

Qawmī Madrasah Education in Bangladesh: Safeguarding Islamic Traditions and Navigating Modern Challenges

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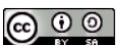
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Abstract

This paper examines *qawmī madrasah* education in Bangladesh as a distinctive site for traditional Islamic scholarship, where the preservation of religious authority is continuously negotiated alongside the demands of modern educational structures. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in four *qawmī madrasahs*, including semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, classroom observations, and engagement with relevant scholarly, policy, and media sources, this study explores the perspectives of students, teachers, parents, and institutional authorities. The paper argues that the central challenges facing *qawmī madrasahs* are not merely the result of curricular limitations, but are rooted in their commitment to preserving the authority, authenticity, and transmission of Islamic knowledge, as understood by their '*ulamā*' (traditional Islamic scholars). *Qawmī* students' aspirations are closely tied to the pursuit of '*ilm*' (religious knowledge) and engagement in *da'wa* (religious outreach), reflecting a broader moral and religious orientation that is often reinforced by family expectations, as many parents enroll their children in *qawmī madrasahs* to cultivate religious commitment, moral discipline, and future Islamic scholarship. However, a significant structural limitation emerges from the lack of formal recognition across the different stages of *qawmī* education. While students may complete the highest level of study, their earlier qualifications remain unrecognized within the national educational framework, creating barriers to entry into general universities, limiting access to a wide range of employment opportunities beyond the *qawmī* sphere, and restricting prospects for higher studies abroad. The findings further show that pedagogical practices, institutional autonomy, and limited curricular integration intersect in shaping both opportunities and constraints within the system. Crucially, resistance to reform is closely tied to concerns among the '*ulamā*' regarding state intervention, particularly the fear that any external regulation may compromise their epistemic and institutional autonomy. The study concludes that meaningful engagement requires a coherent alignment between curriculum, certification, and institutional practice, developed through negotiated frameworks that preserve the internal logic of *qawmī* education while expanding students' access to broader educational and social pathways.

Keywords: *Qawmī madrasah*, *Aliyah madrasah*, Bangladesh, Curriculum, Education system, Islamic traditions, Modern challenges



Introduction

In modern Bangladesh, education typically refers to literacy-based formal schooling, with an emphasis on institutionalized learning to obtain a diploma and career. This formal literacy-based education was formerly strongly related to studying the technical, physical, and vocational parts of a work in a controlled ‘out of context’ setting, which was also seen to be a Western characteristic. Informal education, on the other hand, was connected with “in context” education and was assumed to be mostly non-Western (Strauss, 1984).

One kind of informal education that remains thriving in Bangladesh is *the qawmī madrasah*. Indeed, the educational system in Bangladesh has long been influenced by religious groups and concepts, rendering it a crucial subject in the country. Notable religious factions, particularly the Islamic and Catholic communities, operate significant educational institutions and desire to incorporate their religious teachings into the public education system (Roy et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, the faith and education sector has also been impacted by global policy issues, including curriculum modernization, improvement of teaching and learning standards, and promotion of diversity and inclusion (Roy et al., 2020). This study seeks to gauge the negotiation by Islamic education in Bangladesh in response to the modernization of education, as signified above.

In Bangladesh, the education system functions through two separate channels: secular schools, which can be private or public, and religious institutions, referred to as *madrasahs* (Bano, 2008; Raqib et al., 2015). The term ‘*madrasah*’ (plural: *madāris*) in Arabic originates from the verb “*dars*,” which encompasses the concepts of teaching, educating, and schooling (Moosa, 2015). It has two distinct meanings: first, it refers to any educational institution; second, it refers specifically to a school that focuses only on teaching religious knowledge derived from the Qur’an (Muslim holy book), *ḥadīth* (Prophetic sayings), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *sharī‘a* (Islamic law) (Bhattacharya, 2006; Al-Hasani et al., 2017), all the supplementary subjects required to attain proficiency in these fundamental religious disciplines are covered, including Arabic grammar and literature, *manṭiq* (logic), *balāgat* (rhetoric), Arabic literature and so on (R. W. Hefner, 2008; Bhuiyan, 2010; Moosa, 2015; Bakar, 2017). This study refers to the second definition in explaining *madrasah* in Bangladesh to distinguish it from its secular counterpart.

In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and regions of Thailand and the Philippines; in South Asia, such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; in the Middle East, such as Iran; and in certain parts of Africa, *madrasahs* are prevalent wherever there is a substantial population. They have been utilized extensively as pedagogical tools to promote religious insights. Within the Arabic-speaking world, the term '*madrasah*' encompasses all varieties of educational institutions, ranging from those that exclusively impart traditional Islamic knowledge to those that have undergone a complete secularization process devoid of any religious instruction. However, within many non-Arabic-speaking regions of Asia, the term is employed in a narrower context, denoting educational institutions that are specifically designed to impart what is considered Islamic education to their students (Bakar, 2017). This term encloses '*dayah*,' which are educational institutions in Aceh, Indonesia, either privately operated or owned by the government; '*pondok*,' which are traditional Muslim schools mainly found in the East Malaysia and Indonesia; '*pesantren*,' which are Muslim boarding schools commonly found in Indonesia (Lukens-Bull, 2010); '*Imam Hatip*' schools located in Turkey; and various similar institutions across Asia (Azra et al., 2007; Chew, 2014). In the Subcontinent, the term often refers to the latter, namely the *madrasah* system, which has a distinct history.¹

The evolving political and economic conditions in the early twenty-first century transformed specific *madrasahs* into modern educational institutions. These encompass locations such as Singapore, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. These institutions offer comprehensive education that covers many Islamic subjects, as well as a contemporary curriculum encompassing science, social studies, and modern languages. These *madrasahs* coexist within the educational environment, alongside secular-oriented national and governmental institutions (Gopinathan, 2007).

In Malaysia, where Islam is the state religion, the provision of Islamic religious instruction, akin to that offered in traditional *madrasahs*, is delegated to national institutions. Recently, there has been a striking reduction in the disparity in the provision of Islamic education between national institutions and *madrasahs*.

¹ Madrasahs have existed in the Subcontinent since 1206, when the Delhi Sultanate (Muslim dynasties) was established. Its primary purpose was to provide training for government service personnel. The curriculum was adapted to accommodate the administrative requirements of the Muslim authorities. See for details (Robinson, 2000; Metcalf, 2011).

Certain *madrasahs* that exhibit a progressive stance have opted to transform into national schools or government-aided institutions to secure more reliable financial support (Bakar, 2017; Hashim, 2010). Furthermore, the South Asian diaspora has contributed to the emergence of *madrasah* subsidiaries in Muslim-minority regions, including North America, Europe, and South Africa. These derivatives operate independently of their Asian provenance. These recently founded educational institutions are frequently referred to as 'Housques,' 'madrasah,' 'Shakhsiyah schools,' or 'Muslim or Islamic schools' (Bakar, 2017).

Historically, structured educational institutions catering to the entire population of Bengal, a region encompassing a significant portion of contemporary Bangladesh on the Indian Subcontinent, have been scarce. Simultaneously, the *madrasah* was the only educational establishment dedicated exclusively to Muslims (Hasani, 2023). The inception of present-day *madrasahs* in Bangladesh can be historically linked to their establishment in Bengal by the Muslim monarch Bakhtiyar Khiljī in the early thirteenth century (Binte Abdur Rob, Huq, & Roy, 2020). Until the British assumed control of the Indian subcontinent in the mid-eighteenth century, these institutions predominantly catered to the educational objectives of Muslim individuals (M. Ahmad, 2006; M. Ahmad & Nelson, 2009):

The more robust *madrasah* system was later founded in Calcutta under British governance in 1780/1781 by Governor General Warren Hastings. Consequently, it was also referred to as the Calcutta *madrasah*. This was the first state-administered establishment in British India. The primary objective of this *madrasah* was to provide clerical personnel for colonial administrative offices and courts to serve as interpreters of Muslim legal principles. In addition to secular subjects, it conducted teaching in *Dars-e-Nizāmī*,² which is the traditional *madrasah* curriculum of the Subcontinent (Bano, 2014; K. Suman, 2020).

In Bangladesh, a substantial student population receives formal education from *madrasahs*. Currently, there are two distinct forms of *madrasah* education:

² Mullā Nizām-al-dīn, a distinguished Muslim philosopher and educator hailing from Lukhnow in northern India, formulated the *Dars-e-Nizāmī* curriculum around the mid-18th century. As stated regarding the *Dars-i-Nizāmī* curriculum: "The primary objective of this *Dars-e-Nizāmī* was to establish a learning center that emphasized '*ma'qūlāt*' (rational sciences) rather than '*manqūlāt*' (transmitted sciences)." To know more, see (Zaman, 1999; R. Ahmad et al., 2012).

‘qawmī.’ The term ‘qawmī’ is derived from the Arabic word ‘qawm,’ which equates to ‘public’ (Bano, 2008; Al-Hasani, 2020). It adheres to traditional practices and is overseen by private management, and “Āliyah” (see Table 1), a more contemporary version, has received official recognition from the government (S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017; Al Masum, 2020; S. M. A. Al-Hasani, 2020; Hasani, 2023).

Table 1. Basic Comparison of Qawmī and Āliyah Madrasah

<i>Qawmī Madrasah</i>	<i>Āliyah Madrasah</i>
Greater enrollment and more traditional curricula.	A smaller student base and more modernized curricula.
The syllabus is followed by <i>Dars-e-Nizāmī</i> and is not regulated by the government.	The government oversees syllabus development.
Exclusively devoted to the development of religious expertise.	The principal emphasis is placed on the Qur’an and <i>ḥadīth</i> , although considerable attention is also devoted to non-religious subjects.
The fields of science, technology, and other non-religious studies have been significantly overlooked.	Students receive instruction in ICT, science, social science, and arts disciplines.
The syllabus consists only of texts published in Arabic, Urdu, and Persian.	The curriculum contains Bengali, English, and Arabic texts. There are no Urdu textbooks or instructors.
Multiple <i>qawmī</i> education boards exist, each overseen by a distinct governing body and employing distinctive syllabi and systems.	There is a singular <i>Āliyah</i> madrasah education board in Bangladesh that is under the supervision of the government.
All <i>qawmī madrasahs</i> are derived from the madrasah Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband in India and adhere to its standards.	They originated in the Calcutta <i>Āliyah</i> madrasah in India. However, they do not adhere to these standards.

(Source: *What Are Madrasa Students Actually Learning?*, n.d.)

The *madrasah* sector in Bangladesh has experienced the highest growth rate among all nations. Based on the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS, 2024) report, there has been a significant increase in the number of '*aliyah madrasahs*, which are educational institutions that receive financial support from the government and are under its supervision. This expansion is complemented by increased student enrollment in comparison to previous years. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Number of 'Āliyah Madrasahs, Teachers, and Student Enrollment of 2024

Type of Madrasahs (Āliyah)	Level	No. of Madrasahs	Teachers		Enrollment	
			Total	Female	Total	Female
<i>Dakhil</i>	Grade10	6521	69300	13295	1412562	826629
<i>Alim</i>	Grade 12	1396	22407	4240	486127	265166
<i>Fazil</i>	Graduate	1089	20901	4061	562670	284163
<i>Kamil</i>	Masters	262	6400	1411	300918	102012
Total		9268	119008	23007	2762277	1477970

On the other hand, the *qawmī madrasah* system is an educational system in which '*adab* (manners) represents not only moral values but also the political identity of an individual. The *qawmī madrasah* system in Bangladesh is considered an ultra-orthodox Islamic education system because of its adherence to genuine and scripture-based principles of Islam (Bhuiyan, 2010). This system has grown significantly in rural Bangladesh since the early 20th century, and the *qawmī madrasah* has been a prevalent institution in Bangladesh's educational system for more than a century (Bhuiyan, 2010). However, the *qawmī madrasah* system has several difficulties and challenges that prevent it from adjusting to the demands of the modern world (Alam, 2009). This study analyzes the challenges and obstacles faced by *qawmī madrasah* students in relation to the

advancements in knowledge, technology, and social transformations in modernizing Bangladesh.

We specifically ask the following: How do *qawmī* students and ‘*ulamā*’ position themselves in the contemporary world, and what steps do they take to adapt? What role do *qawmī* ‘*ulamā*’ play in the process of reforming their curricula, and why do *qawmī* intellectuals remain reluctant to accept government policies and funding? How do structural limitations, particularly the absence of recognized secondary and undergraduate qualifications, shape students’ access to higher education, employment, and international opportunities, and what does this imply for their future prospects in contemporary society? What drives Muslim parents to send their children to *qawmī madrasahs* despite the challenges of reconciling religious and secular education? How do students perceive and respond to disciplinary practices within the *qawmī* educational environment, particularly at the early stages of learning? These inquiries have not been widely addressed in previous studies, particularly in relation to lived experiences and institutional dynamics.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the perspectives and experiences of students, teachers, parents, and institutional authorities in *qawmī madrasah* education in Bangladesh. A qualitative method was considered appropriate because the study aims to understand meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences within a specific institutional and cultural context, rather than to quantify variables or generalize across large populations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Fieldwork was conducted between October and December 2025 in four purposively selected *qawmī madrasahs* located in two distinct regions of Bangladesh: Syedpur Jāmi‘a Amdādiyya (Munshiganj, Dhaka Division), Miṣbāḥ al-‘Ulūm Madrasah (Keraniganj, Dhaka Division), Jāmi‘a ‘Uthmāniyya Ḥusaynabad, Bakhrabad (Katakhali, Rajshahi Division), and al-Jāmi‘a al-Salafiyya (Rajshahi Division). These institutions were selected to capture both regional diversity and variation in institutional size and board affiliation, representing urban-adjacent and rural settings across the Dhaka and Rajshahi divisions.

Participants were selected purposively based on their direct institutional role or stake in *qawmī* education. In total, 30 participants were engaged, comprising

students at various levels of study, classroom teachers, senior instructors, institutional authorities including *muḥtamims* (directors), and parents of currently enrolled students. Among the 30 participants, female representation was limited to the parental category, which is consistent with the gender-segregated structure of the *studied qawmī madrasahs*. The absence of female students and teachers as participants reflects this structural reality rather than a deliberate exclusion and is acknowledged as a limitation in the limitations section below.

We argue that the challenges faced by *qawmī madrasahs* in adapting to the modern educational system of Bangladesh are rooted in their commitment to preserving the transmission of traditional religious knowledge, which is regarded as their core function by the *‘ulamā’*. While this commitment sustains religious authority and continuity, it also shapes complex negotiations with modern educational structures, particularly in relation to curriculum integration, recognition of qualifications, and engagement with the state, thereby influencing students’ educational pathways and future opportunities.

We structure this article as follows: Initially, it outlines the historical evolution of *qawmī madrasahs* in Bangladesh. Subsequently, a concise account of their development over time is presented. This is followed by an examination of the structure, curriculum, and challenges facing *qawmī madrasahs*. The article then analyses the lived experiences of students, teachers, parents, and institutional authorities, with particular attention paid to aspirations, constraints, and everyday educational practices. Building on these empirical insights, it discusses reform and resistance, drawing on comparative and scholarly perspectives. Finally, it concludes by outlining key challenges and offering recommendations for *qawmī madrasahs* in modernizing Bangladesh.

Historical Background: The Emergence and Development of Qawmī Madrasahs in Bangladesh

The *qawmī madrasah* system emerged approximately a century after the establishment of the Calcutta *‘Āliyah madrasah*, with origins rooted in resistance to British education policies of the time (S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017; S. M. A. Al-Hasani, 2020). Shāh Walī Allāh Muḥaddith al-Dihlawī, a notable Indian Muslim scholar, recognized the perceived harmful impact of British policies on the

Muslim population in Bengal. He observed that these policies caused division among Muslims, weakening their political, cultural, and intellectual powers (A. A. Ali, 1983). al-Dihlawī sought to address this issue by fostering religious awareness and promoting Islamic values among Muslims (S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017). His initiative culminated in the establishment of a new educational system. al-Dihlawī and other renowned scholars, including Muḥammad Qāsim Nānotawī and Rāshid Aḥmad Gangohī, set up the *madrasah* ‘Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband’ (in Uṭṭar Pradesh, a state of India) in 1867 (A. A. Ali, 1983; M. Ahmad, 2006; Monzoor & Kabir, 2008; Karim, 2018).

The purpose of this institution was to promote Islamic culture, preserve Islamic civilization, prepare Islamic scholars, and foster a dedicated group of Muslims committed to *Allāh* (God) (M. Ahmad & Nelson, 2009). The curriculum of Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband was based on the *Dars-e-Nizāmī* system (the traditional *madrasah* curriculum of the Subcontinent). Thus, establishing this *madrasah* system represents an effort to preserve Islamic heritage and uphold Muslim identity on the Indian subcontinent (Riaz, 2011).

The *qawmī madrasah* in Bangladesh was a successor to the Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband in India (S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017). Recognizing these issues, Shaykh al-Islām Mawlānā Ḥabīb Allāh and a group of ‘*ulamā*’ influenced by Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband established Dār al-‘Ulūm Moinul Islam Hathazari in Chittagong, Bangladesh, in 1901. This institution was built upon the philosophy of Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband in East Bengal (currently Bangladesh) and faced challenges similar to those of its Indian counterparts in the mid-18th century concerning education, culture, and societal norms (Khan, 2004). This institution, colloquially known as the ‘*hathazari madrassa*,’ is the largest *qawmī madrasah* in the country (Puri, 2014).

Subsequently, several Muslim intellectuals established prominent *madrasahs* in Bangladesh. Prominent *madrasahs* in Bangladesh include Potia and Mekhol in Chittagong, Lalbagh and Malibagh in Dhaka, Dār al-‘Ulūm Datta Para in Narsingdi district, Balia *madrasah* in Mymensingh, and Jāmi‘a Emdadia in Kishorganj. All of these institutions are private and adhere to the Deobandi style and curriculum, incorporating the traditional *Dars-e-Nizāmī* curriculum (A. B. M. A. Raqib et al., 2015).

In Bangladesh, the second form of *madrasah* education is *qawmī*, which is overseen by a private management body. However, validating statements on the number of *qawmī madrasahs* or pupils is challenging because of their autonomous character and unreliable statistics (Binte Abdur Rob, Huq, Marshall, et al., 2020). During Bangladesh's independence in 1971, over 1,000 *madrasahs* functioned in the country (Rao & Hossain, 2011). After ten years, the establishment of *madrasahs* saw rapid expansion, surpassing the pace of mainstream educational institutions in Bangladesh, as recognized by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics in 2016 (Golam & Kusakabe, 2020). Reliable aggregate enrollment data for *qawmī madrasahs* remain unavailable owing to their decentralized and largely unregistered character. They are not routinely recorded by either government or non-governmental organizations, and comprehensive statistics remain difficult to obtain (Behera, 2013; Shumi, 2025). What the available evidence does indicate is a pattern of consistent growth: enrollment at the *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* (the highest *Qawmī* degree) level alone reached 32,718 students in 2025 under *al-Hay'at al-'Ulyā li al-Jāmi'a al-Qawmiyya* (the higher official unified governing board of *qawmī madrasahs*), representing a 31.24 percent increase from 24,929 in 2022 (Shumi, 2025). This expansion at the apex level suggests a system that continues to grow, even though the full scale of that growth across lower levels remains difficult to determine with precision.

The Structure, Curriculum, and Challenges of Qawmī Madrasah Education in Bangladesh

Language is central to the *qawmī madrasah* curriculum in ways that go beyond pedagogy. The main languages of instruction are Urdu, Arabic, and Persian, with Urdu accorded priority in most institutions. In several *madrasahs*, even Arabic and Persian texts are taught through Urdu-medium explanation. Bengali is used informally in the classroom, although it does not carry curricular status (personal communication, 2025).

The privilege of Urdu is not accidental. It is a marker of Deobandi scholarly identity. The Deoband movement produced its canonical texts, fatwas, and correspondence in Urdu, and Urdu has functioned for over a century as the prestigious language of South Asian Islamic scholarship. For *qawmī* institutions

in Bangladesh, using Urdu is a way of affiliating with this tradition and signaling continuity with Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband (Zaman, 1999). The students navigated this in different ways. Some frame the acquisition of Urdu as a religious achievement in itself, a sign of belonging to a tradition of scholarship that extends across the Subcontinent. Others are more pragmatic, treating it as a necessary cost to access the Deobandi canon. What most participants shared was the view that Urdu is not a language of everyday life but a language of the *madrasah*, functional within the institution, and carrying little utility outside it (personal communication, 2025). This further compounds the structural isolation that *qawmī* graduates face in a labor market where Bengali and English are operative languages (Golam & Kusakabe, 2020).

A defining feature of *qawmī madrasahs* is their strict exclusion of secular subjects from the curriculum. In contrast to *‘Āliyah madrasahs*, which offer a well-rounded curriculum encompassing contemporary secular disciplines, *qawmī madrasahs* do not integrate these into their academic programs. As a consequence of this deficiency in integration, the curriculum primarily emphasizes traditional religious knowledge while providing minimal exposure to disciplines beyond religion. Although this methodology achieves the objective of *qawmī madrasahs*, which is to cultivate profoundly knowledgeable individuals in Islamic scholarship, it also affects students’ readiness for the contemporary era. It is possible that *qawmī madrasah* graduates lack the expertise and practical competencies required for success in disciplines other than religious studies. This lack of integration can hinder career prospects and socioeconomic mobility, especially in a labor market that is highly competitive and swiftly evolving. Moreover, a clear violation of the national curriculum by *the qawmī madrasahs* resulted in a significant absence of congruence with the overarching educational structure of Bangladesh (I. Ali et al., 2021; Mohammed Raihanul Hoque et al., 2023).

Beyond these, *qawmī madrasah* students in Bangladesh encounter substantial challenges in English, mathematics, and information and communication technology (ICT) instruction compared to students in mainstream schools. The emphasis on religious education in these institutions leads to a diminished focus on these disciplines, causing pupils to fall behind their mainstream peers. This disparity hampers their capacity to effectively compete in the employment market, where expertise in these domains is highly esteemed. Employers

frequently look for applicants who possess a high level of fluency in English and mathematics, along with a good aptitude for information and communication technology (ICT), which has become increasingly crucial in today's technology-driven societies. These discrepancies also restrict students' access to the external world (Golam & Kusakabe, 2018).

However, the ICT gap is not abstract. Our fieldwork observations across four institutions confirmed the nature of this deficiency. None of the four madrasahs had functional computer laboratories. At the two Dhaka Division sites, a small number of administrative computers were present in the *muhtamim*'s (principal) office, but these were not accessible to students. In Rajshahi Division institutions, no computers were observed in any student-facing space. Internet connectivity was absent in the classrooms across all four sites; where mobile Internet was available to teachers, it was used privately and not as part of instruction. No participant, whether a student or teacher, described receiving formal ICT instruction. Several students indicated that the use of smartphones was completely prohibited within the *madrasah* premises, and most had no prior experience with computers or structured digital literacy training. None of the institutions employed a teacher with a stated qualification or responsibility for ICT. In one institution, a teacher mentioned that computer education had been discussed at an administrative level, but that no steps had been taken owing to a lack of funds and, more significantly, a lack of clarity about how such a subject would fit within the existing curriculum framework (personal communication, 2025).

Access to digital tools is now a prerequisite for a wide range of employment, higher education, and civic participation. Students who complete their *qawmī* studies without any ICT exposure do not simply lack a skill; they lack the baseline digital literacy that mainstream employers and universities now treat as a standard. As globalization continues to accelerate the pace of technological change, this gap is likely to widen rather than close without deliberate institutional action (S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017; S. M. A. Al-Hasani, 2020).

The traditional structure of *the qawmī madrasahs* leaves little room for extracurricular activities. Although these institutions provide a solid groundwork for religious erudition, they frequently fail to recognize the importance of co-curricular instruction, which constitutes an essential component of

comprehensive skill enhancement within conventional educational frameworks. Co-curricular activities comprise an extensive array of experiences that transcend the confines of conventional classroom environments. These activities encompass a wide range of pursuits such as debates, athletics, the arts, and numerous organizations and societies. Each of these activities is crucial for fostering the development of students' leadership capabilities, interpersonal aptitudes, and creative thinking. Unfortunately, these activities are not typically included in the curricula of *qawmī madrasahs*, which may hinder the overall growth and personal development of students. Furthermore, *qawmī* students encounter restricted prospects for engaging in extracurricular activities and national athletic competitions. These pursuits promote not only the physical health of students but also the development of discipline, sportsmanship, and cooperation (Mohammed Raihanul Hoque et al., 2023).

These gaps reflect the wider structural distance between *qawmī* education and the mainstream national system. Beyond the curriculum and co-curricular dimensions, this distance has also produced a significant problem of credential recognition. Despite the deep commitment that *qawmī* students bring to their studies, completing even the highest levels of *qawmī* education has left graduates without qualifications recognized within the national framework. It was against this background that Sheikh Hasina, the former prime minister of Bangladesh, declared on April 11, 2017, that *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* certificates would be regarded as equivalent to master's degrees in Islamic Studies and Arabic. Two days later, on April 13, 2017, the Ministry of Education issued a gazette notification formalizing this recognition. The government subsequently approved the bill titled *Recognizing Dawra-e-Ḥadīth [Takmīl] Certificate in Qawmī Madrasah as Equivalent to Post-Graduate Degrees in Islamic Studies and Arabic* on August 13, 2018, with a retrospective effect from April 2017, and Parliament formally passed it into law on September 19, 2018 (The Daily Star, 2018).³

The key institutional dimension of this recognition deserves further attention. The government did not recognize individual boards separately. Rather, the law

³ Following the political transition of August 2024 and the subsequent return of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to power in February 2026, the legal recognition of the *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* certificate as equivalent to a master's degree technically remains in force, as neither the interim government nor the BNP administration has moved to revoke or amend the 2018 legislation.

created a single unified body, *al-Hay'at al-'Ulyā li al-Jāmi'a al-Qawmiyya Bangladesh*, by integrating the six existing *qawmī madrasah* education boards under one umbrella. These six boards are: *Befaql Madārisil 'Arabiyya Bangladesh* (BEFAQ, the largest and oldest, founded in 1978); *Befaql Madārisil Qawmiyya Gawhar Danga Bangladesh*; *Āzād Dīnī Idāra-yi Ta'īlīm Bangladesh*; *Tanjīm al-Madāris al-Dīniyya Bangladesh*; *Anjuman-i Ittiḥād al-Madāris Bangladesh*; and *Jāṭiya Dīnī Madrasah Shikshā Board Bangladesh*. Under this arrangement, the chairman of BEFAQ serves as ex officio chairman of the unified board. *Al-Hay'at al-'Ulyā* is empowered to prepare syllabi, set examination papers, conduct the *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* examination, and award certificates across all affiliated institutions. The *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* examination is conducted exclusively under this combined board (The Financial Express, 2018).

The political context surrounding this recognition is worth noting. The announcement in April 2017 came approximately a year before the December 2018 general election and was widely understood as a measure to cultivate goodwill with the *qawmī* establishment and its affiliated political networks, most notably *Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh* (the largest *qawmī*-based organization in the country), rather than as the outcome of a sustained educational reform process. In the aftermath of the announcement, certain circles with affinities to the ruling Bangladesh Awami League conferred upon Sheikh Hasina the honorific '*Qawmīr Ma*' (Mother of the *Qawmī*) at a ceremony in Dhaka, a gesture that, while not representative of the *qawmī* scholarly establishment as a whole, illustrated how recognition was instrumentalized for political symbolism beyond its educational significance. Independent '*ulamā*' and senior *qawmī madrasah* authorities were measured more in their response, welcoming the formal acknowledgment of *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* credentials while remaining cautious about the government's broader intentions regarding the curriculum and institutional autonomy (M. A. Raqib, 2020). We argue that by extending equivalence only at the postgraduate apex, the Hasina government delivered a symbolic concession while imposing no regulatory demands on the curriculum, no requirements for standardized assessment at lower levels, and no conditions on institutional governance. A more comprehensive approach that addressed recognition across secondary, higher secondary, and undergraduate stages would have required genuine negotiation over standards and oversight, which neither party was

prepared to undertake. Therefore, the outcome was a politically useful gesture that left the deeper structural problems unresolved.

The *qawmī* education system in Bangladesh is subject to criticism and encountering challenges from several factions. Religious conservatives contend that the integration of contemporary and religious education systems is detrimental to *the qawmī madrasahs* and should not include modern education. Secular hardliners concur with these individuals, although they do not consider religious instruction important. Religious moderates advocate for the preservation of *qawmī madrasah* education to cultivate responsible members of the Muslim community, while secular educational institutions are unable to fulfill this role. Secular moderates concur with religious hardliners on the need for religious education, but they do not necessarily advocate that it be exclusively provided by *madrasahs*. The presence of these differences has been a substantial obstacle to *madrasah* education in Bangladesh (Begum, 1993).

However, modernists have condemned the *qawmī madrasah* curriculum for two main reasons. First, its obsolete nature focuses only on Islamic theological topics and matters. The second one lacks participation from *qawmī graduates*, who excel in contributing to the country's construction, societal obligations, and governmental function. Thus, *qawmī madrasahs* cannot generate students with sufficient proficiency to meet the required standards. (S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017). In contrast, the *qawmī* authorities have differing opinions on the government's strategy to overhaul their educational system in order to adequately equip graduates to fulfill the benchmarks established by the global market. Nevertheless, there is a prevalent misconception regarding reform among *qawmī 'ulamā'*, educators, and students. They consider the implementation of Western secular education a reform that endangers Muslim identity and Islamic beliefs, which they regard as a direct affront to Islam. Subsequently, they refrained from introducing any contemporary topic (S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017).

To some extent, the cold relationship with the government has also affected the financial sustainability of *qawmī madrasahs* in Bangladesh. They rely on financial assistance from charitable sources, public contributions, and the collection of zakat. They deliberately declined any government assistance (S. M. A. Al-Hasani, 2020). Each *qawmī madrasah* offers comprehensive religious education to Muslim students, and every *madrasah* has a *Lillah* (free) boarding system. Those

who are impoverished, helpless, and financially penurious can continue their education and accommodation under this free boarding or with little funding. During our fieldwork, upon inquiring about the present state of the *qawmī madrasah*, we were informed that around 70% of the students get tuition without charge, and most of these funds are derived from charitable contributions. Thus, while the number of students is growing, one of the factors is free tuition fees; the development and sustainability of *qawmī madrasahs* in Bangladesh are uncertain, given their dependence on charitable sources (personal communication, 2025).

Between Devotion and Constraint: Lived Experiences in Qawmī Madrasah Education

The lived experiences of students, teachers, parents, and institutional authorities in Bangladesh's *qawmī madrasahs* reflect a meaningful combination of deep religious commitments, personal aspirations, and structural constraints. We found that *qawmī* education is not only a site of religious learning but also a space where faith, identity, and future possibilities are continuously negotiated. Although strong spiritual motivation remains central, significant institutional limitations shape students' educational trajectories and opportunities (personal communication, 2025).

Many students of *qawmī madrasahs* expressed heartfelt gratitude to *Allāh* for the opportunity to study the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* (prophetic traditions), as well as other Islamic sciences. One student named Saifuddin remarked, "We thank *Allāh* for bestowing us the chance to learn the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*," demonstrating how closely their educational experience is tied to religious devotion. This reflects how *qawmī* education is understood not merely as academic learning, but also as a form of religious responsibility and blessing, particularly for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who rely on these institutions for education, food, and shelter.

Students' aspirations were strongly shaped by this religious orientation. Many participants expressed a desire to become *mawlānā* (religious scholar/teacher) or *ālim* (Islamic scholar) or to engage in *da'wa* (Islamic missionary activity). One participant, Rahman, explained, "Teaching is an ideal profession because it allows me to share knowledge while also serving Islam." Another student,

Nayeem, noted that “our main goal is *da‘wa*, but we can continue it in any profession if we are sincere.” Similarly, Farhan emphasized that *da‘wa* remains central to his future plans. These accounts suggest that students view their education not only as a pathway to employment but also as part of a broader religious mission.

However, these aspirations are significantly constrained by structural barriers within the *qawmī* education system. As mentioned earlier, the *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* certificate is recognized as equivalent to a postgraduate degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic under *al-Hay‘at al-‘Ulyā li al-Jāmi‘a al-Qawmiyya*, yet no corresponding recognition exists at the secondary, higher secondary, or undergraduate levels. As a result, students lack a recognized high school diploma or bachelor's degree, both of which are essential for admission into general universities and most formal employment sectors.

The technical barriers to lower-level recognition are real. Unlike *‘Āliyah madrasahs*, which sit within a regulated system with standardized examinations at the *Dakhil*, *Alim*, *Fazil*, and *Kamil* levels, *qawmī* institutions do not operate under a single unified examination system. Different boards apply different syllabi and standards, and not all institutions maintain systematic attendance records or issue certificates in a standardized format. Any government-facing recognition process would require a degree of internal standardization that *al-Hay‘at al-‘Ulyā* has not yet achieved across all its affiliated institutions.

Participants repeatedly highlighted this contradiction. One student, Kamrul, noted, “Even after completing our highest level, we cannot directly apply to universities because we do not have recognized certificates at earlier stages.” Another participant, Hasan, expressed frustration, stating, “We have a master’s level certificate, but still cannot apply for many jobs because we do not have a bachelor’s degree.” This creates a paradox where formal recognition exists at an advanced level, but students remain excluded from basic academic and professional pathways.

To overcome these barriers, some students sit for examinations under the *‘Āliyah madrasah* system to gain eligibility for university admission. While this provides a possible pathway, it also creates an additional burden and reflects the lack of institutional integration between parallel educational systems. The lack of recognized qualifications further affects international opportunities. One

student, Arif, shared that “we want to study abroad, but our certificates are not recognized in many places.” At the same time, participants demonstrated a clear awareness of the need for reform. One participant, Mahmud, stated, “Without modern knowledge, it is difficult to do *da‘wa* properly in today's world,” and Zubair argued that combining traditional and modern education would enable students to contribute more effectively to society.

Teachers and institutional authorities expressed similar views, although often with caution. One teacher explained, “There is no alternative to learning English, and knowledge of mathematics is also essential,” while also emphasizing that such changes should be introduced gradually. Another instructor, Aminul Islam, highlighted that the core objectives of *qawmī* education remain rooted in religion, stating that “our main concerns are *īmān* (faith), *‘amal* (righteous action), *akhlāq* (moral character), *adab* (proper discipline), and *ākhirah* (afterlife).” This reflects a broader concern that reforms should not undermine the system’s religious foundation. Institutional authorities also emphasized that engagement with the state should not compromise institutional autonomy, particularly in matters of curriculum and governance.

A particularly critical issue that emerged from fieldwork relates to students’ experiences of fear, discipline, and withdrawal within the early stages of *qawmī* education. A significant number of children were reported to leave the *madrasah* during their time in the *Ḥifẓ al-Qur’an* (Qur’an memorization program) or while attending the *Maktab* (primary level where students learn the Qur’an and *Tajwīd*, i.e., rules of Qur’anic recitation). This withdrawal is often linked to strict disciplinary practices and the overall rigidity of the learning environment.

Several participants described how fear of teachers played a central role in shaping students’ experiences at this stage. One participant, Imran, explained that he had fled the *madrasah* on three separate occasions, stating that his instructor was “exceedingly stringent” and frequently used physical punishment. He noted that he “was unable to cope with the stress and demands” of the system. Similar experiences were echoed by others, with some students discontinuing their studies altogether due to anxiety and fear associated with classroom discipline.

These accounts suggest that while discipline is often justified within *qawmī* pedagogy as a means of moral and spiritual training, it may also function as a

barrier to student retention, particularly at foundational levels. The tendency of students to leave during the *ḥifẓ* stage indicates that, despite its religious importance, this phase can become a point of vulnerability within the system. In this sense, the issue is not limited to individual experiences but reflects a broader structural concern that has implications for both student well-being and public perception of *qawmī madrasahs*. Simultaneously, teachers and parents interpret discipline as essential for moral development. From their perspective, *qawmī* education is intended to cultivate individuals who understand *ḥalāl* (permissible) and *ḥarām* (prohibited) and who live according to Islamic principles. Therefore, discipline is closely linked to the development of an ethical character and religious commitment (personal communication, 2025).

Student withdrawal during the *ḥifẓ* stage is not a peripheral phenomenon. Bangladesh has formal legal protections against the physical punishment of children: the Children Act of 2013 makes it a criminal offence to cause physical or mental harm to a child, and since 2011, the Ministry of Education has maintained an explicit prohibition on corporal punishment in educational institutions (Akhter, 2026). In practice, however, these protections do not extend to *qawmī madrasahs*. Because these institutions operate independently of the state's regulatory framework, government bodies have a limited ability to monitor or enforce compliance, a constraint acknowledged by official sources (Akhter, 2026). The broader research literature on discipline and learning supports this concern: environments in which students learn under conditions of fear are consistently associated with poorer educational outcomes, higher rates of disengagement, and a greater likelihood of dropout (Gershoff, 2002). Within the Islamic pedagogical tradition, contemporary scholars have increasingly emphasized *rahma* (compassion) and *rifq* (gentleness) as the defining qualities of the Muslim teacher, grounded in the prophetic model of instruction, to argue that *rahma* (compassion) and *rifq* (gentleness) are not merely ethical ideals but pedagogical necessities, constitutive of what it means to teach in the way of the prophet (Abū Ghuddah, 2017; Ajem & Memon, 2011). The *qawmī madrasah* system would benefit from teacher training initiatives that draw on these internal Islamic pedagogical resources, framing reform not as an external imposition but as a renewal of the prophetic educational spirit.

Parental motivations further reinforce this framework, although they are more varied than they might initially appear. Our fieldwork identified at least three

distinct and often overlapping categories of motivation. The first is religious and votive in character: a number of parents enrolled their children to fulfill a religious vow (*mannat*), dedicating a child to become a *ḥāfiẓ* or *‘ālim* as an act of piety. Atullah’s account captures this orientation well; for him, the prospect of his child entering religious scholarship was inseparable from his deepening of faith. The second category is economic. With *qawmī* madrasahs providing free education, meals, and accommodation through the *Lillah* boarding system, enrollment represents a rational response to financial hardship for families who would otherwise struggle to meet basic educational costs. Several participants, including Rashid, explicitly acknowledged this dimension. The third category is social and communal: in many rural and lower-income Muslim communities in Bangladesh, producing a *ḥāfiẓ* or *‘ālim* in the family carries significant social prestige and religious standing. For most parents in this study, religious aspirations and economic considerations were mutually reinforcing rather than competing motivations shaped by the particular social world from which *qawmī* madrasah students are predominantly drawn.

In addition to their educational role, *qawmī madrasahs* also function as important social institutions. They provide free education, food, and accommodation, making them accessible to students from marginalized backgrounds. One participant, Rashid, emphasized that without this support, continuing education would have been difficult. This highlights their role as both educational and social support systems.

Reform and Resistance in Qawmī Madrasah Education: Comparative Perspectives

Following the preceding discussion of structure, curriculum, and lived experiences, this section explores how these internal issues align with broader theoretical and global perspectives on Islamic education. *The qawmī madrasahs* encounter the intricate challenge of reconciling their religious identity with the demands of contemporary educational standards. These *madrasahs* frequently oppose state-led reforms because of concerns that such alterations may compromise their religious independence (Bano, 2008). This challenge is not exclusive to Bangladesh; it reverberates throughout Islamic educational

institutions globally, as they endeavor to incorporate modernity while maintaining their fundamental religious principles (R. W. Hefner, 2010).

Masooda Bano (2014) provides a thorough examination of this resistance, especially in Bangladesh, where *qawmī madrasahs* have a longstanding history of opposing governmental efforts to reform their curriculum. She posits that their hesitance to adopt contemporary subjects arises from the belief that state engagement could result in secularization. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Bangladesh; it is similarly evident in Pakistan, where *madrasahs* oppose government initiatives aimed at implementing secular education. Bano further points out the fact that resistance to modernization transcends mere rejection of modern education; it reflects a profound aspiration to preserve religious authority within the curriculum. Her examination of Pakistani *madrasahs* indicates that although religious leaders exhibit a willingness to consider specific reforms, they remain wary of alterations that could jeopardize their authority over religious education (Bano, 2012).

Similarly, M. Ahmad & Nelson (2009) and Andrabi et al. (2006) examine the tension in Pakistan arising from the state's efforts to modernize education, juxtaposed with the concerns of *madrasah* leaders regarding the potential erosion of their religious authority. This resistance underscores the larger conflict within Islamic educational institutions, as they seek to reconcile traditional values with contemporary expectations. The identical tension resonates in Bangladesh, where *qawmī madrasahs* emphasize religious identity and exhibit reluctance to incorporate contemporary subjects into their educational framework.

Scholarly literature points to growing internal debates within Deobandi circles about the selective incorporation of modern subjects, driven in part by the practical realities facing graduates in contemporary labor markets (Bano, 2014; Zaman, 1999). In Bangladesh, certain *qawmī madrasahs* affiliated with different boards have introduced foundational English and mathematics at lower levels, while keeping the *Dars-e-Nizāmī* core intact (Golam & Kusakabe, 2020). Our fieldwork found that many teachers and students privately recognized the value of modern subjects, even while defending the primacy of religious learning as a matter of institutional identity (personal communication, 2025). These internal accommodations suggest that '*ulamā*' resistance to reform is better understood

as selective and negotiated rather than absolute, shaped by ongoing assessments of what can be absorbed without compromising the epistemic authority on which the entire system rests.

By contrast, Indonesia presents an alternative reform paradigm. Unlike *qawmī madrasahs* in Bangladesh, Indonesian *pesantrens* (the equivalent of *madrasahs*) have shown considerably greater openness to incorporating modern subjects alongside traditional Islamic education, illustrating that the preservation of a strong religious foundation (Nurtawab & Wahyudi, 2022) and engagement with contemporary knowledge are not mutually exclusive (Azra et al., 2007; R. Hefner, 2009). This model carries significant analytical relevance for Bangladesh, where *qawmī madrasahs* face mounting pressure to modernize, yet have maintained a cautious pace of reform (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2010, 2016).

The mechanisms through which this integration was achieved are instructive. Indonesian reform did not result from state coercion alone, but from a combination of policy incentives and internal theological advocacy (Akbar, 2025). Since the 1970s, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has linked state recognition and financial support to the adoption of national curriculum subjects, creating a material basis for change (Nilan, 2009). Simultaneously, reform advocates within the *pesantren* community, most prominently those associated with *Nahdlatul Ulama*, developed arguments for the religious legitimacy of curricular integration (Pohl, 2006), drawing on the concepts of *maṣlaḥa* (public interest) and *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* (objectives of Islamic law) to frame modern education as a religious obligation rather than a secular concession (Ma'Arif, 2018; Ni'am, 2015). Bangladesh lacks comparable internal actors. There is no organization within the *qawmī* system that combines theological credibility to authorize reform from within and the institutional reach to implement it across affiliated *madrasahs*. The recognition of the *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* certificate, framed as an acknowledgment of existing credentials rather than a demand for curricular change, did not generate this kind of internal reform dynamic and has not produced comparable results.

Islamic revivalism also significantly influences the dynamics of resistance to reform. Islamic revivalism underscores the importance of reverting to what is regarded as genuine Islamic teachings, frequently as a reaction to the influence of Westernization (Park & Niyozov, 2008; Sikand, 2005). Leaders in *qawmī*

madrasahs notably accentuate revivalist sentiment, viewing reforms as an intrusion of secular, Western values (Hasan & Anoraga, 2025). Aria Nakissa (2019) examines the ways in which Islamic educational institutions manage these complexities. Nakissa posits that effective educational reform necessitates the integration of contemporary subjects with foundational ethical and religious principles inherent in Islamic education. He also emphasizes that such Islamic institutions could potentially serve as tools of state control, as their modernization efforts frequently entail increased government influence (Nakissa, 2023). Nakissa's examination holds particular significance for *qawmī madrasahs*, where the imperative for reform necessitates a balance between honoring religious authority and responding to the evolving needs of students in a globalized context.

In Bangladesh, the overarching influence of globalization adds layers of complexity to the *qawmī madrasahs'* resistance to reform. Niyozov and Memon (2011) argue that Islamic education systems need to interact with global realities to maintain their relevance, especially concerning technology, science, and critical thinking. *Qawmī madrasahs*, which often lack these components, face increasing pressure as globalization demands new forms of knowledge and competence. While the recognition of *qawmī* degrees as equivalent to Master's degrees represents a significant policy shift, it does not address the deeper structural issue of curriculum integration. As Riaz (2008) and S. M. A. Al-Hasani (2020) contended, without meaningful reforms that incorporate modern curricula, *qawmī* graduates will continue to face barriers in accessing higher education and employment opportunities .

Conclusion: Rethinking Reform in Qawmī Madrasah Education

This study highlights that the question of reform in *qawmī madrasah* education in Bangladesh cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. Rather, the findings reveal an ongoing negotiation in which the preservation of religious authority, institutional autonomy, and engagement with contemporary educational structures remain deeply intertwined. *Qawmī madrasahs* continue to sustain distinct moral and religious educational projects, but their current institutional configuration produces structural discontinuities

that shape students' mobility across educational and professional domains in ways that deserve serious attention.

A key contribution of this study lies in identifying the disjunction between formal recognition and functional accessibility within the *qawmī* system. The recognition of the *Dawra-e-Ḥadīth* certificate at the postgraduate level, in the absence of corresponding equivalence at earlier stages, creates a nonlinear educational trajectory that limits students' ability to transition to mainstream higher education, constrains employment opportunities, and restricts international academic mobility. However, this is not merely a technical gap. It is embedded in broader concerns among the '*ulamā*' regarding epistemic authority and resistance to externally driven integration, and it reflects a pattern of state engagement that has historically prioritized political symbolism over structural reform.

The findings also draw attention to a set of issues that sit closer to the everyday lives of *qawmī* institutions: disciplinary practices, student experience, and institutional design. Student withdrawal during the *ḥifẓ* stage, linked in fieldwork accounts to fear and physical punishment, points to a dimension of *qawmī* education that has significant implications for student retention and long-term educational trajectories. However, this is not peripheral to the question of reform. It is part of it. Curriculum limitations, certification gaps, and pedagogical practices are interconnected, and meaningful reform requires a systemic approach that simultaneously addresses coherence across these dimensions.

Several directions have emerged from these findings. The most pressing need is a structured framework of academic equivalence that ensures continuity across the secondary, higher secondary, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels, enabling students to access higher education and employment without facing structural barriers at every transition point. *Al-Hay'at al-'Ulyā li al-Jāmi'a al-Qawmiyya* Bangladesh could take a concrete first step by developing standardized external examinations at the secondary and higher secondary levels within the *qawmī* framework, and presenting these to the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board as a basis for recognition comparable to the *Dakhil* and *Alim* certificates. This would not require state intervention in curriculum design, would preserve institutional autonomy over content, and would remove

the double burden of sitting for separate *‘Āliyah* board examinations, which the findings of this study suggest is practically prohibitive for most students.

Curriculum development should proceed through the selective and contextually grounded integration of modern subjects, particularly English, mathematics, and ICT, in ways that complement rather than displace the core religious curriculum. The ICT gap documented in this study is not incidental. In the labor market and higher education landscape, where digital literacy is a baseline expectation, *qawmī* graduates who complete their studies without any exposure to computers or internet-based learning face a structural disadvantage that will deepen over time without deliberate institutional action.

Attention should also be paid to the pedagogical environment. Teacher training initiatives within *qawmī madrasahs* are essential not only to improve instructional quality but also to address the disciplinary practices that drive student withdrawal at the foundational stages of learning. As this study documents, children leave the *ḥifẓ* program in significant numbers because of the severity of their disciplinary conditions. The Islamic pedagogical tradition itself offers resources for addressing this concern: the prophetic model of instruction, grounded in *raḥma* (compassion) and *rifq* (gentleness), provides an internal framework for reform that does not require external justification. Framing teacher training in these terms would allow *qawmī* institutions to address genuine problems on their own terms.

Engagement with the state should remain carefully negotiated. Any effort to expand certification, recognition, or financial support should avoid direct intervention in curriculum design or institutional governance. Preserving this autonomy remains central to the identity and legitimacy of *the qawmī madrasahs*, and reform imposed from outside is unlikely to generate the internal buy-in that sustainable change requires. A cooperative approach that addresses the issues of equivalence, access, and opportunity without compromising core principles is both possible and necessary.

The future of *qawmī madrasah* education depends not on abandoning its foundational commitments but on its ability to reorganize its internal structures in ways that ensure coherence between curriculum, certification, and opportunity. *The qawmī madrasahs* are not impervious to change. They are already negotiating the demands of a changing world in quiet and partial ways. The question is whether this process can be made more deliberate, systematic, and genuinely responsive to students whose futures depend on it.

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