ISLAM and the WEST

edited by
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A significant problem with the current debate on the reform of Islamic religious education is that it gives no clear definition of Islamic religious education. Indeed, the long history and the number of models of Islamic religious education make definition virtually impossible. Despite this complexity, many commentators, particularly Western, discuss Islamic religious education using simplistic assertions and negative generalisations. Furthermore, in the eyes of many Western commentators, all Islamic religious educational systems and institutions seem to be virtually identical. Post-September 11, these commentators argue that reform of Islamic religious education has become imperative, as it is perhaps the most important source of anti-Western attitudes among Muslims and is a breeding ground for terrorism and violence. This chapter opposes this simplistic notion of Islamic religious education and provides an overview of Islamic religious education and an outline of its growth and decline in the pre-modern period. This chapter also addresses the debate on reform in the modern period as well as the impact of September 11 upon that debate.

EDUCATION IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD

In the early Islamic period, broadly speaking, there were three different strands of Islamic education. These were the juridical-theological, the philosophical-scientific, and the mystical-spiritual. Of these, the earliest and most important was the juridical-theological, which began when the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the early 7th century CE. Throughout the 7th and 8th centuries, several sub-disciplines developed within this strand, including the Hadith (Sayings
of the Prophet), tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis), tarikh (history), fiqh (law), kalam (theology) and related disciplines such as Arabic linguistics. During the 8th and 9th centuries CE, the translation of (mainly) Greek scientific and philosophical works into Arabic led to the burgeoning of the philosophical-scientific disciplines. Key works on mysticism began to emerge somewhat later. Major centres of learning were found in Damascus, Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Baghdad and Cordoba. In these cities, rulers and ulama (Islamic religious scholars) supported teaching, research and the dissemination of knowledge. Libraries were also established throughout the Muslim world and rulers competed with each other to attract great scholars to their domains. Thus, over this period Islamic civilisation contributed greatly to all aspects of knowledge. This contribution ranged from the Islamic disciplines to philosophy and the natural sciences, and to literature and the arts. Between the 8th and 11th centuries CE, this great range of disciplines was included in the category of Islamic education. On the whole, it was expected that scholars would be accomplished in a broad range of disciplines, with as much emphasis being placed on breadth as on depth.

The juridical-theological disciplines, however, remained dominant in Islamic religious education up to the modern period. Even philosopher-scientists and mystical-spiritual orders could not ignore this field. In the caliphates or emirates, Islamic law was the law of the land. Practitioners of Islamic law, therefore, needed knowledge of the law, while the state required a supply of competent and well-trained judges and administrators of justice. Even within Islamic law, over time, the educational system opted for specialisation in one school of law. This was largely because, in different regions, different schools of law predominated: Hanafi in the Ottoman Empire; Maliki in areas such as North Africa and Spain; Shafi'i in Egypt and South-East Asia; Hanbali in parts of Arabia; Ja'fari in Iran.

As far as mystical-spiritual education is concerned, from the 8th and 9th centuries CE a strong current of mysticism (Sufism) emerged in the Muslim world. Later, from the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, a number of mystical orders developed, such as Qadiriya and Naqshabandiya. The mystical orders concentrated on one specific area of education, the mystical, which varied from order to order but was essentially concerned with the training of the novice through various stages until the desired ultimate objective of 'reaching God' and spiritual purification was achieved. In the mystical system, there was little emphasis on philosophical-scientific or juridical-theological education.

The early Islamic age of great intellectual achievement began to wane in the 12th century, with an increasing tendency to give priority to 'religious' disciplines over 'non-religious' disciplines. Even before
that, distinctions were made between religious and non-religious disciplines, and voices could be heard warning against the dangers of the non-religious disciplines. The formal separation of religious and non-religious disciplines, however, owes much to the famous theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s (d. 1111) discussion on Islamic disciplines and how Islamic education should be structured. In Sunni Islam, Ghazali’s ideas came to dominate Islamic education and its institutions, right up to the modern period. Ghazali believed that the purpose of knowledge was primarily connected to happiness in the hereafter. Because religious sciences served this purpose best, they were at the top of his hierarchy of knowledge. In Ghazali’s view, the non-religious disciplines included areas of knowledge that were ‘useful’ and ‘relevant’ and others that were highly dangerous, such as metaphysics, which he saw as a threat to religion. Ghazali’s systematic attack on philosophy in his well-known work *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (*The Incoherence of Philosophers*) provided the foundation for the denigration of the study of philosophy in much of the Muslim world, in particular the Muslim East. From then on, the philosophical-scientific disciplines gradually became marginal within the domain of Islamic education. The fate of the philosophical-scientific disciplines can be gleaned from Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406) comment on how such disciplines were flourishing in Christian lands in Europe: ‘We learn by report that in the lands of the Franks on the north shores of the sea philosophical sciences are much in demand, their principles are being revived, the circles for teaching them are numerous, and the number of students seeking to learn them is increasing.’ By contrast, at the same time, Muslims on the whole, particularly in Sunni Islam, were being discouraged from studying the philosophical disciplines.

**FROM INDIVIDUALS TO INSTITUTIONS**

Before the establishment of foundations and formal state-supported educational institutions in the 10th and 11th centuries, the practice was for students to move from one scholar (*alim*) to another, or from one town to another, in search of education. Private teachers (not necessarily scholars) gave lessons to individual students or small groups of students at home or at mosques. These teachers played a significant role in teaching basic literacy, numeracy and the fundamentals of religion, particularly to children. Beyond that, no formal educational institutions of higher learning existed. Aspiring students had to study with an *alim* in their own town or had to travel to another town where the *alim* lived. Students would study under *ulama* who had different areas of specialist knowledge; for example, an *alim* might be well-known for his expertise in a particular book on the Hadith, or in *tafsir* or theology. This style of education continued until the establishment of educational institutions such as al-Azhar in Cairo (originally a Shi’ite-Ismaili institution established in the 10th century) and Nizamiya in Baghdad.
(a Sunni institution established in competition with al-Azhar). These institutions were established largely to train judges, administrators of justice and other state bureaucrats. At Nizamiya, the curriculum covered areas such as tafsir, the Hadith and fiqh (the religious disciplines), as well as philosophy, logic, linguistics, medicine, mathematics and astronomy (the rational disciplines).

The establishment of these two institutions saw a gradual increase in the growth and expansion of similar institutions across the Muslim world, supported by specific endowments. Students were at times encouraged with subsidies or stipends so that they were supported throughout their period of study. Without such endowments, it would have been financially impossible for many students to seek education in a foreign town. From the 13th century onwards there was a significant increase in educational institutions in the Muslim world. However, by that time, these concentrated mainly on juridical-theological education and less on philosophical-scientific areas.

The increase in the number of institutions in the educational arena was not matched by an increase in creativity and innovation in education. The juridical-theological system by then did not seem to have the capacity for innovation, creativity or original research that had existed from the 8th to the 11th centuries. Creativity gave way to mediocrity, preservation of the 'heritage', and blind imitation. This emphasis on imitation and preservation meant that scholars keen to put forward new ideas were often discouraged or ostracised. Associated with this was the adoption of uncritical rote learning, memorisation and unquestioning acceptance of authorities. The system gave a prominent place to earlier scholarship and increasingly led to suspicion of original and creative thinking. Except in rare cases, authors writing about Islamic law and theology were interested only in compiling commentary upon commentary and in summarising those commentaries in a vicious circle of doing and redoing that was devoid of any originality.

Related to this was the decline in philosophical-scientific learning. The philosophical-scientific disciplines came to be viewed as not sufficiently religious for the educational institutions of Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus and other major centres of Islamic learning. In fact, fatwas were issued by several leading jurists prohibiting the teaching of philosophy because, in their view, it might lead to the corruption of faith and the questioning of the fundamentals of religion. Some philosophical works were burnt, and in some cases philosophers had to flee for their lives. By the early 19th century, Islamic religious education in key centres of learning, whether Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Baghdad or Damascus, had certain characteristics in common, such as the restriction of the curriculum to religious disciplines, and reliance on memorisation and rote-learning. These institutions and their curricula remained unaffected by developments in Europe.
REFORM DEBATE IN THE MODERN PERIOD

Muslim thinkers debated educational reform from the mid-19th century. Among the first to advocate reform in the modern period was Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) in the Indian subcontinent. He saw the Islamic religious education offered in seminaries in India as backward, anti-modern and too legalistic. He wanted the institutions and seminaries to renew their curricula, pedagogy and structures in keeping with modernity. He advocated adopting Western methods of education, including secular subjects in the curriculum, learning foreign languages such as English and discarding superstitions. Ahmad Khan, like many modernists, took a positive view of Western civilisation and intellectual practices, in contrast to many other Muslims of his period, who viewed the West and Western civilisation with hostility. Modernist reformers recognised that Muslim societies were lagging behind the West in terms of intellectual, social, political and economic development. To rectify this, they asserted that there existed a great need for Muslims to learn from the West. In Egypt, Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) also advocated the reform of Islamic religious education, with particular emphasis on the al-Azhar seminary, but he was opposed by the ulama of al-Azhar. Despite pressure to reform its curricula and teaching, al-Azhar resisted significant reform well into the 1960s.9

The debate on reform continued in the 20th century in almost all key Muslim communities. Naturally, the intensity of the debate, and the support for reform expressed by intellectuals, administrators of Islamic religious educational institutions, ulama and state education authorities varied from country to country, and, even within one country, from region to region and from institution to institution. The reformers saw Islamic religious educational institutions as an important part of Muslim life, at both the individual and collective levels. Graduates of these institutions played or were expected to play a significant role in society, as ulama, muftis, teachers of religion, imams at mosques, and community leaders. Their roles required that they be aware of and knowledgeable about the reality of the modern environment. The reformers believed that in order to achieve this objective, the religious educational institutions had to undergo significant reform in two areas: curricula and teaching methods.

In relation to the curricula, many reformers argued that the distinction between religious and non-religious disciplines should be rethought, particularly as the two had existed side by side in early Islam. Knowledge – be it religious or non-religious – was important and useful, and Muslims, it was argued, were under an obligation to acquire it (including knowledge that in the post-Ghazali period was frowned upon). Islamic educational institutions, it was further argued, should broaden their curricula with modern disciplines from the social
and natural sciences as well as foreign languages. In the religious disciplines, several reformers proposed that students should study Islamic writings from all areas of Muslim intellectual output, be it law, literature, philosophy, mysticism or theology. Several reformers also believed that one of the most effective ways to open the minds of students was to expose them to critical methods of inquiry and to encourage them to understand Islam within its social, political, cultural and historical contexts. It was believed that such a course of action was bound to expose issues of permanence and change, immutability and mutability, the universal and the particular, the absolute and the relative in Islamic law, ethics, morality, institutions and world view.¹⁰

From the reformers’ point of view, designing a curriculum to incorporate Islamic and other areas of knowledge would not itself lead to the desired change. The key strategy for improvement was a radical shift in the purpose of teaching and an overhaul of the key pillars of what was considered valid practice in teaching. Teaching was no longer to be concerned solely with the transmission of knowledge or the exposition of difficult texts, as had often been the case in the pre-modern period. The teacher was to be a facilitator of critical discussion, of the exploration of the link between an issue and its context, not seeking one correct answer but freely exploring all possible aspects of a problem.¹¹

In the 20th century the debate on reform of education in general, and of Islamic religious education in particular, led to the establishment of (a) a number of ‘modern’ Islamic institutions of higher learning and (b) state-funded schools, in which Islamic religious education was taught alongside secular subjects.

INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

One of the important developments in the wake of the debate on reform of Islamic education has been the establishment of a number of Islamic universities and the reform of existing seminaries. Some of these institutions concentrate entirely on Islamic studies; others combine Islamic studies with other disciplines; others have faculties of Islamic studies alongside secular faculties such as medicine, engineering and law.

The Islamic University of Saudi Arabia is an example of the first. It is a relatively recently established university (1961) and its focus is entirely on Islamic studies. It has five Islamic faculties: law, theology, the Qur’an, the Hadith and Arabic. This type of Islamic university adopts a classical model of Islamic studies in a modern university setting. It has a formal curriculum and modern infrastructure, and uses modern methods of teaching and assessment. A shortcoming in teaching, however, is the lack of training in critical thinking. Teaching and learning exist within an authoritative framework in which the teacher is dominant. The research process often consists merely of collecting seg-
ments of information and putting them together in an ordered but uncritical form. Students exercise caution in the selection of research topics, as anything sensitive or controversial is likely to be rejected by potential supervisors. Finally, the whole curriculum is driven largely towards producing graduates who, to a large extent, rely on memorised knowledge, with no critical evaluation of that knowledge.

The International Islamic University of Malaysia is an example of an institution that was intended to remedy the problems associated with more traditional Islamic universities. It comprises not only Islamic disciplines but also others such as medicine, engineering, science, architecture and information technology. However, there is a strong Islamic ethos in all of its faculties, and ideas related to Islamic knowledge and culture are taught throughout the university. The curricula of Islamic disciplines are considered modern, and are offered in a modern setting by staff who are expected to have both modern and traditional education and who may have spent time in universities in the West or in other Islamic countries. The traditional method of focusing on specific texts (books) has been supplanted by a focus on issues, themes and problems. The university stresses the importance of writing as a means of communication and expression. Foreign languages are taught for both research and communicative purposes. Both English and Arabic are used for instruction, even in the teaching of Islamic disciplines. This university is modern in terms of its physical and academic infrastructure, curricula, teaching methods, course objectives, and its interest in relating what students study to the modern context. In a sense, the International Islamic University of Malaysia represents one of the most progressive institutions in contemporary Islamic education.

However, even there – particularly in the faculty that is primarily concerned with what is called ‘revealed knowledge’ (Islamic studies) – teaching and learning continue to take place to some extent in an ethos of traditionalism, albeit with a degree of flexibility, freedom and creativity absent in many traditionalist Islamic universities.

A third model is represented by the reform of existing traditionalist institutions of Islamic higher learning. In Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s, a number of institutes called Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN – State Institute of Islamic Studies) were established, initially in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. In the 1960s, the IAIN system was transformed in an attempt to bring secular and religious education under one roof, with a more modern form of religious education. The purpose was to foster the development of a cohort of Muslims who had a more modern understanding of Islam and its role in a modern society and were predisposed to view modern institutions and modernisation itself in a positive light. The reform of the IAINs was guided by a particular philosophy that stressed that Islam was not incompatible with modernity, that it could
provide a vision of a prosperous future, and that it fostered tolerance and religious pluralism. On the basis of this philosophy, Mukti Ali, the first minister of religious affairs entrusted with their reform, aimed to change the IAINs to modern institutions of Islamic learning whose graduates would be open-minded agents of modernisation, able to contribute towards changing the traditional outlook of many Indonesian Muslims. This entailed exposing IAIN students to various trends in Islamic thought, both classical and modern as well as orthodox and heterodox. Students and lecturers were given considerable freedom to explore and discuss ideas, even when such ideas were in conflict with traditionally accepted dogma. The less orthodox views of Ibn Arabi, the excesses of Sufism, and the theology of the rationalist thinkers of Islam, for example, were studied, lectured on, discussed and openly portrayed as acceptable. There was no censorship of this discourse and students were not criticised for expressing views that appeared to be unorthodox compared to those current in many other Islamic universities.14

PUBLIC SCHOOLS
In the Muslim world, private elementary schooling that focused on reading and writing, recitation of the Qur’an, and some basic skills in the local language was provided by what is known as kuttab (traditional non-formal elementary schools).15 In the 20th century, Muslim states replaced these with schools with more broadly based curricula. While there are differences in the management of school education across the Muslim world, a common characteristic is the provision of a broad-based secular education, with the allocation of some periods in the week to Islamic religious education, the time allocated and content varying from country to country. Usually, the number of periods allocated to Islamic religious education is between two and four per week, but Saudi Arabia tends to give much more time to religion-related areas in its school curriculum. An important characteristic of this religious education is that it tends to emphasise a few, relatively safe, basic principles of Islam. Topics covered include: (a) how to perform the basic rituals such as the daily prayers, fasting and pilgrimage, and the formal prayers that are recited in these rituals; (b) some of the norms and values of Islam, such as the importance of honesty, truthfulness and respect for elders and parents; (c) recitation of the Qur’an and the rules associated therewith; (d) rudimentary information about the life of the Prophet; (e) and, in some countries perhaps, a little about the history of Islam and how Islam was introduced into that country. These religious education curricula omit or minimise important aspects of Islamic history, such as the conflicts that occurred among Muslims from time to time, or the notion of Jihad. Not only are the topics innocuous, but also some of the material presented appears to be irrelevant and too abstract for school students. After ten to twelve years of
such instruction in the school system, perhaps the most students can
expect is to memorise prayers for the daily rituals and learn some basics
of Islam and some Islamic values and norms.

THE SEMINARY AS A CHALLENGE TO REFORM

While most of these developments are encouraging, the future of many
Islamic seminaries where reform has not occurred remains a key con-
cern for Muslim thinkers. These seminaries (often called madrasas)
vary enormously in their curricula, coverage of disciplines, methods of
teaching, and attitudes to issues such as modernity and reform of
Islamic law and theology. Such seminaries exist in most Muslim com-
munities. In Pakistan, there are nearly 10,000 such schools; their num-
ber is probably close to 30,000 in both India and Indonesia (where
they are called pesantrens).16 Some are very small with a few students,
and others may have several thousand students, such as the well-known
Deobandi seminary in India.17 Some also have boarding facilities.
Some teach only traditional Islamic subjects, while others combine
these subjects with so-called secular subjects. Some rely on rote learn-
ing and memorisation; others encourage exploration and creativity.
Some are ultra-conservative, while others are modern, progressive and
liberal. By and large, most would fall into the traditionalist-conserva-
tive category. A few, in Pakistan and Indonesia, have been accused of
teaching students to engage in violence.

An example of a typical seminary in Pakistan is Jamia Salafiya, in
Faisalabad, an Ahle Hadith seminary. Its students enrol after finishing
primary school, at around twelve years of age. Younger students join its
Qur’an memorisation classes. After a minimum of eight years of study,
successful students receive a certificate (equivalent to a BA in Pakistan),
which allows them to become imams or religious education teachers at
school level or at similar seminaries. The seminary’s curriculum is tra-
ditional and is centred on some of the Islamic disciplines. During the
first two years, students are introduced to the Arabic language, pri-
marily basic grammar. Arabic is taught not necessarily for communica-
tive purposes but to prepare students to read classical Islamic texts.
Students are introduced to classical disciplines such as the Hadith,
tafsir and theology. Some of the texts may be in Urdu, and texts in
Arabic are often translated by the teachers into Urdu so that students
can understand them. The focus is on mastering the set texts rather
than a particular discipline. Examinations are used to test the memori-
sation and understanding of texts. Also ignored in this model is the link
between knowledge, for example the Hadith, and its context, such as
the development of the Hadith and the debates surrounding it. The
curriculum is highly authoritarian, and the teacher’s function is to
transmit knowledge, to explain, and to convey to the students what is
to be learnt and how it is to be learnt. Students are not encouraged to
critically explore the issues raised in texts or in the class; their role is often limited to memorising or studying the prescribed texts.

While the Salafiya seminary introduced some reforms in the 1980s, 1990s and beyond, it is still traditional in its approach to education. However, there are far more traditionalist seminaries in Pakistan and elsewhere in the Muslim world. It was primarily these seminaries that Western commentators were targeting for criticism in the post-September 11 period.

REFORM DEBATE POST-SEPTEMBER 11

Since September 11, many Western commentators have argued that traditional Islamic religious education provides Muslim militant extremists with the ideological basis for activities that are anti-Western and terrorist. The educational institutions referred to are Islamic seminaries, madrasas and universities. Pakistan was singled out largely because of its diplomatic connection with the Taliban and because the Taliban harboured Al-Qaeda members. Saudi Arabia’s system of Islamic education was seen as subversive to a certain extent, because fifteen of the nineteen September 11 hijackers were Saudis. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Asia Times wrote:

> Education has also been a lightning rod of controversy lately. Many Saudis worry that the nation’s religious-based schooling inadequately prepares the young for careers in a globalised and technologically advanced world. America has also attacked the Saudi school system, accusing it of indoctrinating pupils with Islamic fundamentalism.

Thomas Friedman of the New York Times stated more succinctly:

> Bin Laden’s challenge was an attempt by the extreme Islamists to break out of their island and seize control of the secular state island. The states responded by crushing or expelling the Islamists, but without ever trying to reform the Islamic schools – called madrasas – or the political conditions that keep producing angry Islamist waves. So the deadly circle that produced bin Ladenism – poverty, dictatorship and religious anti-modernism, each reinforcing the other – just gets perpetuated.

This view of Islamic educational institutions as sources of potential terrorists was also evident before September 11. For example, after his visit to Haqqania madrasa in Pakistan (which was seen to be strongly connected with the Taliban), Jeffrey Goldberg of the New York Times wrote: ‘The Haqqania madrasa is, in fact, a Jihad factory. This does not make it unique in Pakistan. There are one million students studying in the country’s 10000 or so madrasas, and militant Islam is at the core of most of these schools.’

In the aftermath of September 11, governments in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries sought to use the so-called war on terror to
discredit Islamic religious educational institutions. Even in a number of Muslim majority countries, authoritarian governments sought to close a number of madrasas and gain control of the madrasa system, an area that has traditionally remained largely beyond official reach. The opportunity provided by the war on terror to bring such madrasas under the control of the state was therefore attractive. Pakistan announced sweeping reforms of its madrasa system and Bangladesh is exploring ways of following suit. China has utilised the opportunity to closely monitor Islamic education curricula in the troubled province of Xinjiang. In India in April-2002, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs sought 'strict action against religious fundamentalist institutions which have come up in the country, particularly along the India–Nepal border, with the help of Pakistan ISI for indoctrinating young minds to wage holy war against India'.

However, according to the Indian Milli Gazette editorial, 'No madrasa has been ever [sic] named or taken to court, no terrorist has been ever [sic] found in their premises, no texts have been found which teach terrorism'.

Despite this rhetoric, there is little evidence given for a strong connection between terrorist acts by certain Muslims and Islamic religious education in general. Islamic religious education has existed for the past 1400 years in many societies and across the continents, yet on the whole its institutions do not have a record of producing terrorists. None of the Muslim extremist groups or their well-known leaders, as named by the American FBI, are graduates of Islamic religious educational institutions. This applies even to bin Laden and to Ayman al-Zawahiri of the Egyptian Jihad. The nineteen hijackers (and the twentieth, currently in prison in the US) named by the FBI as responsible for the September 11 attacks were not graduates of Islamic religious education. This is not to deny that exceptions exist. In South-East Asia, Jemaah Islamiyah, with which Abu Bakr Bashir and others accused of terrorism are associated, is closely connected with Islamic religious education. Jemaah Islamiyah runs a madrasa in Indonesia, but it is only one of several thousand madrasas and seminaries in Indonesia, the vast majority of which have no connection to terrorism or terrorists. More importantly, there are fifty-six Muslim majority countries, all of which have Islamic religious educational institutions. Such institutions exist also in Muslim minority contexts. If Islamic religious education as such is responsible for terrorism and anti-Westernism, then we should be witnessing terrorism and anti-Westernism on a global scale. A final point is that Islamic religious educational institutions (particularly in Sunni Islam) have tended to support the status quo and not oppose political authorities, even when such authorities are autocratic, authoritarian and unjust. This is in part to do with the Sunni theological position that one should avoid creating havoc in the community. Finally, most Islamic religious
educational institutions provide a service by offering some form of education to the marginalised and disadvantaged in their communities. In Pakistan, for example, thousands of often marginalised students enrol in these institutions, without which they would not have access to any form of education.

In the post–September 11 environment, the debate on the reform of Islamic religious education, which began in the 19th century, has changed. For many Western commentators, reform primarily appears to mean changing the system of Islamic religious education in order to produce a generation of more West-friendly Muslims. In this view, references to violence, Jihad and intolerance towards non-Muslims and the West are to be removed from the religious education curricula, where such references exist. Presumably this is to be achieved through the coercive power of the state to force a set curriculum on the religious educational institutions. This may also mean that the state will monitor these institutions and keep them under strict control. The model appears to be authoritarian, coercive and top-down.

Predictably, this brand of reform has been severely criticised by a wide range of Muslims. Several important discussions on these developments have taken place, including on the al-Jazeera television network, which has a global audience of close to 100 million. While many of the prominent academics and scholars invited to take part in these debates had long argued for the reform of Islamic religious education, they refused to accept that the West in general and the United States in particular should or could impose on Muslims a particular brand of reform, especially in such a sensitive area as Islamic religious education. As one of the scholars who participated stated, the brand of Islam that is promoted is an Americanised Islam or a ‘CIA Islam’, devoid of any ability to withstand and resist injustice, oppression, persecution, neocolonialism and neo-imperialism. The idea that a non-Muslim government or its institutions could dictate to Muslims what Islam is and what Islamic religious education should be was, in their view, tantamount to compromising Islam’s independence.

While the reform of Islamic religious education is an important issue for many Muslims, they reject perceived US attempts to impose such reform upon Muslim societies. In fact, attempts by external actors to do so may in fact thwart the internal project of reform that has been developing over the last century and a half. The war on terror may well be the biggest stumbling block to the reform of Islamic religious education, as it is creating a strong feeling of vulnerability in many parts of the Muslim world. Even in the West, where Muslims have a high degree of freedom to experiment with and explore the interpretation of key Islamic texts and doctrines, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the more liberal-minded among them to advocate their views because of a defensive, conservative backlash. A sense of frustration is
emerging among many progressive Muslims, which could retard any drive towards major reform of this important area. In the current climate, intellectuals, thinkers and scholars who argue for reform may also be labelled traitors, apostates or heretics by others in their communities. The voices of reform in Muslim majority countries, and in the West, could also be silenced by future geopolitical developments. Within the Muslim world there exists a sense of being targeted by the Western world, particularly given that to many Muslims the war on terror does not seem to differentiate between militant and non-militant Muslims (and the latter may include traditionalists, so-called fundamentalists, Islamists and liberal Muslims). In the current sensitive climate, even many reform-minded Muslims believe that internal attempts at reform must not be seen as the result of external pressure.

Throughout Islamic history, reform and change have been associated with a number of factors. One factor has been the degree of confidence on the part of the community, or umma. In times of prosperity, security, freedom, and lack of external threat, Muslims have embraced new values, institutions and ideas, as happened in the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries. In periods characterised by external threats, such as the Mongol invasion and the sacking of Baghdad in the 13th century, that confidence dissipated, as did intellectual freedom, creativity and acceptance of the ‘Other’ to a certain extent. Within communities struggling for survival, any talk of reform or change could be seen as too destabilising to be entertained. Even in the 20th century, the discussion of reform among Muslims often succeeded in places where there was confidence, prosperity, security and freedom. In adverse conditions, such as the current climate, societies are more likely to cling to the status quo, including in matters of religious education. If reform of Islamic religious education is to occur, and I believe it should, it must come from inside Muslim communities.

NOTES
4 Cited in Al Tibawi, Islamic Education, p. 44.
5 For a discussion on how teaching took place in these institutions, see Francis Robinson, ‘Knowledge, its transmission’, pp. 221–22.
In the early 20th century, it had to include subjects such as geography, sciences, and history, but these were mainly taught at the lower levels of the Azhar system (primary and secondary). In the 1960s, the Egyptian Government imposed a series of reforms on the institution, including the establishment of faculties of engineering and medicine and the introduction of law into the Faculty of Shari'a. Despite these changes, the curricula and teaching in the religious disciplines remained traditional to a large extent.


For information about the International Islamic University, see its homepage at [http://www.iiu.edu.my/](http://www.iiu.edu.my/).

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‘Crusade against madrasahs in India’.

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