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# A WHEATLEY Note ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## Empowering Moderate Islam

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### Introduction

IN November 2004, H.M. King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein of Jordan issued the Amman Message to “declare what Islam is and what it is not, and what actions represent it and what actions do not,” and to “clarify to the modern world the true nature of Islam and the nature of true Islam.” He went on to consult prominent Islamic scholars throughout the world and in 2005, hosted a conference where many of them further developed their thinking related to this task. By 2006, the King had gained considerable global support for the initiative, and it culminated in—to quote the initiatives’ associated website—“a historical, universal and unanimous religious and political consensus (*ijma’*) of the *Ummah* (nation) of Islam in our day, and a consolidation of traditional, orthodox Islam.”<sup>1</sup> As King Abdullah describes the message,

“Its content is a message of unity, mutual respect, and brotherhood. As such it is also a definitive answer to sedition amongst Muslims, and a clear demarcation of True Islam in all its forms. And as all True Islam forbids wanton aggression and terrorism, enjoins freedom of religion, peace, justice and good-will to non-Muslims, it is also a message of good news, friendship and hope to the whole world. I pray that this unique consensus as documented and affirmed in this book will bring us closer to a world where we can be loyal to our religion, live in peace and prosper with all our fellow human beings, and fulfill the purpose for which we all were placed on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

This initiative represented a courageous effort to explore what it means to be Muslim during a time when extremists have targeted and killed thousands in the name of Islam. The events of September 11, 2001 brutally demonstrated the depths to which one can sink in the name of religion. By all reasonable definitions, these actions represented what has come to be known as religious extremism.

More than ten years of fighting the *War on Terror* have made clear that military force alone cannot completely stop, nor fully

prevent, actions similar to those of the 9/11 orchestrators, nor the motivations behind them. For this reason, the West—indeed the whole world—must find ways to curb the impulses that influence individuals to turn to extremist measures. If the 9/11 terrorists claimed to find motivation from their interpretation of Islam, albeit an extreme and misled one, finding a way to empower a more mainstream interpretation constitutes one of the more effective counters. In short, in a context in which religious legitimacy trumps all, the best antidote for religious ignorance is religious understanding. It should also be noted that Islamic extremists kill more non-westerners than they do westerners, and the vast majority of these victims are Muslim.

In addressing the question, *How can the West empower moderate Islam?* it becomes helpful to first define the term. Here, an observation by former Islamic radical, Ed Husain, in *The Wall Street Journal*, becomes instructive:

“I am a moderate Muslim, yet I don’t like being termed a ‘moderate’—it somehow implies that I am less of a Muslim. We use the designation ‘moderate Islam’ to differentiate it from ‘radical Islam.’ But in so doing, we insinuate that while Islam in moderation is tolerable, real Islam—often perceived as radical Islam—is intolerable. This simplistic, flawed thinking hands our extremist enemies a propaganda victory: They are genuine Muslims. In this rubric, the majority, non-radical Muslim populace has somehow compromised Islam to become moderate.”<sup>3</sup>

It is unfortunate that the term ‘moderate’ has this negative connotation for some, but it would never have been colloquially adopted had not violent extremists used, and continue to use, the name of Islam to justify their actions.

Both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a role to play in empowering moderate Muslims, and through this process, curbing extremism. As suggested below, both can serve the mainstream Muslim community as it fights to protect Islam from manipulation by extremists.

## Government Empowerment

In 2010, following his work on the Amman Message, King Abdullah approached the United Nations with the idea of creating a World Interfaith Harmony Week. Quoting the associated website, the Week...

"...is not a call to water down one's faith, but rather it's a call to respect our differences and personal beliefs and to unite around the basic principles that people of all beliefs agree upon and to understand that harmony can only come if we build upon a solid foundation of dialogue that has 'Love of God and love of the neighbor or, love of Good and love of the neighbor' as its core principle for engagement."<sup>4</sup>

With reference to the King's initiative, H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan said,

"...whilst we all agree that it is clearly not the business of the UN to engage in theology, it is nevertheless the primary goal of the UN to make and safeguard peace, and without the specific mention of God and of the Two Commandments of Love [see: Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–31] many if not most devout Muslims, Christians and Jews will consider a secular call for an interfaith harmony week a feckless platitude that they cannot fully or sincerely support."<sup>5</sup>

These comments suggest that counter-extremist policies, particularly those advocating religious tolerance, will find greater traction if they incorporate relevant religious principles. For the United States, of course, this task is complicated by Constitutional restraints. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution begins, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," before it continues on to address issues of free speech, press, assembly, and petition.<sup>6</sup> While this Establishment Clause doesn't negate America's ability to address religious factors, it does temper our options. Nevertheless, it is still possible to find avenues through which Western governments can empower moderate Muslims. Unsurprisingly, and as will be seen later, there are even more avenues available to NGOs.

### International

Governments have the authority and resources to undertake a wide range of helpful international initiatives. For example, King Abdullah II's call for a World Interfaith Harmony Week illustrates how a government figure can use his or her position to issue a global call for change. Another way to reach out internationally is to engage moderate Islamist political groups. Hence, our current overtures toward the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

As repressive regimes in the Middle East have fallen in the wake of revolution, moderates have been able to express their views more freely; many have chosen to do so through political Islam. However, political Islam can be a double-edged sword. Just as stronger diplomatic relations between the West and moderate Islamic political groups can help combat religious extremism in the post-Arab Spring world, so too can extremism take root if the resulting chaos is not effectively brought under control. As one

can surmise from the definition below, the term "political Islam" is sufficiently broad to accommodate either direction:

"A form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today's societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundation for which rests on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition."<sup>7</sup>

Mainstream Muslims despise terrorism, and the West has a unique opportunity to empower them, if it is able to seize the moment.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to meet in Switzerland with a group of Tunisians and Egyptians to discuss their respective transitions to democracy. In response to one Egyptian participant, who said he and his colleagues had concluded that establishing one house of parliament would be less complicated and therefore preferable to establishing two, I said, "Don't you dare. Democracy is hard work and you need to build in as many checks and balances as you can from the outset. Otherwise, oppression will eventually creep back in; and you will begin to backslide, as some Eastern European states have in the past." I further observed, "Above all, you need to establish strong civilian control of the military. And if you need a good model for doing so, I suggest you take a hard look at the United States. The way we are structured, it is inconceivable that serious consideration could ever be given to a military takeover of the government." Little did I realize how prophetic that recommendation would prove to be.

A recent *New York Times* article noted that after meeting with members of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political party of the Muslim Brotherhood, Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, commented, "You're certainly going to have to figure out how to deal with democratic governments that don't espouse every policy or value you have." He added, "They certainly expressed a direction that shouldn't be a challenge to us, provided they follow through."<sup>8</sup> More recently, William Hague, Britain's Foreign Minister, noted, while reflecting on the election victories of political Islamist groups in the Middle East, "The test now is how they perform in office of course, and we should not be afraid of talking to and working with those parties. We found already with the new Tunisian government, that they are very willing to work with us, that they agree with us about many global and regional issues, so I think we should be positive about that and not prejudge them."<sup>9</sup> Change of the magnitude that is currently taking place calls for determination and the courage to engage. The stakes are simply too high to let extremism take hold by default.

### Domestic

A number of European countries have greater problems with their Muslim populations than we do in the United States. As pointed out in a recent *New York Times* op-ed, many Muslims in Europe feel excluded and harassed by their governments.

"The recognition and accommodation of Islamic religious practices, from clothing to language to education, does not mean capitulation to fundamentalism. On the contrary, only by

strengthening the democratic rights of Muslim citizens to form associations, join political parties and engage in other aspects of civic life can Europe integrate immigrants and give full meaning to the abstract promise of religious liberty... It is Islam's absence in the institutions young European Muslims encounter, starting with the school's calendar, classroom and canteen, that contributes to anger and alienation."<sup>10</sup>

Approaching Islamic leaders as partners is one approach that is already bearing fruit in Britain, where authorities assert that Islamic leaders have been instrumental in helping to de-radicalize youth across the country.<sup>11</sup> Yet another fruitful approach for addressing such problems is the "Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge" issued by President Obama in March of last year which challenges colleges and universities to sponsor a year of "interfaith service." As explained on the associated website,

"Interfaith service involves people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds tackling community challenges together—for example, Protestants and Catholics, Hindus and Jews, and Muslims and non-believers—building a Habitat for Humanity house together. Interfaith service impacts specific community challenges, from homelessness to mentoring to the environment, while building social capital and civility."<sup>12</sup>

A number of colleges and universities have answered this call.<sup>13</sup> Inter-faith cooperation is also a highly effective means for cultivating moderate thinking.

In a 2010 article published in the *Christian Science Monitor*<sup>14</sup>, Hedieh Mirahmadi, President of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), and Mehreen Farooq, a Research Fellow at WORDE, presented a set of recommendations for curbing radicalization and extremism in the United States. They begin by noting that domestic radicalization is a problem and suggesting that "our domestic counterterrorism strategies end up alienating or underutilizing our best asset—the Muslim community." They advocate empowering moderate Muslims through education, research, and dialogue, contending that "Muslim scholars and community leaders are best suited to confront this problem by providing religious education (and re-education) to youth in both an authentic and 'cool' paradigm."<sup>15</sup>

One such Muslim scholar is Professor Abdullahi Ahmed an-Naim at Emory University in Atlanta, who has written widely on the relationship between Islam and government. He interprets the Qur'an as instructing Muslims to observe Sharia as *their* life's work, *their* responsibility, *their* struggle—not their government's. He even questions the concept of an Islamic state, viewing it as a post-colonial construct based on a mid-20th Century European-style state. As he explains, "My motivation is in fact about being an honest, true-to-myself Muslim, rather than someone complying with state dictates." Accordingly, he believes that the right answer for Muslims is a secular state that promotes human rights, so that they and others can practice their faith freely. Branded as a heretic (a label he wears with some pride), Naim is attracting a following among young Muslims in such countries as Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>16</sup>

## NGO/Civil Society Empowerment

While governments have considerable resources at their disposal to empower selected groups and individuals, NGOs enjoy greater freedom of movement, unencumbered as they are by any political agenda. They are also able to (1) interact with populations in places that are sometimes inaccessible to governments, (2) bring to bear an intimate knowledge of the areas in which they work, and (3) capitalize on long-held relationships with the local communities. NGOs are thus uniquely equipped to empower moderate Muslims both domestically and internationally.

### *International*

The international potential of NGOs was illustrated at a recent USIP event, "Pakistani Peacemakers: The Challenges for Civil Society Actors." While the substance focused on Pakistan, certain over-arching principles emerged. As one commentator noted,<sup>17</sup> the empowerment of "traditional Muslim networks" can cultivate social cohesion and prevent the proliferation of extremism. She explained that these civil society networks are effective in promoting peace, since they are mindful of the religious rhetoric used by extremists and know how to counter it.

In Pakistan, extremists often target Muslims who follow interpretations of Islam that run counter to their own. NGOs can and do speak out in the media against such attacks, often providing sounder interpretations of religious texts and principles in the process.

One of the more direct ways of empowering moderate Islam is the approach that our own NGO, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD), has been taking in Pakistan. For the past eight years, we have been working with the leaders of religious schools (madrasas) to (1) expand their curriculums to include the physical and social sciences, with a strong emphasis on religious tolerance and human rights, and (2) transform their pedagogy to promote critical thinking skills among the students. To date, we have engaged some 2700 madrasa leaders from 1611 madrasas, most of which are located in the more radical areas of the country.

Experience has shown that once you are able to get beyond the veneer of rage and hostility and engage these madrasa leaders, not only do they "get it", but many become ardent champions of the suggested change, often at great personal risk to themselves. Because this work is dealing with the ideas behind the guns, it is every bit as strategic as anything else that is taking place, either on or off the battlefield. Bombs typically create additional terrorists through instilling a need for revenge. Education, on the other hand, both drains the swamp and provides a better future for the children of Pakistan (and our own as well).

### *Domestic*

Domestically, NGOs can promote community-based initiatives centered on education, dialogue, and cooperation. Such efforts encourage and endorse activities that empower those in favor of dialogue over disruption, peaceful conversation over conflict. The fullness of the events calendar on the World Interfaith Harmony Week website suggests there are numerous individuals and

organizations ready to answer the call for inter-religious cooperation and understanding.<sup>18</sup>

A number of NGOs in the United States promote interfaith efforts that address community-related issues. Interfaith Works is one such organization. Working in Montgomery, Maryland, its mission is to “pursue social justice with an emphasis on identifying and meeting the needs of the poor by leading and engaging Montgomery County’s faith communities in service, education, and advocacy.”<sup>19</sup> Interfaith Youth Core, founded in 2002 by Eboo Patel, promotes interfaith community service among university-aged students across the United States.<sup>20</sup>

NGOs such as these, as well as religious organizations that promote inter-faith dialogue form a family of organizations that advance moderate ideas. Still other organizations facilitate this same kind of understanding and cooperation on a broader scale. The Alliance for Peacebuilding, for example, facilitates the activities of the more than 60 organizations that operate under its umbrella. Soliya, one of its member-organizations, encourages students in the United States and across the Middle East to use technology to communicate with and learn from one another.<sup>21</sup> Extremists try to dominate discourse, while projects such as these work in the opposite direction.

In 2006, our center partnered with the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and the Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA, the Pentagon’s leading think tank) to convene a conference that brought 30 US government officials together with a like number of American Muslim leaders to discuss how both groups could begin working together for the common good. The catalyst for this conference was our recognition that the greatest strategic asset the United States has at its disposal in its global contest with militant Islam is the American Muslim community. Not only was this not being recognized, but we were unwittingly alienating this community through counterproductive over-reactions to the events of 9/11. Incidents such as those in which Muslims have been pulled from planes for praying underscore the need for increased religious sensitivity in the execution of government policies.

One of the several objectives of both that conference and a second follow-up conference a year later was determining the most effective way to inform US foreign policy and public diplomacy with a Muslim perspective. In response to that challenge, we established a Policy Forum that brings key Congressional and Executive Branch staff together with respected leaders from the Muslim community to discuss issues that affect US relations with Muslim countries overseas. The purpose of these Forums is to provide the Washington policymaking community with a more nuanced understanding of Islam. From all indications, they appear to be achieving their intended purpose. The Forums also provide an excellent example of the kind of synergy that can be achieved in empowering moderation when NGOs and government work together.

## Conclusion

The question—*How can the West empower moderate Islam?*—is broad and in some ways controversial. This attempt to provide a range of answers to the question is by no means exhaustive; the possibilities are limited solely by our imaginations. The matter clearly demands all the attention we can give it, and this evening’s event should be considered only the beginning of a much-needed, longer conversation.

## NOTES

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