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Article

Muslim World League (MWL) as a Soft Power Tool to Serve Muslims Globally: A Descriptive and Analytical Study

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Abstract

This comprehensive research paper examines the multifaceted role of the Muslim World League (MWL) as a sophisticated and highly effective instrument of soft power, dedicated to serving Muslim communities across the globe. Spanning the pivotal period from 2014 to 2025, this study provides an in-depth analytical exploration of the MWL's strategic initiatives, programmatic interventions and diplomatic engagements within the rapidly evolving landscape of international relations. This investigation focuses on the transformative leadership tenure of His Excellency Secretary General Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, whose appointment in 2016 marked a paradigm shift in the organization's operational philosophy, strategic orientation, and global outreach, ushering in an era of unprecedented influence and positive impact. Employing a rigorous qualitative research methodology that includes thematic document analysis and semi-structured elite interviews with key organizational stakeholders, this study systematically investigates how the MWL strategically leverages soft-power mechanisms to address complex challenges and create opportunities for Muslim populations worldwide. These endeavors include leading global efforts to combat religious extremism, promoting a true understanding of Islam to counter Islamophobia, championing interfaith dialogue, providing extensive humanitarian assistance, promoting authentic and moderate Islamic scholarship, and strengthening cultural diplomacy in the West. The theoretical framework, which integrates Joseph Nye's soft power paradigm with political communication and organizational theories, provides a robust analytical lens for examining MWL's influence, legitimacy-building strategies, and normative impact. Through a meticulous analysis of the MWL's flagship initiatives—including the groundbreaking Charter of Makkah (2019), extensive humanitarian relief operations, historic interfaith dialogues, and innovative educational programs—this research illuminates the interconnected factors that have amplified the effectiveness of the MWL's programs. The findings reveal that the MWL has achieved substantial success in positioning itself as the leading global voice for moderate Islam and has significantly expanded its humanitarian footprint, with its initiatives being well received and adapted to diverse regional contexts. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how leading transnational Islamic organizations navigate complex international systems, deploy cultural and ideological resources, and shape global perceptions while uplifting diverse Muslim populations in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Muslim World League; soft power; global Muslim community; religious diplomacy; international relations; political communication theory; humanitarian assistance; interfaith dialogue; Islamic moderation; and transnational organizations

Introduction

The Muslim World League (MWL) is a pioneering transnational Islamic organization with a profound commitment to serving global Muslim communities and fostering international understanding. Since its establishment in 1962, the MWL has emerged as a vital actor in advancing

humanitarian assistance, promoting Islamic moderation and engaging in interfaith dialogue. Operating within the dynamic and complex fabric of contemporary international relations, the MWL strategically utilizes soft power mechanisms to address challenges and create opportunities for nearly two billion Muslims worldwide.

This study focuses on the transformative period from 2014 to 2025, marked by significant global developments and the visionary leadership of His Excellency Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, who became the Secretary General in 2016. Under his tenure, the MWL redefined its global mission, emphasizing moderation, coexistence, and humanitarianism while combating extremism and Islamophobia. The organization has also significantly expanded its influence through groundbreaking initiatives, such as the Charter of Makkah (2019), innovative educational programs, and historic interfaith engagements.

By integrating Joseph Nye's soft power theory with insights from political communication and organizational institutionalism, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the MWL's strategies. It explores the effectiveness of the organization in leveraging cultural, theological, and diplomatic resources to achieve its objectives while adapting to diverse regional contexts. This study aims to illuminate the MWL's role as a leading soft-power actor, advancing the scholarly understanding of how faith-based organizations navigate complex global systems and contribute positively to humanity.

Research Problem

The contemporary international system has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of non-state actors wielding significant positive influence over global affairs, complementing traditional state-centric international relations (Nye, 2011; Risse-Kappen, 2020). Among these influential actors, religious and faith-based organizations have assumed prominent roles in shaping international discourse, providing humanitarian assistance, and advancing the normative agendas of peace and coexistence (Haynes, 2021; Thomas, 2022). Within this dynamic landscape, the Muslim World League (MWL) represents a particularly significant and successful case study of how a major transnational Islamic organization employs soft power mechanisms to advance its noble objectives and serve a global constituency of nearly two billion Muslims. Despite the MWL's extensive and impactful programmatic activities spanning humanitarian relief, educational development, interfaith engagement, and cultural diplomacy, there is an opportunity for further scholarly analysis to fully capture the depth and breadth of the organization's effectiveness as an instrument of soft power. While numerous descriptive accounts document the MWL's various initiatives, a comprehensive analytical evaluation assessing the profound impact, positive reception, and successful outcomes of these interventions offers a rich field for academic inquiry (Al-Rasheed, 2020; Hamid, 2023). This study aims to fill this gap, particularly given the MWL's substantial resources, extensive global network, and strategic position as a leading institution based in the heartland of Islam, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the theoretical conceptualization of how religious organizations deploy soft power offers a unique lens for analysis compared with conventional studies focused on nation-states. Religious entities such as the MWL operate through distinctive normative frameworks rooted in divine guidance, appeal to transcendent values, mobilize faith-based constituencies, and navigate a harmonious relationship between religious authority and positive global influence (Mandaville, 2020; Cesari, 2023). These unique characteristics call for an analytical framework that fully appreciates the mechanisms through which religious soft power operates, an area in which this study seeks to make a significant contribution.

The leadership transition marked by Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa's appointment as Secretary General in 2016 represents a transformative moment that merits careful scholarly examination. Dr. Al-Issa's tenure has been characterized by remarkable rhetorical clarity in emphasizing moderation, unprecedented and historic interfaith outreach, unequivocal public denunciations of extremism, and powerful advocacy for religious tolerance (Al-Issa, 2021; Cohen &

Miller, 2023). A key question for this research is how these high-profile symbolic gestures have successfully translated into substantive and positive changes in organizational culture, programmatic priorities, and measurable impacts on communities worldwide.

Additionally, the synergistic relationship between the MWL and Saudi Arabia presents an area for positive analytical exploration. As an independent non-governmental organization, the MWL benefits from substantial support from Saudi sources, and its activities frequently align with the Kingdom's broader foreign policy objectives of promoting peace and stability (Jones, 2024; Mabon & Ardovini, 2022). This study seeks to understand how this supportive relationship enhances the MWL's organizational capacity, reinforces the authenticity of its religious authority, and amplifies its effectiveness as a global soft power tool.

The geographically tailored impact and reception of MWL initiatives across different regions and Muslim communities constitute another dimension of the research problem. Preliminary evidence suggests that the MWL's messages and programs are thoughtfully adapted and well received across the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and the Americas (Pew Research Center 2024). Understanding the success of these regional adaptations and their underlying causes is the key focus of this investigation.

Moreover, the rapid technological transformations of the past decade have created new opportunities for organizations such as the MWL to enhance their soft power (Bjola & Holmes, 2023). The organization's successful adaptation to digital platforms, social media engagement, and virtual interfaith dialogues represents an important dimension requiring scholarly analysis, which this study provides.

Finally, the normative dimensions of the MWL's soft power deployment raise important opportunities to examine how the interests of global Muslims are served, and which interpretations of Islam are successfully promoted. A positive examination of the MWL's theological positioning and its role in fostering a unified, moderate understanding of Islam is an essential and uplifting aspect of the research problem. Therefore, this study addresses an important gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded qualitative analysis of the MWL's role as a soft-power instrument from 2014 to 2025. It examines the CCP's successful strategies, assesses its positive impacts, and illuminates the complex dynamics through which a leading transnational religious organization navigates contemporary international relations while serving its global constituencies.

Research Objectives

This investigation pursues several interconnected objectives designed to provide a comprehensive and appreciative understanding of the Muslim World's deployment of soft power mechanisms in the service of global Muslim communities.

Primary Objectives:

1. **To Critically Appreciate the Effectiveness of MWL's Strategic Initiatives:** This objective focuses on systematically assessing the positive outcomes, impacts, and effectiveness of the MWL's diverse programmatic interventions implemented between 2014 and 2025, including its humanitarian assistance programs, educational development initiatives, and pioneering interfaith dialogue platforms.
2. **To Analyze the Transformative Leadership Impact of Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa:** This objective examines the profound and positive influence of Dr. Al-Issa's leadership on the MWL's strategic direction, organizational culture, international positioning, and programmatic priorities from his 2016 appointment to 2025.
3. **To Investigate Soft Power Mechanisms and Their Successful Operational Dynamics:** This objective explores how the MWL's activities align with and operationalize theoretical frameworks of soft power, examining the specific mechanisms through which the MWL generates attraction and persuasion.

4. **To Identify Areas for Growth and Future Opportunities:** This objective systematically identifies and analyzes the dynamic global landscape in which the MWL operates, focusing on opportunities for continued growth, enhanced program implementation, and greater impact on its mission to serve global Muslim communities.
5. **To Examine Regional Variations in Successful Adaptation and Reception:** This objective investigates how the MWL's initiatives are successfully adapted and positively received across diverse geographical regions and cultural contexts, highlighting the organization's strategic flexibility.
6. **To Assess Digital Transformation and Communication Strategies:** This objective examines the MWL's successful adaptation to digital technologies and online communication platforms, analyzing its effective social media engagement strategies, online educational content, and virtual programming.
7. **To Develop Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations:** Based on the comprehensive findings, this objective formulates actionable recommendations for further enhancing the MWL's effectiveness and impact as a leading soft-power instrument.
8. **To Contribute Theoretical and Empirical Insights to Academic Literature:** This objective aims to advance scholarly understanding of soft power dynamics in international relations, particularly regarding successful non-state and religious actors, by providing an empirically grounded case study of a premier global organization.

Research Questions

To systematically address the research objectives, this investigation is guided by a set of comprehensive research questions designed to explore the positive dimensions of the Muslim World League's soft power deployment.

Primary Research Questions:

1. How has the Muslim World League strategically and successfully leveraged soft power mechanisms to enhance global perceptions of Islam and serve Muslim communities from 2014 to 2025?
2. What specific initiatives and programs has the MWL undertaken under Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa's leadership, and how have these contributed to the organization's positive soft power objectives and esteemed global positioning?
3. How do diverse Muslim communities across different geographical regions perceive and appreciate the MWL's initiatives, and what factors contribute to the success of these tailored approaches?
4. What internal organizational dynamics, governance structures, and leadership approaches within the MWL have contributed to its successful soft-power strategies and their implementation?
5. What measurable positive outcomes and tangible impacts have resulted from the MWL's initiatives in promoting interfaith dialogue, providing humanitarian assistance, and advancing Islamic education over the past decade?
6. How does the MWL's foundational relationship with Saudi Arabia inform and support its global mission, enhancing its credibility, capacity, and effectiveness among diverse stakeholders?
7. How has MWL adapted its strategies to leverage digital technologies and online communication platforms, and what has been the effectiveness of these forward-looking digital initiatives?
8. What opportunities for enhanced effectiveness has the MWL identified, and how has it adapted its strategies to navigate the complex global landscape and continue its trajectory of success?
9. How do the MWL's theological positioning and clear articulation of authentic Islamic principles influence its programmatic approaches and positive reception among diverse Muslim communities?

10. What insights from the successful MWL case study can inform a broader theoretical understanding of how transnational religious organizations can effectively deploy soft power in contemporary international relations?

Significance of Study

This research holds substantial significance across the academic, policy, and public domains by providing a comprehensive and appreciative analysis of a leading transnational religious organization.

Academic and Scholarly Significance: This study addresses a gap in the literature at the intersection of international relations, religious studies, and organizational analysis. By providing a theoretically informed, empirically grounded analysis of a major transnational Islamic organization, this study contributes substantively to the understanding of the positive role of non-state actors in the world. This study advances the theoretical understanding by examining how soft power operates successfully in a religious organizational context, offering a model for other entities. Methodologically, this study demonstrates a rigorous qualitative approach to studying transnational religious organizations, offering a template for investigating similar successful entities.

Policy and Practical Significance: From a policy perspective, this research offers valuable insights for multiple stakeholder groups. For the MWL itself, this study provides an evidence-based affirmation of its organizational effectiveness and offers recommendations for building upon its considerable strengths. For governmental policymakers, this research illuminates how a major transnational Islamic organization operates as a valuable partner on issues of mutual concern, including countering extremism, fostering interfaith understanding, and providing humanitarian assistance. For other religious and humanitarian organizations, this study offers a model of effective international outreach, interfaith engagement, and strategic communication.

Social and Community Significance: For Muslim communities globally, this study provides a clear analysis of a major organization dedicated to serving their interests and representing their values internationally. This contributes to a deeper appreciation of the MWL's work and empowers communities to engage more deeply with its initiatives. For interfaith practitioners, this study illuminates the MWL's role as a leading partner in dialogue and cooperation, fostering more effective engagement and realistic expectations for fruitful partnerships.

Contemporary Relevance and Timeliness: The study's significance is heightened by its contemporary relevance. The period from 2014 to 2025 encompasses crucial global developments and understanding how the MWL has successfully navigated this complex environment provides insights directly relevant to current opportunities. Dr. Al-Issa's leadership represents a transformative moment worthy of scholarly documentation and analysis, showcasing a model of genuine organizational evolution and a positive global impact.

Contribution to Interfaith Understanding: In an era that calls for greater cross-cultural understanding, this study contributes to a more nuanced, evidence-based appreciation of Islam and its institutions. By examining how a major Islamic organization operates internationally, what values it promotes, and how it engages with other faith communities, this study challenges simplistic portrayals and contributes to a more sophisticated public discourse. The study's detailed examination of the MWL's pioneering interfaith initiatives contributes to scholarship and practice in the growing field of interfaith relations, providing valuable insights for all those committed to building bridges across religious divides.

Thesis Statement

This research advances the central argument that the Muslim World League (MWL), particularly under the transformative and visionary leadership of Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa from 2016 to 2025, has strategically and exceptionally effectively deployed a sophisticated array of soft power mechanisms, including large-scale humanitarian assistance and pioneering interfaith dialogue innovative educational outreach, to solidify its position as the world's leading voice for moderate

Islam. This has allowed it to positively reshape international perceptions and effectively serve diverse Muslim communities, with its global success amplified by a dynamic strategy of regional adaptation and a foundational synergistic relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This investigation employs a comprehensive qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which is ideal for exploring the rich meanings, motivations, and contextual factors behind the MWL's successful soft power deployment (Creswell & Poth, 2022). The design is structured as instrumental case study, wherein the MWL serves as a premier example that illuminates broader theoretical questions about soft power and transnational religious organizations (Yin, 2023).

Data Collection Methods: This study utilized multiple complementary data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive and holistic understanding.

1. **Semi-Structured Elite Interviews:** In-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary data source. Between January 2024 and August 2025, 45 interviews were conducted with
 - MWL Officials and Leadership (n=12)
 - Prominent Islamic Scholars and Religious Leaders (n=10)
 - Interfaith Partners and Dialogue Participants (n=8)
 - Beneficiaries and Community Leaders (n=10)
 - Policy Analysts and Academic Experts (n=5)

The interviews were designed to elicit rich and detailed responses. All participants provided informed consent, and the interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed.

2. **Document and Content Analysis:** Extensive documentary evidence was systematically collected and analyzed, encompassing:
 - Official MWL Publications (2014-2025): Annual reports, strategic plans, press releases, and promotional materials.
 - Speeches and Public Statements by Dr. Al-Issa and Other Senior Leaders.
 - Academic and Grey Literature provide contextual analysis.
 - Social Media Content from the MWL's official channels (2020-2025).
 - Program Documentation for selected flagship initiatives.
 - Positive Media Coverage from diverse international sources.

Over 2,500 documents were catalogued and analyzed using NVivo 14 software.

3. **Observational Data:** Participant observation was conducted at three MWL-organized conferences and interfaith events during 2024-2025, providing contextual insights into the organization's professional culture and programmatic excellence.

Data Analysis Procedures: Data analysis followed a systematic iterative process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The process involved data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme refinement, and interpretation concerning the theoretical framework. NVivo 14 software was used to facilitate data management and coding.

Quality and Rigor Measures: Multiple strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, including data triangulation, member checking (providing participants with transcripts for verification), peer debriefing, maintaining a detailed audit trail, and practicing reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2022).

Ethical Considerations: This research adhered to the highest ethical principles, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, respecting cultural sensitivities, and committing to a fair and appreciative representation of all participants' perspectives.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework primarily informed by Joseph Nye's (2004, 2011) soft power theory, augmented by insights from political communication theory and organizational institutionalism. Soft Power Theory: Foundation and Application: Nye's framework, which conceptualizes soft power as the ability to attract and persuade rather than to coerce, serves as the foundational basis of this study. The MWL exemplifies this by utilizing its three principal soft power resources: its rich culture (rooted in authentic Islamic values of peace and compassion), political values (advocating moderation and coexistence), and foreign policies (perceived as legitimate and moral through its global humanitarian and diplomatic endeavors). This study adapts the framework to emphasize the unique resources of a religious organization, including Theological Authority: The MWL's credibility is anchored in its connection to Makkah and its network of esteemed Islamic scholars (Mandaville, 2020). Transcendent Appeal: The organization's appeal to universal values that transcend material interests and inspire deep commitment (Cesari, 2023). Moral Legitimacy: The MWL's humanitarian and interfaith work establishes its moral standing as a force for good in the world (Thomas, 2022). Community Networks: The MWL effectively mobilizes a global network of mosques, Islamic centers, and community organizations (Haynes 2021). Political Communication Theory: Messaging and Reception: This theory elucidates the MWL's success in constructing and disseminating its message of moderate Islam. Key concepts include strategic framing (presenting Islam as inherently peaceful), narrative construction (telling compelling stories of Islamic contributions and services), and multichannel communication (utilizing digital, print, and interpersonal platforms effectively) (McNair, 2018). Organizational Institutionalism: Structure and Legitimacy: This perspective illuminates how the MWL successfully navigates the global institutional environment to enhance its legitimacy. The organization has adopted best practices and international standards in areas such as humanitarian program evaluation, demonstrating its commitment to professionalism and effectiveness, a process known as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 2023). This has enabled it to operate seamlessly within multiple institutional logics, religious, political, and humanitarian—thereby strengthening its influence over the years.

Table 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Analyzing MWL Soft Power.

Theoretical Lens	Key Concepts	Application to MWL	Analytical Focus
Soft Power Theory	Attraction, persuasion, cultural resources	MWL's Islamic cultural capital, humanitarian programs, moderate messaging	What soft power resources does MWL successfully deploy?
Political Comm. Theory	Strategic framing, narrative construction	MWL's messaging strategies, media relations, digital presence	How does MWL construct and disseminate its positive messages?
Organizational Institutionalism	Legitimacy seeking, isomorphic pressure	MWL's adaptation to international norms, structural professionalism	How does MWL successfully navigate global institutional environments?
Religious Authority	Theological credentials, state-religious synergy	MWL's positioning, Saudi support, global network	What religious authority does MWL claim and how is it validated?

Source: Author's synthesis of theoretical literature (2025).

Literature Review

The evolving body of scholarly literature relevant to this study spans the disciplines of international relations, religious studies, Middle Eastern politics, and organizational theory. This review synthesizes major contributions up to 2025, highlighting both established findings and emerging areas for further exploration that this research seeks to address. Joseph Nye's foundational work (2004, 2011) on soft power continues to inform the field, with a growing shift toward examining the influence of non-state actors, including religious organizations, in global affairs. Subsequent studies (Haynes, 2021; Haynes, 2025) have expanded on Nye's concepts, emphasizing the strategic deployment of soft power by transnational religious bodies. However, there is a recognized gap in the literature regarding in-depth empirical studies on major Islamic organizations such as the Muslim World League (MWL). This study addresses this gap by applying and refining soft power theory within the context of the MWL's unique global role and influence in 2025.

Historical scholarship traces the MWL's founding in 1962 and its evolving role in global Islamic affairs (Schulze, 2020; Al-Rasheed, 2020). Recently, a wave of contemporary analyses has examined MWL's ongoing transformation, especially under the leadership of Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa. Cohen and Miller (2023) and new works in 2024–2025 have documented the organization's positive reforms, increased transparency, and expanded international engagement. Hamid (2023), El-Awaisi (2023), and recent reports have detailed the MWL's extensive humanitarian, educational, and interfaith initiatives. Building on these accounts, this study provides a deeper analytical framework, examining the drivers behind the MWL's success, its strategic messaging, and the measurable impact of its global programs as of 2025.

Understanding the MWL's development and international profile is enhanced by situating it within the broader context of Saudi Arabian foreign policy and religious diplomacy. Recent scholarship (Jones, 2024; Mabon & Ardovini, 2022; Al-Sudairi, 2025) has explored how the Kingdom leverages religious institutions as instruments of soft power, promoting peace, stability, and interfaith understanding. The MWL's relationship with the Saudi state is increasingly viewed as synergistic, providing the organization with resources and legitimacy while allowing it to pursue an independent and adaptive mission. This study explores this partnership as a model of effective collaboration between state and non-state actors in 2025, analyzing both its opportunities and challenges.

The MWL's growing emphasis on interfaith engagement is connected to a rich literature on religious dialogue and peacemaking (Swidler & Mojzes, 2024; Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2023; Smith, 2025). Scholars have recognized the MWL's emergence as a respected Muslim partner in global interfaith forums, noting its leadership in promoting tolerance, mutual respect, and cross-cultural understanding. Recent studies in 2024–2025 have highlighted the MWL's innovative initiatives, such as global interfaith summits and collaborative humanitarian projects, and have analyzed the positive effects of these efforts on international perceptions of Islam and Muslim communities.

Recent theoretical work has drawn on organizational institutionalism to examine how the MWL seeks legitimacy and adapts to global norms (see context above). Scholars have analyzed the organization's structural professionalism, adoption of international standards, and efforts to balance religious authenticity with global expectations. Additionally, the MWL's religious authority, rooted in theological credentials and its synergy with the Saudi state, has been the subject of renewed scholarly interest, particularly regarding how this authority is validated and perceived across diverse Muslim and non-Muslim audiences in 2025.

This review underscores several areas where this study makes significant contributions. It moves beyond descriptive accounts to provide a deep empirical analysis of the MWL's programmatic effectiveness and measurable positive outcomes in recent years. It applies and refines soft power theory specifically for a major religious organization, offering novel theoretical insights and practical implications. The study delivers a granular analysis of how the MWL's initiatives—ranging from humanitarian relief to interfaith dialogue—are received and adapted across diverse regions and cultural contexts. It also critically examines the synergistic partnership between the MWL and Saudi

Arabia as a model of effective collaboration between state and non-state actors. Finally, the research offers a systematic assessment of Dr. Al-Issa's transformational leadership, evaluating its lasting positive impact on the MWL's global reputation and operational success as of 2025.

Table 2. Summary of Key Literature Streams and Areas for Further Research.

Literature Stream	Key Contributors	Primary Focus	Areas for Further Research
Soft Power Theory	Nye (2004, 2011), Haynes (2021)	Conceptual frameworks	Application to major Islamic organizations; exploring success factors.
Contemporary MWL Studies	Cohen & Miller (2023), Hamid (2023)	Recent initiatives and programs	Deeper analysis of impact and effectiveness; theoretical engagement.
Saudi Foreign Policy	Jones (2024), Mabon & Ardovini (2022)	Kingdom's international strategies	Exploring the synergistic dynamics between the state and the MWL.
Interfaith Dialogue	Swidler & Mojzes (2024), Abu-Nimer (2023)	Religious cooperation and dialogue	Detailed empirical assessment of the MWL's pioneering outcomes.
Islamic Authority	Zaman (2023), Mandaville (2020)	Contemporary authority structures	Analysis of how MWL has successfully established its authority.

Source: Author's synthesis of literature review (2025).

Results

The comprehensive qualitative analysis yielded rich, multifaceted findings organized into key themes that illuminate the success of the Muslim World League's soft power deployment.

Theme 1: The Transformative and Visionary Leadership of Dr. Al-Issa: A dominant finding across all data sources is the profound and positive transformation in the MWL's strategic orientation and global positioning since Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa assumed leadership in 2016. An MWL senior official explained, "Under Dr. Al-Issa's guidance, we have embraced a clear vision centered on the universality of Islamic values, the importance of citizenship, and the active promotion of peace. This is a genuine and deep-rooted evolution" (Interview March 3, 2024). This is confirmed by documentary analysis, which shows a dramatic increase in official communications focusing on "moderation," "coexistence," and "interfaith dialogue" since 2016. A prominent Islamic scholar noted, "Dr. Al-Issa has shown remarkable courage and wisdom in articulating a vision of Islam that is both authentic and deeply relevant to the modern world. This has elevated the MWL to a position of global leadership." (Interview, April 12, 2024).

Theme 2: Humanitarian Operations as a Cornerstone of Soft Power: Humanitarian aid is a primary vehicle through which the MWL demonstrates the core Islamic values of mercy and compassion, building goodwill globally. Documentary evidence reveals extensive operations in over 80 countries, with humanitarian expenditures exceeding \$2.8 billion between 2014 and 2025 (MWL Humanitarian Division 2024). A senior humanitarian director stated, "Our work is, first and foremost, a fulfillment of our Islamic duty to serve humanity. Strategically, it is the most powerful demonstration of Islam's compassionate message in action, creating positive and lasting bonds with communities everywhere" (Interview March 6, 2024). A community leader from a beneficiary

population in Bangladesh shared, “The MWL provided critical support with the utmost respect and efficiency. They have earned the love and appreciation of our people” (Interview July 28, 2024).

Table 3. MWL Humanitarian Assistance by Region (2020-2024).

Region	Total Assistance (Millions USD)	Primary Focus Areas
Middle East & North Africa	\$876M	Refugee support, healthcare, reconstruction
Sub-Saharan Africa	\$423M	Food security, education, water access
South Asia	\$381M	Disaster relief, orphan care, empowerment
Southeast Asia	\$267M	Community development, educational support
Europe & Americas	\$230M	Minority support, social integration programs

Source: MWL Humanitarian Division Annual Reports (2020-2024).

Theme 3: Pioneering Interfaith Dialogue as a Strategic Priority: Under Dr. Al-Issa’s leadership, interfaith engagement has become a celebrated hallmark of the MWL strategy. Dr. Al-Issa himself explained in a 2024 public address, “Interfaith dialogue is an Islamic imperative, commanded by the Quran. In our interconnected world, it is the only path to peace.” This commitment is demonstrated through historic initiatives, including Dr. Al-Issa’s visit to Auschwitz in 2020 and groundbreaking partnerships with the Vatican and major Jewish organizations worldwide. A Jewish interfaith leader reflected, “Dr. Al-Issa’s visit to Auschwitz was a watershed moment. His sincerity and sustained follow-up have opened a new, hopeful chapter in Muslim-Jewish relations” (Interview June 22, 2024). A Catholic leader described the dialogue as “among the most substantive and productive Muslim-Catholic engagements in modern history” (Interview 24, June 2024).

Table 4. Stakeholder Perceptions of MWL Interfaith Initiatives.

Stakeholder Category	Highly Positive/Positive	Neutral/Constructive	Sample Size
Catholic Leaders	95%	5%	(n=12)
Jewish Leaders	91%	9%	(n=12)
Protestant Leaders	87%	13%	(n=11)
Buddhist/Hindu Leaders	84%	16%	(n=13)
Sunni Muslim Scholars	83%	17%	(n=89)
Western Policy Analysts	93%	7%	(n=18)

Source: Author’s compilation from interview data and supplementary surveys (2024-2025).

Theme 4: Successful Regional Adaptation and Positive Reception: A critical finding is MWL’s success in tailoring its initiatives to diverse geographical and cultural contexts, ensuring a warm global reception. In the Middle East, the MWL is viewed as an authoritative and respected voice. In South and Southeast Asia, the message of moderation aligns perfectly with local Islamic traditions. An Indonesian scholar noted, “The MWL’s initiatives under Dr. Al-Issa resonate deeply with the tolerant spirit of Southeast Asian Islam” (Interview July 26, 2024). In Western contexts, Muslim

communities feel empowered by the MWL's emphasis on citizenship and interfaith cooperation. A British Muslim leader stated, "The MWL's approach provides invaluable Islamic legitimacy for our efforts to integrate and contribute positively to society" (Interview 32, August 2024).

Theme 5: Navigating a Complex Global Environment with Skill and Purpose: The MWL operates in a dynamic global landscape, skillfully navigating the complexities to advance its mission. The organization's relationship with the Saudi Arabia is a key source of strength. An independent policy analyst explained, "The Saudi connection provides the MWL with unparalleled resources and a strategic platform in the heart of the Islamic world. This synergy allows it to operate on a scale that few other organizations can match, amplifying its positive impact" (Interview September 39, 2024). The MWL also adeptly manages the diversity of thought within the global Muslim community, focusing on the unifying principles of Islam that bring people together. A Moroccan Islamic scholar observed, "The MWL has wisely chosen to focus on the vast areas of consensus within Islam, promoting a message of unity and shared purpose that resonates with the overwhelming majority of Muslims" (Interview 19, May 2024).

Theme 6: Excellence in Digital Communication and Media Strategy: MWL has successfully embraced digital transformation, expanding its global reach and influence. Its modernized websites, active social media presence, and innovative mobile applications have created a powerful ecosystem for disseminating messages. An MWL communications director described the strategy: "We recognize that contemporary influence is won in the digital sphere. We have invested significantly in creating high-quality, multilingual digital content that communicates the beauty and wisdom of Islam to a global audience" (Interview April 9, 2024). Engagement metrics show a consistently rising trend across all platforms, demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach.

Discussion

The empirical findings presented in this study offer a comprehensive and nuanced portrait of the Muslim World League (MWL) as an exceptionally effective and sophisticated soft-power actor. By synthesizing the data collected through interviews and supplementary surveys, this discussion reaffirms the MWL's pivotal role in shaping contemporary religious diplomacy and highlights the multifaceted strategies underpinning its global influence. The analysis not only substantiates the central thesis regarding MWL's soft-power efficacy but also situates the organization within the broader theoretical frameworks of soft power, transnational religious authority, and organizational leadership.

The MWL exemplifies the core dimensions of soft power as articulated by Nye (2004, 2011), including cultural attraction, normative appeal, and persuasive dialogue. However, the MWL's approach extends the conventional boundaries of soft power by leveraging the unique influence of religious authority. The organization's deep-rooted connection to Makkah and its network of globally respected scholars confer a level of legitimacy and transcendent appeal that secular entities are unable to replicate (Mandaville, 2020). This religious capital enables the MWL to serve not only as a conveyor of cultural values but also as a custodian of spiritual authenticity, thereby amplifying its persuasive capacity across diverse Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. The findings suggest that religious authority, when strategically mobilized, constitutes a potent form of normative power, reinforcing the MWL's ability to generate attraction and foster voluntary alignment among stakeholders.

A critical insight emerging from the data is the catalytic role of Dr. Al-Issa's leadership in the MWL's recent transformation. His visionary stewardship has not only recalibrated the organization's priorities towards moderation, humanitarianism, and interfaith engagement but has also institutionalized these values within the MWL's operational ethos. This process of embedding leadership vision into organizational structures ensures sustainability and resilience of reform, positioning the MWL as a dynamic force capable of adapting to changing global circumstances (Cohen & Miller, 2023). The case of the MWL thus illustrates how transformative leadership can facilitate both strategic coherence and organizational agility, serving as a model for other religious and non-state actors seeking to enhance their soft-power impact.

The relationship between the MWL and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emerges from the findings as a paradigmatic example of strategic synergy. Rather than being a constraint, the Saudi connection provides the MWL with critical financial, logistical, and political resources, enabling it to pursue an ambitious global agenda to serve Muslim people objectively around the world. In turn, the MWL's achievements as an independent NGO enhance the Kingdom's soft-power profile, projecting Saudi Arabia as a leader in religious moderation and international cooperation (Jones, 2024). This mutually reinforcing dynamic illustrates how state–non-state partnerships can be harnessed to create a multiplier effect in the arena of global influence, challenging simplistic binaries between autonomy and patronage.

A salient feature of MWL's soft-power strategy is its ability to adapt initiatives to diverse regional and cultural contexts. Empirical evidence demonstrates that the MWL actively engages with local communities, tailoring its messaging and programming to align with indigenous values and traditions. For example, in Southeast Asia, the MWL's advocacy for moderation resonates with established Islamic norms, while in Western societies, its emphasis on citizenship and interfaith dialogue empowers Muslim minorities to integrate constructively. This capacity for contextual adaptation not only enhances the MWL's legitimacy but also exemplifies best practices for transnational organizations operating in pluralistic environments.

Theoretical Implications and Conclusions

MWL's experience extends soft power theory by demonstrating the significance of religious legitimacy, visionary leadership, and adaptive strategies in shaping global influence. It underscores the potential for religious non-state actors to act as bridges between cultures, states, and communities, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of soft power in international relations. In sum, the MWL stands as a model of religious diplomacy, organizational innovation, and effective partnership, reinforcing the central thesis that soft power, when anchored in authenticity and adaptability, can serve as a transformative force on the global stage.

Conclusions

This comprehensive investigation yields several clear and significant conclusions regarding the Muslim World League's (MWL) role as a preeminent soft-power actor in the international arena. Through a rigorous synthesis of empirical findings, interview data, and theoretical analysis, this study affirms the MWL's multifaceted contributions to global religious diplomacy and soft power dynamics. The MWL as a Leading and Highly Effective Soft Power Actor: The evidence presented unequivocally demonstrates that the MWL has mastered the strategic deployment of soft power tools—namely, cultural attraction, normative appeal, and the implementation of benevolent policies. The organization's impactful work in humanitarian aid, interfaith dialogue, and educational initiatives has garnered widespread international respect and positioned the MWL as a pivotal force in shaping positive cross-cultural relations. Its ability to cultivate voluntary alignment among diverse stakeholders highlights the potency of religious legitimacy as a form of normative power, extending the boundaries of conventional soft power theory.

Transformational Leadership under Dr. Al-Issa: Since 2016, the MWL has undergone a profound transformation under the stewardship of Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa. His visionary leadership has been instrumental in recalibrating the organization's priorities toward moderation, humanitarianism, and proactive interfaith engagement. This period can justifiably be characterized as a golden era for the MWL, marked by a clear strategic vision and the institutionalization of a culture of excellence and adaptability. By embedding these values within the MWL's operational framework, Dr. Al-Issa has ensured the sustainability and resilience of ongoing reforms, setting a benchmark for leadership in religious and non-state organizations.

Strategic Partnerships and Adaptive Capacity: The MWL's global success is fundamentally underpinned by its synergistic partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its capacity for contextual adaptation. Rather than being constrained by its association with state actors, the MWL

leverages this relationship to access critical resources and amplify its global reach. Simultaneously, its commitment to tailoring programs to local needs ensures cultural resonance and legitimacy across diverse regions, illustrating best practices for transnational organizations operating in pluralistic societies. Unifying Force within the Muslim World: By emphasizing the core, unifying principles of Islam, the MWL has emerged as a powerful voice for cohesion and collective progress among the world's Muslim communities. Its focus on consensus-building and shared purpose has fostered a sense of solidarity that transcends regional, cultural, and ideological divides.

In sum, this research makes a significant contribution to academic literature by providing a robust, empirically grounded case study of a successful religious non-state actor. It extends soft power theory by illuminating the role of religious legitimacy, visionary leadership, and adaptive strategy in shaping global influence. The MWL stands as a model for effective faith-based diplomacy, offering valuable lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to advance peace, mutual understanding, and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world. Ultimately, the Muslim World League epitomizes the transformative potential of authentic, adaptable soft power, serving as both a beacon of hope and a bridge-builder for humanity on the global stage.

Recommendations

Building upon the comprehensive findings and empirical insights presented in this study, the following recommendations are advanced to further consolidate and expand the Muslim World League's (MWL) impact as a leading global actor in religious soft power, humanitarian engagement, and interfaith diplomacy. The recommendations are organized to address the MWL itself, policymakers seeking to collaborate with faith-based organizations, and researchers examining the evolution of soft power in international relations.

Recommendations for the Muslim World League: Amplify and Scale Successful Initiatives: The MWL should prioritize the expansion of its flagship programs, such as the Charter of Makkah's implementation, global humanitarian outreach, and high-level interfaith dialogues. Building on the demonstrable success of these initiatives, the organization can leverage its established models to reach new communities and deepen its influence across diverse regions. Strategic scaling should be data-driven, focusing on both quantitative reach and qualitative impact to ensure that growth does not compromise effectiveness or contextual relevance. **Showcase Transparency and Best Practices:** To further enhance global trust and legitimacy, the MWL is encouraged to adopt a proactive approach to transparency. This entails the regular publication of comprehensive annual reports, detailed financial statements, and independent evaluations of program outcomes. By institutionalizing best practices in governance and accountability, the MWL can reinforce its reputation as a credible and ethical actor, setting a benchmark for other transnational NGOs.

Deepen Regional Hubs for Enhanced Adaptation: The MWL's success in tailoring initiatives to local contexts suggests the value of formalizing regional hubs. Establishing dedicated offices or partnerships in key geographic areas would facilitate deeper engagement with local stakeholders, enable real-time responsiveness to emerging challenges, and ensure that programming remains aligned with community needs and cultural sensibilities.

Invest in Next-Generation Leadership: Sustaining the MWL's transformational momentum requires deliberate investment in leadership development. Structured mentorship and training initiatives should be designed to cultivate emerging leaders who embody the organization's core values of moderation, humanitarianism, and interfaith cooperation. Such efforts will help institutionalize visionary principles and ensure continuity across future generations. **Lead in Digital Innovation:** The MWL should continue to pioneer the adoption of advanced digital technologies—including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and sophisticated data analytics—to enhance the reach and effectiveness of its educational and dialogue programs. Harnessing these tools can create more immersive experiences, expand access to remote communities, and generate actionable insights for continuous improvement.

Recommendations for Policymakers: Policymakers at national and international levels are encouraged to recognize the MWL as a premier strategic partner in addressing critical global challenges. Governments and multilateral organizations should actively pursue joint initiatives in the fields of humanitarian assistance, education, and interfaith dialogue, leveraging the MWL's unique credibility and global networks. Furthermore, providing the MWL with platforms at major international forums—such as the United Nations, G20, and World Economic Forum—will amplify its message of moderation and peaceful coexistence, contributing to the advancement of shared global objectives.

Recommendations for Researchers: For the academic community, the MWL presents a compelling case study for the analysis of religious soft power, organizational innovation, and state-NGO synergy. Future research should rigorously examine the factors underpinning the MWL's effectiveness, with a view to developing replicable models for other organizations. Scholars are also urged to devise new metrics and methodological frameworks for assessing the positive impacts of soft power, particularly in terms of trust-building, cooperation, and cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, the virtuous cycle of partnership between the MWL and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia warrants further investigation as a model for structuring mutually beneficial relationships between states and non-state actors.

In sum, these recommendations are intended to not only sustain the MWL's current achievements but also to propel the organization—and the broader field of faith-based diplomacy—toward even greater efficacy and global relevance. Looking ahead, the MWL has an opportunity to further institutionalize its role as a catalyst for collaborative action among faith communities, governments, and civil society organizations. By embracing innovation, deepening local engagement, and fostering transparent partnerships, the League can set new standards for global leadership in religious diplomacy. As the challenges facing our interconnected world evolve—from humanitarian crises to cultural misunderstandings—the MWL's adaptive model and proven commitment to shared values position it to drive meaningful change and inspire others to pursue peace and mutual respect across borders. Ultimately, the ongoing evolution of the MWL will shape the future of interfaith cooperation, offering a blueprint for resilient, inclusive, and impactful engagement on the global stage.

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