



The Battle for the Soul of Islam

Defining the Muslim Faith in the 21st Century

James M. Dorsey



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To Tess, Deirdre, Lucas, Djess, and Olaf. Life would be a void without them.

PREFACE: WHY RELIGION MATTERS IN GEOPOLITICS

Religion was never my focus even though religion-driven players inevitably were part of my decades of reporting and research of the Muslim world. I tuned into the battle for the soul of Islam as a result of having been based among others in Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel and regular visits to Malaysia and Indonesia.

A weekend in 2015 in the northeastern Central Java town of Rembang hosted by Yahya Cholil Staquf, a leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, the Muslim world's largest and most moderate Muslim civil society movement, and his international affairs advisor, C. Holland Taylor, alerted me to the fact that there were fundamentally different visions of Islam competing to define what 'moderate' means. I travelled to Rembang to satisfy my curiosity sparked by snippets I heard and read about Nahdlatul Ulama's pluralistic, anti-autocratic vision of Islam that challenged Saudi and Emirati concepts as well as the teachings of Al-Azhar, the more than 1,000-year-old Cairo-based citadel of Islamic learning.

Morals and ethics are at the core of the discussion of the role of religion in politics, policymaking, and international relations. Scholars Amrita Narlikar and Daniel W. Drezner laid the groundwork for a discussion of the neglect of morals and ethics in a special edition of *International Affairs*, an academic journal, entitled "International relations: the 'how not to' guide."¹

Responding to former White House chief of staff and one-time Secretary of State and of the Treasury James Baker's observation that policy solutions often create problems that need to be ameliorated at a later stage,² Narlikar and Drezner noted that this is an "endemic problem created by the mismatch between the grand arc of international relations and the powerful short-term incentives that political leaders face."

¹ Amrita Narlikar and Daniel W. Drezner (eds.). "International relations: the 'how not to' guide." *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, Issue 5, September 2022.

² James A. Baker III and Thomas M. DeFrank. "The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace 1989-1992." New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1995.

Narlikar and Drezner's edited edition suggested that academics, analysts, and policymakers revisit the maxim of seeking to replicate past policy successes as the basis for the crafting of new policies. Contributors argued that examining how to avoid catastrophic failure might be a better approach. They called implicitly for out-of-the-box thinking. They proposed the application of the medical sector's Hippocratic Oath to international relations. The Oath obliges doctors to avoid doing harm.

"The Hippocratic Oath principle in IR (international relations) serves as a cautionary warning against action merely for action's sake. There is a bias in politics towards 'doing something' in response to an event. Doing something, however, is not the same as doing the right thing... A Hippocratic Oath asks policymakers to weigh the costs and risks of viable policy options before proceeding," Narlikar and Drezner said in their introduction to the special edition.

Inevitably, the search for a moral and ethical yardstick forces one to come to grips with religion, irrespective of whether one is religious or not. Simply put, there is no alternative to religion as a moral and ethical yardstick for societies and systems of governance, whether religious or secular.

Major attempts at creating a secular yardstick, for example, Communism, Kemalism, the philosophy on which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, or Zionism that sought to transform an amorphous religious, cultural, and/or national identity into a clearly defined national Jewish identity, lost their relevance once they were no longer fit for the purpose.

The attempts drove home that there is no societal moral and ethical yardstick not inspired by religion. Countries like the United States and Saudi Arabia could not be more different. Yet, both societies are undergirded by religiously inspired moral and ethical yardsticks. In the United States, Christianity is the overriding inspiration; in the kingdom, it is Islam.

The difference is the yardstick's positioning. In the United States, the yardstick is a voluntary benchmark rather than a hard and fast rule. Adherence is largely regulated socially rather than legally. In the kingdom, the yardstick is religious law that authorities have historically harshly enforced, even if Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has loosened the rules. Perhaps surprisingly, China also fits the bill. It does so in its recognition of religion's centrality by seeking, often brutally, to control, if not repress, expressions of faiths other than Buddhism.

A look at dominant issues, disputes, and conflicts in the last two decades suggests that they involved civilisational choices and policies that often violated international law and challenged a world order based on heterogeneous nation-states and/or propagated exclusionist and supremacist attitudes.³

³ James M. Dorsey. "Civilizationism vs the Nation State." *The Turbulent World with James M. Dorsey.* 24 March 2019. <https://www.jamesmdorsey.net/post/civilizationism-vs-the-nation-state>

These included the controversy over the 2020 US presidential election; Britain's exit from the European Union; the Russian invasion of Ukraine; ethno-religious nationalism in Russia, China, Hungary, Serbia, India, and Israel, as well as among American Christian nationalists; and the carnage in the Middle East.

Nahdlatul Ulama, like opponents of Christian nationalism in the United States, Hindu nationalism in India, and Jewish supremacy in Israel, underscore the likelihood that morals and ethics embedded in respect of human dignity and rights as the organising principle of politics and policymaking will have to be grounded in shared values derived from religion.

Moreover, the central role of religion in shaping societies makes an unambiguous re-articulation of religious precepts to avoid faith justifying abuse of human rights and universally recognised freedoms a *sine qua non*. Inevitably, this requires reform or repositioning of religious law and precepts. The rise of ultra-nationalist, supremacist interpretations of religion has put the struggle for reform into sharp relief. That applies Islam with the rise of Muslim militancy, Christianity with the increasing prominence of Christian nationalism, ultra-conservative and ultra-nationalist Judaism, similar trends in Hinduism Buddhism, and the role of the Russian Orthodox church in framing President Vladimir Putin's anti-Western policy.

The rise of jihadism with the birth of Al-Qaeda and the 2001 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, the subsequent emergence of the even more virulent Islamic State that declared a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq, and the appeal of non-violent political Islam, put a bull's eye on Islam. The focus on Islam was enhanced by geopolitics, especially in the Middle East, a predominantly Muslim part of the world at the crossroads of maritime shipping; rich in oil, gas, and disposable cash; and a magnet as the cradle of Abrahamic faiths.

Moreover, the Middle East, home to Islam's holiest sites, was the Muslim-majority part of the world that twisted the concept of a nation-state that emerged from the 17th-century Peace of Westphalia to suit the elite's autocratic instincts. Westphalia envisioned the separation of church and state and the subordination of religion. With 20th-century decolonisation, the Middle East maintained its long-standing subordination of religion to legitimise autocratic rule but ignored the notion of a separation of church and state. In doing so, it relegated Muslim religious reformers to the margins and prevented the emergence of mass grassroots movements clamouring for change.

That vacuum was filled at the fringes of the Muslim world, particularly in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority state with a history of tolerance and pluralism that predates Islam. "The current struggle between the United States and its allies and transnational jihadism is not a simple clash of Islam versus the West. Instead, it is a competition within Islam between a tiny minority of extremists and a much larger mainstream of moderates,"

said political scientist Jeffrey Haynes.⁴ Haynes coined the phrase ‘religious soft power.’ Yet, at moments of heightened geopolitical tensions between rival Muslim powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran, the quest for religious soft power involves ‘sharp power,’ defined by Hayne’s colleague, Christopher Walker, as information warfare with the aim of sowing discord and fuelling polarisation.⁵

Jihadism, 9/11, and political Islam as well as increasing anti-Muslim sentiment fuelled by rising religious nationalism in multiple faiths put Muslim-majority states and Muslims across the globe in the crossfire. Except for countries like Turkey and Iran that propagated a militant, conservative, and activist interpretation of Islam, Muslim-majority states and Muslim minorities were hard pressed to define a moderate understanding of the faith that demonstrated Islam’s compatibility with modernism, human rights, and principles of tolerance and pluralism.

The pressure sparked a battle for the soul of Islam that pitted self-serving autocrats against proponents of a truly inclusive and pluralistic form of the faith based on reform of religious law and precepts rather than a tightly controlled top-down projection of Islam anchored in a ruler’s decree or changes to national law. For both sides of the divide, religion became a pillar of how they projected themselves on the international stage. It was also a valuable tool in the pursuit of soft power as conceptualised by political scientist Joseph Nye. Nye defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.” He said soft power was rooted in “the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies.”⁶

To be sure, the pressure also enhanced the rivalry between proponents of a ‘moderate’ Islam and more traditional, conservative, and activist forms of Islam that has been a prime focus of Islam- and political violence-related research and media coverage. This book zeroes in on the struggle to define what constitutes ‘moderate’ Islam, about which little has been written, rather than the divide between moderates and militants. To be sure, extensive research exists on individual rivals competing to don the mantle as a beacon of moderate Islam, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia, but few have conducted comparative research or paid attention to the rivalry itself. Nevertheless, the outcome of the battle among moderates is likely to define what Islam stands for in the 21st century.

This book is the product of seven years of looking into the rivalry that amounted to competing quests for the wielding of Muslim religious soft power and leadership of the Muslim world sparked by geopolitical jockeying, particularly in the Middle East, and my eye-opening journey to Rembang. The book

⁴ Jeffrey Haynes. “Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power.” Abingdon: Routledge. 2012. p. 5

⁵ Christopher Walker. ““What Is ‘Sharp Power?’” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 29 Nbr 3. 2018. p. 9–23

⁶ Joseph Nye. “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.” Cambridge: Public Affairs. 2004. p. x

is both a first stab at writing an initial history of the rivalry and a snapshot of an ongoing battle. While this book zeroes in on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Indonesia, it also refers extensively to their main rivals, including Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran, and Turkey. There are other players such as Morocco, Jordan, and Malaysia that I have not included because they either play bit or regional roles or have little impact beyond their borders.

The problem with Saudi Arabia and the UAE's vision is that it is tailored to suit the two countries' rulers. It advocates autocracy and absolute obedience to the ruler without reform of Islamic jurisprudence while allowing for degrees of religious and pluralism required for economic diversification, development, and growth. That is not to say that Nahdlatul Ulama's propagation of religious and political pluralism, respect for human rights, and democracy is without problems. But in the search for a non-autocratic vision of 'moderate' Islam, Nahdlatul Ulama is the only game in town that has the political, organisational, and religious clout to ensure that its voice cannot be ignored, even if it operates in a decentralised Muslim world in which no player can impose their view.

Chapter 1 of the book seeks to frame the battle for the soul of Islam in a global perspective. Chapters 2–4 detail and contrast the approaches of Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Chapter 5 discusses the ideological and theological differences between religious scholars backed by the main players as well as Qatar. Chapter 6 portrays Turkey, a geopolitical powerhouse like Iran, that cycles through various chapters. Finally, chapter 7 delves into the gap between Islam as it is projected by governments and elites and popular attitudes towards religion, religiosity, and religious authority. How that gap plays out may be the joker in the deck.

I have a debt of gratitude to the Smith Richardson Foundation, whose generous support made this book possible.

I also have an immense debt to numerous sources who helped me think things through or whose publications informed my thinking. There are too many to list here, including multiple Nahdlatul Ulama leaders among whom first and foremost Yahya Cholil Staquf and C. Holland Taylor. Many others prefer to remain anonymous to avoid repercussions. So, this book is a tribute to them without whom it would never have come to life.

This book would not have seen the day of light without Tess, my wife. Not only is she the rock in my life, she is also the rock of this book. Her input, knowledge, encouragement, understanding, and patience were priceless.

This book will have served its purpose if it empowers readers to make informed judgements of their own and contributes to a long overdue discussion of religious reform not only of Islam but of religions across the board and a rethink of inclusivity and human rights and freedoms.

Time will tell.

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The Battle for the Soul of Islam

Flying parallel to the Iranian Gulf coast from Islamabad to Riyadh on a US Air Force Boeing 707 in February 1980, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Assistant Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher knew they could change history. In Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, Brzezinski and Christopher set the stage for an Islamist jihad that, a decade later, forced Soviet troops to withdraw from Afghanistan. The jihad lit a fire that sparked the Soviet Union's demise.

Little did Brzezinski, the father of the anti-Soviet jihad,¹ and Christopher anticipate the holy war that would also change the Muslim world in ways that would haunt the United States and the rest of the world for decades. The two men toured the region amid heightened tensions. Religious zealots had seized the grand mosque in the holy city of Mecca three months earlier. That same month, Iranian militants occupied the US embassy in Tehran. In December, protesters burned the Islamabad US embassy to the ground, and Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. Anti-US sentiment was rampant. All of that while the Middle East and South Asia reeled from a popular Shiite Muslim revolt that toppled the Shah of Iran, an icon of US power, a year earlier.

For Saudi Arabia, the Afghan jihad was about more than defeating godless communism and earning brownie points in Washington. It was also about countering Shiite revolutionaries who replaced Iran's monarchy with an Islamic republic. Iranian militants promised to repeat the exercise in Saudi

¹ Murat Yetkin. "We Owe Radical Islamist Militancy to Brzezinski." *Hurriyet Daily News*. 20 May 2017. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/murat-yetkin/we-owe-radical-islamist-militancy-to-brzezinski-113639>.

Arabia and other Gulf states. The jihad crystallised the kingdom's erstwhile religious soft power strategy and created a release valve for frustrated and radicalised youth, often hailing from parts of Saudi Arabia that turned conservative as the 1970s oil boom passed them by. Saudi Arabia's lagging regional economic and military power tempered ambition. At the time, Saudi Arabia was neither one of the Muslim world's largest economies nor a potent military force or the most populous Muslim-majority state. Its religious soft power drive rested on the kingdom's custodianship of Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, the most respected accolade in the Muslim world, and its ability to export religious puritanism.

The jihad put Pakistan, the world's second-largest Muslim-majority country and home to the world's most significant Shi'ite minority, in the bull's eye. So did the South Asian nation's 900-kilometre-long border with Iran. Pakistan was both a launching pad for the jihad and a focal point of Saudi promotion of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism as an anti-dote to Iranian Shi'ite revolutionary zeal. The kingdom funded the jihad with billions of dollars. It steered large sums to anti-Shi'ite and anti-Iranian Sunni militants, ultra-conservative religious seminaries, pro-Saudi media houses, and cultural institutions. This turned Pakistan into one of the foremost targets of a global effort to promote the kingdom's puritan strand of Islam, and an extremist and jihadist breeding ground.

Brzezinski and Christopher flew home with a sense of accomplishment.² The two men agreed with Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq and Saudi King Khaled to support a guerrilla war that would turn Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam and potentially weaken the Communist Party's grip on power. A US-backed Saudi-Pakistani joint venture that enlisted the Muslim Brotherhood facilitated the recruitment of up to 35,000 militants from 43 Muslim countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.³ The militants joined tens of thousands of Pakistani and Afghan volunteers studying at, often Saudi-funded, Pakistani madrassas or religious seminaries.

Abdullah Azzam, a charismatic cleric and former Palestinian fighter, facilitated their arrival. By incorporating Muslim causes in personal jihad, he redefined in a fatwa the religious definition of personal jihad. Azzam's fatwa gave Saudi and other Muslim governments religious cover to enable frustrated young men and thrill seekers in search of meaningful glory to join the Afghan jihad. The Saudi government offered volunteers a one-way US\$75 ticket to Afghanistan to encourage them.

Saudi intelligence chief Turki AlFaisal Al Saud frequently visited the volunteers in the Pakistani frontier town of Peshawar, where Azzam and Osama bin Laden welcomed and accommodated them. An Al Saud aide delivered bags of

² The author accompanied Brzezinski and Warren as a reporter for *The Christian Science Monitor*.

³ Olivier Roy. "Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War." Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995. p. 87.

cash while the Muslim World League and other Saudi government-controlled non-governmental organisations opened offices in Peshawar. As governor of Riyadh, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who became king in 2015, coordinated private donations. Saudi-backed groups managed Peshawar's mushrooming refugee camps. Millions of refugees registered with Saudi-backed mujahedeen to qualify for food and humanitarian aid, turning the camps into recruitment centres.

Pro-government and more mainstream clerics ridiculed Azzam's fatwa. Influential Saudi cleric Abdulaziz bin Baz sought to limit the obligation to defend Muslim causes to financial and moral support. The large numbers of young Muslims responding to Azzam's call and the government's willingness to assist them drowned out criticism. The fatwa fused religious ultra-conservatism and jihadism. What started as a way station in Peshawar for anti-Soviet foreign fighters became Al-Qaeda's nucleus.

With Al-Qaeda came an energised quest for a caliphate, a global wave of jihadist violence, and the post-9/11 Muslim and non-Muslim scramble for a 'moderate' Islam that would serve as a buffer against militancy, extremism, and ultra-conservative supremacism and intolerance. This ongoing battle for Islam's soul means different things to different people. For the most enlightened, it's about more than faith; it's about humanity and shared values and beliefs that encourage peaceful coexistence. For others, it's about religious integrity. For a third group, the battle is a geopolitical power struggle and part of the ruling elite's survival strategy.

The battle is rooted in centuries of struggle and debate. It is a key facet of the Afghan jihad aftermath, the Iranian revolution, and a militant attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca.⁴ "The radical legacy of 1979...began a process that transformed societies and altered cultural and religious references... The ripples of the rivalry reengineered vibrant, pluralistic countries and unleashed sectarian identities and killings that had never defined us in the past," said journalist and author Kim Ghattas.

Thousands of Muslim fighters emerged from a decade of war in Afghanistan drunk with a sense of defeating a superpower. Little was done to deprive them of the illusion that they were more than proxies on a geopolitical and ideological chessboard and help them reintegrate into society. Bin Laden exploited their stupor to create a jihadist franchise; Al-Qaeda launched attacks across the globe, sparking an even more brutal offshoot, the Islamic State. The jihadists struck US embassies in Africa; American warships in the Gulf; the World Trade Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington; public transport in Madrid and London; restaurants, bars, and a music hall in Paris; a theatre in Moscow and hotels and resorts in Indonesia.

The violence sparked a clarion call to define Islam. Muslim autocrats, authoritarians, and illiberals lined up with Western leaders to declare that

⁴ National Public Radio. "1979: Remembering 'The Siege Of Mecca'." 20 August 2009. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112051155>.

jihadism was not part of Islam, even if Islamic law could justify it. Muslim leaders saw the call as an opportunity to solidify their power grip. They projected themselves as icons of religious moderation and allies in a battle against what Al Saud, the former Saudi intelligence chief, dismissively termed in hindsight “young people of little intelligence, minimal education and absolutely no understanding of the complexities of the world, who have to believe they have a mission to change the world through violence... The origin of this way of thinking in recent times lies with Al-Qaida.”⁵

For many of Al Saud’s simpletons, the battle for Islam’s soul was a fallout of the 1924 abolition of the Caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the visionary who carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, which ruled much of the Muslim world and large chunks of the non-Muslim world for more than half a millennium. The Caliphate’s demise left a political, theological, and civilisational void at a time when empires, kingdoms, and tribal confederations dominated the world. The abolition strengthened colonial rule and produced rulers considered illegitimate and corrupt by many. It sparked a century of geopolitical and religious soft power struggles. For the longest time, the contest involved countries and groups competing to be the most purist in doctrine. Today’s battle for Islam’s soul is the competition’s latest manifestation. Instead of focusing on purity, the battle is about adjusting to modernity and twenty-first-century norms in a world grappling with defining morality, ethics, and values in a new order. In some ways, the battle is a throwback to the era of Prophet Mohammed, a Meccan trader concerned with ethics and creating a pathway to a just and pure life.

Jordanian ruler Abdallah I bin Al-Hussein, a descendant of the Prophet, gloated when he heard of the Ottoman Caliphate’s demise. “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 (Prophet Mohammed’s) tribe of Khoreish. Now the Khaliphate has come back to Arabia,”⁶ Abdullah said. He spoke as his father, Hussein bin Ali, the Hashemite emir of Mecca, declared himself a short-lived caliph.

Abdullah responded in the interview to a seven-hour uninterrupted speech by justice minister and professor of Islamic jurisprudence Seyyid Bey in the new Turkish Parliament. Seyyid’s speech laid the groundwork for abolishing the caliphate and challenging a centuries-old alliance between the state and religious scholars or ulama. For much of Islam’s history, the ulama lent states

⁵ Prince Turki AlFaisal Al Saud. “The Afghanistan File.” Isle of Wight: Arabian Publishing. 2021. p. xviii.

⁶ The Manchester Guardian. “Hussein The New Khalif: Special Interview In His CAMP in TrandJordania. Arab Claims to Moslem Leadership. Dangers to Hedjaz From Arabia: Reproach For the Allies. Emir Abdullah Confident.” 13 March 1924, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer.

religious legitimacy, countered unorthodox and alternative schools of thought, and limited the influence of private sector merchants and an independent private sector that enabled and funded the Golden Age of Islam's intellectual flourishing before the eleventh century.⁷

One of a small band of 20th-century Muslim intellectuals who favoured degrees of separation of religion and state and argued that a caliphate was not religiously mandated, Seyyid advocated popular sovereignty. He believed nations could shape their political institutions. Seyyid quoted Prophet Mohammed as predicting a true caliphate would exist in the first three decades following his death. After that, it would become a corrupt sultanate. "To sum up...the issue of the Caliphate, rather than being a religious matter, is a worldly issue," Seyyid said.⁸

Unlike Mohammed, Abdullah's prediction proved wrong. The caliphate did not return to Arabia. A century later, it is not the caliphate that Muslim powerhouses fight about. Instead, they are engaged in a deepening religious soft power struggle for geopolitical influence and dominance in which the concept of the caliphate is in dispute. This battle for Islam's soul pits major players that purport to be religiously moderate, such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia, against one another in sharp contrast to Iran, Turkey, Islamists, and jihadists. The two Gulf states and Indonesia may be the leading contenders seeking to define moderate Islam. However, they also compete with other Muslim-majority states like Morocco, eager to enhance, regionally rather than globally, their religious soft power in the name of moderate Islam and proponents of more hardline interpretations like Turkey and Iran.

Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution marked the moment Saudi religious diplomacy and funding were no longer unchallenged in a class of their own. It heralded the next phase in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry that engulfed the Middle East, North Africa, the non-Arab Muslim world, and the international community. It moved the rivalry beyond Islam's historic divide between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. The revolution produced an alternative form of religious governance that initially recognised a degree of popular sovereignty and challenged monarchical rule.

Like Saudi Arabia, Iran is driven by geopolitics. However, contrary to Saudi Arabia, Iran opted for asymmetric hard power bolstered by revolutionary zeal and hampered by US and international sanctions that limited its access to sophisticated weaponry. It supported religious militants initially in Lebanon and subsequently in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.⁹ The war against Iraq

⁷ Ahmet T. Kuru. "Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2019. pp. 3–6.

⁸ Michelangelo Guida. "Seyyid Bey and the Abolition of the Caliphate." *Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 44, Issue 2. pp. 275–289.

⁹ Claire Parker and Rick Noack. "Iran Has Invested in Allies and Proxies Across the Middle East. Here's Where They Stand After Soleimani's Death." *The Washington Post*. 3 January 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/03/iran-has-invested-allies-proxies-across-middle-east-heres-where-they-stand-after-soleimanis-death/>.

in the 1980s, in which Gulf states funded Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's war machine, fuelled Iran's pursuit of asymmetric hard power. The quest was also in response to rising Iranian nationalism as a result of the war and, at times, served as a vehicle for Iranian efforts to export its revolution. It deepened the cleavage between the Islamic Republic and the conservative Gulf monarchies. Iran saw its nurturing of Shiite militias as its primary forward line of defence, driven by a belief that the United States and its Gulf allies sought to topple its Islamic regime. Iran's detractors viewed the militias as vehicles to undermine conservative monarchies and spread the revolution.

Like in the 1980s, geopolitics could in the 21st century shift the paradigm in the battle for Islam's soul, particularly if the United States succeeds in engineering formal Saudi recognition of Israel. It could put moderate Islam's leadership competition on par with the struggle between moderates and militants. Establishing relations between the custodian of Islam's two holiest cities and the Jewish state could prompt Iran to attack Saudi Arabia, where it is most sensitive. Saudi Arabia has long viewed Iranian efforts to challenge the Saudi administration of Mecca and Medina and the haj, a pillar of the kingdom's international standing, as a significant threat. Iran wants to replace Saudi control with an international Muslim administration. Iran has downplayed its assault on Saudi legitimacy since the kingdom and the Islamic Republic reestablished diplomatic relations in 2023. Saudi Arabia broke off relations in 2016 after Iranian protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions in response to the kingdom's execution of a prominent Shiite cleric. "If Saudi Arabia embraces Israel, Iran will likely throw everything but the kitchen sink at the Saudis," said Middle East analyst Bilal Y. Saab.¹⁰

The Iranian shift to nationalism in the early 1980s was evident in emotive debates in parliament about the utility of the 444-day occupation of the US embassy at a time when Iran was at war with Iraq. Men like Hojatoleslam Hashemi Rafsanjani, the parliament speaker and later president of Iran, Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, the Iranian political hierarchy's number two, and chief jurist Ayatollah Sadegh Khalqali, known as the hanging judge for his penchant for the death penalty and hatred of cats, unsuccessfully argued in favour of a quick resolution of the embassy crisis so that Iran could concentrate on the defence of its territory and revolution. The debates signalled a move from ideological rivalry to a geopolitical fight with Saudi Arabia that continues today while, at the same time, both countries strive to prevent it from spinning out of control. Hampered by its primary reliance on Arab Shiite allies and unable to transcend the Sunni-Shiite divide, Iran fared better in its asymmetric hard power approach than in its attempts to garner religious soft power through cultural and religious outreach and militant support for popular Muslim causes like the Palestinian plight.

¹⁰ Bilal U. Saab. "Peace With Israel Means War with Iran." *Foreign Policy*. 30 August 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/30/saudi-arabia-israel-deal-iran/>.

In the end, no clear winner may emerge from the battle for Islam's soul. Yet, the course of the battle could determine the degree to which Islam will be defined by one or more competing statist forms of the faith that support autocracy, preach absolute obedience to political rulers, and reduce religious establishments to pawns of the state or open the door to a more politically pluralistic and democratic interpretation of the faith. More broadly, it pits the interventionism of illiberal and authoritarian leaders, who envision a civilisational world where borders are defined by civilisation, against proponents of the rule of law and respect for international law.

Implicit in the rivalry is a broader debate across the Muslim world that speaks to the heart of the relationship between state and religion. At the core of the discussion is whether and what role the state should play in enforcing religious morals and the place of religion in education, judicial systems, and politics. As the battle for religious soft power intensifies, the lines dividing the state and religion become increasingly 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.

The battle kicked into high gear in the wake of the September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington. It was further energised by popular Arab revolts a decade later that toppled Tunisia's, Egypt's, Libya's, and Yemen's leaders. The 9/11 attacks shifted the litmus test of moderation from attitudes towards Israel to definitions of Islam that rejected violence and extremism, supported the War on Terror, and paid lip service to religious tolerance and pluralism. The attacks initially enhanced religious moderation's importance in branding Muslim-majority states aligned with the West. It allowed Middle Eastern autocrats to denounce jihadism as a deviation from and misinterpretation of Islam that only they can counter. Advocacy of moderate Islam retained its significance as the battle, over time, became a facet of the global tug of war, shaping a new 21st-century world order.¹¹ Rivals employed religion to garner favour, empathy, and goodwill, or what political scientists term soft power¹² among influential Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu communities across the globe.

The 2011 revolts reinforced autocrats' quest for control of the definition of Islam. "God was a force to contend with during the Arab Spring... Islamist movements, populist uprisings, entrenched regimes, rebellious youth, desperate breadwinners, and secular intellectuals were among those who found themselves – in some form or fashion – reckoning with God in these tumultuous times," said Islam scholar Joud Alkorani. Protesters invoked God in their chants. "God is with us," they chanted as they recited their demands,

¹¹ James M. Dorsey. "The Battle for the Soul of Islam." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 27, 2020. pp. 106–127.

¹² Joseph S. Nye. "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics." New York: Public Affairs, 2005.

and “God is Great” when security forces attacked them. “The question of God’s place in the Muslim world’s travails coupled with an increasingly critical attitude of Muslim youth toward traditionally state-aligned religious authority bolstered autocrats’ need to define Islam,” Alkorani said.¹³

Some of the battle’s contenders project themselves as protagonists of purportedly moderate forms of Islam that are religiously tolerant and pluralistic. They engage in interfaith dialogue but stop short of institutionally and legally reforming outdated, obsolete, and discriminatory concepts in Muslim religious law. Others promote more militant expressions of the faith. As a result, the battle is a struggle to define what Islam represents and how Muslims worldwide will practice their religion. It is a battle at multiple levels and across numerous platforms ranging from the world’s corridors of power to mosques and villages in Africa and Asia to mainstream and social media. The significance of this battle lies in what is at stake. At stake is which Muslim-majority country or countries will be recognised as leaders of the Islamic world and the degree to which moderate Islam incorporates principles of tolerance, pluralism, gender equality, secularism, and human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In some ways, the battle mirrors the Cold War, at the core of which were notions of popular sovereignty, democracy, the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and human and minority rights.

For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the battle is about control of religion, a powerful and emotive mobiliser, regime legitimacy, soft power projection, deflection of criticism of repressive domestic policies, and support for autocracy and authoritarianism. Saudi and Emirati concepts of moderate Islam frame Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed’s strategies to manage their international, regional, and domestic challenges and reshape their nations.

For Turkey, the battle is about exploiting and reviving past imperial glory to project power globally and influence Diaspora constituencies, particularly in Europe. Iran, locked with Saudi Arabia in a battle for Muslim hearts and minds for more than four decades, has faced an uphill battle. Creeping corruption, mismanagement of the economy, and support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime have severely diminished its revolutionary appeal and ability to project itself as a regional alternative.

Unlike Indonesia, an underrated powerhouse, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have geopolitics in their sails, even if Indonesian Islam is far more embracing of pluralistic and democratic values such as the separation of state and religious authority, equality before the law, and religious and political pluralism. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton recognised this on a 2009 visit to the

¹³ Email exchange with the author, 21 August 2023.

archipelago state. “If you want to know whether Islam, democracy, modernity, and women’s rights can co-exist, go to Indonesia,” Clinton said.¹⁴ To be sure, Clinton spoke six years before Bin Salman’s rise and a decade before far-reaching social reforms in the UAE.

Developments in the years since Clinton’s remark should have enhanced Indonesia’s significance. While the Middle East reverted to autocracy, Indonesia and Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest and most moderate Muslim civil society movement, increasingly articulated a genuinely pluralistic and more democratic vision of Islam. The contrast could not have been starker. Nahdlatul Ulama adopted Humanitarian Islam as the UAE and Saudi Arabia supported the rollback of the 2011 revolts’ achievements, cracked down on dissent, and intervened militarily in Yemen. The adoption also coincided with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s hollowing out of his country’s democracy in response to a 2016 failed military coup and Saudi Arabia’s 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Even so, the United States and much of the world prioritised Saudi Arabia as Islam’s heartland, the faith’s cradle, and home to its holiest cities. Moreover, the international community attributes greater strategic value to the energy and cash-rich Gulf states, geographically located along some of the world’s most vital waterways and capable of wielding influence in crucial parts of the world. Minus the geopolitical firepower, Indonesia, the world’s third largest democracy and among its top 20 economies, has many of those attributes. It has Asia Pacific’s third largest natural gas reserves. It is the world’s foremost biofuel producer and boasts significant manganese, copper, gold, tin, bauxite, and nickel deposits. Yet, a US News & World ranking of the world’s best countries listed the Southeast Asian nation as number 32 on the political influence totem pole and 45th in terms of cultural influence. By comparison, the UAE ranked 9th in political and economic power and 14th culturally. Saudi Arabia occupied 11th place in political and economic impact and 36th culturally.¹⁵

The leading contenders in the battle for Islam’s moderate soul—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Indonesia, in association with Nahdlatul Ulama—have more in common than just economic assets. They all support a socially more liberal society but reject Western liberal social norms such as LGBTQ rights. They oppose political Islam. Yet, what divides them is what defines Islam in the twenty-first century.

Contrary to the kingdom and the Emirates, Nahdlatul Ulama argues, in a radical break with tradition, that Islam needs to reform Sharia to remove outdated, obsolete, and problematic legal concepts. Indonesia’s quest for reform of Muslim jurisprudence threatens a vital pillar of how Gulf autocrats

¹⁴ Arshad Mohammed and Ed Davies. “Indonesia Shows Islam, Modernity Coexist: Clinton.” Reuters, 18 February 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-clinton-idUSTRE51H15A20090218>.

¹⁵ U.S. News & World Report. “U.S. News Best Countries.” 7 September 2022. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings>.

position themselves on the international stage. Echoing world leaders, who are careful not to hold Islam as a faith responsible for jihadism and Muslim extremism, men like Bin Salman, his predecessors, and Bin Zayed catered to their narrative by arguing that radicalism is alien to Islam. They skilfully exploited fears of Islamic militancy fuelled by the Iranian revolution, 9/11, and attacks by jihadists and religious zealots, in Europe, Africa, and Africa. The rulers insisted that only they and their state-aligned clerics can counter jihadism, extremism, and religion-driven political violence and promote ‘moderate’ Islam on religious grounds. The focus on “moderate” Islam allowed much of the international community, with the United States in the lead, to draw attention away from popular discontent with autocratic and abusive rule in the Arab world that created an extremist breeding ground. Joining the fight against terrorism allowed Arab rulers to don the mantle of religious moderation and garner favour in world capitals.

By contrast, Nahdlatul Ulama was willing to expose problems in Islamic jurisprudence. It did not shy away from admitting that Islamic law can be interpreted to justify jihadism and extremism, much like other religions embrace texts that legitimise radicalism. In contrast to Gulf rulers and clerics, Nahdlatul Ulama maintained that countering Islamic extremism meant tackling problematic Muslim religious precepts that often contradicted the Qur’anic notion of Wasatiyyah or centrism and Prophet Mohammed’s multiple calls for moderation. The group argued that religious reform was a central plank in ensuring adherence to human rights, embracing pluralism, and preserving the rule of law.

The Indonesian approach went against the grain of traditional Islamic scholars who opt to ignore outdated, obsolete, and problematic provisions of Islamic law rather than amending the law. In that way, scholars ensured that rulers retained their grip on religion. Autocrats and state-aligned scholars’ rejection of Nahdlatul Ulama’s approach is reinforced by the movement’s advocacy of political pluralism and unambiguous embrace of human rights. As a result, Indonesian governments and Nahdlatul Ulama have, unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE that designated the Muslim Brotherhood and its many affiliates as terrorists, not called for the outlawing of the country’s Brotherhood-affiliated political party, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Even so, critics took President Joko Widodo’s government to task for rolling back Islamist influence in politics and society with investigations and prosecutions, the closure of websites and social media pages, and the proscription of militant Islamist organisations. Opinion polls suggested the measures enjoyed public support.¹⁶

Without exception, all players in the battle for Islam’s soul are haunted by their dark sides. Their records on freedom of religion and minority protection are mixed. They employ religious favouritism and counterterrorism to suppress

¹⁶ Greg Fealey and Sally White. “The Politics of Banning FPI.” *New Mandala*. 18 June 2021. <https://www.newmandala.org/the-politics-of-banning-fpi/>.