

REFORMING THE MADRASAH: A Disregarded Dimension in the War on Terrorism

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*All battles are first won
or lost in the mind.*

—Joan of Arc

“THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR is a war of ideas.” We have heard this and similar statements repeatedly over the past five years. We read it in the papers and blogs. We listen to it from our leaders and politicians. It is an accurate statement, but it remains widely underappreciated.

The U.S. government has committed itself to a strong, concerted, and necessary effort to fight in the “war of ideas” using strategic communications, information operations, psychological operations, and civil affairs. In an effort to augment this effort, U.S. troops collect beanie babies, soccer balls, and second-hand clothes to distribute to Afghan and Iraqi children. But Soldiers’ well-intentioned actions, like those of their higher-ups in the military and government, have been largely ineffective. Promoting good will via humanitarian assistance and gestures has made little lasting impact, because such actions do not successfully challenge the ideological forces underpinning Middle Eastern cultural perceptions—and these perceptions are at the root of the conflict between Islamic terrorists and the West. To win the war of ideas, the U.S. and its allies must counter the formation of extremist attitudes where they are born and inculcated: in the Islamic madrasah school system.

Radical, violent Islamists understand the significance of education as a fulcrum in the war. They organize lines of operation under the assumption that long-term control of society depends on what the rising generations of Muslim youth are taught to believe—educating Muslim youth is vital to achieving the Islamists’ long-term goals. The Taliban, for example, have attacked non-madrasah schools, murdered teachers, and intimidated parents and children. In 2006, they destroyed over 200 schools, killed 20 teachers, and drove more than 200,000 children from the classroom.¹

The U. S. needs to undertake a major effort to reorient the madrasah system so that education in the Muslim world focuses less on reproducing repressive religious ideologies and more on teaching the skills needed to develop and globalize their economies; think critically and act independently; and exercise freedom of initiative. In the end, victory in the war of ideas will depend on how effectively we persuade Muslim leaders that madrasah reform is in the best interests of their societies and the Islamic faith.

The Madrasah System

The death of a scholar is the death of knowledge.

— The Prophet Mohammad

Throughout the Muslim world, the main source of education is the madrasah (center of learning), a concept that dates back to the ninth century. We can trace

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PHOTO: A schoolhouse in the midst of repair awaits a roof, students, and a teacher in Bagram, Afghanistan, 16 October 2002. Soldiers from Tennessee’s 489th Civil Affairs Battalion rebuilt the school, which had been destroyed by the Taliban. (U.S. Army, SGT Todd M. Roy)

its genesis to gatherings of students (*taliban*, or “seekers of knowledge”) at mosques to learn more about the Qur’an, Sharia (Islamic law), Hadiths (chronicles of the Prophet Muhammad), Muslim history and literature, mathematics, and science. Many of the Islamic world’s greatest contributions to learning originated in ancient madrasahs.

At the height of European colonialism, a noticeable change began to occur in madrasah curricula. The study of the Qur’an, Hadiths, and Sharia were given much more emphasis, while the secular subjects came to be considered less relevant. By the mid-1800s, to meet the perceived threat posed by European Christian missionaries and their Western ideas, religious studies gained even greater impetus. A hostile view of Western knowledge emerged, caused by the perception that Islam was under religious siege from the West via the introduction of new ideas that challenged Islamic beliefs and values.

Unable to defeat colonial powers in physical battle, Muslims embraced a deliberate “educational jihad” that emphasized the most traditional, most conservative teachings of Islam.² Modern knowledge was deemed “un-Islamic” and “worldly,” and the curricula of many madrasahs increasingly shunned anything but originalism, or strict interpretation of religious teachings. The schools began to focus mainly on *hifz*—committing the Qur’an to memory. In addition, students wishing to become scholars (*ulema*) took additional religious courses that prepared them to become leaders (*imams*) in their towns and villages.

Many madrasahs today still follow the *hifz* tradition. However elementary their curricula, these schools are often the only available form of education for children from the most desperate and impoverished backgrounds. As the disadvantaged populations of the Muslim world explode, madrasahs expand their influence by filling an educational void that governments have ignored. Often the madrasahs function as boarding schools, providing meals and care to children that parents cannot otherwise afford. Students go through the rigors of the *hifz* curriculum, in which their world revolves around the teachings of Islam, but they are fed and safely housed. The madrasah provides a “cheaper, more accessible, and more Islamic

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alternative to education” that appeals to illiterate and indigent populations.³

Currently, there are estimated to be several hundred thousand madrasahs in operation. Young imams frequently found and administer madrasahs of their own in their hometowns and villages. Because the imam is often the only person in town who is literate and qualified to preside over daily prayers, weddings, funerals, festivals, and other rituals, he and his madrasah are accorded great respect, and they wield great influence.

Impressionable youth growing up in madrasahs whose imams espouse intolerant, violent teachings are prime recruits for extremist causes. Widespread reporting on such madrasahs and their teachers has led many in the West to see the schools as symbols of extreme Islam. Western descriptions typically reflect this. The *New York Times Magazine* has described the madrasah system as “education of the holy warrior.”⁴ Writing in *Policy Analysis*, Andre Coulson cleverly dubbed madrasahs “weapons of mass instruction.”⁵ The 9/11 Commission Report referred to the schools as “incubators of violent extremism.”⁶

Pakistani madrasahs under the control of extremist imams have received the most unfavorable media attention. The madrasahs’ great influence in Pakistan is largely due to the Pakistani government’s severe, prolonged lack of investment in public education.⁷ According to a 2004 report by the UN Development Program, Pakistan ranks lower on the education index than every non-African country.⁸ Filling the vacuum are an estimated 10,000 madrasahs that have enrolled close to two million students.⁹ If even a small fraction of these students are radicalized and choose to become mujahideen, the schools could produce hundreds of thousands of indoctrinated enemies intent on jihad against the West with little concern for consequences to themselves. Clearly, such a situation is cause for alarm.

Progressive imams and scholars who dare to propose expanding the madrasah curricula to include lessons of more practical value are often “silenced, humiliated, or chased out of their homes.”¹⁰ According to Abdul-Hamid Abu Sulayman, president of the International Institute for Islamic Thought, “The Muslim scholar is either caught between the ignorant Mullahs threatening him with [hell] or the corrupt rulers threatening him with jail.”¹¹

So dire is the current educational situation in the Middle East that a highly respected foreign policy intellectual has asserted, “There is no education system worthy of the name east of Israel.”¹² That is a strong statement, and one disputed in the halls of universities throughout the Middle East. Even so, the madrasahs that so many Muslim children attend do not prepare their students to participate in a modern workforce or become citizens of a peaceful, stable social order. Their education amounts to little more than prolonged indoctrination in an extreme form of Islam whose only purpose is to promote intolerance, which leads to violence and results in political instability.

The link between secular violence and madrasah education has been demonstrated in many countries.¹³ If millions of children are being taught only to recite the principles of Islam by rote, and an increasing percentage of their teachers advocate violent, extremist ideology, the results will be extraordinarily dangerous. Hundreds of thousands of students are matriculating through “dens of terror, hatcheries for suicide bombers, and repositories of medievalism.”¹⁴ In short, the so-called education offered in madrasahs is both a short- and long-term threat to the West.

Fundamentalist Influences

Islam’s history is full of achievements and singular contributions to humankind. But Mohammad had a strategic vision of an all-encompassing Islam: “There is neither East nor West for God.”¹⁵

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As a revealed and messianic religion, Islam shares with other such faiths a conviction about the need to witness, evangelize, convert, and win over the world to its traditions and doctrines. Adherents to all branches of Islam claim global aspirations, which some movements unfortunately express in a manner some have termed “a globalized pathology.”¹⁶ For these sects, the madrasah system is a crucial weapon of jihad.

In particular, three movements, all in the Sunni branch, seek to monopolize the madrasah systems within their respective spheres of influence: the Deobandi, Salafism, and Wahhabism. These movements are puritanical, legalistic, fundamentalist, and emphasize evangelism to spread their version of Islam. The Deobandi, however, abjures violence against non-believers while Salafism and Wahhabism advocate it. All three sects’ missionaries are skilled, well funded, and often charismatic. One of their favored tactics is to establish madrasahs wherever they go.

The Deobandi movement originated in India under British rule. Fear that competition with Hinduism and British culture would gradually lead to Islam’s disappearance or submergence led to a religious revival among Muslims that promoted independence from British colonialism through education. As a result, the madrasah system became deeply entrenched in the Muslim areas of colonial India, now part of modern Pakistan. The Taliban of Afghanistan are heavily influenced by Deobandi Puritanism, and they rely on students recruited from Pakistani religious schools founded by the Deobandi.

Adherents of Salafism and Wahhabism, terms often used interchangeably, also wish to dominate the education system. Salafism originated from the teachings of Ibn Taymiya, who taught a literal interpretation of the Qur’an in the 14th century. In deference to early generations of believers—the so-called “pious predecessors”—Taymiya sought to purge all modern influence from Islam.

Wahhabism stems from an 18th-century revival of Salafism. Based in Saudi Arabia where it is inseparably linked with the Saudi royal family, Wahhabism promotes an abstemious, aggressive, and violent form of Islam. Wahhabi teachings provided spiritual support for the House of Saud’s military conquest of the Arabian Peninsula, and today they continue to justify and rationalize the

spread of Wahhabi doctrine through violent, even terroristic jihad. Because the daughter of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the sect's founder, married into the Saudi royal family in the mid-18th century, Wahhabism draws the bulk of its financial support from followers among Saudi Arabia's royalty and the country's other wealthy families.

Muslim leaders under the sway of these three movements share an obsessive interest in limiting popular exposure to non-Islamic ideas. They fear that cross-cultural communications and uncontrolled, interconnected communication networks arising from the globalization of trade could cause the Islamic world to succumb to "Westernization" or "Americanization."¹⁷ Hence, they spend a great deal of effort trying to insulate their followers from ideas they think are inimical to Islam. It will be difficult to persuade such leaders that they and their people would benefit from madrasah reform.

Global communications, however, seem to penetrate even the most xenophobic societies. Despite all the anti-Western invective and the closed nature of the madrasah system, many observers assert that exposure to global communications appears to be producing volatile situations in disadvantaged places. People in nations with inadequate or diminishing resources, where schools do not offer the education needed to compete in the global marketplace, can readily see the obvious prosperity of others. This is fanning expectations that, unmet, will lead to instability and violence. As Akbar Ahmed, current chair of Islamic Studies at American University and former Pakistani ambassador to the United Kingdom, notes, there is a "breakdown... taking place when a large percentage of the population in the Muslim world is young, dangerously illiterate, mostly jobless."¹⁸ To reach these youths, Muslim leaders need to expand their vision beyond fundamentalist confines. Vastly increased investment in education within these countries might help establish the framework for economic development and thereby ward off instability.

U.S. Aid to Radicalization

The U.S., too, bears some responsibility for the madrasah problem in the Middle East. In prosecuting the Cold War, U.S.

leaders succumbed to the idea that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" and pursued policies toward Afghanistan without due assessment or concern for possible consequences. In doing so, they inadvertently aided the radicalization of the madrasah system in Pakistan and, by relation, elsewhere in the Middle East.

During the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war, the U.S. gave approximately \$3.3 billion, and Saudi Arabia an additional \$1 billion, to the Afghan government and anti-communist forces. This funding, and the anti-Soviet fighters, logistics, and bases it supported, all came together in Pakistan, where the money was disbursed through the Pakistan Inter-Service Intelligence Agency.¹⁹ The immediate result was that tens of thousands of Afghan fighters trained and saw combat under the aegis of a religious jihad against Soviet invaders of a Muslim land (with the support of several thousand non-Arab fighters who joined the cause).

Samuel Huntington asserts that 75 percent of the funds provided by the U.S. to train Islamic recruits went to "the more fundamentalist Islamist groups, with 50 percent of the total going to the most extreme Sunni fundamentalist factions."²⁰ Much of the U.S.-supported training took place in madrasahs. Thus, the foreign aid provided to the U.S.'s Cold War Muslim allies had two unforeseen results: it helped indoctrinate, train, and equip battle-hardened legions of mujahideen mainly from the most anti-Western, anti-modernist sects in Islam; and it facilitated and further institutionalized an educational system that inculcated extreme and violent



An Afghan mujahideen demonstrates positioning of a hand-held surface-to-air missile, August 1988.

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ideology. When the Cold War ended and the U.S. and its Muslim partners found themselves increasingly at odds, the U.S. learned it had helped create a system that produced—and continues to produce—ideologues and soldiers hostile to the West.

U.S. leaders still do not seem to fully appreciate the lessons available from this experience. Even as the madrasahs of these nations continue to churn out anti-Western mujahideen, U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan remains almost entirely focused on providing military and intelligence-gathering aid, not on preemptive economic and education development. From 2002 to the present, the U.S. has spent several billion dollars to support and bolster Afghan and Pakistani military and national security efforts. It has spent less than one billion dollars on education initiatives in these countries.²¹

Fighting the Pathology

For more and more Muslims, there is no educational alternative to the madrasah system and its radical teaching. Islamic extremists effectively monopolize the training of the Muslim mind by controlling what enters the marketplace of ideas in those schools. Simultaneously, they attempt to quash competing ideas with violence.

What if a competing good were introduced into the Muslim marketplace of ideas? What incentives might entice Muslims to explore alternative ideas and concepts? For example, what if the competing good was a classic liberal education composed of ideas, beliefs, and areas of study not available in the madrasah-controlled Islamic world? What if an education were available that offered science, mathematics, engineering, and architecture, not just rudimentary literacy through memorization and recitation of the Qur'an? And, rather than primarily encouraging and honoring violence

against unbelievers and apostates, what if Muslim governments subsidized an education founded on art, literature, philosophy, and tolerance? What if education offered training to produce a skilled workforce that could fuel a healthy economy with low unemployment? If ever there were a time to take such initiatives against the ongoing effort to monopolize the minds of Muslim youth, the time is now. The question, of course, is “how?”

Worldwide, there are 55 Muslim states and over one billion Muslim faithful (20 million of whom are settled in the U.S.)²² The Islamic world is large, but not monolithic in its ideology or in the curricula taught in madrasahs: there are branches, orders, sects, movements, and schools of thought within Islam much less myopic than the Deobandi, Salafist, and Wahhabi. Thus, there are opportunities to encourage diversity of thought by promoting the benefits that new ideas, critical thinking, and technical skills would bring to the Islamic people and culture.

Those who would reform the madrasah system must introduce curricula that foster and nurture technical skills and the ability to think critically and analyze. Curricula must be based on the four imperatives necessary for a well-rounded education:

- Good overall quality of curriculum content.
- Emphasis on modern sciences and the humanities.
- Healthy classroom methods.
- Extensive extracurricular activities leading to meaningful employment.

In teaching modern sciences and the humanities, educators must strive to produce students with *eloquentia perfecta*—the ability to think, speak, and write logically, coherently, and gracefully—and the ability to assess data, evaluate knowledge claims, and use problem-solving algorithms skillfully and appropriately.²³

One option Middle Eastern leaders might employ is to implement compulsory national standards and regulation. However, internally developed consensual standards and regulation promoted by incentives and additional funding have been found to be more successful. “The best change,” it has been said, “comes from within.”²⁴

To achieve education reform, Muslims must come to accept that the relatively narrow historical context in which Islamic leaders made decisions in

the past is no longer valid, and that consequently, Islamic learning and knowledge must change. For Islam to flourish and for Muslims to prosper in the modern world, Islamic nations must embrace modern sciences. Simply for the faith's own survival, so that its adherents can fulfill their responsibility to spread the Prophet's teachings to a modern world that no longer accepts the imposition of faith by force and coercion, Muslims must be well educated. The Qur'an and numerous Hadiths can be cited to bolster this argument because they stress the superiority of the scholar over the worshipper and the martyr.²⁵

The India Model

Because of the links, in terms of shared traditions that some of the leading Indian madrasahs have with madrasahs elsewhere—particularly in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal—and the influence that Indian ulema have, since the last century, had on Muslims in other countries, reforms in the Indian madrasah system have a broader relevance than in the Indian Muslim community alone.

—Yoginder Sikand, *Reforming the Indian Madrasahs*²⁶

India and Pakistan once implemented a hard-line approach to reforming those madrasahs that advocated violence and terrorism. In Pakistan in the mid-1980s, the government proposed to make madrasahs into “mosque primary schools” by adding secular subjects such as math and science. This initiative failed, however, because of suspicions about government intentions and because the vast majority of imams teaching in rural madrasahs had no formal schooling themselves and were incapable of teaching the core subjects.²⁷

Such experiences brought home the challenges involved in changing the madrasah system, including lack of resources and entrenched cultural attitudes that limit the practical measures that might be taken to change the system quickly. As a result, the measures advocating such reform soon changed, particularly in India.

Today, over 30,000 madrasahs operate in India, several thousand of them run by Deobandi clerics.²⁸ Until recently, few taught Hindi, English, science, or mathematics. However, changes in curricula leading to the study of practical subjects have been moving forward, albeit slowly. In 2001, Indian policy-makers initiated an effort to encourage rather

than force change by offering a program that gave grants for certified math, science, and language teachers. The government provided funding to approximately 3,500 madrasahs that voluntarily participated in this program. As a result, approximately 175,000 students were exposed to modern subject matter.²⁹

The Indian concept has real potential. Forcing madrasahs to reform will never be successful given the current state of affairs in India, Pakistan, and similar nations where government authority in outlying regions is both tenuous and suspect. India accepted the fact that the madrasah system provides a public good in rural, tribal areas that the government is unable to help. By augmenting the existing schools, New Delhi created goodwill even as it expanded the scope of madrasah curricula.

In India, much is being done, and done well. Unfortunately, real progress is mainly a question of resources. Here, the U.S. can provide strong, quiet leadership. It is in the Nation's best interest to do so, since changes to the education system that shapes the skills and perceptions of Muslim students can have a huge impact on long-term U.S. security.

Policy Recommendations

There will be intense debate in the U.S. about how to support madrasah reform—whether openly or clandestinely. The many failed examples of mandatory registration and regulation imposed by external initiatives strongly suggest that successful reform can only come from within. Therefore, the U.S. should nurture reform through thoughtful policies that encourage internal change rather than pressuring financially hard-pressed governments to impose solutions.

What policy initiatives should the U.S. consider funding? A commonsense yet comprehensive menu

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of options is available. Policy initiatives and measures that empower madrasahs to provide a wide array of subjects, modern learning tools, and teacher expertise have great potential. They can help induce voluntary participation or, at the least, impede extremist madrasahs that refuse to adopt programs that benefit their students and society.

The U.S. House and Senate are considering legislation to provide such support, including a proposal to create an entity called Global Compact, which would encourage “universal education.” This initiative would pool resources from donor countries and link grants to measurable standards of accountability and performance. The vehicle for this policy proposal would be the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The MCC would need to increase funding for a second tier of assistance and expand the criteria needed to qualify for assistance.³⁰ Unfortunately, the underfunded MCC is a political shell of what it could be—a major contributor to U.S. foreign policy interests on a level with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Programs aimed at reform should fund literacy programs at all grade levels. To prepare students for the global economy, English proficiency should be one objective, as should vocational programs to produce a skilled workforce and further hone student skills. Graduates from madrasahs participating in these programs who meet prescribed levels of aptitude and basic skill proficiency should receive preference in employment programs. Issuing nationally recognized graduation diplomas that guarantee employment is another option to consider.

International exchange programs could target underprivileged Muslim students in middle and high school, equivalent cohorts, and college students. We must provide the incentive for young Muslims with demonstrated potential to receive the best education available in the U.S., to open their eyes to the opportunities, promise, and potential of free, democratic nations. The U.S. and its Western allies could also use student visa programs much more aggressively, and in a more coor-

dated, strategic fashion than at present. One of the big mistakes the U.S. made following the tragedy of 9/11 was to drastically limit the student visas available to Islamic countries and Muslim students. Another initiative would be to fund scholarship programs at indigenous universities for exceptional graduates of participating madrasahs.

There is a great deal of room for growth in programs that provide professional outreach to imams and other madrasah teachers. The West should consider funding indigenous training academies that certify teachers in secular education. A trained cadre of instructors provided at no or very little expense would be a great incentive to madrasahs to participate in government outreach programs. Besides certification, training academies could offer their students access to related programs and government resources such as lunch programs, curriculum provisions, and foreign exchange and training programs. Summer teacher visitation programs to the U.S., for example, would be a powerful means of outreach to build goodwill and understanding between cultures.

We should also encourage a concerted effort by individual states in the U.S., incentivized by federal funding, to facilitate math and science partnership programs with foreign schools. Collaborating with partner schools and exchanging ideas on math and



Mufti Abdul Waris Niazi (center rear) delivers an interpretation of the collection of God’s revelations to Prophet Mohammad and Sunna (The Tradition of Prophet Mohammad) at a local madrasah in Karachi, Pakistan, 23 September 2003.

science would enable participating madrasahs to acquire expertise and some control over the rational sciences they offer. Based on success with math and science partnerships, policy proposals should provide an open door to partnerships at the local community level.

Offering exchange programs that provide workshops, conferences, and professional development to school administrators, not just teachers, should be an integral part of any comprehensive outreach program. U.S. leaders must consider every aspect of policy development and implementation, through outright and simple funding to direct involvement with program development.

Most important, the biggest influence in any child's life is his or her parents. Many times, impoverished, illiterate parents send their children to madrasahs that provide room and board, but they themselves remain bound to their meager livelihoods and illiteracy. We need to consider and pursue adult education and literacy programs that target Muslim parents.

For any of the aforementioned programs and policy options, the U.S. government should not be the sole provider. Along with USAID, large private foundations could support reform. For example, with the assistance of a Middle East Partnership Initiative grant, Scholastic Books, Inc., published a series of libraries for grades K-6 in Arabic and Farsi. The company is currently seeking grants from the State Department to publish editions in Dari and Pashto. So far, ministries of education in 13 Muslim countries have approved the books, some 200 per grade level. Scholastic has shipped and warehoused its books in Dubai, and they are currently in use in many schools throughout the Persian Gulf.³¹ We need to make a much greater effort to distribute products such as these, not just to state schools, but to the thousands of madrasahs hidden away in remote villages that will otherwise never be able to procure such resources.

We should also consider targeting Muslim women with educational initiatives. Nurturing and facilitating the education of generations of Muslim women should be a top priority. It would increase the intellectual capacity of the Islamic world and, in all likelihood, lead to a more peaceful, more stable region that develops its people and gives them fruitful, satisfying employment.

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Conclusion

To determine the strategies needed to defeat the radical, violent strain of Islam that is infecting the Muslim mind, the "long war" requires us to take a long view. Attacking our enemies kinetically only makes them more resilient, more unpredictable, more vicious. We must defeat the catalysts that nurture violent Islam's beliefs and ideology: poverty, illiteracy, hunger, homelessness, crime, and insecurity. Alleviating the environmental conditions that result in near-complete hopelessness can help turn today's enemies into tomorrow's partners.

Imams continue to man the front line, protecting and defending their faith. To the extent that we can help them realize that the most enlightened way to do so is through liberal, secular education, the better off we will be. There will be compromises in working toward our goals. However, the more we (and they) understand that religion can still permeate madrasah curricula, administration, and teacher conduct, the less conflict, suspicion, and skepticism we will encourage. The objective of education must be to form the whole person—body, senses, memory, imagination, intellect, and will. Even the Jesuits, perhaps the Catholic Church's most zealous missionaries, understood that "development will be defective and even dangerous unless it is strengthened and completed by the training of the will and the formation of character."³²

Due to their backward curricula, madrasahs often produce students who feel alienated from or even repulsed by the fast-changing world in which they live. These students "suffer from an intense inferiority complex, hating everybody with modern education."³³ The alarmingly high rates of unemployment among Muslim youth are in direct correlation to the deficient education they currently receive.

We know how important it is to engage our opponents in every conceivable dimension of warfare. We hear it in speeches. Leaders and mentors remind us of it. We read it in our doctrine and history books. We accept it. The most important weapon on the

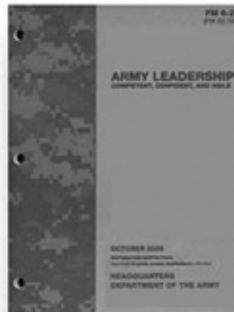
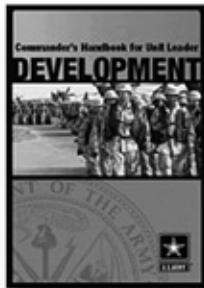
battlefield is the individual combatant. If this is true for us, it is true for our enemies. Therefore, we must engage with and influence Muslim education.

We must try to influence the marketplace of ideas in Islam. We must seek to fully develop young Muslim minds. **MR**

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<https://www.us.army.mil/suite/page/376783>

LeaderNet

<https://leadernet.bcks.army.mil/>

CAL Public Website

<http://usacac/cac2/cal/index.asp>

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