

INSIGHT

Authoritative Fatwas as Soft Power

A Decade of Bridge-Building

(2015–2025)



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Introduction

Over the past decade, the General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide – established in 2015 as a global umbrella for national fatwa institutions – has emerged as a significant player in cultural diplomacy and religious soft power. As the world grapples with extremist ideologies, cultural conflicts, and misunderstandings about Islam, “authoritative fatwas” (formal Islamic legal opinions issued by qualified scholars) have been leveraged as tools of soft power to promote peace, tolerance, and coexistence. Soft power, as defined by political scientist Joseph Nye, is the ability to attract and persuade others to *“want the outcomes that you want”* without coercion. In contrast to hard power’s dependence on military or economic force, soft power operates through culture, values, and ideas. Fatwa institutions – from Egypt’s *Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah* to Indonesia’s Council of Ulama – utilize their religious authority and credibility to shape narratives in line with peaceful Islamic teachings. This paper examines how authoritative fatwas function as an effective instrument of soft power, exploring their legitimacy and methodology, highlighting historical and contemporary cases of fatwas promoting peace and moderation, and analyzing the transnational networks that amplify their impact. Finally, we propose strategies to further enhance the use of fatwas in global diplomacy and interfaith coexistence in the coming years.

Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, and Religious Coexistence

The concept of soft power has become integral to international relations discourse since Joseph Nye introduced it in the late 1980s. Soft power is rooted in attraction rather than coercion – it arises from the appeal of a nation’s or community’s culture, political ideals, and policies. In practical terms, soft power is wielded through bridge-building and cultural diplomacy: for example, educational exchanges, media, arts, or diplomatic outreach that shape positive perceptions. Nye emphasizes that soft power can achieve what hard power cannot, noting that *“it is soft power that will help prevent terrorists from recruiting supporters from among the moderate majority”*, and that it is essential for addressing global issues requiring cooperation. In an era of transnational challenges – from terrorism to sectarian strife – soft power approaches help *co-opt* people into shared goals rather than compel them by force.

Religion as Soft Power: While Nye’s formulation of soft power focused on secular domains (culture, political values, foreign policy), scholars have increasingly recognized religion as a potent dimension of soft power in world affairs. Religion can build bridges between societies by appealing to shared moral values and cultural

affinities. Jeffrey Haynes and others argue that “*religious soft power*” – the influence religious actors and institutions wield – fills a gap in Nye’s original concept . Faith leaders engaging in interfaith dialogue or faith-based diplomacy exemplify how religious values can foster mutual understanding. Indeed, inter-religious initiatives are often seen as a form of cultural diplomacy: they create people-to-people connections and promote coexistence across faith lines . For instance, since the early 2000s, networks of religious leaders have met alongside G8 and G20 summits to deliver messages on common humanitarian concerns, effectively acting as informal diplomats of values . In this context, the Islamic institution of *fatwa* – when used judiciously – is a powerful soft power instrument, capable of guiding hearts and minds through moral authority rather than through any state coercion.

Bridge-Building and Coexistence: Soft power in the Islamic context often means highlighting Islam’s teachings of peace, compassion, and justice to counteract narratives of fear or hatred. This has direct implications for bridge-building between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, Nye observed that America’s soft power was vital in the Cold War and is equally vital in the “war on terror” to win hearts and minds . Similarly, Muslim-majority states and institutions leverage religious soft power to improve Islam’s image and encourage coexistence. A clear case is the United Arab Emirates promoting a “moderate and tolerant” image of Islam by supporting scholars and fatwa councils that reject extremism . These efforts in cultural diplomacy – hosting interfaith conferences, establishing centers for religious pluralism, issuing statements of peace – are all aimed at attracting others to the values of coexistence entrenched in Islamic tradition. In short, soft power provides the “gentle” tools for influencing opinions: dialogue, example, and ideas, rather than dictates.

In sum, soft power offers a framework in which authoritative Islamic voices can operate globally as peacemakers and educators. As we will explore, fatwa councils and grand muftis use this approach to correct misconceptions, challenge extremist propaganda, and present Islam’s true face – thus functioning as agents of stability and harmony in line with soft power principles of attraction and persuasion .

Authoritative Fatwa: Definition, Legitimacy and Methodology

A *fatwa* in Islamic tradition is a non-binding legal opinion given by a qualified jurist (*mufti*) in response to a question by an individual or a court. It dates back to the time of Prophet Muhammad – considered the first mufti – and evolved as an instrument for guiding Muslim communities on matters of law, ethics, and daily life . In essence, a fatwa translates broad principles of Sharia (Islamic law) to specific circumstances.

However, not all fatwas carry equal weight or legitimacy. This brings us to the notion of “authoritative fatwa.”

Defining “Authoritative Fatwa”: Not every religious opinion by a cleric constitutes an authoritative fatwa. An authoritative fatwa is one *“issued by a qualified fatwa practitioner, a mufti, in response to a religious inquiry, problem, or concern”*. It is credible by virtue of the issuer’s recognized scholarly credentials and adherence to established methodology. As the General Secretariat’s awareness campaign emphasizes, a fatwa is *not* merely any Muslim’s opinion on religion; rather, it must meet strict conditions of scholarship and method. Classical scholars like Ibn Khaldun noted that the office of mufti is a public trust in the Muslim community and that authorities *“must take care, lest unqualified persons undertake to act as muftis and lead people astray.”* This underscores that legitimacy in fatwa issuance is paramount – unqualified or self-styled muftis can issue aberrant opinions that misguide and cause harm.

Institutional Legitimacy: In modern times, many Muslim-majority countries have established official national fatwa institutions to regulate this domain. Examples include Egypt’s *Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah* (founded 1895), Malaysia’s National Fatwa Council, Indonesia’s Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), and Saudi Arabia’s Council of Senior Scholars. These bodies are often state-linked or state-supervised, giving their fatwas a measure of official authority within the country’s legal-religious framework. National fatwa institutions maintain rigorous scholarly boards, often with senior muftis and councils deliberating on difficult questions. Their credibility derives from the scholars’ training in the Islamic sciences, their appointment or recognition by the state and the wider scholarly community, and the transparency and consistency of their methodologies. Such bodies often have standardized processes: fatwa requests are researched in light of Quran, Sunnah (Prophetic tradition), classical jurisprudence, and principles of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). Draft responses may be peer-reviewed by a committee before issuance. This systematic methodology ensures that the fatwa is well-grounded and representative of *mainstream Islamic jurisprudence*, not the whim of a single person.

Methodology and Moderation: Importantly, authoritative fatwa institutions today stress a *moderate methodology (manhaj al-wasatiyya)* – an approach rooted in Islamic tradition but keenly aware of contemporary contexts and the objectives of Sharia (maqāṣid). For instance, Egypt’s Dar al-Ifta describes its approach as “moderate, methodological and practical,” aiming to develop fatwas that address modern challenges without straying from core principles. By coordinating expertise in various fields (law, medicine, economics, etc.), these institutions produce holistic fatwas that

consider societal impacts. This legitimacy and thoroughness give such fatwas a unique impact: compliance through conviction. While not legally enforceable in most cases (unless adopted into legislation), people follow authoritative fatwas out of trust and religious devotion. In a sense, the influence of a fatwa lies in its persuasive power, much like soft power in diplomacy – it convinces individuals that a certain course of action is morally and religiously right.

Impact on Society and Policy: Authoritative fatwas affect society at multiple levels. At the individual level, they guide personal behavior – from worship practices to financial dealings – fostering social stability by providing clear answers. At the community level, fatwas can shape norms (for example, fatwas on women’s education or interfaith relations can encourage more progressive community stances). At the state level, governments often consult muftis on matters of public policy for religious validation, such as issuing sovereign Islamic bonds, public health measures, or peace treaties. A notable instance is the role of fatwas during the COVID-19 pandemic, where top councils worldwide declared that following health protocols (even suspending communal prayers) was not only permissible but obligatory to save lives . The General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide explicitly stated in March 2020 that people *“must...follow medical instructions... and stay away from gatherings including congregations in houses of worship,”* affirming that Islam permits praying at home amid such disasters . This guidance had a powerful impact: it gave religious legitimacy to emergency public health measures, thus encouraging compliance through moral authority rather than state enforcement alone.

In summary, authoritative fatwas are distinguished by the recognized standing of their issuers and a careful scholarly methodology that confers legitimacy. These fatwas carry significant weight in Muslim societies – a weight that can be harnessed as soft power to uphold peace, guide public opinion, and counteract extremist interpretations. Before analyzing how fatwas serve as soft power tools internationally, we will review examples where fatwas have been pivotal in advancing peace, countering extremism, fostering interfaith dialogue, and promoting moderation.

Fatwas for Peace, Counter-Extremism, and Coexistence: Historical and Contemporary Examples

Throughout Islamic history, fatwas have been used not only to address ritual and personal matters but also to steer the community during times of crisis – including war, social strife, and ideological extremism. In this section, we explore both historical precedents and recent cases (2015–2025) where fatwas were employed as instruments of peace-building, deradicalization, interfaith harmony, and moderation.

These examples demonstrate the fatwa's role as a form of soft power – influencing behavior and mindsets through religious authority and moral reasoning.

Early and Historical Precedents

In earlier periods, fatwa decrees often legitimized peace treaties or condemned unwarranted violence, thereby acting as religious soft power to normalize peace. One notable modern precedent was the Amman Message (2004–2005) initiative. While not a single fatwa, it culminated in a collective *three-point ruling* (essentially a multi-scholar fatwa) endorsed by 200 leading Islamic scholars from over 50 countries. The Amman Message declaration explicitly forbade takfir (arbitrarily declaring other Muslims apostate) and asserted that only qualified scholars have the right to issue fatwas. By building consensus across Sunni and Shia schools, this global ruling nullified extremist attempts to excommunicate other Muslims and provided a united front against sectarian division. It was a powerful soft power move: an appeal to intra-Muslim unity and tolerance, using the authority of a broad scholarly coalition. The Amman Message's success – gaining support from hundreds of scholars and numerous governments – showcased how *legitimate fatwa rulings can advance peace* and undermine extremist narratives that thrive on declaring others as infidels.

Historically, there are also instances of muftis using fatwas to protect non-Muslim minorities or to quell violence. For example, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Ottoman Sheikh al-Islām (chief mufti) issued fatwas at times to restrain communal violence and emphasize the Islamic duty of protecting Christians and Jews under Muslim rule (aligning with the Ottoman policy of religious coexistence). Such fatwas reinforced state policies of tolerance by giving them religious sanction. Another oft-cited example is how scholars in British India and later in independent India have issued fatwas promoting harmony in multi-religious communities – e.g. fatwas encouraging Muslims to maintain peace during communal riots or to cooperate with non-Muslim neighbors. These historical cases set the stage for how contemporary fatwa authorities address modern challenges of extremism and interfaith tensions.

Countering Violent Extremism through Fatwas

One of the most critical uses of fatwas in recent decades has been to counter extremist ideologies and delegitimize terrorism. Authoritative fatwas offer a direct theological rebuttal to militants who claim religious justification for violence. By drawing on Islam's authentic teachings, moderate scholars can *“challenge these [extremist] narratives, showcasing the genuine, often peaceful interpretations”* of Islamic texts. Indeed, as Dar al-Ifta's research notes, extremists rely on distorted

interpretations, and authoritative fatwas serve as a unifying counter-narrative that corrects such distortions and builds consensus for moderation .

In the last ten years, numerous fatwas have been issued globally to condemn terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Boko Haram, and ISIS (the so-called “Islamic State”). A few prominent examples illustrate this trend:

- **Fatwa Against ISIS (United Kingdom, 2014):** As ISIS surged in Syria and Iraq, propagating a brutality that appalled Muslims worldwide, a group of British Muslim leaders took the notable step of issuing a fatwa *against* ISIS. In August 2014, six senior UK imams endorsed a fatwa declaring it “religiously prohibited” for British Muslims to join or support the “oppressive and tyrannical” Islamic State . They urged Muslims to oppose ISIS’s “*poisonous ideology*” and labeled British fighters for ISIS as “*heretics*” to Islam . This was the first fatwa of its kind in the UK. Though non-binding legally, its moral and psychological impact was significant: it provided young Muslims with a clear religious verdict that ISIS’s call to jihad was illegitimate and sinful. British authorities and community organizations welcomed this as an effective soft power response – using religious persuasion to deter would-be jihadists, rather than just security measures. The fatwa’s language condemning ISIS helped *immunize* the community against extremist recruitment.

- **Tahir ul-Qadri’s Fatwa on Terrorism (2010):** Slightly before our 2015–2025 focus but hugely influential in the period, Pakistani scholar Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri (a Barelvi Sunni leader) issued a comprehensive 600-page fatwa in 2010 against terrorism and suicide bombings. What makes it relevant here is the conscious soft-power strategy behind it: Qadri *published this fatwa in English and publicized it globally* . He directly refuted violent jihadist doctrines and declared suicide attacks “unconditionally haram” (forbidden) in Islam. By writing in English and engaging Western media, Qadri aimed to influence international opinion – correcting the Western misperception that Islam condones terrorism . His fatwa leveraged Islamic scholarship to “*influence the highly-charged ongoing debate about Islamic violence*” in a positive way . This is a prime example of a fatwa used as soft power: it was less about enforcing a rule on followers, and more about branding Islam as a religion of peace on the world stage through an authoritative message. Qadri’s work has since inspired other scholars and even governments to produce similar comprehensive fatwas delegitimizing extremist violence.

- **Pakistan’s Collective Fatwa Paigham-e-Pakistan (2018):** Faced with a decade of militant attacks, Pakistan in 2018 unveiled *Paigham-e-Pakistan* (“Message of Pakistan”), an unprecedented collective fatwa signed by over *1,800 Islamic scholars* from all schools of thought . This document categorically declared *terrorism, suicide attacks, and killings of innocents as haram* (forbidden) in Islam . By achieving unanimity among a vast and diverse group of ulama, the fatwa built a strong religious

consensus against extremist tactics. Pakistan's President at the time, Mamnoon Hussain, hailed it, writing *"This Fatwa provides a strong base for the stability of a moderate Islamic society... We can seek guidance from this fatwa for building a national narrative in order to curb extremism in keeping with the golden principles of Islam."* . The President's endorsement highlights how the fatwa was used as soft power at a national policy level – a foundation for national narrative building . Indeed, the fatwa was published as a book and disseminated widely, effectively serving as a manifesto of religious moderation. By stripping militants of religious cover, Pakistan sought to dry up public support for extremism via persuasion and education, complementing its military efforts. *Paigham-e-Pakistan* stands as a milestone: rarely have so many scholars jointly used their authority in the service of peace. It underscores the transcendent influence of a united fatwa – not just within Pakistan but as a message to Muslim audiences worldwide that mainstream Islam rejects terror.

- **Afghan Ulema Fatwa for Peace (2018):** In June 2018, over *2,000 Afghan clerics* from across Afghanistan convened a council in Kabul amid the ongoing war. In a grand show of religious unity, they issued a fatwa outlawing suicide bombings and called for peace talks . The clerics declared the long-running conflict and terrorist attacks as against the teachings of Islam, and implored the Taliban to accept a ceasefire so that peace could be pursued . In a tragic turn, extremists bombed the gathering, killing several of these brave scholars – an act that only underscored the moral high ground of the ulema. Remarkably, within days of the fatwa, the Taliban did agree to a brief unprecedented ceasefire over Eid al-Fitr 2018, the first in 17 years . While the war resumed afterward, this episode demonstrated the moral pressure and soft power of collective religious voices. The Afghan fatwa delegitimized the Taliban's violent jihad narrative and gave Islamic validation to peacemaking. President Ashraf Ghani fully backed the clerics, saying attacks on such scholars were *"attacks against the values of Islam"* and supporting *"the outlawing of suicide bombings"* by the fatwa . Here, the fatwa acted as a rallying point for all Afghans exhausted by war, and as a tool to push the Taliban towards negotiations – essentially using religious influence to encourage conflict resolution.

- **Global Fatwa Monitoring and Counter-Extremism:** Alongside specific fatwas, fatwa *institutions* have launched sustained initiatives to counter extremist propaganda. Egypt's Dar al-Ifta, for example, established an *Observatory of Takfiri Fatwas and Extremist Views* in 2014 – a dedicated center to monitor and respond to extremist interpretations worldwide. This Observatory analyzes the content of militant fatwas and extremist messaging, then issues timely refutations and corrections based on sound jurisprudence. By 2020, it had evolved comprehensive strategies, providing *"practical, technical, and legal support"* to help institutions and communities face extremist ideology . In tandem, Dar al-Ifta launched an

Islamophobia Observatory in 2015 to combat anti-Muslim hate speech , recognizing that extremism and Islamophobia fuel one another in a vicious cycle. These observatories effectively function as soft power think-tanks: instead of state coercion, they use research, dialogue, and publication to counter radical narratives. Their work enables fatwa authorities to issue well-informed counter-fatwas or advisories that deconstruct extremist arguments and promote a moderate understanding. For instance, Dar al-Ifta often publicizes how extremist fatwas deviate from classical consensus, thereby “*showcasing the genuine, peaceful interpretations*” of contentious religious texts . Through conferences and reports, they also build international partnerships for counter-extremism. The result is a form of religious diplomacy – experts and muftis reaching out across borders to immunize communities against extremism using the pen rather than the sword.

Fatwas Supporting Interfaith Dialogue and Minority Rights

Authoritative fatwas have also played an important role in guiding Muslim relations with non-Muslims, often explicitly encouraging interfaith harmony, dialogue, and the protection of minority rights. Such fatwas exemplify Islam’s inclusive values and provide religious endorsement for cooperation with other faith communities – a key aspect of soft power in multicultural settings.

A prominent contemporary example is the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016, a gathering of over 300 Muslim scholars and leaders (including grand muftis from various countries) which affirmed the rights of religious minorities in Muslim-majority lands. While termed a “Declaration,” it was grounded in Islamic legal principles (notably the Charter of Medina) and in effect functioned as a collective fatwa stating that oppressing non-Muslim minorities contradicts Islam . By invoking Islamic authority to uphold citizenship and religious freedom for minorities, the Marrakesh conference provided a blueprint for Muslim governments and societies to bolster coexistence. It was well-received globally as a Muslim-led soft power initiative countering the extremist narrative of persecuting minorities. The declaration’s impact continues as many participating scholars have since issued local fatwas echoing its content – for example, endorsing the construction of churches or Hindu temples in Muslim countries as permissible and virtuous, citing principles of justice and common citizenship.

On the everyday level, national fatwa bodies have issued rulings facilitating friendly relations with non-Muslim neighbors. For instance, Egypt’s Dar al-Ifta has repeatedly taught that Islam encourages kindness and exchange of greetings across faiths. In a fatwa issued December 2024, Dar al-Ifta responded to a question on whether Muslims

may wish Christians *“Merry Christmas.”* The fatwa emphasized that *“Islam is the religion of mercy, piety and maintaining relations”*, and that Muslims are actually obliged to demonstrate the beauty of Islam through good manners to all, especially non-Muslim friends and family . It clarifies that Islam distinguishes dislike of disbelief from how we treat people: *“Islam does not command anyone to sever ties...nor to [be] hateful towards them... On the contrary, Islam commands Muslims to treat non-Muslim family members and friends with kindness and refined manners.”* . The fatwa concludes that congratulating non-Muslims on their holidays is not only permitted but part of showing *munificence (generosity) and good spirit*, as long as one avoids participating in religious rites contrary to Islam . Such rulings directly promote social cohesion and interfaith friendship. By providing religious validation for gestures of respect (like sharing in holiday celebrations), authoritative fatwas knock down walls of misunderstanding. The Dar al-Ifta even goes further to encourage active engagement: *“Do not settle for a phone call to congratulate them but you may even share their happiness and celebrations,”* the fatwa instructs . This guidance, issued by a top Muslim authority, has ripple effects: it emboldens Muslim communities to engage positively in pluralistic societies, thereby improving Muslim-non-Muslim relations. Indeed, similar fatwas can be found from scholars in countries like India, Indonesia, and the West, all aiming to reassure Muslims that friendliness towards neighbors of other faiths is in accordance with Islamic ethics.

Another area is the protection of houses of worship and sacred symbols of other religions. In many instances, when extremist elements have threatened churches, temples or cemeteries, national grand muftis have issued fatwas or statements declaring it impermissible to harm these sites. For example, Iraq’s grand mufti and Egypt’s grand mufti have each stated that attacking churches is forbidden in Islam and that Christians under Muslim lands are under the Prophet’s historical covenant of protection. These edicts often cite Prophet Muhammad’s friendly treaties with Christians. Such pronouncements serve as potent soft power messages to both Muslims and non-Muslims: they show Islam’s commitment to pluralism and pressure any would-be attackers morally. Similarly, in Europe and North America, where Muslims live as minorities, fatwas from “back home” or local councils encouraging civic engagement and interfaith dialogue have empowered Muslim communities to participate confidently in bridge-building efforts – whether it’s interfaith iftar dinners, peace marches, or joint charitable projects. The cumulative effect of these fatwas is a religious soft power campaign for coexistence: they utilize the respected voice of religion to normalize peaceful, friendly relations across faiths.

Promoting Moderation and Peace through Fatwa Networks

In addition to isolated fatwas, organized international fatwa conferences have become a venue for promoting messages of peace and moderation. The General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide itself has held annual International Fatwa Conferences since 2016, each addressing themes such as extremism, digital media challenges, family stability, and fatwa ethics. These conferences issue final communiqués – essentially joint fatwas or recommendations – that are disseminated globally. For instance, a recent *World Fatwa Conference* recommended stronger coordination among Muslim countries to support just causes and resist extremist narratives in unison . By coming together and speaking with one voice, the fatwa institutions amplify their soft power influence. A unified stance by dozens of Muftis is harder for radicals to dismiss and gives ordinary Muslims greater confidence in the moderate position.

Another notable initiative is the creation of the Global Fatwa Index by the Secretariat's Strategic Studies Unit . This project analyzed thousands of fatwas from around the world – categorizing them and evaluating their content. One goal was to highlight “realistic models” of fatwas that contribute to renewal and development, versus those that are regressive . By spotlighting best practices, the Index guides muftis towards more impactful, context-aware fatwas. It also helps identify extremist fatwas circulating online, enabling timely scholarly responses. This kind of knowledge-sharing is part of the soft power strategy: rather than censoring bad ideas outright, it outshines them by producing better, well-reasoned fatwas that gain public traction.

In summary, from fatwas that delegitimize terrorism to those encouraging greeting one's Christian neighbor, we see a wide spectrum of how Islamic legal opinions have been marshaled to advance peace, tolerance, and moderation. These examples underline a key point: the most effective refutation of misuses of religion comes from within religion itself. Fatwas by qualified, respected scholars carry a credibility that can decisively shape public opinion among Muslims. They are a gentle yet formidable weapon against both extremism and Islamophobia – providing clarity, easing fears, and building common ground. Having surveyed these cases, we now turn to the mechanisms by which fatwa institutions magnify this influence transnationally, effectively operating as hubs of Islamic soft power.

Fatwa Institutions as Transnational Hubs of Islamic Soft Power

In the 21st century, fatwa councils and Dar al-Iftas are no longer confined by national borders. Through digital platforms, international conferences, and formal networks like the General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide, these institutions collaborate and communicate with audiences across the globe. In doing so, they have

become hubs of Islamic soft power – centers from which ideas of moderation, peace, and authentic scholarship radiate outward to influence a broad international community.

The General Secretariat (2015–2025): The very establishment of the General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide in December 2015 speaks to the need for a coordinated global approach . This body was formed, as the Egyptian Mufti Dr. Shawqi Allam noted, in response to a *“cacophony of unregulated and vociferous fatwas inviting extremism and turmoil”* in the early 2010s . In other words, the rise of online radical preachers and confusion among Muslims prompted a collective soft-power response – unite the legitimate muftis to amplify their moderate voice. The Secretariat’s founding members (25 muftis from various countries initially) agreed on executive regulations to guide their cooperation . According to Dar al-Ifta’s report, the Secretariat’s functions include “coordinating with fatwa offices to develop a moderate, methodological and practical fatwa system; exchanging experiences... providing fatwa counsel to muftis around the world; scholarly support to Muslim minorities to assist them in establishing local fatwa offices” . It also set about “setting standards and criteria for the post of mufti [and] fatwa issuance methods”, and *“promoting fruitful cooperation between fatwa offices worldwide”* . These goals illustrate a strategic vision: to elevate the quality and consistency of fatwas globally (so that extreme voices are marginalized) and to create a united front of credible scholars.

Over the past decade, the Secretariat has indeed become an active hub. It convenes an annual *Supreme Council* meeting of member muftis and has organized yearly International Fatwa Conferences under broad themes affecting the Muslim world. Through these conferences and frequent consultations, fatwa institutions from East Asia to Europe share insights and coordinate messaging. A tangible example of this cooperation was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic: in March 2020, the General Secretariat issued a transnational call for solidarity and religious guidance on the pandemic, urging all communities to follow health guidelines and even suspend gatherings, including worship, to save lives . Fatwa authorities in many countries echoed this with parallel fatwas. The Secretariat effectively provided a *global Islamic endorsement* of public health measures, which bolstered governments’ efforts to combat the virus in Muslim populations through voluntary compliance. Such coordinated action is a prime illustration of soft power at work: the appeal to religious duty and common good transcended borders and helped align millions with a life-saving goal.

Multilingual Outreach: Fatwa institutions have embraced multilingual communication as part of their soft power strategy, aiming to reach both Muslim minorities worldwide and educate non-Muslim audiences. Egypt's Dar al-Ifta, for instance, operates an extensive online portal in multiple languages (English, Arabic, French, German, Urdu, Pashto, Swahili, Hausa, among others) . It regularly publishes articles, fatwa digests, and even interactive social media content in these languages. By doing so, Dar al-Ifta serves as a global reference point – a Muslim in Nigeria or a curious non-Muslim in Europe can directly access authentic fatwas on contemporary issues in a language they understand. This outreach counters the language monopoly extremists once had (for example, ISIS was savvy in producing English online content; now, moderate voices also occupy that space). The Secretariat as a whole has encouraged members to enhance their digital presence. As noted in one of its publications, *“recognizing the importance of digital platforms in shaping narratives, Dar al-Ifta has established a robust online presence. Its website and social media channels disseminate fatwas, articles, and videos that counter Islamophobic rhetoric and challenge extremist ideologies.”* . Additionally, engaging in multilingual outreach means these institutions can perform a public diplomacy role: explaining Islamic positions to the wider world and defusing tensions. Indeed, the General Secretariat explicitly seeks to *“disseminate the true image of Islam by correcting misconceptions and redressing bias-driven hate speech [and] anti-Muslim sentiment”* . This is soft power at its finest – using information and truth to win hearts. For example, when misinformation spreads about Islam endorsing violence, the Secretariat can quickly release an English commentary or fatwa clarifying Islam's real stance, thus *proactively shaping global public opinion*.

Transnational Networks and Alliances: Fatwa authorities are also collaborating with international organizations to broaden their impact. A landmark development was the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in 2021 between the General Secretariat and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) . This partnership, formalized by Secretary-General Dr. Ibrahim Negm and UNAOC Director Dr. Nihal Saad, aims to *“develop projects that promote cultural understanding, reconciliation, and renewal of religious discourse”* . The collaboration focuses on critical areas like youth, media, education, migration, and women, aligning with the UN's Plan of Action to safeguard religious sites . By teaming up with UNAOC, the fatwa institutions are stepping directly into the realm of global cultural diplomacy. They have committed to share best practices and coordinate on international initiatives for peace . This move not only lends the Secretariat greater international legitimacy, but it also exports its soft power influence beyond Muslim-majority settings – positioning it as a partner in resolving world problems (such as intercultural tensions, refugee integration, etc.) through the values of faith. In essence, the muftis have become diplomats: for

example, one could easily envision joint workshops at the UN promoting tolerance, where a senior mufti speaks alongside a rabbi and a minister – a scenario made more likely by formal agreements like the UNAOC MoU. *(See image below of the General Secretariat signing the MoU with UNAOC, symbolizing this new level of engagement.)*

Beyond the UN, fatwa bodies network through organizations like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The International Islamic Fiqh Academy (an OIC-affiliated jurists' council) frequently brings top muftis together to issue collective resolutions on modern issues – from climate change to finance – which member countries are encouraged to follow. By participating in these forums, national muftis effectively project their soft power regionally. For example, if the Fiqh Academy declares organ donation permissible as an act of saving life, that decision (a form of collective fatwa) can influence health policies and public attitudes in dozens of countries simultaneously. Likewise, religious attachés and councils in diaspora communities (like the European Council for Fatwa and Research) share rulings suited to minority contexts, ensuring Muslim minorities receive guidance that is both faithful and conducive to good citizenship. The sheer connectivity of fatwa institutions today – via conferences, email lists, and online platforms – means a well-crafted fatwa in one country can quickly be known and adopted in another, creating a multiplier effect.

Educational and Training Role: Fatwa institutions also exercise soft power by training the next generation of scholars and muftis in a globally conscious manner. The General Secretariat has highlighted the importance of *“building competent muftis”* and even proposed scholarly exchange visits and joint training programs . For instance, Dar al-Ifta's intern program brings scholars from Africa and Asia to Cairo for training in its Dar al-Ifta Institute. When these scholars return home, they carry with them the methodologies and moderate approaches learned, effectively spreading the soft power influence of the host institution. The Secretariat's initiative for each fatwa authority to produce documentaries about their work and hold public seminars on fatwa awareness is another tool – it educates both Muslims and the international public about the positive role of fatwas (as opposed to the stereotyped notion of fatwas as draconian edicts). By demystifying the fatwa process and showing its ethical rigor, these institutions enhance their credibility and moral authority globally.

In all these ways, fatwa institutions have transitioned into the digital, globalized age by forming networks of influence. They act as knowledge hubs and moral authorities not just nationally but for the *Ummah* (global Muslim community) and even humanity at large. This hub role strengthens Islamic soft power: it ensures that messages of peace and moderation are amplified collectively, not lost in isolation. A unified

message – say, condemning ISIS or urging vaccine acceptance – coming from a chorus of muftis worldwide is far more persuasive than isolated voices. And when needed, these networks can respond to transboundary crises (like pandemic or hate crimes) with a consistent, principled voice that resonates with believers' consciences.

Having analyzed the current role of fatwa institutions in soft power projection, we next outline forward-looking recommendations to build on these successes. The goal is to propose how, in the coming years, authoritative fatwas can play an even more enhanced role in global diplomacy and religious coexistence.

Recommendations for Enhancing Fatwa-Based Soft Power

As we celebrate the ten-year milestone of the General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide, it is also an opportunity to chart the path ahead. The experience of 2015–2025 has shown the promise of authoritative fatwas as tools of soft power. To maximize this potential, a strategic and proactive approach is needed. Below, we outline key recommendations and forward-looking strategies for fatwa institutions and their partners:

1. Strengthen Global Fatwa Networks and Collaboration: The General Secretariat should continue to expand its membership and deepen ties among fatwa authorities. This could include establishing regional chapters or working groups (for example, a European Council of Fatwa Authorities under the Secretariat's umbrella, an African chapter, etc.) to address local issues in coordination with the global body. Regular virtual meetings and an online knowledge-sharing portal would help muftis exchange research quickly. By increasing institutional cohesion, the fatwa establishment will speak even more consistently on pressing issues, enhancing its persuasive impact. *Strategy:* Organize thematic cross-border fatwa task forces (e.g., on climate change ethics, bioethics, conflict resolution) that prepare joint statements and guidance. Such targeted collaboration ensures the Muslim voice is present in global conversations (like COP climate talks or UN peace efforts) with well-formulated opinions grounded in Islamic ethics.

2. Enhance Digital Outreach and Counter-Disinformation Efforts: Fatwa institutions must remain at the cutting edge of digital da'wah (outreach). This involves not only multilingual websites but engaging content on social media, YouTube, podcasts, and emerging platforms. Short, accessible fatwa-based guidance on trending issues can reach young Muslims who consume information via smartphones. Additionally, there should be concerted efforts to SEO-optimize and promote moderate fatwa content so that it outranks extremist or Islamophobic content in search results. Partnering with

popular Muslim influencers or media outlets can amplify reach. *Strategy:* Develop a dedicated Fatwa Soft Power Digital Unit under the Secretariat to produce high-quality infographics, videos, and Q&A series that distill key fatwas on themes like peace in Islam, Islam's stance on violence, women's rights, etc. This unit can also monitor misinformation online (much like Dar al-Ifta's observatory does) and swiftly respond with facts – for example, debunking a fake “jihad fatwa” rumor by publishing the real scholarly view. By dominating the narrative online, authoritative voices preempt the recruitment tactics of extremists who often prey in the digital space.

3. Broaden Engagement with International Bodies and Initiatives: Building on the UNAOC partnership, the Secretariat and major fatwa centers should actively seek more alliances – with institutions like UNESCO (for peace education), UNICEF (for child welfare and anti-radicalization of youth), and interfaith organizations like the Parliament of the World's Religions. By contributing an Islamic perspective to international peacebuilding and cultural projects, fatwa authorities increase their visibility and demonstrate Islam's commitment to universal values. *Recommendation:* Fatwa authorities can volunteer expertise in drafting international declarations or ethical guidelines. For instance, they could contribute to a UNESCO guideline on Ethics of Artificial Intelligence from a faith perspective, ensuring Islamic ethics are represented. Or host joint workshops with the Vatican or World Council of Churches on scriptural principles of peace – showcasing solidarity across faiths. Such initiatives amplify soft power by positioning fatwa scholars as thought leaders in global ethics, not just parochial jurists.

4. Focus on Youth and Education: The next generation is both a target of extremist recruiters and the future custodians of society. Fatwa institutions should tailor programs specifically for Muslim youth. This might include youth fatwa forums where young people can ask questions and voice concerns (online and in person), with muftis providing mentorship and guidance. Incorporating fatwa-based modules into school or university curricula (in Islamic studies or ethics classes) can ensure students learn about the balanced, merciful interpretations of Islam early on. *Strategy:* Launch a “Fatwa for Youth Initiative” – a multimedia campaign and series of workshops addressing issues relevant to young Muslims (identity, coexistence, science and faith, etc.). Invite youth representatives to be *observers or guest speakers* at International Fatwa Conferences, signaling inclusivity. By engaging youth directly, fatwa authorities harness soft power in the most direct way: winning the hearts of those who will shape tomorrow's communities.

5. Empower Local and Female Scholarship: While national grand muftis play a prominent role, community-level fatwa efforts are equally important for grassroots

soft power. Training and authorizing local imams or muftis in villages, towns, and diaspora communities can decentralize the reach of moderate fatwas. This might involve the Secretariat assisting in the establishment of local fatwa councils in Muslim-minority countries or remote areas, as it pledged to do for Muslim minorities . Additionally, encouraging the role of women muftis and counselors can broaden the appeal and applicability of fatwas, especially in areas like family harmony and education where women's perspectives are valuable. Some countries (e.g., Indonesia and Malaysia) have started appointing women scholars as muftiyah; this should be expanded and networked internationally. *Recommendation:* Provide scholarships and exchange programs for promising female Islamic scholars to train at established fatwa institutions. Host international seminars for female jurists to share experiences. By visibly including women and diverse ethnic voices, fatwa councils demonstrate the inclusivity of Islam – a powerful counter-message to extremist groups that often sideline women or minority sects. This inclusivity strengthens the credibility of fatwa institutions in the eyes of all Muslims, thereby enhancing their soft power.

6. Continue Modernizing Discourse (Renewal of Religious Rulings): To maintain relevance, fatwa authorities should continue the process of *Tajdid* (renewal) in jurisprudence – revisiting old rulings in light of contemporary context to ensure they serve justice and mercy. This doesn't mean changing core principles, but applying them wisely to new circumstances. The ongoing project of renewing religious discourse, championed by scholars like Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb of Al-Azhar and many grand muftis, should produce updated fatwas that, for example, support modern human rights within an Islamic framework, or environmental protection (issuing fatwas calling wastage and pollution as immoral). By addressing such issues, fatwas remain a progressive force and speak to global concerns, improving Islam's image. *Strategy:* Dedicate upcoming Fatwa Conferences to specific global challenges – for instance, a conference on “Fatwa and Climate Change” leading to a fatwa declaration on environmental stewardship, or “Fatwa to Prevent Domestic Violence” to produce guidance for protecting vulnerable family members. Boldly tackling these topics will reinforce the message that Islam through fatwas is *part of the solution* to world problems, not a source of problems – a narrative crucial for soft power.

7. Measurement and Publicity of Impact: To sustain support (including government funding or public trust), fatwa institutions should document and publicize their positive impact. This could include statistics such as number of extremist narratives debunked, testimonials of individuals whose minds were changed due to a fatwa, or case studies of conflicts averted thanks to fatwa intervention. By highlighting success stories, they solidify the perception of fatwas as a force for good. For example, if a deradicalization program in a prison used fatwas to turn militants away from violence,

publishing that story reinforces the power of the fatwa approach . *Recommendation:* Publish an annual “State of Fatwa Report” summarizing contributions to peace and society (perhaps every International Day for Ifta`, Dec 15). Include media-friendly summaries to get coverage. This transparency and self-promotion will enhance the institutions’ soft power by showcasing accountability and effectiveness – traits that attract respect in international circles .

By implementing these recommendations, the influence of authoritative fatwas can be further institutionalized and expanded in the global arena. The past decade has built a strong foundation; the next can build an edifice where fatwa authorities are recognized not only as arbiters of religious questions, but as key peacemakers, bridge-builders, and cultural diplomats of the Muslim world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the period 2015–2025 has underscored the role of authoritative fatwas as an effective instrument of soft power for the Muslim world. Grounded in deep scholarly legitimacy and moral credibility, fatwas issued by recognized national institutions have served to persuade and unify, rather than coerce – exactly the essence of soft power. We have seen how academic notions of soft power – attraction through culture and values (Nye) – find a natural synergy with the Islamic tradition of issuing learned legal opinions to guide the community. Whether through a coalition of muftis condemning terrorism, a solitary fatwa promoting interfaith kindness, or a transnational network shaping discourse, authoritative fatwas have contributed significantly to peace-building, counter-extremism, and coexistence efforts. These religious edicts function as bridge-builders, connecting Islamic principles with universal human ideals of justice, compassion, and mutual respect.

The General Secretariat for Fatwa Authorities Worldwide, on its ten-year jubilee, stands as a testament to a forward-looking vision: that *collective religious authority* can be harnessed to heal divisions and project a moderate voice on the world stage. By professionalizing and internationalizing the practice of ifta` (fatwa-giving), the Secretariat and its member institutions have enhanced Islam’s cultural diplomacy capabilities. They have become, in effect, ambassadors of Islamic soft power – engaging hearts and minds through dialogue, guidance, and exemplary leadership. As highlighted, their partnership with organizations like the U.N. Alliance of Civilizations takes this to the next level, integrating religious soft power with broader global peace initiatives .

Of course, challenges remain. The information age means that misinformation travels fast, and fringe fatwas can still cause damage before they are countered. Furthermore, not all regions have robust fatwa institutions, and political turmoils can undermine religious authority. However, the trajectory of the last decade is encouraging. The “surge in unregulated fatwas” which once seemed to drown the public sphere has met its match in a mobilized alliance of authoritative muftis . As Dr. Ibrahim Negm wrote, *“mobilizing fatwa authorities worldwide to defend the institution of fatwa and the values it embodies is the only route out of this predicament”* of extremism . That mobilization is well under way, and it offers a route to *“development, peace, harmony, positive values, and guidance”* – the very qualities he noted fatwas should embody .

Looking ahead, implementing the recommended strategies – from digital engagement to international partnerships – will further solidify the role of fatwas in global soft power diplomacy. A future where fatwa councils contribute to U.N. peacemaking efforts, where a fatwa might be as eagerly awaited as a U.N. resolution in times of moral crisis, is not far-fetched. By remaining true to their legitimate methodologies and keeping focus on the higher objectives of Sharia (maqasid) – protection of life, intellect, religion, dignity, and property – fatwa authorities can ensure their pronouncements continue to resonate widely and attractively.

In a world often divided by ideological and religious fault lines, authoritative fatwas offer common ground and clarity. They translate the timeless ethical spirit of Islam into guidance for today’s problems, in a language that appeals to reason and conscience. This is soft power in its purest form: the power of ideas and ideals. As we celebrate a decade of the General Secretariat’s achievements, we recognize that the work of promoting peace and coexistence through enlightened religious leadership is ongoing. Yet, we are optimistic. With wisdom, cooperation, and commitment, authoritative fatwas will remain a beacon – a soft but steady light – guiding societies toward greater understanding, compassion, and peace in the decades to come.

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