

THE ROOTS OF EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN

How Pakistan is being Saudi-ized and what this means for our future

by
Pervez Hoodbhoy

The common belief in Pakistan is that Islamic radicalism is a problem only in FATA, and that madrassas are the only jihad factories around. This is seriously wrong. Extremism is breeding at a ferocious rate in public and private schools within Pakistan's towns and cities. Left unchallenged, this education will produce a generation incapable of living together with any except strictly their own kind. The mindset it produces may eventually lead to Pakistan's demise as a nation state.

For twenty years or more, a few of us have been desperately sending out SOS messages, warning of terrible times to come. Nevertheless I, for one, am surprised by how quickly these dire predictions have come true. Even as the flames of terrorism enveloped Mumbai and captured world attention, on the scale of things, that too was a relatively small matter. A full-scale war is being fought in FATA, Swat, and other "wild" areas of Pakistan with thousands of deaths. It is only a matter of time before this fighting migrates to the Peshawar and Islamabad (which has already seen Lal Masjid), and then onwards to Lahore and Karachi. The suicide bomber and the masked abductor have crippled Pakistan's urban life and shattered its national economy.

Soldiers, policemen, factory and hospital workers, mourners at funerals, and ordinary people praying in mosques have been reduced to globs of flesh and fragments of bones. But, perhaps paradoxically, in spite of the fact that the dead bodies and shattered lives are almost all Muslim ones, few Pakistanis speak out against these atrocities. Nor do they approve of military action against the cruel perpetrators, choosing to believe that they are fighting for Islam and against American occupation. Political leaders like Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan have no words of kindness for those who have suffered from Islamic extremists. Their tears are reserved for the victims of Predator drones, whether innocent or otherwise. By definition, terrorism is an act that only Americans can commit.

What explains Pakistan's collective masochism? To understand, one needs to study the drastic social and cultural transformations that have made this country so utterly different from what it was in earlier times.

For three decades, deep tectonic forces have been silently tearing Pakistan away from the Indian subcontinent and driving it towards the Arabian peninsula. This continental drift is not physical but cultural, driven by a belief that Pakistan must exchange its South Asian identity for an Arab-Muslim one. Grain by grain, the desert sands of Saudi Arabia are replacing the rich soil that had nurtured a rich Muslim culture in India for a thousand years. This culture produced Moghul architecture, the Taj Mahal, the poetry of Asadullah Ghalib, and much more. Now a stern, unyielding version of Islam – Wahabism – is replacing the kinder, gentler Islam of the sufis and saints who had walked on this land for hundreds of years.

This change is by design. Twenty five years ago the Pakistani state pushed Islam on to its people. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, floggings were carried out publicly, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for university academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was declared essential for every Muslim. Today government intervention is no longer needed because of a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. The notion of an Islamic state – as yet in some amorphous and diffuse form – is more popular today than ever before as people look desperately for miracles to rescue a failing state.

Villages have changed drastically, driven in part by Pakistani workers returning from Arab countries. Many village mosques are now giant madrassas that propagate hard-line Salafi and Deobandi beliefs through over-sized loudspeakers. They are bitterly opposed to Barelvis, Shias, and other Muslims who they do not consider to be Muslims. Punjabis, who were far more liberal towards women than Pukhtuns, are now beginning to take a line resembling the Taliban. Hanafi law has begun to prevail over tradition and civil law, as is evident from recent decisions in the Lahore High Court.

In the Pakistani lower-middle and middle-middle classes lurks a grim and humorless Saudi-inspired revivalist movement that frowns on every expression of joy and pleasurable pastime. Lacking any positive connection to culture and knowledge, it seeks to eliminate “corruption” by regulating cultural life and seizing the control of the education system.

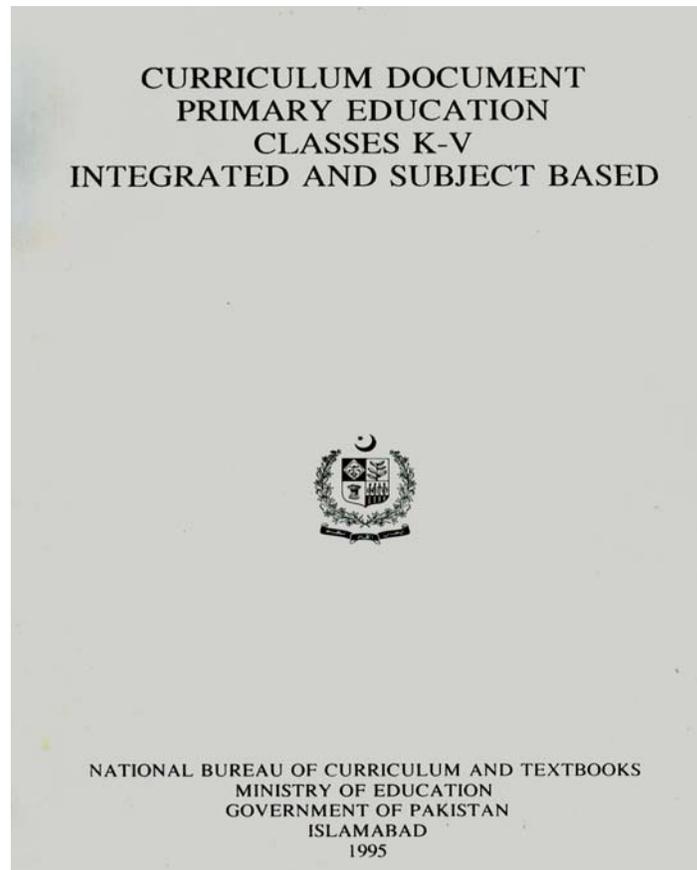
“Classical music is on its last legs in Pakistan; the sarangi and vichitarveena are completely dead”, laments Mohammad Shehzad, a music aficionado. Indeed, teaching music in public universities is violently opposed by students of the *Islami Jamaat-e-Talaba* at Punjab University. Religious fundamentalists consider music *haram*. *Kathak* dancing, once popular with the Muslim elite of India, has no teachers left. Pakistan produces no feature films of any consequence. Nevertheless, Pakistani elites, disconnected with the rest of the population, comfortably live their lives through vicarious proximity to the West. Alcoholism is a leading problem for the super-rich of Lahore, a curious irony for this deeply religious country.

Islamization of the state and polity was supposed to have been in the interests of the ruling class, a classic strategy for preserving it from the wrath of the working class. But the amazing success of the state is turning out to be its own undoing. Today it is under attack from religious militants, and rival Islamic groups battle each other with heavy weapons. Ironically the same army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad, and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam – today stands accused of betrayal, and is almost daily targeted by Islamist suicide bombers.

Pakistan’s self-inflicted suffering comes from an education system that, like Saudi Arabia’s system, provides an ideological foundation for violence and future jihadists. It demands that Islam be understood as a complete code of life, and creates in the mind of

the schoolchild a sense of siege and embattlement by stressing that Islam is under threat everywhere.

Below, the reader can see the government approved curriculum. This is the basic road-map for transmitting values and knowledge to the young. By an act of Parliament passed in 1976, all government and private schools (except for O-level schools) are required to follow this curriculum. It was prepared by the Curriculum Wing of the Federal Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan. It is a blueprint for a religious fascist state.



EXCERPTS FROM THE ABOVE CURRICULUM DOCUMENT
National Bureau of Curriculum and Textbooks
Federal Ministry of Education, 1995

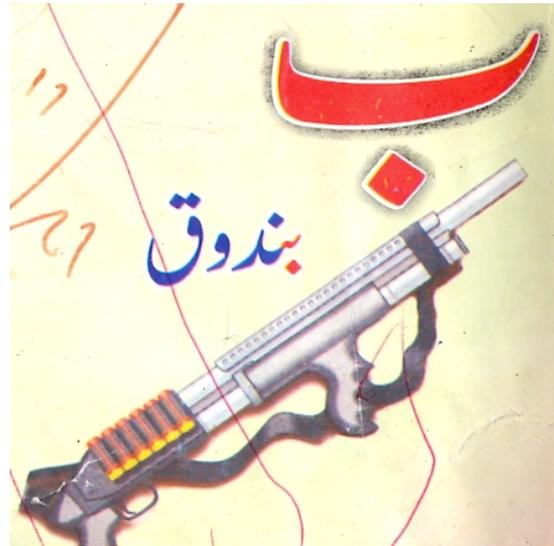
Social Studies: At the completion of Class-V, the child should be able to:

- “Acknowledge and identify forces that may be working against Pakistan.”[pg154]
- “Demonstrate by actions a belief in the fear of Allah.” [pg154]
- “Make speeches on Jihad and Shahadat” [pg154]
- “Understand Hindu-Muslim differences and the resultant need for Pakistan.” [pg154]
- “India’s evil designs against Pakistan.” [pg154]
- “Be safe from rumour mongers who spread false news” [pg158]
- “Visit police stations” [pg158]
- “Collect pictures of policemen, soldiers, and National Guards” [pg158]
- “Demonstrate respect for the leaders of Pakistan” [pg153]

Below are scanned pictures from an illustrated primer for the Urdu alphabet. The mast head states that it has been prepared by Iqra Publishers, Rawalpindi along “Islamic lines”. Although not an officially approved textbook, it is being used currently (2008) by some regular schools, as well as madrassas, associated with the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), an Islamic political party that had allied itself with General Musharraf. [These picture scans have been taken from a girl child’s book, together with her scribbles.]



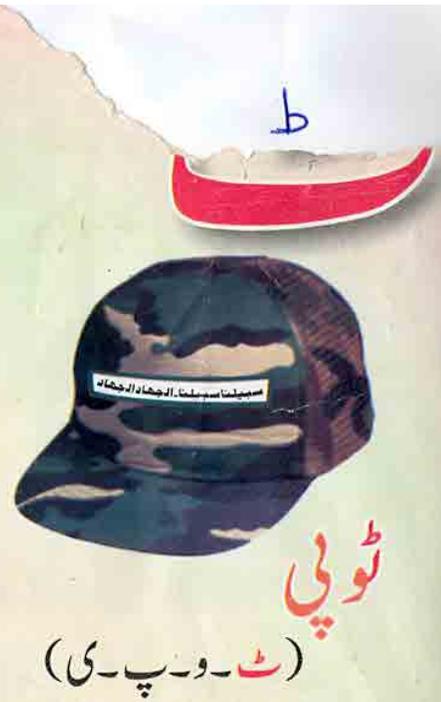
“Alif” (A) for Allah



“Bay” (B) for *bundoq* (gun)

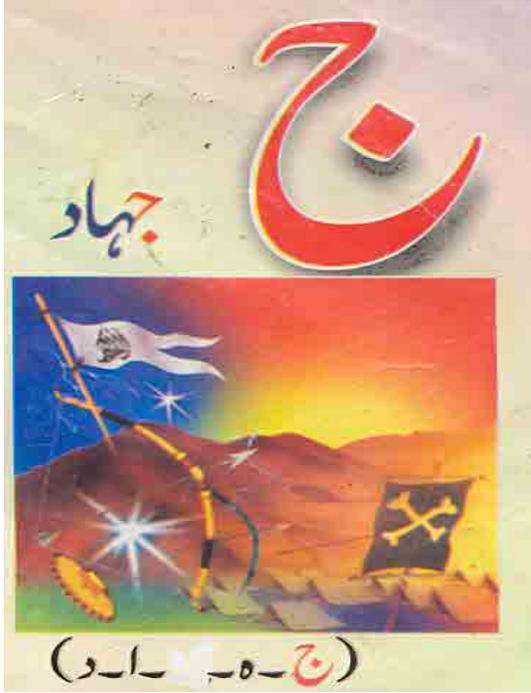


ٹکراؤ (ٹ-ک-راؤ)

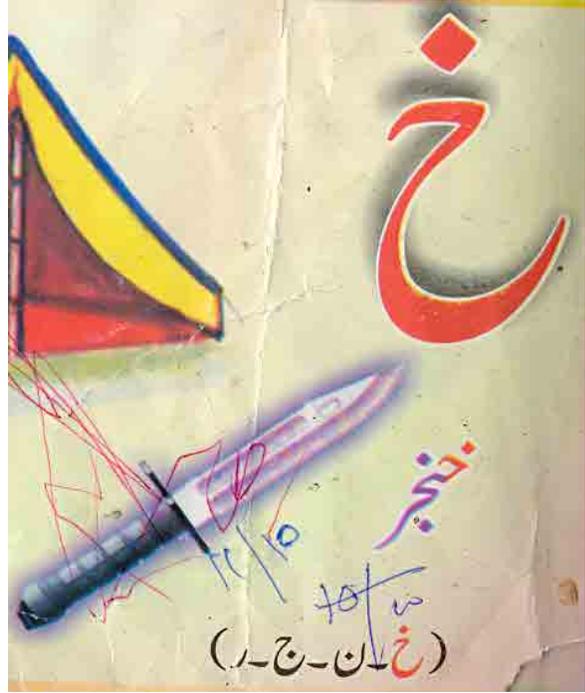


(ٹ-و-پ-ی)

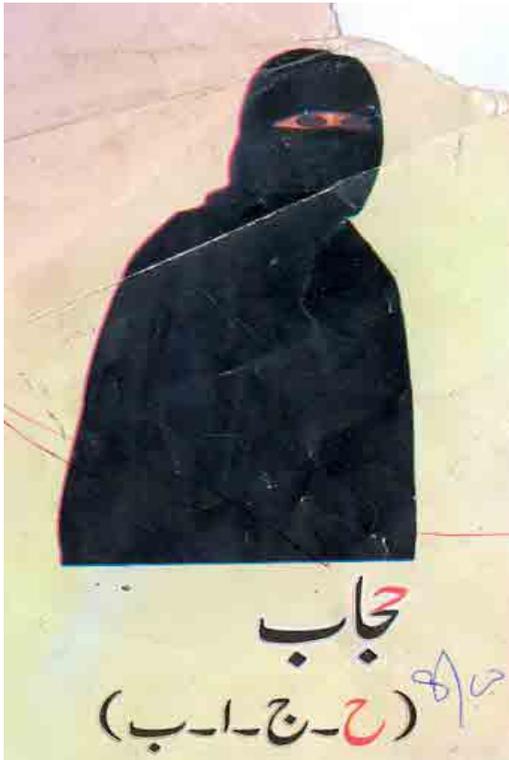
“Tay” is for *takrao* (collision) and “topi” (cap)



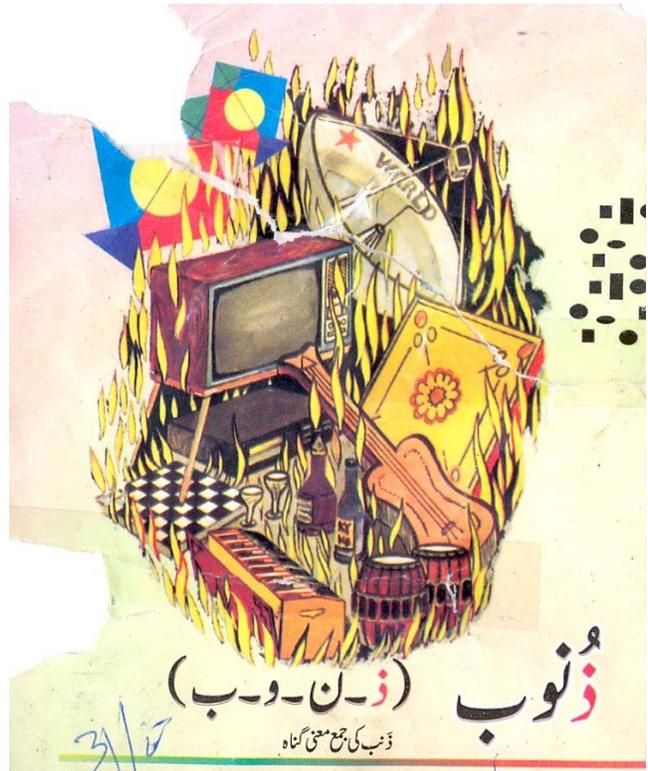
“Jeem” is for jihad



“Khay” is for khunjar (dagger)



“Hay” is for *hijab*



“Zal” is for *zunoob* (an unfamiliar word even for native Urdu speakers, means sins). Note that even traditional Muslim musical instruments are worthy of the fire.

The world of the Pakistani schoolchild was largely unchanged even after September 11, 2001 which led to Pakistan's timely desertion of the Taliban and the slackening of the Kashmir jihad. Indeed, for all his hypocritical talk of "enlightened moderation", General Musharaf's educational curriculum was far from enlightening. It was a slightly toned down copy of that under Nawaz Sharif which, in turn, was identical to that under Benazir Bhutto who had inherited it from General Zia-ul-Haq. Fearful of taking on powerful religious forces, every incumbent government has refused to take a position on the curriculum and thus quietly allowed young minds to be molded by fanatics. What might happen a generation later has always been a secondary matter for a government challenged on so many sides.

The promotion of militarism in Pakistan's so-called "secular" public schools, colleges, and universities had a profound effect upon young minds. Militant jihad became part of the culture on college and university campuses. Armed groups flourished, invited students for jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan, set up offices throughout the country, collected funds on Friday prayers, and declared a war without borders. Pre-911, my university was ablaze with posters inviting students to participate in the Kashmir jihad. After 2001, this slipped below the surface.

The primary vehicle for Saudi-izing Pakistan's education has been the madrassa. In earlier times, these had turned out the occasional Islamic scholar, using a curriculum that essentially dates from the 11th century with only minor subsequent revisions. But their principal function had been to produce imams and muezzins for mosques, and those who eked out an existence as "moulvi sahibs" teaching children to read the Quran.

The Afghan jihad changed everything. During the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, madrassas provided the US-Saudi-Pakistani alliance the cannon fodder needed for fighting a holy war. The Americans and Saudis, helped by a more-than-willing General Zia, funded new madrassas across the length and breadth of Pakistan. A detailed picture of the current situation is not available. But, according to the national education census, which the ministry of education released in 2006, Punjab has 5,459 madrassas followed by NWFP with 2,843; Sindh, 1,935; Federally Administrated Northern Areas (FANA), 1,193; Balochistan 769; AJK 586; Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (Fata), 135, and Islamabad capital territory, 77. The ministry estimates that 1.5 million students are getting religious education in the 13,000 madrassas.

These figures could be quite off the mark. Commonly quoted figures range between 18,000 and 22,000 madrassas. The number of students could be correspondingly larger. The free room, board and supplies to students, is a key part of their appeal. But the desire of parents across the country is for children to be "disciplined" and to be given a thorough Islamic education. This is also a major contributing factor.

Madrassas have deeply impacted upon the urban environment. For example, until a few years ago, Islamabad was a quiet, orderly, modern city different from all others in Pakistan. Still earlier it had been largely the abode of Pakistan's hyper-elite and foreign diplomats. But the rapid transformation of its demography brought with it hundreds of

mosques with multi-barrelled audio-cannons mounted on minarets, as well as scores of madrassas illegally constructed in what used to be public parks and green areas. Now, tens of thousands of their students with little prayer caps dutifully chant the Quran all day. In the evenings they swarm around the city, making bare-faced women increasingly more nervous.



A madrasa in Islamabad, one of the 70 or more that have been established in the last 20 years.



Madrasa students enjoying a burning of video cassettes and CDs in Aabpara, Islamabad's main market in March, 2007. The materials had been handed over by frightened shopkeepers who thereafter switched to other businesses.

Total separation of the sexes is a central goal of the Islamists, the consequences of which have been catastrophic. For example, on April 9, 2006, 21 women and 8 children were crushed to death, and scores injured, in a stampede inside a three-storey madrassa in Karachi where a large number of women had gathered for a weekly congregation. Male rescuers, who arrived in ambulances, were prevented from moving injured women to hospitals.

One cannot dismiss this as just one incident. Soon after the October 2005 earthquake, as I walked through the destroyed city of Balakot, a student of the Frontier Medical College described to me how he and his male colleagues were stopped by religious elders from digging out injured girl students from under the rubble of their school building. This action was similar to that of Saudi Arabia's ubiquitous religious "*mutaween*" police who, in March 2002, had stopped schoolgirls from leaving a blazing building because they were not wearing their *abayas*, a long robe worn in Saudi Arabia. In rare criticism, Saudi newspapers had blamed the *mutaween* for letting 15 girls burn to death.

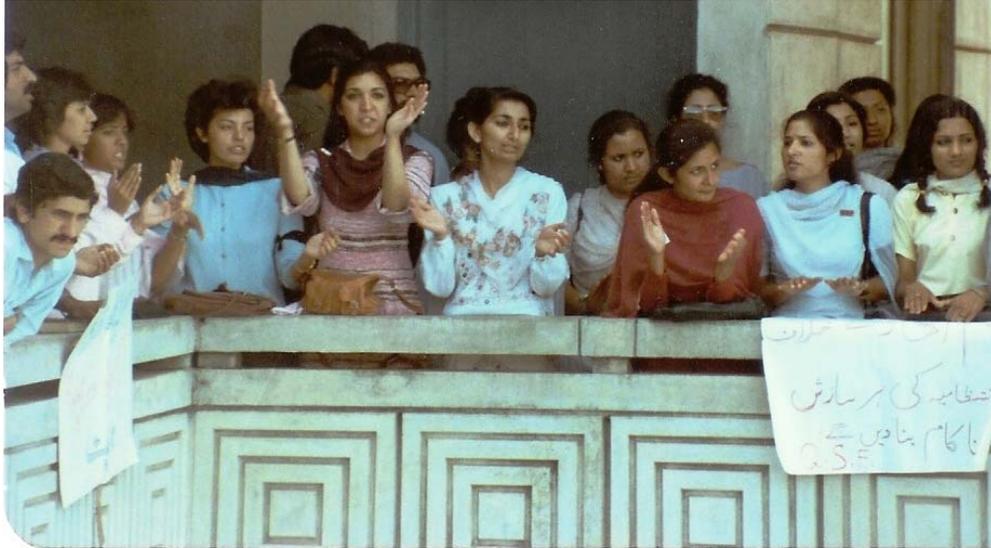
The Saudiization of a once-vibrant Pakistani culture continues at a relentless pace. The drive to segregate is now also being found among educated women. Vigorous proselytizers bringing this message, such as Mrs. Farhat Hashmi, have been catapulted to heights of fame and fortune. Their success is evident. Two decades ago the fully veiled student was a rarity on Pakistani university and college campuses. The *abaya* was an unknown word in Urdu. Today, some shops in Islamabad specialize in *abayas*. At colleges and universities across Pakistan, the female student is seeking the anonymity of the *burqa*. Now she outnumbers her sisters who still dare show their faces.

Although individuals may still thrive in spite of it, the veil profoundly affects habits and attitudes. Many of my veiled female students have largely lapsed into becoming silent note-takers, are increasingly timid, and are less inclined to ask questions or take part in discussions. This lack of self-expression and confidence leads to most Pakistani university students, including those in their mid- or late-twenties, referring to themselves as boys and girls rather than as men and women.

While social conservatism does not necessarily lead to violent extremism, it does shorten the path. Those with beards and burqas are more easily convinced that Muslims are being demonized by the rest of the world. The real problem, they say, is the plight of the Palestinians, the decadent and discriminatory West, the Jews, the Christians, the Hindus, the Kashmir issue, the Bush doctrine, etc. They vehemently deny that those committing terrorist acts are Muslims or, if faced by incontrovertible evidence, say it is a mere reaction to oppression.

The immediate future is not hopeful: increasing numbers of mullahs are creating cults around themselves and seizing control over the minds of worshippers. In the tribal areas a string of new Islamist leaders have suddenly emerged: Baitullah Mehsud, Fazlullah, Mangal Bagh,... An enabling environment of poverty, deprivation, lack of justice, and extreme differences of wealth is perfect for these demagogues. Their gruesome acts of

terror are still being perceived by large numbers of Pakistanis as fighting imperialist America. This could not be more wrong.



Chemistry department, Quaid-e-Azam University, 1985. Left wing female and male students are protesting against the university administrations actions. Note the absence of any head gear.



Chemistry department, Quaid-e-Azam University, 2008. Almost all females are either in burqa or hijab.



A classroom scene at the International Islamic University, Islamabad 2008.

In the longer term, we shall have to see how the larger political battle works out between Pakistanis who want an Islamic theocratic state and those who want a modern Islamic republic. It may yet be possible to roll back the Islamist laws and institutions that have corroded Pakistani society for over thirty years and to defeat its hate-driven holy warriors. There is no chance of immediate success; perhaps things may have to get worse before they get better. But, in the longer term, I am convinced that the forces of irrationality will cancel themselves out because they act in random directions whereas reason pulls in only one. History leads us to believe that reason will triumph over unreason, and humans will continue their evolution towards a higher and better species. Using ways that we cannot currently anticipate, they will somehow overcome their primal impulses of territoriality, tribalism, religion, and nationalism. But for now this must be just a matter of faith.

The author teaches physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad