

**Bridging the Gap with Moderate Muslims: The Failure of U.S. soft power to combat Islamic extremism**

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America's new reality exploded on September 11, 2001. The 9/11 attacks indoctrinated the U.S. into the complex, anti-Western, and deadly world of Islamic radical fundamentalism via terrorism. Like most other world religions, followers of Islam are not homogenous; rather they are a diverse, complex and splintered society. The Jihadist radicals often receive the lion's share of the media's attention for strong rhetoric and horrific suicide bombings; however, it is the moderates with whom U.S. interests align. A new U.S. strategy to combat radical ideology is a prudent, necessary and urgent undertaking.

This new approach must be a combination of offensive and defensive methods using the pillars of engagement, protection and education. A clear strategic U.S. commitment must be established to define, engage and expand moderate Muslim networks operating in the U.S. and throughout the world.

The author argues that the U.S. does not exert its soft power as an instrument of statecraft effectively within the Muslim community. Therefore, the U.S. must define, support and reach out to moderate Muslim networks to counter radical Islamic thought and prevent the proliferation of domestic and international terrorism. Many experts agree that money and the organizational structure of the radical movement are two of its greatest strengths. Thus, overt U.S. financial and organizational support for moderate Muslim networks would engender confidence and provide needed assistance.

Are moderates truly receptive to Western ideology? This author argues yes. Moderate Islam is reflective, self-critical, pro-democracy, and human rights and secularists. The idea that "radical Islam is the problem, moderate Islam as the solution" is not a foreign concept among U.S. strategists, decision makers and leaders. Identifying moderate networks is a difficult task, yet many organizations are coming to provide a platform for more centrist Islamic thought. Moderates can "engage and criticize the tenants of radical Islam with credibility and effect."<sup>1</sup> For example, initiating dialogue through

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<sup>1</sup> Lord, Carnes, 2006, *Losing Hearts and Minds?, Public Diplomacy and Strategic Influence in the Age of Terror*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006, page 113.

conferences centered on establishing a roadmap to halt extremism, and to “empower” and provide moderate leadership a voice is an effective step towards establishing stronger relations with large Muslim-populated organizations through education and understanding.

Radical Islam is quite the opposite of moderate Islam. Though conflicts between the democratized West and radical Muslims are short of a new occurrence, 9/11 was a game changer since it brought the fight to American soil. Comparatively, radicals are institutionally well organized and have vast financial resources to draw from, whereas moderates lag far behind. The problem of the U.S. government to correctly identify camouflaged extremism is not a new phenomenon. The U.S. often establishes relationships of convenience centered on the diplomatic, economic or resource driven needs. Saudi Arabia provides the world not only with its vast oil reserves, but also with Wahhabism, an extremist Islamic philosophy dedicated to a violent interpretation of Islam. America’s thirst for oil has been a seductive relationship forged out of necessity serving as a financial pillar in the emergence of radical Islam. An awareness and search for alternatives from this relationship is a necessary strategic U.S. policy adjustment.

There are myriad of definitions and interpretations for soft power. Some include strategic influence to appeasement to negotiation, to the art of diplomacy in the utilization of soft power to achieve objectives. Most literature on soft power suggests a strategic relationship is necessary. This author asserts that this relationship goes beyond simple dialogue and requires a mutual understanding and correlation of each other’s fundamental objectives. Soft power does not exist in a vacuum; rather it requires both a giver and receiver to be applied effectively. Furthermore, it is only one instrument in a diplomatic tool chest.

Political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. famously depicts soft power as the “ability to get what you want through attractiveness rather than coercion or payments”.<sup>2</sup> Nye further challenges that the origins of soft power exist in culture, political values and foreign policies. To wield the full scope of soft power, Nye stresses the integral connection of both hard and soft power. Hard power is exhibition of military might and coercive use of economic strength. These tactics are vital in the statecraft arsenal, and must be utilized with a combination of other tools such as intelligence, energy security and science and technology. This is the key to unlocking the hearts and minds of your target. A comprehensive understanding of what actually motivates an individual, organization or collective society will contribute to the effectiveness of the strategy, in addition to providing clarification for your own strategic objectives. Unless a country’s interests coincide with the objectives, there will never be a long term strategy to prevent the proliferation of Islamist extremism. The battle is ultimately waged in the hearts and minds of the Muslim community and requires international support with U.S. leadership.

A fundamental problem that many in the Muslim community express is the spread of Western modernization. Yet many polls indicate that the “majority of the population in the region desire the benefits of trade, communication and globalization.”<sup>3</sup> The “hostility” and tension created is often “exploited” by radicals to justify violence, spread fear and further the seeds of Western distrust. Radicals are the minority of Muslims. President Obama’s summer 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt exemplified the use of soft power as it reached out to the Muslim community and explicitly stated that his Administration would actively seek engagement and integration, and further invited Muslims to rise up against extremism. This author asserts that the President’s speech is a great example of optimism and hope [soft power]; however rhetoric is far from action. To deter the proliferation of terrorism and

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<sup>2</sup> Nye, Joseph Jr.: *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, page x.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* page 120.

combat radical ideology, concrete U.S. action must encourage moderates to seek a platform to spread the “softer side of Islam.”

This author does not deny the positive implications of outreach within the Muslim community through programs such as Al Hurra (U.S. Middle East Television Network), Radio Sawa (U.S. State Department 24 hour Arabic radio broadcasting) or the Middle East Partnership Initiative. These are tools in the U.S. soft power arsenal that work to reform political, democratic, women’s rights, education, and economic conditions in the Muslim world. But more funding and a better allocation is needed to help clarify, educate and identify the American perspective and build a bridge to moderate Islam. It is the moderates who can engage, criticize and cultivate the teachings of Islam to combat radical ideology.

Do they really hate us? Through the prism of 9/11 many Americans feared, misunderstood, and judged the Muslim community as a monolithic entity with a cohesive strategy to destroy the West. Yet, many Muslims “share many values such as family, religious belief, and desire for democracy.”<sup>4</sup> A 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Project survey conducted in the Middle East showed that the most attractive dimensions of American society are in rank order: U.S. science and technology; business practices; movies; music and TV; ideas for democracy. <sup>5</sup>The spread of American customs/ideas ranked last. What does this mean to the soft power fight? Motivation is a key factor to a successful strategy. Therefore, in a U.S. soft power campaign technical and professional exchanges within the scientific and business communities could foster collaboration, engender good will, and create long lasting relationships.

The use of internet for fund raising, recruitment and spreading the radical word is a roadblock and potential opportunity in the construction of a moderate network. As the extremists effectively use these tools, so the U.S. must be creative to combat the problem. A 2005 National Defense University study found that al-Qaeda’s Operational Code for terrorism finances is reliant upon multiple sources

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<sup>4</sup> Nye, Joseph Jr.: *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, page 142.

<sup>5</sup> I bid, page 42

including legitimate businesses and charities and often uses the internet for such means.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence is working on finding ways to combat this emerging field of radical financial recruiting and propaganda, however the radicals understand and work within the confines of "charitable contributions" posing greater difficulties to detection.

In conclusion, this author asserts that the first step is the institutionalization of a clear, cohesive and comprehensive strategy to build moderate Muslim networks. The U.S. needs to fix poor policies not defend them. Soft power diplomacy is not an isolated instrument of state power; rather it is one tool utilized in conjunction with the larger tool chest. Alternative forms of energy need to be explored to reduce oil dependency. The effective integration of intelligence, economic power, and soft power, among others, ensures longevity, clarity of objectives and the effectiveness of a strategy. Democratic educations, policy advocacy, the push for women's rights and media support are fundamental components to a comprehensive network.

As one of the fastest growing religions in the world, most of the over one billion Muslims are moderate by definition. By portraying soft power "attractiveness" and strategically aligning U.S. interests with the moderate and liberal Muslim community, the U.S. will achieve the influence to build sympathetic global moderate networks. It is not the moderates that are forcing airplanes into buildings; rather moderates accept western ideals of democracy, women's rights and religious freedom. Though Washington has attempted to extend a hand to the moderate community of Islam for nearly a decade, the strategy clearly lacks an explicit objective of engagement that goes beyond rhetoric and moves towards action. Our best protection is a genuine appeal to moderates.

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<sup>6</sup> Dunn, Lewis, "Can al Qaeda Be Deterred from Using Nuclear Weapons?" National Defense University Press: Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, July 2005 (accessed from class readings CD from Challenges to Combating Proliferation DSS 723-301, November 1, 2009).

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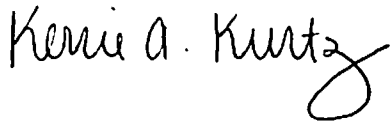
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