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SOFT POWER, HARD RESULTS IN NORTH AFRICA

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For too many decades, America has sent money, soldiers and drones to the sunburned stretches of the Sahara and the Sahel. America's policy makers have, for too long, seen Africa as either a magnet for misery or a source of terror threats.

Meanwhile, China's influence in the region has surged—without sending arms or aid. Instead, the Chinese see North Africa as a market. The Asian power has invested in roads, bridges, pipelines and drilling operations and put itself in line with the Africans striving to join the world's fastest growing middle class.

It is time to rethink America's outlook on North Africa—and Morocco's king, Mohammed VI, subtly pointed out on his recent trip to Mali the path American policy makers should follow. It involves the “soft power” that Obama Administration officials have often praised, but in an innovative way.

In Bamako, Mali's burgeoning capital, the king joined French President François Hollande, in congratulating the Malian people in conducting a largely free and fair presidential election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, despite the constant threats of attack by a welter of radical Islamic groups. “We all welcome the collective victory over the forces of obscurantism and separatists in Mali, [while] we are all aware of the magnitude of the challenges ahead in this new phase of reconciliation and national reconstruction,” the king said.

Then the king announced concrete steps that will counter the long-term growth of radical Islam in Mali. He announced a joint Mali-Morocco two-year training program for 500 imams. The training program “will be mainly devoted to the study of the Maliki rite and moral doctrine that rejects any form of excommunication,” the king said. Radical groups claim that the Muslims who oppose violent overthrow of their national government are unbelievers and therefore undeserving of life. These extremist groups have murdered thousands of Malians and other Africans based on this doctrine that is actually alien to Islam. Speaking in French, the king used the word “excommunication”—a Roman Catholic doctrine of denying fellowship to believers who make certain moral transgressions. He used this term because there is no word for this doctrine in Islam. Indeed, this doctrine does not exist in Islam. The belief -- in the minds of radicals -- that some Muslims can be expelled for their religion and killed as unbelievers simply doesn't exist in Islam. Indeed, it is the radicals that have departed from Islam, not their victims. The king's training program for imams will emphasize this doctrinal point and may well prevent violence.

The king has a special standing to make this religious argument. He is “commander of faithful” and the supreme religious authority in Morocco and his religious title is widely respected across the Islamic world. The king also

insisted on greeting and meeting with the principal religious leaders of Mali, who represents largely moderate Islamic strains. The king's meeting and speech were two unique and strong signals for the promotion of moderate Islam in this very volatile region.

Any international efforts that ignores the religious dimension, the king stressed, would be “doomed to failure.”

He emphasized the centuries of shared religious bonds between Morocco and Mali. Muslim scholars in each nation have long studied the works of religious scholars in the other. And the common threads in that tradition have always been tolerance, humility and freedom of conscience—the very principles that radicals abhor.

The tone of the king's remarks is itself revealing. He didn't come to instruct, but to remind. “The tradition and practice of Islam in Morocco and Mali are one. They feed on the same precepts of ‘balance.’ They claim the same values of tolerance and openness to others, and remain the foundation of continuous spiritual fabric that linked our two countries.”

Beyond training imams and engaging in religious dialogue, the king underlined the importance not just of humanitarian projects, but of charitable works designed to revitalize the physical symbols of the religious traditions of tolerance. He called for “the rehabilitation of the mausoleums, the restoration of [religious] manuscripts, the preservation and revitalization of the socio-cultural life.”

While it would be hard for American diplomats, who naturally lack the religious aura that Morocco's king enjoys, the tone and the message would be easy for U.S. officials to adopt. Using surrogates from Morocco and other parts of the North African religious leadership, the U.S. could repeat and amplify the king's valuable message. But, first, American leaders would have to become comfortable in talking about religion and recognize that the war on terror has a religious dimension. It is past time that they grasp this essential reality.

Finally, the king coupled his theological beliefs with practical action—deeds which reinforced his words. He called for increasing trade and investment between the new African nations, transferring skills and capital. This will create both jobs and hope in war-torn Mali, which badly needs both. This, too, is a message that America could endorse. It was been more than a decade since the U.S. seriously considered lifting trade barriers between itself and sub-Saharan nations and much has changed in the passing years. If America's free-trade arrangement with Morocco could be extended to Mali, that would help heal and quiet a land that might otherwise become a breeding ground for terrorists.

Finally, the king called for a “peaceful reconciliation between all the sons of Mali, open to all sensibilities” and endorsed the birth of a “Ministry for National Reconciliation and Regional Development of the North” to economically develop the region of Mali hardest hit by French and American warplanes while admitting radicals, who have foresworn violence, back into society. Building on successful experiences of South Africa and, to a lesser extent, Rwanda, reconciliation agencies can actually knit civil society back together. This, too, is something that American leaders should lend their voices to.

President Obama has often spoken eloquently about peace and reconciliation, the traditions of tolerant Islam and the need to couple the “hard power” of American military might with the “soft power” of moral suasion and personal example.

The benefits of a new engagement with Africa are equally immense: peace and prosperity for the peoples of two continents.

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