RAND Proposes Blueprint for Building Moderate Muslim Networks

Over the past two decades, radical and dogmatic interpretations of Islam have gained ground in many Muslim societies. Through the threat of violence, radical Islamists have intimidated or silenced moderate and liberal Muslims, who espouse the key principles of democratic culture, including recognition of human rights, respect for diversity, acceptance of nonreligious sources of law, and opposition to terrorism. While radicals are a minority throughout the Muslim world, they hold an important advantage over their nonradical Muslim counterparts: The radical Islamists have developed extensive networks spanning the Middle East and Muslim communities in North America and Europe. Moderate and liberal Muslims, although a majority in most Muslim countries and communities, lack similar networks and may need external assistance to build them.

Recognizing the parallels between the Cold War and the current radical Islamist challenge, RAND examined U.S. and allied efforts to build democratic networks and institutions during the Cold War and derived lessons that can be applied to build moderate Muslim networks today. The researchers identified the similarities and differences between the Cold War and the current Islamist challenge, evaluated U.S. programs of engagement with the Muslim world, and developed a road map for building moderate Muslim networks. They recommend that the U.S. government make building these networks an explicit goal of U.S. policy. The researchers' road map calls for creating an international database of potential and existing partners, formulating a well-designed plan for supporting these networks, and arranging for "feedback loops" to keep the effort on track.

Key findings:

- The U.S. government should make an explicit decision to help build moderate Muslim networks and link these efforts to overall U.S. strategy and programs.

- Partners should be those who adhere to key dimensions of democratic culture.

- Initial efforts should focus on a core group of reliable partners and expand from there.

- An effort should be made to promote the flow of moderate ideas to the Middle East from Muslim communities in Europe, Turkey, Southeast Asia, and other open societies.

During the Cold War, the United States Acted Like a Foundation to Support Moderate Networks

During the Cold War, the United States provided money and organization to foster the creation of democratic institutions that could contest Communists efforts to dominate European civil society. One important feature of U.S. and allied Cold War network building was the link between the public and private sectors. Within the United States and Europe, there was already a democratic intellectual movement opposed to communism. What was needed was money and organization to turn individual efforts into a coherent campaign. 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 those that did, and then remained hands-off, allowing the organizations to fulfill their objectives without interference.

Four Factors Made Cold War Networking Efforts Successful

The success of the network-building efforts of the United States and its allies can be attributed to a few key factors. First, the network development efforts were part of an overall strategy that addressed politics, economics, information and news media, and diplomacy. Second, U.S. networking efforts tapped into and nurtured existing movements. Third, there was a broad political consensus within the United States and allied countries that the West needed to confront Communists on the political and ideological fronts in addition to the military front; this consensus allowed covert networking efforts to continue without political interference. Finally, the U.S. government managed to strike a balance that allowed the groups it supported to maintain a high level of independence while ensuring that their activities promoted long-term U.S. strategic goals.

Similarities and Differences Between the Cold War Environment and the Current Islamist Threat

Comparing the Cold War and the current radical Islamist challenge highlights important similarities and differences. First, as in the late 1940s, the United States is currently confronted with 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. In both cases, policymakers recognized that the United States and its allies were engaged in an ideological conflict that had to be contested across diplomatic, economic, military, and psychological dimensions. But unlike the Cold War, the current battle involves shadowy groups, not a single entity. The Soviet Union was a nation-state with a clear government structure and defined geographical borders. The radical Islamist threat is comprised of nonstate actors that control no territory, reject the norms of the international system, and are not subject to normal means of deterrence. These differences mean that the United States must develop a new networking strategy to meet the challenge.
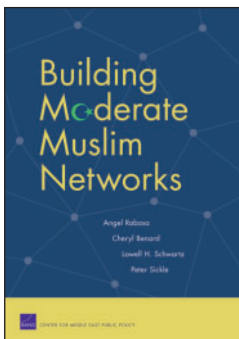
How the United States Can Foster Moderate Muslim Networks

RAND recommends that the United States concentrate on the partners, programs, and regions where U.S. support has the greatest likelihood of affecting the war of ideas under way in the Muslim world. The first step in this strategy is for the U.S. government and its allies to make a clear decision to help build moderate Muslim 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, oversee, and monitor the effort. The U.S. government must build the expertise and capacity to execute this strategy, including an ever-evolving and ever-sharpening set of criteria that distinguishes true moderates from extremists camouflaged as moderates, an international database of potential and existing partners, and a mechanism for monitoring, refining, and overseeing the program.

Partners in the moderate network-building effort should be those who adhere to key dimensions of democratic culture. The effort could initially focus on a core group of reliable partners whose ideological orientation is known and work outward from there. The researchers recommend targeting five groups as potential building blocks for networks: liberal and secular Muslim academics and intellectuals; young, moderate religious scholars; community activists; women's groups engaged in gender equality campaigns; and moderate journalists and writers. Functioning again in a foundation-like role, the United States should assist programs that promote democratic education, particularly programs that derive authoritative teachings supportive of democratic and pluralistic values from Islamic texts and traditions, moderate media, gender equality, and advocacy for moderate agendas.

RAND proposes a shift of focus from the Middle East to regions of the Muslim world where greater freedom of action is possible, the environment is more open to activism and influence, and there is a greater likelihood of success. The researchers emphasize network-building opportunities in the Muslim diasporas in Europe, among Muslims in Southeast Asia and Turkey, and in some of the relatively more open societies in the Middle East. Recognizing that radical ideas from the Middle East are being disseminated to the rest of the Muslim world, RAND recommends opening channels of communication that will encourage the dissemination of modern and mainstream interpretations of Islam back into the Middle East from moderate Muslims elsewhere. ■

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