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## **The Power of Soft Power**

Terror became part of our lives, from bombs in Afghanistan and Iraq, blasts on the trains of European cities, to the horror in the evening news. Provoked by violence and promoted by rhetoric, the world is caught up in a climate fear.

This clearly demonstrates that hardware alone is no way out. Military muscles do not produce positive results. And it is women, not armies, who are ideal agents for positive change. Women do not want to watch the energies of another generation be lost in the battle for ideological control.

Women believe in the power of soft power. And women are experts in the soft power skills: listening, persistent negotiations and dialogue. Long term education programs and alternative security networks are the building blocks for a peaceful future.

In these critical times of hope and horror we must learn to live together. The young Muslim boys and girls must be strengthened and brought into society with adequate social solutions. But what exactly do these young people all over Europe want? We need to find out and listen to them as it is this group that we can expect to be the driving force of Muslim moderation. We must identify their hopes, ambitions, perspectives and develop strategies for encouragement and policies against their exclusion.

Women are excellent communicators, curious and inquisitive and best suited to create an environment of openness, and opportunities to overcome prejudice, build bridges and break up limiting social behaviours.

The debate of proclaimed clash of civilisation has reached a new level of ventilation: the clash of emotions. Talking about terror is not neutral territory; we are all armed with highly charged emotions, histories and agendas. We must hear the arguments and assumptions of all the camps, and to challenge even our own. The worst thing though would be not to talk. We must reach out to the other side and communicate – particularly with our enemies.

We must not be bystanders and pretend we have no control, we are all involved in the making of our society, and we must wake up and shake up.

### ***Young, Muslim – European?***

Social tensions and security fears regarding Muslim populations dominate domestic political topics throughout Europe. How do European Muslims live and think? Where are they from? How do they define themselves in regards to tradition, religion and modernity? What do we know about the young Muslim generation in Europe? Do they feel as threatened by extremists and suicide bombers as we do?

Young Muslims are the hope for a new European-Muslim civil society. What is obvious is that young Muslims in Europe are put under great pressure. They are caught between Western individualism and Islamic tradition and frequently find themselves in an identity vacuum.

Muslim women are constantly in the spotlight, whether they wear a head scarf, a veil, or a miniskirt. Male Muslims are often eyed with scepticism and unease, and are seen as walking time bombs. This treatment can lead to withdrawal and isolation, making them susceptible to online radical opportunists. The feeling of young Muslims that they lack a foothold in society and that their voices go unheard are driving forces behind withdrawal and in extreme cases bring them to live in parallel communities. If young Muslims find themselves unable to establish their place in society and are not supported in their efforts to do so, then they become vulnerable to fundamentalist groups. An analytical look behind the scenes at the aspirations, desires and set backs of the young Muslim generation is beneficial in two ways: for interpersonal relations and strategic security.

There is strong evidence that Muslims born or brought up in Western countries can and do flourish and there are signs of a robust and creative Muslim civil society, thriving within secular or Christian dominated environments. Nonetheless, Muslims, especially Muslim women, still perceive a huge divide between themselves and their adopted countries. This view is often reinforced by native-born Europeans and Americans who see Muslim immigrants as purposefully isolating themselves from the rest of society. Statistics show that substantial majorities in European nations believe Muslims in their country want to remain distinct from the larger society. But this is no longer 'their problem,' and isolation is no longer an option. In our rapidly changing world, it is in our common best interest to make concerted efforts to face issues as they arise and to tackle problems that concern us all.

Third Millennium Muslims are of course, already co-shaping the West. Muslim women and men are becoming increasingly influential in defining modern societies, a force that cannot be ignored. In this year's general election in France, for example, more than 250 minority

candidates ran for office, many of them of North African origin. Five years ago, only one dozen ran. But it is not only engagement at the macro levels that shapes societies. Micro-level involvement, particularly of Muslim women, is beginning to show in their growing visibility as entrepreneurs, university professors, in the media and as mothers of the next generation of American and European citizens.

But how involved are Muslim women in terms of numbers? How can Muslim women confidently participate and contribute to their societies and operate as a visible force for positive change? How can young Muslim males find their place alongside their female counterparts in a transforming society? According to a Pew Global Attitudes report, over 20% of Muslims in Britain remain very concerned that Muslim women will adopt modern Western roles. How can we help Muslim communities to overcome this fear of feminine power, and allow their women to prosper in modern society?

### ***The Muslim Youth of Europe – Modern in Appearance, Conservative at the Core?***

The young, educated generation is the hope for moderate Islam in Europe. Muslim women are at the centre of attention of their families where they are protected, guarded and controlled. Public areas are increasingly becoming minefields for young Muslim women, regardless of whether they wear a head scarf, a veil or a miniskirt. Adolescent male Muslims are often eyed with scepticism and unease, and are seen as walking time bombs.

The male Muslim youth is considered a hot topic in current debates surrounding education, integration and the labour market. They are associated with terrorism and fundamentalism, are considered troublemakers and are the most likely to drop out of school.

*What are the grounds for this? Why do many male Muslims fail to establish footing in their social environments, fall out of social networks and continue to be offenders?*

One assumption is that young men no longer have role models. Fathers often lose their ability to serve as examples because of the “uprooting.”

*Who are these fathers? How do they define the freedoms of their daughters and sons?*

Traditionally, boys are given more freedom than girls and are allowed to do as they please. Girls are more likely to stay at home and use this time for intense studying. They are aware that education is the way to independence. *Of what avail is this? What role do their mothers play in their lives?*

### ***Withdrawal & Isolation***

It is feared that young Muslims will stray from moderate Muslim authorities into the hands of online radical opportunists.

There are numerous forces driving young Muslim men to withdraw to their own world and, in extreme cases, to fall into parallel communities: difficult issues such as familial pressure put on young men to be “good Muslims” and to preserve family honour, peer pressure and the feeling they lack a foothold in society, and that they are unappreciated and that their voices go unheard are a few of these forces. The propositions of preachers in cyberspace are infinite and difficult to oversee. If young Muslims are unable to handle societal pressures, they become targets of fundamentalists.

Encouraging and enforcing the active participation of Muslim women in the public sphere -- who are agents of change by educating the young generation -- will be one of the pressing challenges of the next decade. And if women are supported by their Muslim communities in fully participating in politics and economics, science and theology - this will not only be a victory for women’s empowerment, but a clear vote for democracy and equality.

We must also acknowledge that there are sizeable secular communities existing within both Muslim and Christian nations. You could say that secularism is one of the growing ‘beliefs’ of the modern world. It is essential to build bridges to these secular groups and to recognize them as essential players in co-shaping the future of the West. The difficult question in this regard is how to address secular segments of society, because there is no formal leader of the secular community. Any invitation to open dialogue must be addressed to civil society as a whole.

Indeed, civil society can play a pivotal role between religious and non-religious groups. Civil society can be truly inclusive, embracing the East and the West. From business to business, institute to institute and friend to friend – civil society offers a wonderful opportunity to show mutual respect and connect through dialogue and activity.

But are calls for mutual respect enough? How can we truly kick-start a sea of change? What is new in the Ummah’s offer to open dialogue with the West this time? Is the community ready to move on real taboos that have no place in western culture? Can the different houses of Islam in Europe work together as a common voice?

The opportunity lies at our fingertips: will history report that this generation also missed the boat?

### **Listen Up! Making Room for the Voices of Muslim Youth**

While human beings *hear* about the ills affecting their societies, they too often listen only selectively or, more often, fail to listen at all. As Tariq Ramadan, professor of Islamic studies in Oxford writes in his December 2007 article in the International Herald Tribune, “A Case of

*Selective Hearing”, “In Western countries as well as Islamic countries, we witness a kind of selective hearing. People are invited to listen only to what apparently comforts their prejudices or suits some ideological agenda.”*

Listening is a skill that is learned and it goes one step beyond hearing, allowing us to understand the arguments and assumptions resulting in societal clashes and enabling us to overcome distrust and misunderstanding. The *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*, which promotes peaceful negotiation and decision-making processes, is the right platform to prepare the young generation for tolerance.

Targeting youth at institutions of higher education will reach segment of population that represents some of the more articulate, media savvy, and possibly more self-reflecting Muslim Europeans. At this age, young adults are in a crucial transition, a moment of openness to new ideas and choices. Their experiences in this stage can be the basis for their adult values and identities.

Finding their voice and a positive sense of power gives groups an important feeling of control. If an individual or a group wants to belong but fails to find a place through cooperation, it is not unusual for them to resort to acts of outcry and revenge, such as terrorist activities. Rudolf Dreikurs, the pioneering psychiatrist, hypothesised that those who seek revenge actually want fairness.

Psychologists who analyse group behaviour would arguably explain that the predicament in Islamic-European relations is a classic communication crisis, where an increasingly frustrated party feels unable to exert influence, when normal channels, exhausted or not productive, will begin to reject the opposing party almost as a form of self-defense. The solution in these cases is to start by listening.

As they stand on the cusp of adulthood, these young Muslims are most likely to articulate where they feel limited, where they require encouragement, and what frustrates or affirms them. In making these youth's perspectives clear and captivating, we reach an important step toward rationalising people's fears and encouraging youth's responsible participation in effective dialogue as part of counterterrorism.

Having young adults represent themselves in more than just a token gesture; it offers them a practical opportunity and a responsibility to formulate their own themes and present their ideas and opinions in a way that can be listened to by larger audiences.

Such self-representation is an excellent training ground for peaceful and purposeful social change and development, for which these eloquent and competent youth will help to shape an propel and integrated and productive future, acting as important allies in achieving a new European identity.

### **Muslims and the West: Living Together – but How?**

In April of this year, Women without Borders organized the Matinee “Women against Terror” in an Austrian theatre to share the power of reconciliation and tolerance. Guest speakers included Phyllis Rodriguez, the American Jewish mother of a victim of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, and Aicha el Wafi, the French Moroccan mother of the alleged 20<sup>th</sup> hijacker on trial for involvement in the attacks.

The two women encompassed every trait that would make them natural enemies, but instead they chose to work together to fight the intolerance that allowed their sons to fall victim to hatred. They represent a friendship without borders: two human beings suffering unimaginable pain that chose to look past their race, nationality, and religion to forge a bond that represents the true power of soft power.

The grief, fear and hope of victims are similar as are the anger and hate of the perpetrators. Conflicts are inevitable, but it is how we deal with these conflicts that matters. Hundreds of participants joined together to show that another way is possible, and that terror will not silence their voices. Peace, after all, is a people’s endeavour.

We must ask ourselves: What is the alternative to the beautiful friendship that Rodriguez and el Wafi represent? Anger and desire for revenge are the probable symptoms of an age-old disease with a predictable outcome: more support of military retaliation, a greater divide and further resentment of the “other”, the “enemy”.

Women such as el Wafi choose to tell others about the trap into which her son fell, and the consequences of his actions, in order to keep others from meeting the same fate. Dialogue and tolerance are the tools we must focus on. If we are truly committed to this approach, then those in power will have to listen.

If we fail to encourage dialogue of this kind, feelings of frustration and exclusion will prevail and parallel societies will become the norm, in which fear and hatred of the “other” will run rampant. The creation of these parallel communities poses a great danger to tolerance; unless we promote access to these divided communities through communication, tolerance will be a term without meaning, an empty shell.

Communities will occupy the same territory, but will never interact, and 'tolerance' will mean nothing more than the concession of the others' existence. This was the focus of our recent conference held in the National Library of Vienna, in cooperation with the United States embassy in Vienna and the United States mission to Brussels, posing the key question: "Living together, but how?"

Vienna is the city which the Ottoman Muslims tried to conquer in 1529 and again in 1683 and is the ideal venue to ask how Muslims where to live harmoniously in the West. For if we get this right now - in the heart of Europe – we offer hope not only for ourselves, but also for millions of young Muslims across the Middle East who look to the West to learn how we co-exist. How we do come to terms with our own tradition of enlightenment, our values and liberties?

The Vienna conference brought together politicians and diplomats from across Europe, grass root activists from the Arab world and senior personnel from the US government. And Amr Khaled, the super star Muslim preacher bringing the good feel Islam to the table.

One panel member, former Muslim fundamentalist Ed Husain who since renounced extremism and authored the British bestseller, *The Islamist*, acts as a spokesperson for moderate Muslims wishing to end the hatred bred in mono-cultural European ghettos that exist alongside prosperous all-white neighbourhoods. Husain is the voice of moderate Islam, and we must continue to provide a platform for moderate groups of all races, religions and nationalities experiencing intolerance and discrimination. Husain believes that this moderate majority should speak up and overcome their fears of reprisals from extremists and concern for breaking ranks with fellow Muslims. Ed says: "*I was part of the secret self structure of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist organisation, banned in most Muslim countries and rejected by most mosques in Britain. Yet the group had a free rein on university campuses where it advocated that British Muslim, where a community whose loyalty lay not with the country, but to a coming Kalif in the Middle East. I was indoctrinated in my meetings by angry men struggling in a post colonial Middle East to find new meanings in a new world.*" We need more Eds, who are like him: young, educated and passionate about their Euro-Muslim identity.

Ultimately, it is moderates such as him that have access to those who have chosen a more extreme path. Not only do Muslims require a public platform from which they can be heard, Europeans must also embrace Muslim populations as one of their own. Those that have witnessed the growing tension and division in Europe must speak out to prevent this division from happening elsewhere. Integration is a two-way street.

With these present challenges, questions, and hopes, we begin our expedition into the future and the waters upon which we set sail may be rough. Experienced sailors are needed to navigate and careful preparation is required before embarking. The better we prepare, the more likely we are to arrive at our destination in good condition.

Still, questions are left to be answered: What equipment do we need for such an expedition? Which mind maps will show us the way? And, above all, what must we leave behind? If our trunks are burdened with fear and prejudice, we are most likely to sink. So we must travel light, trust in our companions, and embark on this journey together – women, men, and children – with open minds and the will for a more equal and inclusive future.

Together we are here today to build another vision. Let us not fear, but explore diversity!

*\* Social scientist, author and founder of Women without Borders ([www.women-without-borders.org](http://www.women-without-borders.org)) and Executive Director of the Austrian Foundation for World Population and International co-operation (SWI) [www.swi-austria.org](http://www.swi-austria.org) in Vienna*