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Views from the Madrassa: Islamic Education in Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on previous reports, this third- and final-year study examines tertiary-level Islamic education in Bangladesh, providing in-depth analysis of the relationship between madrassa education and Islamist and radical politics. The report examines the political consciousness of madrassa 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 madrassa education in Bangladesh while also looking at the alleged connections between madrassas and militancy. The paper concludes with a look at the mushrooming growth of ulama-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh.

Key findings

- Little evidence links Bangladeshi Quomi madrassas with radical politics or militancy. Those tied with militant activities had largely Alia madrassa and general education backgrounds. The common denominator among those indicted for terrorist activities, furthermore, has been the experience of the Afghan jihad, not madrassa education.
- While Quomi madrassa students and teachers appear to be largely apolitical, Alia madrassa 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 madrassa "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 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.
- 68% of those with negative U.S. views, however, believe that once President Bush leaves office, U.S. policies "will change for the better." Their anti-Americanism is thus largely a result of specific U.S. policies and is 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 (60%) of madrassa teachers and students disapprove of "jihad" against America.

Policy implications

- Teachers and students fear that the U.S. uses democracy to interfere in the internal affairs of Muslim countries. Significantly, an overwhelming number of teachers and students believe in 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 sector has opened up new avenues for them to disseminate their views on issues of socio-religious and cultural concerns to a wider audience.

Introduction

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 along with the general education system since the birth of Bangladesh. Although now entrenched in the country's educational landscape, madrassa 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 madrassa education and introduce a unified education system. However, such demands never gained either public support or approval from successive governments since the creation of the nation. In the past, the common critiques against madrassa education have been that it is obsolete, backward and unfit to keep pace with modernity; it is unproductive in the sense that madrassa graduates are ill-equipped to run public offices and, thus, to contribute to the country's development; 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.[1] The focus on madrassas 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."[2] As Islam and madrassa education are traditionally pigeonholed together, and as madrassa graduates are collectively called "ulama" in Bangladesh, both the domestic and international media covering the bombing incidents did so with the assumption that madrassa education may have had a share in those outbursts, and that madrassas are a breeding ground for militant recruits. As Supriya Singh states: "Madrassas have been blamed for fomenting extremism in Bangladesh and are believed to play an important role in the training

[1] 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.

[2] "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.

and recruitment of militants."[3] 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 madrassa students."[4]

Consequently, most of the subsequent media reports insinuated that there had been some "links" between militant tendencies and the madrassas in Bangladesh. Prominent secular intellectuals appeared on television talk shows and wrote in newspapers to make their point that madrassa education was breeding militancy and, therefore, needed to be reformed or merged with mainstream education. Thus, the traditional criticism against madrassa education was replaced with this new, overshadowing indictment that madrassas had become harbingers of militancy. And, although it was the Quomi section of madrassa education that was mainly subjected to detailed surveillance,[5] the Alia sector was by no means given the benefit of the doubt. In the aftermath of those militant activities, many madrassas—both Quomi and Alia[6]—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 madrassas and militancy.[7]

The transition from the traditional critiques against madrassa education to this new, superseding arraignment of militancy is worth analyzing. While the traditional set of charges was mainly related to the madrassas' syllabi and pedagogical tradition, the present condemnation of madrassa education is obviously politically charged. The earlier criticism was concerned with the supposed "unworthiness" of madrassa 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 madrassa system in

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[3] Supriya Singh, "Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB): A Profile," IPCS Special Report 11, February 2006, 6.

[4] Julfikar Ali Manik, "Evidence, confessions point at JMB hallmark," *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 16 2005.

[5] "Qawami madrasas came to the fore after August 17 serial blasts across the country last year," says Shakhawat Liton ("Qawami Madrasa Education") *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 23, 2006.

[6] For detailed narratives on Quomi and Alia madrassa distinctions in Bangladesh, see the first- and second-year reports on Bangladesh of the South Asia Education Survey project (refer fn 53).

[7] 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).

Bangladesh—as elsewhere in the Muslim world—is prompted both by the international war on terrorism and by concerns about the political activism of madrassa ulama.

Keeping the above observations in perspective, this report provides an overview of political trends in the tertiary-level Alia and Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh. Building on the research and analyses of the first- and second-year reports on Islamic education in Bangladesh,[8] this third year of the project examines Islamic education at the tertiary level with further and 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 madrassa 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 madrassa education in Bangladesh, and explores their views on Islamic education, the politics of religious groups, madrassas and militancy, and their responses to the continuous negative media coverage of madrassa education in Bangladesh.[9]

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 madrassa teachers and graduate students have any added reasons that may possibly

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[8] See Mumtaz Ahmad, "Islamic Education in Bangladesh," South Asia Education Survey, The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2006 and Mumtaz Ahmad, "Islamic Education in Bangladesh," South Asia Education Survey, The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2007.

[9] This report is based on extensive visits to a number of madrassas (both Alia and Quomi) in Bangladesh, and on comprehensive focus group discussions with madrassa teachers and graduate students. Field surveys were supplemented by a structured questionnaire comprising 60 questions, through which madrassa teachers and students provided their views and opinions about contemporary domestic and global issues affecting Muslims. Given the hostile media coverage of madrassas in Bangladesh, and the widespread negative perception of madrassas in the West, eliciting responses to the questionnaire was a challenge. Several madrassa teachers and students refused to be interviewed or to complete the questionnaire. At one point we procured a letter from the Secretary General of the Wafaqul Madarisil Arabia, the main Quomi madrassa board, and produced it to Quomi teachers and students; but that also did not help much. In some cases, they agreed to cooperate, but then became wary after reading some "sensitive" questions in the questionnaire. They expressed fears of being misrepresented by the researcher, based on past experience with several local and foreign researchers. Some respondents were concerned that their responses might be reported to the national and international intelligence agencies that could land them in trouble.

There were a total of 81 respondents to the questionnaire, including 52 Alia respondents (13 teachers, 39 students), and 29 Quomi respondents (11 teachers, 18 students). Among the two groups, the Alia respondents addressed almost all questions in the questionnaire; the Quomi respondents, however, skipped over the "frightening" questions.

incite their antipathy toward the West. The report will also address some of the key issues of militancy in Bangladesh and will assess the likelihood, or otherwise, of the involvement of madrassa graduates and teachers in militant activities.

Islamic Education and Militancy

Both radical Islam and madrassa education came to the spotlight after the sudden outbursts of militant incidents in Bangladesh on August 17, 2005. As Quomi madrassas are not controlled by the government in the way the Alia madrassas 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 madrassas also generated considerable curiosity and suspicion among civil society groups, academia and the international community. Hathazari Madrassa,[10] arguably the most reputable Quomi madrassa of the country, was at the center of media reports for quite some time. Generally, these reports suggested that the madrassa was a haven for "terrorist" training.[11]

During our earlier visits to Hathazari Madrassa in 2005, 2006 and 2007, we were told by the madrassa authorities that, while some of their graduates who had pursued higher education in Pakistani madrassas did volunteer for the Afghan jihad during the 1980s, the Hathazari Madrassa itself had not participated in any recruitment campaign for the Afghan jihad. Several students from the Lal Bagh Madrassa in Dhaka, however, went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets through their teachers' contacts with the Pakistani Deobandi madrassas. Similarly, a few dozen students from other Quomi madrassas, including some from the Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas 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 madrassas 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 madrassa

[10] This madrassa is situated in the heart of Hathazari town, Chittagong and hence is commonly known as Hathazari Madrassa. But its actual name is Al-Jameatul Ahlia Darul Uloom Moinul Islam.

[11] A *Daily Star* report titled "Barguna Islamic militants charged with sedition," July 02, 2004, suggests that "Hathazari Madrasa of Chittagong" provides "military training" to its students.

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 madrassas, and nine of them had attended madrassas affiliated with the Ahl-e-Hadith.[12] But even here, the common denominator was the experience of the Afghan jihad, and not madrassa education.

Maulana Ahmad Shafi, the Muhtamim (Principal) of Hathazari Madrassa,[13] acknowledged that madrassa education today faced a magnitude of difficulties and hostility that it had never faced before—not even under British rule.[14] While referring to some reports in the local and international media that the Hathazari Madrassa was in a "secret location," 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 madrassa, and that the UNO and the District Commissioner (DC) came regularly to the madrassa, especially for their Friday prayers; thus, if there were any extremist activities and/or militant training taking place at the madrassa, 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 Madrassa, 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 madrassa 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."[15]

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[12] Interview with an official of the Ministry of Interior, Dhaka, January 2007.

[13] Maulana Shafi also offered the author "free board and lodging" for "one whole month" to "see for yourself what we do."

[14] The Quomi madrassa system has continued since the British period. In the last few years, some media tried to link Hathazari Madrassa with extremist/terrorist activities. The madrassa never fell under such allegations before in its life of more than a century. The madrassa was first established in 1896 and has continued its work at the present site since 1901.

[15] Interview with Maulana Ahmad Shafi, March 29, 2008. Teachers and students of this madrassa were very welcoming and eager to cooperate. As being the most well-known Quomi madrassa 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. Many foreign diplomats, especially from the British High Commission and American Embassy in Dhaka, visited the madrassa, expressed their satisfaction with what they saw and made complimentary comments in the visitors' book. A delegation from Nigeria on behalf of the British Government also visited the madrassa.

Since the waves of violent activities in Bangladesh, Hathazari has, like many other madrassas in the country, been regularly visited and monitored by intelligence agencies. As a gesture of openness, teachers of Hathazari Madrassa said that they would be happier if more visitors would come to visit their madrassa, especially for fact-finding purposes.[16] They welcomed the visits to their madrassa by officials from the British High Commission, the U.S. Embassy and diplomats and journalists from several Western countries, with the hope of allaying any misgivings about the Hathazari Madrassa. Similarly, Alia madrassas have also received visits from foreign diplomats. According to the Chairman of the Bangladesh Madrassa Education Board (BMED), the political attaché at the American Embassy in Dhaka visited the BMED in Dhaka to discuss anti-terrorism reports and was extremely satisfied with the Alia system.[17] Zainul Adedin, the Principal of Ta'mirual Millat Alia Madrassa in Dhaka—one of the largest Alia madrassas in the country—also noted that American embassy officials had visited the Madrassa at the end of 2006 and expressed satisfaction with what they saw there.[18]

Teachers at both the Quomi and Alia madrassas do not deny that there are "black sheep" among the madrassa 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 madrassa students and graduates in militant organizations and activities cannot, in any way, be placed at the doorsteps of the madrassas 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 madrassa individuals in those events was an independent act, and not a

[16] "Nothing is hidden here. We are open. The *thana* (police station) is next to the madrassa; and the madrassa is not in a secret location," said Mufti Jashim Uddin, a senior teacher of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) at Hathazari Madrassa, which, according to madrassa 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 madrassas of Bangladesh. Interview with Mufti Jashim Uddin, March 29, 2008.

[17] Interview with the Chairman of Bangladesh Madrassa Education Board, May 28, 2008.

[18] Principal Abedin felt relieved that the negative media reports about the madrassas prompted visits by foreign diplomats and journalists that eventually proved beneficial for his madrassa, as "the true picture came out and all misunderstandings were removed." He expressed surprise that "while the misguided people who committed militant acts in Bangladesh in August 2005 included both graduates from madrassas and general education systems, the media only targeted the madrassas as breeders of terrorism." Interview with Principal Md. Zainul Adedin, May 28, 2008. Adedin is also the Secretary General of the Bangladesh Madrasa Sikhwak Parisod.

product of madrassa education.[19] Likewise, Principal Anwar Mulla, of Uttar Badda Islamiya Kamil Madrassa (Alia) in Dhaka, dismissed the supposed link between madrassa education and militant tendencies and considered the outcry by some secular intellectuals to abolish madrassa education, on the basis of 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 individuals.[20] 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 madrassa education.

Madrassas and the Media

There has been deep concern among the teachers and students of both Alia and Quomi madrassas about the media coverage they have received in recent years. They believe that the media has always been hostile while reporting on madrassa education. They also believe that the domestic media coverage of madrassa education is part of the global media hostility toward Islam and Muslims.[21] 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

[19] The Secretary General argued that: "You cannot generalize and accuse the entire system of madrassa education because of the action of a few individuals. To declare a war against the entire madrassa 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.

[20] He further stated that: "As a graduate of both madrassa education and Dhaka University, I must say that I had felt 1,000 times more secure at madrassa education 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 5 members (dubbed as Islamic scholars; 2 principals, 2 Khateebs and 1 NGO official) sponsored by the US State Department.

[21] Based on our research, 82% of the madrassa teachers and students surveyed for our questionnaire were unhappy with the media representation of madrassa education and institutions. A group of students of Fadil and Kamil levels at Jamia Qasemia Alia Madrassa 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 madrassa education as a surrogate for attacking Islam.

religious speeches and Friday sermons to spread the message that there is no relation between Islam (and for that matter madrassa education) and terrorist activities.[22] Different groups of madrassa stakeholders also organized seminars and conferences to brief the nation about madrassa education and to dismiss any links between it and militant tendency.[23]

Apart from these measures, the Wafaq organized madrassa *shikwa* (education) seminars on a regular basis to clarify the position of the mainstream Deobandi madrassas on militancy and terrorism.[24] According to Maulana Jabbar of the Wafaq, all affiliated madrassas were instructed to remain vigilant about any "suspicious" activities of their students, so as to prevent any "mischievous" elements from infiltrating the madrassa or use of madrassa students and madrassa premises for militant training and activities. The madrassa 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 Sikwok Parisod (BMSP) also alerted its affiliated madrassas to "keep their eyes and ears open" so that no outside elements could infiltrate madrassas or use their students for militant activities.[25] A Quomi madrassa 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 madrassa.

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[22] Interview with Principal Md. Zainul Adedin, May 28, 2008.

[23] 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 madrassas made headlines, particularly in the wake of the August 2005 bombings, the head of the Wafaqul Madaris ul Arabia, Mufti Ahmad Shafi seemed to have a tough time, and took various measures to counter the allegations that madrassa 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 madrassas; 3) instructing all madrassas affiliated with the Wafaq to open up their madrassa 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 madrassas.

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

[25] The Bangladesh Madrasha Sikkhok Parisod (BMSP) also organized a huge anti-terrorism conference at Diploma Engineers Institute in the heard of Dhaka City in 2006, which was attended by NGOs, academics, and high-level government officials. BMSP (2005) represents the Alia madrassa teachers of the country, and replaced the Jamiatul Mudarreseen that used to be led by Maulana Abdul Mannan, the founder of the *Daily Inqilab* and a great patron of madrassa 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 madrassa education at the 2006 conference.

What the Madrassa Ulama are Really Concerned About

As opposed to media reports that madrassa people are "jihadist" and that madrassas are used as training centers for "Islamic militants," our research found that students and teachers of both Quomi and Alia madrassas were preoccupied either with their studies or, if at all interested in politics, with more down-to-earth issues that have tremendous bearing on the progress of the country. 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: unemployment (as identified by 15% of the respondents); corruption (17%); price-hike (17%); flawed and corrupt educational system (13%); political crisis (11%); violence (5%); lack of democratic practices (10%); the problem of irresponsible fatwas (1%); lack of patriotism (3%); lack of hard work (1%); economic difficulties (11%); military rule (7%); poverty (5%); health problems (2%); lack of science and technology (2%); environmental decay (1%); neglect of religious and moral values (19%); militancy (2%); population problem (1%); food crisis (2%); non-Islamic government (10%); and secularism (1%). It was obvious that most respondents were concerned about 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 madrassa 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 madrassas 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 madrassa.[26] Alia madrassa teachers and

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

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

"We want to establish an Islamic system (*Islami Nizam*) in Bangladesh," was a catchphrase we heard in almost all focus group discussions with madrassa students and teachers. Focus group participants 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 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).

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[**Note to Reader: Tables are located at the end of the document]**

On issues such as the Ahmadiya minority, Taslima Nasreen, and the Christian mission-sponsored NGOs, both the Alia and Quomi madrassa 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 madrassa 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 madrassa ulama. The interesting point to note here, however, is that this level of "extremism" is generally viewed

as "normal" and "expected" by many madrassa ulama, based on their religious training and beliefs.[27]

Deprivation, Alienation, and Extremist Tendencies

There is a wealth of literature attributing the radical and extremist inclinations of madrassa graduates to the psychological deprivation that, supposedly, arises out of conditions of socio-economic deprivation and a dearth of adequate job opportunities. However, first of all, while madrassa graduates are not highly paid, they are—in comparison with their counterparts in the general education system—less likely to remain unemployed after graduation. There are at least as many jobs available for madrassa graduates as there are mosques and madrassas in Bangladesh. And, those unable to find jobs in existing mosques and madrassas are likely to secure a sponsor to build a new mosque of their own or open their own madrassa, 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 madrassa 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 madrassa 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

[27] A prominent Dhaka newspaper editor put it this way: "Whenever a reporter or a photographer at my newspaper tell me that a street march of the madrassa 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 madrassa 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."

abode). Hence, the relative material deprivation that madrassa graduates often face, compared with other occupations, is not a matter of much concern for them. The point is not that madrassa 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.[28]

On the question of *boishomya* (discrimination), it is interesting to note that most madrassa 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 madrassas 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 madrassa 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 organizations and the question of the recent upsurge in international terrorism, many madrassa respondents believed that the West uses the slogan of terrorism to undermine the image of Muslims. They seemed to link the U.S. engagement in Iraq 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 madrassa

[28] For example, a highly respected religious scholar who graduated in the late 1960s from Darul Uloom, Karachi, one of the most well regarded Deobandi madrassas of Pakistan, was offered a prestigious position to teach Hadith in a large madrassa 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."

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. 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 the participants in our focus groups, both from 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 Madrassa in Chittagong. Participating in another focus group discussion, a prominent Deobandi madrassa 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 madrassa 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, “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 madrassa 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 madrassa 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.

Madrassas, Global Politics, and the United States

The political consciousness and worldviews of madrassa 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 madrassa 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 madrassa teachers or graduates to substantiate theories that consider madrassas as breeding grounds for anti-Western, and, for that matter, anti-American tendencies.

More than 90% of our respondents from both the Quomi and Alia madrassas 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 believe that once President Bush leaves 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 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 madrassa teachers and students disapproved of the extreme 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 madrassas remain negative. America is 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 madrassa 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 confirmed that a substantial majority of Muslim world public opinion regards the United States in negative terms. Thus, the negative attitudes among madrassa students toward the United States should not be attributed solely to their madrassa affiliation. The political upheavals in the current world influence all, and because of some recent developments in world politics—the war on terrorism, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon—this negative attitude toward the West is prevalent in Bangladesh society as a whole.

As a teacher of Araishidha Alia Madrassa[29] 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 from reading the newspapers, not from our madrassa syllabus. There is no big difference between a madrassa 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.[30]

Another senior teacher at a Quomi madrassa argued that there is no "inherent hatred" (*paidashi dushmani*) among them against America and that the education they received, and now teach, in madrassas teaches them to treat all human beings in a just manner. However, according to him, the Muslims' negative attitude toward the United States in such a state of affairs is vindicated because similar ill feelings against the United States could be found in any community, if that community happened to receive the treatment Muslims are receiving from the United States today. In our survey, however, when the madrassa 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.[31]

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[29] This madrassa is situated in the district of Brahmanbaria.

[30] Focus group discussion, May 16, 2008.

[31] 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

U.S. Interference in the Affairs of Muslim Countries

Madrassa respondents were most concerned by 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 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.[32]

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

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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."

[32] One student from Jamea Qasemia observed that, given that President George W. Bush is in power and that the U.S. administration is 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 globe, 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."

country does not always behave with the "generosity of a big power." Mufti Jashim Uddin of Hathazari Madrassa rejected the notion that madrassa 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 madrassa '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 madrassa teacher in Chittagong said that anti-Americanism was not confined to madrassas 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 Madrassa 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."[33] During a focus group discussion, when one student talked about the negative propaganda against Islam in the United States, Mufti Jashim Uddin, one of the senior teachers of Hathazari Madrassa, 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 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."[34]

9/11: Whodunit?

As regards the tragic attacks of 9/11, many madrassa teachers and students held views which mainly fell under the category of "conspiracy theories." Some believed that the U.S.

[33] Focus group discussion, April 19, 2008.

[34] Interview with Mufti Jashim Uddin, March 29, 2008.

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, as if they had prior knowledge of the tragedy! 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).

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

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 madrassa teachers and students blamed the Jews and Israel for the 9/11 attacks.

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 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 U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced a commitment of only $2 million in relief. The students expressed bafflement at, in their perception, this unenthusiastic and cold response from the richest and most powerful county 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.”

The United Nations and the Muslim World

Teachers of Araishidha Alia madrassa 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."[35] According to responses to a question regarding the UN, it appeared that most madrassa 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.

Madrassa 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 madrassa 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, 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 madrassa: "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 madrassa 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

[35] Focus group discussion with teachers of Araishidha Alia Madrassa, May 16, 2008.

Quomi madrassa 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."[36] Madrassa 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 madrassa 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?" Ninety-one percent of our respondents believed that President Bush was not sincere, while only 9% replied in the affirmative. Twenty-one percent of the total respondents abstained from answering this question.

During the focus group discussions in several madrassas, 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 its 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 Muslims countries one after another," one Alia madrassa teacher observed. Another teacher of Araishidha Alia Madrassa 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 madrassa teachers and graduate students believe in the principle of democracy and many think that truly democratic governments in Muslim

[36] Focus group discussion, March 15, 2008.

countries may end U.S. domination and its negative influences in Muslim lands. 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. 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 madrassa ulama about their perceptions of various Muslim countries and to see how they view their Islamic credentials. We asked our sample of madrassa teachers and students to identify a Muslim country which, in their view, was closer to Islamic ideals (see Table 3):

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

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):

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Another question sought to elicit the views of madrassa 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):

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

From the above tables, it becomes clear that madrassa communities in Bangladesh rate both the government of Saudi Arabia and its Islamic scholarship quite high. Ninety-one percent 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 reduced 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 madrassa respondents, we find a substantially different picture. Only 18% of the Quomi madrassa 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 madrassa 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 "Ahmadiya Muslims," commonly known as Qadianis in the subcontinent. However, that ill-feeling has more to do with the haziness of the identity of the Qadianis than with the issue of Muslim-non-Muslim relations.[37] The extent of the madrassa ulama's hostility toward the Qadianis is apparent from the fact that 94% of our survey respondents thought that the Bangladesh government should declare the Qadianis as non-Muslims.

As many madrassa 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 Qadianis by both madrassa students and the general public. During our focus group discussions, many madrassa teachers said that they did not approve of the violence against the Qadianis but they would continue to demand that they be

[37] Belief in the Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger of God is an essential article of faith for Muslims. As the Qadianis 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 the world over—ulama in Bangladesh demand that the government declare Qadianis as non-Muslims.

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

Theoretically, madrassa 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 madrassas believe in good relationships between, and co-existence with, different faith communities.[38] Ninety-five percent of our survey respondents believed that there are good people in every religious community. Ninety-nine percent 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-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 Bangladeshi Hindu communities in Bangladesh by some misguided people. An Alia madrassa 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.

There is, however, a great deal of concern on the part of the madrassa 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

[38] As Mufti Jehadulla—a Hathazari Madrassa graduate who now teaches at Potia Quomi Madrassa in 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 Younus was known for his assistance to people of all religions during the devastating hurricane of 1991, as well as for his patronage of Quomi madrassas—including the Hathazari and Potia Madrassas—in Chittagong.

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.

Gender Issues

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 madrassa 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 madrassas; but when it came to the question of applying that knowledge, for example, issuing Islamic legal opinions (fatwas), the figure dropped considerably to 75%. In other words, 25% of madrassa 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. Seventy percent 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 ("domestic angels")—while the latter seem to be coming to terms with the "Islamic feminist" argument that women must become engaged in public life, 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 madrassa-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 showed their support of Prime Minster Khaleda Zia.

As discussed above, madrassa 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 question women's education," but "much more gingerly challenge women's rights to work."[39] 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.[40]

The number of female students at both Quomi and Alia madrassas has increased significantly over the last decade or so. Many madrassas 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 Madrassa and Dottapara Quomi Madrassa —both in Narsingdi—offer education to both male and female students on the same campus but in different buildings. Both madrassas 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 Madrassa runs a separate branch in a different site for female students. The Muhtamim of Dottapara Quomi Madrassa states:

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[39] "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.

[40] Interview in June, 2008.

> 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 madrassa. Because of the good reputation of the female students of this madrassa in terms of their behavior and purdah, they are being married off to grooms of good families. Parents send their daughters to madrassa not only for their love of Islamic education, but also for the Islamic and morally healthy environment that is maintained on the madrassa premises.

It is interesting to note here that not all Quomi madrassa ulama are in favor of higher Islamic education for women. Maulana Mufti Abdur Rahmasn, a respected figure among the Deobandi ulama and the patron of more than half a dozen Quomi madrassas in Dhaka and Chittagong, is extremely critical of the recent trend among the Quomi madrassas 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."

Female graduates from Quomi madrassas generally aspire to be "good housewives" and "good mothers" but many of them also teach at girls' Quomi madrassas if and where such madrassas are available. Conversely, female graduates from Alia madrassas 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 madrassas 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 madrassa 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.

Madrassas 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, madrassa education in Bangladesh does not have such an "identity politics" dimension attached to it. As Bangladeshi culture and Islamic culture overlap each other, many madrassa teachers and students consider theirs the mainstream education, and that Bangladeshi identity and madrassa 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 madrassa 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 madrassa 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 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.

Madrassa 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 madrassa 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 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 madrassa 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.[41]

[41] Interview with Maulana Mohammad Ilyas of Sholak Bahar Madrassa, Chittagong, January 2007.

One may also note another important formative influence on the identity formation of madrassa 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 madrassa 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 Hadith, the madrassa 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 madrassa 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 madrassa 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 madrassa students did not see any contradiction between their Islamic commitment on the one hand, and their demand for an independent state of their own, on the other. This author has met several madrassa 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 madrassa 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 madrassas as well as our interviews and conversations with madrassa 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 Shashontontra 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 obviously because of the long-standing hostility of the elders of the Deoband School toward the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Maulana Seyyed 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 madrassas and students are reported to have been expelled for reading his books or showing sympathy for the Jamaat.

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 madrassas 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 madrassa respondents. [42]

In addition to some of the largest Alia madrassas, all madrassas established and patronized by *pirs* and Barelvis—derogatorily known as *gorom sunni* in Bangladesh—are usually opposed

[42] One important limitation of our Alia madrassas' survey was that, among the four madrassas 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 madrassas. We were informed of several Alia madrassas that maintain political allegiances to some other political parties and that are opposed to Jamaat e-Islami politics. In fact, in several Alia madrassas (and in almost all of the Quomi madrassas) the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami is banned by the madrassa authorities to operate. Some leading Alia madrassas that are opposed to the Jamaat politics are: Qaderia Tayyibiya Alia Madrassa (Dhaka), Jamia Ahmadia Sunnia Madrassa (Chittagong), Jamia Millia Ahmadia Madrassa (Chittagong), Sarsina Darussunnat Alia Madrassa (Pirojpur), Durbati Madinatul Ulum Madrassa (Gazipur), Madrassa-e Alia Koruna Mokabia (Borguna), Sonakanda Kamil Madrassa (Comilla), etc. Madrassa-e Alia Dhaka (commonly known as Dhaka Alia), the oldest and the most prestigious Alia madrassa 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.

to Jamaat-e-Islami politics. Thus, the contention that the Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, controls 98% Alia Madrassas[43] 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 madrassa 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 Madrassa in Chittagong, students have to sign a sworn statement (written in Urdu) at the time of their madrassa admission to the effect that, while studying in this madrassa, 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 madrassa.
2. While studying at this madrassa, 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 madrassa, 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 madrassa 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 madrassas 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 madrassas "on political grounds" but chooses not to interfere in their decisions. It is because of these strict rules, Mufti Jashim Uddin of Hathazari Madrassa states, that no Quomi madrassa in Bangladesh has ever experienced any type of *hartal*

[43] "Playing politics with education," *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 22, 2006.

(strike)—as compared with the country's colleges and universities where *hartals* are a common occurrence.

Mufti Jashim Uddin made a distinction, however, between "*duniyavi syasat*" (secular politics) and "*Islami syasat*" (Islamic politics), stating that the madrassas 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 madrassas and protest against any un-Islamic moves."[44] Thus, sending madrassa 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 madrassa elders. Also, while the Quomi madrassas do not allow their students to participate in partisan politics, they impose no such restrictions on the Tablighi Jamaat activities on their campuses. On the contrary, teachers and students are encouraged to become involved in tabligh work and go out for weeks to do *da'wa* (missionary activity).

Likewise, Maulana Shawkat Ali, of Dottapara Quomi Madrassa in Narsingdi district, also implemented a campus ban on political activism in his madrassa. Despite his personal political views and activism—which leaned toward the Awami League[45]—Maulana Shawkat stated that teachers and students of his madrassa did not maintain links with any political party. At the same time, however, like Mufti Jashim Uddin of the Hathazari Madrassa, 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 madrassa 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 madrassa students in the area. The Maulana cited this incident to reinforce his point that, while the Quomi madrassa community is, ostensibly, non-political, its members are prepared to take action whenever there is "an attack on Islam."

As we discussed in our second-year report, the madrassa 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

[44] Interview with Mufti Jashim Uddin, March 29, 2008.

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

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 madrassa 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 have 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 is maintained that the IJO 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 madrassas 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.

NGOs are Bad: Let's Have Our Own NGOs

Besides mosques, madrassas and political parties, the madrassa ulama's participation in public life, until recently, was limited to some religious organizations, milad mehfils, orphanages, and Islamic journalism. It is only since the 1980s that we witness a concerted effort by the madrassa 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 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"[46] that many madrassa ulama decided to establish their own organizations in the fields of social welfare, community development, micro-credit and education.[47] 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 madrassas, 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."[48] 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 donors. It is no wonder that while the total number of Islamic NGOs registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau of the Prime Minister's Secretariat was less than 18 in the early 1980, 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 sector to take up the job of co-

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

[47] 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 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.

[48] Interview with Shah Abdul Halim, Dhaka, 3 January 2007.

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 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 madrassas have their own outreach programs for adult education, social welfare, and basic health services. The well-known Potia Madrassa, 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 the 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 sector 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 mehfils 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.[49]

More than the madrassa 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 has also organized affiliated organizations of its supporters among school and madrassa 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 other 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) 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.

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

[49] 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 mehfils that were organized in the mosques and neighborhoods all over Dhaka.

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.

Another area of the ulama's participation in the Bangladeshi public domain is through publishing and journalism. Although few madrassa 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 madrassas 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 madrassas. 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 madrassas along with other Islamic scholarly and popular literature published in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. The government-funded Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh that has published more than 2,000 books on various Islamic topics, has contributed significantly in disseminating Islamic teachings and providing publishing opportunities for the ulama.

It is obvious from the above discussion that the madrassa 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 (madrassa students) has meant that the ulama can reach a much wider range of society than their secular competitors.

Conclusion

Madrassa education is deeply embedded in Bangladeshi society and educational culture. Madrassa graduates are an integral part of the larger society and contribute in different spheres of public life. An important strength of madrassa 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 madrassas in Bangladesh enjoy is across the political spectrum.

Madrassa 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 madrassas. 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 madrassa 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,[50] watch televisions, 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 madrassa teacher or a graduate student is not much different from an ordinary person from the general stream of education. To essentialize the madrassa 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.

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

DRAFT

Appendix I: Madrassa Education and Reform in Bangladesh

Reforming and Re-forming the Madrassas

We have already discussed the efforts by the governments of Bangladesh toward reforming the traditional system of Islamic education in our two earlier reports. This brief examines the most recent developments in this respect, especially the progress of promised reforms by the government in view of increasing pressures from the international community, and the changes, if any, in the policies of the care-taker government in Bangladesh as well as the views of those associated with the madrassa system.

As discussed in our first and second years' reports, the government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia had initiated, with the help of certain donor agencies and governments, several incentives for the Quomi madrassas to reform their existing curriculum, including the recognition of their diplomas as equivalent to the general education certificates and degrees, admission in the institutions of higher education, and public service employment. The official announcement by the government in this regard, however, remained just that: an announcement. No concrete action was taken to implement this policy decision. In the meantime, Khaleda Zia's government became embroiled in an intense political conflict with the opposition Awami League and lost whatever interest it had earlier shown in madrassa reform. The government officials in the Ministry of Education, who were not quite enthusiastic about the reforms in the first place, shelved the entire reform package until the inauguration of the new government. The University Grants Commission, the government body that regulates higher education and determines requirements for the equivalence of different educational degrees, also put on hold any decision in this regard. When the interim care-taker government of Mr. Fakhruddin Ahmad took over at the end of 2007, it was faced with a different set of political priorities, least of which was madrassa reform. In early 2008, the care-taker government quietly decided to withdraw the notification offering recognition of Quomi madrassa diplomas.

The debate on the need for, and scope of, the madrassa reforms within the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the University Grants Commission (UGC), however, continued. Several high level MOE officials were of the view that, given the independent and assured financial resource-base of the Quomi madrassas as well as their strong commitment to their traditional mode of learning, no amount of government incentives would persuade them to accept the

government-proposed reforms.[51] Mr. Humayun Khalid of the MoE [52] believes that the 2006 government effort to bring the Quomi madrassas under some official control and to recognize the Daura Hadith madrassa diploma as equivalent to an MA degree did not succeed because: (a) there were internal divisions within the Quomi madrassas on the issue of reforming their curriculum; and (b) they were apprehensive of losing their autonomy.[53] They also feared that the government may, at a later stage, impose more restrictions on them.[54] The UGC was also lukewarm on the issue of recognizing Quomi madrassa degrees. Most members of the Commission were of the view that it would be inadvisable to recognize the madrassa degrees as equivalent to the general education degrees without: (a) a thorough revision of the madrassa curriculum; (b) a substantial upgrading of madrassa library facilities; and (c) direct control of the madrassa examination system by the Commission.[55] The UGC Chairman Prof Asaduzzaman was of the opinion that recognizing the madrassa degree would hardly help Quomi education unless the syllabi and curriculum were fully modernized.

The government attempt to recognize Quomi madrassa degrees elicited two contradictory reactions: one, from the opponents of madrassa education and second, from the "patrons" of the Quomi system. The former fiercely condemned the government's move to recognize the Quomi degree,[56] and demanded to "re-form" the madrassa education, rather than "reform" it. The latter liked the idea of the recognition of Quomi degrees but resented government interference in their

[51] Interview with Humayun Khalid, Ministry of Education, Dhaka, May 27, 2008.

[52] Interview with Humayun Khalid, May 27, 2008.

[53] Although Wafaqul Madarisil Arabia is the largest quomi education board, there are three other small quomi boards operating independently.

[54] This contradicts with what the Chairman of the Wafaqul Madarisil Arabia said in this regard. He maintains that in Pakistan and India Quomi degrees are recognized by government, and equivalence of degrees was conferred about 30 years ago, which the Bangladesh government has not done yet. He complains: "The Government does not regard us as equal human beings! What is our crime? We pay taxes and our contributions are being used for sustaining the secular establishments. We are givers, not takers." It is interesting to note here that while the Quomi madrassas demand the recognition of their own degrees, they oppose, according to Principal Zainul Adedin of the Alia system, the recognition of fadil and kamil degrees of Alia madrassas by the government. Professional rivalry, perhaps.

[55] Interview with the Chairman of the University Grants Commission, Dhaka, January 2007.

[56] See "Playing politics with education," *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 22, 2006.

curriculum.[57] Those who were opposed to the very idea of madrassa education as a separate stream argued that the government's decision to recognize the Quomi madrassa degrees would perpetuate and legitimize a system of education that is "out-of-date, archaic, reactionary, and unproductive."[58] What the government needs to do, according to this view, is to go back and implement the recommendations of the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission Report of 1973, that is, abolish the Quomi madrassa system as it exists today and absorb it within the Alia system altogether. However, few people in Bangladesh believe that any government is capable of taking such a drastic action.[59]

The government's decision to acknowledge the Quomi madrassa education system kicked up an uproar all around, with academics and civil society members terming it "a rash political decision designed only to make the Islamic parties in the ruling alliance happy."[60] The MoE officials were especially upset because the Prime Minister Khaleda Zia "did not even bother to evaluate the quality of education in the Quomi education system before settling for this controversial decision," according to a senior MoE bureaucrat. The general perception among secular intellectuals was that the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP) caved in to the mounting pressure from its coalition partners, Jamaat-e-Islami—who rallied for Fadil-Kamil degrees to be made equivalent to bachelor-master's degrees—and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ)—the religio-political alliance of Deobandi ulama—who wanted their Quomi madrassas' degrees to be recognized without accepting any government control.

Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury, an eminent academic, introduced a class angle to the controversy by pointing out the "dire consequences" of the decision: "Students in the general education system will now be deprived socially, academically and professionally," he told *The*

[57] See "Qawami Madrasa Education: Govt won't be allowed to exert control," *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), August 23, 2006.

[58] These views were expressed by a prominent journalist associated with a leading English newspaper of Dhaka in an interview with the author, June 2007.

[59] It is reported that when the opposition leader Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League was criticized by some secular intellectuals after she signed an electoral alliance agreement with a break-away faction of the Deobandi ulama promising them the recognition of the Quomi madrassa degrees and their authority to issue fatwas, Sheikh Hasina replied, "I need votes; and they [the ulama] have votes."

[60] "Playing Politics with Education," Daily Star (Dhaka), August 22, 2006.

Daily Star newspaper.[61] Former Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University, Professor Emajuddin Ahmad, also expressed his apprehensions about allowing thousands of madrassa degree holders in the public and private job markets. What really seemed to worry many among the modern-educated secular circles was that the government decision was "going to help realize the long-cherished ambition of the Jamaat-Shibir to sneak into the public administration and consolidate its strength."

A *Daily Star* article suggested that the Islami Chhatra Shibir controls 98% of Alia madrassas, from which over 25,000 students obtain degrees every year.[62] "Was this decision intended to revolutionize the ideological orientation of the Bangladesh civil service, and to deprive the middle classes of their job prospects," an eminent NGO activist engaged in the private sector higher education project asked. A former president of the Dhaka University Teachers Association, AAMS Arefin Siddique also pointed out that it would be very easy for the madrassa graduates to get good grades because of "the flexible, questionable education system." "It is very alarming news for the nation. The base of the Jamaat-Shibir politics will become far stronger as their followers will now make their way into the public administration quite easily," Mr. Siddiqui observed. Muzahidul Islam Selim, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), described the government decision as "dangerous" and warned that it may even encourage militancy too.

Echoing the alarm bells that "madrassa students are coming, madrassa students are coming," the *Daily Star* article warned: "Shortly, over 30,000 madrassas across the country [are] going to ensure [a] steady flow of graduates for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examinations every year." Some observers noted that the Alia madrassas were already receiving preferential treatment under the four-party alliance government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia: as against 9.74% increase of government funds for the general education, the Alia madrassas received an increase of 22.22% government funds during 2001-2006.[63]

Certain foreign agencies and foundations also took interest in introducing some reforms in the madrassa education, especially in the Alia sector, since there were few takers in the Quomi madrassas. USAID and the Asia Foundation funded some projects for teaching refresher courses

[61] *Ibid*.

[62] *Ibid*.

[63] Bangladesh Economic Review, 2006.

to Alia madrassa teachers. Misbah Foundation, an NGO that seeks to work with madrassas for educational reform, received funds from some Gulf donors and introduced courses on modern subjects for Quomi madrassa teachers. The Asian Development Bank also provided funding to develop 30 selected Alia madrassas into model madrassas.[64] Similarly, the Islamic Development Bank is also taking part in the modernization of madrassa education, and has recently started providing technical education facilities for 100 Alia madrassas at the first phase and plans to add another 100 madrassas to this program at the second phase.

Curriculum Reforms and the Madrassa Ulama

On the issue of madrassa curriculum, the Quomi and Alia madrassas differ widely. The Quomi madrassas follow a curriculum called Dars-i-Nizami or "syllabus of Nizamuddin," introduced by Mulla Nizamuddin Firanghi Mahali, an eighteenth-century educationist and Islamic scholar of South Asia. In its early times, Dars-i-Nizami included subjects like mathematics, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, logic, geography, literature, chemistry (al-chemi) as well as the Quran, the prophetic traditions or hadith, Islamic jurisprudence or fiqh and Sufism. Mulla Nizamuddin did not want it to be "a hide-bound, fixed and unchanging syllabus, as it is sometimes made out to be today."[65] Although originally this "syllabus was flexible enough to allow for the inclusion of new or better books,"[66] later on in the hands of the successors and custodians of this system of education it turned out to be a most rigid program of study impervious to change. It appears that most Quomi teachers and students have internalized the idea that their syllabus does not need any improvement and change, as it is "perfect."

With regard to the syllabus followed in Quomi and Alia madrassas, our survey showed that 85% of Quomi teachers and students were happy with the existing curriculum taught at their madrassas and only 15% wanted some change in the syllabus. Conversely, only 25% Alia teachers and students were satisfied with the Alia curriculum, while 75% Alia respondents were unhappy with their syllabus and want change in it. Both the questionnaire-based survey and the

[64] Interview with Prof. Md. Yousuf, May 28, 2008.

[65] Interview with Maulana Tariq Rasheed Firanghi Mahali (a ninth generation direct descendant of Mulla Nizamuddin Firanghi Mahali) by Yoginder Sikand.

[66] *Ibid.*

focus group discussions found that the Quomi teachers and students were pretty pleased with their traditional syllabus and their distinctive, autonomous pedagogical tradition. The Alia teachers and students, on the other hand, appeared to be most open with regard to changes in the syllabus; and wanted more general, mainstream subjects to be included at the graduate level, presumably in order for them to compete in the job market with college and university graduates with confidence and competence. Conversely, the Quomi teachers and students regarded too much emphasis on secular subjects as a kind of distraction from their focus on religious education. As Professor Mohammad Yousuf of the Alia system stated, "Syllabus of Alia madrassas is constantly under review according to the demands of the time; new subjects are coming up and we need to include them in order to keep our syllabus up-to-date. We are open to any appropriate change in the syllabus. And this change is driven by the demand of the time."[67]

Alia madrassas follow a revised version of Dars-i-Nizami.[68] However, with government initiatives, the Alia madrassa syllabus underwent many changes in the last few decades. In fact, in terms of general, "secular" subjects, the Alia madrassa curriculum is not much different from the college and university programs, as the students in both streams study almost all general subjects along with Islamic and Arabic subjects.[69] Alia students and teachers maintain that curriculum reform is a continual process, and that they are always open to change it according to the needs of the time. In 1985 when Dakhil and Alim were given equivalence to SSC and HSC respectively, this decision was accompanied by a major change in the Alia curriculum. Another major reform in curriculum was introduced in 2007 when Fadil and Kamil were given equivalence to bachelor degree and master degree, respectively. Once equal educational

[67] Interview, May 28, 2008.

[68] Mumtaz Ahmad, "Madrassa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh," 105.

[69] Many students of the Alia system, however, want more college and university level courses to be introduced in their curriculum. One student of Jamia Qasemia Alia madrassa argued during a discussion session that Alia madrassa education is not at par with general education, as graduate students of Alia madrassas lag behind college and university students in their knowledge of science and technology. Most Alia students believe, however, that their curriculum strikes a balance between spiritual/religious and material education. Most of the Alia teachers and students noted with pride that, as opposed to the general stream of education where religious education is not given much importance, they are "fortunate" to have a curriculum that provides them an opportunity to combine "secular" knowledge with Islamic knowledge. Most of the Quomi and Alia madrassa respondents in our survey (73%) believed that Islamic education provided in universities in Bangladesh is of inferior quality in comparison to that in the madrassa system.

standards were assured, the higher level Alia madrassas were granted affiliation with the Islamic University. Apart from such major changes, there have been several minor modifications of the curriculum from time to time. According to the Chairman of Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, all preparations have been made to introduce business and commerce subjects in Alia madrassas, which may happen sometime soon.

Madrassa Education and Modernity

Most Alia teachers and students do not see any conflict between Islam and modernity; hence they see no incongruity between madrassa education on the one hand, and science, technology and modern social sciences, on the other. Rather, they think that Islam and modernity should go together.[70] Some think that Muslim countries lagged behind in socio-economic development, and that the existing development gap between the West and the Islamic World could only be bridged through thorough educational modernization.

Unlike the Alia teachers and students, their Quomi madrassa counterparts are, to a great extent, reluctant to include general/secular subjects in their curriculum. An overwhelming majority of Quomi teachers and graduate students think that the Quomi system's curriculum is "perfect" and hence does not need any change. The maximum that they are willing to accommodate are the introduction of the English language up to the middle level and some changes in the methods of teaching. Many in the Quomi system are scornful of the Alia curriculum, describing it as a "hodge-podge of secular and Islamic subjects." Mufti Jashim Uddin of Hathazari Madrassa, for example, maintains that education should be "either Islamic or secular; combining the two would create confusion and produce students with little knowledge of either of them."

This idea of the total separation of "Islamic" and "secular" knowledge is not necessarily shared by all Quomi madrassa teachers and students. It was obvious from the deliberations of several focus group discussions that a good number of students, as well as some teachers, of the Quomi stream were fully aware of the need for introducing the so-called "secular" subjects in order that the madrassa graduates could competently participate in contemporary Islamic

[70] As one Alia madrassa teacher put it: "The bifurcation between religious and secular disciplines is a product of the education system introduced by the British in India. The traditional system of Islamic education had no such distinction; it was based on equal emphasis on both *duniya* (this world) and *akhirat* (the world hereafter)."

intellectual debates. The majority of Quomi madrassa teachers believe, however, that they "have already done enough" by introducing general education courses and the English language at the elementary level. They are also willing to continue the teaching of English up to year 10. "This does not mean," as one Quomi madrassa teacher put it, that "we have any ill feeling against English or secular education. It is only a matter of priority, and we in madrassas give priority to Islamic subjects."[71]

One major argument advanced by the madrassa ulama to oppose reform in their curriculum is that the students are being trained in schools and colleges to run offices, factories, and businesses. Madrassas, on the other hand, are training people to sustain Islamic ideals in society. They insist that this "division of labor" between modern and traditional sectors of education is good for both, as it ensures specialization in their respective areas of operations.[72] Another argument advanced by the Quomi madrassa ulama to continue with their traditional, "time-tested" curriculum is the lack of necessary resources for the teaching of new subjects.[73]

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[71] Mufti Jashim Uddin of Hathazari Madrassa maintains that "If both (general and Islamic) courses are taught in madrassas, students will be distracted from their main focus (i.e. religious education), as there are plenty of temptations to seek the pleasures of dunia (this world) in general education." The Maulana refers to a verse in the Qur'an that talks about the diversity of the human race and promotes the concept of understanding (*li ta'aarafu*) between different communities. Mufti Jashim Uddin agrees that all languages and subjects are important for various communities to understand each other. He contends, however, that Quomi madrassas cannot offer each and every subject on earth and that their primary purpose is the preservation and promotion of Islamic education.

[72] "If there is a real need and if there is no other way to train people to run secular establishments, we in the madrassas are ready to fill the gap," Mufti Jashim Uddin of Hathazari Madrassa maintains. "But if the colleges and universities are fulfilling this need, why to burden the madrassas with this responsibility?" At the same time, however, he contends that the Quomi madrassa students are sufficiently equipped to run any institution and points to the fact that the accounts of Hathazari Madrassa are maintained by its own students, although they are not professional accountants. He states: "So, it is not true that the Quomi madrassa graduates are totally useless as for as the running of modern institutions is concerned. However, as their access is restricted, they don't have opportunities to develop their skills in running government establishments." Another Quomi madrassa teacher referred to the successful experiment of the Al-Arafa Islami Bank to recruit about 100 junior bank officers from Quomi madrassas graduates a few years ago. The performance of these madrassa graduates was as good as those of the graduates of colleges and universities, if not better than them.

[73] Maulana Shawkat Ali, the Muhtamim (Principal) of Dottapara Quomi Madrassa in Narsingdi, for example, says that that he does not have any reservations against general subjects but the limited resources available to his madrassa—both logistic and financial—do not allow him to add new courses. "Teachers of science, math, English and economics demand higher salaries, and we don't have resources to pay them," he says. Another Quomi madrassa teacher in Dhaka referred to another dilemma faced by most religious institutions: "Ordinary Muslims give us their charitable contributions because they expect reward from Allah for promoting Islamic education. How can I convince them that they will be equally rewarded by funding English, math and chemistry education?"

Appendix II: Madrassa Finances and Community Support

Similar to mainstream non-government schools and colleges, Alia madrassas are largely funded by government subsidies. Like private colleges, they also charge students tuition fees and receive philanthropic donations. However, as Quomi madrassas do not receive any government funds whatsoever, their sources of funding have remained another key issue that comes to the fore repeatedly in both domestic and foreign media. This brief reinforces what was found in the second-year research that charity and generous donations from members of the public are the main sources of funding for Quomi madrassas.

Case Study: Hathazari Madrassa

Like all other Quomi madrassas, Hathazari Madrassa is also supported by generous donations from Chittagong's business community as well as elsewhere in the country, and charitable contributions in cash and kind from the general public. The madrassa maintains complete transparency of its income and expenditure: even the donation of a few eggs is duly entered in the donation register. Audits of the madrassa accounts are conducted every year by independent auditors and the audit report is strictly examined by both the managing committee and the government. It is because of this financial transparency that people trust the madrassas for their obligatory charitable contribution of *zakat*. When asked about the foreign funding of the madrassas, Mufti Jashimuddin of Hathazari stated that many alumni and well-wishers of Quomi madrassas who reside in foreign countries, including in the United Kingdom and the United States, donate generously to their alma mater: "Only in that sense, Quomi madrassas receive financial assistance from foreign countries."[74]

According to Mufti Jashim Uddin, the three most common sources of revenue of Hathazari Madrassa are: (a) *Musti chaal* (handful of rice)—the madrassa distributes small containers to different houses in the neighborhoods for housewives to fill with one handful of rice everyday; (b) *zakat* and *sadka*; and (c) annual mahfil (Islamic devotional gathering) on madrassa premises

[74] Interview, May 28, 2008.

where people from all walks of life and madrassa alumni gather to listen to Islamic scholars and contribute (or pledge to contribute) to the various current and developmental needs of the madrassa. These annual gatherings have become the largest single source of revenue for Hathazari Madrassa. The same is true in case of other large Quomi madrassas. The last annual mahfil of Hathazari was held on March 7, 2008 and was addressed by several prominent Bangladeshi ulama.

Former students of Hathazari Madrassa are employed as imams and khatibs of mosques and teachers of madrassas all over Bangladesh and in many foreign countries. Some of them are running successful businesses. Many of them try to attend the festive occasion of the annual mahfil and donate generously to their alma mater. In this respect, Mufti Jashimuddin noted that there is a difference between college and madrassa alumni in that that the latter in general have a deeper feeling and attachment for their alma mater. About 12,000 living graduates of Hathazari, many of them in their 80s and 90s, attended the grand centenary celebrations of Hathazari madrassa in 1996 and were given ceremonial *pagri* (turbans) on the occasion.

While most Quomi madrassas are dependent on public philanthropy and religious charities, there are some exceptions, however. We reported some cases of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in northern Bangladesh receiving substantial financial support from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. There are others, especially in Sylhet and Noakhali, which receive considerable part of their revenues from Bangladeshi expatriate communities. Then there are some that have their own waqf or commercial properties attached to them that take care of their expenses. There are others that charge regular fees.[75]

[75] Madrassa Hami-us-Sunnah (est. 1931) in Mekhol, Chittagong, for example, does not ask the general public for financial assistance. The founder, Hazrat Mufti Azam Faizullah (d. 1976), wanted to do something different and was reluctant to go from door to door for financial support. The madrassa charges students for tuition, food, accommodation, examinations, etc. Students who cannot afford to stay in the madrassa hostel find rich families in the neighborhood who offer them free food and accommodation. In return these madrassa students teach the children of the host families the recitation of the Qur'an and/or perform some household chores.

TABLE 1

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

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

TABLE 2

Table 2: Who was responsible for the 9/11 tragedy?[76]

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

[76] Survey responses to question on: "Who, in your view, was behind the 9/11 attacks on America?"

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

TABLE 4

Table 4: Which country is the best friend of Bangladesh?

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

TABLE 5

Table 5: Religious Authority of the Ulama of Other Muslim Countries

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