The United States, in Iraq and elsewhere, should cease promoting a secular civil society as the only alternative to a Taliban-like Shia theocracy. We cannot quell the religious yearnings of millions of Iraqis (and many others elsewhere) merely by fostering strong political and economic institutions and the sound values they embody — to wit, democracy and capitalism. The most effective way to counter a theocracy is to include moderate, liberal religious elements in the civil society we are helping to erect.

The First Amendment's disestablishment clause is not a foreign policy tool, but a peculiarly American conception. Just because the American government is banned from promoting religion within the United States does not mean that the State Department and the Pentagon cannot promote religion overseas in societies that are undergoing profound societal changes. This last point is crucial: Overseas we are participating as a key architect and builder of new institutions; we are in what social scientists call "the design business." This is quite distinct from what we do at home: shoring up a solid social structure designed two centuries ago, careful not to rock the foundations or undermine the pillars on which it stands. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other Third World countries, we participate in the ground-breaking, foundation-laying stage, one in which elements we can take for granted at home — such as a thriving religious life within civil society — must be provided.

The current U.S. position reflects, whether deliberately or unwittingly, the
Amitai Etzioni

“end of history” conception that all ideologies are on their last legs as the world embraces the American (or Western) ideals of democracy, human rights, and free markets. This notion, in turn, is but an extension of the Enlightenment conceit that modernity is based on rational thinking, which religion is not, and hence religion is “history” while secularism (reason, science) is the future. Accordingly, societies in which religion is “still” playing a key role are considered behind the times, underdeveloped. As we are learning, however, all over the world people have spiritual needs that cannot be addressed, let alone satisfied, by Enlightenment ideals.

We are witnessing an explosive growth of Christianity in East Asia (in 2000, China had 3.5 million Catholics, up from less than half a million in the mid-1980s); on the Korean peninsula, where nearly a quarter of the population is Christian, a 4,000 percent increase from the early part of the twentieth century; and in Africa (360 million Christians in 2000, compared to 10 million in 1900). We find an “outpouring of pent-up religious [fervor],” as sociologist Alan Aldridge put it, in Russia (which nearly doubled the number of adherents to the Russian Orthodox Church from 1970 to 2000) and other former communist nations in Eastern Europe. And there has been a rise in Islam not only in countries that were never modernized, but even in those that have had extensive secular, modern periods — such as, most tellingly, Turkey. In the United States, although there are continuous debates over the depth of American religious commitments and the possibility of a religious revival, no one doubts that religion is a major force in American life and that important elements of our civil society are faith-based. We should export to Iraq — and to other countries challenged by fundamentalism — our mixed secular and religious civil society.

The reason religion cannot be suppressed, why religion is reasserting itself where it was formerly stifled or thriving where it was never held back, is that it speaks to profound questions to which many millions of people seek answers. These are transcendental questions such as why we are cast into this world, why we are born to die, and what life’s purpose might be. In addition, there are moral questions such as what we owe to our children, to our elderly parents, and to our friends, communities, and nations. Neither democracy nor capitalism speaks to these issues. Secular humanism does provide some answers, but not ones all find compelling; the answers deal largely with moral issues but much less with the truly transcendent ones.

The quest for spiritual answers of one kind or another is evident both in former communist countries and in Islamic countries in which the theocracy is breaking down (such as Iran) or has been ended (e.g., Afghanistan). In all these countries, the breakdown of tyranny precedes an explosive growth of new kinds of anti-social behavior. (I write new kinds of anti-social behavior because other kinds — corruption or spying on one’s friends, co-workers, and neighbors, for instance — were, of course, quite common in the pre-liberation days.) These countries experience sharp rises in drug abuse, HIV, divorce, and crime. The New York Times Magazine published a particularly
distressing account of the reemergence of pedophiles in Kabul, who did not dare act out during the Taliban days.

The reason is obvious: Once police terror as the source of social order is removed, it must be replaced by some other source or else moral and social anarchy will arise. Order in a free society rests primarily on people choosing to refrain from anti-social behavior because of their moral upbringing and the informal enforcement of social norms. No free society can make police the mainstay of its social order; law enforcement’s proper place is as a backup to an order largely undergirded by morality. Sending the military police into newly freed countries and training local cops are of course necessary, but they will not curb anti-social behavior unless accompanied by a new moral code. Religion has been and very much still is one major source of such mores. The religion we should promote is compatible with democracy and not oppressive in its own terms and institutions. Call it a “soft” religion.

**A soft Islam**

I know a bit about how receptive Shiites are to a non-Wahhabi, moderate, soft Islam because they laid out their position during a three-day meeting in Iran that I attended a year ago. It ended just as the holiday commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hossein began. Although the reformers — headed by Dr. Seyyed Ataollah Mohajerani of the International Centre for Dialogue Among Civilizations — organized the meeting, several hardliners also participated. The main point, repeatedly stressed during the meeting, was that both Shia camps — the hardliners and the reformers — want to live in an Islamic society. The main difference between them is that the prevailing hardliners are committed to enforcing the religious code through morality squads, secret police, and jails — in short, the government — while the reformers favor encouraging people to be devout rather than forcing them to abide by the Prophet’s dictates. The line most often repeated was: “If you do not force people to come, they will want to come.”

A similar approach was laid out by professor Muqtedar Khan of Adrian College in Michigan, who writes:

Moderate Muslims aspire for a society — a city of virtue — that will treat all people with dignity and respect. There will be no room for political or normative intimidation. Individuals will aspire to live an ethical life because they recognize its desirability. Communities will compete in doing good and politics will seek to encourage good and forbid evil. They believe that the internalization of the message of Islam can bring about the social transformation necessary for the establishment of the virtuous city. The only arena in which moderate Muslims permit excess is in idealism.
Many have attempted to outline the features of a soft Islam in recent years, resulting in several typologies of liberal, modest, modern, and Euro-Islam that are contrasted with militant, virulent, and fundamentalist Islam. Naturally, there is no agreement about the interpretation of relevant texts and traditions. Nor is it possible (or necessary) to review this large body of literature here. Rather, I seek to list several key features of the sort of Islam the United States should support in those parts of the world where it must counter Muslim fundamentalism.

Soft Islam, as the Islamic legal theorist Khaled Abou El Fadl has described it, differs from the fundamentalist version in that it draws on the members of the community for consultations (sharia) rather than relying on rulings from the mullahs. The concept of sharia has been traced to the pre-Islamic era, when tribal councils decided important public issues through consultation. Professor Forough Jahanbakhsh of Queen’s University in Canada adds that most modern scholars hold that such consultative bodies should be composed of representatives of the whole community, and not just elites.

In 2001, President Mohammad Khatami of Iran, the leader of the reformers, stated that “the constitution [of Iran] states that the rule is Allah’s . . . but it also states that this Divine rule is based on people’s opinions. Man is Allah’s representative on earth and the right to rule does not refer to any specific person. Rather, it refers to all those who participate in elections and set the government’s agenda.” Another principle discussed by some — including Abou El Fadl in his book *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourse* (University Press of America, 2001) — is one attributed to the Prophet: that “every mujtahid [the person exerting effort in deducing the law] is correct.” This means, according to Abou El Fadl, that “one must search for the law without fear of failure” and that while humans strive to discover the Divine Will, “no one has the authority to lay an exclusive claim to it.”

Others have stressed that the Koran is open to different interpretations rather than commanding one strict, rigid, by-the-book line. As Khan writes in his essay “Who Are Moderate Muslims?”:

*Ijtihad* narrowly understood is a juristic tool that allows independent reasoning to articulate Islamic law on issues where textual sources are silent. The unstated assumption being when texts have spoken reason must be silent. But increasingly moderate Muslim intellectuals see *Ijtihad* as the spirit of Islamic thought that is necessary for the vitality of Islamic ideas and Islamic civilization. . . . For moderate Muslims, *Ijtihad* is a way of life, which simultaneously allows Islam to reign supreme in the heart and the mind to experience unfettered freedom of thought. A moderate Muslim is therefore one who cherishes freedom of thought while recognizing the existential necessity of faith.

Abou El Fadl, a professor at UCLA, provides examples of conflicting Koranic interpretations in *And God Knows the Soldiers*. The Koran, he
explains, commands believers, “Do not take a life which God has forbidden unless for some just cause.” Yet what constitutes “just cause” is susceptible to debate. The Koran also instructs, “And do not kill yourselves.” But whether smoking, for example, is a form of killing oneself is also a matter of debate. Regarding the veil or headscarf (hijab) worn by many Muslim women, Abou El Fadl writes:

Most importantly, the historical setting and the complexity of the early context do suggest that the inquiries into the juristic basis of the hijab cannot be considered heretical. In this sense, labeling the hijab as a part of the usul [the foundations of the faith upon which disagreement is not tolerated], and using that label as an excuse to end the discussion in the matter, is obscenely despotic. It might very well be that this is yet another legal issue where the law of God is pursuant to the convictions of the pious adherent.

That last comment is particularly important. When religions are moderated, whether the reforms include praying in the vernacular or allowing men and women to worship together, there is a common fear that the whole construction will unravel. Hence, drawing a distinction between an inviolate core and the other elements is crucial to fostering the sense that one can reinterpret the various religious dictates while maintaining the religion’s essence. Soft Islam builds on this difference between the core and the rest; rigid Islam denies the existence of such a distinction. Thus, the Iranian historian and reformer Hashem Aghajari has addressed the question of the mullah’s religious authority in this way:

The Protestant movement wanted to rescue Christianity from the clergy and the Church hierarchy — [Christians] must save religion from the pope. We [Muslims] do not need mediators between us and God. We do not need mediators to understand God’s holy books. The Prophet [Jesus] spoke to the people directly. . . . We don’t need to go to the clergy; each person is his own clergy.

A particularly important case of divergent interpretations of Islam, one antithetical to a civil global society and one very supportive of it, is found in the debate over the meaning of “jihad.” Some Muslims interpret jihad to mean “holy war.” A group of sheikhs in Cairo, expressing this view, has determined that, “According to Islamic law, if the enemy steps on Muslims’ land, jihad becomes a duty of every male and female Muslim.” Before the recent conflict, Iraqi Imam Omar Hussein Asengawy issued a fatwa — an authoritative religious ruling — holding that all Muslims were obligated to wage war against the United States in the event of an attack on Iraq. “Let’s wage jihad together,” he told his coreligionists last December, “to face the enemy and the infidel.” At the heart of the “holy war” viewpoint is the presumption that all nonbelievers are lower-grade human beings, contemptuously referred to as kaffir.
In other, civil interpretations, *jihad* is conceived as a solely spiritual struggle. Abou El Fadl writes, "*Jihad* . . . means to strive, to apply oneself, to struggle, and persevere. In many ways, *jihad* connotes a strong spiritual and material work ethic in Islam." Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains in *The Heart of Islam* (Harper San Francisco, 2002) that "*jihad* is therefore the inner battle to purify the soul of its imperfections, to empty the vessel of the soul of the pungent water of forgetfulness, negligence, and the tendency of evil and to prepare it for the reception of the Divine Elixir of Remembrance, Light, and Knowledge."

These writings represent a small sample of a huge body of literature, yet they illustrate the basic character of a soft Islam. Such an Islam seeks to educate and encourage good conduct rather than coerce it, is open to reinterpretation on all matters but its core, welcomes participation by the members of the community rather than dictates from the mullahs, and spreads spiritually rather than by the sword.

**Institutional implications**

Islam, like Judaism but unlike Protestantism, is much more a behavioral and less a theological religion. Promoting soft Islam in Iraq and elsewhere cannot be accomplished solely through scholarly symposia on the meaning of moderate Islam or by creating anthologies and delivering lectures, although these activities all have their place. We must turn to policy. The most effective way to develop such a conception is to embody it in new institutions for the whole world to see. Moreover, as we remain knee-deep in rebuilding Iraq, concrete questions — not just matters of theory — must be faced.

Schools provide an especially suitable environment in which to start to examine the third way between theocracy and a secular civil society. Education in several Islamic countries is carried out in madrasas. These are the places where young people are drilled in Wahhabi Islam and anti-Western principles and pumped full of rigid interpretations of religious texts, learning by rote, with next to no exposure to science and the liberal arts. Madrasas are common in theocracies such as the Taliban's Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and northern Pakistan. If the dominant Shiites in Iraq have their way, these schools will be introduced in that country as well. In place of the madrasas, Delaware Senator Joseph Biden has suggested that we should promote secular, American-public-school-like institutions.

Another alternative is to provide two tracks of education within public schools. One track would be essentially secular (although children would learn about religion), and the other would dedicate a significant proportion of the teaching — say, 20 percent — to religious subjects. (We may not wish to advertise to Iraqis that this approach is followed in Israel, but that example shows that the approach is feasible.) In Malaysia, in which there is a
large Muslim population but a relatively moderate one, both secular and religious education are provided: Muslim children can attend secular school in the morning and religious classes in the afternoon.

To ensure that the religious part of public schooling is used for soft religious teachings rather than for fundamentalist indoctrination, the teachers, although as a rule from a given religious group (Shiites in southern Iraq, for example), need to be qualified and selected by the school rather than by religious groups, and the teaching material must be approved by the ministry of education.

This is a sound educational system for several reasons: It prevents fundamentalist education; ensures that all children will acquire the rudiments of modern education; allows those parents who seek it to secure a significant amount of religious schooling for their children with the costs covered by the state; and ensures that children of different backgrounds — secular and religious — will mix, an outcome that is prevented when some of the children go to segregated religious schools. Above all, such a two-track system allows a government to promote moderate religions without preventing anyone who (or whose parent) wishes to have secular education from gaining it. Thus, it is a prime example of how a government can promote religion and still ensure that it will be liberal.

The institutionalization of a civil society with religious elements may also proceed through the provision of social services. In several parts of the Islamic world (in southern Iraq, for instance), various religious bodies provide social services. In France, social services — including health care, welfare, and child care — are provided largely by the secular arms of the government. A third way would be to continue to utilize whatever governmental and secular voluntary social services are available and to expand them while also drawing on religious services — the way it is done in the United States. Despite America’s uncommonly strong commitment to disestablishment, the U.S. government relies to a significant extent on voluntary religious groups to provide many social services. This is done either by contracting with various religious groups for the provision of social services or by allowing religious institutions — Catholic or Jewish hospitals, for example — to receive Medicare and Medicaid payments via individuals who choose to be served by them. As of 2001, 75 percent of the funding for the Jewish Board of Family and Children Services came from government sources. Catholic Charities’ programs receive about 66 percent of their funding from government grants and contracts, and Lutheran Services in America receives more than 33 percent of its annual budget from government funds. Indeed, the United States is expanding its

Establishing a civil society with religious elements may also proceed through the provision of social services.
reliance on faith-based institutions following the Charitable Choice Act of 1996 and the Bush administration’s faith-based initiative. All this could be applied to Iraq, relying on what amounts to two-track social services — those provided by government agencies and those provided by faith-based institutions. Here too the government would impose some limitations on the ways in which religious groups can use public funds. Specifically, it would require that the funds be used fully for social services and not for political action or fundamentalist indoctrination.

Finally, a government keen on promoting a two-track civil society might pay the salaries of the Muslim clergy and the maintenance costs of mosques. To Americans this may seem highly controversial and a gross violation of the separation of church and state, but it is a common practice in many democracies: In Catholic countries such as Spain and Italy, for instance, as well as in Scandinavia and Germany. (In some countries, this is done indirectly; in some cases, the government collects a special church tax from those who attend church, but the net effect is that the clergy are publicly supported and not dependent on passing the plate.) Once the government pays for clergy, it is free to determine who qualifies as such. Fundamentalist preachers will surely not be banned from practicing, but they will not do so on public dollars. A group of moderate clergy may advise the government on who is qualified to serve in the public religious sector.

One may ask, “But what about Christians and other religious groups?” The same arrangements would apply to them. Social services could be delivered by these religious communities, their clergy compensated, and two-track teaching provided. Lest this sound too abstract, one should note that despite our insistence on the separation of state and church, we in effect are a two-track society; this reality is well illustrated by the fact that we allow various religious authorities to conduct marriages that are recognized by the state and also enable people to be married in a civil ceremony without any religious trappings.

The trouble is that so far, we have been approaching Iraq as if we favor only secular institutions. The 13 points released by the U.S. Central Command headquarters in Qatar in mid-April state that Iraq must be a democracy, that the rule of law must be paramount, and that the role of women must be respected — all of which are fine, but all speak to the secular elements of the future Iraq. A two-track approach to constructing a civil society in Iraq, one that provides ample room both for soft Islam and for secular institutions, not only would serve better in countering fundamentalism than sheer secularism, but also would respond to a wider array of human needs.
Much of the recent literature on Islam focuses on the question of whether Islam is or can be made compatible with a democratic regime, an inquiry closely related but not identical to the question of whether there is a soft Islam that can serve as an antidote to Islamic fundamentalism. Can Islam live with free elections, tolerate a free press, grant equal rights to women, tolerate secular authorities, and the rest? Although there is little agreement on this subject, one of the earmarks of soft Islam is that it can coexist with democratic political institutions.

To provide but one example: Treating women as men’s equals in moderate Islamic societies, instead of in the demeaning and abusive way of Islamic fundamentalism, draws on two rather different principles. One is respect for the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other more general, secular liberal political theories, which extol the virtues of individual dignity and individual rights. Another is a soft interpretation of Islam based on arguments such as those made by Forough Jahanbakhish in *Islam, Democracy, and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953-2000* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2001): Previous generations have misinterpreted Islamic sources, and the inferior status of women is a product of the social conditions at the time of the Koran, not the moral teachings of it. In *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (Anchor Books, 1995), Geraldine Brooks questions whether rules that were clearly meant to apply only to the Prophet’s wives, such as seclusion, should have been extended to all Muslim women.

The significance of the difference between these approaches is that if one draws, for political legitimacy, merely on respect for the U.N. Declaration and the ideals associated with it — that is, on Locke and Kant, the Founders, and the Federalist Papers — one in effect presumes that support for democracy must be secular. If one also draws on soft interpretations of Islam, one finds that Islam can be made compatible with democracy so that promoting religion as an essential element of civil society will not hinder the development of a liberal democracy. As Daniel Pipes, a scholar of the Middle East, has put it, “militant Islam is the problem, and moderate Islam is the solution.”

It follows that by promoting soft Islam we get two for the price of one: We promote a religion that is compatible with liberal democracy as well as one that can serve as an effective antidote to the fundamentalists. I take it for granted that Iraq should have a democratic form of government. But it should be one that does not treat religion per se as a threat but, potentially, as a mainstay of civil society, and hence as something that should be promoted — that is, to be sure, in its soft, moderate forms.