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# Building Moderate Muslim Networks

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## Summary

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Radical and dogmatic interpretations of Islam have gained ground in recent years in many Muslim societies. While there are many reasons for this, and while a large and growing body of literature continues to be engaged in exploring them, it is clear that structural factors play a large part. The prevalence of authoritarian political structures and the atrophy of civil-society institutions throughout much of the Muslim world have left the mosque as one of the few avenues for the expression of popular dissatisfaction with prevailing political, economic, and social conditions. In the case of some authoritarian states, radical Muslims present themselves as the only viable alternative to the status quo. They wage their battles in the mass media and political arena of their respective countries—either overtly or underground, depending on the degree of political repression.

By and large, radicals (as well as authoritarian governments) have been successful in intimidating, marginalizing, or silencing moderate Muslims—those who share the key dimensions of democratic culture—to varying degrees.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, as has happened in Egypt, Iran, and Sudan, liberal Muslim intellectuals are murdered or forced to flee overseas. Even in relatively liberal Indonesia, radicals have resorted to

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<sup>1</sup> Those dimensions include support for democracy and internationally recognized human rights, including gender equality and freedom of worship, respect for diversity, acceptance of nonsectarian sources of law, and opposition to terrorism and illegitimate forms of violence. This is further discussed in Chapter Five, “Road Map for Moderate Network Building in the Muslim World.”

violence and threats of violence to intimidate opponents. Increasingly, these tactics are being employed in the Muslim diaspora in the West.

Aside from a willingness to resort to violence to compel fellow Muslims to conform to their religious and political views, radicals enjoy two critical advantages over moderate and liberal Muslims. The first is money. Saudi funding for the export of the Wahhabi version of Islam over the last three decades has had the effect, whether intended or not, of promoting the growth of religious extremism throughout the Muslim world. The radicals' second advantage is organization. Radical groups have developed extensive networks over the years, which are themselves embedded in a dense net of international relationships.

This asymmetry in resources and organization explains why radicals, a small minority in almost all Muslim countries, have influence disproportionate to their numbers. As liberal and moderate Muslims generally do not have the organizational tools to effectively counter the radicals, the creation of moderate Muslim networks would provide moderates with a platform to amplify their message, as well as some protection from extremists. It would also provide them a measure of protection from their own governments, which sometimes repress moderates because they provide a more acceptable alternative to authoritarian rule than do the extremists.

Since moderates lack the resources to create these networks themselves, their creation may require an external catalyst. Some argue that the United States, as a majority non-Muslim country, cannot perform this role. Indeed, the obstacles to effectively influencing socio-political developments abroad should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, with considerable experience fostering networks of people committed to free and democratic ideas dating back to the Cold War, the United States has a critical role to play in leveling the playing field for moderates.

In this report we describe, first, how network building was actually done during the Cold War—how the United States identified and supported partners and how it attempted to avoid endangering them. Second, we analyze the similarities and the differences between the Cold War environment and today's struggle with radical Islamism and how these similarities and differences affect U.S. efforts to build networks today. Third, we examine current U.S. strategies and programs

of engagement with the Muslim world. Finally, informed by the efforts of the Cold War and previous RAND work on the ideological tendencies in the Muslim world, we develop a “road map” for the construction of moderate Muslim networks and institutions. A key finding of this report—which one of our reviewers notes is particularly important—is that the U.S. government and its allies need, but thus far have failed, to develop clear criteria for partnerships with authentic moderates. The net result, already visible, is the discouragement of truly moderate Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

## The Lessons of the Cold War

The efforts of the United States and its partners during the early years of the Cold War to help build free and democratic institutions and organizations hold lessons for the current Global War on Terrorism. At the onset of the Cold War, the Soviet Union could count on the allegiance not only of strong Communist parties in Western Europe (some of which were the largest and best-organized parties in their respective countries and appeared to be poised on the verge of coming to power through democratic means) but also of a plethora of organizations—labor unions, youth and student organizations, and journalists’ associations—that gave Soviet-backed elements effective control of important sectors of society. Outside Western Europe, Soviet allies included a number of “liberation movements” struggling against colonial rule. Therefore, the success of U.S. containment policy required (in addition to the military shield provided by U.S. nuclear and conventional forces) the creation of parallel democratic institutions to contest Communist domination of civil society. The close link between the U.S. grand strategy and its efforts to build democratic networks was a key ingredient in the overall success of the U.S. policy of containment; as such, it provides a model for policymakers today.

One important feature of U.S. and allied Cold War network-building initiatives was the link between the public and private sectors.

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<sup>2</sup> Hilled Fradkin, review of report, October 2006.

Within the United States and Europe, there was already an intellectual movement against Communism, particularly among the non-Communist left. What was needed was money and organization to turn individual efforts into a coherent campaign. The United States did not create these networks out of thin air; they were born of wider cultural and political movements that the United States and other governments quietly fostered.

In almost all of these endeavors the U.S. government acted like a foundation. It evaluated projects to determine whether they promoted U.S. objectives, provided funding for them, and then adopted a hands-off approach, allowing the organizations it supported to fulfill their objectives without interference. Like any foundation, the U.S. government set out guidelines on how its money was to be spent. However, U.S. officials generally realized that the greater the distance between their government and the sponsored organization, the more likely the organization's activities would succeed.

Today, the United States faces a number of challenges in constructing democratic networks in the Muslim world that mirror those faced by policymakers at the beginning of the Cold War. Three particular challenges seem especially relevant. First, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, U.S. policymakers debated whether their network-building efforts should be offensive or defensive. Some believed the United States should pursue an offensive strategy that sought to destroy Communist rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by aiding, overtly and covertly, groups inside those countries that were actively engaged in attempts to overthrow Communist governments. Others believed in a more defensive strategy focused on "containing" the Soviet threat by bolstering democratic forces in Western Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Although for the most part, the defensive strategy prevailed, the United States also sought to reverse the flow of ideas: instead of Communist ideas flowing into the West via the Soviet Union and its front organizations, democratic ideas could infiltrate behind the Iron Curtain via newly established information networks.

A second challenge policymakers in the Cold War faced was maintaining the credibility of the groups that the United States was supporting. The organizers of U.S. network-building efforts tried to



minimize the risks to these groups by, first, maintaining some distance between these organizations and the U.S. government, and, second, by selecting prominent individuals with a great deal of personal credibility for leadership positions in the networks. The U.S. government also supported the network-building activities of independent organizations such as the American Federation of Labor.

A third key challenge confronting U.S. policymakers was deciding just how broad the anti-Communist coalition should be. For instance, should it include Socialists who had turned against Communism but nevertheless were critical of many aspects of U.S. policy? In the end, the United States decided that anyone could be part of the coalition as long as certain basic principles were subscribed to. For example, the membership ticket to the Congress of Cultural Freedom was agreement to an anti-totalitarian consensus. Disagreement with U.S. policy was allowed—and even encouraged—because it helped to establish the credibility and independence of supported organizations.

## **Similarities and Differences Between the Cold War Environment and the Muslim World Today**

Three broad parallels stand out between the Cold War environment and today. First, the United States, both in the late 1940s and today, was and is confronting a new and confusing geopolitical environment with new security threats. At the beginning of the Cold War the threat was a global Communist movement led by a nuclear-armed Soviet Union; today it is a global jihadist movement striking against the West with acts of mass-casualty terrorism. Second, as was the case in the 1940s, we have witnessed the creation of large, new U.S.-government bureaucracies to combat these threats. Finally, and most importantly, during the early Cold War years there was widespread recognition that the United States and its allies were engaged in an ideological conflict. Policymakers understood this conflict would be contested in and across diplomatic, economic, military, and psychological dimensions. Today, as recognized by the Defense Department in its *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, the United States is involved in a war that is

“both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas,” in which ultimate victory can only be won “when extremist ideologies are discredited in the eyes of their host populations and tacit supporters.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, as with all historical analogies it is important to note the differences as well as the similarities between the past and the present. As a nation-state, the Soviet Union had state interests to protect, defined geographical borders, and a clear government structure. Today, by contrast, the United States confronts shadowy nonstate actors that control no territory (although some have been able to establish sanctuaries outside of state control), reject the norms of the international system, and are not subject to normal means of deterrence. Table S.1 summarizes the key differences between the Cold War environment and the environment in the Muslim world today.

**Table S.1**  
**Networking Challenges: The Cold War and the Middle East Today**

	Cold War	Middle East (Today)
Role of civil society	Historically strong	Historically not strong but developing
Hostility between United States and targeted society/ government	Open hostility between Soviet Union and United States Western societies favorable United States seen as liberator in Western Europe	U.S. democracy promotion and moderate network building is seen by authoritarian U.S. Middle East security partners as destabilizing United States not seen as liberator
Intellectual and historical ties	Strong	Weak
Adversary's ideology	Secular	Religion based
Nature of opposing networks	Centrally controlled	Loose or no central control
Policy challenges	Less complex	More complex

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, pp. 21–22.

## U.S. Programs of Engagement with the Muslim World

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a great deal of resources and attention were devoted to the physical security of American citizens and territory. At the same time, with the recognition that combating terrorism was not only a matter of bringing terrorists to justice and diminishing their capacity to operate, there was an effort to understand and address the “root causes” of terrorism. The National Security Strategy document of September 2002 elucidated a refined conception of security that emphasizes the consequences of internal conditions of other states—particularly the lack of democracy. This theme was to be reinforced over the course of the next several years, from the 9/11 Commission Report to, perhaps most dramatically, President Bush’s second inaugural address.

From its prominence in a series of high-profile documents and speeches, the President’s “Freedom Agenda” can be considered a U.S. “grand strategy” in the Global War on Terrorism. However, a consensus on how to identify and support partners in the “war of ideas” has not yet emerged. Specifically, there is currently no explicit U.S. policy to help build moderate Muslim networks, although such network-building activity is taking place as a by-product of other U.S. assistance programs. At the heart of the approach we propose is making the building of moderate Muslim networks an explicit goal of U.S. government programs.

Moderate network building can proceed at three levels: (1) bolstering existing networks; (2) identifying potential networks and promoting their inception and growth; and (3) contributing to the underlying conditions of pluralism and tolerance that are favorable to the growth of these networks. Although there are a number of U.S. government programs that have effects on the first two levels, most U.S. efforts to date fall within the third level, due partly to organizational preferences and to the fact that in many parts of the Muslim world there are few existing moderate networks or organizations with which the United States could partner. In addition, when promoting the formation of moderate networks, the United States must contend with both repres-

sive socio-political environments and high levels of anti-Americanism throughout much of the Muslim world.

For the most part, most efforts of the U.S. government that concern us fall into the categories of democracy promotion, civil-society development, and public diplomacy.

### **Democracy Promotion**

Through traditional diplomacy, the United States engages in state-to-state dialogue and has crafted incentives such as The Millennium Challenge Account for states to join the “community of democracies.” Publicly and privately, the United States emphasizes the benefits of adopting liberal democratic values of equity, tolerance, pluralism, the rule of law, and respect for civil and human rights. This emphasis on democratic values serves to contribute to the development of a political and social environment that facilitates the formation of moderate networks.

In addition, both the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have specific democracy-promotion mandates. To translate these policy goals into action, the Department of State and USAID contract with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), principally the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Asia Foundation, and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID). These are all nonprofit organizations funded by the U.S. government.

Although it is far from the largest U.S. program of engagement with the Muslim world, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) represents a high-profile attempt to break free from pre-9/11 standard approaches. MEPI structures its programs on four thematic “pillars”—political reform, economic reform, education, and women’s empowerment—and directly supports indigenous NGOs on a more innovative and flexible basis. As a new office in the Department of State’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), MEPI was designed to veer away from the conventional government-to-government approach by relying on U.S. NGOs, as implementing contractors, to disburse small grants directly to indigenous NGOs within the framework of the four “pillars.”

In 2004, the United States, together with partners in the group of eight heads of state of major economic powers (G8), attempted to inject a multilateral approach with the launching of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA). In the summer of 2006 BMENA launched an effort to replicate the model of the Asia Foundation—the most successful NGO in promoting programs to develop civil-society institutions—and tailor it to the Middle East region.

### **Civil-Society Development**

The promotion of democracy goes hand in hand with the development of civil society; in fact, many in academia and the policy world consider civil society a necessary precursor to democracy. Civil society refers broadly to a set of institutions and values that serves both as a buffer and a critical link between the state and individuals, families, and clans; it is manifested when voluntary civic and social organizations (such as NGOs) can stand in opposition to forces brought by the state. While civil society develops most easily in democracies, its development is both possible and desirable in non- and pre-democratic states.

The development of civil society and network building are integrally linked: both mutually reinforcing and mutually dependent. In theory, as civil society emerges, moderate networks follow, and vice versa. In practice, U.S. efforts at civil-society development are broader than democracy promotion—they include all of the programs designed to promote democracy plus those with mandates not squarely involved with democracy per se. These include programs promoting economic opportunity, independent and responsible media, environmental protection minority or gender rights, and access to health care and education. This broad approach takes a long view, gradually building democracy and liberal values through a grassroots, bottom-up effort. Such a strategy presents specific challenges to standard operating procedures of the U.S. government, particularly the Department of State, which traditionally has focused on engaging with governments.

Both democracy promotion and civil-society building face two primary obstacles: active resistance by authoritarian regimes and a lack of tangible performance measurement criteria. Government resistance

manifests itself in laws prohibiting NGO formation or acceptance of external support, strict monitoring of NGO activity and, more recently, expulsion of officials (Bahrain) and suspension of activities (Egypt).

On the public diplomacy front, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has engaged in an effort to have the Department of State and the U.S. government at large pursue “transformational diplomacy,” in which U.S. government officials inculcate public diplomacy into both policy design and implementation. But within the government, the objectives of public diplomacy remain varied. Not surprisingly, its effects are the most diffuse and hardest to measure.

The dominant mechanisms to deliver public diplomacy to the Muslim world have been radio and satellite television broadcasting, primarily Radio Sawa and the U.S. Middle East Television Network (Al Hurra). While Al Hurra has been heavily criticized for its inability to gain market share, Radio Sawa has been fairly successful in building an audience. Success in building an audience, however, does not clearly translate to net gains in general moderation or more tangible forms of moderate institution building. It is far from clear that, despite their high cost (\$700 million a year, or ten times the amount allocated to MEPI), either Radio Sawa or Al Hurra has been able to positively shape attitudes in the Muslim world toward U.S. policies.

## Road Map to Moderate Network Building

After reviewing the strategies that were most effective in building a strong and credible body of alternate values, influential dissidents, and reliable counterparts during the Cold War, we surveyed the Muslim world’s intellectual, organizational, and ideational makeup. In parallel, we evaluated the U.S. government’s current public diplomacy effort to reshape political discourse in the Middle East. From this research, we developed the implementation path described below.

The first step is for the U.S. government and its allies to make a clear decision to build moderate networks and to create an explicit link between this goal and overall U.S. strategy and programs. Effective implementation of this strategy requires the creation of an institutional

structure within the U.S. government to guide, support, oversee, and continuously monitor the effort. Within the framework of this structure, the U.S. government must build up the necessary expertise and capacity to execute the strategy, which includes

1. An ever-evolving and ever-sharpening set of criteria that distinguishes true moderates from opportunists and from extremists camouflaged as moderates, and liberal secularists from authoritarian secularists. The U.S. government needs to have the ability to make situational decisions to *knowingly* and for tactical reasons support individuals outside of that range under specific circumstances.
2. An international database of partners (individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, parties, etc.)
3. Mechanisms for monitoring, refining, and overseeing programs, projects, and decisions. These should include a feedback loop to allow for inputs and corrections from those partners who have been found to be most trustworthy.

The network-building effort could initially focus on a core group of reliable partners whose ideological orientation is known, and work outward from there (i.e., following the methodology of underground organizations). Once the ideology of any newly targeted organizations has been firmly ascertained, the United States could begin to increase levels of local autonomy.

Our approach calls for fundamental changes to the current, symmetric strategy of engagement with the Muslim world. The current approach identifies the problem area as the Middle East and structures its programs accordingly. That area is much too large, too diverse, too opaque, and too much in the grip of non-moderate sectors to allow for much traction (as reflected in the experience of MEPI). It can absorb very large amounts of resources with little or no impact. Instead, the United States should pursue a new policy that is *asymmetric* and *selective*. As in the Cold War, U.S. efforts should avoid the opponent's center of gravity and instead concentrate on the partners, programs,

and regions where U.S. support has the greatest likelihood of impacting the war of ideas.

With regard to partners, it will be important to identify the social sectors that would constitute the building blocks of the proposed networks. Priority should be given to

1. Liberal and secular Muslim academics and intellectuals
2. Young moderate religious scholars
3. Community activists
4. Women's groups engaged in gender equality campaigns
5. Moderate journalists and writers.

The United States should ensure visibility and platforms for these individuals. For example, U.S. officials should ensure that individuals from these groups are included in congressional visits, making them better known to policymakers and helping to maintain U.S. support and resources for the public diplomacy effort.

Assistance programs should be organized around the sectors listed above, and would include

1. *Democratic education*, particularly programs that use Islamic texts and traditions for authoritative teachings that support democratic and pluralistic values
2. *Media*. Support for moderate media is critical to combating media domination by anti-democratic and conservative Muslim elements.
3. *Gender equality*. The issue of women's rights is a major battleground in the war of ideas within Islam, and women's rights advocates operate in very adverse environments. Promotion of gender equality is a critical component of any project to empower moderate Muslims.
4. *Policy advocacy*. Islamists have political agendas, and moderates need to engage in policy advocacy as well. Advocacy activities are important in order to shape the political and legal environment in the Muslim world.



With regard to geographic focus, we propose a shift of priorities from the Middle East to the regions of the Muslim world where greater freedom of action is possible, the environment is more open to activism and influence, and success is more likely and more perceptible. The current approach is defensive and reactive. Built on the recognition that radical ideas are originating in the Middle East and from there are being disseminated to the rest of the Muslim world, including the Muslim diaspora in Europe and North America, this approach identifies the ideas and efforts of the extremists in the Middle East and seeks to counter them. Seeking to reverse this flow of ideas represents a much better policy. Important texts originating from thinkers, intellectuals, activists, and leaders in the Muslim diaspora, in Turkey, in Indonesia, and elsewhere should be translated into Arabic and disseminated widely. This does not mean that core areas should be abandoned. Rather, the goal should be to hold the ground in expectation of opportunities for advancement, which can arise at any moment.

There is some “networking” of moderates currently going on, but it is random and insufficiently considered. Networking individuals and groups whose credentials as moderates have not been firmly established or networking pseudo-moderates not only is a waste of resources, it can be counterproductive. The Danish imams who caused the cartoon controversy to spiral into an international conflagration had earlier been presumed to be moderates and had been the beneficiaries of state support, including travel and networking opportunities. Closer scrutiny after the incident revealed that these individuals were not true moderates at all.

Public diplomacy currently lags behind the media curve and needs to pay closer attention to contemporary circumstances. Radio was an important medium during the Cold War, helping isolated populations gain better access to information. Today, citizens of the Muslim world are overwhelmed by a vast amount of often inaccurate and biased information, and content and delivery stand in a much more demanding relationship to each other. Radio Sawa and Al Hurra are perceived as proxies for the U.S. government and, despite their high cost, have not resulted in positively shaping attitudes toward the United States. We believe that the funds spent on Radio Sawa and Al Hurra television

would be better spent supporting local media outlets and journalists that adhere to a democratic and pluralistic agenda.

We propose to launch the initiative recommended in this report with a workshop, to be held in Washington or another appropriate venue, gathering a small, representative group of Muslim moderates. This workshop would serve to obtain their input and their support for the initiative and to prepare the agenda and list of participants for an international conference modeled on the Congress of Cultural Freedom.

If this event were successful, we would then work with the core group to hold an international conference to be held in a venue of symbolic significance for Muslims, for instance, Córdoba in Spain, to launch a standing organization to combat radical Islamism.