

ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH AND PAKISTAN

Trends in Tertiary Institutions

By Mumtaz Ahmad and Matthew J. Nelson



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— FOREWORD —

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, analysts and policymakers struggled to determine how South Asia had become “lost” to Islamist extremism and terrorism. A small—but vocal—group of Western-based academics suggested that the proliferation of madrasas, or Islamic schools, were at least in part to blame. The controversial debates sparked by these institutions led NBR in summer 2005 to launch a comprehensive three-year survey of Islamic education in South Asia, to examine in depth the relationship between Islamic education and Islamist militancy in the region. NBR assembled a multi-disciplinary team of experts to explore trends in Islamic educational institutions in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and India.

The first year of NBR’s South Asia Education Survey provided a comprehensive introduction to the different types of Islamic educational institutions prevalent in these countries, and the context of their historical, political, ideological, and social evolution in Muslim South Asia. In its second year the project aimed to further inform the relationship between Islamic education and Islamist trends in South Asia. In addition, the project introduced a new focus on secular education in a Muslim context, with a particular focus on Bangladesh and Pakistan.

This report represents the culmination of the project’s third and final year of research, which focused exclusively on trends in tertiary-level religious and secular education in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Research findings from these two countries continue to shed new light on the emerging socio-political landscape of Muslim South Asia, with critical implications for U.S. policy and security interests in the region.

Given its considerable policy relevance, exploring emerging trends and developments in Muslim Asia will remain a priority research area for NBR’s Political and Security Affairs Group. NBR studies have found that there are many and varied roles of Islam in Asia that go far beyond the actions of the radical fringes that have drawn much attention in recent years. In addition to its work on Islamist terrorism, the organization has also sought to engage less visible yet no less critical issues, related to other global economic, political, and cultural trends influencing Muslim societies in Asia today, to broaden the debate and better inform policy leaders. We look forward to continued interaction with the policy community on this subject as well as to a wide distribution of this report’s research findings.

I would like to recognize and express appreciation to the members of the research team whose work appears in these pages, as well as to those involved with the project in its earlier phases. It has been a true pleasure to work with each of them, and the project has benefited immensely from their expertise and professionalism. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the NBR project team, fellows, and editors, whose efforts contributed to the success of this initiative.

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Madrasa Reforms and Perspectives: Islamic Tertiary Education in Pakistan

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The author wishes to express his thanks to Malik Afzal Khan (PhD candidate, Education Department) and Zia-ur-Rahman (M. Phil student, Comparative Religion Department), International Islamic University, Islamabad, for their help in conducting a survey of madrasa ulama and students. He is also grateful to Dr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari, Director, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad for his valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this monograph.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on previous years' research, this paper examines recent developments in madrasa reform initiatives throughout Pakistan while looking further into the alleged relationship between madrasa education and extremist tendencies. The report assesses the largely negative attitudes of madrasa *ulama* and their students toward the United States, in general, and their hostile views of U.S. aid to Pakistan and U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world, in particular. The paper concludes with an overview of the relation between madrasas and the question of national and Islamic identity in Pakistan.

MAIN FINDINGS

The Pakistani madrasa curriculum remains virtually unchanged. The government blames madrasa authorities for the failure of its reforms. However, these reforms were prepared in haste by government officials with little understanding of traditional education, and without any input from the madrasa *ulama*. The *ulama's* opposition to these reforms was then used by the government to excuse its lack of commitment. Madrasa curriculum may be said to have played a role in creating an environment that encourages hostile or, at least, negative attitudes toward the "other." However, to claim that there is a direct causal relationship between madrasa education, on the one hand, and anti-Americanism or anti-Westernism, on the other, is, at best, a tenuous proposition. Madrasa education *per se* is entirely devoid of political content. With the same curriculum, madrasa students were never shown to be anti-American until the 1990s. Furthermore, anti-Americanism is not something that is exclusively confined to the madrasas or, for that matter, to Muslims alone. The Bush administration's policies in the Middle East; the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq; the scandals of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay; the widely-reported stories of torture and "extraordinary renditions;" and the general perception that the "global war on terror" is primarily directed against Muslims have all irreparably damaged the moral standing of the United States in the eyes of Muslims. There is now a great deal of pessimism among the madrasa *ulama* who largely feel that the situation will not "change for the better." Given their highly negative and hostile views of America, it is no wonder that 76 percent of madrasa students and teachers questioned believe that "waging jihad against America" is justified.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- A large majority of madrasa students and teachers believes that U.S. non-interference in the affairs of Muslim countries and its withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq will prove to be the most critical factors for improving relations between the United States and the Muslim world.
- Among madrasa *ulama*, there is a noticeable lack of enthusiasm for U.S. economic assistance to Muslim countries. Many believe that the United States and the West attempt to control the policies of Muslim countries through aid. This finding should give pause to policymakers who believe that religiously-inspired unrest, extremism, and militancy in the troubled areas of northern Pakistan can be tackled by the infusion of economic aid.

This paper builds on previous years' research for NBR's South Asia Education Survey project and examines the following: the recent developments—or lack thereof—in implementing the madrasa reform package introduced by the government of Pakistan in 2002; the relationship between madrasa education and extremist tendencies in the country; the attitudes of the madrasa *ulama* toward the United States; and the role of the madrasa *ulama* in politics, professional organizations, and civil society institutions, especially their increasingly significant presence in recent years in social welfare, education, and disaster relief. We also explore the *ulama*'s views on various issues, including the role of women in society, democracy, pluralism, and religious minorities.

The report is based primarily on field work in Pakistan involving interviews with madrasa *ulama* and government officials; focus group discussions; government reports and publications of the madrasas; and a questionnaire-based survey of a sample of 88 madrasa teachers and graduate students from the three main Islamic schools of doctrinal orientation in Pakistan—the Deobandis, Barelwis, and Ahl-e-Hadith.

Madrasa Reforms: Objectives, Policies... And Failure

According to government statistics, there are currently 11,491 madrasas in Pakistan,¹ although unofficial sources have estimated their numbers to range from 12,000 to 15,000 with a total student enrollment of 1.7 million. *Pakistan Education Statistics* gives the total number of madrasa students in the country as 1.518 million out of which 140,431 have been listed as enrolled at the tertiary levels, i.e., in Sanavia Aama, Sanavia Khassa, Alia Almia and Darja-e-Takhassus. In this report, our primary focus will be on tertiary education and on madrasas that impart higher secondary and higher levels of Islamic education in Pakistan. In the majority of cases, madrasas recruit students at the elementary level and the students graduate from the madrasas where they had started their education. Inter-madrasa transfer of students that was quite common in the past is rarely encouraged these days. Most madrasas are identified with a particular school of doctrinal orientation—Deobandi, Barelwi, Ahl-e-Hadith and Shia.

Each doctrinal school has established its own federation (*wafaq*) of affiliated madrasas that prescribes curriculum, establishes standards, conducts examinations, and issues diplomas. The following table gives an overview of the major madrasa federations in Pakistan:

TABLE 1 Central Boards of Madrasas in Pakistan

Name	Doctrinal Affiliation	Headquarters	Date Established
Wafaq-ul-Madaris	Deobandi	Multan	1959
Tanzim-ul-Madaris	Barelwi	Lahore	1960
Wafaq-ul-Madaris Shia	Shia	Lahore	1959
Rabitatul-Madaris-al-Islamia	Jamaat-e-Islami	Lahore	1983
Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Salafia	Ahl-e-Hadith	Faisalabad	1955

SOURCE: Offices of the respective madrasa boards.

¹ Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Education Statistics, 2004-225* (Islamabad, 2006).

Historically, there has not been much cooperation between these organizations representing rival schools of religious thought. In times of external threats, however, they have been quick to join hands and form a united front against any government attempt to introduce madrasa reforms or constrain their autonomy. Thus, madrasas of all schools of thought joined together to oppose Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's attempt to bring them under government control in 1976. Similarly, when the Musharraf government announced its intention in August 2001 (i.e., four weeks before the events of September 11) to modernize madrasa education, all five madrasa federations united in the Ittehad Tanzimat-e-Madaris-e-Diniya to oppose any unilateral move by the government that would adversely affect their autonomy.

The then religious affairs minister, Ijaz-ul-Haq, defined the objectives of "The Pakistan Madrasa Education (Establishment and Affiliation of Model Dini Madaris Board) Ordinance, 2001," prepared by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and promulgated on August 18, 2001, as: establishing model madrasas; improving and securing the uniformity of the standard of education and integration of the system of Islamic education imparted in madrasas within the general education system; securing the registration, regulation, standardization and uniformity of the curricula and standard of education of madrasas; imparting specialized Islamic education in Pakistan along with the general education system; maintaining the autonomous character of religious schools; bringing education and training imparted in religious institutions in consonance with the requirements of the modern age and the basic tenets and spirit of Islam; providing greater opportunities in national life for the graduates of madrasas; according recognition of the degrees, certificates and *asnad* (certificates) awarded by madrasas; and regulating their examination system.

Subsequently, the Madrasa Education Board was established to supervise the three newly-opened model madrasas in Rawalpindi, Karachi and Sukkur. The government had hoped that the private madrasas would respond positively to the incentives offered and would affiliate themselves with the Board. The federation of the different organizations of the madrasas, however, refused to cooperate with the government either on the registration issue or on the question of curriculum reform. Madrasas of all denominations decided not to allow the government to "impinge upon" their autonomy and regulate their activities. Only a small number of madrasas, mostly of Barelwi persuasion, agreed to get registered with the government. Many others contended that they were already registered under the Cooperative Societies Act (1860) and, therefore, did not need any new registration.

The second ordinance regarding madrasa reforms, the *Deeni Madaris* (Voluntary Registration and Regulation) Ordinance 2002, sought the voluntary registration of madrasas, establishment of provincial madrasa education boards, and a ban on admissions to foreign students without valid visas.

To fulfill the declared objectives of madrasa reform, a five year project was formulated by the Ministry of Education at the cost of approximately \$100 million. The plan was to provide facilities to 8,000 madrasas in terms of teachers' salaries, textbooks, stationary, libraries and computers. Again, the federation of the madrasa organizations, Ittehad Tanzeemat-e-Madaris-e-Diniya, refused to oblige despite a series of meetings between its representatives and the officials of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Religious Affairs. The government announced several deadlines for the madrasas' registration but the response from the madrasas was of continued defiance. It was only when the second ordinance was amended to remove the requirement of reporting the income and expenditure statements to the government that the madrasas agreed to register.

Before the promulgation of the ordinance of 2005, about 6,000 madrasas were registered under the Registration of Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act, 1860. From 2005 to 2007, 8,072 more madrasas were registered. The total number of registered madrasas at the end of 2007, according to the former religious affairs minister, was 14,072. It is apparent, therefore, that despite their contestations, a large number of madrasas in Pakistan are now registered with the government, although their registration could not be attained under the newly-issued ordinances.

The curricula of the madrasas are regulated by their respective boards, and have not undergone any significant changes in their core content since inception in the 19th century. Some modern subjects such as English, history, math, etc., have been introduced in several madrasas, especially at the elementary level, and some large madrasas have started some specialized courses on Islamic economics and finance. However, in an overwhelming majority of cases the higher level madrasas remain committed to their traditional curriculum.

At the tertiary level, madrasas are especially reluctant to introduce any changes in view of their emphasis on training *ulama* well-versed in traditional Islamic learning and law. In response to our survey questions on madrasa curriculum, an overwhelming majority of respondents (91.5% teachers and 77.1% students) agreed with the statement that the present system of madrasa education in Pakistan is adequate and does not need any changes. At

the same time, however, a significant majority of teachers (57.1%) and students (65%) were of the opinion that madrasas should also include science courses in their curriculum. Given the madrasa teachers' near complete satisfaction with the existing curriculum, the concession with regard to the introduction of science courses on their part seems cosmetic. Further probing on the question of science courses made it clear that the *ulama* were willing to introduce an introductory general science course for elementary students only.

The entire emphasis of the government reform package with regard to the curriculum reform was on asking the madrasas to introduce some modern subjects *along with* their traditional curriculum, rather than on any qualitative change in the core Islamic sciences. The reform package promised to provide madrasas with all kinds of facilities to facilitate the teaching of English, natural sciences and computer skills, the assumption being that these subjects would orient the madrasa students toward more modern, liberal attitudes and behavior. However, as Candland has noted:

The real problem in the Islamic educational institutions is not that students do not learn computers and natural sciences. Many *madaris*, *darul uloom*, and *jamia* do teach these subjects. But a natural science education is not a guarantee of an enlightened mind. Indeed, many of those most committed to violence in the name of Islam were educated in the natural sciences. The real problem in

At the tertiary level, madrasas are especially reluctant to introduce any changes in view of their emphasis on training *ulama* well-versed in traditional Islamic learning and law.

these schools is that students do not learn how to relate with other communities in a culturally diverse country and a globally interdependent world.²

The officials of the federal government blame the madrasa authorities for the failure of the government reform package. The fact remains, however, that the reform package was prepared by those who had no real understanding and appreciation of the traditional system of education. Few had ever visited a madrasa in their entire lives. The entire reform package was prepared in haste, and without any input either from the educational experts or from the madrasa *ulama*.

It appears, therefore, that, more than anything else, it was lack of proper planning and near total absence of an adequate implementation strategy on the part of the Pakistani government agencies that resulted in the failure of the madrasa reform package.

In addition, the entire thrust of the madrasa reform was the immediate concern of security, and not education reform. It is no wonder, therefore, that the officials of the Ministry of Interior and intelligence agencies were more active in trying to manage the affairs of the madrasas than those of the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

It appears that the *ulama's* opposition to these reforms was used by the government officials as an alibi for the lack of their own serious efforts and commitment in this regard. While the Ministry of Religious Affairs under Ijaz-ul-Haq was quite enthusiastic in working with the madrasa *ulama* to persuade them to accept the reform

package, many of the officials in the Ministry of Education regarded the “madrasas mess” as an “unwelcome burden” on their otherwise modern agency.³ Privately, many Ministry of Education officials resented the idea of according “these mullahs” the status of equal partners in educational planning. It was obvious from our discussions with several officials during the past four years that many of them were merely “doing [our] jobs” in pursuance of the instructions from the president’s office, and the fact that “there was money to be spent.”

Also, there was little or no coordination with the provincial governments and their departments of education or *auqaf* (religious endowments). There were cases in which some federal government agencies were complaining about the lack of information on certain madrasas and, at the same time, the provincial governments were giving *zakat* (donation) funds to these madrasas after obtaining from them all the necessary information, including the total number of their students.⁴ The federal government did not even bother to collect data from the provincial *auqaf* departments

² Christopher Candland, “Pakistan’s Recent Experience in Reforming Islamic Education,” in *Education Reform in Pakistan: Building for the Future*, ed. Robert M. Hathaway (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars).

³ Interview with a senior official of the Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, June 15, 2008.

⁴ The current author was able to obtain, quite easily, all the information from the Government of Punjab about the distribution of *zakat* funds to the madrasas in the province (with their names, location, and the amount disbursed annually), while the concerned federal government agency was still trying to collect the data on its own.

and the provincial *zakat* councils as to how many madrasas in their jurisdictions were receiving financial assistance from these agencies.

It appears, therefore, that, more than anything else, it was lack of proper planning and near total absence of an adequate implementation strategy on the part of the Pakistani government agencies that resulted in the failure of the madrasa reform package. The commitment that was shown at the political level (especially by President Musharraf) was, in no way, matched by the commitment of the government officials who were responsible for project formulation and implementation. Even a cursory look at the proceedings of various meetings convened by these officials to implement the madrasa reform package makes it clear where their real interest was: purchasing vehicles and furniture and creating new administrative positions.

True, the *ulama* associated with various madrasa organizations were not fully cooperative in helping the government implement these reforms and were opposed to any government intervention in their affairs. But the approach of the government officials was equally half-hearted and lukewarm. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs had all the funds and opportunity to establish their own madrasas under the supervision of the Madrasa Education Board and to make these madrasas into model schools combining Islamic education with modern education. But the way the three government-funded madrasas in Islamabad, Karachi and Sukkur were organized, managed and staffed made a mockery of the government claims that these were the models that the private madrasas should follow. The project evaluation wing of the Pakistan Planning Commission was so disappointed with the lack of progress in the Madrasa Reform Package that it proposed to outsource its implementation to a private consulting company to salvage what was left of the project.

Madrasa *Ulama* and their Attitudes toward the United States

The perceptions of, and the attitudes toward, the United States on the part of the madrasa teachers and students remain highly negative. This was borne out, as we will note below, in our survey of the madrasa *ulama* and during our extended interviews and discussions with them. However, it is difficult to determine the precise role of madrasa education *per se* in forming these negative perceptions, given the variegated and multiple factors that could be identified as equally, if not sometimes more, important in the formation of such views.

Madrasa curriculum may be said to have played some role in creating an intellectual-ideological environment that encourages hostile, or at least, negative attitudes toward the “other”

on the part of the *ulama*, but to claim that there is a direct causal relationship between madrasa education on the one hand, and anti-Americanism/anti-Westernism, on the other, is, at best, a tenuous proposition. First, madrasa education is exclusively focused on Islamic religious and

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ancillary sciences and is totally innocent of any political content. The madrasa curriculum has been described—and rightly so in our view—as literalist, legalistic, sectarian, conservative, and outdated, but it is not political, extremist or radical, at least in the sense in which it is made to be these days. Second, with the same curriculum and the same system of education, madrasa students were never shown to be anti-American until the 1990s. Third, as several national and international polls have conclusively shown, anti-Americanism is not something that is exclusively confined to the madrasa *ulama*—or, for that matter, to Muslims alone.

Opposing U.S. Intervention in the Muslim World

The Bush administration policies with respect to the Middle East; the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq; the scandals of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisons; the widely-reported stories of torture and “extraordinary renditions;” and the general perception that the “global war on terror” is primarily directed against Muslims have all created an environment that seems to have irreparably damaged the moral standing of the United States in the eyes of Muslims. According to our survey research, the views of almost all madrasa respondents (both teachers and graduate students) toward America had become “less favorable” since the events subsequent to 9/11. There was also a great deal of pessimism among madrasa *ulama* that things would improve. 83% of our respondents believed that American policies will not “change for the better” with the new administration in 2009. However, the students were a little more optimistic (19%) than their teachers (10%) that things would get better under a post-Bush administration.

We asked our respondents to rank in order the following specific changes in U.S. policies that, in their view, could help the United States improve its relations with the Muslim World: 1. help solve the Palestinian problem; 2. give more economic aid to poor Muslim countries; 3. withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan; 4. stop supporting undemocratic Muslim regimes; 5. stop interfering in the affairs of Muslim countries; and 6. help solve the Kashmir problem. 78% of all respondents ranked the non-interference in the affairs of Muslim countries as number one, revealing that they considered it as a root cause of all other problems. The second important issue that was noted by our respondents was withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq which, in their view, would improve America’s relations with the Muslim world. 28% and 22% of all respondents chose withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq as their second and third option in the ranking, respectively.

The third major issue that was identified as critical for improving relationships between the United States and the Muslim world was the Palestinian problem; 19% and 17% of all respondents identified the U.S. help in the solution of the Palestinian problem as their third and fourth ranking, respectively. Only 4.5% of respondents identified the support of the undemocratic regimes in the Muslim World as the number one problem, which is strange given the almost total lack of legitimacy of (former) President Musharraf and the U.S. support of his regime when the survey was conducted in March-April 2008. Similarly, the madrasa *ulama* were also not interested in seeking economic aid for poor Muslim countries from the United States: only 2.3% ranked this option as number one, while 43% gave it the lowest priority, that is, six, in the ranking. Surprisingly, the U.S. help in the solution of the Kashmir problem—a problem that should have been closer to the hearts of madrasa teachers and students—was chosen by only 17% as number one, while 16% and 12.5% ranked it as four and five, respectively.

Thus, the non-interference in the affairs of Muslim countries and the withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq—which, essentially, means the same as the non-interference option—were seen as the most critical for the improvement in the relations between the United States and the Islamic world. It is also interesting to note that while 17% of the madrasa *ulama* ranked the Kashmir problem as number one, none of them ranked the Palestinian problem as their top priority, although 19.3% and 17% ranked it as numbers two and three, respectively.

Also interesting to note was the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the madrasa *ulama* for the U.S. economic assistance for Muslim countries. No wonder that 47.7% of the respondents did not even care to mention it in any of the six rankings. This should be quite revealing for policymakers both in Islamabad and in Washington who tend to believe that the religiously-inspired unrest, extremism and militancy can be tackled by the infusion of economic aid in the troubled areas of northern Pakistan. The problem, it seems, lies elsewhere!

We explored this issue of the U.S. economic assistance to Muslim countries and the *ulama*'s attitude toward it in our interviews and focus group discussions, especially in the context of the \$10 billion U.S. aid to Pakistan since 2001. Most *ulama* were of the opinion that this aid was meant to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban and, therefore, did not benefit Pakistan. They further pointed out that whatever non-military aid was given to Pakistan “went straight into the pockets of generals and bureaucrats.” But the more fundamental critique of the foreign economic aid was articulated by a senior teacher at an Ahl-e-Hadith madrasa who said:

It is through aid that the Western countries influence and control the policies of Muslim countries. They don't give us aid as charity; their aid is conditional on our surrendering to their political and economic and cultural control. When they give aid, they also send their NGOs and Christian missions to pollute our culture and destroy our ideology and religion. Why else should America be interested in giving [former president] Musharraf hundreds of millions of dollars for madrasa reforms?

Several *ulama* during our discussion on the madrasas' lack of cooperation with the government on curriculum reforms, pointed out that the Musharraf government was offering them “American money” as an incentive to make the changes. “How come America became suddenly interested in Islamic education?” a Deobandi madrasa teacher in Peshawar asked. Another *'alim* in the same session asked: “Isn't it the same American hand that is giving money to Musharraf for madrasa reforms that also gives money to Israel to kill the Palestinians?”

To go back to the question of how America is perceived by the madrasa *ulama*, we asked our respondents to tell us, in their own words the three things that come to mind when they hear the word “America.” The words that they wrote on the questionnaire are as follows: rascal, vagabond and terrorist (50%); the enemy of Islam and Muslims (37%); oppressor and cruel (29%); unjust and warmonger (27%); selfish and hypocrite (22%); colonizer and usurper (21%); and arrogant (14%). Only two respondents out of a sample of 88 had something positive to say about the “well-organized American political governance” and its “clean environment”.

The extent to which the United States has lost any credibility whatsoever among the traditional religious establishment in Pakistan can also be seen from the response of the madrasa *ulama* to our question about (former) President Bush's statement that America will promote democracy and freedom in Muslim countries. All 88 respondents said that they did not believe that President Bush really wanted to promote democracy and freedom in the Islamic World.

We also wanted to know about the *ulama's* perception as to what really determines American policies toward Muslim countries. For 65% of the respondents, the determining factor was the "American government's hostility toward Islam." The American Jewish lobby was identified by 16%, while 15% were of the view that American economic and strategic interests were the determining factors. Interestingly, when we asked our respondents to identify one country that, in their view, was Pakistan's best friend, none of them named the United States, while China topped the list with 46%, followed by Saudi Arabia (42%) among the students polled. The teachers preferred Saudi Arabia (48%) over China (21%). One reason, among others, that determines the *ulama's* views about America is that, according to 84% of our respondents, America is a Christian country. Only 14% believe that it is a secular state where "all religious communities have equal rights."

Given these highly negative and hostile views of America, it is no wonder that 76% of our respondents believed that "waging jihad against America" was justified, while 24% were opposed to the idea of waging jihad against the United States. Interestingly, there was a big difference

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here between the teachers and students: among the teachers, 58% supported the idea of jihad against America, while among the students, the number was much higher, that is, 81%. This difference was corroborated during our focus group discussions in which madrasa students spoke passionately in support of the Taliban in Afghanistan who, in the words of a senior student in a Deobandi

madrasa, were "keeping the flag of jihad high" (*jihad ka 'alam buland kar rahey hain*). Several teachers in the same focus group intervened to calm the passions of their young students by saying that they did not have to take up arms against America; "jihad can be waged with tongue, with pen (*zuban aur qalam ka jihad*), economic boycott, and with so many other peaceful ways."

As a result of several events in their immediate proximity and around the world, America looms large in the political consciousness of the *ulama* today as it never did in the past. The news stories of resistance and civilian casualties in both Afghanistan and Iraq and the sufferings of the Palestinians caused by the Israeli occupation have further inflamed the anti-American passions among the *ulama*—and not among the *ulama* alone, one may add.

Very few *ulama* reported any personal encounter with an American, except some whose madrasas had been visited by American journalists in recent years. The *ulama* thought that these American visitors were "civil," "respectful" and "good listeners," although "totally ignorant" of how and what Muslims feel about America and what Islam stands for. Many *ulama* emphasized during the focus group discussions that they had nothing against the American people and that their anti-American sentiments were directed against the policies of the American government. The three *ulama* who had visited the United States talked fondly about their travels around America and the "generosity" of ordinary Americans. They were proud of the progress made by the American Muslim community but, at the same time, were apprehensive of the "discriminatory measures" against American Muslims since the events of 9/11.

Anti-Americanism in Madrasa Periodicals

While our research revealed that madrasa curriculum—given its highly legalistic and conservative orientation—cannot, as such, be considered a contributing factor to radical ideology or extremism, the periodical publications emerging from the major Deobandi madrasa present another picture. The monthly *Al-Haq* of Akora Khatak’s Haqqaniya madrasa and the monthly *Al-Bayyanat* of Binnori Town madrasa in Karachi are the two Deobandi publications that have long inflamed anti-Shia sentiments and, since the mid-1990s, have championed the cause of the Taliban with great fervor. Unlike moderate Deobandi publications such as *Al-Balagh* of Dar-ul-Uloom Karachi and *Ash-Shariah* of Nusrat-ul-Uloom madrasa in Gujranwala, *Al-Haq* and *Al-Bayyanat* have been among the major anti-American voices in Pakistan’s religious journalism. In this they are only surpassed by the monthly *Tarjuman-ul Qur’an* of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the three publications of Markaz Al-Da’wa-wal-Irshad of Hafiz Saeed of Lashkar-e-Taiba and *Zarb-e-Momin* of Jamia Ar-Rashid, Karachi. The Jamaat-e-Islami’s official organ, *Tarjuman-ul-Quran*, has been leading the charge against U.S. policies in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East, especially post- 9/11.

A survey of 48 issues during 2004-2007 of the two Deobandi monthlies (*Al-Haq* and *Al-Balagh*) and one Barelwi (*Zia-e-Haram*, of Bhera Sharif Madrasa in Sargodha) showed that besides the usual religious topics covered in religious magazines (Qur’an, Hadith, *fiqh*, theology, and biographies of prominent religious personalities), editorial commentaries and articles on current political issues in *Al-Haq* invariably took the United States to task for its support of Israel, “brutalities” in Afghanistan and Iraq, and “anti-Islamic” policies and “conspiracy to dismantle” madrasa education in Muslim countries. While the Barelwi journal *Zia-e-Haram* published 111 editorial comments and articles on politics out of a total of 533, i.e., 20.82% during 2004-2007, only 22% of these 111 articles could be characterized as anti-American. *Al-Balagh* of Dar-ul-Uloom published 92 articles and editorial comments on politics out of a total of 493, i.e., 18%; those that were directly critical of the U.S. policies were 25.5% of 92 political articles. In the case of *Al-Haq*, there were 127 political articles and editorials out of a total number of 337, i.e., 37.6%, and 72% of the 137 political articles mentioned U.S. policies as the main cause of what was wrong with the world, and especially the Muslim world.

Madrasa *Ulama* and Extremism: Sectarianism and Jihad⁵

Inherent Sectarianism

Given that most Pakistani madrasas belong to one or the other doctrinal schools of thought—sect or denomination, if you may—a built-in sectarian loyalty to one’s own group and hostility and extreme views about the other groups inevitably exists, especially during times of heightened sectarian tensions engendered by extraneous forces and developments. The debates (*manazara*), controversies, rivalry, and sometimes conflicts between the Deobandi and Barelwi madrasas have been an integral—and lively—part of the madrasas’ history in Muslim South Asia. Doctrinal controversies between the Ahl-e-Hadith on the one hand and the Deobandis and Barelwis, on the other, have also made the history of the *ulama* and madrasas exuberant in the subcontinent.

⁵ Findings in this section are based on our survey research of madrasa *ulama*, and the focus group discussions and interviews, conducted in several madrasas in Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP).

Every group takes an extremist position against its rival and tries to prove how deviant that group is from the orthodox beliefs and practices of Islam.⁶ In several really extreme cases, some Deobandi *ulama* (Maulana Ghulam Ahmad of Madrasa Ta'lim-ul-Qur'an, Rawalpindi and Qazi Mazhar Hussain of Chakwal, for example) have gone as far as to declare the Barelwis as “*mushrik*” (those who associate other entities with God) or even “*kafir*” (infidel). The Barelwis, on their part, have also not hesitated in describing Deobandis and Ahl-e-Hadith as “*Gustakh-e-Rasool*” (the one who blasphemes against the Prophet). This kind of extremism, in the form of polemical writings, speeches, sermons and *fatwas* as well as conflicts has not been uncommon among the madrasa *ulama*.

Against this relatively “benign sectarianism” involving Deobandis and Barelwis, there is also “fratricidal sectarianism” that (a) pits the Sunnis—that is, the Deobandis, Barelwis, Ahl-e-Hadith and all others in-between—against the Shias, and (b) both Sunnis and Shias against the Ahmadis. Deobandis and Ahl-e-Hadith especially have targeted the Shias for quite some time, demanding that the Shias be declared as non-Muslims on account of their “fundamental deviations” from “mainstream” Islam. Maulana Sami-ul-Haq of Haqqaniya Madrasa in Akora Khatak, Peshawar, Maulana Yusuf Ludhyanvi of Madrasa Binnoria in Karachi, and the arch-sectarians of Sipah-e-Sahaba have all demanded that the Shias be declared as “*kafir*.” Although the Shia-Sunni conflict has been largely homegrown, it has become more intense and deadlier since the Islamic Revolution in Iran that led to the proxy war for religio-political influence in Pakistan between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both the Saudis and Iranians have invested heavily in Pakistan to provide religio-moral and financial support to their respective sectarian allies.

The most extremist form of sectarianism has been practiced against the Ahmadis, however. Both during the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, the anti-Ahmadiya movements launched by the *ulama*—and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami—led to violent riots and considerable loss of life. In the case of the Ahmadis, the *ulama* of all schools of thought—Sunnis and Shias—were united in their demand that they be declared as non-Muslim, a demand that led to the constitutional amendment by the then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to cast the Ahmadis outside the pale of Islam. Thus, while the sectarian extremism involving the Deobandis and Barelwis has been mostly confined to polemics and “*fatwa bazi*,” the Shia-Sunni sectarianism and the anti-Ahmadiya hostilities have often led to violence. In fact, in recent years, more people have died in Shia-Sunni violence in Pakistan than in any other political or religious conflicts and the Deobandi madrasas of southern Punjab and Karachi have played a major role in recruiting the volunteers for the anti-Shia killing sprees. This sectarian extremism, to a large extent, can be justly attributed to madrasa education that tends to encourage and inculcate a sense of self-righteousness in one's own group and an intolerance of the “other,” that, given some extraneous developments, can often lead to violence and bloodshed.

Disputing Jihad

As for the type of religious extremism that extends to issues of national, regional and international politics and gives rise to militant movements fighting wars (jihad) against the state as well as against other nations—both in its “homicidal” and “suicidal” forms—its relationship with madrasa education can be described as contingent and incidental, at best. Madrasa curriculum in

⁶ This does not mean, however, that there have never been cases of harmony and mutual respect among the *ulama* of different schools of thought. There are many instances in which Deobandi and Barelwi *ulama* would study in each other's madrasas in order to be taught by reputable teachers in their rival schools. Then there are cases of personal friendships and mutual respect for each other's scholarship among the Deobandi and Barelwi *ulama* in the late 19th and early 20th century. These cases, unfortunately, have become rare in recent times.

particular and madrasa education in general cannot be said to have anything that is inherently extremist and violent or promotes militancy and terrorism. However, having said that, a case can be made that the worldview inculcated by madrasa education among its students tends to shore up intolerance of the “other” that, in “favorable” circumstances, may lead to extremism, militancy and violence. But the critical element in our argument here is *not* madrasa education as such, but the external circumstances that provide a context conducive for violence and militancy.

When asked about their views on suicide bombing, 45% of survey respondents agreed with the statement that “suicide bombing is *haram* (forbidden in Islam), in all cases whatever is the cause and reason,” while 41% disagreed and 14% said they did not know. The interesting thing to note here is that more students were against suicide bombing (49%) than their teachers (32%), while we expected the case to be otherwise, given students’ proclivity for more emotional and “heroic” responses to events. Also interesting was the fact that 26% of teachers were not sure how to respond to this question, while only 10% of students opted for the “don’t know” response.

It is important to supplement the survey responses with the insights gained during our interviews and focus group discussions with madrasa teachers and students in order to bring to bear the full picture of their views on suicide bombing. With the exception of very few participants in the three focus group meetings, almost all other students and teachers disapproved of targeting civilians by the suicide bombers, although some of them were of the view that “sometimes civilians do get killed” in such incidents. At the same time, however, only a few of them were willing to condemn the suicide attacks that were taking place in the northern areas and other cities of Pakistan. Many in the discussion groups said that the Pakistani Taliban and their supporters in the tribal areas were only “responding” to the “brutal” attacks by the Pakistani security forces, and hence were quite justified in targeting the police and security personnel. These views were more forcefully presented by the participants of focus group discussions in the three madrasas of the NWFP than in the madrasas in Punjab. As for the suicide bombing targeting American and other foreign forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, almost all participants agreed that it was a legitimate method of war against “foreign occupation.”

As for the suicide bombing targeting American and other foreign forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, almost all participants agreed that it was a legitimate method of war against “foreign occupation.”

In response to a question on whether respondents approved or disapproved of jihad against America, 76% said that they did approve of it, while 24% said they did not. But here, unlike the case of suicide bombing, the students, as expected, were more strident than their teachers: while 58% of the teachers were in favor of waging jihad against America, the students who approved of jihad against America were 81%. In this case not only did 42% of the teachers oppose jihad against America but, in their focus group discussions, many of them warned against “those misguided, emotional, and Saddam Husain-like Muslims” who were “destroying their own countries” in the

name of fighting against America. “Have you learned no lesson from the fate of Saddam Husain and Iraq?” one teacher angrily asked his junior colleague in a focus group discussion.

Regardless of their approval or disapproval of waging jihad against America, they were all agreed that U.S. policies toward Muslims and Islamic countries were “harmful” and that Pakistan should not be a part of Washington’s war on terror. While referring to the death and destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan, a madrasa teacher in Rawalpindi said: “Who is more extremist than America? Who is killing innocent civilians and women and children in Afghanistan by aerial bombing? Who said that either you are with us or against us?” At one time when the discussion on suicide bombing and waging jihad against America became quite heightened during a focus group, a senior teacher intervened to conclude by saying, “OK, we have our different views on how to confront America, but confront we must, because if we don’t, America will eat all of us up (*America ham sab ko kha jaey ga*).”

An important issue of debate among Islamic scholars in recent years has been: who has the legal authority to declare jihad according to Islamic law? A majority of Muslim scholars, both traditional and modernist, believe that only the government can declare jihad and that private individuals and groups have no such authority according to Shariah (Islamic law). Since the Afghan resistance against the Soviet occupation and the subsequent emergence of the so-called jihadi organizations fighting against the “near” and “far” enemies, however, some scholars have argued that the *ulama* can also give *fatwas* authorizing jihad and calling upon Muslims to participate in it in “special circumstances.”

Thus, the Afghan resistance against the Soviets was declared a “jihad” by the *ulama* of all schools of thought and, later, when the Taliban were trying to capture the reigns of power in Afghanistan, the *ulama* of the Deoband School issued *fatwas* that their [Taliban’s] struggle was a jihad. Still later, when the Taliban government was attacked by the U.S. in the wake of the 9/11 events, the Deobandi *ulama* issued another *fatwa* to declare their resistance against the United States as jihad and asked Muslims in Afghanistan and Pakistan to join their jihad. Maulana Sufi Muhammad, a Deobandi preacher from Malakand, NWFP, who, in the mid-1990s, had launched the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (Movement for the Enforcement of the Shariah of Prophet Muhammad), recruited about a thousand young volunteers from the tribal areas and crossed into Afghanistan to help the Taliban fight the American troops in November 2001.⁷

Similarly, the *ulama* of all schools of thought have maintained that the groups fighting for the liberation of Kashmir are waging jihad and are, therefore, “entitled” to the moral, political, material, and military support of all Muslims. In fact, the groups fighting for national liberation in Kashmir, Palestine, Chechnya and Lebanon are usually placed by the *ulama* and Islamic scholars in a different category—that is, different from the ones fighting the “near” and “far” enemies—and in such cases there is little difference of opinion among the scholars about the Islamic legitimacy of their jihad.

Our survey results revealed that a large number of the madrasa *ulama* (75%) still believe that only the government is authorized to declare jihad; only 25% gave this authority to the *ulama*. Interestingly, more teachers (84%) were in favor of government’s authority to declare jihad than students (72%). But it is important to note here that: (a) all respondents recognized the sovereign authority of an Islamic government to declare jihad; (b) none of them said that *only* the *ulama*

⁷ Sufi Muhammad’s jihadi intrusion in Afghanistan ended with most of his followers either captured or killed by the Northern Alliance; Sufi Muhammad himself fled back to Pakistan to save his life.

were authorized to declare jihad; and (c) those who said that the *ulama* could *also* declare jihad were of the view that the *ulama* could only exercise this authority if the government failed to fulfill its Islamic obligation, or there was no Islamic government in place.

Related to this was another question as to whether it is permissible to wage jihad against another country even if it was not allowed by one's own government. The opinion of our respondents was almost equally divided: 49% agreed that one can participate in a jihad against a foreign country even if it involves violating the international agreements of one's own government, while 51% disagreed with this position. But the difference of opinion between the teachers and students here again was quite significant: while only 37% of teachers were in favor of foreign jihads, more than half of the student respondents (52%) endorsed the idea of participating in jihads against foreign nations even if not allowed by one's own government.

It was obvious that the madrasa *ulama* viewed this question in the context of the situations in neighboring Afghanistan and the Indian-controlled Kashmir. Several religious groups based in Pakistan—including some with madrasa affiliations—have been active in support of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the resistance/separatist movement in Indian Kashmir. In the case of Kashmir, the Pakistan military intelligence is reported to have encouraged and, in some instances, sponsored Pakistani jihadi groups to infiltrate and fight Indian troops inside Indian-controlled Kashmir. These groups were affiliated with the Jamaat-e-Islami as well as with the Deobandis and Ahl-e-Hadith. Since 2002, however, the Pakistan military had to call quits to its support and sponsorship of insurgency in Kashmir as a result of foreign pressures and threats of Indian retaliation. Former President Pervez Musharraf declared in 2002 that he would not allow Pakistani territory to be used for cross-border terrorism against India. Similar commitments were made by the Pakistan government to the United States and to the Karzai government in Kabul that Pakistan would not allow its citizens to cross into Afghanistan and to join the Taliban in their ongoing war against U.S. and NATO troops.

This is the context in which the madrasa *ulama* seems to be divided between those who would abide by the international commitments of their government (51%), and those who would like to respond to the call for jihad against “the enemies of Islam” as their religious obligation, regardless whether the jihad is approved by their government or not. There is no real difference of opinion among the *ulama* on the issue of whether the struggle of the Kashmir Muslims to liberate themselves from Indian occupation, or the Taliban's war against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, constitute legitimate “jihads,” in the Islamic legal sense. But, as Maulana Fazlur Rahman of the JUI has argued in the case of Kashmir, the jihad would be legitimate only for the Kashmiris and not for the citizens of Pakistan as their government has not declared war against India. This was precisely the position taken by Maulana Abul 'Ala Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, during the 1948 Kashmir insurgency when he refused to endorse the participation of Pakistani citizens in the “Kashmir jihad” as long as Pakistan does not officially declare war against India.

During our focus group discussions it was obvious, however, that the *ulama* were not willing to extend this legal requirement of jihad to the current situation in Afghanistan. There could be several reasons for this apparent anomaly. First, many of them were not certain that the kind of legal restrictions that apply to Pakistani citizens of the “settled” areas also apply to those in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. Second, as many *ulama* in the NWFP madrasas pointed out, for many Pashtun tribes living in areas across the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders, the Durand Line

established by the British that divides these tribes is “an artificial line” and cannot prevent the Pakistani side of the tribes to join their brothers on the Afghan side in times of foreign aggressions. Third, the legitimacy accorded by Pakistan as well as by the international community—including the United States and other Western countries—to the mass participation of Pakistani religious groups as well as volunteers from many other Muslim nations in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets during the 1980s has created a precedent for the *ulama*, and, for many of them, the current resistance by the Taliban is “a continuation of the same struggle for national liberation.” This later point was emphasized again and again by the *ulama* of the NWFP in justifying the joining of Pakistani tribal people in the Taliban resistance against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Interpretations of Democracy

Extremism against America aside, when it comes to the issues at home the madrasa *ulama* tend to become more “moderate.” In response to our question as to what was the most appropriate way in their view to establish an Islamic system in Pakistan, 24% chose “peaceful, democratic means,” 63% chose “education and preaching” —a rather “self-serving” answer, emphasizing their own role in society—and only 3.5% favored “armed revolution.” Again, the difference in the answers given by teachers and their students were both interesting and significant: While there was not much difference in their choice of peaceful and democratic option (teachers: 21%, students: 25%), when it came to the choice of armed revolution, only 1% of students supported this option as opposed to 11% teachers. Teachers also did not seem to have as much confidence as their students did in democracy as a system of government.

In response to another question, 47% of the teachers and 61% of students said that democracy was a system of government “best suited for Pakistan.” That 58% of all madrasa respondents believed that democracy best suited Pakistan as a system of government was quite encouraging, given the general perception that the *ulama* are opposed to democratic process and consider democracy as antithetical to Islam. It must be added, however, that the *ulama* do not subscribe to the philosophical underpinnings of the idea of democracy with its emphasis on the sovereignty of the people. For them, only God is sovereign and, in an Islamic state, democratic practices must be subordinated to the laws prescribed by Shariah.

What Causes Extremism and Militancy?

We were also interested in knowing the *ulama*'s views on the causes of extremism and militancy. A large majority of the respondents (71%) were of the view that American policies were responsible for the rise of extremism and militancy among Muslims. At the same time, however, 21% of teachers and 17% of students in our sample attributed these trends to the “wrong religious ideas” on the part of Muslims. Only 11% of our respondents said that extremism and militancy are caused by adverse socio-economic conditions.

The response that “America is responsible” was no surprise; what we were interested in was to explore what the *ulama* meant by “wrong religious ideas.” During the interviews and focus group discussions many participants referred to the Khawarij (Kharajites) as the archetype of extremism and militancy in Islam and said that the Islamic groups advocating extremism today were the political descendents of this early Islamic rebellion. Extremism—the *ulama* used both the current Urdu usages, “*shiddat pasandi*” and “*inteha pasandi*” —according to this view, has no place in Islam. During one of the focus group discussion sessions on the relationship between Islamic education on the one hand and extremism and militancy, on the other, a senior madrasa teacher

pointed to a nearby shelf of the textbooks taught in his madrasa and asked rhetorically: “Please, open any book from the shelf and show me a single page, a paragraph, or just a line, that incites the students to violence and bloodshed.” He, along with his other colleagues in the madrasa agreed, however, that when it comes to the affirmation of their sectarian positions, some teachers “become emotional (*jazbaati*) and passionate (*josh-o-kharosh*), thus creating among students feelings of ill-will toward the rival sects.”

This type of “extremism,” according to many madrasa *ulama*, is quite common in the madrasas but has remained mostly confined to “verbal assaults” (*zubani hamley*) and disputation (*manaazara baazi*). During our discussion on extremism it was pointed out by many *ulama* that by definition, the word “*shiddat pasandi* (extremism) is antithetical to Islam as Islam is a religion of the middle path and moderation. The Qur’an describes Muslims as *Ummatun Wasatan* (the community of the middle path). No Muslim worth his name can claim to be a Muslim who thinks that his religion teaches him to kill others.⁸ Some *ulama* in another focus group discussion described the current religiously-motivated violence in Pakistan as “*fitna*” (mayhem), referring to the killing of the third Caliph Uthman and the subsequent emergence of the Khawarijis (Kharajites) who challenged the legitimacy of the rule of both Ali (the fourth Caliph) and Mua’awiya (the governor of Syria) on religious grounds and engaged in widespread violence to pursue their religio-political goals.⁹

“Islam is a religion of moderation and the middle path” was the most oft-repeated line by the participants during the discussion on extremism. At the same time, however, there was reluctance on their part to publicly disassociate themselves from the extremist rhetoric of some Islamic groups, including al Qaeda, for fear—it appeared—of being seen as supporters of the American war on terror. It seems that “either you are with us or with the terrorists” formulation has left no space for those who are opposed to extremism and militancy but, at the same time, do not necessarily support the current policies of Washington in its war on terror.¹⁰

Religious Groups and their Socio-Political Networks

Among the major Islamic political parties, the Jamiyat *Ulama-e-Islam* (JUI) and the Jamiyat *Ulama-e-Pakistan* (JUP) represent Deobandi and Bareilwi schools, respectively. The JUI which split into the Fazlur Rahman group (JUI-F) and Sami-ul-Haq group (JUI-S) in the 1990s seems to have lost much of its appeal in Punjab and Sindh and has become mainly a party of the Pashtun

⁸ A participant in a focus group discussion in a madrasa in Islamabad, December 2007.

⁹ The Kharajites are characterized as the first “Islamic rebels” and extremists who propounded a theology of intolerance that declared as *kafir* (non-believer) anyone who did not subscribe to their interpretation of the Qur’an, thus making such individuals legitimate targets for assassination. See Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1996).

¹⁰ An All Parties conference was convened by the political party of the Deobandi *ulama*, Jamiyat *Ulama-e-Islam* (JUI, Fazlur Rahman group), in Peshawar on August 31, 2008 to discuss the deteriorating security situation in the NWFP. The conference, that was attended by all Islamic political groups, passed a unanimous resolution that: a) condemned the American occupation of Afghanistan; b) protested against the American aerial bombing inside Pakistani territory; c) criticized the Pakistan military operations in the tribal areas and Swat; d) asked the government to provide shelter to the people displaced by the ongoing war in the northern areas; and e) urged the government to negotiate with the insurgents in North and South Waziristan (Daily *Jang*, Rawalpindi, September 1, 2008).

What was missing in the resolution was even a single word of sympathy for the hundreds of people who have been killed by the militants in suicide bombings and roadside IED blasts. There was also no mention of the militants and their activities in the speeches that were delivered by the religious leaders in the conference. This cavalier insensitivity shown by the religious leaders of all hues to the victims of militancy—especially in view of the fact that the conference took place only a few days after the suicide bombing in the neighboring city of Wah in which more than 80 innocent factory workers were killed—seemed particularly disingenuous and callous.

Similarly, in a recent rally organized by the NWFP Jamaat-e-Islami in Swat, the JI leaders condemned the military action in the region but had no words of sympathy for the victims of the militants and no words of condemnation of the destruction and torching of hundreds of schools, especially girls schools, by the so-called Pakistani Taliban (Daily *Jang*, Rawalpindi, 14 February 2009).

Deobandi *ulama* of the NWFP and Baluchistan. During the 2002 elections, when it was a leading member of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA or United Action Committee)—an alliance of religious political parties—the JUI was able to win a majority of provincial and national assembly seats in the NWFP and the Pashtun areas of Baluchistan. The MMA government in the NWFP was headed by the JUI, with the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) as a junior partner.

It was the JUI-F that was instrumental in the passage of the 17th amendment to the constitution that helped then General Musharraf to continue to keep the office of the president while still wearing his army uniform. Notwithstanding Maulana Fazlur Rahman's official role as the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, his behind-the-scenes support of former President Musharraf at critical junctures was an important factor in thwarting a popular movement against the military regime. The JUI-F continued its covert support of President Musharraf until and up to his controversial re-election in October 2008.

It was the JUI-F's decision not to dissolve the NWFP assembly in order to give some legitimacy to Musharraf's re-election that caused the demise of the MMA and, subsequently, the parting of ways between the JUI-F and the JI. The split within the MMA was one reason why the JUI fared poorly in the February 2008 elections and lost the majority in the NWFP to the secular-nationalist Awami National Party (ANP). The consummate politician that he is, Maulana Fazlur Rahman of the JUI seems to have triumphed over his election setback by joining the PPP-led ruling coalition in the center and thus breathe a new life into his political relevance.¹¹

The JUP that also split into three rival factions after the death of its charismatic leader, Maulana Shah Ahmad Noorani of Karachi, seems to have gone down in terms of its political influence in its original strongholds of urban Sindh and parts of rural Punjab. The rise of the Sunni Tehrik (Sunni Movement), an anti-Deobandi sectarian outfit of Barelwis in the urban Sindh, the emergence of more populist Barelwi groups such as Awami Tehrik of Tahir-ul-Quadri—who has now conferred the title of “Sheikh-ul-Islam” on himself—in Punjab, and the ascendancy of non-political, *da'wa* (proselytizing) Barelwi groups like Da'wat-e-Islami—“the Green Turbans”—has further weakened the JUP as a political party. Very few Barelwi madrasas in Punjab tend to associate themselves with the politics of the JUP, although the Karachi-based Barelwi madrasas continue to be aligned with a faction of the JUP.

Ahl-e-Hadith had not been very active in partisan politics until the mid-1980s when, under the leadership of Allama Ahsan Ilahi Zaheer, the Jamiyat *Ulama-e-Ahl-e-Hadith* (JUAH) emerged, first as an aggressively anti-Shia movement (with considerable support from Saudi Arabia), and then as a political group extending full support to General Zia-ul-Haq's regime. Like its counterparts in other religious parties, JUAH has also been experiencing internal bickering: at present, there are at least three different factions of Ahl-e-Hadith and none of them is politically significant. A faction of the JUAH led by Sajid Mir was part of the MMA but the other two factions seem to have abandoned politics in favor of religious work.

Among the Ahl-e-Hadith the most prominent name in the jihadi politics of the 1990s was Hafiz Muhammad Saeed of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LT) and Markaz Jamaat-ud-D'awa-wal-Irshad (MJDWI). The LT emerged as one of the most effective Pakistan-based jihadi organizations operating in Indian Kashmir in the mid-1990s, and is reported to have sent hundreds of volunteers across the

¹¹ Maulana Fazlur Rahman nominated his brother Maulana Ataur Rahman for a cabinet position in the PPP-led coalition government as a price for his cooperation with the government. Interestingly, when Maulana Ataur Rahman was assigned the Ministry of Tourism, the Senate Standing Committee on Tourism Development advised the Maulana to undertake an official trip to the South of France in order to learn how foreign tourists could be attracted to Pakistan.

line-of-control into Kashmir. It took credit for several attacks on the Indian forces in Kashmir and was also accused of masterminding the attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001.¹² The LT which is widely believed to have been sponsored initially by the Pakistani intelligence agencies rapidly spread its network of popular support in southern and central Punjab, recruiting volunteers and collecting funds for the Kashmir jihad, although its links with Ahl-e-Hadith madrasas remained rather tenuous.

After the LT was declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department and banned by the Musharraf government in January 2002, it regrouped under its parent organization Jamaat-ud-Da'wa (JD) and repackaged itself as a social welfare society, especially in the wake of the 2005 earthquake in the northern areas of Pakistan. The Markaz Jamaat-ud-D'awa-wal-Irshad in Muridke near Lahore operates the Department of Preaching and (Religious) Reform, Department of *Ulama* and Teachers and Department of Students and Education, Department of Families of the Martyrs and Fighters (Wurasa Shuhada-wa-Ghazian) and manages more than a dozen madrasas in Punjab, NWFP and Baluchistan. The JD operates 200 Da'wa Model schools and two science colleges in different parts of the country, many of them reported to have facilitated a steady supply of jihadi volunteers for Kashmir.¹³

The LT and the JD seem to have led the way in recent years toward organizing Islamic NGOs in the fields of *da'wa*, education, social welfare, relief, and healthcare. While its jihadi activities in Indian Kashmir appear to be on hold, today the JD operates hundreds of clinics, schools, orphanages, and housing schemes in earthquake affected areas of Kashmir. As a result of its well-publicized and extensive relief work in Kashmir after the earthquake, its ability to continue to raise funds (despite the government ban) remains unhindered.¹⁴

The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI): Leaders of Social and Professional Networking

The real leader in Islamic social and professional networking, however, remains the JI that pioneered the art of organizing Islamic “cells” in different social, occupational and professional groups on the model of the communist parties. The JI was the first religious group to have organized its students’ wing, Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT) that, in a matter of a few years, became the torch bearer of the Jamaat in campuses all over Pakistan and a vanguard of its street politics. In the 1970s the JI launched another student’s organization, this time of the madrasa students, Jamiat Tulab-e-Arabiya (JTA), based mostly in madrasas controlled by the JI.¹⁵ The JI is also unique among religious parties in Pakistan in that it has a well-organized women’s wing Halqa-e-Khawateen (Circle of Women) that has its own leadership hierarchy and regional set-up. Similarly, for the female students in schools, colleges and universities, the JI has sponsored Islami Jamiat-e-Talebat that has been quite active in recent years. Both the Halqa-e-Khawateen and the Islami Jamiat-

¹² The LT was identified both by the Indian and Pakistani governments of having organized and masterminded the Mumbai attacks in November 2008 that killed 170 people and wounded more than 200 in one of the worst terrorist incidents in India.

¹³ Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan* (Lahore: Mashal, 2007), 323-324. The Government of Pakistan banned the Jamaat-ud-Da'wa in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist incidents in November 2008 and in pursuance of the United Nations Security Council resolution identifying it as the main culprit in the attacks. The government also arrested more than two dozen of its leaders, including Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, and claimed to have closed down most of its educational and charitable outfits in December 2008.

¹⁴ Even President Musharraf was all praise for the LT and MDWI for their “excellent” relief work after the earthquake in his address to the international media.

¹⁵ The madrasas belonging to other schools of thought (Deobandis, Barelwis and Ahl-e-Hadith) would not allow their students to have anything to do with the JI or its affiliated organizations. In fact, it was a cause for expulsion of students in Deobandi madrasas if they were found to have any connection with the JI.

e-Talebat played an important role, for example, in the agitation against the Hadud Ordinance reforms in 2006.

The JI established its outposts in the trade union and labor movement (National Labor Organization) and fought pitched battles in the 1960s and 1970s with the left-wing labor unions for the control of trade unions in Pakistan Railway, Pakistan International Airlines, Pakistan State Oil, and other major public enterprises. In Punjab and Sindh, the JI also launched its organization to work for the rights of peasants and farmers (Pakistan Kisan Board) but could not make any headway in rural areas given its urban social base. The most successful ideological venture—besides the students' organization—was its outreach to its “natural” constituency of teachers. Among all the occupational groups, the JI had the greatest success in recruiting teachers for its ideological struggle. The *Tanzim-e-Asataza Pakistan* (TAP), the JI-affiliated organization of school, college and university teachers, is arguably the largest and best organized teachers' body in Pakistan. The TAP has advanced the ideological cause of the JI more than any other professional group affiliated with it. The inordinate influence of the ideas of the JI in Pakistan's educational institutions and ineffaceable mark of the JI on educational discourse in Pakistan is a testimony of the TAP success.

Since the 1960s the JI has also been active in organizing their ideological fellow-travelers among lawyers, physicians, engineers, and journalists. IJT workers, after graduation, are encouraged to join one of the JI-affiliated professional and occupational groups, that is, if they do not choose to join the parent organization. This mechanism, mediated by *Halqa-e-Ahbab* (Circle of Friends)—a transit camp of sorts for former IJT workers—provides a smooth transition from students' organization to professional associations.

In addition to women, students, labor, and professional organizations, the JI or its leaders and members have established hundreds of schools, colleges and university-level educational institutions as well as hospitals, clinics, publishing houses and, now, country-wide real estate development and housing projects (*Qartaba City* near Islamabad, for example). Most of them, of course, are run as “for profit” businesses; nevertheless, the ideological undertones of these ventures are not lost on prospective clients.

The Growth of Islamic NGOs and Socio-Religious Societies

An important development in the grass-roots work of religious groups in Pakistan in recent years has been the mushroom growth of Islamic NGOs and socio-religious societies, both at the national and local levels. We have already mentioned the social welfare and education and *da'wa* organizations sponsored by the religious groups to advance their cause. What is new is the entry of religious parties in the modern NGO sector in competition with what they describe as “secular” NGOs that, in their view, are working toward the subversion of Islamic religious and cultural values. The JI and several other Islamic groups have formed their own NGOs in the fields of health, education and human rights.

The madrasa-based *ulama*, however, have concentrated more on establishing national and local level networks of religious societies that would further strengthen their organic links with local

communities of the faithful.¹⁶ These include not only sectarian organizations—Shia, Deobandi, Barelwi, Ahl-e-Hadith—that are intended to solidify in-group loyalties and to secure the turf, but also hundreds of religious societies sponsored by different schools of thought. Many of them are known front organizations of major Islamic groups but there are others that are independent and locally based.

There are at least eight major organizations affiliated with the Deobandi, Barelwi and Ahl-e-Hadith schools that are active against the Ahmadis both in Pakistan and abroad. The most well-known is the ‘Alami Majlis-e-Tahaffuz-e-Khatam-e-Nabuwwat (International Society for the Defense of the Finality of the Prophethood [of Prophet Muhammad]) that is headquartered in Multan and has branches and offices in many African countries, Europe and North America. There are dozens of societies, named after some of the prominent companions of the Prophet and the first four caliphs that are specifically devoted to holding conferences on their death anniversaries. The number of local level committees and societies backed by the *ulama* and funded by the *bazaris* that celebrate with great festivity the Prophet’s birth anniversary (Eid Milad-un-Nabi) run into the thousands. Then there are ad hoc committees and societies that the *ulama* and the religious groups organize to address some urgent religious issue that, in their view, calls for immediate action on their part. Thus, during the Rushdie affairs of 1989 and more recently during the Danish cartoon controversy dozens of *ulama*-sponsored societies popped up to organize protest marches and street demonstrations to defend the honor of the Prophet against what they saw as blasphemous attacks on his person.

It is obvious from the above discussion that the associational base and the organizational linkages of the madrasa *ulama* and the religious groups in Pakistan have expanded considerably in recent years. There are several reasons for this phenomenal expansion of the socio-religious and political networks of the *ulama*. First, the perceived challenge of the “secular” NGOs seemed to have alerted and prompted the *ulama* and religious

groups to fight them on their own turf. Second, the current discourse on civil society institutions and their significance as an alternative to the state apparatus has influenced all sectors of society, including the religious sector. Third, the Afghan jihad of the 1980s that brought millions of dollars into Pakistan from the oil rich Gulf States for jihad and support of Afghan refugees gave further impetus for the growth of Islamic NGOs to “utilize” these funds. Fourth, the rise of Shia-Sunni sectarianism, both as a result of domestic factors as well as the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran with the use of their doctrinal brethren in Pakistan, also tended to encourage the growth of sect-based societies.

...the perceived challenge of the “secular” NGOs seemed to have alerted and prompted the *ulama* and religious groups to fight them on their own turf.

¹⁶ A non-scientific survey of Urdu newspapers of Lahore and Karachi for a period of only two weeks during 2007 showed a listing of 327 religious societies, either with the societies’ announcements of their activities or with the public statements of their leaders. Several of them, no doubt, are what are popularly known as “letterhead” organizations, that is, they only exist on their letterheads and are used by the religious groups to demonstrate their support among a wide variety of organizations. Another popular name for such organizations is “tonga associations,” that is, associations whose entire membership could fit into a tonga—the 5-6 seat horse-driven carriage. Many of them, however, are quite active in regularly organizing religious events and engaging in public debate on Islamic and political issues.

Much more important, however, was the full-blown participation of the *ulama* in politics—especially in electoral politics—that created a need for the transformation of the traditionally sanctified ascriptive (or primeval) groups into modern-type associations. Without necessarily damaging the already existing traditional organic links between the *ulama* and the communities of the faithful, these new associations were meant to further deepen and expand these links through the use of modern organizational and media technologies that are so important for success in electoral politics.¹⁷

The *Ulama* and the Gender Issue

Few other questions have engaged the *ulama* and the Islamists in Pakistan—as elsewhere—than the role and proper conduct of women in Muslim society. From Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi’s *Behishti Zewar* to Maulana Maududi’s *Parda*, Muslim religious leaders have considered the maintenance of clearly defined boundaries between the social roles of men and women as one of the most important defining characteristics of an Islamic society.¹⁸ The consensus view among

Despite their abstract and rhetorical statements that men and women are equal in Islam, the majority of the madrasa *ulama* cannot—and do not—accept the social, economic and political implications of this statement.

the *ulama* is that women have their own separate sphere of activities that is defined by their role within the family as mothers, wives and daughters. They believe in an absolute division between the public sphere (*al-wilaya-al-amma*), that comprises the affairs of state, economy, governance and social relations and is managed by the men, and the private sphere (*al-wilaya al-khassa*) that includes household duties and rearing of children and are handled by women.¹⁹

Despite their abstract and rhetorical statements that men and women are equal in Islam, the majority of the madrasa *ulama* cannot—and do not—accept the social, economic and political implications of this statement. What they really mean by the equality of men and women is their equality before God as moral actors, and

not their equality in social roles. It is interesting to note that in our survey on gender issues, 86% of the madrasa teachers and 93% of students in our sample agreed that “Islam gives equal social, economic and political rights to women.” But, then, 94% of the teachers and 91% of students also said that “women should not be allowed to work outside their homes.” During the focus group discussions, however, many respondents conceded that there are areas such as female education and female healthcare where women would be allowed to work outside their homes. But here

¹⁷ For a very perceptive study of the transformation of “traditional” groups into modern type associations for electoral benefits in India, see, Lloyd and Sussane Rudolph, *Modernity of Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

¹⁸ Ashraf Ali Thanvi, *Behishti Zewar* (Lahore: Maktaba Ashrafiya, 1985); Abul Ala Maududi, *Parda* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1977).

¹⁹ Syafiq Hasyim, *Understanding Women in Islam* (Jakarta: Solstice, 2006), 133.

again, the *ulama* insist that “special arrangements” need to be put in place in work places to ensure the privacy of women employees.

A more important issue in gender relations that has sparked considerable controversy in recent years, especially in the wake of few instances where Muslim women were asked to lead the congregational prayers, is that of the exercise of religious authority. We presented this hypothetical case before our survey respondents: Samina and Saleem have both completed higher Islamic education in reputable madrasas. Both have pursued specialization (*takhassus*) in *fiqh* under the guidance of a well-known *‘alim*. Now, the question is: Are they both equally qualified to issue *fatwas* on issues of Shariah?” Surprisingly, the madrasa teachers were more willing to share their authority with their sisters than their students: 46% of the teachers and only 8% of the students said that, yes, both Samina and Saleem can issue *fatwas* while 54% of teachers and 92% of students were of the view that only Saleem is “qualified” to issue *fatwas* on matters related to Shariah.

The difference of opinion here between the teachers and students is significant. It appears that while the teachers are more self-confident about their well-established religious authority—and probably want to vindicate the value and merit of their pedagogy across the gender lines—the younger *ulama* are not so sure as to how they will fare in competition with their female counterparts.

Madrasas and the Question of National/Islamic Identity

Pakistan is a multilingual and multiethnic nation with important religio-cultural ties to South Asia in the east and southwest and Central Asia in the west. Most people belong to one of the country’s four major ethno-linguistic groups: Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtuns (Pakhtuns), and Baluchis. Since the 1980s the country has seen the emergence of Mohajir ethnicity as well in the urban Sindh, spearheaded by the Muttahida Quami Movement of Altaf Hussain that has mobilized the Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated from India to the newly formed nation of Pakistan after 1947. Ethnically distinct subgroups exist within each of these five categories, for example, Saraikis in south Punjab, Hindko-speakers in the Hazara district, Baruhis and Mikranis in Baluchistan, and Kashmiris who are scattered all over Pakistan. Overall, ethnic identity in Pakistan is multilayered and complex; it may be based on a combination of religion, language, ethnicity, tribe, and even caste, although many Muslims will deny that the caste system exists in a Muslim society.

Then there is an overarching Pakistani identity that, in the views of many, encompasses Muslim identity as well. This position derives its legitimacy from the “Two Nation” theory that played a major role in the making of Pakistan. Articulated by Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, the “Two Nation” theory asserted that, regardless of their ethno-linguistic and regional differences, Muslims of the Indian subcontinent constitute a single nation and, therefore, are entitled to a separate state of their own. Since its very inception, the state in Pakistan has been trying to negotiate the tensions between the Pakistani identity based on the “Two Nation” theory on the one hand, and the ethno-linguistic identities of its constituting regions, on the other. Superimposed on all these multilayered identities has also been the idea of “Islamic identity” derived from the idea of the universal Islamic *ummah* binding all Muslims of the world as a universal community of faith.

Even though the state in Pakistan would emphasize the Pakistani identity for the purposes of nation building, it was, nevertheless, not unsympathetic to the Islamists’ and the *ulama*’s idea

of the *ummatic* identity, given its desire to play a leadership role in the Islamic world and to seek moral and political support of Muslim countries in its rivalry with India. “Pakistan is a fortress of Islam” (*Pakistan Islam ka qil’a hai*) has always been a popular slogan both at the level of the state as well as the religious establishment in Pakistan. Among most Pakistanis, the question of choice between ethnic identity, national identity and Islamic identity is not easy to make, although in smaller provinces (NWFP, Sindh and Baluchistan) many would like to identify themselves as Pashtun, Sindhi and Baluch first. The leader of the Awami National Party in the NWFP, the late Wali Khan, was often quoted as saying that, “I have been a Pashtun for five thousand years, a Muslim for fourteen hundred years, and a Pakistani for only fifty years.”

Among the madrasa *ulama*, the rhetorical commitment to Islamic identity is something that is taken for granted. In view of their role as the guardian of Islamic tradition, they are not likely to identify themselves as anything but as a “Muslim first.” The wellsprings of their religio-intellectual and doctrinal heritage are spread all over the central Islamic lands and thus form an integral part of their collective consciousness. The question of national (Pakistani) identity, however, becomes somewhat murky in view of their universalist Islamic orientations. Then there is also the political legacy of the Deobandi madrasa *ulama* whose elders in the Deoband School (Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, for example) allied with the All India National Congress and opposed the creation of Pakistan. Some prominent leaders of the political organization of the Deobandi *ulama* in Pakistan—Jamiyat *Ulama-e-Islam*—were active members of the Jamiyat *Ulama-e-Hind* that supported the idea of a united India. It is not suggested here that the loyalty of the Deobandi *ulama* to Pakistan is suspect; the fact remains, however, that many of the earlier generation have not forgotten the political bickering in which their elders were involved with the pro-Pakistan Muslim League.

It is also interesting to note here that madrasa *ulama*, especially from minority provinces are not entirely immune to the political dynamics of the ethno-nationalist movements that are active around them. The *ulama*-led Islamic militancy in the northern areas of Pakistan today and the sympathy for the Taliban in Afghanistan, for example, has a very strong component of Pashtun nationalism along with the spirit of jihad. One may also recall that during the 1960s when the three smaller provinces of the then West Pakistan launched a movement to break the one unit and restore the provinces, the JUI of Punjab (the dominant province in united West Pakistan) opposed this movement while the JUI of Sindh and the NWFP supported it. Many Sindhi *ulama* of the JUI were ardent Sindhi nationalists and spoke vociferously against the Punjabi hegemony in Pakistan. It is also interesting to note that since the domination of the Pashtun leadership in the JUI hierarchy, the JUI has lost its following both in Punjab and in Sindh. Today, in view of the fact that its vote bank is concentrated primarily in the NWFP and the Pashtun areas of Baluchistan, the JUI is more focused on issues specific to these regions than national and international issues.

The Deobandi madrasas throughout Pakistan, however, continue to recruit students from all over the country, including a large number of them from the tribal areas of the northern regions, Hazara district and Azad Kashmir. The Binnori Town madrasa in Karachi, for example, has always had a majority of students from the Pashtun districts of the NWFP and the tribal agencies

of FATA. Similarly, Deobandi madrasas in Multan and other southern Punjab cities also have a strong Pashtun students' presence. Unlike, all government-controlled schools and colleges that require a residency certificate for admissions, madrasas are the only educational institutions in Pakistan where no questions are asked about a candidate's place of birth and residence.

It is interesting to note that in madrasa admission registers, students are listed not as belonging to a particular province but according to the districts they come from. Hence, in madrasas, students' fraternity groups are often formed on district basis rather than on province or ethnicity.²⁰ After graduation, madrasa *ulama* do not necessarily return to their own regions; in fact, in most cases, they find employment in mosques and madrasas in parts of the country other than their own. This experience of both education and employment in places far away from their homes gives the madrasa graduates a unique sense of citizenship in a larger national community.²¹

During the focus group discussions on the question of identity, the formulaic response of the madrasa teachers and students was that we are Muslim first and then Pakistani. But then they would also hasten to add that "there is no difference between being a Muslim and being a Pakistani." However, once they were reminded that there are non-Muslims also who are Pakistani citizens, many of them said, "But they are *dhimmis*," in other words, not denying the non-Muslims' legal status as citizens but also not recognizing them as "full" citizens. In one of the focus groups where this author was accompanied by an African Muslim studying in a Pakistani university, one madrasa teacher pointed to him and said: "He is closer to my heart than a Pakistani non-Muslim." Many participants in the discussion agreed that Pakistan being an Islamic state, nationality and religion overlap and that the success and strength of Pakistan as a state would contribute to the glory of Islam.

In our survey we asked our madrasa respondents to choose one of the following three statements:

1. I am Pakistani first, then Muslim.
2. I am Muslim first, then Pakistani.
3. There is no difference between Islam and Pakistan.

The majority of respondents (88%) preferred the second option, "First I am Muslim then Pakistani." None of the respondents, as expected, chose the first option, saying that "I am Pakistani first, then Muslim." But 11% said that they saw no difference between their Islamic and Pakistani identity. The survey clearly revealed that an overwhelming majority of the madrasa respondents either identified themselves primarily as Muslims or saw no difference between their Islamic and national (Pakistani) identities.

That an overwhelming majority of our respondents (88%) chose religion as their primary identity should not necessarily be taken as indicative of their commitment to Islamic universalism, however. Being "Muslim first" may mean for many of the madrasa *ulama* as being Sunni, Hanafi, or

²⁰ Districts are administrative units that were created by the British in India for political expediency and administrative convenience and efficiency. Thus, in most cases, they were "artificial" constructions with no inherent or primordial identities of their own. Over the years, however, these "artificial" administrative constructions have developed an identity of their own with the effect that many people in Pakistan would identify themselves as belonging to a particular district. Akbar S. Ahmad has noted a particular fondness for "Hazarwal" identity among the residents of Hazara district in the NWFP. See Akbar S. Ahmad, *Pakistan Society: Islam, Ethnicity and Leadership in South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²¹ An overwhelming majority of mosque *imams* in Karachi are either from the Hazara district in the NWFP or from other Pashtun districts of the province. Interestingly, many of the mosque *imams* in Karachi are from Bangladesh, trained in the Deobandi madrasas of Noakhali, Sylhet and Chittagong.

Deobandi/Barelwi/Ahl-e-Hadith first, although they may not like to admit it. In other words, there may be some religious/sectarian parochialism lurking behind the façade of Islamic universalism.

Concluding Observations

The debate on the madrasa curriculum before the events of September 11, 2001 focused mainly on issues of pedagogy—its intellectual orientation; the structure of its contents and the relative emphasis on various subjects taught; methodology of teaching; and the relevance of the madrasa curriculum to the educational needs of a modern Muslim society.²² Most critics of madrasa education contended that the madrasa curriculum was out-dated, narrowly-focused on issues of *fiqh* and its most literalist interpretations, and based on religio-intellectual formulations and controversies that are no longer relevant. In the context of South Asian Islam, the debate on the continued relevance and efficacy of madrasa education became more intense in the wake of the introduction of modern institutions of secondary and post-secondary education by the British. Muslim reformers and modernists, from Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to Fazlur Rahman, found the madrasa curriculum doctrinally rigid, intellectually superficial, organizationally archaic, and socially cliquish. They considered the entire curriculum as retrogressive, reactionary, and antithetical to the needs of modern times.

The most devastating critique of the madrasa curriculum, however, came from the neo-fundamentalist revivalists like Abul Ala Maududi (1903-1979) who described it as based on uncritical study and memorization of antiquated texts with the use of a perfunctory and mechanical methodology. The result, as Maududi observed, is a system that fails to stimulate any imaginative and creative intellectual thought, “confines Islam merely to the observance of a few prescribed rituals,” without any “understanding and appreciation of Islam’s revolutionary message,” and contributes nothing to the building of Islamic society except producing religious functionaries to administer rituals.

While the earlier critiques of the madrasa curriculum focused on its out-datedness, its political pacifism, its lack of socio-political concerns and its failure to provide religio-intellectual leadership for Islamic revival, the primary emphasis of the post-9/11 debate has been on its alleged relationship to the rise of Islamic extremism and militancy. It has become conventional wisdom among a circle of scholars, journalists, and policymakers that there is an inherent relationship between the madrasa curriculum on the one hand and religious extremism, militancy, Talibanization, anti-Americanism, and even terrorism, on the other.²³

The core curriculum taught in madrasas of the South Asian subcontinent, known as Dars-e-Nizami that was first standardized by Mulla Nizamuddin (d. 1747) at Farangi Mahal, consists of about 80 books in twenty subject areas broadly divided into (a) “received” or revealed knowledge (the Qur’anic exegesis, Hadith, and *Fiqh*) and (b) rational sciences (Arabic language and literature,

²² See, for example, Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); S. Abul ‘Ala Maududi, *Talimat* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1976).

²³ For articles linking madrasa curriculum with militancy, see, for example, Jeffrey Goldberg, “Inside Jihad U.: The Education of a Holy Warrior,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 25, 2000; Robert D. Kaplan, “The Lawless Frontier,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, 2000; and Ahmed Rashid, “Inside the Jihad,” Interview, *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 10, 2000. Quite pertinent as a representative of Washington policymakers’ views of the madrasa was an October 2003 memo issued by the secretary of defense to his staff in which he said, “Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day that the madrasa and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?” See Dave Moniz and Tom Squitieri, “After Grim Rumsfeld Memo, White House Supports Him,” *USA Today*, October 22, 2003, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-10-22-defense-memo-usat_x.htm.

grammar, prosody, rhetoric logic, philosophy, dialectical theology, medicine, mathematics and medicine). It is important to note that out of the twenty subject areas of the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum, only eight can be considered as solely “religious.” The remaining subjects are otherwise “secular” subjects intended as an aid to the understanding of religious texts. And it is *fiqh* (law) that was given the pride of place in the madrasa curriculum prior to the Deoband’s prioritization of the canonical texts of the Hadith collections.²⁴

A close scrutiny of the madrasa curriculum does not, in any way, indicate anything that can even remotely be considered as inciting to, or inculcating violence and militancy in students. However, like all curricula in religious seminaries—whether Islamic, Christian or Jewish—the madrasa curriculum remains exclusivist and does not entertain the possibility of any doubt in the veracity of its theological claims. It is in this sense, at the most, that one can describe the madrasa curriculum as “extremist,” that is, its emphatic and absolute affirmation of its own truth claims. Any idea of “pluralism” or “relativism” in the context of the belief in the essential truth of Islam would be sheer anathema to the *ulama*.

A close scrutiny of the madrasa curriculum does not, in any way, indicate anything that can even remotely be considered as inciting to, or inculcating violence and militancy in students.

In many respects the current debate on the relationship between the madrasa curriculum and militancy is reminiscent of a similar debate among Middle East scholars on what caused the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. At the time it was argued by a number of scholars that the root cause of the Islamic revolution was Shia theology and the political theory that inculcated among the *ulama* and the faithful the spirit of revolution and the desire for martyrdom. But, as Leonard Binder argued, it was the same Shia theology and political theory that existed in “good times and bad times.” The important question that needed to be addressed was: why and how a particular theological system that sustains political quietism at one time becomes a source of revolutionary upheaval at another?²⁵

It is precisely this question that needs to be raised with regard to the role of the madrasa and its curriculum in radical politics and militancy. Our contention here is that it was the constellation of several domestic, regional and international political developments that created conditions that became conducive for the radicalization of the religious sector in Pakistan which, in turn, employed all of its normative (religious texts) and institutional (mosques and madrasas) resources to advance its religio-political goals. It was in this context that a politically pacifist and religiously conservative madrasa curriculum was pressed into the service of radical political goals.

Also, as Muhammad Qasim Zaman has argued, the madrasa curriculum, that is, the corpus of books taught in the madrasas, alone should not be considered as constituting the “madrasa

²⁴ The revival of the study of Hadith in Muslim India owes to the efforts of Shah Wali Allah and his descendents. The Deoband School later institutionalized this tradition in its curriculum.

²⁵ See, Leonard Binder, “Revolution in Iran,” *Middle East Review Special Studies*, no. 1, 1980.

tradition.”²⁶ It is “a shared engagement” with the texts by the *ulama* in the process of learning and teaching, “the modes of discourse,” and discursive practices that together constitute the madrasa tradition. Curriculum, no doubt, is the core of this tradition but it is embodied in certain pedagogical practices, for example the medium of the commentary, which can lead to the reading of the texts in new ways.

We have already alluded to the exclusivist religious discourse in madrasa education that draws clear boundaries between what is truth and what is falsehood. We have also noted that this exclusivity is not particular to Islamic seminaries alone. In “ordinary” times this exclusivist orientation remains quiescent and is invoked only in scholarly disputations. However, given a “right” configuration of political circumstances, this exclusivist orientation may lead to sectarian violence and hostility toward the followers of other faiths—as we have seen in anti-Ahmadiya riots, Shia-Sunni violence, and attacks on non-Muslims in recent years. Scholarly discourses in the exclusionary tradition, therefore, may translate, in certain specific circumstances, “into a much more sinister practical application.”²⁷

It is also important to note that both Deobandi and Barelwi madrasas inhabit the same theological-legal space as defined by the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum, and yet the Barelwi madrasas have rarely, if ever, been involved in extremist politics, militancy and, what has come to be known as, jihadi activism. If it is the curriculum and pedagogy of the madrasas alone that produce religio-political extremism, militancy, and anti-Western attitudes, then the Barelwi “exceptionalism” becomes problematic.

²⁶ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

Views from the Madrasa: Islamic Education in Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines tertiary-level Islamic education in Bangladesh, providing in-depth analysis of the relationship between madrasa education and Islamist and radical politics. The report examines the political consciousness of madrasa teachers and graduate students in Bangladesh, and analyzes their worldviews with regard to the West and the United States. The report reviews student and teacher responses to negative media coverage of madrasa education in Bangladesh while also looking at the alleged connections between madrasas and militancy. The paper concludes with a look at the mushrooming growth of *ulama*-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh.

MAIN FINDINGS

Little evidence links Bangladeshi Quomi madrasas with radical politics or militancy. Those tied with militant activities had largely Alia madrasa and general education backgrounds. The common denominator among those indicted for terrorist activities, furthermore, has been the experience of the Afghan jihad, not madrasa education. While Quomi madrasa students and teachers appear to be largely apolitical, Alia madrasa affiliates are actively involved in partisan politics. Their political affiliations range from the secular Awami League to the centrist Bangladesh Nationalist Party to the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami. Alia madrasa “agitational” politics is often focused on the so-called “Islamic-political” issues, such as Taslima Nasreen, the alleged “un-Islamic” activities of certain NGOs, enforcement of Shariah laws, and international “Islamic” hotspots. Many students and teachers of madrasas link U.S. engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, among other issues, to the perceived Western anti-Muslim campaign in the name of a war against terrorism. Survey research for this paper revealed that anti-Americanism among madrasa respondents was largely driven by specific U.S. policies, and not due to some inherent Muslim hatred of America; despite their belief that U.S. policies are hurting Muslims “all over the world,” the majority of madrasa respondents surveyed disapproved of “jihad” against the United States.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Madrasa teachers and students fear that the United States uses democracy promotion to interfere in the internal affairs of Muslim countries. Significantly, an overwhelming number of them support democracy and think that truly democratic governments in Muslim countries may end U.S. domination and its negative influences in the Muslim world. They regard democracy as the best way to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh and believe that Islamic law cannot be introduced through violence and terrorism.
- The growing involvement of the *ulama* in social welfare and community services through *ulama*-led NGOs has further strengthened their organic links with local communities, and has provided them with opportunities for more frequent interaction with government officials. Their participation in the modern public sphere has opened up new avenues for them to disseminate their views on issues of socio-religious and cultural concerns to a wider audience.

Madrassa education is an integral part of the Bangladesh education system. Its origin dates back to the colonial period and it has continued to operate alongside the general education system since the birth of Bangladesh. Although now entrenched in the country's educational landscape, madrasa education has always had its critics—especially following Bangladesh's independence in 1971—among secular intellectuals who are opposed to this very system of education and have repeatedly urged successive governments to abolish madrasa education and introduce a unified education system. However, such demands never gained either public support or approval from successive Bangladeshi governments. In the past, the common critiques against madrasa education have been that it is obsolete, backward and unfit to keep pace with modernity; that it is unproductive in the sense that madrasa graduates are ill-equipped to run public offices and, thus, to contribute to the country's development; and that it produces only religious functionaries like mosque imams and *kazis* (or *qadi*, Islamic judge).

Madrassa education in Bangladesh came under intense scrutiny and received renewed critical attention in the wake of the 9/11 attacks against the United States and then, more so, after the 2005 erratic, and rather inept, bombings in different parts of Bangladesh.²⁸ The focus on madrasas was partly generated by the iterated claims of the Jamiatul Mujahideen, Bangladesh (JMB), the self-declared perpetrator of the August 2005 bombings, that its members “have taken up arms for the implementation of Allah's law [...] If the government does not establish Islamic law in the country [...] and if it] resorts to repression on *ulama*, the Jamiatul Mujahideen [JMB] will go for counteraction.”²⁹ As Islam and madrasa education are traditionally pigeonholed together, and as madrasa graduates are collectively called “*ulama*” in Bangladesh, both the domestic and international media covering the bombing incidents did so with the assumption that madrasa education may have played a role in these incidents, and that madrasas were a breeding ground for militant recruits. As Supriya Singh states: “Madrasas have been blamed for fomenting extremism in Bangladesh and are believed to play an important role in the training and recruitment of militants.”³⁰ Moreover, Dr. Asadullah al-Galib, leader of the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh (AHAB)—a close ideological affiliate of the JMB—is reported to have said that he gave “military-style training to madrasa students.”³¹

Consequently, a number of subsequent media reports insinuated that there were some “links” between militant tendencies and madrasas in Bangladesh. Prominent secular intellectuals appeared on television talk shows and wrote in newspapers to make their point that madrasa education was breeding militancy and, therefore, needed to be reformed or merged with mainstream education. Thus, the traditional critiques against madrasa education were replaced with this new, overshadowing indictment that madrasas had become harbingers of militancy. And, although it was the Quomi section of madrasa education that was mainly subjected to detailed surveillance,³² the Alia sector was by no means given the benefit of the doubt. In the aftermath of those militant

²⁸ Mumtaz Ahmad, “Islam, State, and Society in Bangladesh,” in *Asian Islam in the 21st Century*, eds. John L. Esposito, et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49.

²⁹ “Leaflets Ridicule Democracy, ask for Islamic Rule,” *The Daily Star*, August 18, 2005, referenced in Supriya Singh, “Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB): A Profile,” IPCS Special Report 11, New Delhi: Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, February 2006, 2.

³⁰ Supriya Singh, “Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB): A Profile,” IPCS Special Report 11, February 2006, 6.

³¹ Julfikar Ali Manik, “Evidence, confessions point at JMB hallmark,” *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 16 2005.

³² “Qawami madrasas came to the fore after August 17 serial blasts across the country last year,” says Sakhawat Liton (“Qawami Madrasa Education”) *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 23, 2006.

activities, many madrasas—both Quomi and Alia³³—received visits from researchers, media representatives and foreign diplomats. In fact, both pre- and post-August 2005, media reports tended to establish a clear link between madrasas and militancy.³⁴

The change from the traditional critiques against madrasa education to this new, superseding arraignment of militancy is worth analyzing. While the traditional set of charges was mainly related to the madrasas' syllabi and pedagogical tradition, the present condemnation of madrasa education is obviously politically charged. The earlier criticism was concerned with the supposed "unworthiness" of madrasa education and its implications for the development and modernization of Bangladeshi society; the current critique has an international dimension and is viewed through the prism of 9/11. In other words, the current debate on the madrasa system in Bangladesh—as elsewhere in the Muslim world—is prompted both by the international war on terrorism and by concerns about the political activism of madrasa *ulama*.

Keeping the above observations in perspective, this report provides an overview of political trends in tertiary-level Alia and Quomi madrasas in Bangladesh, and provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Islamic education, on the one hand, and Islamist and radical politics, on the other. The report examines the political consciousness of madrasa teachers and graduate students in Bangladesh, and analyzes their worldviews with regard to the West, especially the United States, and their views on socio-political issues of current concern. The report draws on discussion with key individuals associated with madrasa education in Bangladesh, and explores their views on Islamic education, the politics of religious groups, madrasas and militancy, and their responses to the continuous negative media coverage of madrasa education in Bangladesh.³⁵

Given that the military engagements of the West in Muslim countries (Afghanistan and Iraq) in the post 9/11 era have been quite unpopular among Muslims, this report will examine whether madrasa teachers and graduate students have any added reasons that may possibly incite their antipathy toward the West. The report will also address some of the key issues of militancy in

³³ Alia and Quomi are the two main streams of Islamic education prevalent in Bangladesh. Quomi madrasas are private, receive no financial support from the government, and are supported by religious endowments or by zakat, sadaqa, and community donations; Quomi madrasas are predominantly of Deobandi persuasion and teach the standard Dars-i-Nizami curriculum. Alia madrasas are, predominantly, government-controlled and funded, and supervised by the government-appointed Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board; in addition to a revised version of the Dars-i-Nizami, Alia madrasas also offer modern subjects such as English, Bangla, science, social studies, math, etc.

³⁴ See "Madrasa man with 'Taliban link' under sharp watch," Daily Star (Dhaka), May 26, 2004; "Trade Fair Blast: Police pick up hurt madrasa student," Daily Star, (Dhaka), December 27, 2005; "Playing politics with education," Daily Star (Dhaka), August 22, 2006; "Qawami Madrasa Education," Daily Star (Dhaka), August 23, 2006; "Madrasa misadventure," Daily Star (Dhaka), September 03, 2006).

³⁵ This report is based on extensive visits to a number of madrasas (both Alia and Quomi) in Bangladesh, and on comprehensive focus group discussions with madrasa teachers and graduate students. Field surveys were supplemented by a structured questionnaire comprising 60 questions, through which madrasa teachers and students provided their views and opinions about contemporary domestic and global issues affecting Muslims.

Bangladesh and will assess the likelihood, or otherwise, of the involvement of madrasa graduates and teachers in militant activities.

Islamic Education and Militancy

Both radical Islam and madrasa education came to the spotlight after the sudden outbursts of militant incidents in Bangladesh on August 17, 2005. As Quomi madrasas are not controlled by the government in the way the Alia madrasas are, and are doctrinally affiliated with the Deoband School—the school that inspired the Taliban movement in Afghanistan—they received more media attention. The autonomy of Quomi madrasas also generated considerable curiosity and suspicion among civil society groups, academia and the international community. Hathazari Madrasa,³⁶ one of the oldest and arguably the most reputable Quomi madrasa in the country, was at the center of media reports for quite some time. Generally, these reports suggested that the madrasa was a haven for “terrorist” training.³⁷

During our earlier visits to Hathazari Madrasa in 2005, 2006 and 2007, we were told by the madrasa authorities that, while some of their graduates who had pursued higher education in Pakistani madrasas did volunteer for the Afghan jihad during the 1980s, the Hathazari Madrasa itself had not participated in any recruitment campaign for the Afghan jihad. Several students from the Lal Bagh Madrasa in Dhaka, however, went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets through their teachers’ contacts with the Pakistani Deobandi madrasas. Similarly, a few dozen students from other Quomi madrasas, including some from the Ahl-e-Hadith madrasas in northern Bangladesh, also journeyed to Afghanistan through Pakistan, both as volunteer fighters as well as teachers in the Afghan refugee camps.

However, aside from these incidences, there is hardly any evidence to link the Bangladeshi Quomi madrasas with any radical politics and militancy. Those who were linked with the militant activities of the JMB and its affiliated clandestine networks primarily had Alia madrasa and general education backgrounds. Among those who were arrested and indicted for terrorist activities during 2005-2007, only fifteen were reported to have attended Quomi madrasas, and nine of them had attended madrasas affiliated with the Ahl-e-Hadith.³⁸ But even here, the common denominator was the experience of the Afghan jihad, and not madrasa education.

Maulana Ahmad Shafi, the Muhtamim (Principal) of Hathazari Madrasa, acknowledged that madrasa education today faced a magnitude of difficulties and hostility that it had never faced before—not even under British rule.³⁹ Referring to local and international media reports on the allegedly “secret location” of the Hathazari Madrasa, Maulana Shafi noted that the local police headquarters and the office of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) were only a stone’s throw away from the madrasa, and that the UNO and the District Commissioner (DC) came regularly to the madrasa, especially for their Friday prayers; thus, if there were any extremist activities

³⁶ This madrasa is situated in the heart of Hathazari town, Chittagong, and hence is commonly known as Hathazari Madrasa. But its actual name is Al-Jameatul Alia Darul Uloom Moinul Islam. With its impeccable Deobandi credentials, Hathazari madrasa ranks among the top ten madrasas in the subcontinent in terms of its academic standards and reputation.

³⁷ A *Daily Star* report titled “Barguna Islamic militants charged with sedition,” July 02, 2004, suggested that “Hathazari Madrasa of Chittagong” provided “military training” to its students.

³⁸ Interview with an official of the Ministry of Interior, Dhaka, January 2007.

³⁹ The Quomi madrasa system dates back to the period of British colonial rule in the Indian sub-continent. First established in 1896, the Hathazari Madrasa has existed in its present location since 1901. Although there have been recent media allegations linking the madrasa with extremist/terrorist activities, this is the first time in the madrasa’s long history that such allegations have been made.

and/or militant training taking place at the madrasa, they would be the first to know about them. According to the Maulana, the local administration regularly issued reports to the effect that no radical activities took place in Hathazari Madrasa, but the media never highlighted those reports. Further, he maintained that college and university campuses were havens for terrorists and were “reddened” with violence, but nobody accused the general education system for that violence. Nor did any reporters condemn the secular education system in accounts of terrorism on college and university campuses. The Maulana regretted the media’s proclivity for “concocting” and “fabricating” stories about terrorism in madrasa campuses and stated that, “Our students remain busy with their studies all the time; they simply do not have time for anything except their studies.”⁴⁰

Since the waves of violent activities in Bangladesh, Hathazari has, like many other madrasas in the country, been regularly visited and monitored by intelligence agencies. As a gesture of openness, teachers of Hathazari Madrasa said that they would be happier if more visitors would come to visit their madrasa, especially for fact-finding purposes.⁴¹ They welcomed the visits to their madrasa by officials, diplomats and journalists from several Western countries, with the hope of allaying any misgivings about the Hathazari Madrasa. Similarly, Alia madrasas have also received visits from foreign diplomats. In an interview, Zainul Adedin, principal of Ta’mirul Millat Alia Madrasa in Dhaka—one of the largest Alia madrasas in the country—expressed his relief that the negative media reports on madrasas had prompted such visits, as they proved to be beneficial to his madrasa in that “the true picture came out and all misunderstandings were removed.” Further, Adedin expressed surprise that “while the misguided people who committed militant acts in Bangladesh in August 2005 included both graduates from madrasas and general education systems, the media only targeted the madrasas as breeders of terrorism.”⁴²

Teachers at both Quomi and Alia madrasas do not deny that there are “black sheep” among the madrasa graduates who, either as a result of their “misguided” notions of Islam and jihad, or because of their socio-economic situations, are swayed by militants that use the name of Islam for their own political ends. They, however, emphatically maintain that the involvement of these few madrasa students and graduates in militant organizations and activities cannot, in any way, be attributed to the madrasas and the education received at these institutions.

The Secretary General of Wafaqul Madaris ul Arabia, Maulana Abdul Jabbar, also thought that the militant activities that occurred in Bangladesh were “isolated events” and that the involvement of some madrasa individuals in those events was an independent act, and not a product of madrasa education.⁴³ Likewise, Principal Anwar Mulla, of Uttar Badda Islamiya Kamil Madrasa (Alia) in Dhaka, dismissed the supposed link between madrasa education and militant tendencies and considered the outcry by some secular intellectuals to abolish madrasa education, on the basis of

⁴⁰ Interview with Maulana Ahmad Shafi, March 29, 2008. Teachers and students of this madrasa were very welcoming and eager to cooperate. Being the most well-known Quomi madrasa in Bangladesh and also occasionally at the center of media attention, they have become used to such visits, especially by foreign diplomats, academics and journalists.

⁴¹ “Nothing is hidden here. We are open. The *thana* (police station) is next to the madrasa; and the madrasa is not in a secret location,” said Mufti Jashim Uddin, a senior teacher of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) at Hathazari Madrasa, which, according to madrasa authorities is regularly visited by police officers and politicians of different political parties. Mufti Jashim Uddin further maintained that not even a knife (except culinary ones in the kitchen) was found in any madrasas of Bangladesh. Interview with Mufti Jashim Uddin, March 29, 2008.

⁴² Interview with Principal Md. Zainul Adedin, May 28, 2008. Adedin is also the Secretary General of the Bangladesh Madrasa Sikhvak Parisod.

⁴³ The Secretary General argued that: “You cannot generalize and accuse the entire system of madrasa education because of the action of a few individuals. To declare a war against the entire madrasa education system because of the actions of a few individuals is a form of media terrorism. If I do something wrong, the Wafaq should not be blamed for my actions. To demonize the Wafaq on the basis of my wrongdoing would be clearly an extremist tendency.” Interview with Maulana Abdul Jabbar, April 18, 2008.

its alleged association with terrorism, as a “conspiracy.” He further argued that, if any institution was to be shut down for the incidence of violent activities, Dhaka University should be the first one to be closed as it is the premier center for violence, political clashes, money extortion and other antisocial and terrorist activities. He argued that an institution and a system should not be blamed for the actions of a few individuals.⁴⁴ Principal Mulla acknowledged that religiously-inspired militancy had increased in Bangladesh over the past four-five years but maintained that the roots of this phenomenon should be sought elsewhere, and not in madrasa education.

Madrasas and the Media

There has been deep concern among the teachers and students of both Alia and Quomi madrasas about the media coverage they have received in recent years. They believe that the media has always been hostile when reporting on madrasa education. They also believe that the domestic media coverage of madrasa education is part of the global media hostility toward Islam and Muslims.⁴⁵ The *ulama*, however, did not remain unconcerned about the negative publicity they were receiving from the media. Nationally, the *ulama* as a whole made use of religious speeches and Friday sermons to spread the message that there is no relation between Islam (and, for that matter, madrasa education) and terrorist activities.⁴⁶ Different groups of madrasa stakeholders also organized seminars and conferences to brief the nation about madrasa education and to dismiss any links between madrasas and militant tendency.⁴⁷

Apart from these measures, the Wafaq organized madrasa *shikwa* (education) seminars on a regular basis to clarify the position of the mainstream Deobandi madrasas on militancy and terrorism.⁴⁸ According to Maulana Jabbar of the Wafaq, all affiliated madrasas were instructed to remain vigilant about any “suspicious” activities of their students, so as to prevent any “mischievous” elements from infiltrating the madrasa or use of madrasa students and madrasa premises for militant training and activities. The madrasa administrators were also instructed by the Wafaq to carefully scrutinize students’ backgrounds before admitting them, especially at the higher level. Like Wafaq, the Bangladesh Madrasha Sikkhok Parisod (BMSP) also alerted its affiliated madrasas to “keep their eyes and ears open” so that no outside elements could infiltrate

⁴⁴ He further stated that: “As a graduate of both madrasa education and Dhaka University, I must say that I had felt 1,000 times more secure in the madrasa than at Dhaka University.” Interview with Principal Anwar Mulla, April 19, 2008. He is also the Assistant Secretary General of Bangladesh Madrasha Sikkhok Parisod. Principal Mulla visited USA in 2007 as part of a delegation comprising five Islamic scholars sponsored by the U.S. State Department.

⁴⁵ Based on our research, 82% of the madrasa teachers and students surveyed for our questionnaire were unhappy with the media representation of madrasa education and institutions. A group of students of Fasil and Kamil levels at Jamia Qasemia Alia Madrasa in Narsingdi were unanimous in their view during a focus group discussion that there was a “concerted effort” and a “conspiracy” on the part of the media, both domestic and international, to portray a negative image of madrasa education as a surrogate for attacking Islam.

⁴⁶ Interview with Principal Md. Zainul Adedin, May 28, 2008.

⁴⁷ The Chairman and other officials of the Madrasah Education Board attended roundtable conferences organized by NGOs and the media to present their point of view. As Quomi madrasas made headlines, particularly in the wake of the August 2005 bombings, the head of the Wafaqul Madaris ul Arabia, Mufti Ahmad Shafi, took various measures to counter the allegations that madrasa students were involved in terrorist activities. These measures included: 1) organizing press conferences to refute, in his words, “media falsehoods”; 2) issuing statements in newspapers explaining the role of the madrasas; 3) instructing all madrasas affiliated with the Wafaq to open up their madrasa premises for visits by the media, security personnel, and researchers; and 4) seeking access to, and audience with, government officials, especially in the security services, to dispel their suspicions and misgivings about the madrasas.

⁴⁸ The Wafaq organized seven major conferences at Palton Maidan in Dhaka City to protest and refute the media reports on madrasas. Interview with Maulana Abdul Jabbar, April 18, 2008.

madrastas or use their students for militant activities.⁴⁹ A Quomi madrasa administrator confided that, having heard some radical speeches by a religious leader in the area, he became so much concerned about the susceptibility of his students to such rhetoric that he imposed a virtual curfew in the madrasa.

What the Madrasa *Ulama* are Really Concerned About

As opposed to media reports that madrasa people are “jihadist” and that madrasas are used as training centers for “Islamic militants,” our research found that students and teachers of both Quomi and Alia madrasas were preoccupied either with their studies or, if at all interested in politics, with more down-to-earth issues that have some bearing on the progress of the country. Unlike their Pakistani counterparts, establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh overnight through armed struggle seemed to have no place in their consciousness.

In response to an open-ended survey question, “What, in your view, are the three most important problems facing Bangladesh today?” the 60 respondents who answered this question identified 28 pressing problems presently confronting the country: neglect of religious and moral values (19%); corruption (17%); price-hike (17%); unemployment (15%); flawed and corrupt educational system (13%); political crisis (11%); economic difficulties (11%); non-Islamic government (10%); lack of democratic practices (10%); military rule (7%); violence (5%); poverty (5%); lack of patriotism (3%); lack of healthcare facilities (2%); lack of science and technology (2%); food shortage (2%); militancy (2%); the problem of irresponsible fatwas (1%); lack of hard work (1%); environmental decay (1%); population problem (1%); and secularism (1%). It was obvious that most respondents were concerned with pragmatic, urgent issues such as employment, corruption, price hikes, the education system, political and economic crises, etc. Only 10% of the respondents believed that “non-Islamic government” is a problem in Bangladesh.

Quomi madrasa teachers and students seemed to be overly concerned with, and much focused on, their studies and did not appear to have any time for extra-curricular activities or for any serious involvement in politics. As most Quomi madrasas are residential, students remain under intensive pedagogical surveillance at all times, and any involvement in political activities on their part is considered a cause for expulsion from the madrasa.⁵⁰ Alia madrasa teachers and students, on the other hand, have a long-standing tradition of active involvement in partisan politics. The political affiliations of the Alia students range from the secular Awami League to the centrist Bangladesh Nationalist Party to the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami. In the overwhelming majority of cases, their political activism is dictated either by their “parent” political parties on national political issues, or prompted by their own concerns over tuition hikes, lack of facilities and job prospects. Since a majority of the Alia madrasa students are supporters of the students’ wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, their agitational politics is often focused on the so-called “Islamic-political” issues, such as Taslima Nasreen, the alleged “un-Islamic” activities of certain non-governmental

⁴⁹ The Bangladesh Madrasha Sikkhok Parisod (BMSP) also organized a huge anti-terrorism conference at Diploma Engineers Institute in Dhaka in 2006, which was attended by NGOs, academics, and high-level government officials. BMSP (2005) represents the Alia madrasa teachers of the country, and replaced the Jamiatul Mudarreseen (Teachers’ Association) that used to be led by Maulana Abdul Mannan, the founder of the *Daily Inqilab* and a great patron of madrasa education; the BMSP came into existence after the demise of Maulana Mannan. Maulana Sifatullah, the vice-president of the Parisod, died of heart failure while delivering a passionate speech on madrasa education at the 2006 conference.

⁵⁰ Students of Hathazari Madrasa, for example, remain on the madrasa campus premises day and night, and the only free time they are allowed to go outside is between Asr and Maghrib—roughly an hour.

organizations (NGOs), enforcement of Shariah laws, and international “Islamic” hotspots such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Focus group participants from among students expressed a lack of confidence in the mainstream political parties’ commitment to Islam. At the same time, none of the participants believed that a transformation of Bangladeshi society along Islamic lines could—or should—take place through force or coercion. In response to our survey question about the correct methodology of establishing an Islamic system in Bangladesh, all respondents (both Quomi and Alia) were in favor of “peaceful, democratic” means and “education and preaching;” none chose the option of “armed revolution” as a vehicle for Islamic change in the country (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Which method do you approve for establishing an Islamic system in Bangladesh?

Peaceful, democratic means	47
Armed revolution	0
Education and preaching	49
Total Respondents:	96

On issues such as the Ahmadiya minority, Taslima Nasreen, and the Christian mission-sponsored NGOs, both the Alia and Quomi madrasa students are often seen in the forefront of street demonstrations at the behest of their “elders” to mobilize public opinion in support of their demands. The Taslima Nasreen case, for example, could not have achieved such notoriety—and international coverage—without the nation-wide and frantic campaign launched against her by the madrasa *ulama*. Similarly, the agitation to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims that led to several violent incidents in Dhaka during 2004-2006 was spearheaded by the madrasa *ulama*. The interesting point to note here, however, is that this level of “extremism” is generally viewed as “normal” and “expected” by many madrasa *ulama*, based on their religious training and beliefs.⁵¹

Deprivation, Alienation, and Extremist Tendencies

There is a wealth of literature attributing the radical and extremist inclinations of madrasa graduates to psychological frustrations and alienation that, supposedly, arise out of conditions of socio-economic deprivation and a dearth of adequate job opportunities. However, first of all, while madrasa graduates are not highly paid, they are—in comparison with their

...while madrasa graduates are not highly paid, they are—in comparison with their counterparts in the general education system—less likely to remain unemployed after graduation.

⁵¹ A prominent Dhaka newspaper editor put it this way: “Whenever a reporter or a photographer at my newspaper tells me that a street march of the madrasa people is scheduled on issues such as blasphemy or fatwas or NGOs, and they would like to go and cover it for the paper, I tell them to save their time and petrol and print the story and the picture from some similar march that they might have covered last week. First of all, the madrasa people protesting against Taslima Nasreen or the Ahmadis is not new; they do it all the time. And second, what else one can expect from them? I would send my reporter when I hear that they are marching to support freedom of expression.”

counterparts in the general education system—less likely to remain unemployed after graduation. There are at least as many jobs available for madrasa graduates as there are mosques and madrasas in Bangladesh. And, those unable to find jobs in existing mosques and madrasas are likely to secure a sponsor to build a new mosque of their own or open their own madrasa, for which there are always some students that need to be taught and donors that are willing to contribute. Further, if the graduates are lucky enough to have family or community connections with the expatriate Bangladeshi diaspora in the United Kingdom, they may get invited on a “religious visa” to serve as the imam of a mosque, for example, in London or Bradford.

Second, it may be the case that most madrasa graduates do not worry much about material facilities or social recognition, as they seem to have internalized the dichotomization between *deen* (religious life) and *duniya* (the material life); they believe that their primary religious obligation is to worry about the former, and think that the latter should only be of secondary concern. The *deen-duniya* dialectics is constantly invoked by madrasa *ulama* in their everyday conversations; one often hears expressions like: “*Yeh to duniya ki baat hai; hamain ys sey kiya matlab!*” (This is just a worldly matter; we have nothing to do with it) or “*Deen ki fikr karo; duniya to aani jaani hai*” (Worry about your religious obligations; this world is only a temporary abode). Hence, the relative material deprivation that madrasa graduates often face, compared with their counterparts in general education, is not a matter of much concern for them. The point is not that madrasa *ulama* are completely indifferent to material welfare or negligent of family responsibilities; it is, rather, that they are not, generally speaking, as preoccupied with material gains and comforts as are, for example, the modern-educated middle-classes.⁵²

On the question of *boishomya* (discrimination), it is interesting to note that most madrasa teachers and students complaining of discrimination are from the Alia system. Compared with 47% of Alia respondents who expressed feeling “isolated” and “marginalized” in society, only 17% of respondents from the Quomi madrasas felt this way. From these results, it could be hypothesized that it is the proximity to “modernity” that leads to experiences of relative deprivation and alienation. One may argue that the exposure of the Alia students and teachers to the modern social sciences and humanities makes them more aware of their rights to equal opportunity, the lack of which in the real world then becomes a source of frustration. It is also the case that since Alia students study almost the same courses that are taught in general education, they think they have as much claim to government and private sector jobs as the graduates of colleges and universities. The Quomi madrasa graduates, on the contrary, entertain no such notions of their comparable academic standing with the graduates of the general education; neither do they aspire for jobs that would require them to compete with college and university graduates.

Who is a Terrorist?

With regard to Muslim resistance movements, militant organizations and the question of the recent upsurge in militancy in several Muslim countries, many madrasa respondents believe that the West uses the slogan of terrorism to undermine the image of Muslims. They seemed to link the

⁵² For example, a highly respected religious scholar who graduated in the late 1960s from Darul Uloom, Karachi, one of the most well regarded Deobandi madrasas of Pakistan, was offered a prestigious position to teach Hadith in a large madrasa in Dhaka, with a very good salary. He, however, refused to accept the offer, preferring instead to teach in his own small village near Cox's Bazar in order “to be of some help to the students in my village who had nowhere to go for education.”

U.S. engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians to this widely held notion of a Western anti-Muslim campaign in the name of a war against terrorism. In this respect, a student of a Quomi madrasa said: "A person can be portrayed from different angles. For example, in the Bangladeshi context, the term *muktijoddha* (freedom fighter) generally connotes somebody who fought in the '71 war [against Pakistan]. However, from the legal point of view of that time, a freedom fighter could be accused of, and prosecuted for, committing treason. So, in the current world order, people who are described by the West as "terrorists" may not be (and are not) considered terrorists by Muslims and by many others from that slant. In fact, Muslims who are branded as terrorists are fighting for their rights. For example, Hamas is fighting to liberate their country and to end the sufferings of the Palestinians; they are thus freedom fighters and not terrorists, as the West is branding them."

Most of our focus group participants, from both the Quomi and Alia systems, however, made a clear distinction between attacks against specific military targets by the "national liberation movements," and the indiscriminate killing of civilians for purposes of taking revenge or instilling fear in the ranks of the enemy. "There is absolutely no justification for killing civilians, Muslims, Christians, or Jews," stated Maulana Ilyas of Sholak Bahar Madrasa in Chittagong. Participating in another focus group discussion, a prominent Deobandi madrasa teacher said, "If the Hamas in Palestine confines its attacks to the Israeli military targets, I wouldn't describe it as terrorism, but if they deliberately target civilians, then I cannot support them according to Islamic Shariah."

Similar views were expressed in several focus group discussions with regard to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Chechnya. On the question of the August 2005 terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, however, there was a unanimous opinion among the madrasa teachers and students that these were "terrorist" acts and hence un-Islamic. The ultimate test, according to Maulana Mufti Abdur Rahman, one of the most respected Deobandi *ulama* of Bangladesh and the patron of several prominent madrasas in Dhaka, Chittagong and Putiya, "is whether you are destroying life or preserving life in the pursuit of your cause." It is also important to note that close to 80% of the madrasa teachers and students in our survey agreed with the statement that "suicide bombing is *haram* (forbidden in Islamic law) in all cases, whatever is the cause and reason." Among the 18% who disagreed with the above statement, more than two-thirds of them specified that they would only approve of suicide bombing against military targets and that too in a "declared war."

Much more interesting is the madrasa *ulama's* response to our survey question on the root causes of extremism and militancy among some Muslim groups. Only 30% of our respondents seemed to belong to the "blame-America-first" group and identify American policies as the root cause of militancy in the Muslim World; 66% of respondents blamed the "wrong and misguided religious ideas" of some Muslims engaged in militant activities, thereby endorsing the position of American neo-conservatives who believe that the global war on terrorism is, in fact, a "war of ideas," rather than a war about U.S. policies.

Madrasas, Global Politics, and the United States

The political consciousness and worldviews of madrasa teachers and students are informed and influenced not only by what happens in their immediate vicinity, but also by what happens around the globe and by what they read and watch in the media. In this respect, as the West is engaged in two unpopular wars in Muslim lands, the political views of those associated with the madrasa

system in global perspective may not be very different from those of the vast majority in the larger society. Contrary to general perceptions, our survey found no fanatical tendencies among madrasa teachers or graduates to substantiate theories that consider madrasas as breeding grounds for anti-Western, and, for that matter, anti-American tendencies.

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More than 90% of our respondents from both the Quomi and Alia madrasas stated that their views about America have become “more unfavorable” since the events of 9/11. It is also interesting to note that 68% of those with negative views about the United States believed that once President Bush left office, American policies “will change for the better.” This view confirms the findings of several earlier international polls that anti-Americanism in the Muslim World is mainly a result of certain specific policies of the United States—especially those policies that were pursued by the Bush administration—and is

not due to some inherent hatred of America on the part of Muslims. Furthermore, despite their belief that American policies are hurting Muslims “all over the world,” the majority (60%) of the madrasa teachers and students disapproved of the idea of waging “jihad” against America. They would rather try to resist American power through efforts by Muslim countries to seek parity with the United States in science, technology, and economic resources.

Nevertheless, the most common impressions about America among the respondents from Bangladeshi madrasas remained negative. America was seen as: a threat to the Islamic world (65%); imperialist (35%); a war-monger (31%); engaged in the misuse of power and democracy (27%); biased in favor of Israel (25%); and a promoter of terrorism (15%). Considering public opinion in both Bangladesh and in the rest of the Muslim world, the madrasa respondents’ views about America may not differ much from the views of other sectors of society. Several polls by the Pew Foundation and other international polling organizations over the past six years have consistently confirmed that a substantial majority of Muslim world public opinion regards the United States in negative terms. Thus, the negative attitudes among madrasa students toward the United States should not be attributed solely to their madrasa affiliation. The political upheavals in the current world developments seen as a result of U.S. policies influence the thinking and attitudes of all sectors of population in Muslim societies—and not *only* in Muslim societies. As a teacher of Araishidha Alia Madrasa⁵³ stated:

It seems that the West wants to exterminate the Muslims, as obviously only Muslims are singled out for oppression. We have come to know of this fact

⁵³ This madrasa is situated in the district of Brahmanbaria.

from reading the newspapers, not from our madrasa syllabus. There is no big difference between a madrasa graduate and any other educated member of the public with regard to their attitude toward the West. The torture of Muslims in Guantanamo Bay by the U.S. suggests that Muslims are being singled out for oppression. The U.S. is quite vocal on the issue of human rights, but when it comes to Muslims, it is the main violator of human rights.⁵⁴

Another senior teacher at a Quomi madrasa argued that there is no “inherent hatred” (*paidashi dushmani*) among them against America and that the education they received, and now teach, in madrasas teaches them to treat all human beings in a just manner. However, according to him, “the negative attitude of Muslims toward the United States in such a state of affairs is vindicated because similar ill feelings against the United States will be found in any community, if that community happens to receive the treatment Muslims are receiving from the United States today.” In our survey, however, when the madrasa respondents were asked a direct question as to what really determines American policies toward Muslim countries, 48% said that American economic and strategic interests are the determining factors, and only 27% of them identified the American government’s “hostility toward Islam” as the primary reason for American policies.⁵⁵

Even if one takes the rationale given by the madrasa *ulama* for their negative—and often hostile—views of the United States at its face value, some other factors that seem to have heightened the intensity of their—and others’—“anti-American” sentiments must also be taken into account. First, America seems to have become a convenient alibi for the failure of many Muslim societies to successfully tackle their problems of governance and development, although some of these problems can be undoubtedly laid at the doorsteps of foreign forces.⁵⁶ Second, many intellectuals in the Muslim World tend to look for easy and handy explanations for the myriad and complex problems of their societies, the United States being one of them. Third, the recent rise of independent electronic media that is now available 24/7 from major national, regional (Aljazeera, for example) and international media outlets of the world through cable and dish networks, and that was seen by the religious community as a new means of imposing the West’s cultural hegemony against Islamic values and way of life, now—even though unintended—seems to be implanting more counter-hegemonic than hegemonic ideas. Finally, it is also the case that the rulers in many Muslim countries—and including those rulers who are considered pro-U.S.—

⁵⁴ Focus group discussion, May 16, 2008.

⁵⁵ While giving his view on why radical tendencies have grown among some Muslims and why violence and terrorism have become modes of religio-political expressions among some Islamic elements, a senior student from Jamia Qasemia recounted an anecdote which he described as “Don’t disturb the driver.” The story goes like this: Once there was a row between two passengers in a public transport. The aggrieved passenger found no justice while he approached other co-passengers and the “helper” and “ticket-collector” of the bus. Finally he found a notice that said, “If you have any complaints, please approach the driver.” But when he went to the driver to register his complaint, he found another notice next to the driver’s seat that read: “Please do not disturb the driver.” The student explained that just like the aggrieved passenger of the bus, Muslims in the present world have nowhere to go to lodge their complaints and to seek justice. Hence, some of them become so irritated and desperate with their condition of helplessness that they see no other option but to seek justice through counter-violence. “I do not approve of it, but I can understand the reasons and motives behind their extremist ideas and actions.”

⁵⁶ On one rare occasion during a focus group discussion in 2007 at a major Ahl-e-Hadith madrasa near Rajshahi when most participants were criticizing the United States for almost everything under the sun, an elderly teacher, who had earlier expressed his own critical views about the U.S., intervened thus to admonish his colleagues: “Right, it was America who told our rulers to be dishonest and corrupt; it was America who told our government officials not to do anything unless they are bribed; it was America who told our politicians to steal from government treasury, our teachers not to teach, our shopkeepers to hoard and over-charge, our pharmacies to sell fake drugs, our bus drivers to kill people on the road, our architects to build houses that collapse And, yes, it is America who is forcing the rich Gulf princes to spend millions [of dollars] on gambling and buying expensive properties in Western countries while their Muslim brothers are starving; and it is America that is preventing all of us to be good Muslims, good citizens, to do good, and to help those who are in need ...” For a few moments, there was complete silence in the room and then one of the close associates of Dr. Asadullah Ghalib of AHAB remarked, “Our brother is right.”

deliberately encourage anti-Americanism in the often government-controlled media in order to deflect their peoples' wrath against their own misrule, corruption, and undemocratic practices.

U.S. Interference in the Affairs of Muslim Countries

Madrassa respondents were most concerned about what they perceived as a recurrent interference by the United States and the West in different Muslim countries, and U.S. support for autocratic governments in Muslim lands. Respondents referred to the Iraq and Afghanistan situations and deplored the way these two countries are being “destroyed.” They maintained that Western intervention in the internal affairs of Muslim countries is the main reason for troubles in Muslim

Madrassa respondents were most concerned about what they perceived as a recurrent interference by the United States and the West in different Muslim countries, and U.S. support for autocratic governments in Muslim lands.

lands, and that radical tendencies were a result of that interference and of the unfair treatment of Muslims by the West. Madrassa teachers' and students' responses to our questionnaire also suggested that most of them were opposed to U.S. interference in Muslim countries. In response to a question asking respondents to rank in order those policies that, in their view, would improve U.S. relations with the Muslim world, 79% of the madrassa teachers and students ranked “stop interfering in the affairs of Muslim countries” at the top of their list. Surprisingly, “help solve the Palestinian problem” and “withdraw

from Afghanistan and Iraq” received a top ranking from only 15% and 16% of the respondents, respectively.⁵⁷

Despite widespread criticisms against the United States, however, many madrassa teachers and students expressed the view that the United States is a friend of Bangladesh, and that the people of Bangladesh approach the United States in times of difficulty. They appreciated the fact that the United States was the leading nation in the world, but they regretted that the country does not always behave with the “generosity of a big power.” While discussing U.S.-Muslim world relations, students at several Quomi and Alia madrassas introduced the issue of the lukewarm American response in the wake of the Sidr cyclone that hit the southern coastal region of Bangladesh in November 2007. The government of Bangladesh received a commitment of \$200 million from

⁵⁷ One student from Jamea Qasemia observed that, given that President George W. Bush was [at that time] in power and that the U.S. administration influenced by anti-Muslim/Jewish elements, an understanding between the United States and Muslims may not be possible in the near future. He added that people in the United States are kept in the dark about the sufferings of the Muslims by their government, stating that “the Jewish lobby exploits the entire situation; and deliberately spreads wrong notions about Muslims and Islam.”

Most of the students at this madrassa believed that President George W. Bush was mostly responsible for unrest in the world, and emphasized that this opinion was shared by people of all walks of life—educated and uneducated, madrassa graduates and non-madrassa graduates alike. They believed that the United States was acting on a wrong generalization that all Muslims pose threats to its interests. One student noted that: “America possesses immense power which it can use to establish peace, justice and security in the world. If it chooses to do so, it will never have to worry about anti-Americanism and terrorism.”

different countries and agencies soon after Bangladesh was hit by the disaster; and almost half of the total foreign aid came from Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia pledged \$100 million relief money and disbursed the money in cash before any other country, the then U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced a commitment of only \$2 million in relief. The students expressed bafflement at this unenthusiastic and cold response from the richest and most powerful country in the world at a time of such catastrophic disaster in Bangladesh. While some senior teachers reminded their students of the generous U.S. relief aid during several similar situations in the past, the students continued to insist that the Bush administration was “more eager to give money to fight terrorism than to help the cyclone victims.” Mufti Jashim-ud-Din of Hathazari Madrasa rejected the notion that madrasa graduates have any “chronic tendency” to speak ill of the West or the United States. He stated:

If the hatred of America were an issue for us, we would make regular speeches against America; we would devote our Friday sermons against America; and we would write regular columns in newspapers and periodicals against America and the West. But one cannot name a single Quomi madrasa ‘alim who does that. So, how can someone say that we are spreading anti-Americanism? Anti-Americanism is spreading because of America’s own policies.

Another Quomi madrasa teacher in Chittagong said that anti-Americanism was not confined to madrasas alone: “Today America is treated as an object of hatred by people of the entire world, not only by the people of Bangladesh or by Muslims alone. The whole world is cursing them.” Having said that, he jokingly pointed out that the U.S. dollar still remains the most sought after currency in Bangladesh, and not the Saudi Riyal.

Students of Uttar Badda Islamiya Kamil Madrasa voiced the same opinion about the United States and stated that Muslims do not have any intrinsic hatred against the U.S.; many Muslims keep their money in U.S. banks; and that Muslims consider the American people as “friendly and generous, not enemies.”⁵⁸ During a focus group discussion, when one student talked about the negative propaganda against Islam in the United States, Mufti Jashim-ud-Din, one of the senior teachers of Hathazari Madrasa, pointed out that if someone says anything against Islam in the United States, we should not summarily blame the U.S. government or the American people in general for that act. According to one participant in a focus group discussion: “Sometimes people reach such negative conclusions about Islam on the basis of what they read about Muslims and Islam; we Muslims need to present the true message of Islam through research, not simply by protests and agitations.”⁵⁹

9/11: Whodunit?

As regards the tragic attacks of 9/11, many madrasa teachers and students held views which mainly fell under the category of “conspiracy theories.” Some believed that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or the Jewish lobby may have been behind the 9/11 tragedy and that the U.S. administration is dominated by Jews. And some even conjectured that 6,000 Jewish office employees were absent from work in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 because “they

⁵⁸ Focus group discussion, April 19, 2008.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mufti Jashim-ud-Din, March 29, 2008.

had prior knowledge” of the tragedy. The “Jewish conspiracy” seemed so obvious an explanation for many of the *ulama* that they did not require any evidence to accept it. The madrasa *ulama* also referred to several articles that they had read in some Islamic publications from India and Pakistan to the effect that the “entire 9/11 events were staged by America to find an excuse to attack Afghanistan and Iraq” and to control the oil resources of the Muslim world. Some others believed that 9/11 did not happen at all and the entire episode was an illusion created by television images (See Table 2).

TABLE 2 Who was responsible for the 9/11 tragedy?⁶⁰

The Muslim hijackers of Al-Qaeda	2
The CIA	33
The Jews	17
Any other group? Israel	3
Don't know	3
Total Respondents:	58

As the above table shows, 57% of our respondents believed that the attacks on the Twin Towers were orchestrated by the CIA; only 3% of respondents believed in the widely-held theory that the attacks were carried out by al-Qaeda hijackers. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, close to 30% of the madrasa teachers and students blamed the Jews and Israel for the 9/11 attacks.

The United Nations and the Muslim World

Teachers of Araishidha Alia madrasa held the opinion that the United Nations (UN) has not been very helpful in addressing the plight of Muslims worldwide, as it is not interested in protecting the rights of Muslims. One teacher said: “We may need our own United Nations; big powers do not always follow the UN’s rules; instead they use it in their own interests.”⁶¹ According to responses to a question regarding the UN, it appeared that most madrasa teachers and students had little trust in this organization: 75% of respondents believed that the UN is only an instrument of the big powers; only 14% believed that the UN may play an effective role in establishing peace in the world; while only 11% thought that it is the best hope for world peace.

Madrasa teachers and students argued that the big powers, especially the United States, do not abide by UN regulations and that the United States and the United Kingdom waged war against Iraq in violation of international laws. They believed that Muslims are at the receiving end of this lawless condition, and this is one reason of anger among many Muslims. During a focus group discussion, the students at Uttar Badda Islamiya Kamil madrasa argued that if the United States followed UN rules in their true spirit, Muslims would not suffer so much. They believed that in the name of fighting terrorism, Western countries, and especially the United States, use the UN and invade various Muslim countries to plunder wealth, and then render those countries weak and poor. According to the focus group participants, the West’s anti-Muslim stance is driven by its fear of the resurgence of Muslims worldwide, which the big powers want to stop by any means,

⁶⁰ Survey responses to question on: “Who, in your view, was behind the 9/11 attacks on America?”

⁶¹ Focus group discussion with teachers of Araishidha Alia Madrasa, May 16, 2008.

especially by manufacturing and concocting stories of terrorism and then using them as ploys to occupy Muslim countries. According to a teacher of Araishidha Alia Madrasa: “The big powers want to stop even the economic rise of the Muslims. The UN resolutions against Iran are clear indications that the U.S. does not want Iran to develop economically.”

The Palestine Issue

Another important issue that concerned madrasa respondents was the Palestine-Israel conflict. To the question on how the United States can improve its relations with Muslims (mentioned above), 55% of respondents pointed to the sufferings of the Palestinians at the hands of Israel and the need to solve their problem (of them, 15% ranked it first, 21% ranked it second, 45% ranked it third, 14% ranked it fourth, and 5% ranked it fifth). Most respondents thought that Western countries maintain double standards with regard to the Palestinians and the Israelis. One Quomi madrasa student stated: “The way Israel is perpetrating injustices on the people of Palestine is a blot on the conscience of the world leaders who are turning blind eyes to the sufferings of the Palestinians.”⁶² Madrasa teachers and students were equally worried about the suffering of fellow Muslims in Chechnya and believed that although the United States and Russia are apparently not friendly to each other in global politics, they seem to be united in their agendas of oppressing the Muslims.

On the U.S. Promotion of Democracy

On the question of a U.S. agenda to promote democracy in the Muslim world, a majority of madrasa teachers and students were suspicious about the real motives, although they believed that apparently the United States seems to be sincere in developing a democratic culture in the world. One question to the respondents was: “Three years ago, President Bush said that America will promote democracy and freedom in Muslim countries. Do you believe him?” 91% of our respondents believed that President Bush was not sincere, while only 9% replied in the affirmative. 21% of the total respondents abstained from answering this question.

During the focus group discussions in several madrasas, both teachers and students expressed the fear that the United States would use democracy promotion as an excuse to interfere in the internal affairs of Muslim countries and to install leadership that would be amenable to U.S. interests. They argued that there were many non-Muslim undemocratic governments but that the U.S. does not similarly (i.e., militarily) interfere in those countries, expressing the opinion that the main motive of the United States is to stop the progress of Muslims. “They [the U.S.] are on the lookout to find excuses to destabilize Muslim countries one after another,” one Alia madrasa teacher observed. Another teacher of Araishidha Alia Madrasa said: “The Western countries talk about democracy in Muslim countries but in fact want to subvert democracy there in order to put their own people at the helm of affairs.”

Significantly, an overwhelming number of madrasa teachers and graduate students believe in the principle of democracy and many think that truly democratic governments in Muslim countries may end U.S. domination and its negative influences in Muslim lands. They regard democracy as the

⁶² Focus group discussion, March 15, 2008.

best way to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh and believe that Islamic law cannot be introduced through violence and terrorism. In our survey, 92% of the respondents said that democracy is a system of government best suited for Bangladesh; only 8% disagreed with this view.

The *Ulama* and the Muslim World

We wanted to probe the madrasa *ulama* about their perceptions of various Muslim countries and to see how they view their Islamic credentials. We asked our sample of madrasa teachers and students to identify a Muslim country which, in their view, was closer to Islamic ideals (See Table 3):

TABLE 3 The Ulama’s Perceptions of the Islamicity of Muslim Countries

Saudi Arabia	46
Iran	10
Bangladesh	4
Afghanistan	3
Iraq	2
Pakistan	1
Egypt	1
Turkey	1
Total Respondents:	68

A related question provided a list of six countries and asked respondents to identify the country that, in their view, was “the best friend of Bangladesh” (See Table 4):

TABLE 4 Which country is the best friend of Bangladesh?

Saudi Arabia	70
India	4
United States	0
China	3
Pakistan	0
United Kingdom	0
Total Respondents:	77

Another question sought to elicit the views of madrasa teachers and students on the religious authority and legitimacy of the *ulama* of various Muslim countries. The question was: “On matters of religion and Shariah, whose opinion outside Bangladesh will you trust most?” (See Table 5):

TABLE 5 Religious Authority of the Ulama of Other Muslim Countries

Deobandi ulama of India	29
Deobandi ulama of Pakistan	5
Ulama of Al-Azhar in Cairo	14
Saudi ulama	38
Total Respondents:	76

From the above tables, it becomes clear that madrasa communities in Bangladesh rate both the government of Saudi Arabia and its Islamic scholarship quite high. 91% of the respondents consider Saudi Arabia as the best friend of Bangladesh. It appears, however, that this opinion is mainly based on two reasons. The first is sentimental reasons, i.e., Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the custodian of the two holiest sites for Muslims. Second is material consideration, that is, Saudi Arabia is one of the largest employers of Bangladeshi labor as well as a source of economic aid.

When it comes to religious-ideological matters, however, the response is not that wholehearted, as a comparatively lower percentage (68%) of the respondents regards the Saudi government as closer to Islamic ideals. And when it comes to purely theological issues, the percentage is further reduced. Only 50% of the respondents seem to trust the opinion of the Saudi *ulama* on matters of religion and Shariah. What is more significant in this regard is that if we exclude the Alia madrasa respondents, we find a substantially different picture. Only 18% of the Quomi madrasa respondents prefer Saudi *ulama* on questions of Shariah related issues, whereas 64% give their preference to the Deobandi *ulama* of India. In other words, while a majority considers Saudi Arabia as the best friend of Bangladesh, in matters of theology and Shariah, their allegiances are directed more toward Deoband and Al-Azhar.

Attitudes toward Non-Muslims

There exists a paradox with regard to madrasa teachers' and students' attitudes toward non-Muslims. While it is true that they do not demonstrate any hostility to non-Muslims of Bangladesh in general, there is a considerable hostility among them toward the Ahmadis, commonly known as Qadianis in the subcontinent. However, that ill-feeling has more to do with the haziness of the Ahmadis' identity than with the issue of Muslim-non-Muslim relations.⁶³ The extent of the madrasa *ulama's* hostility toward the Ahmadis is apparent from the fact that 94% of our survey respondents thought that the Bangladesh government should declare them as non-Muslims.

As many madrasa teachers and students are involved in the Khatm-e-Nabuwat Andolon (Movement to Assert the Finality of Prophethood), their opposition against the government's inaction in this regard is more noticeable. During 2005-2007 there were several incidents in Dhaka and other cities involving attacks on the Ahmadis by both madrasa students and the general public. During our focus group discussions, many madrasa teachers said that they did not approve of the violence against the Qadianis but they would continue to demand that they be declared as

⁶³ Belief in the Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger of God is an essential article of faith for Muslims. As the Ahmadis take a different creedal stance on this question, and make a distinction between a "messenger" and a "prophet"—a distinction unacceptable to an overwhelming majority of Muslims—*ulama* in Bangladesh demand that the government declare the Ahmadis as non-Muslims.

non-Muslims. Yet, madrasa teachers' and students' relationship with other minority communities in Bangladesh has always been good, or at least uneventful.

Theoretically, madrasa communities do not seem to have any sinister attitude toward non-Muslims in general. The survey results and focus group discussions suggest that teachers and students of madrasas believe in good relationships between, and co-existence with, different faith communities.⁶⁴ 95% of our survey respondents believed that there are good people in every religious community; 99% thought they could live in peace with the followers of other religions, despite the fact that 86% of them considered Hindus, Christians and Jews in general as unsympathetic toward Muslims. Most of them thought that the supposed "hostility" of non-Muslims toward Muslims is a result of wrong notions of Islam spread by the media, and of misgivings about Islam created by some terrorist incidents perpetrated by a few misguided Muslims. However, almost 99% of the respondents agreed that there is presently a need to build bridges of understanding and co-

Many of them believe that most foreign NGOs are funded by Christian missions and are working to convert poor Bangladeshi Muslims through food and job incentives.

existence between different religious communities, which will make the world a better place for all to live.

Several *ulama* expressed their concern about the rising number of anti-Muslim riots in India and said that their main worry on such occasions is to ensure that there are no retaliatory incidents against the Hindu communities in Bangladesh by some misguided people. An Alia madrasa teacher, who is also a member of the Jamaat-e-Islami

Central Executive Committee, sent his students to protect a nearby Hindu Temple from a possible attack by some hooligans after the anti-Muslim Gujarat riots in 2002. A Quomi madrasa teacher in Dhaka said that he admonished his neighbors when he learned that they had participated in the attack on a Hindu temple in the wake of the destruction of Babri Masjid in India by a right wing Hindu mob.

There is, however, a great deal of concern on the part of the madrasa *ulama* about the activities of the Christian missions in Bangladesh. Many of them believe that most foreign NGOs are funded by Christian missions and are working to convert poor Bangladeshi Muslims through food and job incentives. One of the main reasons for the *ulama's* opposition to girls' schools in rural areas operated or sponsored by foreign NGOs is their fear that these schools are, in fact, meant for converting young Muslim girls to Christianity, or, at least, sowing the seeds of doubt about Islam in their vulnerable minds.

⁶⁴ During one focus group discussion in Chittagong, for example, many *ulama* stated that they found some Hindus more respectful of the madrasa *ulama* than the Muslims themselves. Most of them agreed that "we should not ask whether one is a Hindu or a Muslim if he needs help." As Mufti Jehadulla—a Hathazari Madrasa graduate who now teaches at Potia Quomi Madrasa near Chittagong—stated: "A needy person is a needy person; it doesn't matter whether he is a Hindu or Muslim." A popular religious preacher and volunteer for several charitable societies, the Mufti—who comes from a rich family with vast agricultural land property in Hathazari—asserted that he did not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly when it came to helping people and giving charity. In this, the Mufti's aim is to emulate his father's tradition of helping out the poor of all religions: Maulana Shah Muhammad Yunus, his father, was known for his assistance to people of all religions during the devastating hurricane of 1991, as well as for his patronage of Quomi madrasas—including the Hathazari and Potia Madrasas—in Chittagong.

And, Now, What About Women?

With regard to gender issues, our survey turned up some interesting findings. Irrespective of the normative status of women in the Islamic scriptures, and the extent to which Islam allows women to be involved in public life, the madrasa teachers and graduate students surveyed held contradictory views. Whereas 72% of the respondents believed that Islam has given women “equal social, economic and political rights,” only 6% considered that women can be equal to men in intellect and judgment, no matter how highly educated they are. Although a large majority (93%) of Alia and Quomi respondents supported the idea that men and women should get the same education, the idea that women be allowed to work outside their homes was supported by only 64%. Again, 96% of the respondents thought that women should be allowed to seek higher education in madrasas; but when it came to the question of applying that knowledge—for example, issuing Islamic legal opinions (fatwas)—the figure dropped considerably to 75%.⁶⁵ In other words, 25% of madrasa respondents believed that a woman is not equally qualified to issue opinions and judgments on Shariah issues even if she has received the same religious education as a male counterpart in the same institution and under the same scholar.

As regards women’s involvement in public life, Alia respondents were more liberal in comparison with their Quomi counterparts. 70% Quomi and only 17% Alia respondents believed that women should not be allowed to work outside their homes. That is to say that most Quomi respondents were opposed to women’s engagement in public life, while an overwhelming majority (83%) of Alia respondents believed that women should be allowed to work outside their domestic enclosures.

While both Quomi and Alia communities promote women’s education, the former support a more traditional role for women—as mothers, wives and daughters (what they described as “domestic angels”)—while the latter seem to be coming to terms with the “Islamic feminist” argument that women must become engaged in public life along with men, provided they maintain proper Islamic ethics while mixing with male strangers. However, on the question of female political leadership, both Quomi and Alia communities hold a conservative view. Only 26% of respondents agreed with the idea that a woman can become the prime minister in Bangladesh—despite the fact that the country has had, alternately, two female prime ministers from 1991 to 2006 in three consecutive terms, and that this trend may continue as long as these two former prime ministers remain active in politics. It is interesting to note here that the grand alliance of the madrasa-based Islamic political parties, as well as the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami, had no qualms in accepting Prime Minister Khaleda Zia as their coalition leader during 2001-2006. In the early 1990s also, the religious parties and the Jamaat had extended their support to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.⁶⁶

As discussed above, madrasa communities are unanimous in their support of women’s education in principle, which is perhaps true in many other Muslim societies where Islamic movements promote female education. For example, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that in Egypt Islamists “barely

⁶⁵ Compare this with the response of the Pakistani madrasa ulama to a similar question: 54% of the madrasa teachers and 92% of students in our survey in Pakistan said that a woman was not authorized to give fatwas on matters of Shariah even if she has the same degree of religious training as her male counterpart.

⁶⁶ The Bangladeshis elected once again a woman Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, in December 2008 elections with an unprecedented majority. Interestingly, a faction of Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ), the political party of the madrasa-based ulama, had earlier reached an electoral agreement with Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League, accepting Sheikh Hasina as the future Prime Minister.

question women's education," but "much more gingerly challenge women's rights to work."⁶⁷ This seems to be the case with the Bangladeshi Quomi *ulama*, who encourage equal education for Muslim women but are reluctant to allow them to work outside of their homes where they will meet male strangers. Segregation is the answer, as Maulana Ahmad Shafi of Hathazari states:

Women are going out without maintaining modesty. Co-education is corrupting the character of students. We are not opposed to female education, but we want them to maintain their modesty. For this, they should be educated separately.⁶⁸

It is instructive to note here that the number of female students at both Quomi and Alia madrasas has increased significantly over the last decade or so. Many madrasas simultaneously provide education to both male and female students in different sites, or at the same site but in different buildings, ensuring proper gender segregation. For example, Jamia Qasemia Alia Madrasa and Dottapara Quomi Madrasa—both in Narsingdi—offer education to both male and female students on the same campus but in different buildings. Both madrasas have two sections: one for male and the other for female students. The female students are housed and taught in separate buildings, with proper "purdah" enforced. On the other hand, Tamir ul Millat Madrasa runs a separate branch in a different site for female students. The Muhtamim (Administrator) of Dottapara Quomi Madrasa states:

Female students of various social and economic backgrounds come to learn here. Parents who are worried about indecencies and immoralities in the environment of general education send their daughters to our madrasa. Because of the good reputation of the female students of this madrasa in terms of their behavior and purdah, they are being married off to grooms of good families. Parents send their daughters to madrasa not only for their love of Islamic education, but also for the Islamic and morally healthy environment that is maintained on the madrasa premises.

It must be pointed out, however, that not all Quomi madrasa *ulama* are in favor of higher Islamic education for women. Maulana Mufti Abdur Rahman, a respected figure among the Deobandi *ulama* and the patron of more than half a dozen Quomi madrasas in Dhaka and Chittagong, is extremely critical of the recent trend among the Quomi madrasas to open up their doors for women's higher Islamic education. "I am all for Islamic education for girls," Mufti Abdur Rahman says, "but only at the elementary level so that they can read and understand the Qur'an and know about the basic teachings of Islam." He fears that higher education for women, whether secular or Islamic, will bring about a "disruption of traditional family relations as prescribed by Islam." He says that he will not allow higher Islamic education for girls in the madrasas under his influence. According to Mufti Abdur Rahman, "The colleges and universities took the Muslim girls of the upper and middle classes out of their homes and brought them into the limelight of the public [domain]. The NGOs did the same to the girls of the poorer families when these girls were enticed into the garment factories' jobs. Do our *ulama* want to do the same with the girls of the middle class and lower middle class *sharif* families by tempting them to leave their homes in the name of

⁶⁷ "The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and the Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 243.

⁶⁸ Interview in June, 2008.

Islamic education? Whether it is college, university, a garment factory, or a madrasa, the result is the same.”⁶⁹

Female graduates from Quomi madrasas generally aspire to be “good housewives” and “good mothers” but many of them also teach at girls’ Quomi madrasas if and where such madrasas are available.⁷⁰ Conversely, female graduates from Alia madrasas have a wider horizon in terms of engagement in public life and the job market. While many of them opt for the traditional roles of housewives and mothers, a significant number pursue mainstream jobs like teaching in madrasas and schools. Some of them continue their education in the general education stream. One potential area of employment for the Alia female graduates is the growing Islamic banking sector in Bangladesh. Different Islamic banks are now opening “women’s booths,” where female Alia madrasa graduates stand a better chance to be employed. Needless to say, other public sector jobs also remain open to them, as they are to their male counterparts.

Madrasas and Bangladeshi Identity

Unlike in the West, where Islamic education in Muslim community schools is deemed to be a means for second-generation children to preserve their religious and cultural identity, madrasa education in Bangladesh does not have such an “identity politics” dimension attached to it. As Bangladeshi culture and Islamic culture overlap each other, many madrasa teachers and students consider theirs as the mainstream education. For them, Bangladeshi identity and madrasa education cannot be dichotomized. Even if some of them may feel isolated and marginalized in the larger society, only 17% of our survey respondents thought that such isolation and marginalization influenced their identity as Bangladeshi.

Notwithstanding the fact that the wellsprings of their religious education—and often the Urdu medium of madrasa instruction—link them to the north Indian Islamic religio-cultural tradition, their pride in their own Bengali language, culture and traditions is immense and becomes evident when they talk about Tagore and Nazrul songs. Many madrasa students and teachers during our extensive discussions on the question of national identity echoed the currently prevalent formulation that makes a distinction between “Bengali identity” (which they regard as a secular concept, incorporating both Hindu and Muslim composite Bengali culture and language), on the one hand, and “Bangladeshi identity” (a concept that emphasizes the Islamic roots of Bengali language and culture and lays the foundation for the national identity of all Bangladeshi citizens, clearly separating them from West Bengal in India), on the other.

Madrasa teachers and students believe strongly in the concept of a universal Muslim ummah, and remain concerned about the various problems that Muslim communities are facing around the world. They feel deeply disturbed about the plight of Palestinians under Israeli occupation and follow closely the news of death and destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan. During a Friday prayer sermon in 2006 at a mosque affiliated with a major madrasa in Sylhet, the imam concluded his khutba with this prayer:

Oh Allah, grant victory and freedom to our suffering Palestinian brothers; grant
freedom to our brothers in Kashmir and Chechnya; help our fellow-Muslims

⁶⁹ When this author mentioned these views of Maulana Mufti Abdur Rahman to a Principal of a women Quomi madrasa near Chittagong, he responded by saying only that “Mufti sahib is our *buzurg* (elder) and we respect him but times have changed.”

⁷⁰ Interview with a former teacher at Sholak Bahar Madrasa, Chittagong who manages a girl’s madrasa where his own two daughters also teach.

recover their freedom in Iraq and Afghanistan; soften the hearts of those Shias and Sunnis who are killing each other in Iraq and Pakistan; protect the poor Muslims of India from the brutality of fanatic Hindus. Oh Allah, unite the Muslim people from all over the world so that they can face their enemies together.

The common view among madrasa teachers and students is that Bangladeshi culture and Islamic culture have a strong and inseparable meeting point. They find no conflict between their identity as Muslims and as Bangladeshis. They argue that Islam is deeply rooted in Bangladeshi culture and that the “conspiracy” of certain “Kolkata Hajis” (literally: Kolkata pilgrims)—a denigrating term used for the secular intellectuals who reportedly take their cultural and ideological inspiration from Kolkata, the capital of the Indian state of West Bengal—to “pollute” the Bangladeshi culture with the Hindu cultural influences of West Bengal will not succeed.⁷¹

The madrasa curriculum thus ensconces in their hearts and minds an “imagined community” of the Islamic ummah—with its familiar cultural and geographical signposts—that links the green meadows of Eastern Bengal with the fruit orchards of Central Asia and the olive gardens of the Mediterranean.

Hadith, the madrasa students travel, in their intellectual imagination, with generations of the narrators of the prophetic traditions and relive the experience of Islamic urban life in central Islamic lands. The madrasa curriculum thus ensconces in their hearts and minds an “imagined community” of the Islamic ummah—with its familiar cultural and geographical signposts—that links the green meadows of Eastern Bengal with the fruit orchards of Central Asia and the olive gardens of the Mediterranean.

It is also important to note at this point that while an overwhelming majority of the Quomi madrasa teachers remained sympathetic to the idea of a united Pakistan during the 1971 crisis, fearing that an independent Bangladesh under the secular leadership of the Awami League might be a step backward for Islam, many Alia and Quomi madrasa students did not see any contradiction between their Islamic commitment on the one hand, and their demand for an independent state of

One may also note another important formative influence on the identity formation of madrasa graduates, an influence that links them, both emotionally and intellectually, with the geographical wellsprings of Islam in its gilded age. Most of the textbooks that madrasa students read and discuss over a period of several years of their study were written centuries ago by Muslim authors from distant Islamic lands—Baghdad, Basra, Kufa, Damascus, Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Khurasan, Tashkent, Bukhara, and many other cities, big and small, spread all over from Morocco to Central Asia. Similarly, when they study

⁷¹ Interview with Maulana Mohammad Ilyas of Sholak Bahar Madrasa, Chittagong, January 2007.

their own, on the other. This author has met several madrasa graduates who took pride in fighting the Pakistan army along with the Mukti Bahini, the militia force that fought the guerilla war against the Pakistani troops during 1971. Several of them introduced themselves, with a great deal of pride, as former “freedom fighters.” “Pakistan was our dream,” a Quomi madrasa teacher said, “when that dream turned into a nightmare, we had another dream —Bangladesh. Islam and our common history and struggle still bind us with Pakistan but the fact remains that, for me now, the Rajshahi mangoes are much sweeter and delicious than the mangoes of Multan.”

We are Non-Political but...

It was apparent from our visits to Quomi and Alia madrasas as well as our interviews and conversations with madrasa communities that Quomi teachers and graduate students tend to be highly reticent about their political views, and most are reluctant to engage in political discussions. Our respondents maintained that they were not actively involved in any political parties (either Islamic or secular). However, the respondents’ political leanings were evident in their responses to the survey questionnaires. Most of them expressed support for the *ulama*-based Islamic political parties, such as Khilafat Majlis, Khilafat Andolan, Nizam-e-Islam Party and Islami Shashontonra Andolan. On the basis of their survey responses, it can be safely surmised that Quomi teachers and graduates are quite conspicuous by their lack of sympathy and support for the Jamaat-e-Islami, the leading Islamist movement in Muslim South Asia. This is apparently because of the long-standing hostility of the elders of the Deoband School toward the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Maulana Saiyed Abul ‘Ala Maududi, whose religious ideas were deemed as unorthodox by the Deoband *ulama*. In fact, the books written by Maulana Maududi are strictly banned in Quomi madrasas and students are reported to have been expelled for reading his books or showing sympathy for the Jamaat. Some Quomi madrasa *ulama* openly admitted that they prefer the secular Awami League candidates in elections than voting for the Jamaat-e-Islami since, in their views, the Jamaat represents a concept of Islam that is antithetical to the teachings of “our *ulama-e-deen*.”

As regards the two largest political parties, BNP and Awami League, Quomi teachers and graduates tended to adopt a rather taciturn attitude when confronted with a question of loyalty or support for these two parties. However, their views, as expressed in the survey, suggest that their support for these two parties is almost equally divided. Interestingly, among the teachers and students of the Alia madrasas we visited, Jamaat-e-Islami and its students’ wing enjoyed a great deal of support. Among the two mainstream political parties, the BNP seemed to score much better than the Awami League and General Zia-ur-Rahman, the former president and the founder of the BNP, was rated as the “best leader” of Bangladesh so far by a majority of both the Quomi and Alia madrasa respondents.⁷²

⁷² One important limitation of our Alia madrasas’ survey was that, among the four madrasas that were visited, the two larger ones happened to have considerable leanings toward the Jamaat-e-Islami. This does not mean, however, that other political parties and Islamic groups are not represented in the Alia madrasas. We were informed of several Alia madrasas that maintain political allegiances to some other political parties and that are opposed to Jamaat-e-Islami politics. In fact, in several Alia madrasas (and in almost all of the Quomi madrasas) the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami is banned by the madrasa authorities to operate. Some leading Alia madrasas that are opposed to the Jamaat politics are: Qaderia Tayyibiya Alia Madrasa (Dhaka), Jamia Ahmadiya Sunnia Madrasa (Chittagong), Jamia Millia Ahmadiya Madrasa (Chittagong), Sarsina Darussunnat Alia Madrasa (Pirojpur), Durbati Madinatul Ulum Madrasa (Gazipur), Madrasa-e Alia Koruna Mokabia (Borguna), Sonakanda Kamil Madrasa (Comilla), etc. Madrasa-e Alia Dhaka (commonly known as Dhaka Alia), the oldest and the most prestigious Alia madrasa in Bangladesh, is generally influenced by student politics at Dhaka University, as the two institutions are in close proximity of each other. As Jatiabadi Chhattra Dal (JCD), the student wing of the BNP, has long had a strong presence at Dhaka University campus, it also has a stronghold at Dhaka Alia.

In addition to some of the largest Alia madrasas, all madrasas established and patronized by *pirs* and *Barelvīs*—derogatorily known as *gorom sunni* in Bangladesh—are usually opposed to Jamaat-e-Islami politics. Thus, the contention that the Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, controls 98% Alia Madrasas⁷³ in Bangladesh is simply not true. Among the Quomi respondents of our survey, support for the Jamaat e-Islami is almost non-existent. So, if both Alia and Quomi are put together, the Jamaat’s following among the madrasa communities in Bangladesh is not as high as it is made out to be.

Unlike their Quomi counterparts, Alia teachers and graduate students are quite vocal in expressing their political views, and do not shy away from engaging in political discussions. Most Quomi teachers and students, on the other hand, believe that students should not engage themselves in politics, and that they should devote all their attention to their studies. At the Hathazari Madrasa in Chittagong, students have to sign a sworn statement (written in Urdu) at the time of their madrasa admission to the effect that, while studying in this madrasa, they will not join or work for any political organization. The *halaf nama* (sworn statement) reads:

1. I do hereby make an oath that I will not take part in any political activities such as attending meetings and seminars, becoming involved in student political work or forming political groups with my classmates while staying and studying at Darul Uloom Mueen ul Islam, Hathazari, Chittagong. Moreover, I will not read any newspapers or any books published by other institutions. I will also abstain from participating in any examinations held by any organization other than this madrasa.
2. While studying at this madrasa, I will abstain from reading magazines, watching television, or taking part in any extra-curricular activities and games and sports.
3. I will pay due respect to my madrasa, its teachers and the other staff members working here.
4. I will strictly follow the Sunnah in my dress, manners and behavior. If I violate any of the aforementioned rules and regulations, I will be willing to accept any penalty awarded to me by the madrasa authority and will not object to the decision taken by my respected teachers.
5. I am signing this sworn statement consciously and with complete mental equipoise.

We were told by the Wafaq officials that many other Quomi madrasas require their students to sign a similar pledge at the time of their admission. The Wafaq sometimes receives cases of students who have been expelled by their madrasas “on political grounds” but chooses not to interfere in their decisions. It is because of these strict rules, Mufti Jashim-ud-Din of Hathazari Madrasa states, that no Quomi madrasa in Bangladesh has ever experienced any type of *hartal* (strike)—as compared with the country’s colleges and universities where *hartals* are a common occurrence.

Mufti Jashim-ud-Din made a distinction, however, between “*duniyavi syasat*” (secular politics) and “*Islami syasat*” (Islamic politics), stating that the madrasas cannot remain silent whenever there is an “attack on Islam.” According to him, to defend Islam and the Qur’an is “an *imaani dayitya* (religious responsibility); regardless of whoever is in power, we join hands with other madrasas and protest against any un-Islamic moves.”⁷⁴ Thus, sending madrasa students on the streets to protest against Taslima Nasreen’s writings, or to incite violence against the Ahmadiya minority, is considered “halal” politics by the madrasa elders. Also, while the Quomi madrasas do not allow their students to participate in partisan politics, they impose no such restrictions on the Tablighi

⁷³ “Playing politics with education,” *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 22, 2006.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mufti Jashim-ud-Din, March 29, 2008.

Jamaat activities on their campuses. On the contrary, teachers and students are encouraged to become actively involved in tabligh work and go out for weeks to do *da'wa* (missionary activity).

Likewise, Maulana Shawkat Ali, of Dottapara Quomi Madrasa in Narsingdi district, also implemented a campus ban on political activism in his madrasa. Despite his personal political views and activism—which lean toward the Awami League⁷⁵—Maulana Shawkat stated that teachers and students of his madrasa did not maintain links with any political party. At the same time, however, like Mufti Jashim-ud-Din of the Hathazari Madrasa, Maulana Shawkat also had no hesitation in encouraging his students to “go out on the streets whenever Islam is in danger.” For example, he recounted an incident in 2002 whereby police had clashed with Quomi madrasa students in Brahmanbaria over the issue of an “anti-Islamic” NGO gathering. When the NGO in question attempted to organize a protest meeting in response, their efforts were successfully thwarted by Quomi madrasa students in the area. The Maulana cited this incident to reinforce his point that, while the Quomi madrasa community is, ostensibly, non-political, its members are prepared to take action whenever there is “an attack on Islam.”

The madrasa *ulama* are represented in the electoral politics of Bangladesh through two Deobandi *ulama* parties: Khilafat Majlis and Khilafat Andolon. Both were part of the religious alliance—Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ)—that joined the ruling coalition headed by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia from 2001 to 2006. The presence of the two main Khilafat factions in the ruling coalition kept the large madrasa constituency in support of the government during all the political turmoil created by the Awami League to discredit the Khaleda Zia government. The IOJ did not get much in return, and was disappointed when the main political party in the ruling alliance, the BNP, refused to endorse their demand to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims.

Several Bangladeshi journalists and political analysts accused the Khaleda Zia government (2001-2006) for neglecting the extremist activism of some religious organizations and individuals—such as JMB, Dr. As'adullah Ghalib and Bangla Bhai in northern Bengal—to appease the religious elements in her government. It was maintained that the IOJ and the Jamaat-e-Islami, which were part of the ruling coalition, protected the extremist elements from any action by the security forces. Our field research and extensive discussions with government officials and the *ulama* of various groups show that that could not be the case. First of all, there is no evidence that the Islamic groups within the government coalition intervened on behalf of the extremists. Second, neither the IOJ nor the Jamaat-e-Islami had any love lost for the Ahl-e-Hadith organizations and individuals that were engaged in extremist rhetoric and militant activities. In fact, the Deobandi *ulama*-based IOJ was an arch doctrinal rival of the Ahl-e-Hadith movement and resented its patronage by the Saudis and the rapid expansion of its madrasas in north Bengal. Third, much of the religious rhetoric of the Ahl-e-Hadith groups was directed against the *ulama* who were accused of cooperating with the government that was not responding to their “Islamic” demands. Similarly, the Jamaat-e-Islami was equally opposed to the Islamic militants who challenged its own legitimacy and Islamic credentials after it joined the government.

⁷⁵ Maulana Shawkat comes from a political family, with ties to Sheik Hasina. His brother is an important leader of the Narsingdi Awami League.

NGOs are Bad: Let's Have Our Own NGOs

Besides mosques, madrasas and political parties, madrasa *ulama*'s participation in public life, until recently, was limited to some religious organizations, milad mehfil, orphanages, and Islamic journalism. It is only since the 1980s that we witness a concerted effort by madrasa *ulama* and other Islamic organizations to expand their socio-economic and ideological influence through establishing their own NGOs and civil society organizations. The mushroom growth of NGOs in Bangladesh

It was primarily in response to “the challenge of the secular NGOs” that many madrasa *ulama* decided to establish their own organizations in the fields of social welfare, community development, micro-credit and education.

during the past three decades, both foreign-sponsored and local, in areas of education, micro-credit, economic and social development, environment, “*fatwa-baji*” and protection of women's rights created a great deal of anxiety among the *ulama*, since they believed that these secular NGOs, with their progressive agenda, would undermine their influence in society. They were especially concerned about the work of the Christian missionary organizations in the area of education.

It was primarily in response to “the challenge of the secular NGOs”⁷⁶ that many madrasa *ulama* decided to establish their own organizations in the fields of social welfare, community development, micro-credit and education.⁷⁷ The *ulama*'s efforts to compete with the “secular” NGOs in the modern sector received a substantial boost with the inflow of large amounts of funds from both official and private sources in the Gulf States as well as from Bangladeshi expatriate communities in the Gulf, Southeast Asia, Europe and America. Several Saudi-, Kuwaiti-, and UAE-based official, semi-official and private charitable foundations have been pouring huge amounts of funds into Bangladesh since the early 1980s to build mosques and madrasas, establish orphanages, and help in relief operations during floods and cyclones. These funds were channeled mostly through NGOs established by the *ulama*. It appears that many of these Islamic NGOs were established at the behest of the donors to “facilitate the transfer of funds.”⁷⁸ Thus, several dozen Islamic NGOs in the fields of education and social welfare were established by the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolon, Bangladesh of Dr. As'adullah Ghalib with funds from Saudi and Kuwaiti donors. It is no wonder that while the total number of Islamic

⁷⁶ Interview with Maulana Abdul Shakoor, President of Al-Amin Islamic Welfare Society, Sylhet, June 2006.

⁷⁷ This is not to say, however, that the *ulama* were not involved in community service activities before the recent emergence of the NGO phenomenon in the modern sectors of society in Bangladesh. There are at least more than two dozen community welfare organizations in Dhaka and Chittagong that trace their history to the late 19th century and early 20th century. Most of them have been engaged in providing free education for poor Muslim families and in running orphanages and funeral services for the poor. Almost all of them have substantial *waqf* (religious endowment) properties attached to them and are, hence, to a large extent, financially self-sufficient. Many of them have long-standing relationships—spanning generations in some cases—with some prominent business and “*ashraf*” families of Old Dhaka and Chittagong who contribute funds to, and sit on the boards of trustees of, these charitable organizations. Nawab Ahsanullah and Nawab Salimullah's family patronized several of such charitable organizations beginning the late 19th century.

⁷⁸ Interview with Shah Abdul Halim, Dhaka, 3 January 2007.

NGOs registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau of the Prime Minister's Secretariat was less than 18 in the early 1980s, their number increased to more than 150 in the mid-1990s.

These NGOs later joined together to form the Association of Muslim Welfare Associations, Bangladesh (AMWAB) to find a niche of their own in the broader NGO sector and to protect their interests. The AMWAB Secretariat in Dhaka is headed by a modern-educated professional who resigned a senior position in the public sphere to take up the job of co-coordinating the activities of AMWAB's affiliated organizations and lobbying for them. The total assets of these NGOs run into hundreds of millions of takas. The AMWAB secretariat receives dozens of applications every month for affiliation from new organizations. These Muslim NGOs offer interest-free micro-credit to poor families, help create small business opportunities for the unemployed, organize technical training programs and workshops for skills development, initiate rural income generating projects, distribute sewing machines to poor women to enable them to supplement their family income, provide free medical services, run tuition-free schools and coaching centers for poor children, provide Islamic religious education, organize youth sport activities, and initiate self-help and cooperative ventures for rural development. Several of these NGOs also receive donations from the country's two largest Islamic banks, Islami Bank of Bangladesh and Al-Arafa Islami Bank. Many Quomi madrasas have their own outreach programs for adult education, social welfare, and basic health services. The well-known Potia Madrasa, for example, provides free inoculation to neighborhood children under the supervision of a trained physician.

The involvement of the *ulama* in social welfare and community services through these NGOs has further strengthened their organic links with local communities, and has provided them with opportunities for more frequent interaction with these communities as well as with government officials. While foreign funding for these Muslim NGOs has declined considerably in the wake of the August 2005 bombings and the winding up of operations of the two largest Saudi and Kuwaiti donor agencies—Al-Harmain Foundation and the Society for the Revival of Sunna—the *ulama* have been able to mobilize new sources of support, especially from international Islamic relief agencies and Bangladeshi expatriate workers. Their participation in the modern public sphere through their NGO work has also opened up new avenues for them to disseminate their views on issues of socio-religious and cultural concerns to a wider audience. With newly acquired funds at their disposal and a “natural” affinity with the people, these Muslim NGOs seem to be better equipped to compete with the “secular” NGOs on their own turf.

Besides these NGOs, the *ulama's* associational life is mainly centered on traditional Islamic activities organized through national and local-level religious societies that become especially active during the numerous religiously-sanctioned holidays and festivals. Seminars, conferences, discussion groups, Milad and Wa'ez mehfls are organized in hundreds all over the country during the month of Ramadan and on occasions such as the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, Shab-e-Ma'raj (the night of the ascension of the Prophet to heaven) and the death anniversaries of the early caliphs and the companions of the Prophet.⁷⁹

More than the madrasa *ulama*, however, it is the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami that has been especially active in the modern associational sector of civil society. The Jamaat has not only formed separate groups and societies to work among students (Islami Chhatra Shibbir) and women, but

⁷⁹ In 2005 the present author, who was in Dhaka on the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (Eid milad-un-Nabi), counted newspaper announcements by more than 45 Islamic organizations that had put together conferences addressed by prominent *ulama*. These, of course, were in addition to several hundred meetings and milad mehfls that were organized in the mosques and neighborhoods all over Dhaka.

has also organized affiliated organizations of its supporters among school and madrasa teachers, professionals, doctors, business executives, lawyers, peasants, industrial workers, and college and university professors. These groups have proved enormously useful for the Jamaat in terms of expanding its work and influence in several sectors of society. These pro-Jamaat groups are often called upon by the Jamaat leadership to provide policy guidance in their respective areas of specialization, although this author has heard complaints from several leaders of these groups that their advice in policy matters is not given due weight by the Jamaat leaders.

The Tablighi Jamaat—the largest grassroots *da'wa* movement in Muslim South Asia—also has its own separate “cells” for doctors, engineers, teachers, scientists, *ulama*, and college and university teachers. Although not formally organized as is the case of the Jamaat-e-Islami affiliated organizations, the Tablighi affiliated groups in different occupational spheres also play an important role in recruiting new workers for the Tablighi Jamaat in their respective professions. The Tablighis are represented more heavily in medical and engineering professions. According to some reports, more than 30% of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) teachers in Dhaka are affiliated with the Tablighi Jamaat and most medical colleges in Bangladesh have considerable presence of Tabligh workers both among teachers and students.⁸⁰

In recent years, the *ulama* and the Islamists also have had the opportunities to be invited to international Islamic conferences and seminars organized by several official and private Islamic organizations in the Gulf States. Some Ahl-e-Hadith *ulama* and the Jamaat-e-Islami leaders regularly attend the Saudi-sponsored World Muslim League (Rabita 'Alam-e-Islami), the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the World Mission of Masajid conferences and are also members of their consultative councils (Majlis-e-Shura). All three have their local offices in Bangladesh that operate as NGOs and are funded by the parent organizations in Saudi Arabia.⁸¹

Another area of the *ulama's* participation in the Bangladeshi public domain is through publishing and journalism. Although few madrasa *ulama* are represented in mainstream media, religious journalism has been their mainstay since the introduction of the printing press in British India. Before independence, Calcutta had been an important center of Islamic religious journalism and publishing. Many of the Islamic weekly and monthly magazines transferred to Dhaka and Chittagong with the migration of the *ulama* to the former East Pakistan in 1947. Today, there are more than 35 Islamic weekly and monthly magazines published from different major cities of Bangladesh. Several Quomi madrasas publish their own monthly magazines to disseminate Islamic teachings and report on their activities. Many of these magazines have increased their circulation considerably in recent years as a result of the growing demand for popular Islamic literature on the part of the urban middle classes. They are mostly non-political in their orientation and contain articles on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, Islamic beliefs and social practices, and biographies of pious Muslims.

There are also Islamic publishing houses that publish popular and scholarly religious books, in both Bangla and Urdu that are widely available in specialized bookstores and small bookstalls attached to mosques and madrasas. For instance, there is an entire marketplace, with more than 100 religious book stores, located next to the historic Chittagong mosque that sells textbooks taught in the madrasas along with other Islamic scholarly and popular literature published in

⁸⁰ This should not be surprising since the founding fathers of the Tabligh work in East Bengal were engineers.

⁸¹ Not to be left out, the U.S. State Department Public Diplomacy section also started inviting the Bangladeshi *ulama* for extended visits to the United States in order to win their “hearts and minds.”

Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. The government-funded Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh that has published more than 2,100 books on various Islamic topics—the largest such publishing effort by any Islamic organization in the Muslim world—has contributed significantly in disseminating Islamic teachings and providing publishing opportunities for the *ulama*.

It is obvious from the above discussion that the madrasa *ulama* and the Islamists in Bangladesh are not as isolated from the modern public sphere as they are portrayed to be. While retaining their monopoly on the traditional Islamic religious establishments, they seem to have expanded considerably their outreach to modern civil society as well, using its associational and communication technologies. The easy and ready availability of the enormous supply of voluntary manpower (madrasa students) has meant that the *ulama* can reach a much wider range of society than their secular competitors.

Conclusion

Madrasa education is deeply embedded in Bangladeshi society and educational culture. Madrasa graduates are an integral part of the larger society and contribute in different spheres of public life. An important strength of madrasa education is that it has a strong support base among the common people, who are always ready to come forward and offer all sorts of assistance to this system of education as it is more akin to their religious beliefs and sentiments. The support that madrasas in Bangladesh enjoy is across the political spectrum.

Madrasa graduates come from different social and economic backgrounds—from rich business families to the sons of rickshaw-pullers and day laborers—and represent different political orientations. Their political consciousness and worldviews are formed more by their encounter with the wider world than by their affiliation with madrasas. Apart from the revised Dars-e-Nizami curriculum, the education that Alia students receive is not much different from what college and university students do. The Quomi students, on the other hand, have continued to study almost the same books for over a century, and most of what they read is the Qur'an, Hadith, theology and law.

In the madrasa environment and curriculum, therefore, students do not have any added reasons that may influence their perceptions of, and attitudes toward, the West or the United States. Like other members of society, they read newspapers,⁸² watch television, and become informed *and concerned* about the developments and upheavals in the Muslim world. Their exposure to the media greatly influences their perceptions of world politics and the role of the West. In this respect, a madrasa teacher or a graduate student is not much different from an ordinary person from the general stream of education. To essentialize the madrasa education as the primary or main culprit for the recent rise of extremism and militancy among some Muslim groups is, therefore, a tenuous proposition, and one that has more to do with the politics of “representation” than with the reality of the situation.

⁸² It is true that Quomi madrasas discourage their students to read newspapers, but it would be wrong to presume that such restriction is absolute. Madrasa students find their way to read newspapers and become aware of what is happening around the world.

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Religion, Politics, and the Modern University in Pakistan and Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper provides an account of the relationship between religion and politics in the public- and private-sector universities of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Acknowledging that religion and religious education are thoroughly institutionalized (even in ostensibly non-religious universities) through compulsory and elective coursework, hostel-based activities, and numerous student organizations, this paper focuses on the ways in which public-sector universities have been affected by a history of violent clashes involving the student wings of various political parties (especially the Jama'at-e-Islami). The paper goes on to note that a growing number of elite students have sought to escape from this pattern of violence with a retreat to private-sector universities featuring a nominal ban on campus politics. However, the paper argues that more often than not, although this shift has succeeded in permitting an escape from violence for some, it has not succeeded in revising the link between religion and politics for most. In most cases, the dominant role of parties like the Jama'at-e-Islami has merely been replaced with a greater emphasis on transnational religious reform movements affiliated with Hizb ut-Tahrir and, especially, the Tablighi Jama'at.

MAIN FINDINGS

Studies of the relationship between religion, religious education, and contemporary politics in South Asia must begin to move beyond an account of local *madrasas*. Increasingly, the most important trends require an account of “religious” education in the context of ostensibly “non-religious” schools. The politicization of religious education is not confined to the poor. In the context of local universities, the politics of religious education is closely tied to members of the upwardly mobile, highly educated, urban middle classes. Students politicized along ostensibly religious lines are rarely students of religion. What distinguishes them is not their subject of study, but their general reluctance to acknowledge differences of religious and/or political opinion. Politicization along ostensibly religious lines takes many different forms. In many cases, the ideological cleavages between and among different “religious” parties may matter more than those between “religious” and “non-religious” parties.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Frustration with the violence surrounding party-based “politics-as-usual” in public sphere universities has led many students to re-engage the terms of “religion” *apart from* any formal “political” processes. This rejection of standard forms of political negotiation and compromise is, in certain respects, *just as important* as the decision to abjure violence.
- Where university administrators have sought to clamp down on religious activism with force, their efforts have failed to address underlying religious tensions.
- Efforts to ban specific political parties (or politics in general) have merely pushed existing groups underground while giving a boost to the formation of new groups.
- The most effective response to religious and political activism appears to involve an effort to acknowledge the importance of religion on campus while, at the same time, working to protect those who might wish to articulate specific expressions of dissent.

For several years, the relationship between religious education and contemporary politics in South Asia has been discussed in terms of *madrasas*. How are the terms of a modern religious education constructed and conveyed in the context of local *madrasas*? Who studies in these *madrasas*? Who teaches in them? How are *madrasas* tied to, or separated from, the institutions of the modern state?

In previous research for NBR's South Asia Education Survey project I sought to look beyond this narrow focus on *madrasas* to include an account of "religious" education in the context of (ostensibly) "non-religious" schools. This effort focused, specifically, on public and private primary and secondary schools in Pakistan and Bangladesh, drawing attention to the ways in which religious education has become virtually inescapable *across the educational landscape*.

Many parents, for instance, engage several different "part-time" enrolments in an effort to provide their children with more than one type of education at the same time—a "religious" education in the context of their local *madrasa* each morning, for instance, followed by an ostensibly "non-religious" education in the context of their local public (or private) school later in the day.

Others, however, find that religious education is already an intrinsic part of their children's education *even in the context of their local public or private school*. Indeed, primary and secondary schools in Pakistan and Bangladesh almost invariably include Islamic Studies, or Islamiyat, as a *compulsory* part of their curricula for all Muslim students (Classes 1-10).

Even as the findings from this research argued that future studies must begin to move beyond an exclusive focus on "full-time" *madrasa* enrolments to include a deeper understanding of "part-time" enrolments as well, then, it additionally went on to note that future studies must *also* begin to move *beyond the madrasa altogether* in an effort to account for the terms of "religious" education in the context of (ostensibly) "non-religious" public and private schools.

Building on previous years' research, this paper seeks to move beyond the question of religious education in the context of "non-religious" primary and secondary schools to include an account of public and private *universities* as well.

How are the terms of "religion" and "politics" connected in the context of the modern *university*? How have the terms of this connection changed over time? And, more importantly, how do different *types* of universities—for example, public-sector universities and private-sector universities—articulate different *types* of connections? What follows is a detailed response to this new set of questions.

The first part introduces the main characters in this account of religion, politics, and the modern university, drawing particular attention to those allied with mainstream political parties like the Jama'at-e-Islami (for example, the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba in Pakistan and the Islami Chhatra Shibir in Bangladesh) as well as those who seek to move *beyond* "national" politics toward an idealized space of "transnational" religious and political solidarity.

For the most part, party-based groups like the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba and the Islami Chhatra Shibir dominate the on-campus political landscape in Pakistan and Bangladesh. But, as I will explain, this situation is slowly changing. In particular, I will argue that a growing sense of frustration with the often violent terms of party-based "national" politics has led a growing number of students, faculty members, and administrators to embrace alternative forms of religious and political expression. And, cutting straight to the chase, I will argue that this shift in favor of

“alternatives” reveals itself, most prominently, in the expanding presence of transnational religious groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), the Tablighi Jama’at, and (in Pakistan) Da’wat-e-Islami.

The second part draws on this cast of characters to provide a detailed account of the various ways in which religion, politics and the modern university have come together, *in practice*, over time. Here, special attention will be paid to a series of debates regarding campus-based politics, faculty recruitment, and the shifting terms of student residential life (particularly in the context of local hostels).

Throughout, I will argue that the relationship between religion and politics on campus is neither growing “more intense” nor becoming “more relaxed” in any quantitative sense. Instead, this relationship is merely changing its contours and, in many ways, becoming more complex.

Part three of the paper presents a more detailed discussion of this increasingly complex environment, drawing special attention to the networks of influence that link each campus to specific religious and political allies within the community as a whole. Here, my comments will focus, primarily, on the relationship between students, individual members of the faculty, and their ties to the various groups previously mentioned, namely national political parties and emerging forms of transnational religious and political solidarity.

As I will explain, the shifting terms of student politics—in effect, the movement *away from* mainstream national political parties *toward* transnational religious and political groups—are reflected in, and, in many ways, encouraged by, individual members of the faculty and, in some cases, by the university (in effect, the administration) as a whole.

The fourth and final part concludes with a more elaborate discussion of this shift *away from* national political parties *toward* emergent transnational religious and political groups, focusing on the terms of this shift in *private-sector* universities. As I will explain, private-sector universities lie on the cutting edge of this transition. I will also draw upon the work of Mahfuz Sadique (2006) to explain exactly why this is the case.

Campus Politics: Actors

Returning from the University of Chittagong, in Bangladesh, one member of my four-pronged research team summarized the larger context within which the relationship between religion, politics, and the modern university must be understood: “It’s not a matter of religion,” she said. “It’s just politics.”⁸³

She went on to explain that a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion, politics, and the modern university must begin, not with an account of competing *religious* ideas, but rather with an account of competing *political* parties—parties that routinely draw on “religious” ideas to construct their identities, articulate their positions, and justify their actions. In particular, she explained, “Religious parties are not the most important parties. They’re just the most influential.”

⁸³ In Bangladesh, my research team was composed of four (part-time) women and two (full-time) men. This group included four Muslims, one Christian, and one Hindu. Three studied at Dhaka University (public-sector); two at North South University (private-sector); and one at *both* Dhaka University *and* North South University. In Pakistan, my team included four (full-time) men—three Sunnis and one Shi’a. All four studied at the University of Peshawar (public-sector).

Actors (Party v. Non-Party)

In Pakistan, the focus on competing parties draws our attention to a familiar spectrum. Apart from the Peoples Student Federation (PSF) representing the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and the Muslim Students Federation (MSF) representing the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), the most important officially recognized student group on campus is the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT) representing the Jama'at-e-Islami.⁸⁴

In addition to these three main groups, however, different campuses in different parts of Pakistan also bear the influence of specific *regional* groups—groups like the Punjab Students Association (PSA), the Baloch Students Organization (BSO), the Pakhtun Students Organization (PSO), and the All-Pakistan Muttahida Students Organization (APMSO), representing *muhajir* students throughout urban Sindh (with close links to its parent party, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, or MQM).⁸⁵

In Bangladesh, the political spectrum is very similar. The main political parties are represented by their student wings as follows: the Awami League is represented by the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL); the Bangladesh National Party is represented by the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD); and of course the Jama'at-e-Islami is represented by the well-known Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) and its sister organization the Islami Chhatri Shangstha.⁸⁶

However, whereas in Pakistan the three main political parties were joined by several *regional* parties, the situation in Bangladesh is somewhat different. In Bangladesh, these three parties are joined by a range of (considerably less active) *religious* groups, including the Buddha Asrom that caters to Buddhist students, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Loknath Sheba Sangho catering to Hindus, and the YMCA/YWCA catering to Christians.

The importance of these national, regional, and “sectarian” or “confessional” parties cannot be overstated. In fact, as the remainder of this report will explain, a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion, politics, and the modern university is, almost invariably, channeled through a detailed understanding of party-based campus conflicts involving the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT) and the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS).

There is, however, a second group of actors in both countries—one that specifically seeks to *reject* this pattern of party-based, Jama'at-dominated “politics-as-usual.” This second group tends to be associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jama'at, and Da'wat-e-Islami in Pakistan.

The first group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, does not reject the notion of party-based politics *per se*. It merely shifts its party-based attention away from the capture, the reconstruction, or the rehabilitation

⁸⁴ In Pakistan, the IJT is also joined by a sister organization known as the Islami Jamiat-e-Talibat.

⁸⁵ In addition to these national and regional political parties, Shi'a students are represented by the Shi'a-specific Imamia Students Organization (ISO).

⁸⁶ Siddiqul Islam (a.k.a. Bangla Bhai), an important leader of the Jama'at-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) who was tried for various acts of terrorism and sentenced to death in May 2006, was an active member of the Islami Chhatra Shibir during his student days at Azizul Haq College in Bogra. (See, for instance, Shamim Ashraf, “All 7 JMB Shura Men Had Links to Jamaat, Shibir,” *The Daily Star*, April 28, 2006.) Also, it should be noted that Islami Chhatra Shibir has been implicated in *several* murders. With reference to local universities, see in particular the murder of Professor S. Taher Ahmed (Geology, Rajshahi University, died February 2006), Dr. Mohammad Younus (Economics, Rajshahi University, died December 2004), and Professor Gopal Krishna Muhuri (Principal, Nazirhat College Chittagong, died November 2003).

of the modern state toward the construction of an idealized, transnational, global *khilafat*.⁸⁷ However, the second group, Tablighi Jama'at, seeks to remove itself from the global "political" fray altogether. Ostensibly "apolitical," the Tablighi Jama'at is by all accounts the most dynamic, amorphous, engaging, and popular religious reform movement in the world. And, in what follows, this group will be described as the *largest* and, yet, in many ways, also the *quietest* group in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The third group, Da'wat-e-Islami, is not active in Bangladesh, primarily owing to the intra-Sunni nature of its specific sectarian identity. This group is, in effect, a Barelwi Sunni version of the nominally Deobandi Tablighi Jama'at. Based at the Faizan-e-Madina Masjid in Karachi, its focus is almost entirely religious *da'wa* and *tabligh*—that is, proselytization—with no explicit focus on the electoral dynamics of modern mainstream politics. In fact in this sense the Tablighi Jama'at and Da'wat-e-Islami are virtually indistinguishable.⁸⁸

Again, it's important to keep in mind that Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jama'at, and Da'wat-e-Islami are neither the most powerful nor the most prominent groups on campus. They are, however, extremely important in the context of private-sector universities. What follows is an attempt to briefly explain exactly why this is the case.

Actors (Public-Sector v. Private-Sector)

In recent years, the number of private-sector universities has grown by leaps and bounds, particularly in Bangladesh. In many ways the rationale behind this trend is a purely "escapist" rationale articulated by those with a desire (and the means) to avoid the challenges, the inefficiencies,

...private-sector universities have become increasingly popular over time, with a considerable portion of their market appeal stemming from their ability to introduce a "ban" on nettlesome party-based "politics."

and, above all, the violence associated with public-sector (party-based) "politics-as-usual." In fact, private-sector universities have become increasingly popular over time, with a considerable portion of their market appeal stemming from their ability to introduce a "ban" on nettlesome party-based "politics."

This ability to "ban" politics, combined with increasingly restrictive security arrangements and a hectic semester system

⁸⁷ In Bangladesh, Hizb-ut-Tahrir launched its student wing, originally known as Chhatra Sabha but now called Chhatra Mukti (Liberated Youth), in 2007. Today, Chhatra Mukti "discussion circles" are held each week at several different universities throughout the country. At Dhaka University, these discussions take place on Saturday afternoon at 5:00PM. At North South University, they take place on Tuesdays at 5:00 PM. (N.b. In Bangladesh, the Chief Coordinator of Hizb-ut-Tahrir is Dr. Mohiuddin Ahmed at Dhaka University; the Media and Promotions Secretary is Dr. Mustafa Minhaz at Asia Pacific University.)

In Pakistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir is officially banned. Nevertheless, its Official Spokesman is Mr. Naveed Butt, who notes that despite this ban, HT is able to support "[regular] protest demonstrations, *dars* in homes, press conferences with selected journalists, and leaflet distribution [campaigns]." "Recently," he notes, "we have adopted a new style of mass SMS to thousands of [local] mobiles." See the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Pakistan) website <http://www.khilafat.pk/home/Q&A.html>.

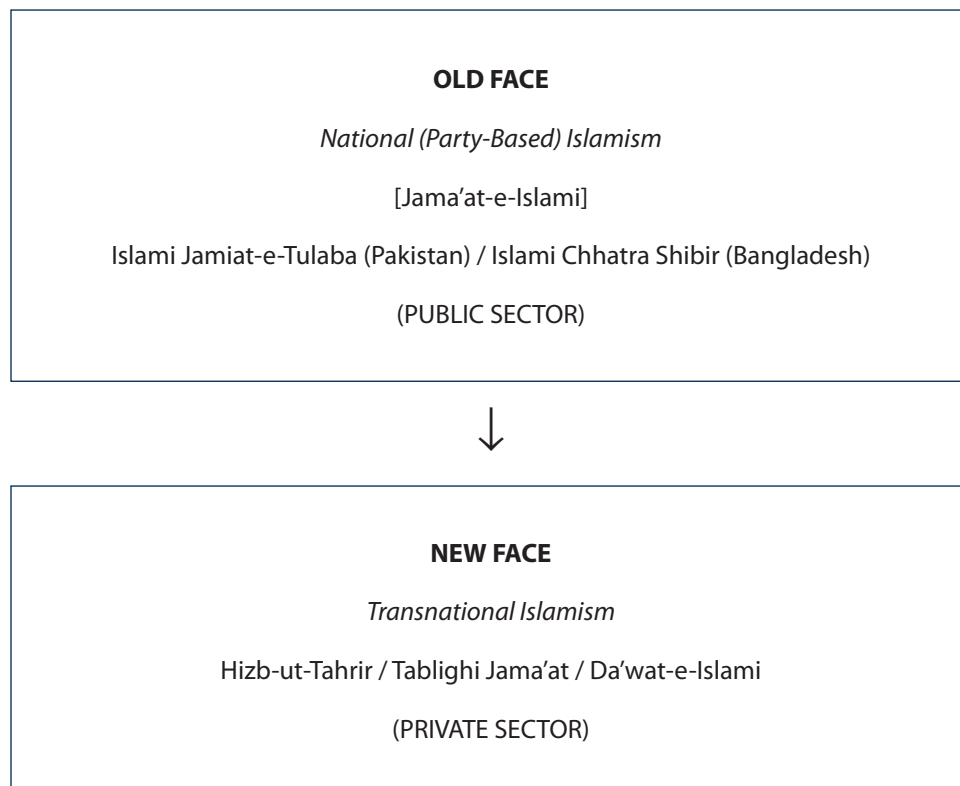
⁸⁸ Whereas those affiliated with the Tablighi Jama'at tend to refer to a written manual, or handbook, known as the *Faza'il-e-Amal*, those affiliated with Da'wat-e-Islami tend to embrace a manual known as the *Faizan-e-Sunnat*. Da'wat-e-Islami also maintains a network of affiliated *madrasas*. The Tablighi Jama'at does not. See Thomas K. Gugler, "Jihad, Da'wa, and Hijra: Islamic Missionary Movements in Europe," 2008, <http://www.zmo.de/Mitarbeiter/Gugler/Jihad,%20Dawa%20and%20Hijra.pdf>.

that tends to keep students a great deal busier than the annual exams used in most public-sector universities, has permitted many private-sector universities to charge much higher fees—in effect, a premium for the privilege of avoiding what can only be described as an irregular, inefficient, and violent public-sector norm.

Public-sector universities are still the most powerful institutions in Pakistan and Bangladesh. But, just as mainstream political parties might be described as “the most powerful” without necessarily remaining “the most influential,” public-sector universities might be described as powerful and, yet, increasingly overshadowed (both academically and otherwise) by their private-sector counterparts.

As the remainder of this report will explain, however, the “escapism” associated with private-sector universities has been much easier to conceptualize in theory than it has been to deliver in practice. In fact, as Sadique Mahfuz explains, the relationship between religion, on the one hand, and politics, on the other, has often simply re-emerged, *within* the private sector, in the context of “a new face.”

FIGURE 1 Religion and Politics on Campus



Before I discuss the circumstances that have produced this expanding zone of private-sector “escapism,” however, some attention should be paid to the existing politics of the public-sector. Who joins the Chhatra Shibir? Who joins the Tablighi Jama’at? Who joins Hizb-ut-Tahrir? And why?

Actors (Student Recruitment Mechanisms)

There can be little doubt that many new students arrive on campus with pre-existing ideas that draw them toward, or away from, specific political groups.⁸⁹ As our research unfolded in both Pakistan and Bangladesh we found that very few students were in a position to resist the recruitment efforts of the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT) and the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS).

Across more than twenty different universities in Pakistan and more than fifteen in Bangladesh, covering hundreds of personal interviews with students, faculty members, and administrators, we found that the IJT and ICS were deeply involved in at least five different types of targeted recruitment initiatives. These initiatives did not preclude the possibility of “overlapping” student affiliations—involving, for instance, the IJT or the ICS, on the one hand, and Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Tablighi Jama’at, on the other. But for the most part, they *did* involve an effort to obtain exclusive political allegiance in a context that was for the most part defined by strict, campus-based political “party” cleavages.⁹⁰

Five Types of Targeted Recruitment Initiatives

Administrative Support. In Bangladesh, for instance, field researchers pointed to a pattern in which Islami Chhatra Shibir members simply inserted themselves into specific administrative gaps within the university as a whole.

For example, at Rajshahi University, they found that ICS students set up a temporary stand near the Agrani Bank each year, asking every new student seeking admission to the university to have their university admissions forms “officially attested” by the ICS. This of course allowed the ICS to create a positive impression among the new student cohort very early on, appearing “student-friendly” and, for the most part, “service-oriented.”⁹¹

Posters. In addition, the research team found that campus recruitment drives were widely publicized on large posters. At the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) in Sylhet, one of these posters read:

Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Shibir! We are calling you toward a great education, a great path, a good life, and the great ideals of Islam. If anyone says it is our political program then, yes, it is our program. Islamic education is the only way to protect our hard-earned independence. The goal of the Shibir is to satisfy Allah by reorganizing our lives in light of Allah’s direction through the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH).

⁸⁹ In some cases, those with an interest in existing patterns of student-based religious recruitment have pointed to discipline-specific trends—suggesting, for instance, that students from the natural sciences may be more susceptible to the rhetorical appeal of religious groups like IJT, ICS, Hizb ut-Tahrir, or the Tablighi Jama’at. In fact, early on, members of the research team in Bangladesh noted that Hizb ut-Tahrir recruits appeared to be drawn from amongst top-ranked students in business, economics, medicine, and engineering as opposed to languages, anthropology, or law. In the final analysis, however, we found that a *priori* discipline-specific assumptions were only weakly supported by the evidence.

⁹⁰ Additional recruitment initiatives—not mentioned here—involve various off-campus events. At Rajshahi University, for instance, ICS-affiliated students were said to benefit from free off-campus medical support at a special ICS-affiliated clinic known as the Mukti Clinic. In fact as Mahfuz Sadique explains, the ICS recruitment process begins “even before the students enter university.” “Former Shibir high-ups have gone on to set up university admission coaching centers where students with good academic records are taken into the fold. [And, among] the coaching centers conducted by Shibir,” he notes, “Focus for Dhaka University, Concrete for BUET, Index for Chittagong University... Songshaptak for Jahangirnagar University, and Retina for the medical colleges [were] identified as the main establishments.” See Sadique Mahfuz, “Islam’s New Face,” 2006 <http://mahfuz.wordpress.com/2006/12/12/political-islam-in-bangladesh-the-serpent-green-rises/> (N.b. This is a December 2006 version of the September 2005 article quoted in Part IV below.)

⁹¹ A similar case was reported at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) in Sylhet, where “all of the student wings of the [different political] parties set up stalls in the campus to sell admissions forms, distribute party leaflets, and offer different services like letting students know about the admission test results as soon as these are released.”

According to Professor Abdul Quader, a former leader of the Chhatra Shibir (now serving as head of an independent political party known as Khilafat-e-Majlis), the group's recruitment efforts are primarily focused on first-year students. Shibir pays special attention to students with religious family backgrounds, notable academic strengths, and, especially, "the power of persuasion" defined in terms of strong debating skills. These students, Quader explained, are initially approached as "friends." Yet, even apart from this carefully structured pattern of "informal" engagement, they are often invited to participate in what Quader described as "an exciting schedule of tea parties, picnics, off-campus excursions, on-campus debates, and *da'wa* programs."⁹²

Events. At Punjab University in Lahore, we found that one of the most important events to generate student support for the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT) was connected to an annual campus book fair. This fair (a common event in many universities) provided academic and religious books to university students at discounted rates. It remains an extremely popular event.

Accommodation Support. The most important recruitment strategy, particularly in Bangladesh, is however the provision of special assistance to new students seeking on-campus accommodation. This strategy was reported at Dhaka University, SUST, the Sir Salimullah Medical College, Eden University College at the Bangladesh National University (All-Women), and Rajshahi University, as well as the University of Karachi.

At Dhaka University (DU), *The Daily Star* (May 12, 2007) reported that Shibir activists "rent houses around the DU campus and provide lodgings to students who agree to become activists." "There are more than 50 houses in Shahbagh, Paribagh, Kantaban, Palashi, Nilkhet, and the adjoining areas," the paper noted. But, even apart from these *off-campus* houses, the paper went on to explain that several *on-campus* halls are similarly controlled.

One student, for instance, was contacted by ICS and "offered an accommodation in Sgt. Zahurul Haq Hall in exchange for his allegiance to [the ICS] cause." "We have good connections with the house tutors and the provosts of the halls," noted the president of the Sgt. Zahurul Haq "ICS Unit." Furthermore, he noted, "without our recommendation ... [students cannot] get accommodation in the halls."

At SUST, the research team reported that ICS always set up "welcome tables" for new students in an effort to ascertain "the status of each student—for example, who will need seats in the hostels."⁹³ "Those who needed hostel seats were regularly contacted by the party men, and after they got their seats in the hostels, [these students] found out that they were also in the party!"

⁹² Personal interview, February 15, 2008 (Mohammadpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh).

⁹³ It is important to point out that this pattern is not specific to ICS. As the research team explained, "we talked to one guy from Chhatra Dal who desperately wants to leave the party as he cannot stand the violence. In fact he even left the hostel once and went to live outside the campus. But he soon had to return to the hostel, and thus the party, because he could not afford to live outside."

The most important recruitment strategy, particularly in Bangladesh, is however the provision of special assistance to new students seeking on-campus accommodation.

Again and again, the research team explained, “it’s obvious that the first-year students are the main target of all the parties—particularly if they are in need of a hostel seat.”⁹⁴

Tafsir. At Eden University College (Bangladesh National University), also known as the Eden Girl’s College, the pattern of recruitment was somewhat different—in fact in many ways it was considerably more extensive.

Drawing attention away from simple welcome tables, off-campus excursions, leaflets, and hostel seats, the research team found that all of the new girls at Eden were simply encouraged to participate in weekly *tafsir* (Qur’anic interpretation) sessions sponsored by the Islami Chhatri Shangstha in the hostel prayer rooms.⁹⁵

In fact throughout Bangladesh, the rigorous and often rather aggressive forms of recruitment associated with the all-male Islami Chhatra Shibir contrasted, quite dramatically, with the more relaxed methods used by the Islami Chhatri Shangstha, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Tablighi Jama’at. More often than not, the methods used by Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Tablighi Jama’at were described as considerably less dramatic, but, in many ways, substantially more effective.⁹⁶

Often reporting from private-sector universities, for instance, many members of the research team pointed to what might be called “a total personality transformation” among those affiliated with Hizb ut-Tahrir and, especially, the Tablighi Jama’at. For example, affiliated students were often describe as having new beards, new clothes (*kurtha pajama*), new *hijabs*, *niqabs*, *burqas*, and so on.

At the private-sector Independent University of Bangladesh (IUB) the research team interviewed a student who explained that his older brother had been so thoroughly swept away by the Tablighi Jama’at that his parents had since gone out of their way to protect him (that is, the younger brother) from the same fate. He was scarcely let out of the house—chauffeured from one place to the next, monitored by a full-time guardian, and, for the most part, strictly confined to his room.

Another student reported that, eager to experience the virtues of *tabligh* for himself, he attended the famous *bishwa ijtema*—an annual gathering featuring more than two million Tablighis—at Tongi, near Dhaka, in 2007. Unlike many of his classmates, however, he noted that he was *not* taken in. In fact, he explained, he was immediately put off by the “un-hygienic” way in which everyone was told to eat from the same common plate! A third student, also at IUB, was equally put off by what he described as the Tablighis’ false sense of modesty—what he described as a thoroughly disagreeable religious “pretence.”

And, at Stamford University, a number of similar stories emerged—suggesting, on the one hand, that the Tablighi Jama’at had become increasingly active within the private sector; and, on the other, that, even if a growing number of private-sector students, faculty, and administrators did seem to express a growing interest in the Jama’at, the attraction was *not* universal.

⁹⁴ At the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), the research team discovered that “every hostel has a Hostel Committee and ... those who are appointed as representatives tend to be leaders of the student political parties or at least students with strong political affiliations originating from their medical college days.” They went on to note that “students seeking seats in the residential hostels liaise with these representatives to ensure an allocation and, usually, those who have a prior acquaintance with them have a better chance of securing a seat. In return for these favors the students support the continued candidacy of their representatives in the administration or elsewhere.”

⁹⁵ At the (private-sector) North South University, we found that students routinely engaged one another in casual conversation after their daily prayers—addressing matters of common interest like the War in Iraq, the merits of Islamic banking, the legitimacy of suicide bombing, and so on.

⁹⁶ Whereas many criticized the “hard-sell” methods of ICS, others noted that this rigorous pattern of party-based discipline served some students quite well. As one member of the research team noted, drawing attention to her meetings with ICS-affiliated students at SUST, “they might seem somewhat extreme because they want to establish Islamic rule, [but] in fact they make brilliant students as they have a very routine life and they give comparatively more time to [their] studies.”

The point, however, lies in realizing that, throughout Pakistan and Bangladesh, recruitment efforts involving each and every one of the main political actors—from the mainstream political parties (and their respective student wings) to the Tablighi Jama’at—are all extremely widespread. Their presence, if you will, is no longer exceptional. It is, in fact, the norm.

Campus Politics: Mechanisms

For those with an interest in the relationship between religion, religious education, and modern politics in South Asia, the modern university is no longer “a place set apart.” Pick up any course catalogue in Pakistan or Bangladesh and immediately, the extent to which religious education is no longer confined to the local *madrassa* becomes perfectly clear. In Pakistan, courses featuring religion as “a subject of study” are extremely widespread; in Bangladesh, only marginally less so.

Consider, for the sake of illustration, the following (purely indicative) list of courses:

FIGURE 2 PAKISTAN: Public-Sector Universities (Compulsory Courses)

University of Peshawar:	
History	The Holy Prophet and the Khalifa-e-Rashidun; Khilafat-e-Umayyah; Khilafat-e Abbasiyya; The Modern Arab World; The Muslim Freedom Movement in India; Islamic Culture; Islamic Institutions.
Political Science	Government and Politics of Pakistan (including the Evolution of Islamic Society, the Khilafat Movement, the Role of the Ulema in the Politics of South Asia, and Islamization in Pakistan); Muslim Political Thought (including al-Farabi, al-Ghazali, al-Barani, Ibn-e-Khaldun, Jamal-ul-din Afghani, and Mohd. Allama Iqbal); Social Change and Political Development (including Islam as an Agent of Social Change); The Muslim World and Its Dynamics.
Pakistan Studies	Ideology of Pakistan (including a study of the concepts of ummah and millat, the concept of “state” among the Muslims of South Asia, and Muslim reformers, e.g. Sirhindi, Shah Waliullah, the Mujahideen of Balakot, Sir Syed A. Khan, and Iqbal); Religions and Ideologies (including Christianity, Communism, Capitalism, Humanism, and “Social-Islam”); Pakistan through the Ages (including The Role of Islam in Sindh, the NWFP, and the Punjab; the Ulema; the Mashaikh; and Sufism à la Hazrat Dataganj Bakhsh); and Constitutional Development (including Islamic provisions: 1947, 1956, 1962, and 1973).
Psychology	Contemporary Psychology (including A Brief Introduction to Muslim Contributions to the Development of Psychology); Theories of Personality (including Indigenous and Islamic Theories of Personality).
Philosophy	Muslim Political Thought; “Iqbaliat.”
Khyber Medical College (University of Peshawar):	
MBBS	Pakistan Studies; Islamic Studies.
University of Engineering and Technology (University of Peshawar):	
Engineering	Pakistan Studies; Islamic Studies.
University of Arid Agriculture:	
Agriculture	Pakistan Studies; Islamic Studies.

PAKISTAN: Private-Sector Universities (Compulsory Courses)

Allied College of Textile Management:	
Dying and Printing	Pakistan Studies; Islamic Studies.
Textile and Fashion Design	Pakistan Studies; Islamic Studies.
COMSATS Institute of Information Technology:	
Mathematics	Pakistan Studies; Islamic Studies.
Physics	Pakistan Studies; Islamic Studies.

Similar lists were collected from the University of Karachi, the Lahore University of Engineering and Technology, the King Edward Medical College in Lahore, the Newport Institute of Communications and Economics in Karachi, and many others.

Indeed, every indication seems to suggest that, throughout Pakistan, both Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies (which, in many ways, amounts to a further course in religious studies) are almost completely unavoidable.⁹⁷ In fact no matter what sort of institution one attends—public or private; elite or non-elite; comprehensive or specialized—and no matter what degree one seeks to obtain (primary, secondary, tertiary, and so on) in whatever subject, “non-religious” education must be said to include a concentrated dose of contemporary “religious” coursework.

In Bangladesh, too, religion as a subject of inquiry remains extremely widespread. And, yet, having said this, it is important to note that religion as a subject of inquiry in Bangladesh is also handled somewhat differently. Indeed, religion as a subject of inquiry in Bangladesh is not confined to the study of Islam. Instead, it typically extends well beyond Islam to engage the terms of “religion” in general—in effect, religion as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon “in comparative perspective.”

FIGURE 3 BANGLADESH: Public-Sector Universities

Dhaka University:	
World Religions (BA and MA options)	Primitive Religious Belief; Indigenous Religious Traditions of Bangladesh; Islamic Religious Tradition; Schools of Islam; Hindu Religious Tradition; Schools of Hinduism; Buddhist Religious Tradition; Schools of Buddhism; Christian Religious Tradition; Jain Religious Tradition; Zoroastrian; African; Jewish; Japanese; Korean; Sikh; Baha'i; The Aboriginal Religious Tradition of Australia; Women in World Religion; Religion and Science; Religion and Politics; Environment and Religion; Religion, Peace, and Conflict; Mysticism in World Religion; New Religious Movements.
Political Science	Religion and Social Movements; Islamic Politics.
Anthropology	Anthropology of Religion.
Women's Studies	Gender and Religion in Comparative Perspective.

⁹⁷ In many ways, this reinforces what we learned last year (NBR Phase II) regarding the role of “religious” education in the context of ostensibly “non-religious” primary and secondary schools. See Nelson, “Religious Education in Non-Religious Schools: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and Bangladesh,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (2008), 46:3, 337-361.

North South University:	
Environmental Studies	Culture, Religion, and the Environment.
Religious Studies	An Introduction to World Religion (focusing on Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto; Comparative Dogmas and Doctrines; Superstition; and New Religious Movements).

In addition to these religion-specific courses, several universities offer additional specialized degrees in Arabic and Islamic Studies as well as elective Islam-specific courses within other degree programs—for example, in economics, sociology, history, political science, and international relations.

Indeed, religion is not something that external organizations (for example, political parties) have brought in “from the outside.” It is, rather, something that the university sees as lying within its remit ... as a matter of routine.

The question, therefore, does not concern the extent to which the terms of “religion” have increasingly invaded, disturbed, or disrupted an already existing “non-religious” academic space. Rather, the question concerns the ways in which the terms of religion, as a constant, in conjunction with the terms of contemporary politics, as another constant, have shifted, and changed, over time.

What follows is merely a further attempt to detail this confluence of religion and politics within the modern university in two ways: first, by focusing on several recent points of campus “controversy” (for example, party-based politics, controversial cultural programming, and the contested use of on-campus mosques) and second, by describing some of the factors that have contributed to the growing “complexity” of these controversies over time. These factors are related, primarily, to the religious influence of individual faculty members, administrators, and “off-campus” political parties.

Campus Controversies: Party Politics

Drawing special attention to the enduring influence of the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) in Bangladesh, the research team assigned to the University of Chittagong came up with a list of six “campus controversies” that, broadly speaking, seemed to summarize the range of issues that emerged in most other universities. This list included:

1. the co-mingling of male and female students (e.g. Valentine’s Day);
2. the celebration of Pahela Baishakh (i.e. Bengali New Year);
3. “party-based” faculty recruitment;
4. “party-based” accommodation (e.g. hostel seats);
5. protection rackets (e.g. “tolls” paid by students seeking to avoid harassment); and
6. disagreements about the nexus between student politics, national politics, and the work of university administrators, e.g. the University Vice-Chancellor.

This list was collected at the University of Chittagong, but similar lists were collected at many other universities—comprehensive universities as well as specialized universities (including women-only universities)—in both countries.⁹⁸

What follows is a more detailed examination of these controversies—focusing, specifically, on national and regional “political” controversies and local (often hostel-based) controversies related to “gender” relations, “cultural” programming, and specific “religious” events (including regular prayers).⁹⁹ In the context of this discussion, I will focus primarily on public-sector universities. In the subsequent part, I will turn my attention to the private sector.

Religion and National Political Parties

Under Awami League Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001), the Bangladesh Chhatra League was the dominant force at the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology. But, in a pattern that has been repeated many times over, this hierarchy was turned around completely when Sheikh Hasina was ousted by Prime Minister Khalida Zia in 2001. In fact, during the first three months of 2008, the research teams assigned to several different universities throughout Bangladesh reported that this tension between the Awami League (BCL) and the Jama’at-e-Islami (ICS) had been resolved, almost entirely, owing to the emergence of a BNP-Jama’at alliance under Khalida Zia, in favor of the latter (ICS).

During the time of the Awami League government, the team reported that, at the University of Chittagong, “there were ... constant clashes between the Chhatra League (BCL) and the Chhatra Shibir (ICS).” However, after the BNP-Jama’at coalition government came into power, they noted, “the League was forced to leave the university.” Since then, they explained, “Shibir has enjoyed a kind of monopoly. The Shibir controlled everything and therefore clashes were unlikely.”

(After a new emergency regime was brought in (January 2008), however, the team reported that this ICS dominance had gone underground. In fact, they noted, “Shibir still enjoys more-or-less the same level control [albeit ‘under cover.’]”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Cutting sharply against the notion that specialized universities focusing on the natural sciences, business, medicine, or technology might be “more likely to include religious tensions” (primarily owing to the fact that they have fewer students engaged in a critical examination of religion, society, and politics), we found that *comprehensive and specialized universities differed very little in terms of their basic orientation to the relationship between religion and politics on campus*. The most important variable in fact for those with an interest in the relationship between “religion,” on the one hand, and “politicized religion,” on the other, was *not* the nature of the existing course content. In fact the most important variable boiled down to the funding structure of the institution as a whole: *public v. private*.

⁹⁹ Among the places we visited, the following institutions were particularly troubled by what I call (party-based) campus “politics-as-usual”: the University of Peshawar (including Khyber Medical College, the University of Engineering and Technology, and the Institute for Management Studies), the Lahore University of Engineering and Technology, and Punjab University, as well as Dhaka University, the University of Chittagong, Rajshahi University, the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), and Eden Girl’s College (Bangladesh National University). *All are public-sector universities*. The most subdued included: the National College of Business Administration and Economics in Lahore, the Allied College of Textile Management, also in Lahore, and COMSATS, in Islamabad, as well as the North South University, Stamford University, the Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, the Bangladesh University of Business and Technology, and the Independent University of Bangladesh—all in Dhaka. *All are private*. (The only exception to this rule was the public-sector Fatima Jinnah Women’s University in Rawalpindi.)

¹⁰⁰ According to the research team, campus politics were banned at KUET in the context of the 2008 “emergency.” However, they went on to note that Jama’at-e-Islami affiliates tied to the Islami Chhatra Shibir had begun to identify themselves as members of the Tablighi Jama’at in order to circumvent this ban. “Actually the Jama’at-e-Islami use this name [TJ] because politics is banned over here and TJ is a non-political party, so [the ICS students] use this name for their secret activities. [They] work secretly with the help of the teachers, but it is an open secret among the students.” In addition, the team reported that the Jama’at and Chhatra Shibir continue to maintain “a close link with Chhatra Dal”.

Clearly, national-level politics are not unknown within the modern “non-religious” university. In fact, we discovered, “religious” parties like the Jama’at-e-Islami and its respective student wings are, typically, the most active participants of all!¹⁰¹

Religion and Regional Political Parties

At Peshawar University, these national-level trends remain extremely well entrenched. But in recent years, national-level parties like the PML-N have been somewhat overshadowed by the work of specific regional groups.

One particular case—described by one member of the research team as “the most serious and controversial event” in the history of the University of Peshawar— may help to illustrate this general trend. In this case a senior warden serving in the Benazir Bhutto Girl’s Hostel sought to implicate the University Provost in a campus-wide prostitution ring. Initially, the warden was fired from her job on (allegedly trumped-up) charges of corruption. But in due course, she responded by accusing the Provost of pressuring her to recruit the women living in her hostel to provide “sexual favors” to senior government officials.

Needless to say, this was an extraordinary accusation. And, “for the first time ever, the religious and the liberal students on campus came together in a series of joint protests *against* the Provost.” Windows were smashed; signboards destroyed. But, according to the research team, these protests on their own were not the most interesting part of the story. The most interesting part emerged when “the leader of the [regionally specific] Pakhtun Student Organization [PSO] chose to depict the whole issue as one opposed to the traditions of the Pakhtuns, [whereas] the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba [IJT] maintained that it was, primarily, a violation of the Islamic law.”

Indeed, a closer look revealed that even a “common” protest agenda was not enough to overcome the prevailing pattern of party-based “politics-as-usual” in what can only be described as the most important campus in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP).

As the leading member of the research team explained, in his concluding remarks, “the situation took an entirely new turn when these two groups [namely, the PSO and the IJT] demanded action against the Provost on completely different grounds.” “The IJT demanded that the Provost should

¹⁰¹ The most important case of this type, I would argue, occurred in November 2007, when Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf leader Imran Khan attempted to show his support for a growing student movement against the military-backed regime of President Pervez Musharraf with a massive student protest in Lahore. This protest was scheduled to begin at Punjab University (New Campus), despite the fact that PU had been a stronghold of the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba (IJT) for several years. This pattern of party-based rivalry was not expected to present any significant problems for Mr. Khan, however. In fact, as Khan himself pointed out, the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf and the Jama’at-e-Islami were *strongly united* in their opposition to President Musharraf.

The politics of the university, however, merely “overlapped” with the politics of the nation as a whole. The two were *not* “identical.” In fact when Imran Khan arrived on the PU campus, the IJT interpreted his presence as an invasion of their sacred space. And, without a second thought, they bundled Mr. Khan into an office, locked the door, and called the police. Well aware of the fact that President Musharraf was eager to round up as many of his political opponents as possible, they handed him over to the authorities—fully expecting him to sit, and rot, in jail.

In the first instance, this event was seen as a clear demonstration of the enduring power of the Islami Jamiat-e Tulaba (IJT) at Punjab University. But, caught up in what can only be described as an enormous anti-Musharraf wave of protest, the campus community—including several faculty members—denounced the IJT as “a parallel administration” that was “illegal” and “destructive” for the university as a whole. And, according to the research team, “the IJT suffered *potentially irreparable damage*” as a result of their actions. In fact, the IJT’s PU *nazim* was soon removed from his post by the national leadership of the Jama’at-e-Islami.

be tried under the terms of *shari'ah*, but the PSO insisted that he should be tried by a traditional Pakhtun *jirga!*¹⁰²

Campus Controversies: Gender and Cultural Programming

In many ways, party-based political rivalries lie at the heart of the modern public-sector university—not only in Pakistan, but also in Bangladesh. They drive student recruitment. They

...every member of every research team at every university in both countries noted that the relationship between religion and politics was defined, on a day-to-day basis, by competing views regarding appropriate gender relations and common cultural events.

determine the allocation of on-campus accommodation. They define a climate of violence. And so on. Indeed, they frame the language of difference, disagreement, and conflict on almost every issue.

As our research unfolded, however, we found that, more often than not, the most common expression of these campus-based political rivalries grew out of simple disagreements regarding gender and culture. Indeed, every member of every research team at every university in both countries noted that the relationship between religion and politics was defined, on a day-to-day basis, by competing

views regarding appropriate gender relations and common cultural events.

Gender Relations

The most common version of “the gender story” involves two boys attached to the student wings of rival political parties battling each other for the same girl. Boy A “gets the girl,” and Boy B, “consumed with jealousy,” brings the full power of his national or regional political coalition to bear on a much larger confrontation—often involving weapons.

A single example drawn from the University of Karachi should serve to illuminate the underlying implications of this basic campus trend. In this story, IJT students locked horns with students from the All-Pakistan Muhajir Students Organization (APMSO) over the celebration of Valentine’s Day (2006) after a member of the IJT insults a member of the APMSO sitting with his girlfriend in front of the university’s Pakistan Studies Centre. While initially the APMSO students agreed to quietly leave, the next day the humiliated boy returned with a much larger contingent of

¹⁰² The University of Karachi, in many ways, merely extends this pattern, suggesting that, although the PSO is, in many ways, a “regional” party, its influence is in no way confined to “just one region.” (In fact, given the movement of Pakhtun families from Peshawar to Karachi over the years, the IJT-PSO rivalry is no less important in Karachi than it is in Peshawar.) *Within urban Sindh*, however, the most important cleavage does not involve a two-way cleavage separating the IJT from the PSO. It is, rather, a three-way cleavage involving the IJT, the PSO, and the All-Pakistan Muttahida Students Organization, or APMSO, representing local *muhajir* students and their political patron, the Muttahida Qawmi Movement (MQM). Indeed, as one member of the research team pointed out, focusing, specifically, on the University of Karachi, “the main issue is the political rivalry between the IJT, the PSO, and the APMSO,” primarily owing to “the interference of these three groups in the hostel and the departmental admissions process.” Even after twenty years of bitter conflict between and among these three parties, he noted, “the campus environment is still very tense,” and several hostels “are still occupied by the Pakistan Rangers,” who “patrol the campus to maintain law and order.”

APMSO affiliates. In due course, he proceeded to beat one of the IJT members who had insulted him the day before.

The research team pointed out that “at the same time a campus-wide discussion started.” “Some students,” generally regarded as the more “cosmopolitan” or “progressive” students, were of the view that “the University of Karachi should not remain set apart from what had become a truly global [Valentine’s Day] celebration.” But there were others, mostly those affiliated with the IJT, who disagreed. They maintained that, “instead of Valentine’s Day, the students should celebrate any important victory in Islamic history instead of blindly following western culture and values.”

The research team additionally noted that a third view had begun to emerge. Increasingly popular within the student body as a whole, this view attempted to carve out an entirely new approach, noting that “we can celebrate this day [Valentine’s Day] by expressing our love with our parents, our brothers, our sisters, and our friends within the Islamic limits; it is not necessary that we should express our love with a girlfriend or a boyfriend.”

In fact, the team explained, the campus as a whole had become increasingly fed up with the enduring rivalry between the IJT and its party-based opponents (in this case, the APMSO). They sought to construct an entirely new approach—a more thoroughly “religious” approach unsullied by the dynamics of contemporary campus “politics.”

As the research team explained, “most of the faculty members were also against the celebration of Valentine’s Day.” They considered it “a simple wastage of time.”¹⁰³

Cultural Programming

Competing ideas about “appropriate gender relations” may be the most common source of religious-cum-political tension on campus, but they are not the only source. In fact, competing ideas about the most appropriate forms of common cultural expression are, in many ways, just as controversial.

At the University of Peshawar, students came to blows in 2006 when the IJT objected to a special musical evening organized to showcase the talents of different groups from within the NWFP and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan (Bannu, Chitral, Waziristan, and so on). Originally billed as a brief study break before the annual university exams, the IJT insisted that “music itself” was completely “un-Islamic.” And, having announced their objections, they appealed to the administration to cancel the event. Nevertheless, when the administration decided to permit the event, the IJT resolved to disrupt it. The first night ended in a brawl and the second featured a dramatic exchange of gunfire, during which several students were injured.

In response, the university administration introduced a temporary ban on all musical instruments and all CD players in the campus hostels. In an even more draconian move, they prohibited all activities on the large lawn between Blocks A and B of the university’s largest hostel

¹⁰³ At Rajshahi University, in Bangladesh, students affiliated with Chhatra Shibir extracted Tk. 35 from certain couples as “payment for a special Valentine’s Day function.” But in fact, this was just a protection racket, extorting money from couples to protect them from harassment by the Shibir’s own vigilantes. According to the research team, “the couples are increasingly frightened to celebrate Valentine’s Day on campus, so, in recent years, many of them have decided to celebrate off campus.”

At Jahangirnagar University, a related case emerged within the ranks of the Shibir itself. In this case, a male student based in Al-Beruni Hall fell in love with a female student based in Preetilota Hall. The boy was affiliated with Chhatra Shibir and, when his colleagues came to know about his girlfriend, they insisted that he end his relationship. Initially, the boy hesitated, but eventually he agreed. Once again, recalling the case of the student who could not afford to escape from an ICS-controlled on-campus hostel (see fn12 above), the research team explained that “the boy thought it would be very tough for him to survive in the campus without the help of Chhatra Shibir.” (Interestingly, however, the team went on to note that Shibir members “never harass members of the Chhatra League or the Chhatra Dal, because these two organizations are more powerful than ICS at Jahangirnagar U.”)

(New Hostel)—initially designated as the site of the controversial “Music Night.” This lawn, known as Zero Point, was already famous for its celebrations, its recreational activities, and its frequent campus clashes. And, yet, as if a simple ban was not enough, the administration went on to construct a large wall to fence off the lawn entirely.

A similar conflict emerged when students at Khyber Medical College (KMC)—one of the most prestigious components of the University of Peshawar—gathered to celebrate their annual Cultural Day. On this day, students are invited to wear anything they like. Many opt for regional Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pathan-style clothing, but a certain number opt for Western dress as well. The most popular choice, however, particularly among the women, is Indian dress—for example, silk saris.

This, on its own, tends to upset those affiliated with the IJT. But, in 2008, two KMC students decided to press the envelope just a bit further. Dressing up as a Hindu bride and groom, they proceeded to perform a complete Hindu marriage ceremony on campus. They circled “the sacred fire” seven times; the boy placed a *mangal sutra* around the girl’s neck and *sindoor* on her forehead; and so on. Naturally, the IJT was shocked.

In the past, the IJT had not been a very powerful force at KMC. But, when they responded to this shift in the nature of conventional “Cultural Day” practice with a “Love for Islamic Dress” Campaign, the KMC administration issued a stern warning to the Cultural Society ... lest the situation, on campus, slowly begin to change.

This pattern is, I think, quite revealing. It is revealing because, on the one hand, it points to a pattern of religious-cum-political contestation in which a particular group of *Muslims* have sought to assert their appreciation for a tradition of religious coexistence and pluralism by celebrating a set of *Hindu* rites and holidays—and that too in Peshawar. But it is also revealing because it points to an important *difference* between existing patterns of religious-cum-political contestation in the public-sector universities of Pakistan and those of Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, Muslims *and* Hindus at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) sit together on a committee responsible for organizing (and sponsoring) *both* Muslim *and* Hindu holidays—special *iftaar* parties during Ramadan, on the one hand, and special events for the Saraswati Puja, on the other.

At KUET in Khulna, several Muslims join their Hindu colleagues for the celebration of this *puja* every year. And, in Dhaka, a huge “non-denominational” worship space in Jagannath Hall, at Dhaka University, is given over to a massive campus-wide celebration of the Saraswati Puja (every year) without any sense of controversy whatsoever.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, even despite a general sense in which the terms of party-based politics amount to a source of considerable disruption, the notion that Muslims and non-Muslims must continue to co-exist, as partners, on campus, appears to be quite well entrenched—at least in Bangladesh.¹⁰⁵

At Stamford University in Dhaka, for instance, several Hindu students were asked if they felt any sense of religious discrimination owing to the fact that Stamford had decided not to declare a regular university holiday for the Saraswati Puja. “Not at all,” they said, adding that, even without a special holiday “students celebrate the *puja* on campus with considerable zeal, decorating the campus and bringing in various idols for worship.” In fact, they explained, “the university administration even bears some of their *puja*-related expenses.”

¹⁰⁴ At Dhaka University, most non-Muslim students (for example, Hindus and Buddhists) live in Jagannath Hall. Apart from creating a separate space for Hindu idols, this allows the canteen of beef-eating Muslims to remain set apart from the canteen used by local Hindus.

¹⁰⁵ In many ways, this finding strongly reinforces much of the data that we collected during the second phase of the NBR South Asia Education Survey. See Nelson 2008, *op cit*.

Having said this, it is important to note that the situation in Bangladesh is not entirely immune to the notion of “communal” tension or conflict. On the contrary, several members of the research team, at several different universities (from Chittagong to Sylhet), noted that the terms of the Bengali New Year, or Pahela Baishakh, had become shrouded in controversy.¹⁰⁶ In fact if anything, a closer look at the debates surrounding the celebration of Pahela Baishakh suggests that—not only in Pakistan, but also in Bangladesh—the most important lines of “communal” or “sectarian” cleavage do not concern the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Instead, they lie between, and among, local Muslims.

Even in Peshawar, Muslim students posing as Hindus were criticized, not because they *are* Hindus, but rather, because they *are* Muslims—Muslims whose views, or behavior, attempt to redefine, or reinterpret, “the boundaries of Islam.” And, in Bangladesh, perceived alliances with local Hindus (for example, in the context of Pahela Baishakh) are opposed, primarily, because they are thought to reflect a challenge to the terms of “unity,” and “solidarity,” *within*.

In recent years, a common trend growing out of this climate of religious and political anxiety has emerged in the formation of “segregated” religious programming organized by the IJT, in Pakistan, and the ICS, in Bangladesh.¹⁰⁷

At SSMC, in Dhaka, for instance, Chhatra Shibir has withdrawn its support for the existing calendar of on-campus cultural programming (music programs, dramas, and so on), citing a general objection to the presence of female performers in the existing line-up of events. In fact, last year, ICS started organizing its *own* series of cultural programs with *external* financial support: “Islamic” musical programs featuring *hamdh-nath* (only); all-male dramas (with men performing the women’s roles); and so on.

At Eden University College—the all-women’s college located within the Bangladesh National University (BNU)—a similar trend has emerged. Notwithstanding the absence of any campus-based gender divide, the Islami Chhatri Shangstha has decided to stage a separate series of “Islamic” dramas every year to highlight specific “religious” norms.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ During Pahela Baishakh 2006, in particular, ICS activists at the University of Chittagong “called a strike on campus, locked all entrances to the university, and dismantled all of the structures that had been erected for the celebration.” According to the research team, “this account of Shibir obstructing the observance of the Bengali New Year and preventing the organizing of concerts and dance programs is an excellent illustration of the nature of religious ideologies propagated by the Shibir.” “The Bengali New Year is... an occasion which is integral to the cultural identity of the nation,” they noted. But “if one traces the history of this event it will be seen to have a close association with the Hindu calendar, Hindu rituals, and Hindu-specific food. The dominance of Tagore’s songs [and] *baul* music are intrinsically related to the celebration of Pahela Baishakh, but these things are contrary to the ideology of the Shibir, and it is for this reason that this event is strongly opposed.”

¹⁰⁷ One of the best examples emerged at the Sir Salimullah Medical College. Here, each hostel receives a daily newspaper, and, by consensus, the students living in the Alauddin Hostel agreed to read the *Dainak Prothom Alo*. But the students affiliated with Chhatra Shibir opposed this choice, and, unilaterally, they decided to replace the *Prothom Alo* with the recently launched (Jama’at-affiliated) *Dainak Naya Digonto*. This led to (yet another) violent confrontation, after which the Academic Council decided to reinstate the *Prothom Alo*. At the same time, however, Shibir decided to construct a *second* (separate) newspaper board next to the existing newspaper board for “their” paper, the *Naya Digonto*. According to the research team assigned to SSMC, this “peaceful solution” was only possible owing to the existing emergency regime. If the BNP had been in power—in alliance with the Jama’at-e-Islami—they explained, the students of Alauddin Hostel at SSMC would be reading the *Naya Digonto*...and only the *Naya Digonto*.

¹⁰⁸ At Punjab University, in Lahore, the same basic trend has taken on a specifically *sectarian* dimension. In the past, Shi’a students were known to offer their prayers in the same mosque as their Sunni classmates—*common* prayer timings, if you will, embracing *different* styles of prayer. But, in 2007, the Shi’a students in Hostel Number 14 began to offer their prayers separately (after the Sunni prayers) behind a *separate* Shi’a *imam*. When some of the Sunni students objected to this practice, the Shi’a students insisted that they should be allowed to construct their own (separate) mosque—if, in fact, the university refused to build a separate mosque on their behalf. But again, the IJT came out against this idea, noting that any move to “acknowledge” sectarian differences would only “exacerbate” the possibility of fissiparous sectarian trends on campus. The administration, for its part, feared that any move to accommodate the Shi’a demand would provoke a violent response from the IJT. In fact, the administration denied having any knowledge of the Shi’a demands whatsoever (notwithstanding numerous press reports).

The question, of course, concerned the possibility of recognizing, appreciating, and perhaps even embracing the notion of differences *among* local Muslims—in effect, acknowledging the possibility that “Muslims might be Muslim in several different ways,” as compared to the sense prevailing among several members of the IJT that, ultimately, “difference itself” was completely “un-Islamic.”

Campus Politics: Context

As noted above, students are not the only constituency caught up in existing forms of party-based “politics-as-usual.” On the contrary, faculty members and senior university administrators are often

...faculty members throughout Pakistan and (especially) Bangladesh routinely complain that party-based “politics-as-usual” had become almost completely unavoidable in the context of routine matters like faculty recruitment, faculty promotion, and benefits.

closely tied to exactly the same party-based politics. In fact, faculty members throughout Pakistan and (especially) Bangladesh routinely complain that party-based “politics-as-usual” had become almost completely unavoidable in the context of routine matters like faculty recruitment, faculty promotion, and benefits.

On-Campus Networks

Faculty Recruitment and Promotion. At the University of Chittagong, for instance, a reporter for *The Daily Star* noted that 65 out of 90 faculty appointments in 2002-2003 went to Islami Chhatra Shibir activists in violation of

existing recruitment norms—including at least one computer science graduate of the (private) Jama’at-affiliated International Islamic University in Chittagong. (Historically, he explained, private-sector graduates were never appointed within public-sector universities.) The reporter also pointed out that a number of first-class graduates applying for the only political science post were passed over in favor of a Shibir activist currently on trial for murder!¹⁰⁹

The best example of this pattern (this pattern of party-based faculty recruitment), however, emerged at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), in Sylhet, where a bona fide case of merit-based promotion involving a local Hindu mathematician was cited repeatedly in an effort to show, quite clearly, how merit-based exceptions could be used to prove the common (party-based) “rule.”

According to the research team assigned to SUST, “there have been *no apolitical recruitments* (let alone minority recruitments) for the last five years.” And, “as a result,” they noted, “many brilliant students who were supposed to get directly into the university as lecturers, [according to a tradition whereby the top three students in each department are invited to join the faculty], failed to get a post.” Even “despite these conditions,” however, they noted that a Hindu mathematician standing first in her class was invited to join the faculty “thanks to her head of department, who alerted the Vice Chancellor (and several national newspapers) that she would resign if the girl was not appointed.”

¹⁰⁹ See Shahadat Hossain Riad, “Shibir, JCD dominate in appointment of CU Teachers,” *The Daily Star*, May 26, 2004. According to Riad, additional ICS-friendly appointments were made in statistics, geography, zoology, and finance. And, in mathematics, no appointments were made “as there were no suitable candidates from Chhatra Shibir and Chhatra Dal.” (Two non-ICS candidates with first-class undergraduate and postgraduate degrees were, however, rejected.)

In fact, the research team pointed out, “this story was very popular as quite a number of our interviewees gave this example of ‘apolitical’ appointment at a time when everything in the campus was controlled by the ruling BNP-Jama’at government and their local allies—the Chhatra Dal and the Chhatra Shibir.”¹¹⁰

Another example—by all accounts a more typical example—emerged at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). In this case, the top three graduates of the Department of Civil Engineering were passed over, and, without even a hint of protest from the Vice-Chancellor, a Chhatra Shibir student (ranked fourth) was appointed instead. As the research team assigned to BUET pointed out, “this story is very popular.” In fact, they noted, this story amounts to “[clear] evidence that the Jama’at-e Islami is active on campus.”

Faculty Politics (Intra-Faculty and Faculty-Student Relations). Even apart from the question of faculty recruitment and promotion, however, the question of intra-faculty relations tends to reflect the same pattern of party-based—and, for the most part, Jama’at-dominated—politics-as-usual.

At the University Peshawar, for instance, a common study tour sponsored by the Department of Economics led to a significant rift within the faculty when the leader of the tour, a librarian, reported a pattern of misbehavior involving several elite women and several FATA-based boys.

After receiving the librarian’s report, the chairman of the department convened a special Committee of Inquiry to decide upon an appropriate course of action. But, in a pattern bearing some resemblance to student-level politics, the research team noted that this committee was divided between three “liberals” and one “radicalist” [*sic*]. In fact, they noted, the committee itself was so thoroughly divided that, in the end, they submitted two separate reports.

In the first report (known as “the majority report”), the “liberal” faculty members suggested minor fines for those involved in “misbehavior” and a simple warning to the student body as a whole. But the “radicalist” recommended severe punishments and a permanent ban on mixed-gender study tours. His report was, perhaps not surprisingly, “endorsed” by the IJT.

The Chairman of the Economics Department, seeking some sort of compromise, imposed heavy fines on the men, sent warning letters to the parents of the women, and introduced a total ban on all study tours. Still, his efforts came to naught. The IJT was disappointed with his so-called “punishment” of the women and, of course, the student body as a whole was put off by his “total ban” on study tours. In fact, even without the pressing involvement of a second (non-IJT) political party, the research team assigned to the University of Peshawar noted that the sitting faculty members, just as much as the students, were inextricably bound up with a contemporary (campus-based) “politics” of contested “religious” norms.¹¹¹

At Punjab University, in Lahore, the situation was in many respects even worse. In November 2004, a group of students from the Department of Social Work were, quite literally, rounded up by the chairman of the department and locked in a library to protect them from a vicious attack by IJT vigilantes who opposed their habit of mixed-gender socializing.

¹¹⁰ As Mahfuz Sadique explains, “a significant number of former Shibir leaders have been getting teaching positions at universities.” “While some positions have been ensured through the Jamaat lobby,” he adds, “the system of recruiting activists among students with good academic backgrounds . . . has helped Shibir in this infiltration of the teaching fraternity. Some have [also] taken up resident positions as house-tutors [and] provosts of several halls.” These positions allow them to “play a key role in accommodating the Shibir members in residential halls through [the] allotment of seats.” In particular, he notes, “Dhaka University sources have repeatedly warned that Shibir has built up its strongholds in Salimullah Hall, Jasimuddin Hall, and Haji Muhammad Muhsin Hall.”

¹¹¹ A similar theme, drawing attention to the political affiliations of the faculty at Eden Girl’s College, in Dhaka, emerged in the comments offered by a first-year student of zoology. She noted that, *even in the context of her zoology courses*, faculty members were constantly engaged in a vigorous program of *da’wa* and *tabligh*—in many cases, stressing the value of *pardah* and encouraging a special appreciation for the distinctive merits of the *hijab*.

Unfortunately, several members of the Social Work faculty (70 percent female) reported that they had very little confidence that the University Disciplinary Committee would take any action, mostly because they believed that “a significant number of PU teachers, administrators, and employees ... [were] sympathetic to the IJT.” Indeed, similar attacks on faculty members in the past had led, not to a sense of solidarity among the faculty, but rather to what one professor described as “considerable tensions” within the Academic Staff Association.

Pressing straight to the heart of the matter, one member of the faculty complained that “*President Musharraf speaks of reforming the madrasas, but he has totally forgotten about such elements present at one of the country’s top universities.*”¹¹²

These examples, drawn from the University of Peshawar and the University of Punjab, provide an excellent picture of the linkages between campus-based “politics-as-usual” and the faculty as a whole. But, in my view, the best illustration of these linkages appears in Appendix II (below).

Here, party-based rivalries within a particular faculty—the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Peshawar—are alleged to have been directly involved with a pattern of vigilante violence targeting another group of faculty members at the same institution! In fact, as the details of this story clearly reveal, IJT-affiliated “student shock troops” were called in by one group of faculty members with explicit instructions to harass, and intimidate, another.

Faculty Politics (Collaboration, Resistance, and “Rejectionism”). At Eden University College (Bangladesh National University), a senior member of the Fourth-Class Employees Association—a wizened *durwan* (guard) with more than twenty years of experience on campus—reported that even his menial staff association had become thoroughly politicized.

During the Awami League years, for instance, he reported that his Employees Association was closely tied to Sheikh Hasina, and, during the BNP-JI years, it shifted its allegiance to Khalida Zia. In the meantime, however, he went on to explain that, during the Zia years, the administration remained rather closely tied to an explicitly “Muslim” constituency, constructing a new campus mosque and several Muslim prayer rooms while ignoring the needs of non-Muslim staff altogether. Hindus, in particular, he noted, had no prayer room at all.



Surprisingly, Jama’at-affiliated faculty members throughout Bangladesh were often found to be quite reticent when asked about their political sympathies—typically, owing to feelings of apprehension introduced in the wake of the 2008 “emergency.” In fact, if anything, we found that their sympathies were explicitly and repeatedly denied.

“Referring to the Islami Chhatri Shangstha,” for instance, the Chairman of the Islamic Studies Department at Eden College “blatantly denied the presence of any such group.” “Even though there may be students with links to different political parties,” he noted, “these parties had ceased to function in the wake of the emergency.”¹¹³

And of course, at SUST, faculty members were equally tight-lipped. “When we were interviewing a member of the social science department,” noted the research team assigned to SUST, “she

¹¹² In response to this statement, IJT Representative Rana Muhammad Arshad claimed that the PU IJT activists “arrived on the scene only after the clash began and tried to control the situation.” In particular, he noted that “the IJT is always wrongfully accused. Its students are expelled from campus without any reason.” See “Students, Teachers Fell Insecure in Punjab University,” *The Daily Times*, November 1, 2004.

¹¹³ According to the research team assigned to Eden University College, “the presence of Islami Chhatri Shangstha is known to every student. They openly arrange Islamic sessions and give Islamic knowledge to the students. In fact, all of the group’s activities are also known to the teachers. In reality, many of these activities take place with the implied support of the faculty and the administration.” “However,” they added, “after the emergency the scenario has changed.”

completely denied the fact that Shibir existed on campus.” (This was surprising, because, just a few steps from this faculty member’s office, the research team encountered a Shibir recruitment poster—the poster mentioned, and translated, on page 10 above.)¹¹⁴

The most astonishing pattern of denial emerged during a visit to the Institute of Education Research (IER) at Dhaka University. In this case, a well-known faculty member—already famous for his progressive politics—was criticized (in 2008) for suggesting that a female student should remove her *burqa* in order to make her identity clear. This, in turn, led local members of the Islami Chhatra Shibir to call a campus-wide strike and, in due course, the whole issue exploded in the national press.¹¹⁵ The faculty member refused to apologize; his recalcitrance led to death threats; the campus was closed for several weeks; and, eventually, the Vice-Chancellor was called in to negotiate a solution.

In the course of their interview with the Chairman of the Institute for Education Research, however, the research team found that he was remarkably reluctant to speak. In fact, his enthusiasm faded as soon as the conversation turned away from his own academic achievements to the work of Chhatra Shibir.

“He became very reluctant. He was a provost in one of the male student halls, and in all these years of working there he said he had never witnessed any incident or any clash between the student parties, even though it’s well known that every hall has a committee tied to a particular party” (see footnote 28). “All of our questions were answered with ‘no comment’ or a simple ‘no.’” In fact, “at the end of the interview, he stated that Dhaka University was a peaceful secular institution with no serious conflicts or clashes.” “When we asked how this could be true given the fracas surrounding the student and her *hijab* last year—and that too in his own department, the IER—he again went back to the same mode of answering, saying that he was not aware of any such incident.” Indeed, they reported, “it was just impossible to believe his reluctant answers when we learnt that he had been working there for fifteen years.”

In this case, the Chairman’s reluctance was undoubtedly related to the imposition of a political “emergency” in Bangladesh in January 2008. But, in several other cases, we found that several opponents of the Islami Chhatra Shibir and the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba were equally reluctant to share their views. Like the “progressive” IER professor mentioned above, many had received a variety of specific, and credible, threats.¹¹⁶

At the Institute of Education Research (IER), these threats came in the form of tiny strips of (metaphorical) white cloth. In Karachi, they arrived in the form of anonymous letters.¹¹⁷ At the University of Peshawar, administrators attempting to expand private internet services had received death threats from unknown sources off-campus. And so on.

Indeed, this climate of religious-cum-political fear pushed several public-sector faculty members to call upon the university police to provide them with increased personal security—see, for example, the University of Karachi, Punjab University, Dhaka University, and SUST. And of course, as our research unfolded, we found that a growing number of faculty members had simply

¹¹⁴ Later on, the research team reported that she was “a senior leader of the Shibir.”

¹¹⁵ Related articles can be found on the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Bangladesh) website <http://www.khilafat.org/index.php>.

¹¹⁶ In Bangladesh, the credibility of these death threats can be judged from the cases of Professor Ahmed, Dr. Younus, and Professor Muhuri (see footnote 4).

¹¹⁷ In this case, the research team assigned to the University of Karachi noted that “it was not clear whether those who sent the threatening letters had contact with the Taliban or sent them as a joke. But one thing is clear—Talibanization is taking roots in Pakistan, and now it is influencing the university students as well.”

begun to turn their attention away from campus-based “politics-as-usual” toward alternative forms of religious (and political) engagement.

Seeking Alternatives. At Jahangirnagar University, for instance, a steadily expanding contingent of faculty members affiliated with the Tablighi Jama’at had begun to linger after their *isha* prayers every Thursday in a subtle effort to encourage some of their colleagues “to choose another way.” In fact, this was (by far) the most common faculty response.

“Many faculty members hate student politics, and they are not willing to join with any of the existing political groups,” noted one member of the research team assigned to Jahangirnagar University. “But the Tablighi Jama’at is not a political group. It remains far removed from any type of violence, so the students have developed a soft corner for it. And, today, *almost every student supports the activities of this group whether or not they are involved with it.*” “Not only at Jahangirnagar University, but also in every higher educational institution,” he explained, “this is a common scenario.”

As a matter of fact, he added, “the activities of the TJ are totally mosque-based; the members sit together after their prayers and discuss religious matters. Some of the teachers at Jahangirnagar University—mainly the “non-political” teachers—are also present at that time.” “Every Thursday,” he noted, “they arrange ‘a big sitting’ for at least an hour.” At the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), the administration itself has taken this trend one step further, authorizing 4-5 university-owned buses to carry large groups of students to the enormous *bishwa ijtema* organized, every year, by the Tablighi Jama’at in Tongi (north of Dhaka).

This is, in many ways, quite remarkable. It is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that the very same buses have been denied to a group of students seeking to transport their colleagues to a series of (secular) events organized, each February, to commemorate Mother Language Day. In fact, as the research team assigned to KUET pointed out, “the universities authorize these buses to send their students out for *tabligh* every month, but others do not get the same facilities.” Of course, they added, drawing an interesting (but unintended) link between the Tablighi Jama’at and the Jama’at-e-Islami, “it’s very well known that the Jama’at refuses to celebrate [Mother Language Day].”

At the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), a fourth-class service employee noted that many of his colleagues on the university staff go for *tabligh* every month. He himself participates whenever he can—for example, whenever he returns home on leave to Rangpur. But the staff at BSMMU, he argued, tends to be even more enthusiastic and committed to the cause of *tabligh* than the students, primarily because, he noted, “the work of *tabligh* is purely religious and never (explicitly) political.”

Off-Campus Networks

The interesting thing about the Tablighi Jama’at is, of course, the sense of “distance” it provides—distance from violence, difference from “politics,” difference from the modern “state” itself. Indeed, those who join the Tablighi Jama’at are often convinced that, after joining the Jama’at, they will succeed in avoiding what can only be described as an extremely tiresome pattern of party-based “politics-as-usual” on campus. But in fact, this is misleading. At the University of Peshawar (UET), for instance, the buses set aside for those who wish to attend a particular Tablighi *markaz* tend to be arranged by none other than the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba. And, at KUET, the buses traveling to Tongi tend to be authorized by an administration shot through with close ties to the Islami Chhatra

Shibir. Indeed, a closer look reveals that, more often than not, religious networks “on campus” are closely tied to a complex web of political (and logistical) support.

At Hamdard University in Karachi—one of the largest private-sector universities in Pakistan—efforts to reduce the influence of this rather tiresome pattern of campus-based “politics-as-usual” led to the construction of a new campus more than 20km away from the city centre ... with only one hostel (for women).

This was not enough to create an entirely separate (private-sector) enclave set apart from campus-based “politics-as-usual,” however. When a student from the Faculty of Engineering, Science, and Technology (FEST) sought to impose his views about the *hijab* on the girlfriend of a student from the Faculty of Management Science (FMS), for instance, a small fight broke out. And, the next day, undeterred by a general prohibition on (private-sector) campus politics, the student from FEST called in IJT reinforcements from the University of Karachi.

In what amounts to an absolutely perfect illustration of the general distinction between public and private-sector universities throughout the region, however, the Hamdard University administration took swift and decisive action. They arrested the IJT “outsiders,” handed them over to the police, and established a faculty committee to investigate the nature of this (rare) political “breach.” The committee, in turn, decided to expel the student who politicized the issue. And, taking one final step, they issued a stern warning to the rest of the student body “not to engage in any kind of political activity.”

At Hamdard University, like so many private-sector universities, the goal seems to lie in erasing the scourge of student politics altogether. At Rajshahi University, the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), Dhaka University, and UET (Lahore), on the other hand, the answer seems to lie in a schizophrenic pattern of cautious trepidation, teargas, and, ultimately, tentative acquiescence.

Campus Politics: Responses

In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, one of the most important factors for those with an interest in caging the student wings of the Jama’at-e-Islami—or, at least, driving them underground—seems to lie in a specific change of government.¹¹⁸

Indeed, the shifting strength of the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba and the Islami Chhatra Shibir appears to be astonishingly regime-dependent. When the MMA and/or the PML-N comes to power, in Pakistan, the IJT tends to enjoy to a slightly longer leash, and, when the BNP comes to power, in conjunction with the Jama’at-e-Islami, in Bangladesh, the ICS clearly benefits.

Failing a specific change of government, however, the most common response to Jama’at-centered religious-cum-political activism on campus tends to express itself in the form of raw police (or military) force.

At the University of Karachi, for instance, campus unrest throughout the 1980s and 1990s led to a campus invasion on the part of the Pakistan Rangers—many of whom, the research

¹¹⁸ At Eden Girl’s College, students readily admitted that the admissions procedure was framed in terms of those in power. “When it was an Awami League government,” noted one group of final-year students, “the Chhatra League controlled the admissions process, and when it was a BNP government, the Chhatra Dal had control.” In fact, they noted, “the students of each political group used to take bribes from those seeking admission. And, even beyond this, students who wanted a hostel seat were asked for money by the politically powerful students.” However, they added, “after the interim government came [in 2008], all these activities were stopped.” The Chhatra Shibir, in particular, was reported to be operating increasingly “under cover.”

team discovered, “still occupy various university hostels” in a stated bid “to maintain law and order.”(Their presence, however, appears to be somewhat ineffective. For instance, the research team assigned to the University of Karachi witnessed at least one case of election-related gunfire in plain sight of the Rangers during their visit to Karachi during the February 2008 elections.)

At the University of Punjab, administrative efforts to seize control over the annual campus book fair (2006) led to considerable resistance on the part of the IJT. In response, the administration followed in the footsteps of their colleagues in Karachi and called in the army. Overnight, the army raided several hostels and arrested a number of IJT leaders on orders from the University Vice-Chancellor.

(This time, however, the students on campus effectively “split their vote.” On the one hand, they joined the IJT in a rally *against* the Vice-Chancellor, criticizing his decision to call in the army. And, yet, on the other hand, they expressed their frustration with the IJT for giving the VC a pretext to call in the army in the first place. After all, they complained, the IJT had robbed them of a very popular book fair.)

At Jahangirnagar University, a coordinated attack by Islami Chhatra Shibir and thousands of local JI activists in 1988 was repelled by the Bangladesh Army. In fact, the research team discovered, this army-led campus invasion was supported by millions of citizens throughout Bangladesh. And, in the end, they noted, it may have resulted in *the only successful military or police assault on a Jama'at-affiliated student group to date*.

As Professor Abdul Qader explained, violent and coercive tactics are used by all sides in a concerted and continuing bid for “complete campus control.” But in general, he observed, *the most violent party is, almost invariably, the government-sponsored party*. In each case, he noted, this party has sought to use its period in power—generally regarded as a period of practically unlimited political impunity—to attack (or eliminate) its rivals.

Indeed, the challenge moving forward does not appear to lie in finding new ways to “defeat” the forces of (party-based) campus politics *militarily*. Instead, it seems to lie in finding new ways to address them, and contain them, *ideologically*.



So far, every indication seems to suggest that this campaign for campus-based “hearts and minds,” particularly in the private sector, is being led by “the ideologues of the informal,” namely, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jama'at, and (in Pakistan) Da'wat-e-Islami.

This is, in fact, the argument that Mahfuz Sadique articulates in his unusually detailed and insightful article, “Islam’s New Face” (2005/2006). Focusing, specifically, on the politics of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the private-sector universities of Bangladesh, he notes that private-sector universities have emerged as “[a] new front” in “the war to win hearts and minds to the Khilafa state.”

“Since the enactment of the Private University Act [in] 1992,” Sadique explains, “Bangladesh—or, Dhaka to be precise—has seen a sharp increase in the number of private-sector universities.” In fact, he notes that “the present count, according to the accrediting authority for private universities—[namely], the University Grants Commission—is [already] 54.”

“While the Act [makes] no mention of prohibiting student unions, or student political bodies [within these universities],” he notes, “most of [them] have taken a safe approach by enforcing a strict embargo on any form of student organization that may have an affiliation with politics.” In particular, he explains, coming straight to the heart of the matter, “[the] growing acceptability of

private universities, [both] among students and [among] the parents who pay for their education, [is] largely due to the non-political atmosphere they assured.”

“After a frightful decade of violence and session-jams ... during the eighties,” he writes, these “apolitical” private-sector universities emerged as “a welcome option” to many students and their parents. And, yet, at the same time, he notes, the resulting ideological vacuum “left many students craving a political identity,” notwithstanding the creation of an elaborate set of carefully regulated private-sector student activity clubs. In fact, he explains, it was in this context that Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) first arrived to make its mark.

According to Sadique, one of the first HT “circles” in Bangladesh was formed on the campus of one of Dhaka’s leading private-sector universities: North South University (NSU). “Though this circle had no physical infrastructure,” he notes, it began to propagate its views informally, and before long, it had affiliated groups at Independent University Bangladesh, East West University, American International University (Bangladesh), City University, and Southeast University. “It’s true that we have tapped into the ideological, or rather intellectual, vacuum at private universities,” noted Imtiaz Selim, former head of HT within the private-sector universities of Bangladesh.

“At North South University,” Sadique explains, “dozens of members attended ... group sessions after [their daily] prayers.” Not only men, but women too. In fact, Sadique reports, HT’s core membership was always rather small; but, over time, the number of “sympathizers” grew rapidly.

“Their leaflets are minimal but attractive in design, and many of them are in English, which conveniently caters to the psyche of private-sector university students,” noted one final-year student at NSU’s School of Business, describing the approach taken by HT as “nothing less than guerilla marketing.” “Their members mingle within the general student body ... in the canteen, in the student lobby, in the study areas, and mostly in the tea stalls adjacent the university.” They “whip up conversations ... on some topical issue, like the Iraq war or *hartal* [i.e., strikes],” he noted, “and eventually [they] bring up their discussion [circles].”

According to Sadique, most private-sector university authorities have been inclined to observe HT’s activities from a distance and with a large dose of caution. “As prayer rooms, canteens, rest areas, [and] study rooms became [a] political playing field for Hizb ut-Tahrir,” Sadique discovered, the authorities “simply [chose to] overlook it as general religious practice.” Because religion is such a sensitive issue, he explained, most administrators simply decided to look the other way.

“The private universities already have a reputation for being “too western,” and we’re scared that cracking down on [HT] will further strengthen this allegation,” noted one private-sector professor. In fact, “with the official stance of no-student-politics still in place,” Sadique points out, “most of the private-sector universities “have tried [very] hard to keep the situation under wraps.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, Sadique goes on to explain that the left-leaning parties tend to be the only ones with a profile that clashes, directly, with Hizb ut-Tahrir. But here again, he argues, the leftists have been “surprisingly inactive.”

Interestingly, in the course of his research, Sadique discovered that The Student’s Union (by all accounts the largest left-leaning student body in most public-sector universities), “did not consider the private universities to be legitimate educational institutions,” and, as a result, they “simply refused to operate in them”!

Ultimately, Sadique argues, “the Islamic student movement in Bangladesh has a new face,” and *this new face is the face of non-violent transnational religious reform movements* like HT and the Tablighi Jama’at—movements that explicitly and consistently seek to distinguish themselves from the violent disruptions associated with a campus-based “politics-as-usual” long dominated by

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mainstream political parties and their (unruly) student wings, including, above all, the Jama’at-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir.

“As a faith-based organization,” Sadique notes, “students have been found to be connected to [parties like HT and networks tied to the Tablighi Jama’at] even after graduation.” And, “as they rise through the ranks in Bangladesh, the party’s financial and organizational capacity will increase

likewise as all members contribute both voluntarily and also compulsorily.”¹¹⁹

Referring specifically to the recruitment efforts of Hizb ut-Tahrir in public and private-sector universities, Sadique noted that “this process has been going on simultaneously at both public and private universities. But the two streams of institutions have yielded different results. While [HT] efforts in public universities have been mostly limited to Dhaka University [with particular strengths in the Institute of Business Administration, Commerce, and Finance], private universities have shown a [far greater] acceptance of their efforts.”



To be sure, Sadique restricts his assessment to the higher education sector in Bangladesh. But the same trends can be found, with only minor modifications, in Pakistan as well. Since 2002, HT has been confronted with a formal ban on its activities in Pakistan, forcing it to maintain a much lower profile—not only in the public sector, but also in the private sector. In fact within the private-sector universities of Pakistan, HT faces a *de facto* “double ban”: one ban imposed by the state, targeting HT; one imposed by the private-sector universities themselves, targeting “politics in general.”

Having said this, however, HT is not at all invisible (see footnote 5). When the famous *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad with a bomb tucked into his turban were re-published in February 2008, many of the ensuing protests were coordinated by HT.¹²⁰ These protests were never very large, but they were quite significant. In fact, as several commentators rushed to point out, their significance lay primarily in the profile of their participants: urban, educated, professional, middle class. “HT now has roots in Pakistan...and a large number of its members are [very] well educated,” notes Mazhar Abbas in a 2005 article prepared for *The Friday Times* in Lahore, adding that “this is a rare phenomenon in religious extremist groups,” which usually draw their members from “the lower classes.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ See Sadique Mahfuz, “Islam’s New Face,” 2005, http://www.newagebd.com/2005/nov/04/eid_special05/non-fiction03.html.

¹²⁰ See cartoon protests at ‘Hizb-ut-Tahrir wilayah Pakistan,’ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voN3Iq5O7VI>.

¹²¹ See Mazhar Abbas, “Hizb ut-Tahrir Attracts Educated Elites in Pakistan,” *The Friday Times* (Lahore), July 1-7, 2005.

In fact Abbas's article, entitled "Hizb ut-Tahrir Attracts Educated Elites in Pakistan," grew out of an interview with HT Official Spokesman Dr. Naveed Butt—an engineering graduate from the University of Illinois at Chicago (now based in Pakistan)—who noted that policymakers in the West were inclined to believe that HT was "a terrorist organization" and, then, having done so, ban it on this basis. As Butt went on to explain, however, this was a mistake. HT, he argued, was not "a terrorist organization." Instead it was merely "an intellectual movement targeting the [urban] educated classes."

In recent years, transnational groups like HT have increasingly emerged as an expanding intellectual and political force within urban middle-class circles—circles once dominated by the Jama'at-e-Islami. As the JI has become more and more thoroughly embedded within mainstream politics (and, thus, the politics of violence), however, it has in many ways merely alienated its core constituency. This, in turn, has forced the JI to cede its position as the party of a disciplined intellectual vanguard to newer groups like HT.

Even as we acknowledge the growing importance of HT among Pakistan's urban, educated, professional middle-class—by all accounts, the constituency most likely to abandon local Jama'at-dominated public-sector universities in favor of specific private-sector alternatives—however, it is important to note that *HT is not the only option* for those who might wish to "abandon" Pakistan's public-sector "politics-as-usual." On the contrary, a much larger number have expressed an interest in extending this process of abandonment one step further.

Searching for a way, not merely to *replace* the existing state with a global *khilafat*, in keeping with the aspirations of HT, but in fact to *reject* any sense of "the modern state" altogether, tens of thousands of students have joined hundreds of thousands (even millions) of non-students in rejecting the ideological program of HT in favor of the more radically "egalitarian" Tablighi Jama'at.

Indeed, as a radically egalitarian alternative to the explicitly elite focus of HT, the Tablighi Jama'at remains extremely popular among modern university students—both in Pakistan and in Bangladesh. Both groups are strictly voluntary and broadly transnational. Both espouse a non-violent response to the existing political order. And, of course, both remain consistently set apart from the work of contemporary political parties (including "Islamist" parties).

Having said this, however, it is important to keep in mind that, *unlike HT, the popularity of the Tablighi Jama'at is not confined to urban intellectuals*. On the contrary, in its effort to move away from any attachment to any sort of religious or political "elite," the Tablighi Jama'at remains firmly embedded within a much larger constituency—in effect, a "cross-class" coalition stretching well beyond the modern university to incorporate anyone who might wish to reconcile an appreciation for egalitarianism with an enduring focus on the evangelizing spirit of Islam.¹²²

Indeed, whereas HT tends to be described as a transnational movement of highly educated, non-violent, urban professional elites dedicated to the establishment of a global *khilafat*, the Tablighi Jama'at tends to point in a far more complex direction. In many ways, it points toward a peripatetic alliance of transnational evangelists completely set apart from any concern for the terms of "bureaucracy," "professionalism," or "the state" whatsoever.

As one member of the research team pointed out, following up on his work at SUST, "the Tablighi Jama'at is not a political group" in any way—adding, by way of explanation, that the

¹²² For a discussion of the role of women within the Tablighi Jama'at, see Barbara D. Metcalf, "Tablighi Jama'at and Women" in *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Movement for Faith Renewal*, ed. Mohammad Khalid Masud (Leiden, Brill: 2000), 44-58.

Jama'at remains "far removed from any type of violence." In fact, he noted, the campus community at SUST had developed "a soft corner for the Jama'at" precisely because it seemed to insist on such a rigorously consistent pattern of absolute political "detachment." Indeed, the Tablighi Jama'at is often described as "apolitical." And in a certain sense it is. Unlike the Jama'at-e-Islami or Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jama'at harbors no interest in (or connection to) state power at all.

For those with an interest in the relationship between religion, religious ideology, and politics in the context of the modern university, however, the fact that an ostensibly "apolitical" organization might succeed in capturing the minds of so many highly intelligent students is, itself, "politically" interesting. Indeed for those with an interest in the relationship between religion, politics, and

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the modern university, the most intriguing question among a host of new and important questions seems to concern what might be called "the politics of the apolitical." What does it mean, "politically," to "reject" modern politics? At what point do the terms of "apolitical" detachment become, as it were, "politically" significant? And, ultimately, does an "apolitical" public posture amount to a posture of public "political" protest? For those with an interest in the relationship between religion, politics, and the modern university in Pakistan and Bangladesh, these are increasingly pressing questions.

Conclusion

On February 11, 2008, I landed in Dhaka to begin my field research. On that day, the leading headline in *The Daily Star* reported severe clashes between Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) activists at the Dhaka Polytechnic Institute (DPI).

These clashes grew out of an exceptionally trivial matter—in effect, a first-year Chhatra Shibir student was found sitting in a portion of the Latif Hostel canteen generally reserved for second-year students. In due course, the clashes that erupted (leaving more than 40 injured) exposed a number of extremely important and familiar issues: politicized hostel seat allocation; collaborating faculty sponsors; off-campus links with alleged terrorists; police interference (*inside* the DPI hostels); a history of murdered faculty members (murdered for their political affiliations); and so on.

This was an exceptionally revealing series of events. During the next two weeks, as the coverage of this event unfolded, one observation in particular caught my eye. Noting that the DPI campus had been closed in the wake of the clashes, *The Daily Star* reported that "no other activities, except for prayers, [were being] allowed in the [DPI] mosque." And, almost as an afterthought, the reporter

added that, as a result of this restriction, “Tabligh members would [henceforth] require permission to go and stay [in the campus mosque].”¹²³ As usual, the Islami Chhatra Shibir was “the main story.” But the Tablighi Jama’at was never far behind. In fact, both groups were shown to exist “side-by-side,” even, in some cases, within a context of overlapping student affiliations.

The dominant trend on campuses throughout South Asia is, of course, a trend increasingly defined by the terms of a frustrating party-based political “stalemate” and, in many ways, an increasingly violent pattern of campus-based “politics-as-usual.” But of course, having said this, it is also important to note that the dominant trend has two faces. The first face, defined by the Islami Chhatra Shibir (or the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba), often appears in plain sight. But the second, defined by Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jama’at, and Da’wat-e-Islami, typically appears “behind the scenes.”

This second face is, in certain respects, the “less powerful” face. But, in my opinion, it is also the “more important” face. In fact, this is the face that I have chosen to describe, throughout this report, in terms of private-sector “escapism,” “rejectionist” religious revivalism, and, increasingly, as Sadique explains, *the symbiotic interaction between them*.

Insofar as campus politics have become locked in a pattern of zero-sum competition, typically involving religious parties like the IJT or the ICS and their mainstream political opponents, I have argued that a growing number of students, faculty members, and administrators have also begun to search for “alternative” expressions of religious and political engagement. These “alternative expressions” tend to be associated with transnational organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Tablighi Jama’at—that is, *ummah*-based organizations that explicitly *reject* the routine use of violence. In fact, precisely insofar as this is the case, the transition that Sadique describes—namely, the transition from one face of Islam to another (less violent) face—must be regarded as a good thing.

At the same time, however, many of the students, faculty members, and administrators with an interest in seeking out what Sadique describes as this “new” (non-violent) face of Islam also appear keen to avoid any form of engagement with the modern state, modern forms of political negotiation, and modern forms of routine political compromise. In fact in this sense, their quest for an “alternative expression” of Islam tends to *remain* quite inflexible—in many ways, almost relentlessly “monolithic.”

Their politics is, of course, non-violent. But, at the same time, it is also uncompromising, detached, and utopian. In fact, both HT and the Tablighi Jama’at, just as much as the Jama’at-e-Islami and its mainstream political rivals, appear to remain consistently unsympathetic to even the most common expressions of dissent. Disagreement, if you will, remains both politically and religiously unwelcome.

Of course the political implications of this uncompromising position are quite familiar. In public-sector universities throughout Pakistan and Bangladesh, the uncompromising positions adopted by the Jama’at-e-Islam and its mainstream political rivals have degenerated into violence on a fairly regular basis. But, even apart from the question of violence, I discovered, this rather persistent aversion to any expression of dissent could be said to play an extremely important role in frustrating of the terms of “democracy,” and, more specifically, “democratic” discussion and debate.

Even apart from these rather significant *political* implications, stretching from sporadic violence to the systematic failure of democracy, however, my research led me to believe that the *intellectual*

¹²³ See “Militants Rule Dhaka Polytechnic Hostels,” *The Daily Star*, February 28, 2008.

implications of this effort to eradicate dissent may be important for the future of the university itself. No disagreement, if you will, no debate. No scholarly *debate*, no *development*. Indeed, scholarly “development” is often believed to be more-or-less intrinsically related to the productive capacity of scholarly disagreement and debate. And, across the board, *it is precisely this pattern of scholarly disagreement and debate that the Jama'at-e-Islami, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jama'at, and Da'wat-e-Islami have been so keen to annihilate*. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that, in several different ways, the political aspirations of these very different groups have sought to destroy the very core of the modern university as an institution designed to protect, and preserve, “scholarly” and “political” debate.

The most immediate risk to emerge from the existing confluence of religion and politics in the context of the modern university in Pakistan and Bangladesh, in other words, may not involve an increase—or, as the case may be, a decrease—in existing levels of violence. In fact the most immediate risk may boil down to a general decline in the work of the university itself as an engine of social, and political, dynamism, debate, and change.



In the context of my research, a closer look at what Sadique describes as “the two faces of contemporary (campus-based) Islamism” led me to five important conclusions, each of which appears to challenge the prevailing wisdom among those with an interest in the relationship between religion and politics on campus today.

The first of these five conclusions—in certain respects, a preliminary or “background” conclusion—draws attention to the fact that, moving forward, any truly compelling account of the relationship between religion, religious education, and contemporary politics in Pakistan and Bangladesh must begin to move “beyond the *madrasa*.”

For several years, U.S. policymakers with an interest in South Asia have stressed the political risks flowing out of urban and rural *madrasas*. But, in several different ways, my research suggests that the time has come to expand and elaborate this view, drawing special attention to expressions of “religious” education in ostensibly “non-religious” schools.

The second conclusion—in many ways, a more dramatic sociological conclusion—lies in drawing attention to some of the ways in which the politicization of religious education is no longer a phenomenon confined to the poor and/or the socially marginalized. In fact it never was. As my research unfolded, throughout Pakistan and Bangladesh, I quickly realized that the politicization of religion, religious education, and religious identity is often a phenomenon closely tied to the upwardly mobile, highly educated, urban (or urbanizing) “middle class.”

Again, U.S. policymakers have had a tendency to focus on the possibility that greater access to economic resources might succeed in drawing individual students away from the terms of religious expression and extremism. But, again, I would argue, the time has come to reconsider and revise this rather conventional view: religious extremism is *not* a simple “extension” of economic deprivation. In fact, moving forward, every indication seems to suggest that considerably more attention should be paid to the relationship between “extremist ideologies” and the emerging politics of South Asia’s expanding (and celebrated) urbanizing middle class.

My third conclusion is, in many ways, closely related to the first two. Throughout the course of my research, I found that “students politicized along ostensibly religious lines” are *not* (typically) students of “religion.” Instead, my research revealed that these students tend to be drawn from a

wide range of different subjects. Religion may be *one* of these subjects, but, again, even a preliminary reading would suggest that religion is *neither* the most popular subject *nor* the fastest growing.

Indeed, those with an interest in the relationship between “education,” on the one hand, and religious or political “extremism,” on the other must begin to look *beyond* the students of “religion” housed in local *madrasas*. The focus, if you will, is *neither* “economic deprivation” *nor* “religion.” The focus is simply “extremism.”

With this in mind, policymakers around the world would do well to remember that religious extremism is simply another manifestation of extremism in general—in effect, an exaggerated aversion to dissent. Religion, if you will, is simply taken up as a cover for certain expressions of this aversion—for some, a religious “rhetorical” shell.

Having said this, however, my fourth conclusion draws attention to the fact that students who might be described as “politicized” or even “radicalized” along ostensibly religious lines are rarely subject to cohesive patterns of politicization (or radicalization). More often than not, the terms of their politicization are defined by the leadership of mainstream political parties firmly grounded in the politics of an existing nation-state. These terms are, in every case, deeply factionalized. And, in many cases, these terms are also rather violent. Even those who seek to “abandon” or “escape” from the mainstream political stalemate that surrounds them, however, cannot be described in terms of any cohesive *pattern* of politicization (or extremism). On the contrary, even a superficial understanding of the existing “alternatives” would be enough to reveal that Hizb ut-Tahrir differs from the Tablighi Jama’at just as much as (if not more than) Shibbir departs from Dal.

It is of course a cliché to say that emerging expressions of modern Islamist mobilization exist in many different forms, each one demanding a carefully “tailored” religious and political response. But, having said this, it may be premature to suggest that this cliché does not bear some repeating. Too often, policymakers interface with existing “state” institutions, relying on crude “financial” resources to attract or engage local allies. This approach is not entirely ineffective in every case. But, when it comes to groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Tablighi Jama’at—groups that routinely bypass the state in an effort to organize both locally and transnationally while, at the same time, either explicitly targeting affluent members of the urban middle class (HT), in the case of the Tablighi Jama’at, providing no point of entry for any source of outside funds whatsoever—this approach clearly has its limits. Again, different groups invite different patterns of engagement.

Fifth, and finally, it is important to stress the fact that politicized and even radicalized religious groups enjoy considerably more influence within the context of local universities—not only among individual students, but also among the faculty, the staff, and the university administration—than they do within the population as a whole.

In fact, as the research for this report unfolded, we found that, if you want to capture the nature of existing debates regarding the politicization of religion (or religious identity) in Pakistan and Bangladesh, you could do far worse than seeking to construct a special focus on particular debates unfolding *within* the public and private-sector universities of either country. In fact the lessons to be derived from such a focus on the modern university are numerous.

In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, university administrators have sought to clamp down on a rising tide of religious-cum-political activism—in many cases with violence. But in both countries this application of force has failed to stem the rising tide. In fact if anything, this application of force has merely “normalized” or “legitimized” the use of violence on campus. Similarly, efforts to “ban” specific political parties (or “politics in general”) have merely pushed some parties underground

while providing others with a special recruitment boost. In fact a closer look reveals that, more often than not, the most effective response to this “rising tide of religious and political activism” has relied on a deliberate effort to *acknowledge* the enduring importance of religion while, at the same time, developing a focused effort, within the university as a whole, to protect and preserve a *specific right of dissent*.



The greatest challenge facing Pakistan and Bangladesh does *not* lie in the challenge posed by existing patterns of “politics-as-usual” on campus. On the contrary, I would argue, the greatest challenge may lie in *the growing irrelevance* of “politics” as we know it—in effect, politics as a pattern of contestation, conflict, and (ultimately) compromise..

In recent years, a growing number of students have begun to throw up their hands in a fit of frustration with the violence surrounding stalemated party-based “politics-as-usual” in public-sector universities. This is, of course, understandable. But, in their frustration, many of these students have also sought to re-engage the terms of “religion” and the construction of a modern “religious” community apart from any (negotiated) “political” process. Their commitment to non-violence is, of course, extremely important. And, in my opinion, *this commitment should be applauded*. But their rejection of any standard, conventional, or accepted form of “political” contestation, “political” negotiation, or compromise is, in certain respects, *just as important* as their decision to abjure the use of violence.

In the short and medium term, the greatest challenge posed by the trends discussed in the context of this report does *not* lie in an impending transformation of the existing political order—neither through the use of violence nor through the expansion of what I have described as an emerging effort to “abandon” the existing political order altogether.

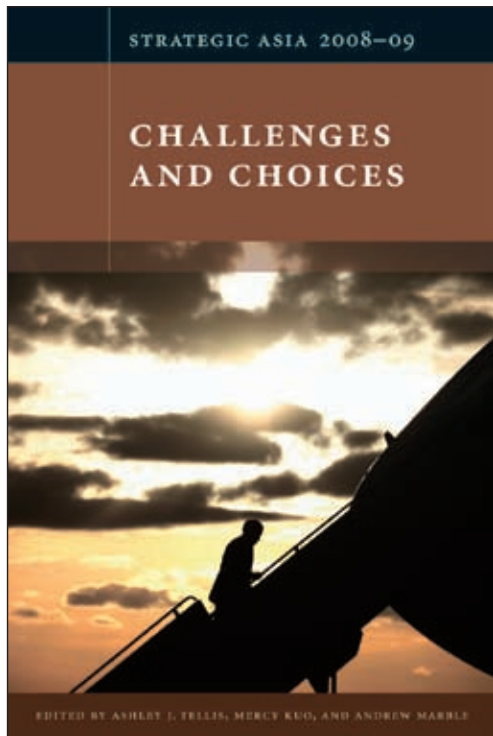
In fact the greatest challenge lies in the emergence of a rather robust effort to remove the terms of dissent, disagreement, and debate from the ongoing work of the university altogether. Indeed, even if we begin to see declining levels of violence—owing, in some sense, to a surge in student support for the non-violent politics of Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Tablighi Jama’at—we will, nevertheless, continue to struggle with emerging forms of intellectual and political disengagement masquerading as an urgent demand for a contemporary religious “consensus.”

In the context of a modern university, it simply goes without saying that debate is indispensable. The challenge does not lie in any effort to “reduce” or “remove” debate. No, the challenge lies in an effort to revive, rehabilitate, and sustain it. Given the enduring importance of religion on campus, the terms of this challenge may become increasingly complex over time. But the challenge, itself, is clear.

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