. This struggle—over the ideological, religious, and political foundations of newly established nation-states—can be traced back to the post-independence contexts of the early-to-mid 20th century.⁵ It was never resolved.

These evolving debates and divisions around religion, identity, and the state, while decades in the making, must also be situated in the more recent context of a worldwide crisis around liberalism and the international liberal order. With a fraying liberal consensus, there is more space—not just in the Middle East but also in the West—for ideological combat. Sometimes this combat takes the form of hard power, but more often it is channeled through foreign policy, diplomacy, and soft power. It should not be surprising that the competition around Islam has intensified as America's role in promoting a predictable and constraining liberal order has declined.

BACKGROUND AND KEY CONCEPTS

Efforts by governments to harness the social power of religion in world politics are nothing new. Historically, numerous empires and kingdoms in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia claimed a religious basis to their political legitimacy. For example, in the 18th and 19th centuries, there was often a close alignment between British colonial functionaries and Christian missionary activity in the expansion of the British Empire.⁶ Even with the

4 See Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 89-91. As Freer writes: "Harboring no ill will against the government and able to function as they wished under its supervision, Brotherhood members simply did not require a separate organizational structure, which itself was weak and informal even at its height."

5 For a variation of this argument, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash that Shaped the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). See also Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism*. Using Egypt as the main example, Gerges argues that these divides were far from inevitable and were contingent on the decisions made by "secular" and Islamist actors in the 1950s. In Hamid's argument, the role and relevance of Islam in politics is seen as a stronger determining factor and less contingent on particular decisions at particular times. See also Shadi Hamid, "Muslim Brothers: The Rivalry that Shaped Modern Egypt," *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2018, for a discussion of the question of contingency and counterfactuals raised in Gerges' book.

6 See Andrew Porter, *Religion versus empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

consolidation of the modern state system in the 20th century, religion continued to function as part of the backdrop of Cold War geopolitics. The United States worked with and promoted faith-based groups and religious proxies—including militant groups—in Latin America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East as a counterweight to the atheism of Soviet socialism.⁷ As has been well-documented, in some cases the Islamism promoted by the United States during the Cold War evolved into forms of militant activism virulently opposed to the West.⁸

Turning to the Muslim world, we find a clear pattern of governments co-opting religion—and religious leaders—as part of national development agendas or to protect the state against interpretations of religion that may undermine their authority.⁹ Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that even in ostensibly secular Muslim-majority countries, religious language is routinely employed by the state, and religion functions as the common grammar of everyday politics.¹⁰ Nearly all post-independence states—including even the most avowedly secularist like Atatürk’s Turkey—saw religion as something intertwined with the state, to be managed and deployed against opponents in a near continuous battle for control over the public sphere. The very fact of a newly and increasingly powerful centralized state was itself radical in light of a classical Islamic tradition that emphasized the autonomy of the clerical class as a check on executive authority.¹¹

If religious production mattered for the state at home, then surely it would matter abroad. In the realm of foreign policy, there has been voluminous literature on efforts by Iran to export its Islamic revolution after 1979 as well as a long-standing debate about Saudi Arabia’s export of Wahhabism¹² around the world—both of which we examine below.¹³ Alongside these more established lines of analysis, and interacting with them in various ways, we have seen the advent of a distinctive post-9/11 phase of Western governmental engagement with religion. Various neoconservative groups aligned with the George W. Bush administration sought to promote interpretations of Islam consistent with U.S. geostrategic priorities. Meanwhile

7 For an analysis of the role of religion in American foreign policy during the Cold War, see Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, May 2017, <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-398>; Dianne Kirby, “Harry Truman’s Religious Legacy: The Holy Alliance, Containment, and the Cold War,” in *Religion and the Cold War*, ed. Dianne Kirby (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 77-102; William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

8 See for example Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001); Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil’s Game: How the US Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Metropolitan, 2005); and Dianne Kirby, “The Cold War and American Religion.”

9 See Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

10 Nathan Brown, *Arguing Islam After the Revival of Arab Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

11 Knut Vikør, *Between God and the Sultan: A History of Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 186-88; Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6-7. See also Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

12 The term “Wahhabism” is rarely used in self-description by any religious actors and tends to be employed by those outside Saudi Arabia—often with a negative connotation—to label the ultra-conservative approach to Islam that characterizes the Kingdom’s religious establishment. The term refers to Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), a puritanical theologian from central Arabia whose alliance with the forebears of the current royal family played a central role in the establishment of the first Saudi state. Wahhabism is more properly understood as a Saudi variant of Salafism, a religious movement stressing conservative piety and the paramount importance for Islamic law and sources and methods from the first generations of Islam.

13 See, for example, Edward Wastnidge, “The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War,” *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 364-377; Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion, Expediency, and Soft Power in an Era of Disruptive Change*, 2nd ed. (Quantico, VA: Middle East Studies, Marine Corps University, 2015); Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., *Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Arabia’s Political, Religious, and Media Frontiers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

European governments created organizations to push for a domesticated, apolitical Islam at home while dispatching Muslim leaders overseas to reassure skeptical co-religionists in the Middle East and Asia that Muslims are doing just fine in the West.¹⁴ The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office's "Projecting British Islam" program is a case in point. It would be a mistake to analyze the decisions of these various governments as purely or even primarily international relations questions without looking closely at what might otherwise be dismissed as abstract questions of religion and theology.

With this in mind, several new trends within what we might call "statist Islam" have become discernible. After the rise of ISIS, many governments in the Middle East have been trying to position themselves as sources of "moderate" Islam or *wasatiyya* ("religious centrism"), hoping to attract funding for various counter-ideology activities and to affirm their distance from extremism.¹⁵ At the same time, "emerging powers" such as Turkey and Indonesia have incorporated aspects of religion into their broader global engagement activities. Turkey, for example, has built mosques alongside the transportation infrastructure it funds in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, while Indonesia promotes its own distinctive idiom of "Archipelagic Islam" (*Islam Nusantara*) as a global religious brand.¹⁶ The use of religious proxies in the ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while not by any means a new phenomenon, has taken on different forms and become more expansive in its regional impact after the Arab Spring.¹⁷

In this paper we employ the concept of *religious soft power* to thematize the phenomenon whereby states incorporate the promotion of religion into their broader foreign policy conduct. The term is of course a refinement of Joseph Nye's famous concept of soft power, coined nearly 30 years ago to refer to the various non-coercive means by which State A convinces State B to define its preferences and interests in terms of those held by State A. In addition to the promulgation of international institutions as an important dimension of soft power, Nye explicitly refers to cultural attraction, values, and ideology as key elements of soft power in world politics.¹⁸ More recently, scholars such as Jeffrey Haynes have proposed a focus on religious soft power in order to draw attention to the various ways governments engage and include religion in their overall soft power equation.¹⁹ To be sure, Nye's concept of soft power, viewed by many as vague and analytically imprecise, has attracted its fair share of criticism.²⁰

14 See David Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds & Dollars," *U.S. News and World Report*, April 25, 2005. On the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Projecting British Islam initiative, see "Projecting British Islam," U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/tna/20090123021311/https://fco-stage.fco.gov.uk/en/fco-in-action/counter-terrorism/counter-terrorism/preventing-extremism/projecting-british-islam/>.

15 Annelle Sheline, "Middle East regimes are using 'moderate' Islam to stay in power," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/01/middle-east-regimes-are-using-moderate-islam-to-stay-in-power/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ac6ad0200b27.

16 James B. Hoesterey, "Rebranding Islam: Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, and the Making of 'Moderate Islam,'" *Contending Modernities*, April 20, 2016, <https://sites.nd.edu/contendingmodernities/2016/04/20/aci-indonesia-rebranding-islam-public-diplomacy-soft-power-and-the-making-of-moderate-islam/>.

17 Some analysts have suggested that sectarian tensions may be starting to recede. See for example Hassan Hassan, "The Eclipse of Sectarianism," *The Atlantic*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/end-sectarian-violence-middle-east/573580/>.

18 For his most extended treatment of soft power, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

19 Jeffrey Haynes, *Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power* (London: Routledge, 2016).

20 See, for example, Niall Ferguson, "Think Again: Power," *Foreign Policy* (March/April 2003): 18-24; Steven Lukes, "Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (June 2005): 477-493; Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (June 2005): 583-612. For a refinement of the concept see also Laura Roselle et al., "Strategic narrative: a new means to understand soft power," *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 70-84.

Likewise, Haynes himself recognizes many similar limitations in the concept of religious soft power.²¹ Given our primary focus on descriptive analysis, however, we feel that religious soft power functions as a useful shorthand to denote the broad phenomenon addressed by this paper.

While some of the examples we cite below—such as Saudi Arabia leveraging its custodianship of Islam’s two holiest sites to foster Muslim goodwill—would seem to fit within Nye’s conventional soft power formula, many of our examples involve narrow and quite instrumental uses of religious actors and ideas to accomplish tactical objectives—a less comfortable fit for soft power in Nye’s standard formula. We nonetheless find a focus on religious soft power useful for demonstrating that states see value—and, seemingly, results—in using religion to engage and influence populations in other countries. This resort to religion is particularly salient in the context of an emerging “post-liberal” world order.²² In other words, as we witness a breakdown in the global consensus around liberalism, it is worth paying attention to how geopolitical actors are pushing ideological alternatives and forms of transnational cultural solidarity.

Turning now to the scope of this paper, we want to clarify that we are not focusing on direct state support for militant Islamist groups. This includes funding from various Gulf countries for militants in Syria and Libya, which is something more akin to the projection of *hard power* via proxy organizations. Rather, our focus here is on how states deploy various entities that propagate religious messages, religious education, or discourses of religious solidarity. We are of course aware that in some cases there is a great deal of fungibility when it comes to this distinction. It is, for example, difficult to separate Iran’s support for Hezbollah qua militant proxy from Iran’s broader cultural outreach to Lebanese Shia. We explore the complexity around this issue in more detail below.

We also want to clarify that we are not imputing specifically Islamic motivations to the decision by governments to prioritize religious outreach. Thus, unlike the various contributors to Adeed Dawisha’s classic edited volume, *Islam in Foreign Policy*, we do not seek to posit specific cultural causes for foreign policy actions.²³ For our parts, we are perfectly happy to put aside the question—and conceptual minefield—of Islamic intentionality and sincerity and focus on the instrumental use of religion as a tool of global engagement. We acknowledge, however, that actions that may begin as purely instrumental, and even cynical, can develop their own ideological momentum. Actors may “decide”—after the fact—that they really did believe the things they said they believed. In addition, governments, even in authoritarian contexts, are not unitary actors. In practice, this means that some officials in a given ruling coalition may take the ideological premises of foreign policy conduct more seriously than others. Likewise, even the purely instrumental use of religion by state actors may yield unintended ideological consequences by reinforcing certain ideas and images in the minds of target populations.

Finally, while our focus in this paper is on Islam as statecraft, we certainly do not view states’ use of religion in foreign policy as a phenomenon confined to the Muslim world. There are numerous examples today of governments pursuing geopolitical agendas through the prism of religion. The Kremlin has leveraged the transnational reach of the

21 Jeffrey Haynes, *Religious Transnational Actors*, pp. 115-116.

22 For more on “post-liberalism,” see Shadi Hamid, “Post-liberalism, East and West,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-04-11/post-liberalism-east-and-west>.

23 Adeed Dawisha, ed., *Islam in Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Russian Orthodox Church to build support for Moscow's policies in Ukraine.²⁴ India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) mobilizes Hindutva, a form of Hindu nationalist ideology, in its outreach to Indian diaspora communities around the world.²⁵ And Israel has cultivated ties with conservative evangelical Christians in the United States, seeking to portray the Jewish state as the natural guardian of a common Judeo-Christian heritage.²⁶ There is no shortage of other similar examples.

For our purposes, we see value in looking comparatively at the foreign policies of different countries whose modern histories reflect varying experiences between the state and a single religious tradition, Islam. Three of the most important power brokers in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey—have in recent years all articulated strategic frameworks for foreign policy that to one degree or another involve significant reference to religion. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seeks to revitalize his country's pre-republican legacy in the form of a "neo-Ottoman" vision for Turkey's cross-regional aspirations; Iran taps into traditional Shia discourses of dispossession in the process of establishing itself as the geopolitical hub of "resistance culture"; and, most recently, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman made the intriguing announcement that the Kingdom would be returning to its pre-1979 tradition of "moderate Islam" as part of his pursuit of Vision 2030, a sweeping package of economic and social reforms. Set against the volatile and violent aftermath of the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, and ongoing civil wars developing a better understanding of the uses and abuses of religious soft power seems imperative.

THE STRUGGLE FOR ISLAMIC HEGEMONY: SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

The long-standing Saudi Arabian-Iranian rivalry is a sectarian battle, to be sure, but it is first and foremost a conventional geopolitical competition—one that has more recently intensified into a battle for survival. Not surprisingly, then, the conflict is portrayed in unabashedly existential terms by both parties. Until an about-face toward "moderation" by de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi support for strict interpretations of Islam coincided quite nicely with its ambition to constrain Iran. Regardless of how anti-Shia Saudi rulers actually were themselves, sectarianism—expressed with powerful and resonant religious language—was useful in rallying domestic support.²⁷ As Toby Matthiesen documents, sectarian narratives against the Houthis in the ongoing Yemen war were successful in mobilizing Islamist support for the regime's foreign policy.²⁸

24 Nalia Zinets, "Ukraine moves to split church from Russia as elections approach," *Reuters*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-church/ukraine-moves-to-split-church-from-russia-as-elections-approach-idUSKBN1HQ1ZA>. For more examples of the Russian Orthodox Church's growing influence abroad, see Alexandra Lazescu, "A Proxy for the Kremlin: The Russian Orthodox Church," *World Affairs*, accessed June 7, 2018, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/proxy-kremlin-russian-orthodox-church>, and Marcel van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

25 See Ian Hall, "Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power," *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 113-131; and Jeffrey Haynes, "Religion and Foreign Policy Making in the USA, India and Iran: Towards a Research Agenda," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2008): 143-165.

26 David D. Kirkpatrick, Elizabeth Dias, and David M. Halbfinger, "Israel and Evangelicals: New U.S. Embassy Signals a Growing Alliance," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/world/middleeast/netanyahu-evangelicals-embassy.html>.

27 See Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, New Edition, 2015).

28 Toby Matthiesen, "Saudi Arabia" in *Rethinking Political Islam*, eds. Shadi Hamid and William McCants (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

In trying to analyze the sources of sectarian conflict, it becomes difficult to distinguish, at least in any clear way, between the “religious” and the “political.” The religious fuels the political; a worsening political conflict inflames religious passions, and so on. This offers another example of how a purely cynical or instrumental use of religion for geopolitical ends—or what Kamran Bokhari calls “geosectarianism”—can, over time, begin to have theological effects, changing how Islam is interpreted and generating new religious discourses on the status and legitimacy of particular minority or sectarian groups.²⁹

Saudi Arabia: Exporting Wahhabism?

Saudi Arabia’s export of Wahhabism has been a focus of discussion and debate for decades. What is not disputed is that since the 1960s, various entities within or connected to the Kingdom have spent tens of billions of dollars to promote an ultraconservative and austere interpretation of Islam around the world. Observers remain divided over the significance and impact of these activities, with some drawing a direct causal line from Saudi support for conservative religion to terrorism, while others see little more than the transnational circulation of religious ideas that yield widely varying and often limited effects.³⁰

The motivations for Saudi Arabia’s involvement in this kind of religious export activity have evolved over time, with shifts in both the regional environment as well as Saudi domestic politics shaping its promotion of religious soft power. In the 1960s, Saudi projection of conservative religion formed part of an Islamic—and monarchical—response to the more secular nationalism emanating from Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt, then the Kingdom’s chief regional rival. While Saudi Arabia has traditionally been associated with Salafism³¹ and Wahhabism, the common enemy of the socialist left (when it still seemed dominant) led Saudi officials to help broker a thaw between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the early 1970s.³²

Even in the infancy of Saudi religious soft power, there were motivations other than *realpolitik* at work. For example, many within the Kingdom’s religious establishment and royal family viewed the global propagation of Islam as a religious obligation (*fard*) deeply intertwined with Saudi Arabia’s privileged role as custodian of Islam’s two holiest sites. During the 1970s and 1980s, Saudi religious outreach was driven by a combination of the country’s Cold War alignment with the United States (which saw in Islam an ideological counterbalance to Soviet influence) and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The latter development, and more specifically the new Islamic Republic’s efforts to export its revolution, marked a new phase of “geo-religious” competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran—each of them vying to assert supremacy among Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia also worried about Iran’s influence on its own significant Shia minority population, a community subject to high levels of discrimination and *de facto* second-class citizenship. In the eyes of some of Saudi Arabia’s most hardline clerics, the Shia weren’t even legitimate Muslims.

29 Kamran Bokhari, “The Saudi-Iranian Geosectarian Struggle,” *The Islamic Monthly*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/the-saudi-iranian-geosectarian-struggle/>.

30 For contrasting perspectives see for example Dore Gold, *Hatred’s Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003) and Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

31 Salafism, often used simply to describe conservative interpretations of Islam, refers to a doctrinal orientation that emphasizes puritanical piety and the centrality of the contemporary companions of the Prophet Muhammad (the *salaf as-salih*, or “pious ancestors”) as a source of legal precedent. Wahhabism is the distinctly Saudi variant of Salafism, although in practice it hews closely to the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence.

32 Fawaz A. Gerges, *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash that Shaped the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 330.

Throughout the 1980s, South Asia was a major destination for Saudi funding. Elements of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq's "Islamization" drive (such as the expansion of funding for madrasas and religious higher education) were enacted with partnership and financial assistance from benefactors in the Kingdom and, of course, Saudi Arabia was a key broker in the various networks of direct and indirect support flowing to mujahedeen fighters—usually via Pakistan—following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The 1990s saw a diversification in the geographic scope of Saudi outreach, with a surge of funding for mosques and religious education in sub-Saharan Africa in part as a response to the growth of Pentecostal Christianity. Over the years, other regions have also attracted the attention of religious benefactors in the Persian Gulf, including Southeast Asia (especially Indonesia and the Philippines), Muslim communities in Europe and North America, and the various Central Asian republics after the fall of the Soviet Union. Concerns about Iranian influence have been the primary driver of Saudi Arabia's religious outreach efforts since 2003, when Tehran began asserting itself more forcefully in the Arab world as a response to its perceived encirclement by U.S. forces in Afghanistan, the Gulf, and Iraq.

But what exactly is implied by the idea of "Saudi Arabia" exporting Wahhabi influence? To think of such activity as a calculated and coordinated aspect of the Saudi government's foreign policy conduct is to miss a much more complex reality. While some of the entities involved are indeed governmental ministries and agencies, others are private or quasi-governmental. Some are funded by the Saudi royal family—but independent of the government bureaucracy. Still others are firmly linked to the Kingdom's religious establishment, which at times has enjoyed considerable independence from both the government and the House of Saud. In some cases, Saudi benefactors have relied on non-Saudi groups and networks—such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 80s—to manage and implement aspects of its global religious outreach. In practice, this means that whatever the original intentions Saudi actors may have had, they become diluted by other agendas. In short, to fully understand the global Saudi *da'wa* apparatus, it is imperative to get past a "black box" image of the Kingdom so as to fully appreciate the diverse array of Saudi entities—both public and private—involved in transnational religious propagation.

The many and varied actors involved in global Saudi *da'wa* efforts comprise an "ecosystem" of sorts, including the following key components:

- *Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Da'wa, and Guidance*: The governmental body primarily responsible for the management of religious affairs and a major provider of resources (money, books, personnel) for international proselytization activities including mosque building, the development of religious schools, and the organization of lecture tours by religious scholars and *da'is* (preachers). Ministry officials sometimes serve as "religious attachés" at Saudi diplomatic posts around the world, acting as liaisons with local Muslim communities and religious leaders.
- *Muslim World League (MWL)*: A parastatal organization established in 1962 through royal patronage to promote Muslim solidarity and encourage the propagation of Islam globally. While formally independent of the Saudi government, the MWL is traditionally headed by a Saudi, headquartered in Mecca, and largely dependent on the Kingdom for its finances. Although representatives from various regions and diverse Islamic trends have been part of the League's governing council over the years (including the Muslim Brotherhood and its South Asian cognate, the

Jamaat-e-Islami, both of which were highly influential during the League's early phase), the growing centrality of Saudi figures in its executive functions has led most observers to regard the MWL as a vehicle for securing and promoting Saudi religious hegemony.³³

- *World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY)*: An organization established in 1972, originally for the primary purpose of preparing young Saudis and other Muslims planning to study in non-Muslim settings—mainly Europe and North America—to protect and preserve their religious beliefs.³⁴ Over time, its activities began to cross-fertilize with Muslim Brotherhood-linked networks, particularly in Europe and, given WAMY's close ties to the Saudi religious establishment (in contrast to the MWL's alignment with the al-Saud family), it became more directly involved in activities focused on the propagation of Wahhabi doctrine.³⁵
- *Islamic University of Medina (IUM)*: An institution of higher education established in 1961 and closely tied to the Kingdom's religious establishment with a primary mission of providing training in the classical Islamic sciences to Muslims from around the world. IUM's provision of generous scholarships for international students has made it an attractive destination for higher religious study. Frequently viewed as a direct conduit for exporting Wahhabism via the training of religious scholars, recent scholarship has painted a more complex picture regarding the transnational circulation of religious ideas within and through this institution. Michael Farquhar's study of IUM, for example, demonstrates that aspects of its teaching have come to reflect the diverse range of cultural settings and theological orientations represented within its very global corpus of students.³⁶

There are also a wide variety of Saudi and Saudi-funded charitable organizations that incorporate elements of proselytization into their provision of aid, relief, and social services around the world. Some of the main players here are the International Organization for Relief, Welfare and Development (formerly known as the International Islamic Relief Organization, an affiliate of the MWL), the al-Haramain Foundation, and al-Waqf al-Islami. While the vast majority of their activities fall into the realm of valuable charitable services, some have been accused—alongside cognate Christian relief organizations—of proselytizing to particularly vulnerable populations.³⁷ All three organizations have also had to deal with accusations (and, in some cases, actual convictions) of specific personnel and country programs being linked to funding for militant groups such as Hamas and al-Qaida. After 9/11, the Saudi authorities began to regulate charities much

33 Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Islamischen Weltliga* (Berlin: Verlag, 1990).

34 See Peter Mandaville, "The new transnationalism: globalising Islamic movements" in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, Volume 6, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207; and Reinhard Schulze, "Da'wah from Saudi Arabia: Transnationalism in the Context of the Muslim World League," unpublished paper, 2009.

35 "Muslim Network and Movements in Western Europe," (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2010), <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe/>.

36 Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

37 William Racimora, *Salafist/Wahhabite Financial Support to Educational, Social and Religious Institutions* (Brussels: European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2013); Daniel L. Byman, "Getting Real With Riyadh," *Brookings Institution*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/getting-real-with-riyadh/>. On the co-mingling of proselytization and humanitarian relief, see David Rohde, "Mix of Quake Aid and Preaching Stirs Concern," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/22/world/worldspecial4/mix-of-quake-aid-and-preaching-stirs-concern.html>.

more tightly, but this reach does not necessarily extend to smaller private or family-based charities, some of which enjoy cover from various members of the royal family.³⁸

One final aspect of Saudi Arabia's transnational religious influence worth mentioning relates to labor migration and the cultural and religious diffusion that occurs as a result. Since the 1970s, large numbers of workers from South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Arab world began flocking to Saudi Arabia due to the significantly higher wages they could earn during Kingdom's oil-fueled construction boom. Many of them came from Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, or from countries with significant Muslim minorities such as India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.

A smaller but still significant number of skilled workers—engineers, doctors, and government advisors—came from Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab countries. They returned to their home countries exposed to stricter, more conservative forms of Islamic practice. This helped to create a new, influential, and Islamically-minded bourgeoisie that would give added strength to religious revivals that were already underway.³⁹ In Jordan, for example, there was one mosque for every 13,181 residents in 1973, while, by 1984, there was one for every 6,908 residents.⁴⁰ In Jordan and the Palestinian territories, remittances from labor migration were coupled with economic aid, particularly from Saudi Arabia until a falling out during the Gulf War. Financial assistance from Gulf donors, along with remittances from Jordanian expatriates, accounted for as much as nearly half of Jordan's GNP.⁴¹ This kind of transnational religion does not necessarily represent evidence of a desire on Saudi Arabia's part to generate specific outcomes in Jordan or South Asia as part of its overall foreign policy. Still, it is worth looking at "religious remittances" as one dimension of the point we make above about the projection of religious influence outside a state's borders not necessarily reflecting a coherent policy impulse.

Rethinking the spread of Wahhabism

There has been no end to the debate about the impact of Saudi funding on Islam around the world. Skeptics point to evidence that the arrival of Wahhabism created a fertile environment for extremist groups to grow and recruit, citing in certain cases—such as Pakistan—direct ties between Saudi-funded mosques or schools and recruitment into militant organizations.⁴² In his book-length treatment of soft power, Joseph Nye himself seems to subscribe to this account of Saudi Wahhabism directly inspiring radical Islamism. "The soft power of Wahhabism has not proved to be a resource that the Saudi government could control," he writes. "Instead it has been like a sorcerer's apprentice that has come back to bedevil its original creator."⁴³

38 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Al Haramain Islamic Foundation," press release, June 19, 2008, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1043.aspx>; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Director, Branches of Charity Bankrolling Al Qaida Network," press release, August 3, 2006, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp45.aspx>; Carlotta Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>.

39 See for example Katy Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Attiya Ahmad, *Everyday Conversions: Islam, Domestic Work, and South Asian Migrant Women in Kuwait* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

40 Eugene L. Rogan, "Physical Islamization in Amman," *The Muslim World* 76 (January 1986): 36.

41 Robert Satloff, *Troubles on the East Bank: Challenges to the Domestic Stability of Jordan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1986), 7.

42 Carlotta Gall, "How Kosovo Was Turned into Fertile Ground for ISIS," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>.

43 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power*, 96.

Others have focused on Wahhabism's impact on society more broadly, including a shift toward more conservative norms and practices—including an apparent correlation between the arrival of Saudi funding and the adoption of previously unfamiliar practices such as women wearing full face veils (*niqab*). For others, the effects are apparent in shifting attitudes toward religious minorities that Wahhabism views as illegitimate (such as Shia) or forms of religious practice it regards as deviant (such as Sufism). Taken collectively, these various effects are commonly said to generate over time a distortion of local culture through the transplantation of “foreign” religious practices—a narrative in which, for example, funds for mosque building also entail the acceptance of Saudi-approved imams and specific texts in religious schools.⁴⁴

However, the notion of wholesale bulldozing of pristine local culture by foreign ideologies is far too simplistic. Saudi support for religion is welcome in some communities where, for instance, the local authorities have viewed an emphasis on religion and religious education as contradictory to national development and modernization agendas. If there is a demand for religious education—and there often is—there will be incentives and pressures for someone, or some country, to provide it. In other cases, local rulers seek Saudi support to burnish their own religious credentials.⁴⁵ In such situations, resources from the Middle East are often vital for creating religious infrastructure. It is also *not* the case that Saudi religious norms simply “replace” local Islam. Rather, a far more complex process of adaptation—on both the sending and receiving sides—takes place. Indeed, some countries on the receiving end of Wahhabi proselytization seem capable of absorbing these influences without seeing much in the way of local disruption or social change.

One of the major factors bearing on this question is likely the strength of local religious institutions and the state's regulatory capacity vis-à-vis religion. In countries where local religious institutions are strong and, moreover, strongly connected to the state, such as in Turkey, transnational influences may have less dramatic effects. Another variable to consider is the strength of mass-based Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, that can make it more difficult for Salafi organizations to gain traction (since they are often appealing to the same conservative constituencies).

Another challenge in assessing the nature and extent of Saudi transnational religious influence relates to Salafism more broadly. There may be a temptation to interpret any observed increase in Salafism in a given environment as evidence of foreign Wahhabi influences; however to do so would be misleading. In other words, the mere existence of Salafism cannot be used as a proxy for foreign and especially Saudi support for Salafism. There may be simpler explanations. It is, of course, possible that more people turn to Salafism because more people find it appealing for reasons wholly their own. In some cases, Saudi funding may be helpful for local organizations. But funding can only take you so far. Some countries—such as Pakistan and Egypt—have their own “indigenous”

44 Scott Shane, “Saudis and Extremism: ‘Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters,’” *The New York Times*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html>; Krithika Varagur, “Indonesia’s Moderate Islam is Slowly Crumbling,” *Foreign Policy*, February 14, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/14/indonesias-moderate-islam-is-slowly-crumbling/>; Abdulmajeed al-Buluwi, “The Saudi-Turkey Cold War for Sunni Hegemony,” *Center for Geopolitical Analyses*, April 1, 2014, <http://icmu.nyc.gr/The-Saudi-Turkey-cold-war-for-Sunni-hegemony?page=1>; Daria Sito-Sucic, “Bosnia’s Muslims divided over inroads of Wahhabism,” *Reuters*, January 21, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-wahhabi/bosnias-muslims-divided-over-inroads-of-wahhabism-idUSL2972174820061229>.

45 James M. Dorsey, “Spreading the Gospel: Asian Leaders Wary of Saudi Religious Diplomacy,” *The Huffington Post*, March 23, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/spreading-the-gospel-asian-leaders-wary-of-saudi-religious_us_58ce7059e4b07112b6472eb4.

Salafi traditions that have waxed and waned over the years. Indeed, Egypt's first Salafi organization—Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya—was founded in 1926, before Saudi Arabia even existed as such, while Pakistan's Ahl-i Hadis movement dates back to the late 19th century.

Another problem associated with reducing the presence of Salafism or conservative religion to byproducts of Saudi influence is the fact that the Kingdom is not the only country in the Gulf supporting transnational religious propagation. Although their smaller petrodollar economies mean that they operate globally at a more modest scale, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates have to varying degrees also supported many of the same Islamic causes, engaged in mosque building, and funded religious education in ways that are similar to Saudi Arabia. Qatar's religious establishment, for example, has long been influenced by scholarship and religious trends from Saudi Arabia, and its national mosque is named in honor of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.⁴⁶

In other contexts, young people have turned to the perceived safety and authenticity of the Salafi tradition as a means of establishing a firm anchor in religion—particularly in the face of an overwhelming media environment where reliable answers to questions on religious matters are difficult to find. Tunisia, after its 2011 revolution, is a striking example of this. The country immediately saw a rapid rise of Salafi activism (presumably Saudi clerics and funders couldn't have worked *that* quickly). For decades, Tunisia had little space for overt expressions of religion, and now all of a sudden an unexpected democratic opening had left a large vacuum. With mainstream Islamist parties like Ennahda focused almost exclusively on party politics, Salafis found themselves with unprecedented freedom to maneuver, particularly in areas where state institutions were weak.

What also remains unclear is the extent to which the various Saudi actors and activities discussed above can be said to collectively constitute an official religious soft power strategy on the part of the Saudi state. While some of the entities most directly involved in Wahhabi propagation are organs of the Saudi government, it would be wrong to assume that all of them view the Kingdom's international challenges and opportunities in exactly the same way. Indeed, some manifestations of Saudi Arabia's external religious outreach over the years are best understood as a function of domestic politics and horse trading between and within, for example, the royal family and the religious establishment.⁴⁷ Similarly, the religious attachés stationed at Saudi embassies in many countries—many on secondment from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs—were viewed with suspicion by the Kingdom's foreign ministry, which worried that their not always subtle activities would create tensions with the local government and population. In many cases, such religious activity is just that: proselytization carried out under the auspices of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (rather than the foreign ministry) or by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, which bears little relationship to Saudi geopolitical designs. However, in other respects—particularly with regard to blunting Iranian influence—there does seem to be a broad convergence among the

46 James M. Dorsey, "Qatari Wahhabism vs. Saudi Wahhabism and the perils of top-down change," *The Huffington Post*, December 4, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/qatari-wahhabism-vs-saudi-wahhabism-and-the-perils_us_5a257240e4b05072e8b56b29; David Roberts, "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood: Pragmatism or Preference?" *Middle East Policy* 21 (Fall 2014): 84-94.

47 While Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has moved to constrain the power of some elements of the religious establishment—such as the *mutawwa*, or religious police—it is not yet clear whether or to what extent his actions will affect Saudi Arabia's global religious propagation activities.

various Saudi stakeholders. If Shia Islam in the eyes of most Saudis equals Iran, and Wahhabism is doctrinally opposed to Shia, then almost by definition Wahhabism becomes a useful tool for countering Iranian influence across the Muslim world.

What to make of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's claim that Saudi Arabia's export of Wahhabism over the past half century was undertaken primarily at the behest of the United States in order to counter Soviet influence at the height of the Cold War?⁴⁸ One former senior U.S. intelligence official acknowledges that broadly speaking—at least prior to Iran's 1979 revolution—the U.S. national security establishment had a relatively benign view of Islam. "Religion in general was perceived as a bulwark against atheistic communism and a potential lever by which to weaken the Soviet system," he explained, "and so anything the Saudis did through, for example, the Muslim World League, would have been viewed sympathetically by the United States."⁴⁹ While this falls far short of the Saudi crown prince's account of an active campaign by Washington to harness Wahhabism as part of its Cold War strategy, it broadly squares with other existing accounts of U.S. support for Islamic causes as part of its proxy efforts against the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ However, it is also clear that Saudi Arabia's religious outreach activities pre-dated American dabbling in geostrategic religion and that it served Saudi Arabia's own political—and proselytizing—interests in various ways. In this sense the claim by Mohammed bin Salman that Saudi religious export activity can be reduced to the logic of a particular Cold War alliance rings hollow.

Exporting Islamic revolution? Iran and "resistance culture"

The immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was replete with speculation about Tehran "exporting" revolutionary Islam to other countries in the Middle East and neighboring Muslim regions.⁵¹ The likelihood of directly replicating Iran's particularist theocracy elsewhere was never very high, however, and the narrow focus on such a scenario distracted from the fact that Iran's leadership was developing far more sophisticated ways of packaging the ideational appeal of its revolution for geopolitical effect. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's core doctrine of *vilayat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the clerics, was regarded by most senior Shia clergy (including many in Iran itself) as highly unconventional, and it never gained much traction beyond pragmatic tributes paid by some Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. To be sure, Tehran certainly tapped into historical narratives of Shia dispossession to good effect when reaching out to co-religionists living in the Arab Gulf (e.g., Saudi Arabia's Shia minority), but the revolution's most potent international appeal would be found in other facets.

First, the Iranian Revolution was welcomed by many mainstream Sunni Islamists, who might have otherwise been suspicious of Shia Islam. They saw Iran as a potential ally against their own repressive regimes; The "Islamic" nature of the Islamic revolution took precedence over any perceived sectarianism. Sunni Islamists had more in common

48 See Martin Chulov, "I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says crown prince," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.

49 Author interview with Graham Fuller, former CIA official and vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council, May 31, 2018.

50 See, for example, Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind*; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*; Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*; and Dianne Kirby, "The Cold War and American Religion."

51 See, for example, Shireen T. Hunter, "Islamic Iran and the Arab World," *Middle East Insight* 5, no. 3 (1987); Shireen T. Hunter "Iran and the spread of Revolutionary Islam," *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (April 1988): 730-749; Magnus Ranstorp, "Hizbollah's Command Leadership: Its Structure, Decision-Making and Relationship with Iranian Clergy and Institution," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6, no. 3 (1994): 303-339.

with Shia Islamists than they did with Sunni secularists.⁵² This religious soft power would decrease over time, with geopolitical considerations driving revolutionary Iran to forge an alliance with Syria's secular Baath regime. Second, Iran succeeded, again especially at first, in tapping into a persistent yearning among many recently decolonized countries for an alternative to the twin poles of U.S. capitalism and Soviet communism. For some of these countries—including non-Muslim nations in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia—the Iranian Revolution was viewed in the broader context of non-alignment.⁵³ Third, those aspects of the revolution that emphasized overcoming inequality, injustice, and neo-imperialism allowed Khomeini to be perceived as a Third Worldist visionary and to gain support throughout the developing world. As Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia's Ennahda party, once explained, the Iranian Revolution “enabled us to Islamize some leftist social concepts and to accommodate the social conflict within an Islamic context.”⁵⁴ A number of Sunni-dominated countries such as Indonesia and Nigeria saw pockets of conversion to Shia Islam due to Iran's perceived anti-imperialist credentials in the wake of 1979.⁵⁵ To this day, for example, Islamic Republic International Broadcasting—Iran's radio world service—broadcasts in Hausa to northern Nigeria.

In short, the Islamic Republic has adopted a broad-based approach to cultural diplomacy. Its appeal is, to a significant degree, ideational in nature and not strictly a function of power projection. Sometimes it draws on Islamic narratives; sometimes Islamist narratives; and, increasingly over time, sectarian narratives. Certainly the Islamic Republic has sought to portray itself as the protector of embattled Shia minorities and sometimes even—in the cases of Iraq before 2003, Azerbaijan before the fall of the Soviet Union, and, presently, the Kingdom of Bahrain—Shia *majorities*.⁵⁶ As the chief international sponsor of Hezbollah, a mainstay of Lebanon's Shia community, Iran has cultivated a powerful proxy force capable of exerting considerable political and military influence across the Levant. Witness, for example, the movement's recent role in Syria defending the Assad regime; even here, we find a religious framing in the form of Hezbollah explaining its presence in Syria in terms of defending religious shrines.⁵⁷

Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the rapid inversion of political power that handed control to the country's long-oppressed Shia, Iran has cultivated close ties to the Iraqi government. Some of the Popular Mobilization Forces that emerged

52 When Khomeini declared that “Islam was political or nothing else,” he was saying something that Sunni Islamists had long said. Interestingly, the writing of Sayyid Qutb, in many ways the Egyptian Brotherhood's last true revolutionary, became influential in Iran, with much of his work being translated and disseminated in the country. See for example Yusuf Unal, “Sayyid Qutb in Iran: Translating the Islamist Ideologue in the Islamic Republic,” *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 1 (November 2016).

53 Houman A. Sadri, “An Islamic Perspective on Non-Alignment: Iranian Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice,” in *The Zen of International Relations: IR Theory from East to West*, eds. Stephen Chan et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan U.K., 2001).

54 Ibid, 53.

55 See Conor Gaffey, “Who is Sheikh Zakzaky, Nigeria's Most Powerful Shiite Muslim?” *Newsweek*, December 16, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/who-sheikh-zakzaky-nigerias-most-powerful-shiite-muslim-405297>; and Shireen T. Hunter, “Iran and the spread of revolutionary Islam”; and A. Rahman Zainuddin and M. Hamdan Basyar, *Syiah dan Politik di Indonesia: Sebuah Penelitian* (Bandung: Mizan, 2000).

56 For an example of Iran's activities in post-Saddam Iraq, see Michael Eisenstadt, “Iran and Iraq,” *United States Institute of Peace*, 2010, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-iraq>. For examples of Iran's activities in Bahrain, see Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. For examples of Iran's activities in Azerbaijan, see Anar Valiyev, “Iranian Soft Power in Azerbaijan: Does Religion Matter?” in *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ansgar Jödicke (London: Routledge, 2018).

57 See Edward Wastnidge, “Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis,” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 148-159.

to fight ISIS in Iraq after 2014 are effectively Iranian proxies, even if they are formally accountable to the central government in Baghdad. Iran has sought to exploit the instability arising from the Arab revolts of 2011 by initiating a concerted campaign of transnational influence operations in countries across the Middle East—but particularly in the Gulf region—where the grievances of Shia communities align with the themes that inspired the toppling of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The Bahraini government dismissed a mass protest movement in 2011 as Iranian meddling. This was a convenient fiction from the regime given the presence of very real discontent within the country’s majority Shia population, but Tehran’s hand was certainly not absent either, particularly when it came to more radical Shia Islamist groupings such as al-Haqq. Likewise and more recently, Iran’s control of the Houthi rebels in Yemen (another Shia minority) has often been overstated, not least by Saudi Arabia, yet various forms of coordination and operational linkage between Tehran and the movement’s leadership undoubtedly exist.

Not dissimilar to some examples of Saudi transnational partnership with Sunni political and militant groups, much of what we have covered in this section looks more like Tehran using proxy groups—often with a broadly compatible religious alignment—to pursue its security objectives, and less like broad-based religious soft power outreach. Iran has of course also engaged publics and civil societies throughout the Muslim world via the lens of religion. In Iraq, for example, Tehran has sought to cultivate ever closer ties within the major Iraqi seminary cities of Najaf and Kerbala, seemingly engaging in disinformation campaigns designed to foster support for Iranian clerics among Shia in Iraq through false endorsements of Iran’s supreme leader by leading Najafi scholars.⁵⁸ With the question of succession to Iraq’s octogenarian Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—by most accounts the most widely followed religious scholar in the Shia world—now firmly on the table, Tehran has launched a lobbying effort in Najaf in the hope of having a friendly successor who can facilitate access to Iraq for Iran’s religious establishment.

Perhaps the defining feature of Iran’s soft power strategy since the revolution has been its flexible character. Even Khomeini’s seemingly rigid interpretation of Shia Islam as the bedrock of Iran’s identity was more complex in reality; Khomeini’s political theology, which diverged from much of the traditional Shia religious establishment, did not hinge on the return of the Imam, making it seem less distinctly “Shia” than it otherwise might have been.⁵⁹ Regardless of how ideological individual politicians might be, states have interests that they pursue by tailoring their message for different audiences and drawing on different sources of religious, ethnic, linguistic, and historical legitimacy. Not surprisingly, then, Iran’s cultural diplomacy has proven to be rather nimble. When for purposes of outreach to countries in Iran’s near abroad—such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan—it has been more useful to stress ethnic, linguistic, and historically “Persianate” affinities, the Islamic Republic has only been too happy to do so.⁶⁰ Likewise, when engaging on religion in Sunni countries, Iran has de-emphasized revolutionary Shia Islam. For example, in 2007, Tehran set up an “Iranian Corner” at a branch of Indonesia’s National Islamic University (NIU) outside of Jakarta. Rather

58 Hayder Al-Khoei, “Post-Sistani Iraq, Iran, and the Future of Shia Islam,” *War on the Rocks*, September 8, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/post-sistani-iraq-iran-and-the-future-of-shia-islam/>.

59 Sunni and Shia Islam recognize different lines of succession to the Prophet Muhammad, with Sunnis emphasizing the institution of *khilafah* and the figure of the Caliph and Shia following a separate lineage of hereditary Imams.

60 Marzieh Kouhi Esfahani and Mahmoud Reza Golshanpazhooh, “Culture, the Core of Soft Power: An Overview of Iran’s Cultural Component of Soft Power,” *Hemispheres* 29, no. 4 (2014): 79-88.

than functioning as an homage to the glories of the Islamic Republic, this public diplomacy resource provided a library dedicated to historical Persian contributions to Sufism, the dominant religious trend at NIU and a defining element of Indonesia's own religious culture. Such an initiative demonstrates that Iran possesses sophisticated awareness of its audience for religious soft power outreach. Iran has even sought to bring religious soft power to the world stage, perhaps most prominently through former President Mohammad Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilizations" initiative at the United Nations.⁶¹

Much of this activity, including the aforementioned NIU center, falls under the auspices of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), the international public diplomacy arm of the Islamic Republic. Often co-located with Iranian embassies around the world but reporting directly to the supreme leader, ICRO officers provide funding and other assistance for a wide range of cultural initiatives including art exhibitions, libraries, educational initiatives, and people-to-people exchange programs.⁶² Engaged in similar sorts of activities but somewhat more removed from the Iranian government are the various *bonyads*, or cultural foundations, through which Iran has established Islamic universities and seminaries in various countries or provided scholarships for international students to study in Iran.⁶³ Interestingly, the activities of some of these foundations are not limited to Shia communities but also encompass Sunni Muslim settings where Iranian outreach helps to reinforce narratives of resistance (e.g., aid to Gaza from the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation).⁶⁴ In linguistically Persian but religiously Sunni Tajikistan, Iran has entered into direct competition with major Sunni transnational players, including Saudi-funded charities. ICRO is also a major player in promoting an update of the anti-imperialist narrative that was a hallmark of the immediate post-revolutionary period. This emphasis on "resistance culture" involves Iran positioning itself as a hub for pushing back against American influence in the Middle East and building partnerships between Iran and other communities, organizations, and, in some cases, countries with an anti-American orientation (e.g., Hezbollah, Russia, but also anti-free trade groups in Brazil and Asia).⁶⁵ It entails, in other words, a return to an updated form of Arab nationalism sponsored by Tehran—but now with a religious rather than secular face.

While these examples show that the religious soft power strategies of Saudi Arabia and Iran cannot be reduced entirely to bilateral competition, it is also evident that, over time, the presence of the other has been the most consistent driving factor in each country's religious outreach calculus. We can also discern clear differences in

61 United Nations, "United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, 2001 Launched With Headquarters Round Table Discussion," press release, September 5, 2000, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2000/20000905.ga9747.doc.html>. For an analysis of the U.N. Alliance of Civilizations, see Jeffrey Haynes, *The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations and the Pursuit of Global Justice: Overcoming Western versus Muslim Conflict and the Creation of a Just World Order* (New York and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2018).

62 See "Islamic Culture and Relations Organization," <http://icro.ir/>.

63 See, for specific examples, Marzieh Kouhi Esfahani and Mahmoud Reza Golshanpazhooh, "Culture, the Core of Soft Power," 87; Alireza Nader et al., *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), 13-14; and Ahmad Majidiyar, "Iran's soft power: Islamic Azad University opening branches in major Syrian and Iraqi cities," *Middle East Institute*, January 17, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/iran-s-soft-power-islamic-azad-university-opening-branches-major-syrian-and-iraqi-cities>.

64 See "Relief Organization Sparks Controversy Over Large Donations Abroad," *Iranwire*, June 11, 2018, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/5347>.

65 Edward Wastnidge, "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 364-377.

their respective approaches. Where Saudi Arabia has been associated with the direct promotion of specific religious doctrines—and, moreover, interpretations of Islam that are often virulently anti-Shia—Iranian religious outreach has tended to focus more on leveraging the grievances of Shia communities abroad and on emphasizing Shia Islam’s anti-imperialist and counter-hegemonic credentials.

More recently, the Riyadh-Tehran rivalry has migrated into new spaces, with satellite television, the internet, and social media all emerging as zones of contention. The Saudis own a plethora of Salafi-oriented broadcast properties and many Saudi religious scholars have large followings on social media platforms such as Twitter. Iran is also a major player in the online space, frequently working through existing media channels to shift news and commentary narratives in its favor. In aggregate terms, all of this activity has generated a social environment in the Middle East in which many issues—religious and otherwise—have been viewed through the lens of sectarianism.

It is also important to note that Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the realm of religion has not always been zero sum. Religious ties between Riyadh and Tehran (or Qom) have experienced periods of relative cordiality, and within forums such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation the two have often been at pains to emphasize a shared religious identity. Similarly, the relations of Sunni Gulf governments to their Shia populations cannot simply be reduced to cross-Gulf antagonism or Iranian “meddling.” Saudi Arabia’s approach to its Shia minority, particularly in the Eastern Province, has a domestic history that long predates any efforts by Tehran to leverage the grievances of those communities. Similarly, it would be far too simplistic to portray Shia communities in the Arab Gulf as passive, undifferentiated agents of Iran since various groups within these communities have adopted quite different stances vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic.

USES (AND ABUSES) OF “MODERATE ISLAM”

The aftermath of 9/11, the dramatic events of the Arab uprisings, and the rise of ISIS have all elevated the urgency and importance of the debate around Islam’s role in public life. Various regimes faced criticism from extremist groups that questioned their very legitimacy, while in other cases non-violent Islamist movements pushed for reform in ways that challenged existing regimes—not just in the traditional sense of power and control, but also in terms of religious legitimacy. Many regimes have drawn legitimacy from a mixture of religious and historical sources, and any competition to those claims is perceived as threatening and even existential.

Not surprisingly, regimes have responded by seeking to reinforce their religious purchase (Morocco) or by developing new religious messages to distinguish themselves from both domestic and foreign opponents (Saudi Arabia). Ever since the 9/11 attacks, there has been an eager Western and international audience for narratives around religious reform and countering violent extremism. To see a close ally leading the way on such initiatives offers the prospect of progress: that Middle Eastern regimes, however autocratic, are at least attempting to address what, for the international community, remains the primary national security concern in the region. “Something” is being done, and that something is being done by Muslims themselves.

Morocco is a case that generally receives less attention but is in many ways a model of the effective dual use of religion by an Arab regime. Here, religious soft power does two things at once; it solidifies regime legitimacy by reinforcing the religious roots of the

monarchy, and it elevates Morocco in the international arena as an important voice for religious “moderation,” regardless of what this moderation actually means in practice.

In Morocco, the king’s spiritual role as *amir al-muminin* (commander of the faithful) is constitutionally enshrined. While Morocco is often viewed in the West as one of the region’s more secular countries, the very fact that the monarchy is so intimately involved with religious initiatives both at home and abroad belies this. The claim to spiritual legitimacy is central to the monarchy’s justification for dominating politics and continuing to hold reserve powers. In 1969, King Hassan II put it this way: “Islam forbids me from implementing a constitutional monarchy in which, the king, delegate my powers and reign without governing. ... I can delegate power, but I do not have the right on my own initiative, to abstain from my prerogatives, because they are also spiritual.”⁶⁶

With this in mind, the country’s main Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), entered into a bargain: it could participate and even govern—of course under the watchful eye of the royal court—as long as it accepted that religious legitimacy resided in the king and only the king. To question his role as commander of the faithful was tantamount to heresy. As Avi Spiegel writes, “PJD officials still evoke religion, but almost never in opposition to the state.”⁶⁷ To the extent that Morocco is considered a success, it is, at least in part, due to its ability to domesticate its Islamist groups. What is, in effect, an anti-democratic orientation in politics at home is broadly accepted as in line with Western values abroad. This too requires a nurturing of the target audience in question. The 2016 Marrakech Declaration was a focal point of these efforts, bringing together more than 300 religious scholars to commit to the protection of minority rights. In hosting the conference, King Mohamed explained: “We in the kingdom of Morocco will not tolerate the violation of the rights of religious minorities in the name of Islam. ... I am enabling Christians and Jews to practice their faith and not just as minorities. They even serve in the government.”⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, the Marrakech Declaration was well received, burnishing Morocco’s credentials and highlighting its aspirations to become a leading trainer of “moderate” imams in the Muslim world. As the anthropologist Aomar Boum wrote: “Morocco’s government has not only paid attention to the rise of independent preachers but it has been proactive in curbing their influence by controlling their production of fatwas and limiting their access and control of mosques. To counter extremist messages, the government also supervises the training of moderate scholars and preachers. As a result, Morocco enjoys relative political stability.”⁶⁹ In a one report, Susan Hayward of the United States Institute of Peace called the Marrakech Declaration “a powerful response to a pressing global human rights concern and a model for how religious tradition and international human rights law can be mutually reinforcing.”⁷⁰ She also

66 See Avi Max Spiegel, *Young Islam: The New Politics of Religion in Morocco and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 38.

67 Avi Max Spiegel, “Morocco,” in eds. Shadi Hamid and William McCants, *Rethinking Political Islam*, 61.

68 Aida Alami, “Morocco summit pushes Muslim clerics to improve the lot of religious minorities,” *Religion News Service*, January 26, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2016/01/27/morocco-summit-pushes-muslim-clerics-improve-lot-religious-minorities/>.

69 Aomar Boum, “Morocco’s Program for Securing Religious Toleration: A Model for the Region?” *University of Chicago Divinity School*, March 18, 2016, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/moroccos-program-securing-religious-toleration-model-region>.

70 Susan Hayward, “Understanding and Extending the Marrakesh Declaration in Policy and Practice,” (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2016), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR392-Understanding-and-Extending-the-Marrakesh-Declaration-in-Policy-and-Practice.pdf>.

notes, however, that the declaration “has received little attention in the Muslim world, and has been viewed as an elite, idealistic initiative,” again raising the question of who is the target audience when assessing the impact of religious soft power.

The Moroccan king’s patronage for the Marrakech Declaration and other initiatives can be understood as one element in a sequence of developments since 2003 (when Casablanca was struck by a series of suicide bombings) where state institutions have gradually come to encompass or co-opt more and more of the country’s religious sector. This has included the creation of the Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas, an organization established in 2006 to focus on promoting moderate interpretations of religion. Through the Mohamed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morocco has also developed and implemented programs for training imams in the values of tolerance and pluralism, including the delivery of religious training services outside Morocco (particularly in West Africa and the Sahel).⁷¹ Ann Wainscott has described this as a process of “bureaucratizing Islam”—a strategy by which the state harnesses the social power of religion through official regulatory bodies, institutions, and government functionaries. As she puts it:

Given the emphasis on policing Muslims inherent in its discourse, the War on Terror presents particular opportunities to states with Islamic identities. Such states not only can maneuver to regulate domestic religious actors but ... also can offer their services to other states, even secular ones, in need of assistance in policing their religious spheres. In doing so, states with religious identities can expand their influence beyond their borders.⁷²

However, Morocco is not unique in how it seeks to deploy its religious establishment in response to the regional and global security environment. We have seen similar developments in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, another nation whose ruling family advances its religious credentials—as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and, under the Ottoman Empire, governors of the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia where Islam’s two holiest cities are to be found—as part of their claim to political legitimacy.

Jordan was a driving force behind the Common Word, a 2007 open letter on shared inter-religious values addressed to then Pope Benedict and major Christian religious leaders from more than 100 Muslim religious scholars and intellectuals. The letter was drafted by the Jordanian Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal who leads the Royal Ahl al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman. Previously, the Jordanian royal family had played a key role in the Amman Message, a 2004 statement by several hundred Muslim leaders seeking to clarify various Islamic legal questions and essentially reclaim the mantle of religious authority from Salafi-Jihadi groups such as al-Qaida.⁷³ In 2014, Prince Ghazi was a lead organizer of an open letter signed by a number of leading Islamic religious scholars and addressed to the head of ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which advanced a theological and legal refutation of claims and practices associated with the Islamic State. And in a manner reminiscent to the Moroccan king’s decision to create a new religious body, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi in 2017 established a new national council charged with combating

71 Sarah Alaoui, “Morocco’s Religious Diplomacy: To What End?” *Center on Public Diplomacy*, June 7, 2018, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/morocco%E2%80%99s-religious-diplomacy-what-end>.

72 Ann Marie Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3.

73 See Stacey Gutkowski, “We are the very model of moderate Muslim state: The Amman Messages and Jordan’s foreign policy,” *International Relations* 30, no. 2 (2016) 206-226.

radical religious ideology to both complement and compete with al-Azhar University, the Sunni world's premier institution of Islamic learning. This followed an earlier 2015 call by Sissi for a broad reform of Islam, a move calculated to reassert state control over major religious institutions perceived as having become too independent in the wake of the 2011 revolution.

How successful can these countries be at positioning themselves as credible sources of something like “moderate Islam”? Does that concept even hold appeal or resonate with broader populations? There are good reasons to be skeptical of such claims, not least of all because state-controlled religious bodies are often regarded as little more than government mouthpieces.⁷⁴ This brings us back to a point raised earlier: the question of whether this “moderate Islam” represents a meaningful and effective tool for challenging extremist groups, or whether it more closely resembles a form of religious soft power theater intended to reassure the United States that Muslim nations are stepping up while simultaneously providing a security rationale for closing civic space? While “moderate Islam” may not be a particularly resonant—or relevant—message for Moroccans, Jordanians, or Egyptians more broadly, it would be a mistake to judge such initiatives on those terms. There is little evidence to suggest that the governments in question wish to change the popular culture and social practice of Islam on the mass level. If, however, we measure the success of such programs in terms of whether they co-opt religious space and counter the influence of domestic challengers—including politicized interpretations of Islam that could function as opposition—then they do appear more successful.

There is also another angle worth considering. Many of the countries promoting “moderate Islam”—Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt among them—have also been concerned about the impact of Saudi religious conservatism within their own borders. Emphasizing religious centrism as an antidote to al-Qaida and ISIS provides them with a more palatable message for pushing back against Wahhabi influence—and one less likely to ruffle feathers in Riyadh. In this sense, today's focus on “moderate Islam” can be understood as the most recent chapter in a much longer effort by countries in the Middle East to offset the influence of the region's most well-resourced religious hegemon.

THE RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER OF EMERGING NATIONS: TURKEY AND INDONESIA

The governments of two other countries under consideration here—Indonesia and to a lesser extent Turkey—cannot be considered “regimes” in the same sense as the countries discussed above. They have been more democratic, and the public and electoral aspects of foreign policy figure more prominently. Naturally, then, what we would refer to as “public diplomacy” is more relevant. These two cases are particularly interesting because Turkey and Indonesia, both members of the G-20, are commonly considered rising powers. We can therefore think about their religious outreach activities as one component in their broader strategy for claiming a more prominent role on the global stage.

While Turkey's democratic credentials are now in doubt, the first 10 years of rule by the Islamically oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP)—when Turkish democracy

74 See Annelle Sheline, “Middle East regimes are using ‘moderate Islam’ to stay in power.”

was still very much alive—saw an important reorientation in the projection of religious influence abroad. Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs, or Diyanet, is the primary mechanism for wielding this influence and supporting Islamic causes abroad. It is a massive bureaucratic entity whose budget now exceeds most other cabinet ministries, including both the Foreign and Interior Ministries. It trains imams, administers mosques and religious schools, and oversees Friday sermons. Under the AKP, Diyanet staff has at least doubled, and its annual budget has increased fourfold.⁷⁵ The Diyanet has long had a role in Turkey’s external affairs but prior to AKP rule, its functions outside the country were more limited and reflective of the secular Kemalist orientation that was then dominant in Turkish society and politics. For example, the branch of the Diyanet established in Germany in 1984 (*Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği*, commonly known as DITIB) sought to ensure that the religious lives of Turkish immigrants remained consistent with the apolitical understanding of Islam preferred by Ankara. In this respect, it competed quite openly with the German branch of Milli Görüş, a movement with Islamist roots.

After consolidating power and promoting a particular approach to Islam at home, Turkey under Erdoğan has increasingly looked abroad. While there are cases of using ties with Turkish minority communities to drum up electoral support for the AKP, including through religious education and the training of imams, most Turkish religious soft power is in the vein of cultural and public diplomacy. Although he himself disavowed the label, observers have commonly associated former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu with a “neo-Ottoman” turn in Turkish foreign policy. This neo-Ottoman orientation has two main dimensions. First, it refers to a trend discernible since the mid-2000s when Turkey began diversifying its portfolio of international relations. In practice, this saw Ankara preserving but de-emphasizing the centrality of its alliances with the West and NATO in favor of enhanced relations with its near abroad—Central Asia, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East—including a range of countries whose territory was once part of the Ottoman Empire. Second, and perhaps more relevant, Turkey under Erdoğan has sought to position itself as a leader in the Sunni Muslim world and to compete—sometimes quite directly—with the likes of Saudi Arabia. The religious dimensions of neo-Ottomanism therefore seem less about the projection of any specific theological or ideological model (per Saudi Arabia and Iran), and more to do with revitalizing a distinctly Turkic model of civilizational Islam in which economic and geopolitical power go hand in hand with Muslim identity. Turkey’s current policy of supporting Muslim Brotherhood movements and parties in the Arab world is ideologically consistent with the roots of the ruling AKP but also—and perhaps more importantly—emblematic of Ankara’s desire to challenge the religious legitimacy and political influence of regional monarchies. As some observers have suggested, the rift between Turkey and Saudi Arabia that emerged in the context of Jamal Khashoggi’s death at the hands of Saudi agents in Istanbul—while carefully managed by both sides—is emblematic of this broader rivalry.⁷⁶

During Erdoğan’s tenure, the Diyanet has expanded in scope and function, and from 2014 it began to answer directly to the prime minister. Outside Turkey, the Diyanet has

75 David Lepeska, “Turkey Cast the Diyanet,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 17, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-05-17/turkey-casts-diyamet>.

76 See, for example, Faisal Devji, “Jamal Khashoggi and the Competing Visions of Islam,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/24/opinion/islam-khashoggi-saudi-arabia-turkey.html>; and Mustafa Akyol, “Khashoggi’s Death is Highlighting the Ottoman-Saudi Islamic Rift,” *Foreign Policy*, October 17, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/17/khashoggi-was-the-victim-of-an-ottoman-saudi-islamist-war/>.

facilitated a significant campaign of Turkish-funded mosque building. During the early AKP years, much of this was focused on the Balkans and other neighboring regions where Turkey has natural ethnic, cultural, and linguistic affinities or ties through Ottoman heritage. More recently, however, we have seen Turkish-funded mosques popping up in South Africa, Sudan, Somalia, and the United States (in Maryland for example), but also in counterintuitive locales such as Cuba and Haiti.⁷⁷ Beyond constructing religious facilities, the Diyanet has also provided scholarships for young religious scholars to come to Turkey for study in the country's system of *imam hatip* training schools.

Turkey's approach to religious soft power does not seem to be about pushing specific doctrines or theological positions. Rather, where Turkey is seeking to expand its broader partnerships (particularly on the economic front) in Muslim countries or in nations with a significant or influential Muslim minority, adding a religious dimension to its diplomacy allows Ankara to establish a baseline of cultural proximity and affinity—and a basis for further partnership. Erdoğan has even suggested that Turkey has a developmental model of sorts to offer, one that combines religious conservatism, economic liberalism, and (at least until recently) democracy. So as it finances transportation infrastructure in East Africa, Turkey also builds mosques along those roads—offering both hardware and software, as it were.

While it has not “commodified” moderate Islam in quite the same way as Morocco or Jordan, Turkey does not hesitate to emphasize the moderate (i.e., state-compliant) character of Turkish Islam when operating in regions—such as the Balkans—that have expressed concern about the deleterious local effects of Saudi influence. In such settings, Turkey will often point to the close affinities between Turkish Islam and local religious sensibilities, as part of a broader benchmark of cultural compatibility.

As in the case of Saudi Arabia, Turkey's religious soft power activities are not a wholly state-run affair. While the Diyanet has a healthy budget for its international mosque building activities, much of the funding for building religious facilities and providing scholarships comes from private sources in Turkey, particularly some of the wealthy conservative business figures who are the mainstay of the AKP's political support. More complicated is the saga of Erdoğan's relationship with the Hizmet movement of the preacher Fethullah Gülen. The network of more than 1000 Gülen-inspired schools all over the world was, for many years, something the Turkish government was quite happy to flaunt in the early AKP years as an important facet of Turkey's global soft power. After 2013, however, when relations soured between Erdoğan and Gülen following accusations that the latter's followers were exercising undue influence within the country's judiciary (particularly in connection with corruption charges against Erdoğan and his family), the Turkish government began to ask countries to close down or deny licensing to Gülenist schools. After the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, which Erdoğan blames directly on Gülen, there has been a draconian crackdown on all entities and figures linked, no matter how tangentially, to what the Turkish government began calling FETO (“Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization”).

77 For Turkey's mosque building projects in Cuba, see Ishaan Tharoor, “Turkey's Erdogan wants to build a mosque in Cuba. It's based on a historical fallacy,” *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-missionary/special-report-gaddafis-secret-missionaries-idUSBRE82S07T20120329>. For Turkey's mosque building project in Haiti, see “Haiti's first mosque with minaret opens,” *Daily Sabah*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/religion/2016/06/28/haitis-first-mosque-with-minaret-opens>.

Another rising Muslim power that has been promoting its own “brand” of Islam of late is Indonesia. More specifically, the President Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi) has pushed the concept of *Islam Nusantara*—roughly translated as “Islam of the archipelago”—as a distinctly Indonesian contribution to global Muslim culture.⁷⁸ While there is no clear intellectual figurehead associated with *Islam Nusantara*, its chief characteristics generally align with Nahdatul Ulama (NU), one of the two mass Islamic movements in Indonesia, with more than 35 million followers. NU represents the traditionalist strain of Indonesian Islam, with a heavy emphasis on Sufism and the pluralistic comingling of Islam with the country’s pre-Islamic cultural and religious influence from Buddhism and Hinduism.

Unlike Turkey, Indonesia has not yet found a clear niche for operationalizing its religious soft power brand within a broader cultural diplomacy framework or global engagement strategy. To date, it has tended to connect the idea of *Islam Nusantara* to the security paradigm of countering violent extremism (CVE), hinting that, in contrast to other regions of the Muslim world (particularly the Arab world), moderation is built into the DNA of Indonesian Islam. Indonesia boasting about its credentials as a nation of moderate religion strongly resembles the aforementioned efforts by Morocco and Jordan to reassure Western security partners.

There is also a broader geopolitical significance to Indonesia flexing its cultural muscles in this way. For centuries, Indonesian Muslims have felt peripheral to Islam’s supposed religious heartland in the Middle East, with the idea that “authentic” Islam was something to be sourced from Arab religious scholars and institutions. In *Islam Nusantara* it becomes possible to detect a new assertiveness among Indonesian religious intellectuals and—as they look at the chaos and fragmentation that characterizes religious debates in the Middle East—a growing confidence in the idea that Indonesian Islam might represent its own distinct value proposition. As one example of this, the country’s Ministry of Religious Affairs—with backing from Jokowi—announced in 2017 the creation of a new Indonesia International Islamic University. Its explicit goal is to establish the archipelago nation as a global destination for religious higher education and to compete with institutions such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt, the Islamic University of Medina, and other international Islamic universities in Pakistan and Malaysia.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

Whether governments are “Islamist” or “secular”—or, more likely, somewhere in between—they all, almost without exception, understand that the ideational components of foreign policy matter. On a broader social level, the countries discussed above are all, to one degree or another, religiously conservative countries, so it is difficult to see how Islam wouldn’t play an important role in soft power projection. But the question is *how* important? The challenge, as many of these examples tell us, is in striking a balance between, on the one hand, over-emphasizing the power of religious

78 See Yahya Cholil Staquf, “How Islam learned to adapt in ‘Nusantara,’” *Strategic Review – The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs* 5, no. 2 (April-June 2015): 18-28, http://www.baytarrahmah.org/media/2015/Strategic-Review_How-Islam-learned-to-adapt-in-Nusantara_Apr-Jun-2015.pdf, and Azis Anwar Fachrudin, “The face of Islam Nusantara,” *The Jakarta Post*, July 24, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/07/24/the-face-islam-nusantara.html>.

79 Ryan Dagur, “Indonesia ready to build International Islamic university,” *UCANews*, January 23, 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indonesia-ready-to-build-international-islamic-university/81312>.

ideas to produce certain kinds of foreign policy outcomes and, on the other, reducing all religious soft power to just another expression of *realpolitik*.

It is clear that while religious soft power has been a constant in the foreign policy of Middle Eastern states over the past decades, there are significant differences in how it is used; the mechanisms through which it operates; and the kinds of outcomes associated with its deployment. First, as the case of Saudi Arabia demonstrates, it makes little sense to think of religious soft power as a tool exclusively designed and wielded by state actors. In the Kingdom, a wide variety of entities with varying levels of affiliation with the Saudi government are part of its broader religious soft power apparatus. Moreover, religious soft power activities are sometimes spaces for domestic proxy politics to play out (as the case of Erdoğan and Gülen shows us), or they serve as sites for bureaucratic competition between different official actors and their nongovernmental proxies.

One pattern that emerges from the analysis pertains to correlations between the extent of the religious basis of a given state, its adoption of religion as an explicit aspect of its international identity, and its ability to mobilize religion as a tool of soft power. Thus Saudi Arabia (since its inception) and Iran (since 1979) have both enjoyed a comparative advantage in this regard given that they are both “Islamic states.” As we have seen, Saudi Arabia’s claim is closely related to its status as the home to Islam’s two holiest sites, as well as its generous support for Islamic causes around the world. By contrast, the Islamic Republic of Iran claims that Saudi Arabia’s alliance with neo-imperial global powers such as the United States weakens its Islamic identity while touting its own narrative of resistance as a more authentic embodiment of Islamic geopolitics. By contrast, a country such as Turkey—given its membership in NATO and the legacy of Kemalism—has had greater difficulty positioning itself as a champion of Islam, although the AKP government is trying to change that, with some success.

As we have also seen, however, the “use” of religious soft power by states is anything but straightforward. In the case of Saudi parastatal actors such as the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, the heavy involvement of Muslim Brotherhood networks in the organization’s transnational operations meant that the intentions of the original Saudi funders might have borne little resemblance to the ideas actually propagated by WAMY outlets in, for example, Europe and West Africa. Alongside Iran’s efforts to build religious inroads within Iraqi society, we also see tendrils from Iraqi religious institutions in Najaf reaching out to Iranian seminaries in Qom. In short, alternative non-state centers of religious power can co-opt, push back, or negate efforts by the state to exert influence via religious ideas and symbols.

We also need to do away with the idea that there is a clear and linear process of religious soft power transmission from “sender” to “recipient.” Countries in which the soft power strategies of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey play out are rarely passive recipients. Rather, there is a much more complex process of give-and-take between local religious norms and externally sponsored religious activities. Indeed, in some cases—such as African Muslim communities looking for support from the Gulf in the face of what they perceived as heightened competition from Pentecostal Christian groups—the demand signal can actually originate in the recipient country.

But as we have also seen, there are cases where religious soft power is very much an expression of geopolitics. The Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry illustrates this very clearly, as does the touting of “moderate Islam” by a wide range of countries keen to assert

their utility within security frameworks defined primarily by the United States, such as countering violent extremism. In the case of emerging nations such as Turkey and Indonesia, we see a form of religious soft power that is often quite consciously coupled with broader engagement strategies that fall somewhere between soft and hard power. As these countries go about diversifying their global partnerships, the combination of religion as a marker of cultural proximity with foreign direct investment or development aid becomes a powerful package, adding new dimensions to international relationships that might otherwise be perceived as purely transactional in nature.

Beyond helping us to understand the multidimensional nature of contemporary geopolitical issues in the Middle East, there is another reason why it makes sense to pay more attention to religious soft power going forward. There is much talk today about the demise of the global consensus (if there ever was such a thing) around liberalism as the normative basis of the international system. In recent years some observers have questioned whether with the rise of China, as well as countries like Turkey and Indonesia, we might be moving toward a post-liberal or post-Western world order.⁸⁰ If something like this is indeed occurring, then it becomes even more important to pay close attention to how other kinds of ideas and narratives are gaining traction not just within states but in how they conduct themselves abroad. That is not to say that these ideas will necessarily be antithetical to the liberal international order, but rather that it may be increasingly possible—and useful—for countries to put a culturally specific spin on liberal economics and to parse their security interests through religion.

80 See, for example, Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers are Remaking Global Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peter Mandaville is a nonresident senior fellow with the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings and professor of international affairs in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. He is also senior research fellow at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs. The author of several books—most recently *Islam and Politics* (2nd edition, 2014)—he is a former member of the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Staff (2011-12) and was a senior advisor in its Office of Religion and Global Affairs (2015-16).

Shadi Hamid is a senior fellow in the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution and the author of *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World*, which was shortlisted for the 2017 Lionel Gelber Prize for best book on foreign affairs. He is also the co-editor with Will McCants of *Rethinking Political Islam*. His first book *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* was named a *Foreign Affairs* Best Book of 2014. An expert on Islam and politics, Hamid served as director of research at the Brookings Doha Center until January 2014. He is also a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. They also thank the participants in the workshop on “The Middle East and the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power” held at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC on April 18-19, 2018, whose presentations and feedback significantly shaped several aspects of this paper. They are also grateful to Ray Kim and Yousuf Abdelfatah for their research assistance.

This paper is part of a series on religious soft power made possible by support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Georgetown University. The views expressed in this report are those of its authors and do not represent the views of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Georgetown University, their officers, or employees.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

BROOKINGS

The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu)