

# Rethinking the Battle of Ideas: How the United States Can Help Muslim Moderates

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by Ronald R. Krebs

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*Abstract: There is little disagreement in Washington that the United States is losing the so-called Battle of Ideas, and there is a surprising consensus on what needs to be done: “reach out” to Muslim moderates. Bolstering moderate voices in the Muslim world is indeed crucial to the fate of the War on Terror, but “reaching out” to them is no solution. In fact, it is the last thing Muslim moderates need, since it deepens their legitimacy problems. The West’s criticism may do more to help Muslim moderates become a political force to be reckoned with than its love ever could. This “cruel to be kind” rhetorical strategy can, and should, be combined with open material support for Arab and Muslim civil society, but crucially without regard to political orientation. Such a policy has its drawbacks and it will be a difficult sell, but it is the only way to make progress in the Battle of Ideas.*

The so-called War on Terror seems to be with us to stay. More than six years after the September 11 terrorist attacks, even the war’s critics, who might prefer this campaign to be waged under the law-enforcement paradigm, have resigned themselves to it,<sup>1</sup> and presidential candidates of both parties almost universally pay deference to it. But there can be no political victory in this supposed war without the emergence of an authentic and legitimate moderate politics in the Muslim world. This is hardly news to the architects of U.S. counterterrorist policy, who in recent years have devoted increasingly coordinated thought and action to cultivating Muslim moderates. But grades are not given for effort alone, and little progress has

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Michael Howard, “A Long War?” *Survival*, Winter 2006-2007.

been made in what is often called, as the militarized idiom of our moment demands, the “Battle of Ideas.”

The 9/11 Commission dreamed of a “moderate consensus,” uniting Western liberals with like-minded Muslims, but that vision remains today as distant as ever.<sup>2</sup> The reason is not just that Iraq hangs like a millstone around the U.S. neck—though it does. The reason is not just that the government’s efforts suffer from a continued lack of coordination—though they do. The reason is not just a skewed vision of the “Muslim moderate” that typically excludes Islamists, even those willing to play by the democratic rules of the game—though that too is a problem. Even if the United States withdrew from Iraq and stability returned to that land, implementation challenges were solved, and a broader conception of the “moderate” informed counterterrorist policy—even if all these things miraculously came to pass, progress would be hard to achieve.

The reason: the very strategy of “reaching out” to moderates—the strategy to which both the administration and its critics subscribe—is misguided. Moderates do suffer for resources, but this is merely symptomatic of their failures to clear the real hurdle: establishing local legitimacy. Muslim moderates cannot be “mobilized,” again to adopt the beltway argot, until they exist as a legitimate political force with an agenda distinct from that of their extremist co-religionists. Typically suspect in the eyes of their fellow Muslims, the last thing they need is for Westerners, and especially Americans, to “reach out” to them—by emphasizing common values, such as non-violent conflict resolution; by suggesting that moderates of all religious stripes are natural allies in the struggle against extremism; or by expressing their willingness to engage in mutual dialogue, not just strategic communication. The received wisdom fails to grasp that such “reaching out” deepens moderates’ legitimacy problems, and, in the present circumstances, it consequently helps press them into the extremists’ tighter embrace or at least into a public stance more openly opposed to the West generally and to the United States particularly. In short, mobilizing Muslim moderates has so far proved a Sisyphean task: the harder we work at pushing the boulder up the hill, the more surely it rolls right back down.

What then is to be done? Moderates need to gain the trust of their fellow Muslims. Only then can they possibly serve as the crucial brokers mediating between what are too often represented as warring civilizations. American talk of Muslim “allies” and “partners” in the War on Terror is thus counterproductive, as are other ways of extending a welcoming hand. The counterintuitive implication of this logic is that America’s criticism, more than its love, may be what Muslim moderates desperately need if they are to become a political force to be reckoned

<sup>2</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Authorized ed. (New York: W.W. Norton 2004), p. 376.

with—at least in the short-to-medium run. Tough rhetoric that seeks to isolate moderates, rather than pull them close to the United States, may be more effective in helping the moderates' cause than a more inclusive rhetoric ever could. This can, and should, be combined with open material support for Arab and Muslim civil society, but crucially without regard to political orientation. Such aid would likely disproportionately benefit moderate voices, but without tarring them as U.S. stooges. The danger is that such a policy may be too clever by half. Yet, in our current predicament, this approach to the politics of moderation may, to paraphrase Churchill, be the worst—except for all the others.

### **Moderation and Ambivalence**

Insurgents employing terrorist tactics have two basic objectives: first, weakening the will of the adversary, and second, solidifying support among their own population. The terrorist attacks's victims are often the less important audience. More commonly than popular and even sometimes scholarly accounts appreciate, terrorists are “solipsistic,” focused more immediately on shoring up their base of support.<sup>3</sup> A common strategy to that end is to provoke a militarized (over-)reaction from the victim. From the Algerian National Liberation Front to the Basque ETA to the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad, nationalist insurgents have embraced this strategy of provocation.<sup>4</sup> Transnational Islamist extremists, at first organizationally connected to and now more loosely inspired by Al Qaeda, appear to share that orientation. That their declared goals are so diffuse and protean suggests that they have been, at least in the short to medium run, less interested in compelling non-Muslims to change specific behaviors—the strategy of coercion—than in consolidating Muslim support for their religious and political agenda. The War on Terror proceeds simultaneously on military, financial, criminal, and political fronts, but it is the first—the military—that not only makes headlines but has occupied the bulk of American counterterrorist resources and energy. The “battle for hearts and minds” occupies the very lowest rung on the U.S. ladder of priorities, even though it is first on Al Qaeda's and like-minded groups'.

Brute force alone cannot prevent terrorism from rearing its ugly head. Terrorism is a political problem requiring a political solution. Experts on counterterrorism, thus, have rightly identified “mobilizing moderates”

<sup>3</sup> Ian S. Lustick, “Terrorism in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Targets and Audiences,” in Martha Crenshaw, ed., *Terrorism in Context* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Revised and Expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, “Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security*, Summer 2006; Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).

as a priority.<sup>5</sup> Who counts as a moderate varies by context—moderation is necessarily relative—but, in the War on Terror, Muslim moderates are those willing to forswear and condemn violence, even when it furthers political goals they largely share, and uphold the rule of law, at least at home. Their ultimate aims may be no less far-reaching than those held by the “extremists,” who are defined by their rejection of non-violent conflict resolution. Moderates need not be committed secularists, and those who enjoy mass popularity almost certainly will not be. It may be asking too much of Muslim moderates—at least those that aspire to political viability—that they volubly denounce violence against civilians in Palestine/Israel or Iraq. Moderates cannot be expected to support U.S. policy in the region or even to refrain from attacking it with gusto. Nor can they be expected to resemble a genteel parliamentary opposition, transplanted from Western Europe into the Middle East.

If this is what a moderate Muslim politics looks like, skeptics will respond, who needs it? Why bother bolstering such forces? This is no mere cavil, but it is short-sighted. On the principled one hand, if arbitrary government has contributed to the attractiveness of extremism, then the commitment to the rule of law and the norm of peaceful conflict resolution cannot be dismissed as trivial. These values lie at the core of the Battle of Ideas and, thus, the War on Terror. Upholding them is crucial if Western polities are to escape the charges of hypocrisy that Muslim critics regularly lob. On the strategic other hand, legitimate Muslim moderates, articulating a political identity distinct from extremists, would constitute a credible political alternative in their countries. To the extent that Arab and Muslim populations actively have backed or more passively cheered on violent Islamists, they have done so out of a combination of frustration with their own repressive regimes, of resentment at Western success and power, and of humiliation due to their own powerlessness. Muslim moderates’ rise would necessarily translate into a decline in support for more extremist elements. Counterterrorist force could then be more readily applied and at lower cost, terrorist leaders could be captured more easily, terrorist organizations would have greater difficulty finding competent replacements, and terrorists could be brought to the negotiating table.<sup>6</sup> Moderate Muslims are most important, however, because only they can serve as brokers forging connections across social and political boundaries, breaking down barriers, and linking Western authorities with alienated Muslim populations—Muslims in Africa and Asia—as well as the Muslim citizens and residents of Western countries.

<sup>5</sup> See, among others, Robert J. Art and Louise Richardson, “Conclusion,” in Art and Richardson, eds., *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past* (Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, 2007), pp. 575-576, 594.

<sup>6</sup> These are all important ways in which terrorism can be brought to an end: see Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *International Security*, Summer 2006.

Muslim moderates, however, cannot act as brokers if they are perceived as the loyal servants of Western, and especially American, interests. Ultimately, they require local legitimacy: they must be seen as legitimate by the co-religionists among whom they reside and to whom they wish to speak. Muslim moderates acquire and maintain such legitimacy by adopting an *ambivalent* political posture that distances them both from more extreme Islamists and from true-believing Westernizers. Their rhetoric is cobbled together from these opposed sources, borrowing from extremists to criticize the West and from the West to criticize extremists. There can be no “special relationship” with Muslim moderates worth their salt, just uneasy cooperation based on both principle and interest. In other words, Muslim moderates cannot be expected to parrot the Western or American line: were they to do so, they would expose themselves to ridicule, lose all political support, and perhaps even forfeit their lives. Moderates’ ambivalent posture requires a dexterous rhetorical performance. Dangers lurk on both sides. If they tilt too far in either direction, the other may deem them untouchable. Any effort to occupy the middle ground may seem contradictory and even perfidious to Westerners buffeted by extremist violence and to more extreme Muslims on the lookout for Western sympathizers. Finding the rhetorical “sweet spot” requires unusual skill and judgment.

Westerners are naturally most attracted to secular Muslims who identify with the Enlightenment and liberalism, but deepening the partnership with this camp should not greatly occupy U.S. leaders’ energies and resources. American officials might comfort themselves with the knowledge that they had a sincere and wholehearted ally in the Muslim world, but such comfort would be awfully cold once the ramifications became clear. Only *legitimate* Muslim moderates are useful, and tolerance of their ambivalence is the necessary price to be paid—although it is one that attentive domestic audiences, conditioned in the United States particularly since September 2001 to a Manichaean view of the world, may deem too high. Finally, the very aspiration to “mobilize” Muslim moderates bespeaks hubris. This language suggests that the European experience with empire and decolonization, the tragic U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and failed Cold War efforts to nurture anti-communist “third forces”—a series of cautionary tales regarding the ease of controlling and manipulating non-European societies—have receded too far into the past and have sadly been forgotten.

### **From Rhetoric to Reality**

The value of Muslim moderates has over time become increasingly clear to the George W. Bush administration, as well as its varied critics. At least in principle, U.S. counterterrorist strategy has recognized the Battle of Ideas as

a priority since 2001. But the 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* could, in this vein, summon only vague commitments to de-legitimizing terrorism, finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, “diminish[ing] the underlying conditions that terrorists seek to exploit in areas most at risk,” and “kindl[ing] the hopes and aspirations of freedom in those societies ruled by the sponsors of global terrorism.” The closest the U.S. administration came to mobilizing moderates was a commitment to “support” and “work with” “moderate and modern governments, especially in the Muslim world.”<sup>7</sup> The 2006 version, however, was more impressive in developing the theme of bolstering *legitimate* Muslim moderates, rather than “modern”—that is, secular authoritarian—regimes. In addition to promoting “effective democracy,” the more recent strategy spoke of encouraging “political reforms that empower peaceful Muslims to practice and interpret their faith.” “Responsible Islamic leaders” are those who “denounce . . . the ideology of terror,” and they are America’s “allies.” The United States pledged to “continue to support the efforts of our Muslim partners overseas to reject violent extremism.” Yet the administration did not explicitly acknowledge that such moderates might well be deeply critical of U.S. policy. In addition, its rebuttal of conventional arguments—its insistent denial that terrorism was rooted in poverty, hostility to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or U.S. counterterrorist efforts—as well as its characterization of Muslim moderates as “allies” and “partners” suggested that criticism would not be tolerated well. Moreover, all this was part of “the long-term antidote to the ideology of terrorism,” and this program, whatever its merits or flaws, bore no relationship to the four-pronged immediate plan of action that constituted the bulk of the document.<sup>8</sup>

The Bush administration, and President Bush himself, have often taken flack for being immune to criticism and overly defensive, but their plans for reaching out to the Muslim world evolved to take several pages out of their critics’ books. Sophisticated observers noted immediately after the September 2001 attacks that Muslim moderates would need to take the lead in promoting their own tradition of political non-violence and tolerance, that the United States’ capacity to shape intra-Muslim debates was limited at best, and that explicit U.S. interventions would likely backfire.<sup>9</sup> The *9/11 Commission Report*, published in 2004, devoted substantial attention to the Battle of Ideas, similarly emphasizing that cultivating liberal values “must come from within Muslim societies themselves” and

<sup>7</sup> *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2003), pp. 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2006), pp. 9-11, 1.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Fareed Zakaria, “The Roots of Rage,” *Newsweek*, Oct. 15, 2001; and George Lakoff, “Metaphors of Terror,” Sept. 16, 2001 ([www.press.uchicago.edu/News/911lakoff.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/News/911lakoff.html)).

recommending that the United States support such developments, referring vaguely to “help[ing] moderate Muslims combat the extremists’ ideas.” The 2006 *Strategy* also stressed that “the faithful followers of Islam” must be the ones to counter extremist Islam, much as the 9/11 Commission had underscored that political and social reform and even the value of freedom would have only limited appeal “simply because we are its carriers. . . . The United States can promote moderation, but cannot assure its ascendancy. Only Muslims can do this.”<sup>10</sup> A 2004 Century Foundation task force, led by former counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke, similarly noted that “any message delivered from the United States is greeted with suspicion in the Islamic world” and urged that the United States confine itself to “stimulat[ing]” more trusted purveyors of liberal Islam and then “wait[ing] backstage.” Americans and Europeans should “demonstrably welcome Islam as a part of their cultures” and celebrate “common values that we share with the Islamic world.”<sup>11</sup>

After 2001 the Bush administration could be, and was, fairly criticized for devoting little attention to the Battle of Ideas. The revolving door atop the State Department’s public diplomacy bureaucracy only emphasized the confusion, inadequate planning, and naïveté that accompanied those more overt efforts. Today, U.S. public diplomacy is still hampered by a lack of funding and strategic coordination,<sup>12</sup> and at its core still lies the misguided premise that U.S. foreign policy is misunderstood.<sup>13</sup> In general, the principals’ rhetoric did not match their priorities and did not translate into concrete policy initiatives. But, in 2004-2005, the wheels of government reportedly began to move in a more serious and concerted way to transform rhetoric into reality. Since then millions of dollars, if not more, have been spent in a revitalized, variegated, and often covert campaign to promote more moderate Islamist voices—through funding for Islamic radio and television, curricular reform, think tanks, workshops for preachers, training of *madrassah* teachers in science and civics, and counseling of Islamist political parties.<sup>14</sup> In other words, after three years of relative inactivity, winning Muslim “hearts and minds” and mobilizing Muslim moderates became a greater concern in

<sup>10</sup> *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 362-63, 375-76; *2006 National Strategy*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Clarke et al., *Defeating the Jihadists: A Blueprint for Action* (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2004), pp. 5, 105.

<sup>12</sup> See Susan B. Epstein, “U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and the 9/11 Commission Recommendations,” Congressional Research Service, May 1, 2006, RL 32607; and Jess T. Ford, “U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strategic Planning Efforts Have Improved, but Agencies Face Significant Implementation Challenges,” General Accounting Office, Apr. 26, 2007, GAO 07-795T.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald R. Krebs and David M. Edelstein, “The Quest for the Holy Sale: Washington’s Troubling Obsession with Public Diplomacy,” *Survival*, Spring 2005.

<sup>14</sup> David E. Kaplan, “Hearts, Minds, and Dollars,” *U.S. News & World Report*, Apr. 17, 2005; Mona Yacoubian, “Engaging Islamists and Promoting Democracy: A Preliminary Assessment,” United States Institute of Peace Special Report 190, Aug. 2007.

Washington—though it still took a back seat to the ever-more-dire situation in Iraq.

### **Diagnosis: A Flawed Strategy**

There is little sign of a forthcoming victory in this struggle. In the Arab and Muslim world, explicit or even implicit support from the United States remains “the kiss of death” for politicians, as Lebanon’s former president, Amin Gemayel, discovered in August 2007. A Saudi reformer observed, after Gemayel’s upset by a relatively unknown candidate, “The minute you are counted on or backed by the Americans, kiss it goodbye, you’ll never win.”<sup>15</sup> Outside the Middle East, the situation is little better. In Indonesia, even post-tsunami U.S. assistance, hailed for having tempered anti-Americanism in that country, has also created an opening for radical groups and hampered moderates. A raised U.S. profile in Thailand “could provide a platform for the insurgents [in the southern part of the country] to denounce Bangkok as a puppet conditioned by a U.S. agenda.”<sup>16</sup> Arab and Muslim opinion of the United States remains intractably negative. Some polls suggest that support for suicide terrorism is declining among Muslims and that Osama bin Laden’s popularity is waning—perhaps thanks to Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia’s wanton civilian attacks—but these same surveys also find increasing Muslim distance from those political values, ideas, and customs that Americans hold dear.<sup>17</sup> Strong moderate voices in the Arab and Muslim worlds continue to be few and far between.

Why has the United States made such little headway in its effort to mobilize Muslim moderates? One possible answer is that the strategy and even the operational plan are well designed, but their implementation has been less than ideal. For all their enthusiasm about promoting democracy, U.S. leaders have shown less interest in supporting democratic institutions and processes in practice—that is, in treating freely elected governments as legitimate national representatives irrespective of their policy positions. Nor have U.S. leaders pressured authoritarian leaders to liberalize their regimes regardless of who might rule in their stead. The United States long bolstered Pakistan’s military ruler, Pervez Musharaff, and it has led its European allies in boycotting the Palestinian Authority since Hamas’ January 2006 triumph. Tentative pressure on

<sup>15</sup> Hassan M. Fattah, “U.S. Backs Free Elections, Only to See Allies Lose,” *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Amitav Acharya and Arabinda Acharya, “The Myth of the Second Front: Localizing the ‘War on Terror’ in Southeast Asia,” *Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2007, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Thanassis Cambanis, “In Arab World, Zarqawi’s Tactics Bred Disgust,” *Boston Globe*, June 12, 2006; “Global Unease with Major World Powers,” June 27, 2007, and “A Rising Tide Lifts Mood in Developing World,” July 24, 2007, Pew Global Attitudes Project, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

the Saudi and Egyptian governments to open their tightly controlled political systems reached a modest apex in 2005-6, but it swiftly fell by the wayside.<sup>18</sup> This inconsistency has not been lost on regional observers. As a left-leaning Lebanese columnist complained, referring to the shaky pro-Western coalition in power in Beirut, "The U.S. openly says it supports the Siniora government, but it should say we support the Lebanese government."<sup>19</sup> Inconsistent U.S. backing for electoral processes and their sometimes unwelcome results, it might be argued, undercuts moderates in their struggle with extremists for ideological dominance. Another possibility is that radicalization within the Muslim world derives from specific quarrels over U.S. foreign policy: its fostering of globalization and the transition to a market economy; its steadfast support for Israel as the average Palestinian's plight has intensified; its continued occupation of Iraq, which promises to last beyond the next presidential election to a substantial, if attenuated, extent. As long as these sores continue to fester, moderate Muslims cannot make much headway at home.

These explanations beg a crucial question, however. Why should the fate of Muslim moderates hinge so tightly on the popularity of the United States? This claim holds only to the extent that moderates have hitched their political wagon to the American horse. But few moderates in the Muslim world with political ambitions would be so foolish. In fact, moderate Muslims have often been nearly as vigorous in their critique of U.S. foreign policy as their more violent co-religionists, and thus they would not particularly profit from U.S. concessions. Moreover, realistically, few of the offending policies are likely to change soon, with the possible exception of Iraq. Consistent democracy promotion requires long time horizons, and the short-term costs are often strategically and politically unbearable. Globalization, which has fueled the U.S. economic engine, may collapse, but not because U.S. leaders are likely to sour on it. Questions about the U.S. tilt toward Israel have of late been raised more acutely, but the vociferous response, complete with allegations of anti-Semitism, is not likely to inspire further skeptics.<sup>20</sup> If mobilizing Muslim moderates depends on these sorts of policy changes, perhaps the United States should simply abandon the goal. These explanations are plausible, but that does not make them correct. It is equally plausible that the strategy is itself flawed.

Indeed, another explanation is that, in practice, many in the West, even American and European critics of the Bush administration, have been uncomfortable with the moderate voices that have emerged from the Muslim world. This includes most prominently the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,

<sup>18</sup> Michael Slackman, "On Human Rights, U.S. Seems to Give Egypt a Pass," *New York Times*, Oct. 16, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Fattah, "U.S. Backs Free Elections."

<sup>20</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

which has vacillated regarding its long-term commitment to democratic institutions and processes and non-violent conflict resolution.<sup>21</sup> But it also encompasses even those Islamists who are avowedly opposed to violence, like the popular but controversial philosopher Tariq Ramadan, who was branded a “gentle jihadist”—and this in a liberal outlet!<sup>22</sup> Ramadan’s rhetorical ambivalence—as a fierce critic of the U.S. role in Israel and Iraq, as well as of Islamist-directed and -inspired terrorism—has provoked vicious attacks from both secular Westerners and traditional Salafists. He has been denied a visa to teach in the United States (as he had been earlier banned from France in the 1990s), ostensibly because he made a contribution to an Islamic charity later named a Hamas front. Yet, according to a European counterterrorist official who approved of the decision, his visa was really revoked because his ideas were too dangerous to permit a public hearing.<sup>23</sup> Even those who take the problem of mobilizing Muslim moderates seriously too often define their targets so narrowly as to exclude any who might have broad appeal in the Muslim world.<sup>24</sup> A related point is that U.S. public diplomacy efforts are doomed to failure because they are conceived as one-way strategic communication, not part of a true dialogue.<sup>25</sup> By this account, reaching out to a broader spectrum of Muslim moderates, including committed Islamists, and engaging in deliberation, in which both sides are open to changing their minds, might allow for real headway in the Battle of Ideas.

This sophisticated alternative reflects a deep concern with the legitimacy of America’s Muslim interlocutors, and it has much merit: only moderates with standing among their fellow Muslims are rightly seen as worth talking to. Yet it still does not take sufficiently seriously the challenges facing Muslim moderates. Tariq Ramadan himself has been censured by less compromising Islamists because he condemns violence and embraces the modern project. If the United States is widely perceived as evil incarnate, those willing to enter into dialogue with it—no matter how seemingly sincere the devil appears in its current guise—will be irreparably tainted, as naïfs or sell-outs. The participants in such a dialogue may try hard to leave, and may even

<sup>21</sup> Marc Lynch, “Brothers in Arms,” *Foreign Policy*, Sept./Oct. 2007; James Traub, “Islamic Democrats?” *New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 29, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Smith, “The Gentle Jihadist,” *American Prospect*, Mar. 5, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Deborah Sontag, “Mystery of Islamic Scholar Who Was Barred by the U.S.,” *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Angel Rabasa et al., *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007). For this critique, see Hussein Haqqani, “Islam’s Weakened Moderates,” *Foreign Policy*, July/Aug. 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Marc Lynch, “Taking Arabs Seriously,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2003; Lynch, “Al-Qaeda’s Media Strategies,” *National Interest*, Spring 2006; Hady Amr and P.W. Singer, “Engaging the Muslim World: A Communications Strategy to Win the War of Ideas,” The Brookings Institution ([www.opportunity08.org/Issues/OurWorld/43/r1/Default.aspx](http://www.opportunity08.org/Issues/OurWorld/43/r1/Default.aspx)).

occasionally succeed in leaving, power and rank at the door, but they cannot leave history behind. It intrudes into deliberation, and, given the long history of suspicion and the present of occupation, it is hard to imagine that Arab and Muslim observers would not be deeply skeptical of U.S. motives and that Arab and Muslim participants in deliberation with the United States would retain much more than a shred of legitimacy.

The designers and critics of American foreign policy aspire to win Muslim hearts and minds, and they hope to help nourish moderate Muslim voices by reaching out—rhetorically and materially—to Muslims who share Americans' liberal political values. The presumption is that those moderates will be America's "allies" and "partners" in the War on Terror and that the substantive political and ideological differences between America and moderate Muslims will be insignificant.<sup>26</sup> There is something peculiarly American in this denial of basic conflicts of interest and vision, in this image of differences being eliminated and not just managed.<sup>27</sup> But there is also, more importantly, a failure to grasp the fundamental ambivalence that being a legitimate moderate entails. Some U.S. officials have recognized that the United States is "radioactive" in the Arab and Muslim world and that associating with the United States is deadly for Muslim moderates, certainly politically and quite possibly literally.<sup>28</sup> But they have not fully grasped the implications, and current U.S. strategy, rather than promoting ambivalent and, thus, legitimate moderate Muslim political forces, works to render moderates less ambivalent and ultimately therefore less moderate.

The more the United States reaches out to potential moderates—by uttering welcoming words, stressing common values and beliefs, providing exclusive funding—the more it undercuts them. The more closely moderates appear to be aligned with the United States, the less legitimacy they enjoy with the community that really matters: their co-religionists. Thus, the stronger their incentives to blur the lines between themselves and the extremists and the weaker their incentives to establish a clearly distinct political agenda. If, when the United States reaches out to them, they become true allies, as American foreign policymakers seem to desire, then they cannot broker to the Muslim masses and their political value declines. If, when the United States reaches out to them, they sound increasingly like their extremist brethren, to maintain their communal bona fides and retain local legitimacy, then they will have greater difficulty brokering to the West and their political value also declines. As a recent study found, after examining U.S. efforts in several Arab nations, initial Islamist enthusiasm for U.S.-sponsored

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Ronald D. Asmus et al., "A Transatlantic Strategy to Promote Democratic Development in the Broader Middle East," *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2005, esp. pp. 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles; or, The Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

<sup>28</sup> Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars."

democracy-promotion programs gave way everywhere to “boycotts and disrupted engagement.” Islamist political parties felt compelled to distance themselves from the United States in the face of popular “anger over U.S. policies in the region.”<sup>29</sup> This is hardly the only reason that strong moderate voices have not emerged in the Muslim world, but it certainly does not help. Put differently, before moderates can be mobilized, they must be produced—or, more precisely, a political environment must be constructed in which they can establish *themselves* as moderates.

### **Treatment: Tough Love**

This diagnosis of the malady that has befallen U.S. efforts in the Battle of Ideas suggests a deeply counterintuitive course of treatment: one might call it the “you’ve got to be cruel to be kind” solution. Both current policymakers and their critics presume that such a political environment will emerge if the United States reaches out to moderates in the Muslim world—however narrowly or broadly defined—and emphasizes the common values, the shared identity, that bind Western and Islamic civilization. Ambivalence, however, entails articulating some substantial measure of *difference* rather than identity, and thus U.S. policy should not only tolerate Muslim moderates’ expression of difference, but work to promote and highlight it. Muslim moderates are always vulnerable to the allegation that they are Western and specifically American lackeys—this was precisely what one Saudi reformer told the 9/11 Commission<sup>30</sup>—and counterterrorist policy should be designed not to forge a “moderate consensus” but to provide moderates with the ammunition to combat extremist accusations and affirm their credentials as good Muslims and Islamists. Neither reaching out to moderates nor standing by silently can accomplish this. The implication is that U.S. public diplomacy should itself adopt an at least ambivalent, if not at times hostile, tone. It would emphasize less the commonalities than the abiding differences between these political and religious cultures, and it might well focus on what moderate Muslims have in common with their extremist co-religionists, perhaps even on occasion going so far as to charge them with being extremists in *mufti*.

This would be a marked policy reversal, but it follows in straightforward fashion from the preceding logic. Alignment with the West is more bane than boon for aspiring Muslim moderates. By taking a public stance that distances the moderates from the Western camp, and positions them in a Muslim camp marked in part by difference from the West, the United States could help boost moderates’ local appeal. If the United States does not view these figures as friends, Muslims may well say, then they must be sincere and well-meaning

<sup>29</sup> Yacoubian, “Engaging Islamists,” p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 373.

advocates for the advance of the *ummah*. The conventional wisdom in favor of reaching out to Muslim moderates and perhaps offering policy concessions makes sense only at a later stage, once their reputation and credibility are well-established and when they can politically afford to reciprocate, even at the cost of some local support. If only that were the case today . . .

The controversy surrounding Tariq Ramadan, for example, has only boosted his standing among fellow Muslims in Europe. Ramadan is an avowedly elitist figure, who can talk postmodern talk as the ivory-tower academic he is and who drops references to Western philosophers in his discourses on Islam, but he has a large following. Ramadan complains about his treatment by Western authorities, but the great irony—one he rarely acknowledges—is that Western rhetoric lumping him in with Al Qaeda, depicting him as a jihadist wolf in a moderate sheep's clothing, has rendered him less vulnerable to extremist critique. Ramadan would not be the superstar he is if he were embraced readily by non-Muslim Westerners. Paul Berman's recent searching critique, intended to discredit Ramadan and his naïve defenders, has, among Muslims, presumably only been to Ramadan's credit. Ian Buruma's more sympathetic portrait, perhaps rendering Ramadan more palatable to Western audiences, was presumably less helpful. As Ramadan himself admitted to Buruma, then French Interior Minister and current President Nicolas Sarkozy's efforts to embarrass him during a 2003 televised debate—a notorious episode in which Ramadan called for a “moratorium” on stoning adulterous wives but refused to condemn the practice outright—“helped me enormously.” Sensitive to his credibility with Muslims, Ramadan has insisted that “I won't change any thinking in the Muslim world if I issue a blanket condemnation of stoning to please the French interior minister.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the Western demonization of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, though he is no moderate, has given him a substantial political lift, compensating for a “go-it-alone style” and lackluster economic performance that have left him politically isolated at home.<sup>32</sup>

The operational ramifications of such a strategic shift would be enormous. The U.S. public diplomacy apparatus would then not expend resources seeking to improve the image of the United States prevalent in the Muslim world—an effort that has not surprisingly born little fruit. Nor would it bother funding radio and television stations spreading Western music and movies, with the occasional pro-U.S. news tidbit thrown in. These do little harm, but they do even less good. More importantly, leading U.S. diplomats

<sup>31</sup> Paul Berman, “Who's Afraid of Tariq Ramadan?” *New Republic*, June 4, 2007; Ian Buruma, “Tariq Ramadan Has an Identity Issue,” *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 4, 2007; Sontag, “Mystery of the Islamic Scholar.”

<sup>32</sup> Michael Slackman, “U.S. Focus on Ahmadinejad Puzzles Iranians,” *New York Times*, Sept. 24, 2007.

and political figures would not publicly identify model moderate Muslims, friends with whom it works to bring about a new Middle East. Nor would they even quietly seek to fund liberal organizations in civil society that promote human rights, political openness, and the like: covert streams of funding are often exposed, and simply the knowledge that such funding exists, even if the precise recipients are not known, renders moderates politically vulnerable.<sup>33</sup> These have so far been purely negative steps—what would *not* be done—but the United States, as the leading target of extremist Islamists' ire, cannot stand on the sidelines, and passivity would not help the moderates' cause.

A United States informed by this strategic outlook would also take more limited positive steps to promote a politics of moderation among Muslims. Its officials' rhetoric and its various public diplomacy products would, while avoiding the suggestion of a "clash of civilizations," accentuate the abiding differences between currently settled understandings of Muslim and Western values, while at the same time stressing the capacity for cooperation despite such differences. American spokespeople stationed abroad would deliberately and specifically represent local officials and activists with more moderate leanings as largely indistinguishable from more extremist sorts.

Overall, American assistance for Muslim, including Islamist, civil society would be broad and well-publicized, rather than narrow and hidden. Ties with moderate Muslims need not be severed, but they also must not be unusual if moderates are to escape the political costs of such associations. The more extensive U.S. ties are with Muslim elites and masses, regardless of ideological orientation, the less ties with moderates will stick out and the less they will raise questions about moderates' loyalties. Once radical Islamists—that is, those unquestionably beyond reproach—proudly began to relieve the great Satan of his misbegotten wealth, moderates could accept U.S. and European aid without hesitation. Such aid would likely disproportionately benefit moderate voices, since they are at present a relatively weak political and social force and, thus, can count on less local funding. It would even facilitate more targeted financial support for moderates, since the open aid would camouflage more generous covert funding streams.

This recipe of greater publicity and greater pluralism will not be popular, and seeing it through will require the expenditure of substantial political capital. Current U.S. assistance programs to promote the development of Muslim civil society are more pluralistic than most Americans realize, but they remain very much below the radar screen—partly because their exposure would provoke criticism at home, where *madrassahs* are seen as suicide-bomber factories and where Islamist is a dirty word. The political

<sup>33</sup> See the Iranian dissident Akbar Ganji's open letter to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, September 2007, reprinted as "The US and the Plight of the Iranians," *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 22, 2007. See also Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Guy Dinmore, "U.S. Funds Put Iran's Activists in Line of Fire," *Financial Times*, June 15, 2007.

costs would only rise were another mass-casualty attack to take place within America's borders, especially if the perpetrators had been affiliated with U.S.-funded organizations. Nevertheless, while Americans might be uncomfortable funding ideological opponents, moderate Muslims would reap the gains, and the United States might even score points for consistency as it nurtured Muslim civil society as a whole, without applying a political or ideological litmus test.

The danger of such a proposal is that it might prove too clever to be sustainable. Moderate Muslims, shocked by the harsh rhetorical turn, might throw in their lot with the extremists. They would have to accept that, in the short-to-medium run and for their own good, their best friends in the West might not in public sound all that different from their worst enemies. America's allies might also recoil and seek to distance themselves, and international regard for the United States might conceivably fall even further, if it has not already hit rock bottom. But the likelihood and extent of alienation might be reduced if secret avenues of communication were kept open, preferably through less-reviled third parties, and if the strategic logic were thereby explained and expectations managed. At the same time, Western, and specifically American, publics, who have shown little patience for Muslim grievances, might turn from the comparatively limited War on Terror to a boundless War on Islam. But they will need to learn that authentic Islamist moderates will be unsparing in their criticism of both extremism *and* the West. And, to the extent that education mitigates these negative consequences on both sides, moderate Muslims might find themselves in the worst of all possible worlds, as their co-religionists' suspicions might no longer be allayed by hostile American rhetoric.

Properly calibrating such a policy will undoubtedly be a great challenge. While the difficulty should not be downplayed, finding that balance is also not as unusual as it may seem. Contrary to the classical liberal assumption that all good things go together—an assumption that has historically shaped U.S. foreign policy—policymakers more often than not sit at the horns of dilemmas, in which the ramifications of policy choice cut in multiple directions. That is why broad strategic guidance is not, and cannot be, sufficiently specific to supplant the judgment and sensitivity to local conditions that skilled and experienced policymakers must exercise. Indeed, precisely how the United States can help Muslim moderates find their voice—what that sustainable balance is between hostility and blandishments toward, and between engagement with and isolation of, moderates—will vary from the Middle East to Europe to Southeast Asia.

Policy is not the science of the ideal. It is the art of the least bad. And that is what is today required in waging the Battle of Ideas.

