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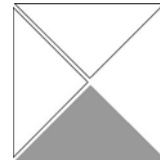
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## Essays

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### **India's Embattled Madrassas**

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by Farish A. Noor

**Since the declaration** of the global war on terror by the U.S. government, the word madrassa has entered public discourse and brought with it a host of associations. From being dubbed the "dens of holy terror" to "jihad factories," this ancient institution has been much written about of late, and yet little understood.

The word madrassa itself comes from the root word *dars*, which means lessons given to students. Since medieval times, madrassas have been part of Muslim social life and are found all over the Muslim world. Over the centuries, they evolved into distinct institutions that trained scholars who would later become religious functionaries, bureaucrats, artists and tradesmen. One could compare them to the religious seminaries that produced generations of Jesuits in the West.

In recent years, madrassas worldwide have come under intense public scrutiny. In 2002, scores of them that had been set up by the Taliban regime were shut down. In August, the government of neighboring Pakistan formally declared that foreign students will no longer be allowed to study at the country's madrassas, while attendance by foreign students at Indian madrassas has dropped to a trickle.

For academics like myself studying madrassas and their transnational connections, our labors have grown increasingly difficult thanks to the public hysteria that we have had to struggle against. During an extended field trip to northern India recently, I chose to focus my research on two madrassas in particular: the prestigious Dar'ul Uloom of Deoband, and the equally famous Dar'ul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama of Lucknow.

The Dar'ul Uloom of Deoband has attracted considerable interest after it was revealed that some of the leaders of the Taliban movement had been trained in smaller madrassas linked to it. The discovery that some of the young men responsible for the London bombings were educated at madrassas in the subcontinent raised the level of public concern as well.

My stays in Deoband and the Nadwa of Lucknow were not without incident. In August, Deoband was once again in the headlines thanks to a *fatwa* issued by a Deobandi scholar which declared that women's participation in politics ought to be limited. (The fatwa was later retracted, though this did little to diminish Deoband's reputation as a bastion of conservatism.) Deoband's rector, Maulana Marghoobur Rehman, finally turned to the media to defend the reputation of his madrassa, which has so far produced more than 76,000 graduates and has an alumni network that stretches from the United Kingdom to Malaysia. It seemed as if the Indian media and government were once again rediscovering the ancient world of madrassas, despite the fact that they have been around for centuries—one of the first being the madrassa Aalia of Calcutta that was set up in 1781.

India's madrassas have adapted themselves to the changing political climate of the country. When India was governed by the East India Company, the schools were allowed to continue providing the same sort of religious education they had offered for centuries. Later, during the Indian uprising of 1857, many of the madrassas stood at the forefront of the anticolonial movement. Following the defeat of the Indian nationalists, India's Muslim community took refuge in their shared religious identity. The Dar'ul Uloom madrassa of Deoband was founded in 1866 as an attempt to safeguard the cultural legacy and religious beliefs of Indian Muslims.

For much of the 20th century, India's madrassas have offered the country's Muslim population an alternative path to education and social advancement. The route to the madrassa remains one of two simple options available for thousands of young Muslim boys in the country: either they opt for a rudimentary education in a government school or try their luck at enrolling for a place in a madrassa, where they are at least provided with scholarships (*wazaif*) and the chance of graduating to become an imam at a mosque or Muslim official. For many of the boys who end up there, a place in Deoband or Nadwa seems like a dream come true: "My family comes from Bihar and we are poor," said a 17-year old student of religious law. "I have six brothers and sisters and I am the eldest boy. When I got my place in this madrassa, my parents were so happy they cried and thanked God. For the first time in years I have clean clothes and three meals every day!" he told me, beaming with satisfaction! .

While it is true that the madrassas offer what must seem like a golden opportunity for many of the poor boys who end up living behind its walls, there are others who insist that they are in need of reform and modernization. As

Professor Akhtarul Wassey of the Jamia Millia University of Delhi pointed out: "The contribution of Indian madrassas to the education of Indian Muslims is beyond doubt. But sadly since the late 19th century, these madrassas have failed to evolve in terms of their syllabi and teaching techniques, partly due to the fear that any kind of modernization might lead to the corruption of traditional Islamic learning."

The concerns of Prof. Akhtarul are echoed by many other Indian intellectuals, academics and politicians. Muslims in India make up a substantial minority numbering more than 150 million, and many ordinary Muslims happen to occupy the lower end of India's social strata. At the same time, India has also witnessed the resurgence of the Hindu right, with fiery leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party roundly condemning the madrassas as hotbeds of fundamentalism and Trojan horses for "foreign elements" (an oblique reference to Pakistan) constantly attempting to undermine the country.

While the more cosmopolitan and well-connected elite of India's great cities like Delhi and Mumbai lament the obvious lack of modernization in the madrassa system, those who teach in the institutions themselves remain adamant that the madrassas should not change simply for the sake of adapting to the present day. "Why should we include courses like business studies or modern subjects in our curriculum?" asked a senior teacher of one of the madrassas I visited. "If boys want to learn about worldly things then they can enroll in any other college or university."

These contradictions were evident during my stay at the madrassas. At both Deoband and Nadwa, computer labs now sit side-by-side classrooms filled with young boys learning the traditional techniques of calligraphy and book-binding. The Internet and mobile phones have entered the once-sacred precinct of the great Deoband madrassa, though breaks in between classes are still sounded by the banging of the gong in the main courtyard. English is now taught at both madrassas, but so are texts such as the *Shara-e Aqaid*, a 15th century treatise that raises theoretical questions such as whether there is only one sky above our heads or whether the sky can be divided into seven, eight or nine parts.

Tackling the question of India's madrassas is likely to be a highly sensitive political challenge. First, while local critics of the antiquated teaching methods and curriculum exist within the Indian Muslim community itself, their efforts to modernize these venerated institutions have been made even more difficult thanks to the undue pressure imposed by the international media and right-wing Hindu parties in India itself. Many of India's prominent Muslim reformers have found themselves in the difficult position of trying to persuade the madrassas to alter their ways without being summarily labeled as "agents of the West," or accused of caving in to pressure from the Hindutva lobby.

Second, the present Congress Party-led government is now forced to demonstrate its commitment to plural democracy on the one hand, and curbing the activities of genuine radicals and militants operating in the country on the other. While the Congress leaders cannot afford to antagonize the Muslim vote, they are also being taken to task by right-wing Hindu groups that claim they are not doing enough in the war on terror.

Third, any attempt to bring about reform in religious educational institutions also has to look at the problems faced by the national educational system as a whole. In India, as in Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, there has been much discussion about the weaknesses of the madrassa educational system. But what the governments in all these countries have avoided addressing is the more complicated issue of the failure of national education in the first place. In a country where the state-run schools are underfunded and poorly equipped, is it not commonsensical for students to turn to other educational alternatives?

Finally, addressing the question of the Indian madrassas and their role and place in the future raises complex questions about Indian identity itself, and whether the nation can come to terms with the challenges of pluralism in the long run. The accusations that the madrassas of India are unpatriotic ring hollow when one takes into consideration the fact that many of the madrassas (including Deoband) have always been pro-India, and that many of the leaders of the Deoband movement actually opposed the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. Nonetheless, it also has to be conceded that for institutions dedicated to the sole purpose of educating Muslim scholars, an inevitable question then arises: Can these students, who have spent years in the company of only other Muslim boys (as girls are practically absent) adjust to the realities of living in an increasingly cosmopolitan and wired India?

Notwithstanding the challenges that lie ahead for the madrassas of India, the fact remains that they have played a crucial role in providing avenues for education, employment and social mobility for thousands of students from all over the world. This view was confirmed by a British Asian student whom I came across while conducting my interviews there. When asked why he had come all the way to this small town in Uttar Pradesh, his reply was: "Why Deoband? Because of its reputation of course! Who hasn't heard of Deoband the great? Why, this has to be the Oxford of madrassas!"

How the Indian government, Indian intellectuals and leaders of India's Muslim community deal with the question of modernizing this Oxford among madrassas may well be one of the key issues that will shape Hindu-Muslim relations and the future of India's Muslim community in the years to come. The solutions cannot possibly be simple ones, but they certainly must be Indian ones.

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