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Indonesian Muslims wearing masks and maintaining social distance perform Friday prayer at the At-Tin Grand Mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia on June 5, 2020. (Eko Siswono Toyudho/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

## The Battle for the Soul of Islam

*James M. Dorsey | October 28, 2020*

Jordanian ruler Abdullah I bin Al-Hussein gloated in 1924 when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the visionary who carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, abolished the Caliphate.

“The Turks have committed suicide. They had in the Caliphate one of the greatest political forces, and have thrown it away... I feel like sending a telegram thanking Mustapha Kemal. The Caliphate is an Arab institution. The Prophet was an Arab, the Koran is in Arabic, the Holy Places are in Arabia and the Khalif should be an Arab of the tribe of Khoreish,” Abdullah told *The Manchester Guardian* at the time, referring to the tribe of the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>1</sup> “Now the Khaliphate has come back to Arabia,” he added.

It did not. Arab leaders showed no interest in the return of the Caliphate even if many Muslim intellectuals and clerics across the Middle East and the Muslim World criticized Ataturk’s abolition of it. Early Islamist political movements, for their part, largely declared the revival of caliphate as an aspiration rather than an immediate goal. A century later it is not the caliphate that the world’s Muslim powerhouses are fighting about. Instead, they are engaged in a deepening religious soft power struggle for geopolitical influence and dominance.

This battle for the soul of Islam pits rival Middle Eastern and Asian powers against one another: Turkey, seat of the Islamic world’s last true caliphate; Saudi Arabia, home to the faith’s holy cities; the United Arab Emirates, propagator of a militantly statist interpretation of Islam; Qatar

with its less strict version of Wahhabism and penchant for political Islam; Indonesia, promoting a humanitarian, pluralistic notion of Islam that reaches out to other faiths as well as non-Muslim centre-right forces across the globe; Morocco which uses religion as a way to position itself as the face of moderate Islam; and Shia Iran with its derailed revolution.

In the ultimate analysis, no clear winner may emerge. Yet, the course of the battle could determine the degree to which Islam will be defined by either one or more competing stripes of ultra-conservatism—statist forms of the faith that preach absolute obedience to political rulers and/or reduce religious establishments to pawns of the state. Implicit in the rivalry is a broader debate across the Muslim World that goes to the heart of the relationship between the state and religion. That debate centers on what role the state, if at all, should play in the enforcement of religious morals and the place of religion in education, judicial systems and politics. As the battle for religious soft power between rival states has intensified, the lines dividing the state and religion have become ever more blurred, particularly in more autocratic countries. This struggle has and will affect the prospects for the emergence of a truly more tolerant and pluralistic interpretation of one of the three Abrahamic religions.

### **An Ever More Competitive Struggle**

A survey of the modern history of the quest for Muslim religious soft power reveals an ever more competitive struggle with the staggered entry of multiple new players. Initially, in the 1960s, the Saudis, with Pakistani and a degree of West African input, had the playing field more or less to themselves as they created the building blocks of what would emerge as the world's most focused, state-run and well-funded Islamic public diplomacy campaign. At the time, Western powers saw the Saudi effort in fostering conservative Islam as part of the global effort to contain communism. Ultimately, it far exceeded anything that the Soviets or the Americans undertook.

The Saudi endeavor, in contrast to the United States that could rely on its private sector and cultural attributes, was by necessity a top-down and largely government-financed initiative that overtime garnered widespread public support. The bulk of Saudi money went to non-violent, ultra-conservative religious, cultural and media institutions in countries stretching from China across Eurasia and Africa into the Americas. Some recipients of Saudi largesse were political, others were not. More often than not, funding was provided and donations were made with the tacit approval and full knowledge of governments, if not their active cooperation.

Following the 1979 Iranian revolution, the kingdom's religious outreach no longer focused on containing communism alone, and Saudi practice increasingly mirrored Iran's coupling of religious soft power with hard power through the selective use of proxies in various Middle Eastern countries. Rarely publicly available receipts of donations by Saudis to violence-prone groups and interviews with past bagmen suggest that the kingdom directly funded violent militants in select countries in response to specific circumstances. This included Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, Pakistan to support anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian militants, Bosnia Herzegovina in aid of foreign fighters confronting Serbia in the 1990s, Palestine, Syria where Islamists were fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Iraq wracked by an anti-Shiite insurgency and Iran in a bid to fuel ethnic unrest.

Money was often hand carried to recipients or channelled through businessmen, money exchangers and chosen banks. Receipts of donations to Sipah-e-Sahaba, a banned virulently anti-Shia group that attacked Shias in Pakistan, and its successors and offshoots, bear the names of a Saudi donor who is hard to trace. They suggest that the dividing lines between private and officially-sanctioned funding are blurred.

To be sure, the level of Saudi funding and the thrust of the kingdom's religious soft power diplomacy has changed with the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The drive today is to project the kingdom and its Islam as tolerant, forward-looking, and outward- rather than inward-looking. Saudi religious outreach also aims to open doors for the kingdom through demonstrative acts like the visit to the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz in Poland by a delegation of 25 prominent Muslim clergymen led by Mohammed al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League. The League, which was once a prime vehicle for the kingdom's global promotion of religious ultra-conservatism, has also been forging closer ties with Jewish and Christian evangelist communities.

Indeed, Prince Mohammed has turned the League into a propagator of his vaguely defined notion of a moderate Islam. Meantime, Saudi Arabia's retreat from religiously packaged foreign funding<sup>2</sup> has created opportunity for the kingdom's competitors.

Facts on the ground in the kingdom and beyond, nonetheless, tell at times a different story. Schoolbooks are being cleansed of supremacist and racist references in a slow and grinding process initiated after the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom said in its 2020 report that "despite progress in recent years, Saudi textbooks have seen some backsliding regarding language inciting hatred and violence toward non-Muslims. While the 2019–2020 textbooks showed marginal improvements in the discussion of Christians, textbooks still teach that Christians and Jews 'are the enemy of Islam and its people,' and that members of the LGBTQI community will 'be struck [killed] in the same manner as those in Sodom.'"<sup>3</sup>

Prince Mohammed's nominal embrace of religious tolerance and inter-faith dialogue has produced far more public interactions with Jewish and Christian leaders but not led to a lifting on the ban on public non-Muslim worship and the building of non-Muslim houses of worship in the kingdom itself. Access to holy sites like Mecca and Medina remains banned for non-Muslims, as it has been for most of Islam's history, and often entry into mosques is also barred.

While Saudi Arabia has implemented strict regulations on donations for charitable purposes abroad, the source and the channelling of funding to militants that serve the kingdom's geopolitical purpose remains unclear at best. Militant Pakistani bagmen described in interviews in 2017 and 2018 the flow of large amounts of money to ultra-conservative madrassas that dot Pakistan's borders with Iran and Afghanistan. They said the monies were channelled through Saudi nationals of Baloch origin and often arrived in suitcases in an operation that they believed had tacit Saudi government approval. The monies, according to bagmen interviewed by this writer, were being transferred at a time when U.S. policymakers like former national security adviser John Bolton were proposing to destabilize the Iranian regime by supporting ethnic insurgencies.<sup>4</sup> Saudi Arabia was also publicly hinting that it may adopt a similar strategy.<sup>5</sup>

## **No Longer in A Class of Its Own**

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked the moment when Saudi religious soft power was no longer in a class of its own. It also launched a new phase in Saudi-Iranian rivalry that progressively has engulfed the Middle East and North Africa and beyond. Competition for religious soft power and influence is a fixture of the rivalry. So is the marked difference in Saudi and Iranian concepts of religious soft power.

Although both had sectarian traits, Saudi Arabia's primary focus was religious and theological while revolutionary Iran's was explicitly political and paramilitary in nature and geared toward acquiring hard power. Iranian outreach in various Arab countries focused on cultivating Shiite militias, not on greater religious piety.

The Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s in which Sunni Gulf states funded Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's war machine shifted Iran's focus from export of its revolution to a greater emphasis on Iranian nationalism. Iran also moved to nurturing Shiite militias that would constitute the country's first line of defense.

Gone were the days of Tehran's emphasis on groups like the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain that gathered regularly in a large sitting room in the home of Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, a one-time designated successor of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the exploits of his son, Mohammed Montazeri, who was nicknamed Ayatollah Ringo and founded an armed group in Lebanon and Syria that aimed to liberate Muslim lands.

The watershed shift has shaped Iran and its religious strategy, including its support for and recruitment of Shiite and other groups and communities in the Middle East, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It constituted Iran's soft and hard power response to the Saudi effort to infuse Muslim communities worldwide with an ultra-conservative, anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian interpretation of the faith. Elsewhere, like in Southeast Asia and West Africa, the thrust of Iranian religious diplomacy was, like much of the Saudi effort, focused primarily on religious and social issues.

The shift was evident early on in emotive debates in Iran's parliament in 1980 about the utility of the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran at a time that Iran was at war with Iraq. Men like Hojatolislam Hashemi Rafsanjani, the speaker of the parliament who later became President, Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, the number two in the Iranian political hierarchy at the time, and chief jurist Ayatollah Sadegh Khalqali, who was known as the hanging judge for his penchant for the death penalty, argued unsuccessfully in favour of a quick resolution of the embassy crisis so that Iran could focus on the defense of its territory and revolution.

The debates signalled a shift from what was initially an ideological rivalry to a geopolitical fight that continues to this day and that is driven by the perception in Tehran that the United States and the Gulf states are seeking to topple the Islamic regime.

## **An Ever More Complex Battle**

If the first phase of the battle for the soul of Islam was defined by the largely uncontested Saudi religious soft power campaign, and the second phase began with the emergence of revolutionary Iran, the third and most recent phase is the most complex one, not only because of the arrival on the scene of new players but also because it entails rivalries within rivalries.

The new players are first and foremost the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Qatar, and Indonesia. Their entry into the fray has further blurred the dividing lines between purely religious and cultural soft power, nationalism, and the struggle within Muslim societies over values, including various freedoms, rights, and preferred political systems.

The third phase is complicated by the fact that all of the players with the exception of Indonesia have embraced Iran's model of coupling religious soft power with hard power and the use of proxies to advance their respective agendas. This is apparent in the Saudi-UAE-led war to counter Iran in Yemen; Emirati, Egyptian and Turkish support for opposing sides in Libya's civil war; and Turkish and Gulf state involvement in Syria.

The intensifying violence lays bare the opportunism adopted by most players. Saudi Arabia, for example, has been willing to forge or maintain alliances with groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood even though it has designated the organization as a terrorist entity,<sup>6</sup> while the UAE, which claims the mantle of moderation but still supports the forces of Libyan rebel leader Khalifa Haftar whose ranks include a significant number of Salafist fighters.<sup>7</sup>

The resurgence of political Islam as a result of the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled leaders in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen, fuelled the worst fears of men like Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed, Egyptian General-turned President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed.

The upheaval also created an opportunity for the UAE, a country that prides itself on being a cutting-edge, cosmopolitan home to people from some 190 countries. It launched a multi-faceted effort to project itself as an open and tolerant society that is at the forefront of Islamic moderation and tolerance, and to respect religious diversity and inter-faith dialogue.

Bin Zayed's acquiescence of the Salafis, who have sought to impose strict Islamic law on Haftar's eastern Libyan stronghold of Benghazi, is based on their association with an ultra-conservative strand of the faith that preaches absolute obedience to the earthly ruler in power. That acquiescence contradicts Bin Zayed's otherwise dim view of ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam like Wahhabism.

Speaking in 2005 to then U.S. ambassador James Jeffrey, Bin Zayed compared Saudi Arabia's religious leaders to "somebody like the one we are chasing in the mountains," a reference to Osama bin Laden who at the time was believed to be hiding in a mountainous region of Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> In an email to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman twelve years later, Yusuf al-Otaiba, a confidante of Bin Zayed and the UAE's ambassador in Washington, asserted that "Abu Dhabi fought 200 years of wars with Saudi over Wahhabism."<sup>9</sup>

Al Otaiba's comment came a year after the UAE, in a bid to undermine Saudi religious diplomacy, sponsored a gathering of prominent Sunni Muslim leaders in the Chechen capital of Grozny that effectively ex-communicated Wahhabism.<sup>10</sup> Western officials refrained from publicly commenting, but they privately commended Emirati efforts to confront a worldview that they feared provided a breeding ground for social tensions and extremism.<sup>11</sup>

Bin Zayed has played a key role in shaping Bin Salman's policies to shave off Wahhabism's rougher edges and to bring the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's religious soft power endeavors closer together. This alignment has resulted in what author Shadi Hamid calls non-political politicized

Islam, or a “third trend in political Islam.”<sup>12</sup> That trend, in the words of scholar Gregory Gause, “is tightly tied to state authority and subservient to it.”<sup>13</sup>

Bin Zayed’s efforts have paid off. Despite ruling at home with an iron fist, Bin Zayed has been able to promote a state-controlled Islam that styles itself as tolerant and apolitical and preaches obedience to established rulers without addressing outdated or intolerant concepts embedded in the faith such as the notion of kafirs or infidels, slavery, and Muslim supremacy that remain reference points even if large numbers of Muslims do not heed them in their daily life.

His success, backed by armies of paid Western lobbyists, is evidenced by the fact that the UAE is widely perceived as a religiously tolerant, pluralistic, and enlightened society. This is in stark contrast to Bin Salman and Saudi Arabia’s reputational problems as a result of the 2018 killing in Istanbul of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the arrests and alleged torture of dissidents and others deemed a potential threat.

The UAE has also successfully projected itself as a secular state despite the fact that its constitution requires legislation to be compatible with Islamic law. In doing so, Emirati leaders walk a fine line. Islamic scholars with close ties to the UAE felt a need to rush to defend Al Otaiba, the UAE ambassador,<sup>14</sup> against accusations of blasphemy for telling Charlie Rose in a television interview that “what we would like to see is more secular, stable, prosperous, empowered, strong government.”<sup>15</sup>

To avert criticism, the UAE government rolled out Mauritanian philosopher Adballah Seyid Ould Abah who insisted that it was “obvious that (Al Otaiba) did not mean secularism according to the concept of ‘laïcité’ or according to the social context of the term. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other countries in the region are keen on sponsoring a religion, maintaining its role in the public field, and protecting it from ideological exploitation which is a hidden manifestation of secularization.”<sup>16</sup>

The UAE scored one of its most significant successes with the first ever papal visit to the Emirates by Pope Francis during which he signed a Document on Human Fraternity with Al Azhar’s Grand Imam, Ahmad El-Tayeb. The pope acknowledged the UAE’s growing influence, when in a public address he thanked Egyptian judge and his late advisor Mohamed Abdel Salam, who was close to both the Emiratis and Egypt’s Al-Sisi, for drafting the declaration. Abdel Salam ensured that the UAE and the Egyptian president rather than Al Azhar put their stamp on the document.

### **Creating the UAE’s Religious Ecosystem**

To bolster the Emirati version of “counter-revolutionary” Islam and counter influential Qatari-backed groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and other strands of political Islam, Bin Zayed launched a multi-pronged offensive involving geopolitical as well as religious building blocks.

Bin Zayed drew a line in the sand when in 2013 he helped orchestrate a military coup that toppled Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brother who won Egypt’s first and only free and fair election.<sup>17</sup> His engineering of the 2017 debilitating UAE-Saudi-Bahraini-Egyptian diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar, which is accused of being a pillar of political Islam, further strengthened Bin Zayed’s drawing of the religious soft power battle lines.

The battles that have ensued between the UAE and Qatar have been as much in the realm of ideology and ideas as they have been in war theatres like Libya, where the UAE has funded and armed Libyans fighting the elected, internationally recognized Islamist Government of National Accord based in Tripoli.

Bin Zayed signaled his ideational intentions with the creation of religious organizations of his own, the launch of Emirati-run training programs for non-UAE imams, and a visit a year after the 2013 coup in Egypt to Al Azhar's sprawling 1000-year-old mosque and university complex in Cairo. The visit was designed to underline the Emirati ruler's determination to steer Al Azhar's adoption of moderate language and counter extremism and fanaticism.<sup>18</sup>

Meantime, the new Emirati imam-training programs put the UAE in direct competition with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Morocco, major purveyors of Muslim clerical training. The UAE scored initial successes with the training of thousands of Afghan clerics<sup>19</sup> and an offer to provide similar services to Indian imams.<sup>20</sup>

The UAE's growing world influence was evident in those who participated in the 2016 Grozny conference that effectively excommunicated Wahhabism. Participants included the imam of the Al-Azhar Grand Mosque, Ahmed El- Tayeb, Egyptian Grand Mufti Shawki Allam, former Egyptian Grand Mufti and Sufi authority Ali Gomaa, a strident supporter of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, Al Sisi's religious affairs advisor, Usama al-Azhari, the mufti of Damascus Abdul Fattah al-Bizm, a close confidante of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, influential Yemeni cleric Habib Ali Jifri, head of the Abu Dhabi-based Islamic Tabah Foundation who has close ties to Bin Zayed, Indian grand mufti Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad, and his Jordanian counterpart, Sheikh Abdul Karim Khasawneh.

The participation of El-Tayeb, a political appointee and salaried Egyptian government official, and other Egyptian religious luminaries who had supported Al-Sisi's military coup, said much about the UAE's inroads into Al Azhar, an institution that was for decades a preserve of Saudi ultra-conservatives. El-Tayeb signaled the shift when in 2013 he accepted the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Cultural Personality of the Year in recognition of his "leadership in moderation and tolerance."

El-Tayeb was lauded "for encouraging a culture of tolerance, dialogue and protection of civil society" at a moment that Morsi, the embattled Egyptian president, was fighting for his political life, and Bin Zayed was cracking down on Emirati Muslim Brothers.<sup>21</sup>

The Grozny conference was co-organized by the Tabah Foundation, the sponsor of the Council of Elders, a UAE-based group founded in 2014 that aims to dominate Islamic discourse that many non-Salafis assert has been hijacked by Saudi largesse. The Council, like the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, another UAE-funded organization, was created to counter the Doha-based International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) headed by Yusuf Qaradawi, one of the world's most prominent and controversial Muslim theologians who is widely viewed as a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Tabah Foundation is headed by Saudi-based Mauritanian politician and Islamic scholar Abdullah Bin Bayyah as well as El-Tayeb. Before he established the Emirati-supported group, Bin Bayyah was vice president of Qaradawi's European Council for Fatwa and Research, created

to provide guidance to European Muslims through the dissemination of religious opinions. He also heads the Emirates Fatwa Council that oversees the issuing of religious opinions and trains and licenses clerics.

Bin Bayyah as well as other prominent traditionalists with past ties to the Brotherhood and/or political Islam, including Hamza Yusuf, an American convert to Islam, and Aref Ali Nayed, a former Libyan ambassador to the UAE, found common ideological ground in the assertion that the Brotherhood and jihadist ideology are offshoots of ultra-conservative strands of Islam. They saw the UAE's position as rooted in decades of animosity between Al Azhar and the Brotherhood that Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak exploited to counter the Brothers and Wahhabism.

Born Mark Hanson, Yusuf, a disciple of Bin Bayyah, is widely viewed as one of the most influential and charismatic Western Islamic preachers.

Nayed, an Islamic scholar, entrepreneur, and onetime supporter of the 2011 popular “Arab Spring” revolts, moved Kalam Research & Media, a Muslim think tank that he founded in 2009, to Dubai and aligned it with the UAE's strategy.

“I believe that the entire region is undergoing an identity crisis in reality. Who are we? And what is the Islam we accept as our religion?... It is an existential question and there is a major struggle. I believe that there is fascism in the region as a whole that dresses up as Islam, and it has no relation to true Islam... Let me be explicit: there are countries that support the Muslim Brothers, and there are countries that are waging war against the Muslim Brothers... This is a regional war—we do not deny it,” Nayed told BBC Arabic.<sup>22</sup>

Embracing Machiavelli's notion of religion as a powerful tool in the hands of a prince, members of the Abu Dhabi ruling family, including Bin Zayed and his foreign minister, Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, began courting Bin Bayyah in early 2013. They invited the cleric to the Emirates the same month that Morsi was toppled.<sup>23</sup>

In a letter three months later to Qaradawi's IUMS that bitterly opposed the overthrow of Morsi and condemned the Egyptian military government's subsequent brutal repression of the Brotherhood, Bin Bayyah wrote that he was resigning from the group because, “the humble role I am attempting to undertake towards reform and reconciliation [among Muslims] requires a discourse that does not sit well with my position at the International Union of Muslim Scholars.”<sup>24</sup>

Bin Bayyah published the letter to demonstrate to Emirati leaders that he had ended his association with Qatari-supported Islamist groups. He has since acknowledged that he speaks on behalf of the UAE government.<sup>25</sup> The courting of Bin Bayyah emanated from Bin Zayed's realization that he needed religious soft power to justify the UAE's wielding of hard power in countries like Yemen and Libya. The timing of Bin Zayed's positioning of Bin Bayyah as what Usaama Al-Azami, an Islamic scholar,<sup>26</sup> dubs “counter-revolutionary Islam's most important scholar,” was hardly coincidental. It coincided with the gradual withdrawal from public life of the far more prolific and media savvy Qaradawi, who had become a nonagenarian.

Al-Azami argues that the UAE's financial and political clout rather than intellectual argument will decide to what degree the Emirates succeed in their religious soft power campaign.

“The counter-revolutionary Islamic political thought that is being developed and promoted by Bin Bayyah and the UAE suffers from certain fundamental structural problems that means its very existence is precariously predicated on the persistence of autocratic patronage. Its lack of independence means that it is not the organic product of a relatively unencumbered engagement with political modernity that might be possible in freer societies than counter-revolutionary Gulf autocracies,” Al-Azami wrote.<sup>27</sup>

Yahya Birt, a British Muslim scholar of UAE-supported clerics, argues that their need to project their sponsors at times is at odds with reality on the ground. “The extracted price of government patronage is high for ulema in the Middle East. Generally speaking, they have to openly support or maintain silence about autocracy at home, while speaking of democracy, pluralism, and minority rights to Western audiences,” Birt said.

“What does this mean for the soft power dimension of the UAE with projects such as the Forum for Promoting Peace? On the face of it the Forum seems benign enough: promoting ideas of peace, minority rights and citizenship in the Arab and Muslim world, but at what price? Any criticism of the UAE’s human rights violations...seems impossible,” Birt went on to say.<sup>28</sup>

### **Longing For Past Imperial Glory**

Slick public relations packaging is what gives the UAE an edge in its rivalry with both Saudi Wahhabism as well as with Qatar and Turkey. Saudi Arabia is hobbled by the image of an austere, ultra-conservative and secretive kingdom that it is trying to shed and a badly tarnished human rights record magnified by hubris and a perceived sense of entitlement. For its part, Turkey’s religious soft power drive has a raw nationalist edge to it that raises the spectre of a longing for past imperial glory.

Inaugurated in 2019, Istanbul’s Camlica Mosque, Turkey’s largest with its six minarets, symbolizes President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s ambitions. So does the controversial return a year later of the Hagia Sophia, the 1,500 old-church-turned-mosque-turned museum, to the status of a Muslim house of worship. In contrast to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the general who turned Hagia Sophia into a museum to emphasize the alignment with the West of the state he had carved out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, Erdogan embarked on a campaign of support for mosques and Muslim communities in former imperial holdings and beyond.

In doing so, Erdogan was following in the footsteps of Ottoman sultans who sought legacy in grandiose mosque construction. He was signaling his intention to restore Turkish glory by positioning his country as the leader of the Islamic world, willing and able to defend Muslims across the globe. His was a worldview outlined by Ahmet Davutoglu, Erdogan’s onetime prime and foreign minister, who argued that Turkey’s geography, history, and religious and cultural agency empowered it to be a regional hegemon.<sup>29</sup>

Erdogan underlined the importance of religious soft power in his geopolitical strategy by granting his Religious Affairs Department or Diyanet a key role in foreign and aid policy. Established by Ataturk in 1924 to propagate a statist, moderate form of Islam that endorsed secularism, Erdogan infused the directorate with his version of political Islam.

Erdogan harnessed the Diyanet to legitimize his military escapades in Syria, Libya, and Iraq<sup>30</sup> in much the same way that Iran and now the UAE blends hard power with religious soft power.

Diyamet regularly instructs imams at home and abroad to recite a Quranic verse, Sura Al-Fath or the Verse of the Conquest, to legitimize the Turkish president's adventures. The sura conveys a message of victory and conquest as well as the favor God conferred upon the Prophet Mohammed and his followers. It promises increased numbers of faithful as well as forgiveness of worldly mistakes by those who do jihad on the path of God.

The construction of mosques and the dispatch of Diyanet personnel who serve as imams, religious counselors, and political commissars have been an important component of a multi-pronged Turkish strategy to build influence. The strategy also included development and humanitarian aid, the funding and building of infrastructure, private sector investment, and the opening of universities.

The meshing of religious soft power and aid has served Turkey well. Perhaps nowhere more so than in Somalia where US\$1 billion in aid channelled through Diyanet and other NGOs funded the building of the Recep Tayyip Erdogan Hospital in the capital Mogadishu<sup>31</sup> and the establishment of Turkey's foremost foreign military base.<sup>32</sup> Somalia is at the eastern end of a major Turkish diplomatic, economic and cultural push across the African continent that is part of policy designed to position Turkey as a major Middle Eastern, Eurasian and African player.

The price tag attached to Turkish largesse often was that beneficiaries handed over schools operated by the exiled preacher Fethullah Gulen, a onetime Erdogan ally who Turkish officials accuse of building a state within a state and engineering the 2016 failed military attempt to unseat Erdogan with the backing of the UAE. Beneficiaries were often required to extradite suspected Gulen followers and look the other way when Turkish intelligence agents kidnapped alleged followers of the preacher and return them to Turkey.<sup>33</sup>

Turkey's quest for religious soft power kicked into high gear in the wake of the failed 2016 coup with Erdogan repeatedly defining Turkish identity as essentially Ottoman. It is an identity that obliged Turkey in Erdogan's view to come to the defense of Muslims around the world, starting with the 45 modern-day states that once were Ottoman territory. Erdogan, for instance, embraces Palestinian nationalist aspirations as well as Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip, and the struggle for independence of Kosovo because they are Muslim. Erdogan is not the first Turkish leader to root Turkey's Islamic identity in its Ottoman past.

So did Turgut Ozal, who in the 1980s and early 1990s put Turkey on the path towards an export-driven free market economy. Ozal, as president, also pioneered the opening to post-Soviet Central Asia and encouraged Turkish investment in the Middle East and North Africa. But he shied away from de-emphasizing Turkey's ties to the West. Erdogan's contribution has been that by breaking with Turkey's Kemalist past, he was able to put Islam as a religion and a foundational civilization at the core of changing Turkish educational and social life and positioning the country on the international stage.

If Ozal, a former World Banker, was the more cosmopolitan expression of Turkish Islamism, Erdogan veered towards its more exclusivist, anti-Western bent. Ozal embraced Westernization as empowering Turkey. Erdogan rejected it because it deprived the state of its religious legitimacy, ruptured historic continuity, and produced a shallow identity. It is a strategy that has paid dividends. Erdogan emerged as the most trusted regional leader in a 2017 poll that surveyed

public opinion in 12 Middle Eastern countries. Forty percent of the respondents also recognized Erdogan as a religious authority even though he is not an Islamic scholar.<sup>34</sup>

The irony of Erdogan's fallout with Gulen as well as the souring of Turkish-Saudi relations, initially as a result of Turkish suspicions of Gulf support for the failed coup and the 2018 killing in Istanbul of Khashoggi, is that both the Turkish preacher and the Saudi journalist were nurtured in Saudi-backed organizations associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Gulen played a key role in the 1960s in the founding of the Erzurum branch of the Associations for the Struggle against Communism, an Islamist-leaning Cold War Turkish group that had ties to Saudi Arabia.<sup>35</sup> Erdogan, former Turkish president Abdullah Gul and former parliament speaker Ibrahim Karatas, among many others, were formed in nationalist and Islamic politics as members of the Turkish National Students Union, which represented the Muslim World League in Turkey.<sup>36</sup>

Turkey has a leg up on its competitors in the Balkans, Central Asia, and Europe. Centuries of Ottoman rule as well as voluntary and forced migration have spawned close ethnic and family ties. Millions of Turks pride themselves on their Balkan roots. The names of Istanbul neighbourhoods, parks and forests reflect the Balkans' Ottoman history. Central Asians identify themselves as Turkic, speak Turkic languages and share cultural attributes with Turks.

In Europe, Turkish operatives often enjoy the goodwill of large well-integrated Diaspora communities even if the fault lines run deep between Turks and Kurds opposed to the Turkish government's repression of Kurdish political aspirations.

Turkey's Achilles Heel may be that the Ottoman-style Islam it projects is a misreading of the empire's history. In another twist of irony, Erdogan embraced a Kemalist vision of the Ottomans as a religiously driven empire rather than one that perceived itself as both Muslim and European and that was pragmatic and not averse to aspects of secularism. It is that misreading that in the words of Turkey scholar Soner Cagaptay has produced "an ahistorical, political Islam-oriented, and often patronising foreign policy concoction" and has informed Turkey's soft power strategy.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey has sought to bolster its bid for religious soft power by positioning itself alongside Malaysia as the champion of the rights of embattled Muslim communities like Myanmar's Rohingya. Turkey's claim to be the defender of the Muslim underdog is however called into question by its refusal, with few caveats, to criticize the brutal crackdown on Turkic Muslims in China's northwestern "autonomous region" of Xinjiang.

Turkey's perfect opportunity to project itself arose with Gulf acquiescence to the U.S.'s official recognition of Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, as well the launch of a peace plan that buried hopes for a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To the chagrin of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Turkey convened a summit in Istanbul of the Riyadh-based, Saudi-dominated Organization of Islamic Cooperation that groups 54 Muslim countries to denounce the U.S.'s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Erdogan vowed two years later to prevent Israel from annexing parts of the West Bank and declared that Jerusalem was "a red line for all Muslims in the world."<sup>38</sup> Erdogan has also condemned the UAE and Bahrain's recent

diplomatic recognition of Israel even though he has never reversed Turkey's own ties with the Jewish state.

### **The New Kid on the Block**

Indonesia, the new kid on the block in the competition for Muslim religious soft power and leadership, has proven to be a different kettle of fish. Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim movement, rather than the government of President Joko Widodo, has emerged as a formidable contender, one that is capable of operating on the same level as the states with which it competes.

As a result, the Indonesian state takes a back seat in the global competition among Muslims. It benefits from its close ties to Nahdlatul Ulama as well as the movement's ability to gain access to the corridors of power in world capitals, including Washington, London, Berlin, Budapest, the Vatican, and Delhi. Nahdlatul Ulama was instrumental in organizing a visit to Indonesia in 2020 by Pope Francis that had to be postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>39</sup>

The movement also forged close working ties to Muslim grassroots communities in various parts of the world as well as prominent Jewish and Christian groups. Nahdlatul Ulama's growing international influence and access was enabled by its embrace in 2015 of a concept of "Nusantara (archipelago) Islam" or "humanitarian Islam" that recognized the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>40</sup> The movement has also gone beyond paying lip service to notions of tolerance and pluralism with the issuance of fatwas intended to re-contextualize the faith by eliminating categories like infidels.<sup>41</sup>

Nahdlatul Ulama's evolution towards a process of re-contextualization of Islam dates back to a 1992 gathering of religious scholars chaired by Abdurrahman Wahid, the group's leader at the time and later president of Indonesia. The gathering noted that "the changing context of reality necessitates the creation of new interpretations of Islamic law and orthodox Islamic teaching."<sup>42</sup>

Speaking to a German newspaper 25 years later, Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf laid out the fundamental dividing line between his group's notion of a moderate Islam and that of Indonesia's rivals without identifying them by name. Asked what Islamic concepts were problematic, Staquf said: "The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the relationship of Muslims with the state, and Muslims' relationship to the prevailing legal system wherever they live ... Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity... In today's world such a doctrine is unreasonable. To the extent that Muslims adhere to this view of Islam, it renders them incapable of living harmoniously and peacefully within the multi-cultural, multi-religious societies of the 21st century."<sup>43</sup>

Widodo initially hoped that Nahdlatul Ulama's manifesto on humanitarian Islam would empower his government to position Indonesia as the beacon of a moderate interpretation of the faith. Speaking at the laying of the ground stone of the International Islamic University (UIII) in West Java, Widodo laid down a gauntlet for his competitors in the Middle East by declaring that it was "natural and fitting that Indonesia should become the (authoritative) reference for the progress of Islamic civilization."<sup>44</sup>

Widodo saw the university as providing an alternative to the Islamic University of Medina, that has played a key role in Saudi Arabia's religious soft power campaign, and the centuries-old Al Azhar in Cairo, that is influenced by financially-backed Saudi scholars and scholarship as well as Emirati funding. The university is "a promising step to introduce Indonesia as the global epicenter for 'moderate' Islam,'" said Islamic philosophy scholar Amin Abdullah.<sup>45</sup>

Saudi and Emirati concerns that Indonesia could emerge as a serious religious soft power competitor were initially assuaged when Widodo's aspirations were thwarted by critics within his administration. A six-page proposal to enhance Indonesian religious soft power globally put forward in 2016 by Nahdlatul Ulama at the request of Pratikno, Widodo's minister responsible for providing administrative support for his initiatives, was buried after the foreign ministry warned that its adoption would damage relations with the Gulf states.<sup>46</sup>

That could have been the end of the story. But neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE anticipated Nahdlatul Ulama's determination to push its concept of humanitarian Islam globally, including at the highest levels of government in western capitals as well as in countries like India. Nor did they anticipate Mr. Widodo's willingness to play both ends against the middle by supporting Nahdlatul Ulama's campaign while engaging on religious issues with both the Saudis and the Emiratis.

The degree to which Nahdlatul Ulama is perceived as a threat by the UAE and Saudi Arabia is evident in battles in high level inter-faith meetings convened by the Vatican, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, and others over principles like endorsement of the UN human rights declaration.

Nahdlatul Ulama's rise to prominence was also what persuaded Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League, to visit the Indonesian group's headquarters in Jakarta in early 2020.<sup>47</sup> It was the first visit to one of the world's foremost Islamic organizations in the League's almost 60-year history. The visit allowed him to portray himself as in dialogue with Nahdlatul Ulama in his inter-faith contacts as well as in conversation with Western officials and other influential interlocutors.

Al-Issa had turned down an opportunity to meet two years earlier when a leading Nahdlatul Ulama cleric and he were both in Mecca at the same time. He told a Western interlocutor who was attempting to arrange a meeting that he had "never heard" of the Indonesian scholar and could not make time "due to an extremely previous busy schedule of meetings with international Islamic personalities" that included "moderate influential figures from Palestine, Iraq, Tunisia, Russia and Kazakhstan."<sup>48</sup>

Saudi Arabia was forced several months later in the run-up to the 2019 Indonesian presidential election to replace its ambassador in Jakarta, Osama bin Mohammed Abdullah Al Shuaib. The ambassador had denounced in a tweet—that has since been deleted—Ansor, the Nahdlatul Ulama young adults organization, as heretical and he had supported an anti-government demonstration.<sup>49</sup>

Nahdlatul Ulama's ability to compete is further evidenced by its increasingly influential role in Centrist Democrat International or CDI, the world's largest alliance of political parties, that grew out of European and Latin American Christian Democratic movements. Membership in CDI of

the National Awakening or PKB, the political party of Nahdlatul Ulama, arguably gives it a leg up in the soft power competition with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which both ban political parties. Meantime, the PKB is far more pluralistic than Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has shown increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

CDI's executive committee met in the Javan city of Yogyakarta in January 2020. Participants included prominent Latin American leaders and former heads of state, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa and Elmar Brock, a close associate of German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Nahdlatul Ulama's sway was apparent in CDI's adoption of a resolution that called for adherence to universal ethics and humanitarian values based on Western humanism, Christian democracy, and Humanitarian Islam. The resolution urged resistance to "the emergence of authoritarian, civilizationalist states that do not accept the rules-based post-WWII order, whether in terms of human rights, rule of law, democracy or respect for international borders and the sovereignty of other nations."<sup>50</sup>

Nahdlatul Ulama benefits from what journalist Muhammad Abu Fadil described as rejection of an "Arab face of Islam" that in his words was "hopelessly contorted by extremism" in Western perceptions. Abu Fadil suggested that "certain elements in the West have become interested in 'Asian Islam,' which appears to be more moderate than Arab Islam; less inclined to export radical ideology; less dominated by extremist interpretations of religion; and possessed of a genuine and sincere tendency to act with tolerance."<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

A major battle for Muslim religious soft power that pits Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and Indonesia against one another is largely about enhancing countries' global and regional influence. This battle has little to do with implementing notions of a moderate Islam in theory or practice despite claims by the various rivals, most of which are authoritarian states with little regard for human and minority rights or fundamental freedoms.

Muslim-majority Indonesia, the world's third largest democracy, is the odd-man out. A traditionalist and in many ways conservative organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim movement, has garnered international respect and recognition with its embrace of a Humanitarian Islam that recognizes the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the principles enshrined in it and has taken tangible steps to address Islamic concepts that it considers outdated. In doing so, Nahdlatul Ulama has emerged as a formidable challenger to powerful state actors in the battle for the soul of Islam. But it still faces the challenge of overcoming the Arab view, expressed by Abdullah I of Jordan after the end of caliphate, that Muslim leadership must somehow return to the Arabs.

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