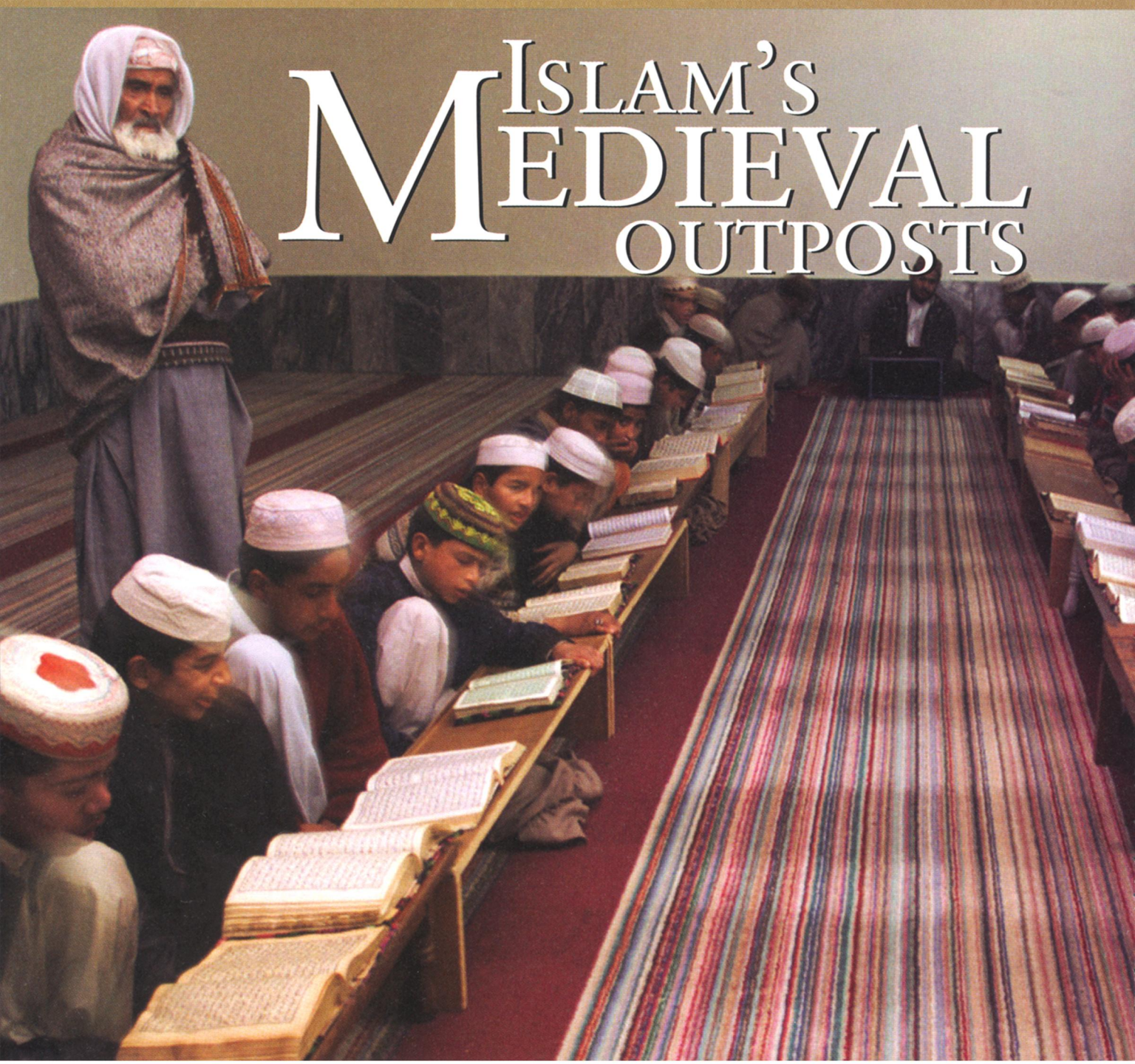
Islam's Medieval Outposts



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For centuries, young men have gathered at Islamic seminaries to escape Western influences and quietly study Islamic texts that have been handed down unchanged through the ages. But over the last two decades, revolution, Great Power politics, and poverty have combined to give the fundamentalist teachings at some of these madrasas a violent twist. And now, in one of globalization's deadlier ironies, these "universities of jihad" are spreading their medieval theology worldwide. | **By Husain Haqqani**

As a 9-year-old boy, I knelt on the bare floor of the neighborhood *madrasa* (religious school) in Karachi, Pakistan, repeating the Koranic verse, "Of all the communities raised among men you are the best, enjoining the good, forbidding the wrong, and believing in God."

Hafiz Gul-Mohamed, the Koran teacher, made each of the 13 boys in our class memorize the verse in its original Arabic. Some of us also memorized the translation in our own language, Urdu. "This is the word of God that defines the Muslim *umma* [community of believers]," he told us repeatedly. "It tells Muslims their mission in life." He himself bore the title *hafiz* (the memorizer) because he could recite all 114 chapters and 6,346 verses of the Koran.

Most students in Gul-Mohamed's class joined the *madrasa* to learn basic Islamic teachings and to be able to read the Koran. Only a handful of people in Pakistan spoke Arabic, but everyone wanted to learn to read the holy book. I completed my first reading of the Koran by age seven. I was enrolled part time at the *madrasa* to learn to read the Koran better and to understand the basic teachings of Islam.

Gul-Mohamed carried a cane, as all *madrasa* teachers do, but I don't recall him ever using it. He liked my curiosity about religion and had been angry with me only once: I had come to his class straight from my English-language school, dressed in the school's uniform—white shirt, red tie, and beige trousers. "Today you have dressed like a *farangi* [European]. Tomorrow you will start thinking and behaving like one," he said. "And that will be the beginning of your journey to hell."

Hafiz Gul-Mohamed read no newspapers and did not listen to the radio. He owned few books. "You don't need too many books to learn Islam," he once explained to me when I brought him his evening meal. "There is the straight path, which is described in the Koran and one or two commentaries, and there are numerous paths to confusion. I have the books I need to keep me on the straight path." He had never seen a movie and advised me never to see one either. The only time he had allowed himself to be photographed was to obtain a passport for the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the hajj. Television was about to be introduced in Pakistan, and Gul-Mohamed found that prospect quite disturbing. One *hadith* (or saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed) describes "song and dance by women lacking in virtue" coming to every home as one of the signs of apocalypse. Television, Gul-Mohamed believed, would fulfill that prophecy, as it would bring moving images of singing and dancing women into every home.

The *madrasa* I attended, and its headmaster, opposed the West but in an apolitical way. He knew the communists were evil because they denied the existence of God. The West, however, was also immoral. Westerners drank alcohol and engaged in sex outside of marriage. Western women did not cover themselves. Western culture encouraged a mad

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race for making money. Song and dance, rather than prayer and meditation, characterized life in the West. Gul-Mohamed's solution was isolation. "The *umma* should keep away from the West and its ways."

But these were the 1960s. Although religion was important in the lives of Pakistanis, pursuit of material success rather than the search for religious knowledge determined students' career choices. Everyone in my *madrasa* class dropped out after learning the essential rituals. I remained a part-time student for almost six years but eventually needed to devote more time to regular studies that would take me through to college. Gul-Mohamed was disappointed that I did not seek a *sanad* (diploma) in theology, but he grudgingly understood why I might not want a degree in theology from a parallel education system: "You don't want to be a mullah like me, with little pay and no respect in the eyes of the rich and powerful."

And so it was for much of the four decades before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a period when policymakers were more interested in the thoughts of Western-educated Muslims responsible for energy policy in Arab countries than those of half-literate mullahs trained at obscure seminaries. But Taliban leaders, who had ruled Afghanistan since the mid-1990s, were the products of *madrasas* in Pakistan, and their role as protectors of al Qaeda terrorists has generated keen interest in their alma maters. A few weeks after September 11, I visited Darul Uloom Haqqania (Center of Righteous Knowledge), situated on the main highway between Islamabad and Peshawar, in the small town of Akora Khattak. Taliban leader Mullah Omar had been a student at Haqqania, and the *madrasa*, with 2,500 students aged 5 to 21 from all over the world, has been called "the University of Jihad." The texture of life in the *madrasa* still has elements that represent a continuum not over decades but over centuries. But at Haqqania, I saw that the world of the *madrasa* had changed since I last bowed my head in front of Hafiz Gul-Mohamed.

In a basement room with plasterless walls adorned by a clock inscribed with "God is Great" in Arabic, 9-year-old Mohammed Tahir rocked back and forth and recited the same verse of the Koran that had been instilled into my memory at the same age: "Of all the communities raised among men you are the best, enjoining the good, forbidding the wrong, and believing in God." But when I asked him to explain how he understands the passage, Tahir's interpretation was quite different from the quietist version taught to me. "The Muslim community of believers is the best in the eyes of God, and we must make it the same in the eyes of men by force," he said. "We must fight the unbelievers and that includes those who carry Muslim names but have adopted the ways of unbelievers. When I grow up I intend to carry out jihad in every possible way." Tahir does not believe that al Qaeda is responsible for September 11 because his teachers have told him that the attacks were a conspiracy by Jews against the Taliban. He also considers Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden great Muslims, "for challenging the might of the unbelievers."

The remarkable transformation and global spread of *madrasas* during the 1980s and 1990s owes much to geopolitics, sectarian struggles, and technology, but the schools' influence and staying power derive from deep-rooted socioeconomic conditions that have so far proved resistant to change. Now, with the prospect of *madrasas* churning out tens of thousands of would-be militant graduates each year, calls for reform are growing. But anyone who hopes for change in the schools' curriculum, approach, or mind-set is likely to be disappointed. In some ways, *madrasas* are at the center of a civil war of ideas in the Islamic world. Westernized and usually affluent Muslims lack an interest in religious matters, but religious scholars, marginalized by modernization, seek to assert their own relevance by insisting on orthodoxy. A regular education costs money and is often inaccessible to the poor, but *madrasas* are generally free. Poor students attending *madrasas* find it easy to believe that the West, loyal to uncaring and aloof leaders, is responsible for their misery and that Islam as practiced in its earliest form can deliver them.

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THE MADRASA BOOM

Madrasas have been around since the 11th century, when the Seljuk Vizier Nizam ul-Mulk Hassan bin Ali Tusi founded a seminary in Baghdad to

Class of 2002: Islamic students pray during a graduation ceremony at a madrasa in Pakistan.

AP/GHAFFAR BAIG

train experts in Islamic law. Islam had become the religion of a large community, stretching from North Africa to Central Asia. But apart from the Koran, which Muslims believe to be the word of God revealed through Prophet Mohammed, no definitive theological texts existed. The dominant Muslim sect, the Sunnis, did not have a clerical class, leaving groups of believers to follow whomever inspired them in religious matters. But Sunni Muslim rulers legitimated their rule through religion, depending primarily on an injunction in the Koran binding believers to obey the righteous ruler. Over time, it became important to seek religious conformity and to define dogma to ensure obedience of subjects and to protect rulers from rebellion. Nizam ul-Mulk's *madrasa* was intended to create a class of ulema, muftis, and *qazis* (judges) who would administer the Muslim empire, legitimize its rulers as righteous, and define an unalterable version of Islam.

Abul Hassan al-Ashari, a ninth-century theologian, defined the dogma adopted for this new *madrasa* (and the tens of thousands that would follow) in several polemical texts, including *The Detailed Explanation in Refutation of the People of Perdition* and *The Sparks: Refutation of Heretics and Innovators*. This canon rejected any significant role for reason in religious matters and dictated that religion be the focus of a Muslim's existence. The *madrasas* adopted a core curriculum that divided knowledge between "revealed sciences" and "rational sciences." The revealed sciences included study of the Koran, *hadith*, Koranic commentary, and Islamic jurisprudence. The rational sciences included Arabic language and grammar to help understand the Koran, logic, rhetoric, and philosophy.

Largely unchanged and unchallenged, this approach to education dominated the Islamic world for centuries, until the advent of colonial rule, when Western education penetrated countries previously ruled by Muslims. Throughout the Middle East, as well as in British India and Dutch-ruled Indonesia, modernization marginalized *madrasas*. Their graduates were no longer employable as judges or administrators as the Islamic legal system gave way to Western jurisprudence. Muslim societies became polarized between *madrasa*-educated mullahs and the economically prosperous, Western-educated individuals attending modern schools and colleges.

But the poor remained faithful. The failings of the post-colonial elite in most Muslim countries paved the way for Islamic political movements such as al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin (the Muslim Brotherhood) in the Arab world, Jamaat-e-Islami (the Islamic Party) in South Asia, and the Nahdatul Ulema (the Movement for Religious Scholars) in Indonesia. These movements questioned the legitimacy of the West-

ernized elite, created reminders of Islam's past glory, and played on hopes for an Islamic utopia. In most cases, the founders of Islamic political movements were religiously inclined politicians with a modern education. *Madrasas* provided the rank and file.

The Iranian Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, both in 1979, inspired a profound shift in the Muslim world—and in the *madrasas*. Iran's mullahs had managed to overthrow the shah and take power, undermining the idea that religious education was useless in worldly matters. Although Iranians belong to the minority Shiite sect of Islam, and their *madrasas* have always had a more political character than Sunni seminaries, the image of men in turbans and robes running a country provided a powerful demonstration effect and politicized *madrasas* everywhere.

Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary regime promised to export its revolutionary Shiite ideas to other Muslim states. Khomeini invited teachers and students from *madrasas* in other countries to Tehran for conferences and parades, and he offered money and military training to radical Islamic movements. Iranians argued that the corrupt Arab monarchies must be overthrown just as Iranians had overthrown the shah. Iran's Arab rivals decided to fight revolutionary Shiite fundamentalism with their own version of Sunni fundamentalism. Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries began to pour money into Sunni *madrasas* that rejected the Shiite theology of Iran, fund ulema who declared the Shiite Iranian model unacceptable to Sunnis, and call for a fight against Western decadence rather than Muslim rulers.

In the midst of this conflict, and the *madrasa*

Heads of the Class

Famous (and Infamous) Madrasa Graduates

Abdul Hadi Awang, chief minister of the Malaysian state of Terengganu:
Upon election as chief minister in 1999 on the Islamic Party ticket, Awang sought to impose laws that would punish adultery with stoning to death and theft by amputation. Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad invoked the country's secular constitution to stop the laws from coming into effect, as he had done in the state of Kelantan a decade earlier.

Iran's ayatollahs:
The spiritual leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini graduated from the Hawza Ilmia in Qom, Iran. All of Iran's ayatollahs are graduates of the Shiite *madrasa* system, at the apex of which are the two seminaries in An Najaf, Iraq, and the one at Qom.

Jalaluddin Haqqani, Afghan mujahideen commander:
Haqqani graduated with honors from a *madrasa* in Pakistan and earned a reputation for courage in fighting the Soviets. The CIA considered him a reliable ally and shipped him lifesaving drugs and medical equipment when he was injured in battle. He later joined the Taliban and is now on the "most wanted" list of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Sheikh Abbas Madani, Algerian cleric and dissident leader:
Madani led his Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) to victory in the first round of Algeria's first free election in 1991. Algeria's military canceled the second round, bringing the country's cautious advance toward democracy to a halt and starting a bloody civil war. Madani has been in prison and under house arrest since, occasionally issuing statements calling for an end to the violence and a return to democracy.

Abdurrahman Wahid, president of Indonesia, 1999–2001:
Wahid was elected president as a consensus candidate after the fall of the Suharto military dictatorship. He studied at *madrasas* in Indonesia and in Egypt. As head of Nahdatul Ulema (the Movement of Religious Scholars), Wahid advocated a tolerant and democratic interpretation of Islam.

Mullah Omar, Taliban leader (madrasa dropout):
The Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Omar attended two *madrasas* in Pakistan but did not graduate from either. He left to join the anti-Soviet jihad in his native Afghanistan. In 1995, he organized the Taliban movement to bring post-Soviet Afghanistan's civil war to an end. After taking power, the Taliban imposed Mullah Omar's strict interpretation of Islam on Afghanistan, until the fall of Kabul to pro-U.S. forces in November 2001.

boom it spawned, the United States helped create an Islamic resistance to communism in Afghanistan, encouraging Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich states to fund the Afghan resistance and its supporters throughout the Muslim world. Pakistan's military ruler at the time, Gen. Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, decided to establish *madrasas* instead of modern schools in Afghan refugee camps, where 5 million displaced Afghans provided a natural supply of recruits for the resistance. The refugees needed schools; the resistance needed mujahideen. *Madrasas* would provide an education of sorts, but they would also serve as a center of indoctrination and motivation.

General Zia's model spread throughout the Muslim world. Maulana Samiul Haq, headmaster of the Haqqania *madrasa*, is a firebrand orator who led anti-U.S. demonstrations soon after the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. When I asked if he thought it appropriate to involve his 5- and 6-year-old charges in political demonstrations, Haq remarked, "No one is too young to do the right thing." Later, he added, "Young minds are not for thinking. We catch them for the *madrasas* when they are young, and by the time they are old enough to think, they know what to think." Students and teachers carried militant Islamic ideology from one *madrasa* to another. On one of the walls of the *madrasa* of my youth, someone had written the *hadith* "Seek knowledge even if it takes you as far as China." Across the road from the *madrasa* at Haqqania, some of Tahir's classmates have written a different *hadith*: "Paradise lies under the shade of swords."

The success of General Zia's experiment led to the creation of similar free schools in places as diverse as Morocco, Algeria, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Muslim immigrants in Europe and North America established *madrasas* alongside their mosques, ostensibly to teach religion to their children. Islam requires Muslims to set aside 2.5 percent of their annual savings as *zakat* (charity), and religious education is one area on which *zakat* can be spent. *Madrasas* do not need huge funds to run, though. Teachers' salaries are low, the schools need no funding for research, and books are handed down from one generation to the next.

Madrasas have proliferated with *zakat* and financial assistance from the gulf states. (Some classrooms at Haqqania have a small inscription informing visitors that Saudi Arabia donated the building materials for the classroom.) Modern technology has also played a role, whether by creating international financing networks or new methods of spreading the message, such as through online *madrasas*. Pakistan had 244 *madrasas* in 1956. By the end of last year, the number had risen to 10,000. As many as 1 million students study in *madrasas* in Pakistan, compared with primary-school enrollment of 1.9 million. Most Muslim countries allocate insignificant portions of their budgets for education, leaving large segments of their growing populations without schooling. *Madrasas* fill that gap, especially for the poor. The poorest countries, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, Yemen, and Indonesia, boast the largest *madrasa* enrollment.

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Classes at Haqqania are free, as are meals, which are quite basic. Tahir, the seventh of nine children, likes being at the *madrasa* because it provides him an education without costing his parents anything. He lives in a crowded dormitory of 40 to 50 students, sleeping on rugs and mattresses on the floor. He spends most of the day memorizing texts, squatting in front of a teacher who memorized them in a similar fashion as a child. "God has blessed me as I am learning His word and the teaching of His Prophet," Tahir told me. "I could have been like others in the refugee camp, with no clothes and no food."

Tahir's teacher carries a cane and can often be brutal. One *madrasa* in Pakistan has resorted to the practice of chaining students to pillars until they memorize the day's lesson. But compared with life in a squalid refugee camp, the harshness of the *madrasa* probably is a blessing. Tahir's day begins with the predawn prayer and a breakfast comprising bread and tea; it ends with the night prayer and a dinner of rice and mutton. And if Tahir does well at the *madrasa* and earns a diploma, he can expect to find a job as a preacher in a mosque.

NO TURNING BACK

An estimated 6 million Muslims study in *madrasas* around the world, and twice that number attend *maktabs* or *kuttabs* (small Koranic schools attached to village mosques). An overwhelming majority of these *madrasas* follow the quietist tradition, teaching rejection for Western ways without calling upon believers to fight unbelievers. The few that teach violence, however, drill in those beliefs firmly. The militant *madrasa* is a relatively new phenomenon, the product of mistakes committed in fighting communism in Afghanistan. But even the quietist *madrasa* teaches a rejection of modernity while emphasizing conformity and a medieval mind-set. The Muslim world is divided between the rich and powerful, who are aligned with the West, and the impoverished masses, who turn to religion in the absence of adequate means of livelihood. This social reality makes it difficult for the *madrasas* to remain unaffected by radical ideas, even after the militancy introduced during the last two decades disappears. Cutting off outside funding might help, but because of their modest expenses, *madrasas* can survive without assistance from oil-producing states.

Legitimizing secular power structures through democracy might reduce the political influence of *madrasas*. But that influence is unlikely to wane dramatically as long as *madrasas* are home to a theological class popular with poor Muslims. And the fruits of modernity will need to spread widely before dual education systems in the Muslim world will come to an end.

Muslim states are now calling upon Western governments to support *madrasa* reform through financial aid. The proposed recipe for reform is to add contemporary subjects alongside the traditional religious sciences in *madrasa* curriculum. But *madrasas* will probably survive these reform efforts, just as they survived the introduction of Western education during colonial rule. Can learning science and math, for example, change the worldview shaped by a theology of conformity? I asked Tahir if he is interested in learning math. He said, "In *hadith* there are many references to how many times Allah has multiplied the reward of jihad. If I knew how to multiply, I would be able to calculate the reward I will earn in the hereafter." FP

Want to Know More?

For an overview of the issues confronting contemporary Islamic education, see Fazlur Rahman's ***Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Rosnani Hashim's ***Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for Theory and Practice*** (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996) examines the problems created by a dual educational system that provides both contemporary and theological education.

Mumtaz Ahmad offers detailed case studies of *madrasas* in **"Continuity and Change in the Traditional System of Islamic Education: The Case of Pakistan"** in Craig Baxter and Charles H. Kennedy's, eds., *Pakistan 2000* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001). Ahmad also traces the history and future direction of *madrasas* in a speech delivered on April 30, 2002, titled **"Madrassas (Koranic Schools) in Muslim Societies: What Role in Development?"** available online at the World Bank's Web site.

Another useful study of Pakistani *madrasas* is Muhammad Qasim Zaman's **"Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan"** (*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 2, April 1999). Husain Haqqani surveys jihadist literature in Pakistan in his book review **"The Gospel of Jihad"** (FOREIGN POLICY, September/October 2002). Jessica Stern's essay **"Pakistan's Jihad Culture"** (*Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2000) sheds light on the link between *madrasas* and jihadi militancy. Studies of jihadi *madrasas* and proposals for their reform can be found in Peter Singer's **"Pakistan's Madrassahs: Ensuring a System of Education Not Jihad"** (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2001) and in the International Crisis Group's report **"Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military"** (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2002).

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