

# Praise for *The Madrassah Challenge*

*“This is a true benchmark study—it establishes the standard for future work on Pakistan’s vast educational/religious establishment. Fair bases her important recommendations on unprecedented fieldwork and judicious use of the existing literature. This will be an invaluable guide for policymakers, both in Pakistan and in the community of states that wish to help that state develop a truly modern and effective educational system.”*

—Steven Cohen, Brookings Institution

*“This study provides a comprehensive and objective assessment of Islamic education in Pakistan. Weighing the madrassah system’s contribution to sectarianism, violent worldviews, and militancy, Fair methodically dispels many common myths about the country’s religious schools. She also offers sound advice to U.S. policymakers anxious to encourage reforms.”*

—Marvin Weinbaum, Middle East Institute

*“This book provides a highly nuanced understanding of Pakistan society, the challenges and constraints the public education system in Pakistan faces, and the overall place and influence of religious schools in the country. The author is cognizant of the inflated attention that madaris have received from the international security community, especially in the past five years. This solidly researched work, strengthened further by field research, is an objective, welcome contribution which should help separate the fiction surrounding madaris from the reality.”*

—Anita M. Weiss, University of Oregon



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# **The Madrassah Challenge**

## **Militancy and Religious Education in Pakistan**



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**C. Christine Fair**



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To my beloved husband, Jeffrey D. Kelley,  
who has tolerated long stays from home and long hours.  
He is everything to me.



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# Foreword

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Since the founding of the first madrassah in eleventh-century Baghdad, *madaris* (the plural of *madrassah*) have been bastions of Islamic religious orthodoxy. Their core curriculum has remained unchanged. Over the centuries, millions of theologians and religious judges (*muftis* and *qadis*) have been trained at *madaris* in knowledge of the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence. In one sense, the *madaris* were comparable to orthodox religious seminaries in other religious traditions. But the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan changed the perception of the West about *madaris*. As the Taliban emerged from Pakistani seminaries to impose their brand of radical, antimodern, and brutal Islamic rule in Afghanistan, the image of a *madrassah* as the training center for young Islamist zealots took root.

Before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. and European policymakers were more interested in the thoughts of Western-educated Muslims responsible for energy policy in Arab countries than those of half-literate mullahs trained at obscure seminaries. But Taliban leaders, who had ruled Afghanistan since the mid-1990s in the aftermath of Afghanistan's brutal civil war, were the products of *madaris* in Pakistan, and their role as protectors of al Qaeda terrorists has generated keen interest in their alma maters. Several journalists visiting the Darul Uloom Haqqania (Center of Righteous Knowledge), situated on the main highway between Islamabad and Peshawar, in the small town of Akora Khattak, spoke of the conservative school as "the University of Jihad."

The transformation and global spread of *madaris* during the 1980s and 1990s owes much to geopolitics, sectarian struggles, and technology, but the schools' influence and staying power derive from deep-rooted socioeconomic conditions that have so far proved resistant to change. Now, with the prospect of *madaris* churning out tens of thousands of would-be militant graduates each year, calls for reform are growing. But change in the schools' curriculum, approach, or mind-set is unlikely to be easy.

In some ways, *madaris* are at the center of a civil war of ideas in the Islamic world. Westernized and usually affluent Muslims lack an interest

in religious matters, but religious scholars, marginalized by modernization, seek to assert their own relevance by insisting on orthodoxy. A regular education costs money and is often inaccessible to the poor, but madaris are generally free. Poor students attending madaris find it easy to believe that the West, loyal to uncaring and aloof leaders, is responsible for their misery and that Islam as practiced in its earliest form can deliver them.

Madaris have been around since the Seljuk Vizier Nizam ul-Mulk Hassan bin Ali Tusi founded a seminary in Baghdad to train experts in Islamic law in the eleventh-century. Islam had become the religion of a large community, stretching from North Africa to Central Asia. But apart from the Quran, which Muslims believe to be the word of God revealed through the Prophet Mohammad, and scattered records of Hadith, the sayings of Prophet Mohammad, no definitive theological texts existed.

The dominant Muslim sect, the Sunnis, did not have a clerical class, leaving groups of believers to follow whoever inspired them in religious matters. But Sunni Muslim rulers legitimated their rule through religion, depending primarily on an injunction in the Koran binding believers to obey the righteous ruler. Over time, it became important to seek religious conformity and to define dogma to ensure obedience of subjects and to protect rulers from rebellion. Nizam ul-Mulk's madrassah was intended to create a class of *ulema* (theologians), *muftis* (jurist-consults), and *qadis* (judges) who would administer the Muslim empire, legitimize its rulers as righteous, and define an unalterable version of Islam.

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

But the poor remained faithful. The failings of the postcolonial elite in most Muslim countries paved the way for Islamic political movements such as al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin (the Muslim Brotherhood) in the Arab world, Jamaat-e-Islami (the Islamic Party) in South Asia, and the Nahdatul Ulema (the Movement for Religious Scholars) in Indonesia. These movements questioned the legitimacy of the Westernized elite, created reminders of Islam's past glory, and played on hopes for an Islamic utopia. In most cases, the founders of Islamic political movements were religiously inclined politicians with a modern education; madaris provided the rank and file.

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

Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary regime promised to export its revolutionary Shiite ideas to other Muslim states. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries began to pour money into Sunni madaris that rejected the Shiite theology of Iran, fund ulema who declared the Shiite Iranian model unacceptable to Sunnis, and call for a fight against Western decadence rather than Muslim rulers.

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

Pakistan was affected profoundly by the madrassah boom. It had 244 madaris in 1956. In recent years, the number has risen to several thousand. Pakistan's budgetary allocation for public education is inadequate for its burgeoning population, leaving large segments of the poor population without schooling. Madaris fill the education gap, especially for the poor. In the process, the number of madaris with ties to Islamist radicals has also increased, though it still reflects a minuscule proportion of total Pakistani madaris. While not all Islamist radicals come from madaris, Pakistani authorities have often described the madaris as being the central source for the rise of radical Islamism and terrorism.

The nature and extent of the security and social challenge posed by the madaris has seldom been methodically studied by American scholars. Much of the information about madaris in the United States, especially from Pakistan, is anecdotal. In *The Madrassah Challenge*, Christine Fair fulfills the need for an empirical study of the structure, pervasiveness, and nature of Pakistan's madaris.

This study reflects data on madrassah enrollment as well as assessing the quality and impact of a madrassah education. It goes beyond the rhetorical statements in the usual media coverage about "the dominant role" of madaris in Islamist radical movements and paints an honest picture of the madrassah within the context of the overall educational situation of Pakistan. Instead of arousing fear, *The Madrassah Challenge* helps in understanding the relationship between militancy and religious education in Pakistan and analyzes the various ideas for madrassah reform.

Husain Haqqani

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**Aaliyah:** Two-year program of religious studies that follows Thanviyah, e-Khassah (see below).

**Alim** (pl. *ulama*): Scholar of Islamic religion and law.

**Alimiyah:** Two-year program of religious studies that follows Aaliyah.

**al-uloom al-aqliya:** Rational sciences, such as philosophy, geometry, medicine, chemistry, and geography. Often contrasted to *al-uloom al-naqliya* (religiously “transmitted” sciences).

**al-uloom al-naqliya:** “Transmitted sciences,” such as reading and interpreting Quran and Hadith (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Sometimes called traditional or religious sciences. Often understood in contrast to *al-uloom al-aqliya*.

**Ahl-e-Hadith:** Sunni interpretative tradition associated with Hanbali school of jurisprudence (in Pakistan sometimes called Salafist).

**Barelvi:** Usually refers to the followers of Imam Ahmed Raza Khan Barelvi, an important Muslim scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Barelvis tend to observe practices that are Sufi in orientation, such as worship at the graves of religious leaders and the acceptance of rituals associated with this religious tradition.

**Dars-e-Quran:** Literally, study of the Quran. Informal study sessions that convene at a home or a mosque.

**Dars-i-Nizami:** Curriculum devised by Mullah Nizamuddin Sihalvi (d.1748), a scholar in Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy based at Farangi Mahal (a famous madrassah in Lucknow).<sup>1</sup> Not the same curriculum propounded by Mullah Nasiruddin Tusi (d.1064) at the Nizamia madrassah he established in eleventh-century Baghdad. Almost all Sunni madaris—irrespective of whether their sectarian affiliation is Barelvi, Ahl-e-Hadith, Jamaat-i-Islami, or Deobandi—follow this course of study, formally adopted by the Deoband seminary in 1867. Shia madaris have a similar multiyear curriculum. (See *Deobandi*.)

**darul uloom:** Universities.

**daura:** Literally, a tour. Here, a tour of religious proselytization, often in the service of specific groups, such as Tāblighi Jamaat.

**dawa:** Literally, “summons” or “invitation.” Implies proselytizing to non-Muslims to embrace Islam and to Muslims to become better Muslims, variously defined. (See *Tabligi Jamaat*.)

**Deobandi:** School of Islam that emerged from a Muslim religious revival movement in the South Asian subcontinent during British rule. Began in the town of Deoband in modern-day India. Originated as a puritanical movement to uplift Muslims by purifying Islamic practices through, among other things, discouraging mystical beliefs, such as intercession by saints and propitiation at graves and shrines.

**fauqani:** Madrassah education. Generally takes eight years in four two-year stages, beginning with Thanviyah-e-Ammah and ending with Alimiyah.

**fiqh:** Islamic jurisprudence.

**Hadith:** The sayings, actions, and thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad. With the Quran it comprises the sunna (Islamic law). Scholars of various interpretative traditions disagree about the legitimacy of various Hadith texts in the interpretative traditions within Islam.

**hafez:** One who has memorized the Quran.

**Hanafi:** Dominant school of Islamic jurisprudence in Pakistan and South Asia generally. Considered to be the most liberal of the four schools of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) because it accepts both analogical reasoning and unanimity in decision making.

**Hanbali:** One of the four schools of *fiqh* within Sunni Islam. The most rigid of the four schools, as it rejects both analogical reasoning and unanimity in decision making. The foundation of Wahhabi thought.

**Hifz-e-Quran:** Memorizing the Quran.

**Ibtidai:** Literally, “primary.” The first level (five years) of religious education, roughly equivalent to the period of primary education in the worldly sector.

**Islamiyat:** Islamic studies. An official component of Pakistan’s state curriculum.

**Jamaat-i-Islami:** Supra-sectarian Islamist political party in Pakistan.

*jamia*: Colleges

*madrussab* (pl. *madaris*): School that imparts secondary and postsecondary religious education using a specialized curriculum, Dars-i-Nizami.

*maktab* (pl. *makatib*): Religious primary school that generally teaches young children to read the Quran and sometimes to recite it.

*markaz*: Literally, “center.” Headquarters or central offices of an organization. In the context of this study, the central locations of the five boards that govern Pakistan’s madaris.

*maslak* (pl. *masalik*): Way or practice, usually in reference to a particular interpretive tradition.

*matriculation* (“*matric*”): Certificate on completion of ten years of education and passage of an examination. Matric qualification is a prerequisite for many jobs in Pakistan as well as admission to colleges and universities.

*maulvi*: Religious scholar.

*Mutawassitab*: First level of formal religious education that follows Ibtidai. Three years long, it is the equivalent of middle school. (See *Vustani*.)

*Nazira-e-Quran*: Learning to properly recite the Quran.

*nisab*: Curriculum.

*qari* (alt. *qazi*): One who has mastered the recitation of the Quran in one of the seven major styles of recitation, *tajweed*.

*radd*: Refutation.

*Tablighi Jamaat*: Deobandi-influenced organization dedicated to the propagation of authentic Islam (*dawa*). Aims to cleanse Islam of *shirk*, beliefs and practices inconsistent with orthodox Islam and rooted in local, pre-Islamic beliefs.

*tafseer*: Exegesis of the Quran.

*Takmeel*: Typically a one-year, post-M.A. course of religious study.

*Thanviyah-e-Ammab*: Two-year level of religious studies that follows Mutawassitah.

**Thanviyah-e-Khassab:** Two-year level of religious studies that follows Thanviyah-e-Ammah.

**ulama:** See *Alim*.

**umma:** The global Muslim community, the community of Islamic faithful.

**Vustani:** First level of formal religious education that follows Ibtidai. Three years long, the equivalent of middle school. (See *Mutawassitab*.)

**wafaq:** School of thought (maslak). Usually translated as “board”—as in school board. There are five such boards (four Sunni and one Shia), and most of Pakistan’s madaris are affiliated with one of them.

**zakat:** Almsgiving. Muslims donate a percentage of their annual earnings as alms or charity. The amount differs according to Sunni and Shia traditions.

# Acronyms

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B.A.	Baccalaureate
FSR	Education Sector Reform
F.A.	Fine Arts
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Agencies
IU	International Islamic University
IRIT	Iqra Rozatul Itfal Trust
ITMD	Ittehad-e-Tanzimat Madaris-e-Diniya
Jl	Jamia Tafceem ul Quran
JUI	Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Islam
JUI-F	JUI-Fazlur Rehman
M.A.	Master of Arts
MMA	Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal
MRA	Ministry of Religious Affairs
NWFP	Northwest Frontier Province
PEIP	Private Educational Institutions of Pakistan
PEMBO	Pakistan Education Madaris Board Ordinance
PIHS	Pakistani Integrated Household Survey
PME	Pakistan Madrassah Education Ordinance
PML-Q	Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid
SPDC	Social Policy and Development Center
SRA 1860	Societies Registration Act of 1860
SSP	Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan
UNICFF	United Nations Children's Education Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WAPDA	Water and Power Development Authority

