

## **Pakistan's lurch towards ultra-conservatism abetted by Saudi-inspired pyramid scheme**

By James M. Dorsey

### **Introduction**

Pakistan has been for at least four decades a major theatre of operations in the global struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for dominance in the Muslim world. The stakes for both regional powers are high given that Pakistan borders on Iran; shares with the Islamic republic the restless region of Baluchistan that potentially allows Saudi Arabia and Iran to stir the pot in each other's backyard; and is home to the world's largest Shiite minority viewed by the kingdom as an Iranian fifth wheel. To counter potential Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia has poured billions of dollars into supporting ultra-conservative forces in Pakistan that despite doctrinal theological differences with Wahhabism, the ultra-conservative worldview that underwrites the rule of the Al Saud family, adhere to an equally puritan, literal interpretation of Islam that is inward-looking, intolerant and supremacist in nature.<sup>1</sup>

Saudi funding, a pillar of the kingdom's more than 40-year long public diplomacy campaign, the world's largest dedicated effort of its kind, has helped weave ultra-conservatism into significant segments of Pakistani society as well as key branches of government and the state that have fostered an environment capable of sustaining itself, expanding its reach, and spawning institutions that target specific societal groups. It has also enabled institutions that are inspired by Saudi ideology but not necessarily financially or otherwise associated with the kingdom. No social group or class, including Pakistan's political and military, has proven to be immune to the spread of ultra-conservatism as a result of Pakistani government policies and Saudi encouragement.

Al-Huda International Welfare Foundation, a religious school with branches in numerous Pakistani cities as well as in North America, Europe and the Middle East has emerged as the leading institution in persuading large numbers of upper and middle class Pakistani women, many of whom had adopted liberal lifestyles, to change their ways and adhere to an ultra-conservative interpretation of the faith akin to Saudi ideology that Al Huda projects as the only true Islam. In doing so, Al Huda contributes not only to Pakistan society's drift towards ultra-conservatism, but also to acceptance of a worldview that wittingly or unwittingly serves Saudi geopolitical goals in a key country at the crossroads of the Middle East and South and Central Asia.

### **A divisive figure**

Al Huda director Farhat Naseem Hashmi, a charismatic, 60-year old Pakistani Islamic scholar and cultural entrepreneur, has emerged as a divisive figure in Pakistan. To her followers, she is an inspiration who launched them on a life-fulfilling path by introducing them to an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam. To her detractors, she is an agent of Saudi-inspired obscurantism and intolerance. Hashmi, critics charge, reflects and drives the spread among Pakistan's upper and middle classes of the kind of ultra-conservatism that fosters an enabling environment for radicalization. "She preaches extremism, there is no doubt about it. She uses religion to teach jihad. She engages in hate speech," said Azaz Syed a prominent Pakistani journalist who focuses on Islamic militancy and has written an acclaimed book on the topic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James M. Dorsey, Creating Frankenstein: The Saudi Export of Wahhabism - Remarks at 2016 Exeter Gulf Conference, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 24 August 2016, [https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.jp/2016/08/creating-frankenstein-saudi-export-of\\_24.html](https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.jp/2016/08/creating-frankenstein-saudi-export-of_24.html)

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the author, 11 April 2017

Confronted with multiple allegations of her alleged militancy, Hashmi, a tall, heavy-set woman, fully covered by a black Saudi style robe and dark blue head and face cover that leaves only her eyes visible behind round glasses, expresses surprise. “I wonder where people get these things. There is no politics in our classes. Politics is not my domain. What I care about is peace at heart and peace at home. I don’t read about politics. I teach people how to build good lives and be good people. It disturbs me that there is no peace in the world. I don’t understand why people quarrel. Whatever peace at heart I have achieved, I want to share with others,” Hashmi says.<sup>3</sup>

In a stunning break with a Saudi-backed 1974 amendment to the Pakistani constitution as well as with widespread Sunni Muslim public opinion, Hashmi asserted that Ahmadis, viewed as heretics because they acknowledged a prophet to have emerged after the Prophet Mohammed, had the right to define themselves as Muslims. The amendment denied Ahmadis that right. To obtain a passport, Pakistanis have to sign an oath that they are not Ahmadis and recognize Mohammed as the last prophet. Ahmadis are granted passports that identify their religion as Ahmadi rather than Islam.

Saudi Arabia first exerted its influence in Pakistan in 1953 when it intervened to prevent Islamist leaders sentenced to death for leading anti-Ahmadi riots in the city of Lahore from being executed. Large numbers of Ahmadis have since been attacked and killed in incidents that continue until today. “Everyone has the right to live the way they want to live without interfering in others business or harming others... If an Ahmadi defines himself as a Muslim that is his business,” Hashmi said. There is little in Hashmi’s record to explain her expression of a seemingly liberal attitude that sharply contradicts ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim thought, recordings of her lectures, the teachings of Al Huda faculty, and descriptions by former students of the worldview propagated by Hashmi and Al Huda.

Similarly, Hashmi, seeking to distance herself and Al Huda from any association with Saudi Arabia, asserted that she did not know who Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom’s powerful deputy crown prince and son of King Salman, when asked about the limited social and economic reform he is seeking to implement in his country. “Who is he?” she asked somewhat incredulously. Abiding by an ultra-conservative ban on women meeting un-related men in the absence of a male relative that is the law of the land in Saudi Arabia, Hashmi met this writer in the presence of Atif Iqbal, her son-in-law, scion of a Pakistani naval commander, and an Al Huda board member.

Further asserting that she also knew nothing about Wahhabism, Hashmi insisted that “I don’t follow a specific sect, madhab (school of Islamic legal thought) or scholar. I had no idea about Wahhabism when people talked about it. I never went to a madrassa. I never met such religious people,” Hashmi claimed somewhat disingenuously. Pakistani analysts who focus on their country’s ultra-conservatism noted that refusal to follow an established school of Islamic law was a feature of Saudi-inspired Salafism.<sup>4</sup>

When asked about specific scholars, including ones who taught at Saudi religious universities, who may have influenced her academic study of Islam, Hashmi conceded that she had met them in Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Egypt. Hashmi denied however that she met with Islamic scholars on regular trips to the kingdom to perform the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and visit her daughter in

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with the author, 11 April 2017

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with journalist Hamid Mir and Abdullah Khan, managing director of the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, 12 April 2017

Riyadh. In an email, Iqbal, followed up by saying that “you must already be aware that most Saudi scholars do not meet/interact with women directly.”<sup>5</sup>

The denials notwithstanding, Hashmi is believed to have maintained close ties since her graduation with a host of prominent ultra-conservative scholars, some of whom have sparked controversy for their alleged jihadist sympathies. Zakir Naik, a controversial Indian scholar dubbed the world’s foremost Salafi television evangelist, who has endorsed Osama Bin Laden and political violence, said in a You Tube video that he had frequent contact with Hashmi and her husband, Idrees Zabir.<sup>6</sup> Al Huda faculty often cite fatwas or religious opinions issued by prominent Saudi Wahhabi scholars in their lectures.<sup>7</sup>

Hashmi, a mother of four, sparks controversy not only among her more liberal detractors but also among ultra-conservative, male religious scholars, who accuse her of being an innovator despite her rejection of *bida’a* or innovation, a pillar of Wahhabism and Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism because she empowers women with religious knowledge and the tools to perform their own Quranic exegesis. Even if Pakistan’s ultra-conservative religious establishment views Hashmi as a threat to their misogynist vested interests, they grudgingly acknowledge the significant influence she wields and impact she has had among the Pakistani elite. Similarly, her success in enhancing Saudi soft power by spreading a Saudi-supported worldview is beyond doubt. “I don’t follow them (the Saudis). I follow the book. We both follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah (the sayings and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed) and reject shirk (idolatry or polytheism),” Hashmi said.

In 1994, Hashmi, the eldest of 12 siblings, founded Al-Huda (The Correct Path) International Welfare Foundation, a voluntary non-profit religious academy with franchises in various Pakistani cities as well as in Britain, the United States, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka. Hashmi was inspired by the Islamism and strict adherence to Islamic religious practice that was spoon-fed to her and her siblings from early childhood on. Her parents were activists of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Pakistan’s first and oldest Saudi-backed Islamist party. As a student, Hashmi emerged as an activist in the party’s student wing, but left disgusted with the lack of principle and opportunism that underlies politics. “I was shocked at what was going on. I thought it better not to be where my heart was not,” she said.

Her father, a homeopathic doctor, would wake his children early every morning to teach them the Qur’an and basic tenets of Islam before they went to school and he headed for work. “My father was religious but not typically religious. He was broadminded. He sent us to normal schools and universities. He let us see the world with our own ideas. There was no compulsion,” Hashmi said. She kept asking her father questions because there was little of the Qur’an that she initially understood. “But gradually I started to understand and love it. It touched my heart. I started teaching, I want to share with others,” Hashmi said.

In many ways, Hashmi is a product of her times. She was shaped by the Islamist policies in the 1970s of Pakistani general and president Zia ul-Haq, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, who imposed gender segregation and conservative dress and restricted women’s career opportunities. Nonetheless, Hashmi charted her own path in the world of ultra-conservatism. To the chagrin of traditional Islamic scholars, she pursued her religious studies and obtained her doctorate at Glasgow University, a

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<sup>5</sup> Email to the author, 12 April 2017

<sup>6</sup> Farroukh Choudhary, Dr.Zakir Naik expressing his views about Dr Farhat Hashmi & Al-Huda International, You Tube, 24 March 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGpBHqBX2yw>

<sup>7</sup> Faiza Mushtaq, *New Claimants to Religious Authority: A Movement for Women’s Islamic Education, Moral Reform and Innovative Traditionalism*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, December 2010, p. 152

western institution, rather than at an acknowledged seat of Muslim learning like Al Azhar in Cairo or the Islamic University of al-Madinah al-Munawarah, popularly known as the Islamic University of Medina. “She is not a follower or interpreter of Islam. It’s her own interpretation. Her teachings are against Islam,” said Tahir Ashrafi, a prominent Pakistani Islam scholar who maintains close ties to Saudi Arabia’s religious establishment.<sup>8</sup> Hashmi rejects the criticism, charging that her religious critics “don’t understand. Most them have never studied at these (Western) universities.”

Yet, prominent Saudi-backed scholars, including Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, an Albanian Salafist scholar and protégé of Saudi grand mufti Abdul Aziz Bin Baz, influenced research for her doctorate, Hashmi said in a 2008 radio interview.<sup>9</sup> Hashmi said she had received special guidance from Al-Albani as well as Muhammad Hameedullah, an Indian Islamic legal scholar who helped draft Pakistan’s first constitution. Speaking to this writer, Hashmi, however downplayed Al-Albani’s influence. “There was not really any one scholar. I met many people during my research. I visited Jordan, Albani was living there in 1988. We went to see him once,” Hashmi said. Widely revered, Al-Albani was controversial in ultra-conservative circles because of his criticism of literalism. To justify her empowerment of women, Hashmi quotes Al-Albani as arguing that anyone, male or female, rather than only an Islamic scholar, can evaluate evidence and drawing conclusions.<sup>10</sup>

By the time she established Al Huda, Hashmi had made a name for herself as an orator at informal Islamic classes or darses for women in the homes of Islamabad’s elite. She also lectured at girls’ colleges and the Saudi-funded International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI) described by one of its senior scholars as “the epitome of Salafi control in Pakistan,”<sup>11</sup> and visited ultra-conservative madrassas and religious institutions. Her study circles mushroomed into an institute with a national and international footprint.

Hashmi attracts throngs of upper and middle class women to the institute’s classes and public lectures. Her taped sermons sell like hotcakes in cities as far flung as Karachi, Toronto and Houston and circulate in Pakistani prisons. Hashmi’s lectures are also available online. Radio stations across Pakistan broadcast her speeches. Women who are not associated with Al Huda often play the tapes while driving or working in their kitchens.

Volunteers like Begum Abida Gurmani, a prominent dars teacher, helped established Al-Huda’s franchise across Pakistan. Al Huda’s social base broadened with its expansion into vocational training as well as social services such as financial aid to widows, student scholarships, hospital and prison charity programs, the digging of wells in remote desert areas, and emergency relief in times of natural disaster.

Supported in the 1990s by Arjumand Leghari, the wife of then Pakistani president Farooq Leghari, Hashmi and her sister Nighat, who established her own religious educational institute, Al-Noor, as an off-shoot of Al Huda, seeded an ultra-conservative cottage industry that targeted upper and middle-class women.<sup>12</sup> A religious eco-system grew around the Hashmis’ institutes that included Islamic

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with the author, 19 April 2017

<sup>9</sup> Dawah Radio, 26 March 2008, <http://www.download.farhashmi.com/dn/df-Profile/Interviews-Intros-QA/1-Dawah-Radio-26th-Mar-08.mp3>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, p. 159

<sup>11</sup> Email to the author, undisclosed date

<sup>12</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, Al-Huda: Pakistani institute that ‘radicalised’ thousands of women, Hindustan Times, 15 December 2015, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world/long-before-tashfeen-malik-pak-institute-blamed-for-radicalising-women/story-URzRLlvzbb3npYJY5I9ycN.html>

bookstores, fashion retailers, Sharia-compliant financial services, and artisanal design or home décor ateliers.

Farooq Leghari was known to be very pious and believed to have had ties to militants, including Sipah-i-Sahaba, a virulently, Pakistan intelligence and Saudi-backed anti-Shiite and ant-Iranian group.<sup>13</sup> His wife was the Hashmis' introduction to the families of some of Pakistan's most senior military and government officials. Al Huda's board includes since its founding the wives of senior officials and officers who list their profession as housewife.<sup>14</sup> Al Huda's inroads into Pakistan's political and military elite meant that it could rely on substantial donations from the country's wealthy as well as the Pakistani diaspora in Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> Hashmi counts among her large number of graduates from military families the wife of General Muzaffar Usmani, who was fired as deputy chief of army staff in 2001 by President Pervez Musharraf because of his militant Islamist views and connections.<sup>16</sup>

Al Huda has repeatedly denied that it was funded by Saudi institutions despite the institute's ideological affinity to the kingdom's worldview. The institution's audited accounts for fiscal year 2014-2015 reported net assets of \$9.2 million and income of \$3.3 million, primarily from donations, student fees and the sale of books and cassettes.<sup>17</sup> Bankers said donations from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf paid for Al Huda's headquarters in a large, well-maintained villa with a whitewashed exterior and green-tiled roof in an upmarket, leafy Islamabad neighbourhood close to the landmark 20-storey Saudi Pak office tower, co-owned by the governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

Question marks about Al Huda persist despite the publication of its accounts because of its repeated refusal to engage in debate about its philosophy, impact on society, funding, and affinity with Saudi religious ideology with its detractors. "We wrote Hashmi a letter suggesting a public debate. The audience would be 50 people chosen by Al Huda and 50 chosen by us. We never received a response," said Abbas Hussein, the head of a teacher's training institute in Karachi, who was among the letter's authors.<sup>19</sup>

### **Spreading the message**

To spread its message, Al Huda obliges its students to persuade friends and neighbours to attend three-day courses based on curricula designed by the institution. Girls and young women who are also enrolled in non-religious educational institutions often kick start these courses by initiating after-school discussions. Others develop similar activities in their families or among women in their neighbourhood. Al Huda has mushroomed into a network of some 200 branches with graduates using its syllabi and education materials as well as tapes of Hashmi's lectures to start diploma courses of their own. Hashmi insists that she does not intend to produce religious scholars. Instead, Al Huda promotes what Hashmi termed "a practical understanding" of Islam, not "an idealist approach."<sup>20</sup> Al Huda's diplomas are not recognized by Pakistani government agencies.

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<sup>13</sup> Multiple interviews with Sipah-i-Sahaba leaders July 2016 – April 2017

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Atif Iqbal, 11 April 2017

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Pakistani bankers, 11 April 2017

<sup>16</sup> Interview with journalist and author Khaled Ahmed, 18 April 2017

<sup>17</sup> Al Huda International Welfare Foundation, Audited Financial Statements for the Year Ended June, 30, 2015, <https://www.alhudapk.com/Reports/Audit-report-2015.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Pakistani bankers, 11 April 2017

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the author, 12 January 2017

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author, 11 April 2017

Former students of Al-Huda describe a curriculum that educates them in puritan Islam, encourages them to isolate themselves from the outside world and view it as hostile, and in some cases brings vulnerable youth to the edge of radicalism. Students listen in rapt as Hashmi teaches them, speaking in a calm, slow and melodious voice. They buy tapes of her speeches to listen to them again and again. Graduates express a deep-seated love of Islam, a less materialistic approach towards life, a greater ability to control their emotions, and an increased sensitivity for the needs of the less fortunate.

Critics charge that Al Huda's approach disrupts family relations. Husbands and other relatives of Al Huda graduates have accused Al Huda of radicalizing their womenfolk. Some husbands considered, at times divorce or banning their wives from their homes.<sup>21</sup> "Women who attended Al-Huda would often irritate their families on their return by berating everyone for not being devout enough," Ayesha Saleem, a British-Pakistani who attended Al Huda classes in Canada and Pakistan, recalled.<sup>22</sup>

Women were taught at Al Huda that the burden of ensuring men's piety is on them and is achieved by women covering themselves so they don't arouse men sexually. They further learn that a husband cannot commit rape because a wife cannot refuse him lest "the angels curse her till morning."<sup>23</sup> Durdana Najam, an on and off Al Huda student for some ten years, recalled being taught that a wife "is obliged to obey her husband and should leave everything aside when her husband asks for sex etc. There is no concept of marital rape in Islam primarily because marriage is considered a consensual relationship. However, even when a woman is married off without consent, as it usually happens in our culture, she is not supposed to consider sex with her husband as 'marital rape,' and should go for it," Najam said.<sup>24</sup>

Al Huda's multiplier effect has significantly contributed to changing Pakistani culture and the role it attributes to women. Hashmi's targeting of the upper classes reflected a belief that its members would set the trend for society as a whole. Hashmi sees Al Huda as the incubator of a reformed system of Islamic education adapted to a modern society rather than as a pioneer breaking new intellectual ground. Faeza Mushtaq, a Pakistani scholar who wrote her doctoral thesis on Al-Huda, quoted Al Huda students and graduates as viewing themselves as part of an educated class responsible for setting the standards of moral conduct for the rest of society.

Mushtaq estimated that some 15,000 women had graduated from Al Huda by 2010 and that tens of thousands more had attended the institution's classes.<sup>25</sup> The social change Hashmi and her followers envision is shaped by Ji's worldview and Saudi ultra-conservatism's literal interpretation of the Qur'an as well as the Sunna, the actions and sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed. It strives to eliminate cultural accretion and tradition, emphasizes ritual, and rejects mysticism and any concept of legitimate intermediaries with God.

"Hashmi targets the middle and upper class. If effective in these classes, they would have a trickledown effect. If society reforms the upper class, reforming society is easy. The upper class are

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<sup>21</sup> Interviews with students and graduate of Al Huda in the period between July 2016 and January 2017

<sup>22</sup> Aliyah Saleem, Al-Huda school is an institute of Islamist zeal, *The Australian*, 16 December 2015, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/alhuda-school-is-an-institute-of-islamist-zeal/news-story/3e71ba2b82c906211b7b3b6bc9adc64d?nk=4780091fb72330ac3e9ee1237f733a6f-1450590181>

<sup>23</sup> Farhat Hashmi, How To Guard Your Husband's Honor As Allah Has Commanded, *Quran For All*, 26 July 2008, <https://farhathashmi.wordpress.com/2008/07/26/how-to-guard-your-husbands-honor-as-allah-has-commanded/>

<sup>24</sup> Email to the author, 26 January 2017

<sup>25</sup> Faiza Mushtaq, A Controversial Role Model for Pakistani Women, *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, Vol 4, 2010

not conservative like the middle class. They were women who drank and didn't have a moral past. She restored the honour of each of us by saying that Allah forgives. She was talking about things that people could relate to," Najam said.<sup>26</sup>

Najam asserted that "women were brainwashed to the extent that they would go home and want to change everything overnight. Even now, I don't like to listen to music. I listen and I have an impulse to turn it off. It confuses me. It makes you restless. That is what they taught us. It's quite an impact. It's 24/7 five hours there and memorizing the Qur'an at home. They were telling us time and again: don't engage in anything that has no value. No TV, no music, no jokes, only religious literature. Fiction equalled something not real. Anything not real is false and forbidden in Islam. People who go to Al Huda are inclined towards ultra-conservatism. Al Huda reinforces it," Najam said.

Al Huda's concept of authentic Islamic knowledge void of "cultural accretions" mimics Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism, including its rejection of 'bida'a' or innovation.<sup>27</sup> Innovation includes things like photography, music, dancing, festivals, the celebration of birthdays including that of the Prophet Mohammed, Sufi-inspired matrimonial ceremonies, and chelum, the widely observed Barelvi and Shiite practice of observing a 40-day remembrance period after a death. "Al Huda believes music is the work of the devil," Najam said. True to its adherence to Saudi-inspired ultra-conservatism, Al Huda's website is void of human images.<sup>28</sup>

Najam began questioning what she was being taught after her first two years at Al Huda. "It was just another institution. I became disgruntled because there was nothing new," she observed.<sup>29</sup> Najam was attracted to Al Huda at a time in her life that she was struggling with personal issues. "It came naturally to me. I wanted to be a religious person. I was looking. I had emotional issues and I had two options: become an ultra-modern alcoholic or get religion which gives you structure. I listened to Farhat Hashmi. It was the softness of her voice, her delivery. She gave a new look to religion, a modern urban version. Her whole personality was very different from the norm. She was nicely made up, she wore earrings and would take off her burka when among women only. She spoke in English. Her educational background impressed people. She's a modern woman who has seen the world. I was working in advertising. I left my job and career and joined Al Huda," Najam said.<sup>30</sup>

Najam's observations stroked with Mushtaq's research. "Hashmi commanded the undivided attention of listeners in every large or small Al-Huda group I observed. Audience members would be scribbling furiously in their notebooks in an attempt to take down every word, or otherwise following along in their open books, and it was rare to find signs of distraction," Mushtaq said.<sup>31</sup>

Najm described how she "went to Allah with big expectations. I was deeply in love with Allah. I thought people who become religious change dramatically and adopt a different attitude toward life. I wanted somebody who would understand me and give me a support system. I liked the idea that we could directly related ourselves to the Qur'an. I could read the text and understand it I wanted Islam to reform," Najm said.

Saleem reported a similar attraction to Al Huda as a 17-year old. "I certainly fitted the template: unhappy at home, bored and a fervent believer in the most rigid, literalist form of Islam... When

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with the author, 13 January 2017

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.alhudapk.com/>

<sup>28</sup> Al Huda International Welfare Foundation, <https://www.alhudapk.com/>

<sup>29</sup> Interview with the author, 13 January 2017

<sup>30</sup> Interview with the author, 13 January 2017

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, p. 193

Tashfeen Malik, a Pakistani woman, along with her US-born husband, Syed Farook, used automatic weapons (in December 2015) to shoot down 14 people in San Bernardino, California, I realised we had even more in common,” Saleem said.<sup>32</sup> Malik attended Al Huda classes in the Pakistani city of Multan before immigrating to the United States.

The degree to which Al Huda’s religious concepts, including rejection of cultural expressions like dance, music and television bump up against Pakistan’s cultural reality are evident in the difficulty of one student in refraining from dancing at weddings. “The battle has been with myself. I used to be the first to get up at a mehndi (a pre-wedding ceremony) and dance. I was that sort of a person. Leaving it, oh, it was so difficult, especially initially. Very, very difficult. I danced my heart out at my brother’s wedding. This was before ... But my covering has helped. Because with the hijab you do look like an idiot if you do get up to dance, and nobody expects you to anymore,” the student said.<sup>33</sup>

Al Huda students stop watching television and films and abandon listening to music. In a twist of irony, Al Huda’s ring tone on her mobile phone is musical. It plays a religious song. “I used to love listening to music, so much so that when our driver used to turn down the volume of the songs playing in the car so he could concentrate on the traffic, I used to fight with him. But the Qur’an and music can’t go together; the essence of both is different. If I know something is in the Qur’an, and proven by the Sunnah, there is no question of not to try and follow it. As far as chalisva (the marking of the 40<sup>th</sup> day of a death) and mehndis are concerned, all these activities are bida’at (innovations), things the Prophet never did... I got engaged recently and not a single picture was taken... Birthdays are an issue that also come up. The Prophet never celebrated his birthday. For me, birthdays are occasions that tell me that I am a year closer to my death, to akhrat [the Day of Judgement] for which we have to prepare. So how can I celebrate? What am I celebrating? Being a year closer to death?” said another student.<sup>34</sup>

### **Terrorist tracts**

Contributing anonymously to the blog of The Express Tribune, one writer noted that “Al-Huda adherents drastically change once they enrol in the institute’s classes and gradually reject their earlier set of friends as well as their way of life. They shun the companionship of more liberal and moderate Muslims. The same happened in the case of Tashfeen Malik, the Al Huda graduate-turned jihadist in San Bernardino. Malik’s friends at Bahauddin Zakariya University said that she changed radically once she started attending Al-Huda classes in Multan.”<sup>35</sup>

Mosharraf Zaidi, an Islamabad-based columnist who specializes in education issues, argued that if Malik was radicalised while studying in Pakistan, “it was because she was exposed to ways of thinking that these schools have helped to promote. They require people to isolate themselves from modernity — television is wrong, eating McDonald’s is wrong, mixing with (the) opposite gender is

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<sup>32</sup> Ayesha Saleem, Aliyah Saleem’s life at the Islamic women’s institute, The Times, 14 December 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/article4638802.ece?CMP=OTH-applenews-sharing&shareToken=98892e87c98eec112a27d6d8c4cbcd5d>

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Sadaf Ahmad, Identity matters

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Sadaf Ahmad, Identity matters

<sup>35</sup> Anonymous, Does Al-Huda have strains of Taliban ideology within its teachings? The Express Tribune, 9 December 2015, <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/30791/does-al-huda-have-strains-of-taliban-ideology-within-its-teachings/>

wrong. And once you establish that isolation, then dehumanizing people is easy...and if you leave someone there, you have left them on a cliff.”<sup>36</sup>

The history of Malik and her family speaks to critics of Hashmi’s Saudi-inspired ultra-conservatism. Two decades in Saudi Arabia where Malik moved with her parents when she was a toddler to escape sectarian skirmishes persuaded the family to abandon their Sufi and Barelvi Muslim practices that included visiting shrines, honouring saints and enjoying Sufi trance music, practices rejected by the kingdom’s Wahhabism. The change sparked tensions with relatives in Pakistan, whom the Maliks accused in Wahhabi fashion of rejecting the oneness of God by revering saints. The family stopped returning to Pakistani for weddings and other family events. As a result, Malik and her siblings barely knew their relatives.

Malik returned to Pakistan in 2007 to study pharmacology in Multan, a city famous for its Sufi shrines and a number of madrassahs suspected of being jihadist nurseries. Syed Nisar Hussain Shah, one of the university’s scholars recalls Malik seeking his assistance in moving out of the school’s dormitory where the lifestyle was too liberal for her taste. “She told me: ‘My parents live in Saudi Arabia, and I am not getting along with my roommates and cannot adjust with them, so can you help me?’” Shah said.<sup>37</sup>

Abida Rani, a close friend of Malik at university, said Malik changed in 2009 when she started travelling across town almost every day to attend evening classes at Al Huda. Increasingly, Malik focused more on her Islamic studies than on pharmacology. “We were like, ‘What happened to Malik? She became so religious, so serious and so focused on Islamic teachings, and she lost her interest in her studies,” Rani said. Instead of socializing, Malik would watch one of Pakistan’s 24-hour Islamic television channels. In her final year at the university, Malik refused to be photographed and after graduation tried to remove her pictures from university databases. She collected her university identification and library cards and destroyed them. “I don’t want any pictures without the veil,” Rani quoted Malik as saying.<sup>38</sup>

Malik enrolled after graduation full-time in Al Huda’s Multan branch where she spent 18 months. After enrolling, Malik, wearing a full niqab, refrained from communication with the opposite sex, and spent most of her time studying the Quran.<sup>39</sup> At the school she was known as ‘the Saudi girl’ for her zealotry in urging others to become better Muslims.

Malik may have been physically beyond the public eye, online she had an active presence. Her sympathies were evident on a Facebook page she created under the name Larki Zaat or ‘girl with no names’ on which she chastised ‘coconut Muslims,’ those who were not sufficiently militant.’ An FBI

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<sup>36</sup> Tim Craig, Pakistan is still trying to get a grip on its madrasa problem, The Washington Post, 16 December 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistan-is-still-trying-to-get-a-grip-on-its-madrassa-problem/2015/12/16/e626a422-a248-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistan-is-still-trying-to-get-a-grip-on-its-madrassa-problem/2015/12/16/e626a422-a248-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb_story.html)

<sup>37</sup> Declan Walsh, Tashfeen Malik Was a ‘Saudi Girl’ Who Stood Out at a Pakistani University, The New York Times, 6 December 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/world/asia/in-conservative-pakistani-city-a-saudi-girl-who-stood-out.html>

<sup>38</sup> Tim Craig, Abby Phillip and Joel Achenbach, From pharmacy student to suspected San Bernardino terrorist: The baffling journey of Tashfeen Malik, The Washington Post, 5 December 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/san-bernardino-investigation-looks-at-the-assailants-relationship-and-their-path-to-terrorism/2015/12/05/c14a4b6e-9b80-11e5-94f0-9eeaff906ef3\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.9c9be92099b7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/san-bernardino-investigation-looks-at-the-assailants-relationship-and-their-path-to-terrorism/2015/12/05/c14a4b6e-9b80-11e5-94f0-9eeaff906ef3_story.html?utm_term=.9c9be92099b7)

<sup>39</sup> Sara Mahmood and Shahzeb Ali Rathore, Online Dating of Partners in Jihad: Case of the San Bernardino Shooters, RSIS Commentary, 18 January 2016, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CO16006.pdf>

investigation found at least two private messages on Facebook that she sent at the time, telling Pakistani friends that she favoured jihad and wanted to join the fight.<sup>40</sup> Authorities believe her behaviour was a product of Al Huda's education.

Malik fit the bill when Syed Rizwan Farook, a US-born county health inspector of Pakistan descent advertised for a wife on BestMuslim.com. "I spend much of my free time in the masjid (mosque) memorizing the Quran. I am looking for a practicing muslimah (an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim woman), someone who takes her religion very seriously, and is always trying to improve her religion and encouraging others to do the same using hikmah (wisdom) and not harshness."

Malik took her piousness indeed very seriously. She wore a niqab, a black garb and face veil that only leaves the eyes visible to the outside world. Once resident in the United States, Malik became a phantom. She seldom left the couple's suburban California home and when she did with her husband, she refused to get out of the car. Even the imam at the Islamic Center in Riverside, California, who married the couple and hosted their reception, and Farook's male relatives never saw Malik or heard her voice.

Prominent Pakistani political analyst and author Khaled Ahmed noted that the issue with an ultra-conservative refusal to inter-act with society at large was not the consumption of "terrorist tracts" in their educational, social and cultural institutions, but the isolationism it entails. "The suicide bomber is not made through syllabi but through isolation from society... Anyone withdrawing from society by rejecting its norms is ripe for the plucking by the terrorists. The residential madrassa does that. In Islamabad, a number of female "dars (study)" groups are busy doing that in varying degrees.," Ahmed argues, referring to Al Huda's penetration of elites in the Pakistani capital.<sup>41</sup> "I call Al Huda the fourth generation of religious seminaries. It does not promote use of violence but takes you closer to the red line. Now, it is a personal decision to cross the red line and take or give one's life," added Ayesha Siddiq, a prominent scholar of the Pakistani military and political violence in the country.<sup>42</sup>

"Women (at Al Huda) would often weep, overcome by religiosity. We were constantly taught that this path was our choice, but also that not choosing it was the way of sin. Gradually, perhaps because I was far from my family, young and troubled, and my education in Britain had provided me with little secular knowledge, I was completely sucked in... I feel that al-Huda's literalist, conservative interpretation of Islam, which discouraged criticism or dissent, built a fire. It laid down the kindling, the twigs, the wood, ready for a match. And the flames swept in from two directions. First, from geopolitical events: the discourse of Muslim oppression that has gained force across the world, which Islamic State, among others, uses so powerfully. Yet it also requires an internal fire, something within an individual that will ignite fundamentalist theology into violent -action. Most women who leave al-Huda institute are zealous for a while, but the sheer intensity requires so much emotional energy that it invariably fizzles out... This happened to me... Yet there was a time when I was lonely, isolated, a troubled girl with nothing but my all-encompassing faith, when I know that a spark could have been ignited within me. I walked on. Tashfeen Malik lit the fire," said Aliyah Saleem, a contemporary of Malik's at Al Huda.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> William Finnegan, Last Days, Preparing for the apocalypse in San Bernardino, The New Yorker, 22 February 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/22/preparing-for-apocalypse-in-san-bernardino>

<sup>41</sup> Khaled Ahmed, Daughters of Al Huda, 21 August 2010, The Express Tribune, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/41523/daughters-of-al-huda/>

<sup>42</sup> Interview with the author, XXX

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Saleem, Al Huda

“All her students, who you would think after coming closer to God, would become more tolerant and at peace, have always showed the opposite result. They became intolerant, judgmental and arrogant instead... There is no real proof to back the theory that Al-Huda brainwashed Tashfeen and others into terrorism but one thing that is for sure is that Madame Hashmi’s institute promotes unhealthy fanaticism and an orthodox manner of thinking. And that could very well turn one into a cold-blooded murderer given just the right push; all in hopes to getting in heaven.” added Shamila Ghyas, who attended several classes given by Al-Huda co-founder Farhat Hashmi.<sup>44</sup>

Saleem mused that “whether the school laid down the foundation for Malik’s crimes I cannot say — they certainly did not preach violence there — but it left me on the brink of radicalisation... Muslims are expected to pray five times a day, but I prayed six. Up in the middle of the night performing my additional prayer, I’d weep for my parents, my siblings, everyone I knew, because they were going to Hell and I needed to win them over to the true path too. I’d changed my life — now I must change theirs. Only in retrospect do I realise that essentially, I’d been brainwashed into something resembling a cult. This is what I believe that Malik, who finished her degree in pharmacology a star pupil then went to study at the Al-Huda college in Multan, Pakistan, went through too. She left deeply religious, fully veiled, eager to destroy all photographs of herself, not just because men might see them but — as we were taught — all representations of living things, including people, were idolatrous.”<sup>45</sup>

Look back at her experience, Saleem she felt that “Al-Huda’s literalist, conservative interpretation of Islam, which discouraged criticism or dissent, built a fire. It laid down the kindling, the twigs, the wood, ready for a match. And the flames swept in from two directions. First, from geopolitical events: the discourse of Muslim oppression that has gained force across the world, which Isis, among others, utilises so powerfully. Yet it also requires an internal fire, something within an individual that will ignite fundamentalist theology into violent action.”<sup>46</sup>

In a statement after the San Bernardino attack, Al Huda described itself as “a non-political, non-sectarian and non-profit organisation which is tirelessly serving humanity by promoting education along with numerous welfare programmes for the needy and destitute.” Al Huda said it “does not have links to any extremist regime and stands to promote peaceful message of Islam and denounces extremism, violence and terrorism of all kinds.” The institution said that it could not be held responsible for “personal acts “of its students. “We firmly believe that any Muslim who is aware of the teachings of his/her religion, and truly adheres to the directives of the Holy Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), will never involve himself/herself in violent acts, because they invoke the anger of Allah Almighty and lead to harm and corruption on earth.” the statement said.<sup>47</sup>

### **Breeding extremism**

Malik was but the last incident that raised questions about Al Huda. Other incidents have also fuelled suspicions that Al Huda’s teachings contribute to an enabling environment in which militancy and radicalism can flourish. Al Huda and Hashmi have repeatedly denied allegations that they breed

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<sup>44</sup> Shamila Ghyas, Al-Huda mightn't be linked to terrorism, but Farhat Hashmi's misogynistic and Shiaphobic institute is a hub of radicalization, The Nation, 10 December 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/blogs/10-Dec-2015/al-huda-mightn-t-be-linked-to-terrorism-but-farhat-hashmi-s-misogynistic-and-shiaphobic-institute>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Saleem, Al Huda

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Saleem, Al Huda

<sup>47</sup> Al Huda International Welfare Foundation, Official Statement on California Shooting, Undated, <http://www.alhudapk.com/officialstatement>

extremism, asserting that they can be not held responsible for the individual actions of a few. To be fair, the number of known cases of Al Huda students seeking association with jihadist groups pales against the huge numbers that have attended the institutions classes and events.

Critics nonetheless note that Hashmi and other Al Huda faculty have repeatedly been quoted as adopting extremist and jihadist positions or enunciating hard-line views that lacked compassion for those who did not share their worldview. In one case, the mother of the alleged mastermind of an attack in 2009 on a mosque near the Pakistani army's headquarters in Rawalpindi in which 37 people were killed studied at the International Islamic University of Islam turned out to be an Al Huda teacher.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Hashmi, lecturing students in Canada in Urdu in the wake of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan that killed 80,000 people, said they should "understand why such calamities take place. The people in the area where the earthquake hit, were involved in immoral activities, and God has said that he will punish those who do not follow his path."<sup>49</sup>

Samar, an Al-Huda lecturer in Karachi, discussing the 2004 Asian tsunami, told her class that "something must have been wrong, must have justified the destruction...It is said that those places (where the tsunami struck) had become the playgrounds of the rich and famous." In a subsequent interview, Samar drew a Qur'an-based distinction between God's punishment for errant civilizations and events that serve as warnings and trials in which innocents also suffer. Samar was suggesting that her remark, like Hashmi's subsequent statement, portrayed the tsunami and the earthquake as warnings rather than punishments.<sup>50</sup> Neither Hashmi nor Al-Huda responded however publicly to publication of Hashmi's statement on the earthquake by a Canadian journalist who said she had heard the scholar making those remarks.<sup>51</sup> Al Huda however reported days later about its relief work in the wake of the earthquake and described the often emotional experiences of its volunteers.

Attempting to spin Hashmi and Samar's remarks, Al Huda published a pamphlet advising the faithful to focus on one's own behaviour rather than on what caused the earthquake. Entitled 'When Disaster Strikes,' Al-Huda, quoting scripture, cautioned, however, that "it is necessary for every heedful eye to learn a lesson from the calamities and disaster occurring in the lives of individuals and nations. To call them a turn of events, calamities or merely an accident...can prove harmful. Allah T'alah says: 'And verily we will make them taste of the near torment (in this world) prior to the supreme torture (in the Hereafter) in order that they may return repent."<sup>52</sup>

In another incident, Hashmi was quoted as describing Osama bin Laden as an Islamic warrior. "Al Huda supported the Taliban and had a soft spot for Osama bin Laden. They do not believe that 9/11 was perpetrated by Muslims. They believe it was the US. Osama bin Laden was a good person and jihad was legitimate. There was an element of extremism. One teacher ordered us to go home and throw the TV out. The same teacher talked about feeling like doing a suicide bombing and going to Palestine. It was repeated to Al Huda and she apologized. She said someone had complained," Najam said.

Syed Badiuddin Soharwardy, a 62-year old Canadian-Pakistani Sufi scholar who heads the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada tells a similar tale about Al Huda's Canada campus. Hundreds of successful, highly educated, Urdu-speaking Pakistani and Indian families have been converted to "an

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<sup>48</sup> Interview senior Pakistani counter-terrorism official, 15 April 2017

<sup>49</sup> Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, Islamic School for Women Faithful or Fundamental? Globe and Mail, 2 March 2012, <https://amityindias.blogspot.jp/2012/03/islamic-school-for-women-faithful-or.html>

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, New Clamants, p. 212

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* Obaid-Chinoy

<sup>52</sup> Al-Huda International, When Disaster Strikes, 2005

extremist version of Islam. Cassettes of her sermons are played in homes where groups of women gather to listen to them. She reaches thousands through her physical and virtual network,” Soharwardy said. He said groups of young to middle-aged Hashmi devotees confront him regularly during his public sermons and lectures to denounce Sufism, the mystical wing of Islam, and non-ultra-conservative interpretations of the faith.<sup>53</sup> Among speakers invited to Hashmi’s Canada campus was Naik, the controversial Indian scholar who said in a You Tube video that he was delighted to have been invited after having been banned from numerous countries. Canada subsequently also barred Naik entry.<sup>54</sup>

Soharwardy asserted that “Hashmi plays on Muslim grievances against the West and an understanding of Islam that is quite similar to that of (Anwar) al-Awlaki,” a popular Yemeni-American jihadist preacher who was killed in Yemen in a US drone strike. The imam believes that most of the roughly 20 Canadian women who have sought to make their way to the Islamic State had been influenced by Hashmi.<sup>55</sup>

Attendance at Al Huda’s Canada branch dropped sharply after four of its students decided to make their way to the Islamic State in Syria. Three of the women were intercepted by authorities. The incident forced Hashmi to at least temporarily shut down her Canadian operation, which was housed in a converted laboratory-equipment factory amid plazas in Mississauga, Ontario. The facility had a central classroom for adults as well as a prayer hall with a wheeled gender partition that usually allotted more space for women than men, a kindergarten-to-Grade 6 Islamic elementary school, and nursery rooms.<sup>56</sup> Al Huda’s Canada Facebook page continues to be regularly updated with video clips and other announcements.<sup>57</sup>

Soharwardy’s assessment was echoed by Asra Nomani, a journalist from an ultra-conservative background, who described Al Huda graduates as “the Taliban’s ladies’ auxiliary.”<sup>58</sup> She dubbed Al Huda “the hub of Muslim rebirths” and its activist graduates “part of a battalion of women quietly manoeuvring around town in shapeless navy gowns, headscarves tightly pinned at their chins and, often, partial veils (niqab) drawn up over the bridge of their nose as their battle armour.” These mujahida or females engaged in jihad by selling textiles and jewellery to raise funds for the Taliban she asserted. They “wield Nokia mobile handsets while driving mostly shiny white Honda Preludes through the quiet streets of Islamabad’s F and G sectors, the middle-class through upper-class neighbourhoods where they live with servants, microwaves and Paknet Internet connections. And in their own way, they definitely feel they are waging their own unique jihad,” she wrote.

A Canadian columnist, human rights activist of Pakistani descent, and former head of the Canadian Muslim Council, Farzana Hassan charged that Hashmi portrayed jihad in her lectures as a self-defence against perceived Western intellectual and cultural encroachment. “It is quite possible Malik agreed with the concepts of provocation and pre-emptive jihad,” Hassan said. She was referring to

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with the author, 23 February 2017

<sup>54</sup> John Goodard and Noor Javed, Canada tells Muslim speaker to stay home, imam says, The Star, 22 June 2010, [https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2010/06/22/canada\\_tells\\_muslim\\_speaker\\_to\\_stay\\_home\\_imam\\_says.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2010/06/22/canada_tells_muslim_speaker_to_stay_home_imam_says.html) / *Ibid.* Choudhary

<sup>55</sup> Interview with the author, 23 February 2017

<sup>56</sup> The Canadian Press, Al Huda Institute Canada Shuts Doors Following Terror-Related Allegations, 8 December 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/12/08/al-huda-institute-canada\\_n\\_8752790.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/12/08/al-huda-institute-canada_n_8752790.html)

<sup>57</sup> Al Huda Institute Canada, <https://www.facebook.com/AlHudaInstitute/>

<sup>58</sup> Asra Q. Nomani, The Taliban’s ladies auxiliary, Salon, 26 October 2001, <https://www.salon.com/2001/10/26/mujahida/>

Tashfeen Malik, an Al Huda graduate who together with her American-Pakistani husband, gunned down 14 people in San Bernardino, California, in December 2015.

“Hashmi advocates jihad as Allah’s third most-favoured doctrine, without describing the conditions which require it... She describes the spiritual benefits of jihad, but appears puzzled non-Muslims cannot understand why Muslims can be so willing to give up their lives for a cause. She believes it’s easy for Muslims because of their belief in rewards in the hereafter. She lambasts non-Muslims for equating jihad with terror and maintains the defence of Islam is a Muslim’s paramount duty. Hashmi cites Muslim history to bolster the view women willingly participated in jihad, even in its militant form, qital (a reference to armed jihad). She elevates the value of jihad by defining it as striving in Allah’s cause with one’s capabilities, resources, even one’s life,” Hassan said.<sup>59</sup>

### **Saudi affinity**

Hashmi’s affinity with puritan Saudi religious thinking harks back to her cultural and political origins in Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the Pakistani Islamist political party that enjoyed Saudi backing for decades. JI was established by Syed Abul A’la Maududi, an Islamist philosopher, jurist, and author whom Saudi Arabia in 1953 rescued from the guillotine and who went on to co-found the Muslim World League. A government-controlled non-governmental organization, the league has for the better part of half a century been a global distributor of Saudi largesse and ultra-conservative literature. Liberally funded by the government and always headed by a prominent Saudi, the league’s administration was populated by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. It argued that Islam would not succeed as a religion or civilization unless Muslims rid themselves of cultural accretion and tradition, rigorously reconstructed the pristine faith of the Prophet, and gained political power.<sup>60</sup>

“There’s a lot of Saudi influence in Al Huda. They want to import Saudi Arabia’s Islam. JI never had the effect on people that Al Huda does. Hashmi’s style was unorthodox. Her lectures were related to science. Her style of teaching was not installing fear of Allah or a lot of books on hell and fire. Fear was used as a tool in traditional madrassas. Hashmi gave hope to people. She personified Allah as an entity that needed to be loved to be understood,” Najam said.<sup>61</sup> Hashmi’s emphasis on personal transformation and the individual’s right to interpret the Qur’an is rooted in Saudi-backed forms of Salafist ideology. Her message resonated with many who had been put off by dire ultra-conservative warnings of doom and gloom and were attracted by her portrayal of God as merciful and forgiving of sins.

“The core ideas of the movement – about direct access to the sacred texts; true understanding spurring behavioural transformation; self-appraisal and social reform being linked under the concept of da’wa (religious outreach) – are certainly not unique to it. Al Huda’s innovation is its ability to link these ideas to practical activities that women can perform in their daily lives and convince them that they can be religious and modern at the same time,” said, Mushtaq, the Pakistani scholar.<sup>62</sup>

Many of Al Huda’s students and graduates are women who take their mobility, education and employment opportunities for granted. They sport Cartier watches and drive luxury cars, yet remain “suspicious of the male-dominated mainstream Islamic institutions that have come to be associated

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with the author, 26 January 2017 / Farzana Hassan, Is Al-Huda willing to denounce jihad?, Toronto Sun, 8 December 2015, <http://www.torontosun.com/2015/12/08/is-al-huda-willing-to-denounce-jihad>

<sup>60</sup> Interviews with Muslim World League officials in 1995 in Bosnia, 1998 in Kosovo, 2001/2002 in Saudi Arabia, and 2006 in Mali

<sup>61</sup> Interview with the author, 13 January 2017

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, p. 110

with coercive, state-led Islamization efforts and which do not offer them any autonomous space. Al-Huda positions itself as an alternative to both these extremes, while selectively utilizing elements from both," Mushtaq said.<sup>63</sup>

Hashmi imbues her students with core beliefs that are shared by her ultra-conservative, male peers. Like them, she argues that many modern Muslim practices deviate from what is allowed in a literal reading of the Qur'an and Hadith, the Prophet's sayings. Yet, their paths separate with Hashmi's insistence that the obligation to acquire Islamic knowledge applies equally to men and women. She rejects criticism that women do not need to learn Qur'anic exegesis by pointing to verses in the Qur'an that make it obligatory for men and women alike to acquire religious knowledge. She notes that Islam's first school was in the Prophet's house where he would instruct his women of his household. Hashmi argues that a woman's responsibility towards her household and family does not relieve her of the obligation to engage in religious learning.<sup>64</sup> Hashmi has also challenged ultra-conservative precepts by distributing audio-visuals of her lectures and giving television and radio interviews in which men can hear her voice and by travelling without a male escort.

Hashmi's vision of society, despite her literal adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, strokes in some ways with reform efforts of Prince Mohammed, the Saudi leader she claimed not to know who he was. Both seek to enhance the role of women as part of a redefinition of religious ideology that maintains ultra-conservative values while shedding some of its misogynist sharp edges. Like Prince Mohammed, Hashmi suggested that she was in favour of women being allowed to drive. "They have their cultural influences, we have ours. My students drive... With time things will grow. You have one goal but routes are different... Society's basic unit is a home. Women play a big role in making a home. If she is mature; if she is educated; if she is healthy, caring and understanding, she can produce a good generation. If we have good human beings, neighbours and citizens, you can obtain love and peace in neighbourhoods and countries," Hashmi said.

Hashmi and her husband, who is also a former IUI lecturer, remains at the same time wedded to the teachings of Ahl-i-Hadith or the People of Tradition, an ultra-conservative movement that traces its roots to 19<sup>th</sup> century northern India. Ahl-i-Hadith was Wahhabism's earliest ally on the sub-continent and its most loyal one in modern day Pakistan. Ahl-i-Hadith scholars, unlike other ultraconservatives who object to the fact that Hashmi studied under non-Muslim rather than Muslim scholars, do not bar their followers from enrolling in Al Huda. Ultra-conservatives further reject her methods including her abandonment of the madrassa curriculum and the principle of rote learning as well as her assertion that women to teach the Qur'an after only a year of two or training, and targets the upper class for whom many scholars have contempt.<sup>65</sup>

Saudi teachings pervade Al Huda's curriculum. Using a syllabus developed by Hashmi, Al Huda's students are taught that feasts like Valentine's Day, Halloween, New Year, and Basant, a springtime Punjabi kite-flying festival, are un-Islamic because they have alien origins, encourage acceptance of worldly values, distract attention from God or endorse romance before marriage. An Arabic grammar book included in the syllabus quotes the Prophet as saying: "You are enjoined to appreciate Arabic on three counts: I'm an Arab, the Quran is in Arabic, and Arabic is the language of those who belong in paradise."<sup>66</sup> Knowledge of Arabic serves a dual purpose: access to Islamic texts

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, p. 106

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq p. 133

<sup>65</sup> Mufti Abu Safwan (ed.), *Maghribi Jiddat Pasandi aur Al-Huda International (Western Modernism and Al-Huda International)*, Karachi: Jamhoor Ahl-i Sunnat wal Jamaat, 2003

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, *New Claimants*, p. 150

in their original language and an affinity with the heartland of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism, Saudi Arabia. Students at IIUI, the Saudi funded university in Islamabad whose mosque was donated by Saudi Arabia and whose foreign liaisons are primarily Saudi universities, are encouraged to attend religious classes at Al Huda.<sup>67</sup> Khaled Ahmad, a prominent Pakistani journalist and author, noted that culturally “we (Pakistanis) have no connection with the Arabs. We are connected to Iran culturally and linguistically.”<sup>68</sup>

“Al-Huda and many other Islamic institutions believe that having lived so many centuries with Hindus, the Muslims of the sub-continent have forgotten what entails the real Islam. We celebrate marriages, funeral and other events like Hindus. So, Al-Huda wants its students to unlearn the Hindu rituals and adopt Islamic lifestyle,” Najam said.<sup>69</sup>

Al Huda’s emphasis on what it describes as authentic Pakistani culture in effect amounts to the propagation of cultural norms of Saudi Arabia. “The changes that take place as a result of this cultural production are visible on a number of different levels. They are...visible in women’s changed attire, as they begin wearing hijabs and abayas in public. This is a form of purdah or veiling that is not indigenous to Pakistan, but is rather an Arab import. Shops have now begun selling ready-made abayas along with the more traditional chadors. Other examples of the production of cultural material include different kinds of decoration pieces that now occupy a place in women’s homes; these women’s ideological change at Al-Huda is clearly manifest in the way they have replaced the crystal figures and paintings depicting animal and human figures in their living rooms with landscapes and framed Qur’anic verses showing different calligraphic styles... Ideological alterations are not only manifest in material changes, but also in behaviour, and this, too, alters a culture. Many women, for instance, have stopped dancing at weddings. Teachers at Al-Huda liken the act of dancing to prostitution,” said Sadaf Ahmad, a Pakistani cultural anthropologist who has written extensively about Al Huda.<sup>70</sup>

Al Huda lecturers regular refer to fatwas or religious opinions issued by Saudi grand mufti Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Baz. They denounce political leaders as corrupt but stop short of questioning their authority – a reflection of Saudi-backed interpretations of Islamic texts that position unconditional obedience of the ruler as a religious obligation. Criticism of Saudi Arabia is however creeping into Al Huda lectures. If faculty described Saudi Arabia a decade ago as an Islamic welfare state, lecturers more recently appeared critical of the kingdom’s perceived failure to come to the aid of Syrian refugees. Najam recalled her instructors as criticizing “Saudi Arabia’s cold behaviour towards Muslims in general and Palestine in particular.”<sup>71</sup>

### **Manipulating uncertainty and discontent**

Hashmi, Saudi-backed ultra-conservatives, and Islamist militants target, among others, elites looking for ways to come to grips with modernity. Their quest, shared by lower class groups who felt that they have no stake in society, was manipulated by successive Pakistani governments that played politics with religion, supported militant groups, allowed ultra-conservative madrassas to flourish,

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<sup>67</sup> Amna Shafqat, Islamic University Islamabad: My education in a Saudi funded university, PakTeaHouse, 11 February 2015, <http://pakteahouse.net/2015/02/11/islamic-university-islamabad-my-education-in-a-saudi-funded-university/>

<sup>68</sup> Interview with the author, 18 April 2017

<sup>69</sup> Email to the author, 31 January 2017

<sup>70</sup> Sadaf Ahmad, Identity matters, culture wars: An account of Al-Huda (re)defining identity and reconfiguring culture in Pakistan, Culture and Religion, Vol. 9:1, p. 63-80

<sup>71</sup> Email exchange with the author, 18 February 2017

and benefited from Saudi financial largesse.<sup>72</sup> Ultra-conservatism wove itself into key branches of government with senior military and intelligence officials, persuaded by the Islamism of General ul-Haq, Pakistan's dictatorial leader in the 1980s, joining ultra-conservative movements.

Hashmi acknowledged that her success builds on a global trend of popular loss of confidence in political systems and leadership. "The expectations of Pakistanis have not been fulfilled in our 50-odd years of independence. There is a feeling of betrayal and despair. Even political Islam has not been able to address people's grievances. There is a search for direction, for guidance. I wanted to help others experience the peace I felt by reading the Koran. When people benefit from something, they will be drawn to it," she told the BBC.<sup>73</sup>

Organizations like Al Huda "increase the societal threshold for accepting norms and values that may otherwise be rejected or challenged by those subscribing to liberal norms,"<sup>74</sup> said Pakistani scholar Ayesha Siddiqi in a study of radicalism among students at Pakistani elite universities.<sup>75</sup> Siddiqi positioned ultra-conservatism and radicalism as part of a pop culture that appealed to multiple segments of society. Stereotypes of 'us' versus 'them' populate the culture and "empower a small group of people rather than social reality," Siddiqi concluded.

The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as rising Islamophobia since 9/11 reinforced perceptions of an emerging clash of civilizations. Western profiling of Muslims and a feeling of being ostracized and not treated as equal by the West reinforced religious identity among many. The sense of discrimination and prejudice sensitized the Pakistani upper classes to the plight of Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere. "There was growth of religiosity bordering on radicalism," Siddiqi said.<sup>76</sup>

The marriage between Saudi financial and ideological muscle and opportunism among Pakistani political leaders produced greater piety among the discontented and elites alike. Sectarianism, intolerance towards Muslim and non-Muslim minorities, and rejection of pluralism, alternative lifestyles and basic freedoms flourished. "It's not just beards and hijabs that symbolise their conservatism. It's also a worldview that involves a trend towards latent radicalism. It is a view of the other that is exclusionary and does not accommodate differences," Siddiqi cautioned.<sup>77</sup>

Inherent in Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism and Al Huda's teaching is latent radicalism defined by Siddiqi as "the tendency to be exclusive instead of inclusive vis-à-vis other communities on the basis of religious belief. Such an attitude forces people to develop bias against an individual, a community, a sub-group or a nation on how faith is interpreted for them. In its extreme form, it can take people towards violence as well... (It) prepares the mind in a certain fashion which could at a later stage turn towards violence or active radicalism. The inability to challenge traditional notions and viewing the world through a bias lens, especially coated with religious overtones or padded with religious

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* Dorsey, *Creating Frankenstein*

<sup>73</sup> Saher Ali, Pakistan women socialites embrace Islam, BBC News, 6 November 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/3211131.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3211131.stm)

<sup>74</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, *Red Hot Chilli Peppers Islam – Is the Youth in Elite Universities in Pakistan Radical?*, Heinrich Boell Stiftung, 2010, [https://pk.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Red\\_Hot\\_Chilli\\_Peppers\\_Islam\\_-\\_Complete\\_Study\\_Report.pdf](https://pk.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Red_Hot_Chilli_Peppers_Islam_-_Complete_Study_Report.pdf) / Interview with the author, 22 July 2016

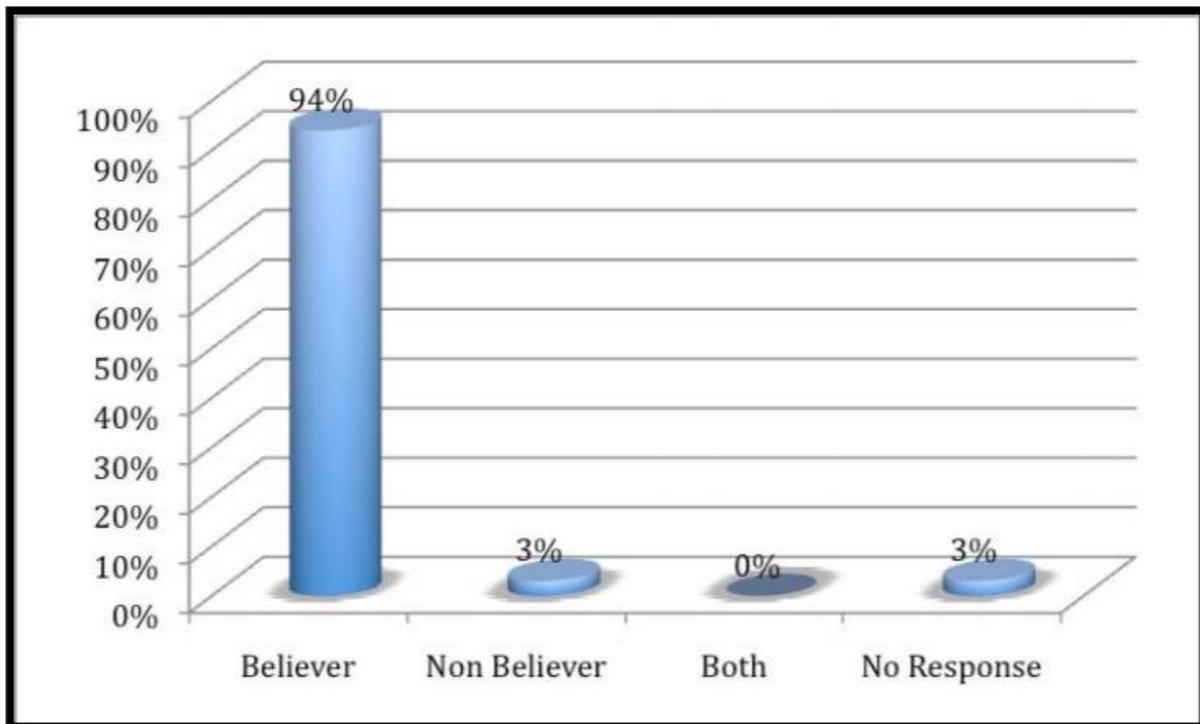
<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* Siddiqi

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* Siddiqi

<sup>77</sup> Interview with the author, 22 July 2016

belief prepares the mind to accept the message from militant organizations,” Siddiqa’s report said.”<sup>78</sup>

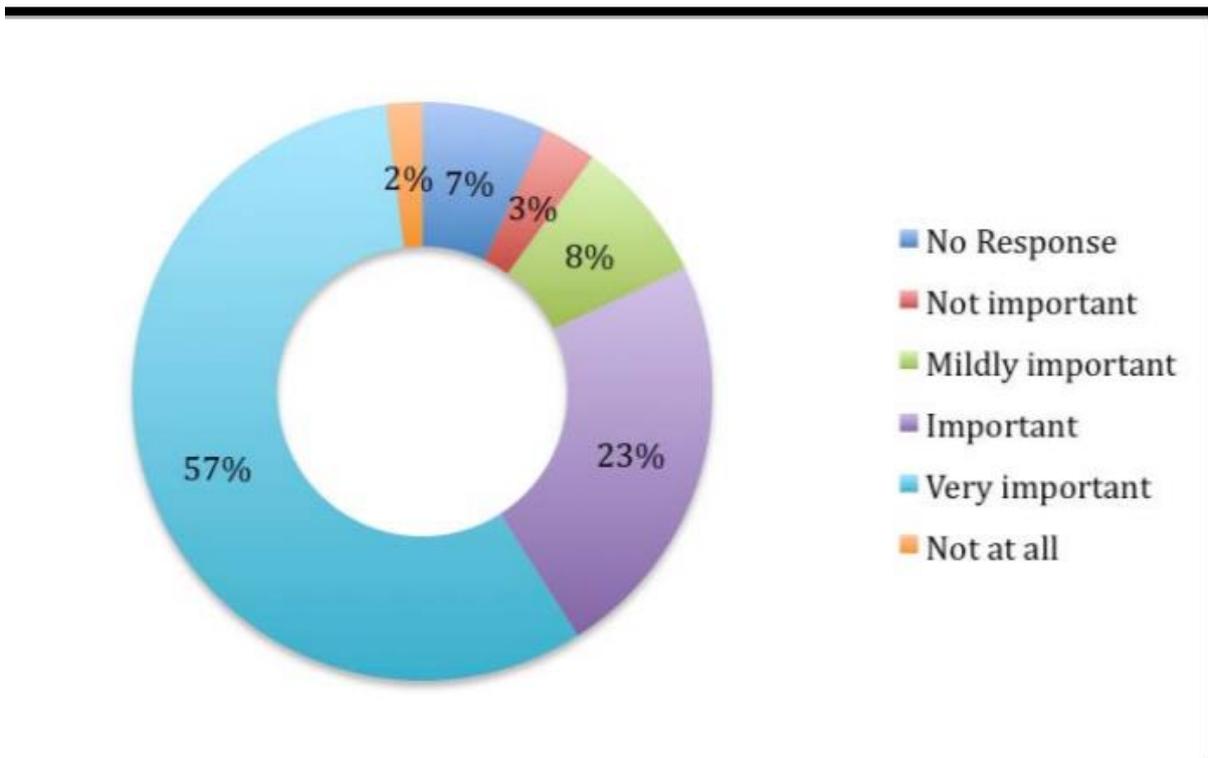
### Are you believer or non-believer?



Source: Heinrich Boell Stiftung

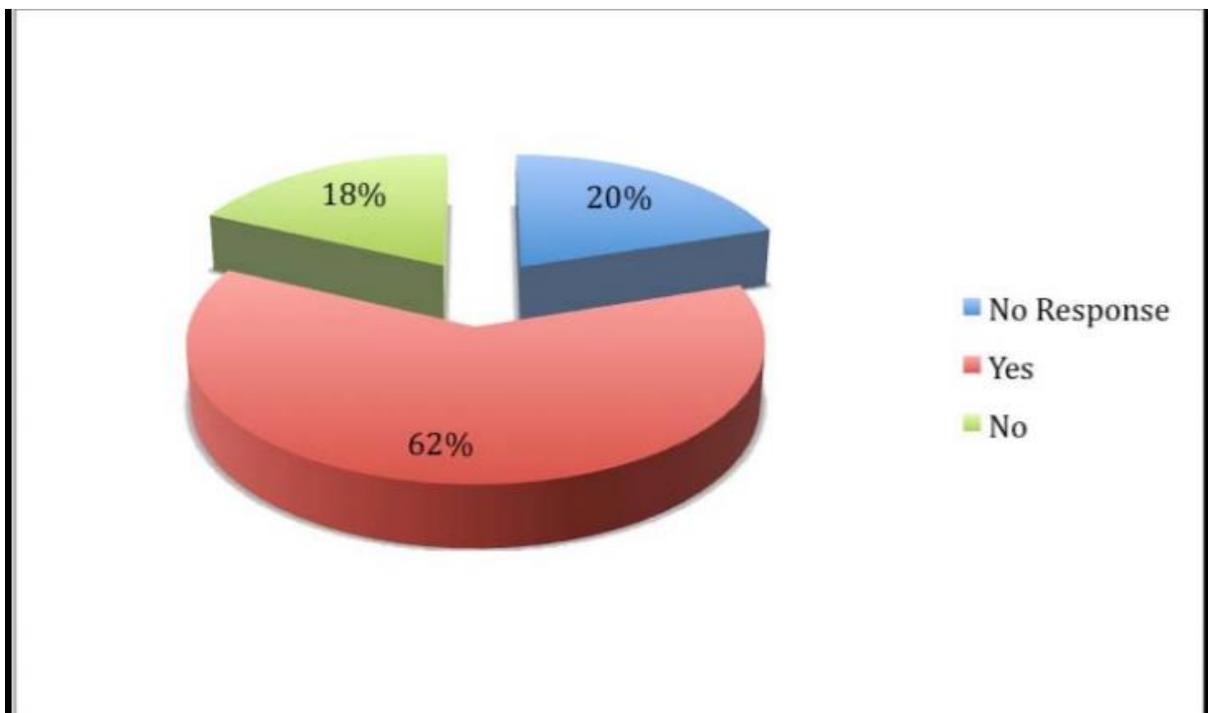
<sup>78</sup> Ayesha Siddiqa, Red Hot Chilli Peppers Islam – Is the Youth in Elite Universities in Pakistan Radical?, Heinrich Boell Stiftung, 2010, [https://pk.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Red\\_Hot\\_Chilli\\_Peppers\\_Islam\\_-\\_Complete\\_Study\\_Report.pdf](https://pk.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Red_Hot_Chilli_Peppers_Islam_-_Complete_Study_Report.pdf)

**: How important is religion for your life?**



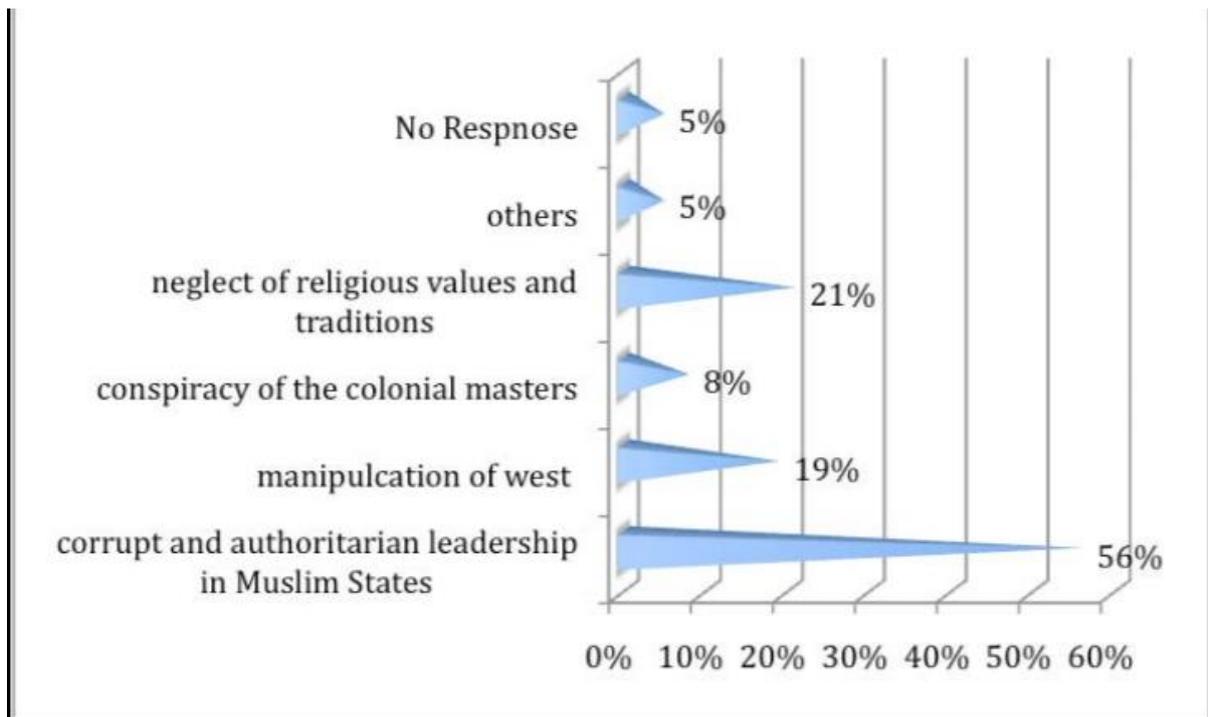
Source: Heinrich Boell Stiftung

**Are Shiites Muslim or Non-Muslim?**



Source: Heinrich Boell Stiftung

**What's the reason for the backwardness of the Muslim ummah?**



Source: Heinrich Boell Stiftung

“The Saudi-isation of a once-vibrant Pakistani culture continues at a relentless pace. The drive to segregate is now also being found among educated women. Vigorous proselytisers carrying this message, such as Mrs Farhat Hashmi, have been catapulted to the heights of fame and fortune. Their success is evident. Two decades back, the fully veiled student was a rarity on Pakistani university and college campuses. The abaya was an unknown word in Urdu. Today, some shops across the country specialise in abayas. At colleges and universities across Pakistan, the female student is seeking the anonymity of the burqa. And in some parts of the country she seems to outnumber her sisters who still ‘dare’ to show their faces. I have observed the veil profoundly affect habits and attitudes. Many of my veiled female students have largely become silent note-takers, are increasingly timid and seem less inclined to ask questions or take part in discussions. They lack the confidence of a young university student,” warned Pervez Hoodbhoy, a Pakistani nuclear physicist, mathematician and activist.<sup>79</sup>

“Islam in south Asia is changing. Like 16th-century Europe on the eve of the Reformation, reformers and puritans are on the rise, distrustful of music, images, festivals and the devotional superstitions of saints’ shrines. In Christian Europe, they looked to the text alone for authority, and recruited the bulk of their supporters from the newly literate urban middle class, who looked down on what they saw as the corrupt superstitions of the illiterate peasantry. Hard-line Wahhabi and Salafi fundamentalism has advanced so quickly in Pakistan partly because the Saudis have financed the building of so many madrasas that have filled the vacuum left by the collapse of state education,” added writer and historian William Dalrymple.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Pervez Hoodbhoy, The Saudi-sation of Pakistan, Newline, January 2009, <http://newlinemagazine.com/magazine/the-saudi-isation-of-pakistan/>

<sup>80</sup> William Dalrymple, In Pakistan, tolerant Islamic voices are being silenced, The Guardian, 20 February 2017, [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/20/islamic-state-foothold-pakistan-government-sehwan-bombing-saudi-fundamentalism?CMP=fb\\_cif](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/20/islamic-state-foothold-pakistan-government-sehwan-bombing-saudi-fundamentalism?CMP=fb_cif)

Al Huda's puritan concepts resonate with students because they build on cultural codes and notions that are the staple of elementary and secondary Pakistani education. Prominent Pakistani historian Khursheed Kamal Aziz, better known as K. K. Aziz, noted that Pakistani history books date the country's history to 712 CE when Muhammad Bin Qasim became the first Muslim to conquer the Indian subcontinent.<sup>81</sup> That conceptualization is debunked by many Pakistani historians and analysts who in the words of scholar Kamran Ahmed, a prominent intellectual and author, argue that "while the descendants of a few Pakistanis today may have come with an army, the fact is that most of the people of Pakistan are descendants of those who were already living in the subcontinent and only converted to Islam at some point in history. Moreover, these converted Indian Muslims were not considered part of the ruling class by the Arab, Persian or Afghan rulers of the subcontinent."<sup>82</sup>

Ahmad, the Pakistani cultural anthropologist, argued that "the government of Pakistan has, over the years, strengthened Pakistan's Muslim identity through its active propagation of a hegemonic religio-nationalist discourse that ties Pakistan's creation to Islam. The internalisation of this discourse by many people making up the urban middle class facilitates their acceptance of Al-Huda's Islamic ideology that highlights their Muslim identity, disowns the land's history prior to the first Muslim conquest in 712 CE, and criticises all things un-Islamic," Ahmad said.<sup>83</sup>

### **Ultra-conservatism in contemporary packaging**

With its austere interpretations of Islam and neglect of Pakistan's non-Muslim history, Al Huda is dressing up its Saudi-inspired worldview in contemporary packaging in an attempt to change the very nature of Pakistani society and adopt a republican version of the Saudi model. Describing Al Huda as a school-turned-social movement, Ahmad notes that "it has been able to make inroads into the middle and upper classes of the urban areas of Pakistan, a feat other religious groups have been unsuccessful at accomplishing. Its success amongst urban women is manifest in the way women transform their ideology, behaviour, and lifestyle in accordance with the religious discourse they internalise while at this school, and in the enthusiasm with which they work towards spreading its ideology into mainstream society through a variety of forms of da'wa or religious outreach."<sup>84</sup>

Hashmi's success, Ahmad said, was that the Qur'an often only impacted the lives of women "when they came across a religious teacher who had religious knowledge, and therefore legitimate religious authority, in their eyes."<sup>85</sup> "Hashmi has built her appeal by deliberately distancing and contrasting Al-Huda with madrasas (Islamic religious schools) and other groups that provide Islamic education in Pakistan," added Mushtaq, the other Al Huda scholar.<sup>86</sup>

The ultra-conservative identity of Al Huda students is reinforced by the rejection of Westerners, Indians and Shiites in the institution's rhetoric. Al Huda's newsletter asserts that "instead of missionary work to non-Muslims, the Shia harbour a deep-seated disdain towards Sunni Islam and prefer to devote their attention to winning over other Muslims to their group."<sup>87</sup> The newsletter

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<sup>81</sup> K. K. Aziz, *The Murder of History: A Critique of History Textbooks Used in Pakistan*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2010

<sup>82</sup> Kamran Ahmad, *Mental blocks in Political Economy*, *The News, Pakistan*, 3 April 2005

<sup>83</sup> Sadaf Ahmad, *Identity matters, culture wars: An account of Al-Huda (re)defining identity and reconfiguring culture in Pakistan*, *Culture and Religion*, Vol. 9:1, p. 63-80

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* Sadaf Ahmad

<sup>85</sup> Sadaf Ahmad, *Al-Huda and Women's Religious Authority in Urban Pakistan*, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 103:3, p. 363-374

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, *A Controversial Role*

<sup>87</sup> Hussein Abdulwaheed Amin, *The Origins of the Sunni/Shia Split in Islam*, *Al Huda Newsletter*, June 2008, [http://www.al-huda.com/Article\\_3of82.htm](http://www.al-huda.com/Article_3of82.htm)

nonetheless reprinted a fatwa by Sheikh Mahmud Shaltut, a former grand imam of Cairo's Al Azhar declaring the Shiite Ja'afari school of thought "a school of thought that is religiously correct to follow in worship as are other Sunni schools of thought."<sup>88</sup>

Najam, who was taught by her mother to "hate Ahmadis and dislike Shiites" but wanted to marry an Ahmadi, a Muslim sect considered heretics by a majority of Muslims, concluded nonetheless after years at Al Huda that "a lot of mess and sectarianism was created through their interpretation."<sup>89</sup> Najam's concerns about sectarianism in Al I-Huda were echoed by some of its Shiite students who nonetheless continued to attend classes. The students charged that Al Huda lecturers displayed a lack of respect for the Prophet Muhammad's family, Shiite imams and other venerated Islamic figures. One of Hashmi's cassettes that Shiites found particularly offensive was withdrawn after Shiite students complained. The students perceived the views of Hashmi's husband, Idrees Zubair as even more rigid and doctrinaire.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, Najam noted that "Muslims are generally apprehensive that the Jews and Christian conspire against them. In Al Huda, we were told time and again that Jews and Christians would never be sincere to Muslims. However, it was also told that they both are exceedingly conspiratorial against each other as well." That attitude did not stop Al Huda from employing Christians as maid's in the institution's kitchen.<sup>91</sup>

"When I became a teacher at Al Huda, I checked papers. The assignment was mass communication. I was so disturbed going through these papers. Every paper identified Israel and the US as the enemy of Islam. I complained that this is not reality. There is a lack of Muslim introspection. They told me that I had strayed from the right path because I took off my burka. I was not stopped from coming to Al Huda but I knew that they disliked me. They became reserved toward me," Najam said.

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[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2954341](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2954341)

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* Amin

<sup>89</sup> Interview with the author, 13 January 2017

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* Mushtaq, p. 215

<sup>91</sup> Email to the author, 26 January 2017