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“How Saudi Arabia and Iran use Islam in foreign policy”
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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. Today's episode features a discussion of a new paper from Foreign Policy at Brookings titled "Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion and foreign policy," the inaugural publication of a new project on the geopolitics of religious soft power in partnership between Brookings and the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

With me in the Brookings Podcast Network studio are the paper's authors Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville. Shadi is a senior fellow at Brookings and the Project on U.S. relations with the Islamic world, and author of *Islamic exceptionalism: How the struggle over Islam is reshaping the world*. Peter is a Brookings nonresident senior fellow also with the Project on U.S. relations with the Islamic world, and is currently on leave from George Mason University and now is at Georgetown's Berkeley Center. His book titles include *Islam and politics*.

Also on today's program, Metropolitan Policy Program Senior Fellow Bill Frey discusses his analysis of recent Census Bureau data on declining U.S. population growth.

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And now on with the interview, Shadi and Peter, welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria.

MANDAVILLE: Thank you.

HAMID: Thanks, Fred.

DEWS: Let's start off with this concept of religious soft power, it's instrumental to the paper. Tell us about what soft power is more generally and why you think it's good to

highlight its religious aspects. Maybe Peter we can start with you.

MANDAVILLE: Sure. So this concept of soft power has been part of the lexicon of international relations for years now, decades, dating back to 1990 when the prominent scholar Joe Nye first coined the term. And what Nye meant by soft power is the idea that states have the ability to influence and convince other countries to do what they want, not by using force or by money, but through the appeal of their ideas and their values and norms. And Nye first had in mind when he coined this term the context of the end of the Cold War. And this idea that was in the air at the time and embodied by famous writings such as Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" essay, the idea that we were entering an era where American values and liberalism more generally seemed to have universal appeal, that peoples all around the world would be adopting, too, and behaving according to the norms and values associated with this country.

We want to bring renewed attention to soft power in the very different global context that we see today. Some people have characterized it as a post-Western or a post-liberal context in which the appeal of liberalism and American influence may be on the decline. And we think that in such an environment it becomes relevant again to pay attention to ideas and the way that they circulate around the world and get traction and hold appeal. And we've noticed that there are a number of governments around the world, particularly in the Middle East but not exclusively in that region, that are actually using religion and religious ideas as part of their conduct of foreign policy.

DEWS: So did Nye contemplate or not contemplate the aspect of religion in his soft power idea?

MANDAVILLE: If you read the book that Nye wrote about soft power some years after coining the term there are a few nods to the idea of religion, but he really firmly associates the term with more secular values and more specifically ideas about the most effective ways to organize governments or economies. So ideology more broadly our

argument is that in today's world you need to pay attention to all sources of ideas including religious sources.

DEWS: Shadi, let me ask you this question. I think a lot of Americans would connect Islam and foreign policy, religion and foreign policy, with support for militants. Is that a legitimate view or is that unfounded?

HAMID: So some of the countries that we look at in our report do or have offered support to various militant groups. That's not the focus of our paper though, we wanted to—that does get a lot of attention and we unfortunately, I would say, tend to see the Middle East primarily in counterterrorism terms. We wanted to broaden the lens a little bit and talk about, as Peter, said the soft part of power, which does not include the use of force or terrorism and so on. And to say ... —there's not a single major Muslim majority country that does not feature Islam as an important element in its foreign policy. So this isn't just one or two states. This is a pretty universal phenomenon.

And we also wanted to question or challenge this idea that only Islamists are the ones who mix religion and foreign policy. And what we see here is that many many countries, some of whom try to portray themselves as more secularly oriented or progressive or reformist or even anti-Islamist, all of them do a lot of religion in their foreign policy.

And now you might ask, well why? Number one, Islam is effective. Islam works as an ideological currency. And part of that has to do with the fact that Islam is simply resonant among publics in the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, that in countries where you know say 90 percent of the population is Muslim and most people identify as Muslim, and most people have various levels of practice, Islam is going to connect with them. And now if you look at some of the alternatives, like why couldn't there be another ideology that you could use? And you go through the list and they're just simply not as compelling. I mean we saw the decline of pan-Arab nationalism, liberalism doesn't

have a strong popular constituency in much of the Middle East. So Islam is a natural contender then. And the other contender and we do talk about this a little bit is nationalism but nationalism by definition is something that is going to be less appealing to people who are in your nation. So if you're doing Saudi nationalism that's not going to appeal much to an Egyptian. Right?

DEWS: I just want to encourage listeners if they want a deeper dive into Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood and those kinds of issues to not only go and look for your papers, Shadi, but also listen to some podcast interviews that we've done together on the Brookings Cafeteria.

So I want to dive into the specific case studies that you discuss in the paper in a minute. But just to keep our lens broad for a couple of minutes here. Is religion as soft power only seen in Muslim majority countries or is this a phenomenon that we might also see in majority Christian countries like the United States or Britain or Canada and other non-Muslim states?

MANDAVILLE: It's certainly not a phenomenon limited to the Muslim world. We happen to both be scholars whose work primarily focuses on the Muslim world so we naturally gravitate towards those cases. But this idea of governments incorporating religion into their foreign policy is not something that's exclusive or unique to Islam. There are other governments today that do this in various ways. One thing, for example, Russia under Putin, and Putin has certainly tried to leverage the Russian Orthodox Church as part of that country's geostrategic outreach. One thinks today for example of the whole discussion and controversy around Ukraine and the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as one of those issues. India is well under the ruling BJP Party which certainly emphasizes its Hindu identity and has incorporated various forms of outreach to Hindu communities around the world as part of the work that it does. Israel also, quite aside from the obvious kind of Jewish identity of Israel as a country and as a homeland for

the world's Jews, and its outreach to Jewish communities around the world. Israel has also reached out to conservative evangelical communities in the United States whose support for Israel they want to shore up by emphasizing the kind of historical affinities between Israel and the centrality of Israel as a concept an evangelical thought when it comes to the United States.

However in this country using religion, it gets little more complicated because the U.S. Constitution and the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment specifically proscribes the federal government from endorsing or providing funding for any particular form or interpretation of religion, which means that the U.S. government has not directly incorporated religion into the way that it does foreign policy.

That said over the years the United States government has certainly looked positively on a range of private actors in the United States, including certain missionary organizations and the work that they've done in various countries particularly during the Cold War where the United States saw religion as a useful antidote to the spread of communism. So the United States was very open to Christian missionary organizations from this country and elsewhere doing work around the world, and indeed an important part of this story is the fact that the United States, even though we sometimes think today of Islam as a sort of source of risk and an object of concern for US foreign policymakers, during the Cold War American policymakers saw Islam very differently. They saw Islam as a useful counterbalance to the spread of communism and were very open to the kinds of funding that countries like Saudi Arabia provided for Islamic causes around the world.

HAMID: And I would just add, I do think it would be unlikely or let's say a little bit weird to have a paper called "Christianity Statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy." There is, I think, a difference that we have to be attuned to, that there are built-in limits, for example, for the BJP in India. There are in many Hindu majority or plurality states. Or if we're talking about the Russian Orthodox Church, they are going to

be able to appeal to Russian-speaking audiences but not necessarily other Christian country. When we think about Western Europe, it would be odd to talk about how the Netherlands uses Christianity in their foreign policy. So I guess what that means is simply that for now and for a variety of complex reasons Islam is a stronger ideological currency, or offers the potential of a stronger ideological currency, and both on the supply side and the demand side in a way that Christianity no longer does. And that goes back to, governments will do things that are effective for them. And even if individual policymakers, say in Saudi Arabia or Egypt or whatever, don't have strong theological convictions, they can still very well support certain theological interpretations out of some form of practicality or even cynicism.

DEWS: Well, Shadi, let's use that as a pivot point to the specific case studies in your paper. You know, a lot of focus on Saudi Arabia and Iran and particularly their rivalry but also you talk about some other countries as well. Let's start with Saudi Arabia. Where is the kingdom of Saudi Arabia most likely to be using religious soft power in its foreign policy toolkit?

MANDAVILLE: Great to start with the case of Saudi Arabia because it forces us to immediately recognize that the use of religious soft power is nothing new. In this report we're not saying that, hey this has never happened before. Saudi Arabia has been doing this in one form or another since the early 1960s.

And there has been a long running debate that many of our listeners will be familiar with, this question of Saudi Arabia's export of Wahhabism, the form of Islam, the form of Salafi Islam that is very closely identified with the religious establishment of that country. But to me what is worrying about the conversation we've been having about Saudi Arabia's export of Wahhabism is that it tends to take place on one of two extremes of a sort of spectrum. Either people are saying that the export of Saudi Islam has sort of destroyed various forms of local Islamic belief and practice in countries around the world, as if there

has been this sort of Wahhabi wrecking ball that just crashes through these countries destroying these pristine beautiful local interpretations of Islam. And so it's very destructive in that account. On the other extreme are people who say well, no, you know, it's just conservative religion but it hasn't really had any significant impact.

Neither of these two things is quite correct. And the specifics of it, the reality of it is actually very understudied. So we wanted to kind of find a balance in this whole debate.

The other issue around this discussion is the fact that people tend to, when they talk about Saudi Arabia exporting Wahhabism, they tend to treat Saudi Arabia as kind of a monolithic black box. But to understand what's going on there you have to open it up and you immediately see that there are a range of different actors arrayed variously across the political landscape within Saudi Arabia that are part and parcel of this activity. You need to understand the politics between them and the fact that their motivations differ. So some of this is certainly the Saudi government but some of it is also what we term “parastatal organizations” like the Muslim World League the World Assembly of Muslim Youth—international organizations that are not official agencies of the Saudi government but are either heavily if not fully funded by Saudi Arabia, and to varying degrees steered by the Saudi authorities, but separate from it.

And there's also a whole range of smaller private charities in the kingdom that are able to operate with varying levels of top cover from the Saudi royal family to do what they do. And so in understanding this phenomenon you have to understand a sort of complex set of political factors within the Kingdom that mean that what we see on the external side—the projection of Saudi religious influence in the world—is often a product of jockeying for position and politics within the Kingdom as various groups inside Saudi Arabia vie with each other for influence and power appear.

DEWS: Let me ask you to dive even a little more deeper into the practicalities of how Saudi Arabia would use religious soft power, say, on the ground. I've read about

Wahhabi schools in Indonesia or maybe in other countries of the world. Now, are they run by an arm of the diplomatic presence in that country or are they a private organization? Are local children going into these schools and learning the Saudi interpretation of Islam? What like— you talk to in the paper about the interplay between local culture and their expression of Islam and whatever it is that Saudi Arabia is teaching. What does that look like on the ground?

MANDAVILLE: You know, it's all of the above and more. If you look around the world and the various countries where the different countries that have been on the receiving end of Saudi religious influence over the years you see widely varying equations. We see some countries where the impact seems to be very broad based and intense and others where there seems to be less impact from Saudi influence. To kind of unpack and understand that sometimes it has a lot to do with the strength of the religious sector within that country and the extent to which the government in that country regulates religion. Sometimes it has to do with the kind of demographic equation in that country, you know.

So in countries where you already have latent social conflicts that maybe have a sectarian dimension, the entering of the Saudi factor adds fuel to the fire and generates it.

With respect to kind of who's doing the influence and the control of this again it widely varies. There are some countries where you have representatives of the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs who are effectively assigned to the Foreign Ministry and based in Saudi embassies in those countries who go around providing funding, doling out money for mosque building with the understanding that certain kinds of texts will be also provided. You have other places where there is just a direct grant from Saudi Arabia to a local religious organization that brings in this point that you raised about kind of, how this relationship gets mediated from country to country. It's not always a simple equation or a linear case of Saudi influence being sent from Riyadh arriving in a country and reconfiguring religion in that country. The Saudis have to contend with the reality that there

are local actors on the ground that have the capacity to receive and adapt those influences.

So what gets sent from Saudi Arabia is not necessarily always what arrives and plays out on the ground in some cases. You know, we've seen evidence that in some countries the demand signal actually comes from the country that ultimately receives the money rather than the Saudis deciding to target a particular country. So it's a much more complex process than the conventional discussion of this phenomena it often makes it out to be.

HAMID: Oftentimes there is this kind of narrative trope where you see pictures and from Indonesia or against and in the 1940s or '50s and people are, like, wearing miniskirts and then people try to explain how is it that certain cultures or societies have become more conservative. And the Saudis, I think, generally have provided a very easy answer and a very simplistic and problematic one where people say, oh it's the external oil money from the Gulf. And that's what fundamentally transform these cultures.

As Peter said, it can be in some cases a contributing factor but it takes two to tango here, and clearly enough people in various receiving countries find this more conservative or literalist approach to Islam appealing. So if the Saudis were coming with something, or Saudi organizations or individuals were coming with something that was completely uninteresting or unappealing to target audiences then it wouldn't work. But the fact is there is a demand side to this equation and for a variety of reasons some people do find the more conservative interpretations associated with the Saudis to be compelling.

And this also coincides with a period starting in the '70s going into the '90s and 2000s where we generally see a conservative religious revival in various countries and that has its own— there's a number of factors and we can't just say well, the bad Saudis came in. There was a pristine pure pluralistic culture and if only we could go back to a time. So we have to be very careful about avoiding that kind of narrative.

MANDAVILLE: And, you know, we're kind of drifting into the realm of just kind of talking about the spread of religious influence more generally in society. To kind of bring it back to the question of foreign policy which is at the heart of our paper, I think the best way to understand this as an instrument of Saudi foreign policy is to first recognize that, as we already mentioned, there are these various Saudi entities and organizations that do this kind of work around the world. But the Saudi government through its oversight and regulatory mechanisms kind of has the ability to turn the faucet on and off in the sense of making it more and less difficult for Saudi organizations to spread religious influence abroad.

And when you look historically at the patterns around the turning on and off of the faucet you begin to see that they coincide with Saudi geopolitical objectives and agendas during particular historical periods. So during the early phase of this work in the 1960s the Saudis saw the pan-Arabism, the sort of secular pan-Arabism of Abdul Nasser in Egypt, as their main regional rival. And so a lot of this was aimed at offsetting the ideology of pan-Arabism emanating from Egypt from 1979 after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. However, Saudi Arabia began to perceive Iran, particularly because of its new religious identity as an Islamic state, as its rival—its primary rival. And so a lot of this activity was retooled to focus on counterbalancing Iranian influence.

DEWS: I do want to hear about Iran in more detail in a few minutes. That's another major component of your paper. But first what about the extension of soft power by Saudi Arabia into non-Muslim countries like, say, the United States or Great Britain?

HAMID: Peter, do you want to take that one?

MANDAVILLE: Well, sure, I mean that's absolutely a thing. When we think of the arrival and consolidation of Muslim communities in Europe and North America from the 1960s onwards it's absolutely the case that particularly in Europe where these communities had very, kind of, low levels of socio-economic attainment with respect to

things like household incomes and education, these were poor communities that didn't have the capacity to develop and build their own local religious infrastructure. And so they were reliant on charitable contributions and largesse from abroad, and Saudi Arabia was very much aware of and had its eye on the kind of emergence and consolidation of Muslim communities in the West broadly speaking.

And so some of the early activities of these parastatal organizations that I mentioned—Muslim World League, World Assembly of Muslim Youth—were very much about trying to exert influence within and to build constituencies of support for Saudi Arabia within Muslim communities in Europe and North America.

DEWS: Let's take a quick break here for another edition of Metro Lens.

Demographer and Metropolitan Policy Program Senior Fellow Bill Frey shares his analysis of recent Census Bureau data on the declining U.S. population growth rate. Afterward I'll return to my conversation with Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid talking about how Iran uses religious soft power in its foreign policy.

FREY: I'm Bill Frey with the Metropolitan Policy Program here at the Brookings Institution.

While 2018 was a year of economic revival historically low unemployment and rising wage growth, demographic indicators stand in contrast, seemingly ushering in an era of population growth stagnation. This was emphasized in the recently released Census Bureau population change estimates for the year ending in July 2018. These data show that the national rate of population growth is at its lowest since 1937—a result of declines in the number of births and gains in the number of deaths. And the nation's under-18 population has declined since the 2010 census. This is on the heels of new data showing that geographic mobility within the United States is also at a historic low. And while some states particularly in the Mountain West are growing rapidly, nearly a fifth of all states

displayed absolute population losses over the past two years.

While some of these downward demographic trends reflect the delayed impact of the Great Recession, the aging of the American population is the broader cause—a factor that the nation will have to cope with for years and decades to come.

The U.S. population growth rate of 0.62 percent for 2017 to 2018 is the lowest registered in 80 years. While the nation's growth rate varied through wars, economic upheavals, baby booms, and baby busts, the current rate reflects a further dip in a trend toward a lower level of growth registered since the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009.

These downward growth trends initially reflected declines in immigration as well as lower natural increase—the excess of births over deaths—because the economy was down during the recession. But over the past few years as immigration gained some momentum, reduced natural increase became more responsible for the overall declines in population growth. As it dropped from 1.6 million in 2000 to 2001 to just above 1 million last year, there were fewer births than in recent decades and more deaths than in earlier years.

The decline in births may have been accentuated by young adult millennials who, still bearing the brunt of the recession, may still be postponing births. However, the long-term trajectory should yield fewer rather than more births as the population ages with proportionately fewer women in childbearing ages. The rise in deaths is more directly related to the nation's aging population. Census Bureau projections show that their rise to be the major cause of reductions in the nation's natural increase over time.

This leaves immigration as an ever more important contributor to national population growth. Because of the recent decline in natural increase, immigration now contributes nearly as much to population growth, and is projected to be the primary contributor to national population growth after 2030, as natural increase continues to decline. Thus immigration, its size, and its attributes will be an important contributor to the

nation's future population that is growing slowly and aging quickly.

The national population growth slowdown did not occur in all parts of the country. Two states—Nevada and Idaho—grew by more than 2 percent last year continuing a recent boom in the Mountain West, which like other regions, took growth hits earlier in the decade. Among the 14 states which grew by more than 1 percent, most are located in the south and west. Yet all is not upbeat even for these high flyers. Among the 14 states that grew so rapidly, 10 grew more slowly than in the previous year.

The bigger story in the last two years is the number of states which lost population. Ten states in 2016 to 2017 and nine states last year compared with only one or two states earlier in the decade. These are states where current natural increase along with immigration could not counteract migration to other parts of the country. Among these are the two large urban states—New York and Illinois. The latter losing population for the fifth straight year. As natural increase dwindles, all states will rely more heavily on migration from the rest of the U.S. and abroad to fuel growth or stave off decline.

The new Census estimates put an exclamation point on what we should be preparing for as the country ages and grows less rapidly from natural increase. The latest national growth rate of 0.62 percent is noticeably below what we'd have experienced in prior decades. While it is still higher than the growth rates in countries like Germany, Italy, and Japan, this means that policymakers must place increased attention on caring for a larger and more dependent ageing population and dealing with the realities of a slower growing labor force. In particular it requires a more serious discussion of U.S. immigration policy, because of the future contributions that immigration will make growing America's society and economy.

DEWS: Bill Frey had more to say about low geographical mobility and how that relates to population changes. You can hear the full audio on our Soundcloud channel or find Bill's research on our website. Now back to the conversation on religious soft power.

DEWS: Let's switch to Iran. As a layperson on this issue, I understand Saudi Arabia and Iran have quite an intense rivalry. Saudi Arabia represents the Sunni side. Iran represents the Shia side, again to put it very simply. Can you talk about the role of religious power in Tehran's foreign policy and also touch on that Sunni-Shia rivalry?

MANDAVILLE: So Iran has certainly incorporated its own versions of religious outreach into its foreign policy, not least of all of course back in the early 1980s when everyone was talking about the idea of Iran exporting its Islamic revolution not just elsewhere in the Middle East but to other countries in the Muslim world. Now, they never really succeeded in that. And I think part of it is that the appeal of the very specific ideological model that the Islamic Republic of Iran was based on, this idea that clerics should have direct political control, actually was a very atypical notion within Islam itself and certainly didn't have broad appeal among Sunni publics around the world. So I don't think that there was ever much of a prospect of them exporting the Islamic Revolution.

But what they did do quite effectively back then and continue to do today is to translate some of the historical symbols of Shia Islam. Right? Which is a sect in Islam, you know, whose historical experience has been very much one of dispossession and oppression, right, at the core of its identity the idea of a religious minority oppressed by in this case a sort of Sunni majority. And so what they've managed to do in a variety of contexts, including non-Muslim countries, you know, during the Cold War and today around the Middle East, is to translate that kind of history of Shia oppression into a kind of broader political discourse of resistance against imperialism more generally. And so they've been able to kind of build certain kinds of affinities in various parts of the Middle East but also places like sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, among communities that are concerned about the impact of U.S. and Soviet, and again today U.S., neo-imperialism around the world. In other countries where there are Shi'i minorities, or in the case of

countries like Bahrain and Iraq Shi'i majorities, they have very much tried to kind of wedge themselves into the political demography of those situations and activate those Shi'i communities in ways that have caused many headaches for local governments.

So in contrast to the Saudi approach to this, I think it's fair to say that Iran's strategy with respect to religion has been multifaceted, indirect, and in many ways more sophisticated, because I think they do a better job than the Saudis in understanding the worldview and sensibilities of the local audiences that they're trying to influence.

HAMID: And in a sense they have been forced to be more sophisticated in their approach and this is where I don't think we can really look at Saudi use of religious soft power and Iran's use as being equivalent because of the demographic imbalance as Peter alluded to. If you're only 10 to 15 percent of the overall Muslim population then you have to be very careful to not be explicitly or overtly anti-Sunni because Sunnis are a big part of your audience, and you can't afford to alienate them. And actually in the early years after the Iranian revolution in '79 we see Sunni Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. And interestingly enough Rached Ghannouchi of Tunisia's Ennahda was a big fan of Khomeini and the Iranian revolution in the early '80s before people started realizing that it was pretty authoritarian. And that shows that the Shia-Sunni divide was something that the Iranians were able to transcend through a broader appeal to this revolutionary ideology.

Now if you take the Saudis, various Saudi religious actors have been quite overtly and aggressively anti-Shia. So you see that on one side but not necessarily on the other. And, I mean, just another example of this, which also has theological reasons behind it but you know you do see extremist Sunni actors who consider Shia to be outside the fold. In other words they are not real Muslims and therefore their blood is illicit and you can kill them. It is very rare to find Shia extremists of any sort that see Sunnis that way and say that Sunnis are outside the fold and therefore their blood is illicit, and naturally if you're a minority you're less likely to try to say that oh the 85 percent of other Muslims are outside

the fold because they're not like us. So I think that the aspect of being a minority, if you're a Shia or if you're a Shia policymaker, let's say, in Iran, it does really shape the constraints and how far you're willing to go with certain sectarian rhetoric.

DEWS: Let me ask this, too, because I'm thinking about it so most of my listeners might be thinking of it too. We know that Tehran, perhaps its most successful export of its revolution is with Hezbollah in Lebanon. But should we be thinking about that relationship as hard power versus the export of religious soft power? Is there a place to make a distinction around Hezbollah?

MANDAVILLE: There are elements of both present but I think the balance tips towards the hard power side of things, and that Tehran's sponsorship of Hezbollah has provided it with a militant proxy organization that allows it to directly pursue specific geopolitical and even military goals in the ground in Lebanon and, as we've seen more recently, in Syria.

There is a soft power dimension as well in so far as the leadership of Hezbollah is one of the few religious leaderships in the Shi'i Muslim world that endorses the official state ideology of Iran, this concept of *Velayat-e faqih* that teaches that religious clerics should directly hold political power. That concept has very limited appeal elsewhere in the Shi'i world and because of the largess enjoyed by Hezbollah at the hands of Tehran, part of that deal has been that Hezbollah's leadership officially endorses that concept and kind of pushes it when they can. But I'd say that that relationship is first and foremost a hard power one.

In addition to the kind of ideological endorsement of Tehran that comes around there Hezbollah, as I think many of your listeners will know, is more than just a militant organization. It's a political party and it's also a vast network of social services and civil society organizations operating on the ground particularly in Lebanon. And so through the auspices of Hezbollah's vast networks in Lebanon the Iranian government has also

mounted any number of kind of cultural and public diplomacy programs that have sought to kind of spread this wider idea of resistance against Western imperialism as distinct from pushing specific theological goals.

DEWS: So while Saudi Arabia and Iran are the two most prominent examples of where there's soft power and foreign policy, your paper also touches on other countries like Morocco and Jordan specifically. Can you talk about Morocco and Jordan?

HAMID: Yes. So as I said earlier, everyone's doing it. Morocco, Jordan, Egypt do it in a different way and they get different things out of it. So in the case of Egypt a couple of years ago President Sisi gave a major speech talking about religious revolution, religious reform which gained him some plaudits here in the West. But these three countries all try to portray themselves as being founts of this moderate Islam so to speak. I would put moderate Islam in quotation marks because some of it is theater and that's something that we try to get at in the paper, that there is a performative aspect to this that appeals to Western audiences abroad. But there is also a regime survival dimension, that if you look at, say, the Moroccan king who is officially and constitutionally enshrined as *Amir al-Mu'minin*, the Commander of the Faithful, it's very important for the Moroccan king to control religious discourse because he is the sole actor that can actually embody religious and historical legitimacy.

And so using that religious legitimacy the Moroccan king then promotes this idea of a kind of Moroccan Islam that is moderate, progressive, more open to gender equality. So on and so forth. Jordan does something similar, and again with the Jordanian monarchy there is a historical religious legitimacy there that the king and the regime draw on, and that allows them to be more effective. And of course Sisi doesn't have necessarily that religious legitimacy but does have an institution like Al-Azhar which is the premier Sunni institution of scholarship. And there we see the Egyptian regime really taking control over Al-Azhar in order to essentially make Al-Azhar a mechanism or an instrument of Egyptian

foreign policy, and again presenting Egypt as, we are the ones who offer a moderate alternative to the extremists.

Which is all to say that I think there has to be a certain level of care when we hear these claims from our allies, and because they're our allies we may be inclined to want to believe them or want to see them as doing something quite positive, and there are perhaps positive aspects when it comes to some of this. But we do have to remember that for authoritarian regimes and particularly the more authoritarian ones like Egypt, this is fundamentally about regime security and about sidelining domestic opponents, and using religion to do that. So we have to be careful about buying into this rhetoric too much.

MANDAVILLE: You know I broadly share your skepticism around this idea of the theater of moderate Islam that a number of these governments in the region have been pushing and peddling and trying to sell to Western governments. But just to kind of maybe focus on one positive dimension of it. I think of the countries that we've just discussed—Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Oman—all of these countries to varying degrees sort of tried to position themselves as purveyors of moderate Islam over the last decade or so. The one country where there is a there there with respect to this question to some extent is actually Morocco, and I think that is a function of the kind of historical legacy of the Moroccan royal family and that country's role not just in North Africa but in West Africa and the Sahel over centuries, where religious networks, you know, based in Sufi mystical Islam that have strong hubs in centers of power in what is today Morocco have been deeply influential. All the other countries we've touched on are countries that have only come into existence fairly recently. Whereas the kind of historical legacy of Morocco's regional religious influences across North Africa and West Africa mean that it does have the ability to exert influence in a way that is viewed as more credible and legitimate compared to some of these other countries.

DEWS: You also in the report talk about other countries: Indonesia and Turkey.

Specifically Indonesia is really interesting because it's far outside the Muslim heartland of the Middle East. It's also I think the world's largest Muslim majority country by population.

MANDAVILLE: For now, for now. It's going to change. Our good friends at the Pew Research Center are projecting some fairly fundamental shifts in which countries in the world have the largest Muslim population by 2050 and 2070 ...

HAMID: So who's going to take over, Peter?

MANDAVILLE: India and Pakistan are both likely to take it.

DEWS: So for now but Indonesia is far outside the Muslim heartland but it also uses where the soft power in the exercise of its foreign policy. How does it do that?

MANDAVILLE: And this is the new thing. So we treat Indonesia in the report as an example of a country that's often talked about as an emerging power. We usually associate the notion of emerging powers with the Brazils, the Indias, the Chinas. Those countries have experienced phenomenal economic growth and then have now started to kind of exert themselves in other ways. Indonesia and Turkey, you know, who we treat in the same category here, are countries that have often been seen as sort of second tier emerging powers, you know, trying to carve out a new regional, at least, if not global role for themselves. What's been interesting to observe about Indonesia in recent years is that there has been sort of an inversion of how Indonesia has dealt with its almost, I hesitate to call this, but it's Islamic baggage. For a long time the Indonesians, I think, felt like they had sort of a chip on their shoulder at the far periphery of the Muslim world and an idea that, quote unquote, authentic Islam real Islam is something that's in the Middle East. The Arabs have it. And so in order to get the real thing they need to go and learn from scholars in Cairo at Al-Azhar where you had for the last century a large Indonesian population. Medina in Saudi Arabia, where again you have a large cluster of Indonesian scholars. But this idea that the Indonesians were not sort of confident in their own Muslim-ness.

In more recent years, however, they've kind of turned that model on its head and

have sought to kind of try and position themselves globally as the embodiment of a certain kind of Islam. And so you'll hear the Indonesian president today, as well as one of the country's largest mass religious movements, Nahdlatul Ulama, which has something like 35 million members, a large organization, you'll hear them talking today about what they term *Islam Nusantara*, which translates roughly as kind of Islam of the archipelago. The idea that far from the Islam of Indonesia and Malaysia and the archipelago of Southeast Asia being somehow inauthentic or second- or third-rate Islam, that it's theirs and they want to take ownership of it, and it has specific characteristics, and there are good characteristics that should be offered to the world in terms of being not just moderate in the sense of rejecting violence but pluralistic in the sense of being capable of combining influences from other religious traditions, namely Hinduism and Buddhism which were present in Southeast Asia for centuries before Islam arrived, Christianity, and the idea that Indonesia could be a model for the world to follow in terms of a pluralistic and tolerant Islam. And they want to kind of offer this as part of their broader branding package, of their broader Brandee equation as an emerging power.

DEWS: Now what about Turkey. Those of us who aren't specialists, again, we would look at Turkey's history post-World War I, post Ataturk, as being expressly secular in its government. But now Turkey is also using than soft power in its foreign policy. Can you address that?

HAMID: So one thing I'll just say first about this idea of secularism. So I think there is a broad kind of recognition that Ataturk in the early- to mid-20th century as well as his successors were secularists. But one thing that's important to remember is that in all these cases the state had and wanted to have intimate control of religion. So for Ataturk the goal was to change how Turks understood religion and that required a very heavy-handed state-centered approach. So when we as Americans talk about secularism we tend to think of it in terms of the separation of church and state. That never happened in Turkey and

even in the more secular oriented countries that we discussed in the paper there is no example where there is anything resembling the separation of mosque and state, which I think helps us to kind of turn this idea of secularism on its head, that even those who we think are secular and we tend to see that as positive are actually violating what I think many Americans would consider to be a core principle of secularism, which is that the religious establishment or religious actors should have some degree of independence.

I'll just say to start on Turkey—and Peter feel free to jump in—is that we do see a rather sharp shift and, you know as you mentioned, there was this, let's say, more western- or quote unquote secularly-oriented foreign policy that tried to say that Turkey is different from the Arab world, that Turkey is in some way unique because it has gone through these religious changes now with the AK party government and President Erdoğan. And they came into power in 2002. We do see a kind of reorientation where neo-Ottomansim if you want to call it that becomes a central feature of Erdoğan's approach to foreign policy. And you do see a real effort to draw on, you know, maybe in an implicit way, the historical legitimacy of the Ottoman Caliphate, that this was the last great caliphate. This was when the Ottoman Empire was still projecting influence and there is a sense that Erdoğan wants to bring some of that back, at least as a kind of ideological subtext. Although of course it won't become the caliph but I think probably in his heart of hearts in his dreams he would kind of ideally want that.

But we do see this effort to say that Erdoğan is the leader of Muslims in a more general sense where he even comments on things that are going on among say American Muslims or Muslims in a different country and you might say, well what does the Turkish president have to do with what's going on with the local Muslim communities in X country? But there is this sense that because it affects Muslims it matters to Erdoğan and it matters to his more to his Islamically-oriented government.

MANADVILLE: You know, even though we don't talk so much about Turkey in the

report compared to, say, Saudi Arabia and Iran, I would say that with respect to the broader goals and objectives of our project on the geopolitics of religious soft power, I think it's Turkey's strategy here that most comprehensively embodies what we're talking about. It's a very calculated, tempered approach to incorporating religion into a particular regional and global identity that Turkey is trying to build for itself. It's not just crudely pushing a particular theological approach. It's not just endorsing movements based on particular ideology. Although Turkey has done that under Erdoğan where Istanbul has become one of the sanctuary cities for exiled members of the Muslim Brotherhood. And after all we need to remember that President Erdoğan, his own roots lie within what was effectively the Turkish branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. But he hasn't used the instruments of state power to push the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. Rather it is more akin to this kind of neo-Ottomanism that Shadi referred to. But you find it expressed in places that you wouldn't expect.

So, you know, when we think of Africa and you think of emerging powers investing in Africa, China is the usual story that we hear about. Turkey has also put a lot of money into infrastructure and transportation projects in particularly eastern Africa. And what's interesting to see is that, you know, in addition to building the highways Turkey is also providing funding for the mosques along the highways. Right? So it's this multi-layered strategy that, yes, provides the material goods but also along the way you get these icons of socio-cultural affinity that are designed to kind of foster a sense of goodwill. We see it also in one of Turkey's hottest export commodities in recent years of soap operas. Right? So, you know, Turkish soap operas over the last decade have been phenomenally popular throughout the Middle East and some of the most popular ones are basically historical dramas set during the Ottoman Empire. Right? Where Turkey is trying to kind of push this nostalgic memory of the Ottoman Empire as a sort of benevolent force in the world that was sophisticated and tolerant and cosmopolitan in nature and where you had, you know,

these wise rulers wrestling with moral issues. And so you know all of this I think put together as a package speaks to Turkey as a country that is being very creative and how it does this.

That aside, as much as I seem to be pointing to Erdoğan as the master statesmen around this stuff, there are other elements in Turkish politics most notably the kind of growth of Erdoğanism, right, just this personal accumulation of power that I think are very worrying. And so I think we need to kind of keep an eye on this space as this man has accumulated so much power for himself to kind of see what he does with it going forward.

HAMID: This is where I think Turkey has lost some of its sources of religious soft power. If you look earlier during the Arab Spring where Turkey was still pretty democratic before we start to see Erdoğan embracing his more authoritarian tendencies, there was this sense that maybe Turkey could offer a, quote unquote, model or example of how Islam and Islamism can be accommodated within a democracy. And there was a sense and especially when you see the rise of the Brotherhood in Egypt in the period from 2011 to 2013, Turkey had I think a lot of potential to offer a certain kind of religious soft power. Now as we're talking about, it still does it in various ways but because Erdoğan has become more authoritarian that has sullied the examples. So for example if you're an American Muslim who might otherwise be interested in now-Ottomanism now you're going to have to contend with the fact that Erdoğan is someone that you really want to be publicly associated with because we've seen the dark side of his authoritarian inclinations.

MANDAVILLE: And let's not forget the case of Fetullah Gulen and his Hizmet movement right in the early years of Erdoğan's tenure. His government was very happy to point to the schools that the Hizmet movement ran all around the world as examples of something positive that Turkey was offering the world. They were explicitly part of their public diplomacy portfolio talking about these schools until such time from 2013 onwards as Erdoğan began to perceive his movement as a direct threat to his own power. And then

suddenly his orientation towards that movement changes 180 degrees almost overnight.

DEWS: Let's wrap it up this way with a quote from the paper. You write that one reason we need to pay attention to religious soft power is, quote, the demise of the global consensus around liberalism as the normative basis of the international system.

Can you unpack that?

HAMID: Well, I think one big thing that we want to emphasize is ideas matter, and there is a tendency in D.C. and just more broadly in talking about foreign policy to see it in a kind of more realist sense of countries have national interests, they pursue them in very rational, straightforward ways. And we don't always account for the powerful role of ideas. And sometimes ideas start off perhaps not very powerful at first but they gain their own kind of momentum as ideologies are deployed. And over time we see their power.

So I think that, at least for now, where America is playing less of a role or a less effective role on the world stage—and there are even in our own country here in the U.S. questions about the classical liberal tradition or just liberalism more generally as an idea that is uncontested, it is no longer uncontested if it ever was—but now there is I think a broader questioning of some of the things that we took for granted in the kind of post-Cold War 1990s, 2000s context. And other ideologies and other ideas are gaining ground, gaining traction, will for the foreseeable future. So this kind of paper fits into a broader debate about what happens when alternative ideas gain traction and these are examples of some of those alternative ideological currencies.

MANDAVILLE: So here's where I'd maybe just nuance that a bit because mostly what I'd say is what Shadi said. But I think we want to be careful to not suggest that we're talking about a kind of wholesale replacement of liberalism with Islam as the new chief ideological currency in the Muslim majority world or the Middle East. It's much more complicated than that. Because going back to the example of Turkey one would never say that Erdoğan is moving away from liberalism in favor of Islam. If you look at the economic

policies of Turkey in recent years it's hard to describe them as anything other than hyper-neoliberal in nature. But there is also an Islamic element in there as well. So it's not necessarily about saying we're moving away from liberalism to Islamism. It's saying that these things can coexist and that what we may see is the emergence of sort of hybrid things like Islamic neoliberalism where it's quite possible to maintain this sort of technical components of organizing economies based around market dynamics at the same time as you're emphasizing in the sort of social and cultural realms the idea of a Muslim or Islamic basis to that.

HAMID: We should also remember that liberalism was never the predominant ideological currency pretty much anywhere in the Middle East so we can't talk about liberalism being replaced in the Middle East by something else. But what I, what I do think is important is this idea of we're entering, or in some ways we're already in, an era of ideological combat where we're moving away from the kind of technocratic concerns where we thought that politics could be purely rational and transactional. Of course that will always be an element of how we conduct and how other countries conduct foreign policy. But we're seeing it even in our own country and how the Trump administration pursues its foreign policy. We're having a debate about a more nationalist type foreign policy where there is an ideological distinctiveness. So, I think what we're seeing more broadly is that the space is open and because America isn't playing the same kind of leadership role in promoting the so-called international liberal order, there are going to be more ideological vacuums. And those vacuums mean that other countries and other actors can step in with whatever their ideological alternatives are. And I think that's really the future that we're looking at.

Now, it can change if the U.S. decides in the future and subsequent administrations to play perhaps a more active role in going back to this idea of an international liberal order but perhaps it's too late for that and we can't return precisely to the way things were

before.

DEWS: Well, gentlemen, I want to thank you for sharing your time and expertise in what I consider fascinating and important masterclass on this topic. Thank you.

HAMID: Thanks for having us.

MANDAVILLE: Thank you, Fred.

DEWS: You can find the paper by Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, “Islamic statecraft. How governments use religion and foreign policy,” on our website, brookings.edu.

“The Brookings Cafeteria” podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. The producers are Brennan Hoban and Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Jessica Pavone and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.