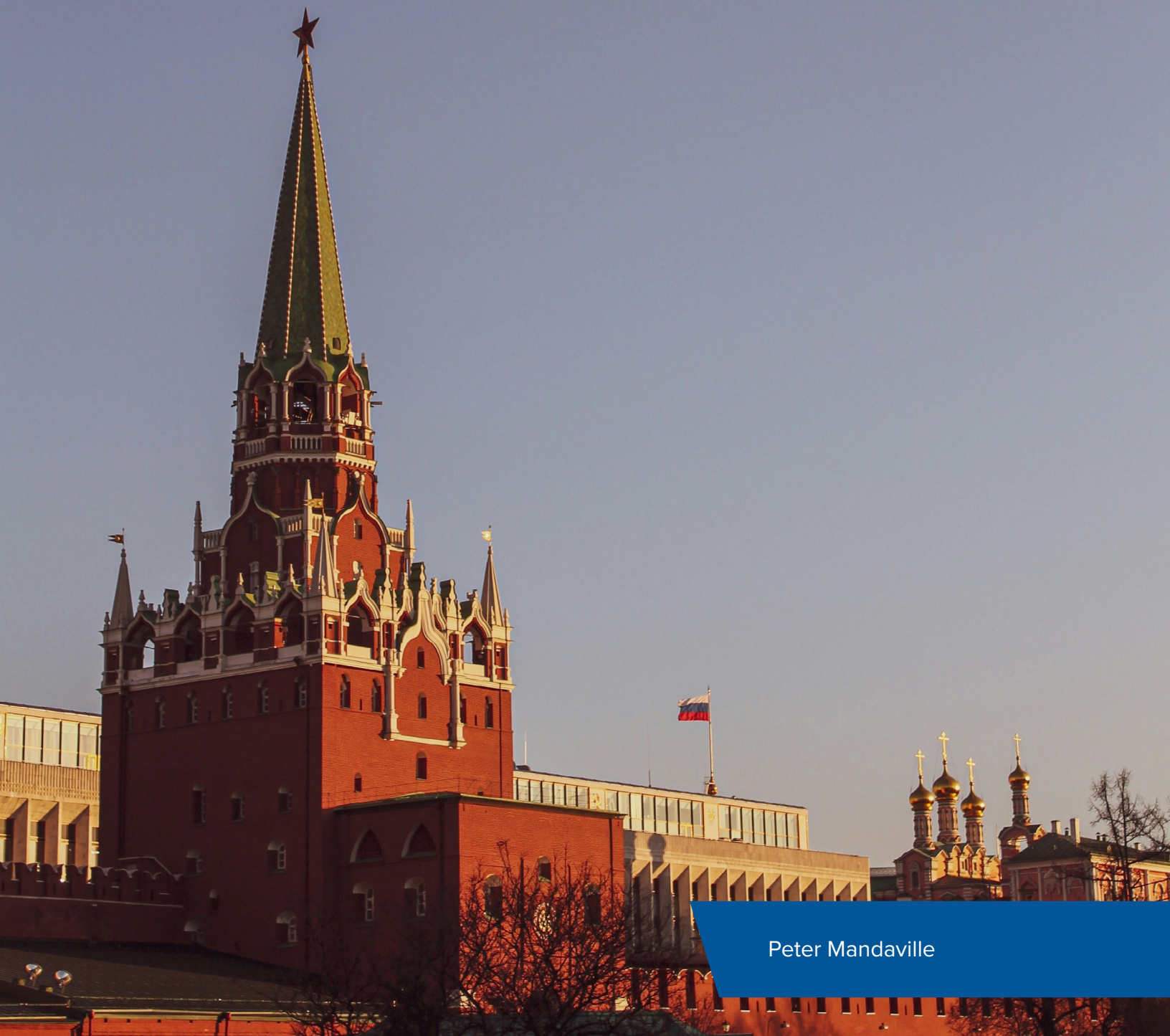
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Religion as statecraft: What a decade of research reveals about the geopolitics of religious soft power



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Bottom lines up front

- Over the past three decades, states across every major world region have integrated religion into their foreign policy in deliberate and strategically significant ways.
- Religion shapes what actors are willing to do, what coalitions they can build, and what legitimacy they can claim.
- The Gulf has long been Western analysts' primary reference for religious diplomacy—but the Balkans are now ground zero for geo-religious competition.

Introduction: Religion returns to the center of world politics

For most of the modern era, religion occupied an awkward position in the conduct of international affairs. The secular state system consolidated after 1648 consigned faith to the private sphere, and Western-trained diplomats and analysts proceeded accordingly: Trade flows, military balances, and ideological competition among secular creeds defined what "serious" foreign policy was about. Religion, when it appeared at all, was treated as a complication—the kind of factor that explained why certain conflicts were especially intractable, rather than a lens through which to analyze the underlying logic of state behavior.

That assumption has become increasingly untenable. Over the past three decades, states across every major world region have integrated religion into their foreign policy in deliberate, institutionalized, and strategically significant ways. Saudi Arabia has channeled billions of dollars into the global propagation of its preferred interpretation of Islam. Turkey has transformed its Directorate of Religious Affairs—the Diyanet—from a domestic bureaucratic body into a transnational diplomatic instrument, building mosques and schools in places as diverse as the Balkans to sub-Saharan Africa. Russia has made the Russian Orthodox Church a pillar of its campaign to position Moscow as the defender of "traditional values" and a counterweight to the liberal international order. China has mobilized its Buddhist heritage as a soft-power asset along the Belt and Road corridor, even as it conducts one of the most severe campaigns of religious repression in the world against its Uyghur Muslim population. India under Narendra Modi has brought the Hindu nationalist ideology known as Hindutva into its diplomatic calculus, reshaping how New Delhi engages with its diaspora and its neighbors. And these are only the most prominent examples among dozens.

What is happening is not simply the return of religion to politics—religion never fully left. What is new is the scale, the deliberateness, and the geopolitical stakes of how states now deploy religion as an instrument of statecraft. This report synthesizes findings from the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project—an eight-year, globally comparative research initiative of Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs—to make sense of these developments for policymakers and to identify the patterns that most demand attention.

What the GRSP project found

Launched in 2018 with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation, the GRSP project is the first sustained, globally comparative effort to study how states incorporate religion into their external relations. Over two phases, it has examined more than forty countries across every major world region and faith tradition. Conducted in partnership with the Brookings Institution, the United States Institute of Peace, and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, the project has also examined specific regional theaters—the Western Balkans and Asia—where the intersection of religion, geopolitics, and great-power competition has become especially acute.

The project's theoretical contribution is to bring religion explicitly into the analysis of power in international relations. Building on the late political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr.'s concept of "soft power"—the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce—the project has developed the concept of "religious soft power" to capture how states mobilize religious authority, identity, institutions, and networks in service of their foreign policy objectives. At the same time, it has been attentive to the limits of that concept. Religion in foreign policy is not always "soft" in Nye's sense. When deployed to sow discord, polarize target societies, or suppress religious minorities, it shades into what Christopher Walker, an expert on democracy and

authoritarianism, has called "sharp power." The line between the two, as the evidence shows, is often deliberately blurred.

Why this matters now

These findings arrive at a moment of geopolitical consequence. The liberal international order that provided the dominant framework for global affairs since 1945 is under sustained challenge. Great-power competition has returned as the organizing logic of international politics—and the competition is no longer purely material. It is also ideological, cultural, and, increasingly, religious. The contest between liberal democratic and authoritarian visions of political order is playing out partly through claims about religion: who speaks for Islam, what Orthodox Christianity demands of its adherents in their political loyalties, whether Hindu civilization constitutes the proper basis for India's international identity, whether Buddhism can serve as a vehicle for Chinese great-power aspirations.

Policymakers in Washington and allied capitals have been slow to register this dimension. The dominant frameworks—i.e., realist calculations of power and interest, liberal institutionalist assumptions about convergence around shared norms—tend to treat religion as epiphenomenal, a surface feature of deeper material conflicts. The evidence suggests this is a mistake. Religious soft power is not a sideshow to the main geopolitical drama. In a growing number of theaters, it is the drama itself, or at minimum an integral part of it that shapes what actors are willing to do, what coalitions they can build, and what legitimacy they can claim.

What this report does

The pages that follow distill the project's most policy-relevant findings into five interconnected analytical claims about how religious soft power works, who wields it, and what its effects are. They draw on a full body of work: the comparative country studies assembled in the Oxford University Press volume titled *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power* (2023); policy briefs and commentary produced in partnership with the Brookings Institution; a regional series on the Western Balkans and Asia; an ongoing webinar series on religion in foreign policy; and recent project outputs including a working paper on religion and the Russia-Ukraine war. Together, these findings point toward a set of implications for how US and allied policymakers should understand and engage the geopolitics of religion in the years ahead.

Religious soft power serves domestic audiences as much as foreign ones

A common assumption in policy discussions is that religious soft power is primarily an outward-facing phenomenon—a tool states use to cultivate influence abroad, win friends among global coreligionists, or project a particular civilizational image to the world. The evidence across more than four dozen country cases tells a more complicated story. Across nearly every context examined, the deployment of religion in foreign policy turns out to be as much about managing audiences at home as it is about winning them abroad. The foreign and domestic functions of religious statecraft are more than related; in most cases, they are inseparable.

This dynamic is perhaps most visible in the Arab Gulf. Saudi Arabia's decades-long investment in the global propagation of its preferred interpretation of Islam—through the World Muslim League, the construction of mosques and *madrassas* from Southeast Asia to West Africa, and the funding of religious education programs worldwide—is often understood as an exercise in ideological influence. But this outreach has also served a critical domestic function: providing successive Saudi governments with a mechanism for managing the clerical establishment at home, channeling the energies of religiously conservative constituencies outward rather than allowing them to accumulate as a domestic political challenge to the monarchy.[1] The same logic underlies the more recent shift under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has dramatically curtailed the domestic power of the rigid and austere Wahhabi religious establishment while simultaneously repositioning Saudi Arabia as a champion of "moderate Islam" in international forums. The foreign policy brand and the domestic consolidation strategy are two faces of the same maneuver.[2]

Morocco illustrates the pattern in a different register. The religious soft power apparatus built by Hassan II—centered on the king's claim to the title Commander of the Faithful and institutionalized through bodies such as the Mohammed VI

1. Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, "Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy," Brookings Institution, November 2018.
2. Annelle Sheline, "Religious Diplomacy in the Arab Gulf and the Politics of Moderate Islam," in Peter Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

Institute for the Training of Imams—was initially designed to shore up monarchical legitimacy at home before it was extended outward as an instrument of regional and international influence.[3] Morocco's positioning as a hub of moderate, Sufi-inflected Islam in West Africa and beyond is inseparable from the palace's strategy of containing Islamist political challengers within Morocco itself. Foreign projection and domestic consolidation are two expressions of a single political logic.

Turkey under the Justice and Development Party, known as the AKP, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan provides perhaps the most extensively documented instance of this entanglement. The transformation of the Diyanet from a domestic bureaucratic body into a transnational actor operating in over 140 countries has tracked closely with shifts in Erdoğan's domestic political fortunes and his management of the AKP's relationship with its religious base.[4] Turkey's international religious outreach has served simultaneously as an instrument of foreign influence, a mechanism for maintaining ties with Turkish diaspora communities in Europe, and a signal to domestic audiences about the AKP's Islamic credentials. The emphasis has shifted as the political context has evolved.[5]

The pattern extends well beyond the Muslim world. Russia's embrace of the Russian Orthodox Church as a cornerstone of its international identity provides the Kremlin with ideological legitimacy it has otherwise lacked since shedding Soviet Marxism.[6] The 2020 constitutional amendments embedding references to God and Russia's Christian heritage formalized an increasingly intimate church-state partnership that serves domestic cultural and civilizational legitimation at least as much as it advances Russia's traditional values agenda abroad. Similarly, Modi's mobilization of Hindu nationalist themes—from yoga diplomacy to the internationalization of Ram Mandir symbolism—is calibrated at least as much for the base of the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at home as for any international audience.[7]

The policy implications are significant and underappreciated. When Western governments engage with states that deploy religious soft power, they tend to take the foreign policy framing at face value—treating Saudi moderation discourse, Turkish religious outreach, or Moroccan imam training as primarily about external influence. The domestic logic is at least equally important, and often more so. Understanding what a state's religious foreign policy is doing for its leadership at home is essential to predicting how that policy will evolve, where its limits lie, and what kinds of engagement are likely to be effective. A counterterrorism partnership built on a shared interest in "moderate Islam" may be more fragile than it appears if the moderation discourse is primarily serving the partner government's domestic political needs rather than reflecting any durable theological or institutional reality.

The commodification of "moderate" Islam

Few concepts have done more work in the intersection of religion and foreign policy over the past two decades than moderate Islam. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Western governments—above all the United States—found themselves urgently in need of Muslim partners who could offer a credible alternative to the jihadist narrative. States across the Muslim world were quick to recognize the opportunity. By positioning themselves as exemplars and exporters of a moderate, tolerant, and democratically compatible Islam, they could simultaneously cultivate Western security partnerships, access foreign assistance—and acquire a powerful tool for delegitimizing domestic political opponents. The result was the emergence of moderate Islam as a geopolitical commodity: a brand with real exchange value in the international system, and real costs for the societies in which it was deployed.

The supply side of this dynamic is well illustrated by three cases that superficially resemble one another but operate through quite different mechanisms. Jordan has built an elaborate infrastructure of moderation—the Amman Message of 2004 on Islamic tolerance, the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, the Jordan Interfaith Coexistence Research Center—presenting the Hashemite kingdom as a uniquely authoritative voice for mainstream Sunni Islam and a reliable counterterrorism

3. Ann Wainscott, "Hassan II and the Foundations of Moroccan Religious Soft Power," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*
4. Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, "Turkey: An Ambivalent Religious Soft Power," Berkley Forum, June 2019.
5. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkey's Ambivalent Religious Soft Power in the Illiberal Turn," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*
6. Robert C. Blitt, "'Putin-Phonia': Harnessing Russian Orthodoxy to Advance Russia's Secular Foreign Policy," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*
7. Sumit Ganguly, "The Modi Government and the Uses and Limits of India's Religious Soft Power," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*

partner.[8] Morocco has pursued a comparable strategy centered on its widely-respected Maliki legal tradition and its imam training institute, positioning Rabat as an alternative source of Islamic authority to the Gulf states and a natural partner for European governments anxious about radicalization in their Muslim communities.[9] The Gulf states—particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and, in a different register, Qatar—have invested heavily in interfaith dialogue initiatives and international religious tolerance frameworks that present them as enlightened Islamic modernizers, even as their domestic religious landscapes tell a more complicated story.[10]

What unites these cases is the way moderation discourse functions less as a description of a theological position than as a geopolitical performance. In this context, "moderate" Islam does not refer to a clearly defined set of religious commitments. It refers to whatever interpretation of Islam a given government is prepared to endorse and to contrast with the "extremism" of its opponents. Governments championing moderate Islam have consistently defined extremism in ways that happen to encompass their domestic political challengers—Islamist opposition parties, independent clerics, civil society organizations—rather than the specific violent actors that Western counterterrorism agendas were ostensibly targeting.[11] The moderation framework thus became a mechanism for acquiring Western validation of domestic repression, with governments able to present the suppression of legitimate political opposition as a contribution to the global war on terrorism.

Egypt provides a particularly stark illustration. Al-Azhar, historically one of the most authoritative institutions in Sunni Islam, has under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi been increasingly conscripted into a state-directed moderation agenda that serves primarily to provide religious cover for a security state whose methods bear little relationship to any meaningful conception of moderate governance.[12] The reputational costs are considerable: The erosion of Al-Azhar's credibility as an independent religious authority represents collateral damage to the very Islamic soft power resources Egypt is ostensibly cultivating.

Indonesia presents a different but equally instructive variant. As the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, Indonesia has genuine credentials as a context in which Islam and democratic governance coexist, and its diplomatic efforts to leverage this have been substantive rather than purely performative.[13] Yet even here, the moderate Islam brand has encountered the limits of geopolitical packaging. Indonesian efforts to export its model to the Middle East and North Africa have made little headway, in part because Middle Eastern audiences—and governments—have shown limited appetite for lessons in Islamic moderation from Southeast Asia, and in part because Indonesia's own domestic religious landscape is more contested than the brand suggests.[14] The audience that most validates a religious soft power brand is not always the audience that the projecting state most needs to reach.

For US and allied policymakers, the implications run in two directions. First, skepticism is warranted toward governments that present themselves as partners in promoting moderate Islam. The moderation discourse, wherever it appears, should prompt the question: moderate relative to what, and serving whose interests? The record suggests that the answer is frequently "relative to the government's domestic opponents, and serving the government's consolidation of power." Security partnerships built on this foundation may produce tactical counterterrorism cooperation while simultaneously empowering governments whose repressive practices generate the grievances that fuel radicalization over the longer term. Second, the instrumentalization of moderate Islam has imposed real costs on the Islamic intellectual and institutional landscape itself, crowding out genuinely independent religious voices and associating moderation with authoritarian governance in ways that complicate its deployment as a positive norm. Western governments that have invested in promoting moderate Islam as a counterterrorism tool should reckon seriously with their own role in producing these dynamics.

8. Stacey Gutkowski, "Moderation as Jordanian Soft Power: Islam and Beyond," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power*. On the 2004 Amman Message, see https://ammanmessage.com/
9. Wainscott, "Hassan II."
10. Annelle Sheline, "Declaration Proliferation: The International Politics of Religious Tolerance," Berkley Forum, July 2019; and David H. Warren, "Interfaith Dialogue in the United Arab Emirates: Where International Relations Meets State-Branding," Berkley Forum, July 2021.
11. Sheline, "Religious Diplomacy."
12. Khalil al-Anani, "Sisi's Appropriation of Islam Undermines Egypt's Religious Soft Power," Berkley Forum, April 2022.
13. James B. Hoesterey, "Indonesian Islam as Model for the World? Diplomacy, Soft Power, and the Geopolitics of 'Moderate Islam,' " in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*
14. Hoesterey, "Indonesian Islam."

Religious soft power is inherently competitive and operates in contested arenas

A persistent blind spot in policy discussions of religious soft power is the tendency to analyze it one state at a time—to ask what Saudi Arabia is doing, or what Turkey is doing, in isolation. No state, however, projects religious influence into a vacuum. Every act of religious statecraft takes place in an arena already occupied by other actors—state and nonstate, domestic and foreign—pursuing their own objectives with their own religious resources. Understanding religious soft power as a competitive, multiactor phenomenon rather than a series of unilateral projections is essential to grasping how it functions and what its effects are likely to be.

The most extensively documented competitive arena is the contest over Sunni Islamic authority among Muslim-majority states, which intensified sharply following the 2011 Arab uprisings and the subsequent fracturing of the regional order. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE have each deployed religious institutions, clerical networks, and media infrastructure in pursuit of influence over Muslim publics across the Middle East, Africa, and beyond—and each has done so in direct competition with the others. The Saudi-Qatari rivalry that culminated in the 2017 Gulf crisis had a pronounced religious dimension: Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated networks brought it into direct confrontation with a Saudi-UAE axis committed to extirpating political Islam as a regional force.[15] Turkey's Diyanet has positioned itself as an alternative to both Gulf visions, projecting an AKP-inflected Islam that draws on Ottoman heritage and resonates differently—and competitively—with Muslim communities from the Balkans to Central Asia.[16]

This competitive dynamic shapes outcomes in ways that single-actor analysis cannot capture. Bulgarian Muslims, for instance, have found themselves subject to competing religious influences from Turkish and Saudi sources simultaneously, each offering a different institutional infrastructure—mosques, education, clerical training—and a different vision of Islamic practice.[17] Local religious landscapes become arenas of proxy competition, with communities navigating among competing patronage structures in ways that can fragment existing religious institutions and complicate governance. Similar dynamics have been documented in Kosovo, Bosnia, and across sub-Saharan Africa, where Gulf states, Turkey, Iran, and increasingly China compete for influence among Muslim communities through overlapping and sometimes contradictory programs.[18]

The China-India competition over Buddhist heritage adds a further dimension. China under Xi Jinping has invested heavily in presenting itself as a center of Buddhist civilization, hosting international Buddhist forums, funding the restoration of Buddhist sites, and cultivating networks of Buddhist institutions across South and Southeast Asia.[19] This initiative is partly directed at Belt and Road countries with significant Buddhist populations—e.g., Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar—but it is also a direct challenge to India's claim to custodianship of a religion born on the subcontinent. India has responded by emphasizing its own Buddhist heritage through the International Buddhist Confederation and enhanced promotion of pilgrimage circuits. The competition is geopolitical at its core, with religion serving as the medium through which rival great power claims to regional cultural leadership are prosecuted.[20]

Competition over Orthodox Christian authority between Russia and Ukraine represents perhaps the highest-stakes religious rivalry currently playing out. Moscow's claim to religious authority over Ukrainian Orthodox Christians through the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church has been a cornerstone of the Kremlin's broader assertion that Russians and Ukrainians constitute a single civilization. Ukraine's establishment of its own autocephalous Orthodox Church in 2019, granted independence by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople over Moscow's strenuous objections, was accordingly experienced in Moscow as an act of civilizational aggression—and has been treated as such in Russian

15. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Using Religion for Geopolitical Ends in the Gulf Disputes between Abu Dhabi and Qatar," Berkley Forum, August 2020.
16. Öztürk, "Turkey's Ambivalent Religious Soft Power in the Illiberal Turn."
17. Rositsa Atanasova, "Balkan Affairs: Turkish and Saudi Influence on Bulgarian Muslims," Berkley Forum, June 2020.
18. Harun Karčić, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans: The Interplay of Religion, Politics, and History," Berkley Forum, July 2022; and Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, *The Geopolitics of Religion and Culture in the Western Balkans: A Thematic Series* (Georgetown University, 2022–2024).
19. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, "Chinese Buddhism and Soft Power and Sharp Power: Geopolitical Strategy and Modality of Religion," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*
20. Ganguly, "The Modi Government."

information warfare ever since.[21] The religious competition and the military conflict are deeply entangled.

Iran's competition with Saudi Arabia for influence over Muslim communities adds a Sunni-Shia dimension to this landscape. Iran's cultivation of Shia networks—through the patronage of seminaries in Iraq's Najaf and Karbala, support for Shia political movements from Lebanon to Bahrain, and the ideological infrastructure of the Revolutionary Guard—constitutes a religious soft power apparatus that operates in direct competition with Sunni Gulf state outreach.[22] What is distinctive about Iran's approach is its combination of particularistic Shia appeals with a broader anti-imperialist narrative capable of resonating with non-Shia audiences in the Global South, giving Tehran a reach that extends well beyond the boundaries of the Shia world.[23]

The competitive framing has direct implications for policy. Bilateral assessments of a partner government's religious outreach will miss the competitive dynamics that shape how that outreach lands in target societies. Programs designed to support "moderate" religious voices in a given country may inadvertently alter the balance among external religious patrons in ways that produce unintended consequences. And efforts to engage religious actors in conflict prevention or peacebuilding need to account for the fact that those actors are embedded in competitive patronage structures whose external sponsors may have interests quite different from those of the peacebuilding agenda. Religious soft power is a *system phenomenon*—and needs to be analyzed as one.

The deliberately blurred line between religious soft and sharp power

When Nye introduced the concept of soft power, he was describing something fundamentally attractive: the capacity to shape others' preferences through appeal rather than coercion. Religious soft power, in its most straightforward form, operates on the same logic: A state cultivates influence by making its religious culture, institutions, or interpretations appealing to foreign audiences. But the evidence across multiple regions and faith traditions points to a more troubling pattern that increasingly overlaps with this classical model: The deliberate use of religious ideas, networks, and institutions not to attract but to destabilize, polarize, and divide. This is what Walker termed sharp power, and in its religious variant, it represents one of the most underappreciated threats in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.[24]

The distinction matters because the policy responses it demands are quite different. Religious soft power, even when it serves the projecting state's interests rather than the receiving society's, is at least operating within a recognizable framework of attraction and legitimacy. It can be engaged, countered, or balanced through competing appeals. Religious sharp power is a different animal. It operates through disruption, exploiting existing social fault lines, amplifying grievances, and weaponizing religious identity to fragment social cohesion in target societies. It is often deliberately designed to be difficult to attribute and to masquerade as the organic expression of local religious sentiment. And it tends to work most effectively precisely where societies are already under stress.

Russia's use of Orthodox Christianity in the Western Balkans and Ukraine is the most extensively documented case of this dynamic. In the Balkans—a region that has emerged as ground zero for contemporary georeligious competition—Russia has deployed the Russian Orthodox Church and affiliated institutions not primarily to make Russian Orthodoxy attractive but to exacerbate existing ethnic and religious tensions, deepen political polarization, and obstruct Euro-Atlantic integration.[25] Serbian Orthodox Church networks have been mobilized in support of Russian foreign policy narratives in Montenegro, Bosnia, and North Macedonia, often in ways that amplify intercommunal tensions and complicate the work of local peacebuilders.[26] The religious dimension of these influence operations is not separable from the broader information warfare tool kit; it is one instrument among several, chosen because

21. Denys Brylov, Tetiana Kalenychenko, and Peter Mandaville, "Religion and the Russia-Ukraine War: A Primer," Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, May 2026.
22. Edward Wastnidge, "Shi'i Diplomacy: Religious Identity and Foreign Policy in the Axis of Resistance," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*
23. Wastnidge, "Shi'i Diplomacy"; and Jon Hoffman, "Russia and China in the Middle East: The Neglected Religious Dimension," Berkley Forum, May 2021.
24. Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 9–23.
25. Berkley Center, *The Geopolitics of Religion and Culture*.
26. Karčić, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans."



Framed by the Grand Cascade of Peterhof estate, the Russian flag flies beside the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. Credit: Unsplash/Tamara Malaniy

religious identity provides a particularly resonant register for the polarization agenda.

In Ukraine, the religious competition between the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate and the newly autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine has taken on sharp power characteristics since the full-scale invasion of 2022. The Moscow Patriarchate's framing of the war as a spiritual struggle against Western decadence—endorsed by Patriarch Kirill in terms that have shocked even some within the Orthodox world—represents the conscription of religious authority in the service of a military campaign.[27] Meanwhile, Russian information operations have sought to deepen divisions within Ukrainian religious communities, presenting the Ukrainian government's restrictions on Moscow Patriarchate institutions as religious persecution in international forums while simultaneously using those institutions as vectors of political influence and, in some documented cases, intelligence gathering.[28]

China's management of religion presents a different but equally instructive variant of the soft-sharp power entanglement. On the soft power side, Beijing has invested in Buddhist diplomacy and cultural outreach as a vehicle for building relationships across Asia. On the sharp power side, China has simultaneously pursued one of the most severe campaigns of religious repression in the contemporary world: the systematic suppression of Uyghur Muslim religious practice in Xinjiang, characterized by the United States and numerous other governments as genocide, alongside tightening controls on Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity, and even Chinese Buddhism itself when it falls outside state-sanctioned parameters.[29] Buddhism as a diplomatic asset abroad, Islam as a security threat at home: This is not a contradiction but a coherent strategy. Religion is an instrument of state power, to be cultivated where it serves state interests and suppressed where it does not. China has also sought to use its international religious outreach to shape narratives about Xinjiang in Muslim-majority countries, with considerable success in securing statements of support from Organization of Islamic Cooperation member states whose governments have

27. Brylov, Kalenychenko, and Mandaville, "Religion and the Russia-Ukraine War."
28. Brylov, Kalenychenko, and Mandaville, "Religion and the Russia-Ukraine War."
29. Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, *The Geopolitics of Religion and Culture in Asia: A Thematic Series* (Georgetown University, 2023–2024).

their own reasons to value Chinese economic partnerships over solidarity with Uyghur Muslims.[30]

Transnational Hindu nationalist networks connected to organizations affiliated with India's ruling BJP represent an emerging case that research has begun to document. The global spread of Hindutva ideology—through diaspora organizations, cultural institutions, and social media networks—has in several contexts moved beyond the cultivation of Hindu cultural identity into the active promotion of anti-Muslim narratives and the harassment of critics of the Modi government.[31] The line between cultural soft power and the kind of transnational intimidation that constitutes sharp power has in these cases been crossed, with implications for the social cohesion of diaspora communities in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere.

Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, who was president from 2019 to 2023, added yet another dimension to this landscape: the transnational mobilization of conservative evangelical and Pentecostal networks in support of an explicitly illiberal political agenda, building connections with like-minded movements in the United States, Portugal, and across Lusophone Africa in ways that have reinforced the global "culture wars" dynamic.[32]

For policymakers, the key operational implication of this finding is that religious influence operations require a different analytical and policy tool kit than religious soft power in its classical form. Attribution is harder, the actors involved are often nominally nonstate, and the damage done—to social trust, intercommunal relations, and democratic institutions—is diffuse and difficult to measure. Existing frameworks for countering foreign interference, designed primarily around electoral manipulation and information operations, need to be extended explicitly to cover the religious dimension. This means developing greater capacity to track transnational religious networks and their state sponsors, building resilience in societies particularly exposed to georeligious competition, and engaging multilateral partners—including in the Global South, where the effects of religious sharp power are often most acute—in developing shared norms around the limits of state-sponsored religious outreach.

Underperforming ambitions and the gap between projection and reception

The previous findings have established that religious soft power is real, consequential, and in some of its sharper manifestations genuinely threatening. It would be easy to conclude that states wielding it are doing so effectively: that the mosques Turkey builds in Africa translate into durable influence, that Saudi Arabia's global propagation networks produce the outcomes Riyadh intends, or that China's Buddhist diplomacy is securing the regional relationships Beijing seeks. The evidence, on closer examination, tells a considerably more modest story. Religious soft power turns out to be a blunt and unreliable instrument whose effects are difficult to control, frequently fall short of ambitions, and sometimes produce outcomes actively contrary to those ambitions. The gap between projection and reception—between what states intend and what target audiences take away—is one of the most consistent findings to emerge from this body of research.

The Indonesian case is perhaps the clearest illustration. Indonesia has invested substantially in presenting its experience of democratic Islam as a model for Muslim-majority societies elsewhere and has found genuine enthusiasm for this narrative among Western governments eager to identify a Muslim-majority success story. But its efforts to translate this brand into influence within the Muslim world—particularly in the Middle East and North Africa—have made conspicuously little headway. Middle Eastern audiences and governments have shown limited appetite for lessons in Islamic governance from Southeast Asia; the theological traditions are different, the political contexts are incommensurable, and the implicit suggestion that Indonesian Islam offers a superior model has generated resistance rather than admiration in contexts where local religious authorities have their own claims to authenticity and precedence.[33] The gap between Western enthusiasm for the Indonesian model and Middle Eastern indifference to it reveals something important: The audience that most validates a religious soft power brand is not always the audience that the projecting state most needs to reach.

Jordan's experience is similarly instructive. Amman has constructed an impressive architecture of Islamic moderation—

30. Ashiwa and Wank, "Chinese Buddhism."
31. Berkley Center, *The Geopolitics of Religion and Culture in Asia*.
32. Guilherme Casarões and Amy Erica Smith, "'Brazil Above Everything or God Above Everyone?' The Sources of Brazil's Religious Soft Power," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*
33. Hoesterey, "Indonesian Islam?"

the Amman Message, "A Common Word between Us and You" interfaith initiative, a series of royal declarations on Islamic tolerance—that has won considerable recognition in Western policy and academic circles. Yet research examining the actual impact of these initiatives finds little evidence of durable influence on how Islam is perceived in the West, or on the religious landscape of Muslim communities in Jordan's immediate neighborhood.[34] The moderation brand has been effective at cultivating relationships with Western governments and securing Jordan's position as a valued security partner, but it has not succeeded in shifting the terms of Islamic discourse in the ways Amman's architects intended. Recognition is not the same as influence.

Saudi Arabia's experience with religious propagation networks illustrates a different dimension of the reception problem. Decades of investment in spreading puritanical Salafi and Wahhabi interpretations of Sunni Islam globally produced outcomes that were, from the Saudi government's perspective, deeply unwelcome: The same networks that Riyadh had funded became vehicles for jihadist recruitment and ideological radicalization that eventually turned against the kingdom itself.[35] The lesson—that religious outreach creates infrastructure and ideas that take on lives of their own, well beyond the control of the sponsoring state—applies across cases. Turkey has discovered that Diyanet-trained imams in European Muslim communities do not always remain reliably aligned with Ankara's political agenda. Iran has found that the transnational Shia networks it has cultivated sometimes pursue local agendas that diverge from Tehran's strategic priorities. Religious soft power, once projected, cannot be recalled or redirected at will.

The Roman Catholic papacy offers a partial counterexample that helps clarify the conditions under which religious soft power is more likely to be effective. The papacy under the late Francis exercised genuine influence in specific, well-defined domains—climate diplomacy, refugee advocacy, the facilitation of the Cuba-US rapprochement—precisely because it combined moral authority with institutional coherence and the interventions were selective.[36] But even here, the limits were visible: Papal authority over national episcopal conferences weakened, the church's moral credibility had been severely damaged by the abuse scandal, and the capacity of Rome to translate its soft power into specific policy outcomes remained highly contingent on the political context of the receiving government. Even the most institutionally coherent religious soft power actor in the world cannot reliably convert attraction into influence.

The reception problem has a structural dimension that deserves particular emphasis. Religious soft power is received not by abstract publics but by specific communities with their own theological traditions, political contexts, and existing patronage relationships. A mosque built by Turkey in Kosovo lands differently than one built in Kazakhstan. Saudi-funded Islamic education in Mali has different effects than the same curriculum in Bosnia. The effectiveness of religious soft power cannot be assessed by examining the projecting state's inputs—the money spent, the mosques built, the clerics trained—but only by examining what recipient communities do with those inputs. And recipient communities, as the evidence consistently shows, are active interpreters of external religious influences rather than passive recipients. Local religious actors negotiate, adapt, resist, and selectively appropriate external resources in ways that routinely frustrate the intentions of external sponsors.

For policymakers, this finding should function as a corrective to two symmetrical errors. The first is overestimating the effectiveness of adversaries' religious soft power—treating every Saudi-funded mosque or Russian Orthodox initiative as a reliable vector of hostile influence, when local reception dynamics frequently blunt or redirect that influence in unpredictable ways. The second is overestimating the effectiveness of one's own partners' religious soft power—assuming, for example, that a counterterrorism partner's moderation discourse is reshaping religious opinion in the ways it claims. In both cases, the corrective is the same: analytical attention to reception, not just projection. Understanding how religious influence lands in specific communities—through ethnographic research, local partner networks, and sustained diplomatic engagement with religious actors on the ground—is a prerequisite for serious policy engagement with the geopolitics of religion.

34. Gutkowski, "Moderation as Jordanian Soft Power: Islam and Beyond." See also Taylor Luck, "Tiny Jordan's outsize role fostering interfaith understanding," *The Christian Science Monitor Online*, December 26, 2018, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2018/1226/Tiny-Jordan-s-outsize-role-fostering-interfaith-understanding

35. Mandaville and Hamid, "Islam as Statecraft."

36. Timothy A. Byrnes, "Soft Power of the Catholic Papacy," in Mandaville, ed., *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power.*

Conclusion: Implications for policy and practice

The five findings presented in this report add up to a picture of religious soft power that is simultaneously more pervasive, more competitive, more dangerous in some of its manifestations, and more limited in its effects than conventional policy wisdom tends to assume. States across every major world region are deploying religion as a foreign policy instrument with a degree of deliberateness and institutional investment that demands serious analytical attention. At the same time, the gap between ambition and effect that appears consistently across cases should caution against both alarmism and complacency. Religious soft power is a real force in contemporary geopolitics—but it is an unruly one, and the states wielding it are frequently surprised by the results.

Several overarching implications for US and allied policymakers follow from these findings, offered not as a checklist of recommendations but as a reorientation of perspective.

Take religion seriously as a geopolitical variable—not just a cultural footnote

The dominant frameworks through which US foreign policy is analyzed and conducted—i.e., realist calculations of interest and power, liberal institutionalist assumptions about convergence around shared norms—tend to treat religion as a second-order phenomenon, relevant perhaps to understanding why certain conflicts are especially intractable but not central to the structural analysis of international order. The evidence challenges that assumption directly. The contest over who speaks for Islam is inseparable from the contest over regional order in the Middle East. Russia's mobilization of Orthodox Christianity is not decorative to its challenge to the liberal international order: It is constitutive of it, providing the civilizational legitimation that Russian foreign policy requires. China's management of religion at home and abroad reflects a coherent strategic logic with significant implications for its relationships across Asia and the Global South. Hindu nationalist networks are reshaping diaspora politics in ways that affect democratic discourse in Western societies. None of these dynamics can be adequately understood through a purely materialist lens. Analytical frameworks that systematically exclude or marginalize religion will generate systematically incomplete assessments.

Develop greater institutional capacity to analyze religious soft power

Recognizing religion as a geopolitical variable is necessary but not sufficient: It also requires institutional capacity to analyze it with rigor and sophistication. The US government's capacity in this area has been uneven. The State Department's Office of Religion and Global Affairs, established in 2013, represented an important step toward institutionalizing religious literacy within American diplomacy, but its mandate has been inconsistently supported and its analytical reach remains limited relative to the scale of the phenomenon it is tasked with understanding.[37] What is needed is not merely religious engagement—dialogue with religious leaders, support for interfaith initiatives—but genuine analytical capacity: the ability to track transnational religious networks, assess the domestic political functions of partners' religious outreach, evaluate reception dynamics in target communities, and identify the point at which religious soft power shades into sharp power. This is specialized knowledge that requires sustained investment in expertise, language capability, and field presence.

Apply skeptical scrutiny to partners' moderation claims

The post-9/11 framework of moderate Islam has created powerful incentives for governments to present themselves as bulwarks against extremism while using the moderation discourse to serve domestic political purposes that have little to do with the counterterrorism agenda they are ostensibly advancing. This does not mean that partnerships with Muslim-majority governments on counterterrorism and religious governance are without value; it means that the religious branding that accompanies those partnerships should not be taken at face value. Policymakers should routinely ask what a partner government's moderation discourse is doing domestically, who it is defining as extremist and on what basis, and whether the repressive practices it enables are more likely to reduce or to reproduce the conditions that generate radicalization over time. The record on these questions is, at best, mixed.

37. Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, "The Case for Enhancing U.S. Engagement with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation," Berkley Forum, May 2022.

Attend to the sharp power dimension—and build coalitions to address it

The finding that religious sharp power represents a growing and underappreciated threat, particularly in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and across Asia, points toward a gap in existing policy frameworks for countering foreign interference. Current approaches focus primarily on electoral manipulation, information operations, and economic coercion. The religious dimension of foreign interference—i.e., the use of transnational religious networks to polarize societies, obstruct integration, and legitimize authoritarian agendas—requires dedicated analytical and policy attention. Building coalitions to address this challenge is itself a religious soft power challenge: Muslim-majority governments in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation that have their own reasons to avoid scrutiny of religious outreach activities will not be natural partners, while European governments with significant Muslim populations and immediate exposure to georeligious competition are more promising interlocutors. Multilateral norm development around the limits of state-sponsored religious outreach—analogous to existing frameworks around state-sponsored disinformation—deserves serious exploration.

Focus on reception, not just projection

The consistent finding that religious soft power underperforms its ambitions—that local communities are active interpreters rather than passive recipients of external religious influence—should reshape how both threats and opportunities are assessed. Analytically, this means investing in the granular, context-specific knowledge of local religious landscapes that is a prerequisite for accurate assessment. Programmatically, it means that efforts to build resilience against malign religious influence will be most effective when they work with and through local religious actors and institutions rather than imposing external frameworks. The most durable counter to religious sharp power is a healthy, pluralistic, and institutionally robust local religious ecology—and that is something that can be supported, though not manufactured, from outside.

The deeper challenge this research poses is ultimately one of world order. The post-Cold War assumption that international politics was converging toward a secular liberal framework in which religion would play at most a marginal role has not survived contact with the evidence. The world that is emerging—multipolar, ideologically diverse, and increasingly shaped by civilizational claims in which religion figures prominently—is one in which the geopolitics of religion will be a permanent feature of the landscape rather than an occasional complication. Developing the analytical tools, institutional capacities, and diplomatic frameworks to navigate that landscape effectively is among the more pressing tasks of the current moment.

In producing this report, the author made use of a generative AI tool to search across the hundred-plus articles, working papers, webinar transcripts, and edited volumes that collectively constitute the outputs of the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power project, in order to identify and synthesize cross-cutting themes.

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