EDUCATION REFORM IN PAKISTAN:
Building for the Future

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PAKISTAN'S RECENT EXPERIENCE IN REFORMING ISLAMIC EDUCATION

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When the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan, in December 1979, until it withdrew in defeat, in August 1988, Pakistan's Islamic boarding schools were praised for absorbing tens of thousands of Afghan refugee children and young adults. Some of these schools received funding to train anti-Soviet mujahideen [fighters in defense of faith] and were thereby praised as bulwarks against Soviet aggression. The take-over of Kabul by taliban [Islamic boarding school students, literally seekers of knowledge] in September 1996 and the attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon in September 2001 cast Pakistan's Islamic boarding schools in a disturbing, new light.

Since September 12, 2001, the Pakistani government has been under considerable pressure to police the activities and reform the educational system of the Islamic boarding schools. In 2001 and 2002, the government issued two ordinances designed, respectively, to establish new exemplary Islamic boarding schools and to regulate better the existing Islamic boarding schools. What are the specifics of these reform measures? How have these reforms been received? How effective have they been? And how might they be made more effective?

Estimating Madaris Enrollment
Recently, madaris enrollment estimates have been keenly contested. How many Pakistani students study in a religious boarding school? And what percentage of total school enrollment does that represent? Estimates of madaris enrollment range from fewer than half a million to more than two

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million. Because estimates of enrollments in private and public school vary as well, estimates of the percentage of students studying in religious boarding schools vary even more widely, from fewer than 1 percent to as much as much as 33 percent.

The range of estimates and the bases of these estimates are themselves important pieces of evidence about the role of the madaris in Pakistani society and about scholarship on madaris. The wide range of estimates indicates that generally scholars and educational professionals have a very weak understanding of even the basic dimensions of the madrassah. The differing statistical bases for these estimates indicate that some scholars and educational professionals dismiss data sources that other researchers regard as convincing.

A recent World Bank study estimates that there are fewer than 475,000 madrassah students and that fewer than 1 percent of the secondary school-going population attends a madrassah (Andrabi et al. 2005). The attempt to ground the widely ranging estimates of madaris enrollments in verifiable data is laudable. But many scholars have found the assumptions used for those estimates to be problematic. The report is based, in part, on a national census and a national household survey, neither of which were designed to gauge madaris enrollment. Indeed, the national census does not ask about children’s school or madrassah attendance. It asks about adults’ “field of education.” In their own survey of three districts, the authors find three times the percentage of students in madaris as is estimated by the national census and the household surveys. Yet their survey was restricted to areas served by public schools and thus probably underestimates madaris enrollments for Pakistan as a whole, which is poorly served by public schools. Further, the extrapolation, that fewer than 1 percent of Pakistani primary aged students attend madaris, is based on the statistic that 19 million students are enrolled in private and public schools (GOP 2004). However, half of these children drop out before reaching the fifth grade. Finally, the report conflates a madaris education with an education in religious schools, as suggested by the title of the report. This leads to problems with interpretation of the data, as will be discussed below.

Many scholars find that establishment-based surveys are more trustworthy than statistical manipulation of household surveys. Pakistani police and officials in the ministries of education and religious affairs conduct establishment surveys of madaris enrollments. These count the number of students in madaris, rather than estimate enrollments from household responses. By these estimates, between 1.7 and 1.9 million students in Pakistan are educated in madaris. The former estimate comes from the former minister of religious affairs, Mahmood Ahmed Ghazi (ICG 2002: 2). The later estimate comes from Pakistani police. The number of madaris supports these estimates. More than ten thousand madaris are registered with the government. At least that many are thought to operate without registration. A typical madrassah will educate more than one hundred children. Thus, the official establishment surveys’ estimate of nearly 2 million madaris students is not unrealistic. An estimate of fewer than 500,000 is. Whatever the precise number of madaris students, the Islamic boarding schools of Pakistan educate not merely the residual few whom government and private schools do not reach, but a substantial segment of the population.

**ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS IN PAKISTANI SOCIETY**

A brief explanation of the terminology that teachers in Islamic boarding schools themselves use will make the following discussion more productive. A madrassah is a school for grades one through ten. Thus, the age of students in madaris typically runs from five through sixteen years. Children below the age of twelve are typically non-residential students. The plural of madrassah is madaris. Many refer to Islamic boarding schools as dini madaris to distinguish them from western-styled government and private schools, which were introduced under British rule. Din refers to faith. Thus, the Urdu word dini might be translated as “religious.” For study beyond the ten years offered by the madaris, one would attend a darsul uloom [literally, an abode of knowledge], for grades eleven and twelve. The darsul uloom, then, is the equivalent of upper secondary schools in the British system, also known, in Britain, as sixth form colleges. For study beyond the darsul uloom, one would attend a jamia, the equivalent of a college or university. Thus, some Islamic educators in Pakistan suggest that the names of the Pakistani Madrasah Education (Establishment and Affiliation of Model Dini Madaris) Board Ordinance 2001 and the Dini Madrasah (Regulation and Control) Ordinance 2002—aimed at, respectively, building new institutions of Islamic education and reforming existing Islamic boarding schools, at all levels not merely at the madaris level—itself demonstrate that the government does not adequately understand the structure of Islamic educational institutions.
The Pakistani madrasah has only recently assumed its present form. Most of the formally registered madaris were established during General Zia ul-Haq’s tenure (1977–1988) not only through the encouragement of the state but also often with the financial assistance of the state. In 1977, there were a couple hundred madaris registered with the madaris central boards (Malik 1996). By 1988, there were more than 2,800 madaris registered with one of the five madaris boards (GOP 1988, cited in Rahman 2004: 79).

If madaris are sectarian and militant, it is not the product of an Islamic approach to education but of the militaristic policies of General Zia and his supporters. For nearly a decade, the U.S. government, among others, poured hundreds of millions of dollars of weapons into Pakistan, much of it through madaris, and used madaris students to fight a proxy war in Afghanistan. According to the Washington Post, the U.S. government even supplied texts to madaris glorifying and sanctioning war in the name of Islam. (Stephens and Ottaway 2002, cited in ICG 2002:13). If only a small fraction of that money and ingenuity were sustained over the past decade on curriculum development, on books and scholarships, on teacher and staff salaries, and on facilities and amenities, the madaris sector could be transformed again—this time into a foundation for tolerance and moderation, essential teachings of Islam. Indeed, it might be argued that the U.S. government has a moral duty—not merely a strategic interest—to commit such funds and to help to repair the damage done to the madaris sector.

Some madaris—well known to those who study Pakistani sectarianism—continue to serve as recruitment grounds for young militants (Abbas 2002, Rana 2004). Many madaris also socialize and politicize youth to a particular sectarian organization’s or a religious political party’s perspective. Generally, however, madaris are institutions of caretaking and education (See Candland 2005). Most have done a remarkable job of caring for and educating a large population whose basic needs have been entirely neglected by the state.

There are five boards [wiqafia] that oversee the institutions of Islamic education in their respective “school” of Islamic thought: Ahl-i-Hadith, Barelvi, Deobandi, Jamaat-i-Islami, and Shia. With the exception of the Rabta-tul-Madaris-al-Islamia, the Jamaat-i-Islami board, which was established under the patronage of General Zia ul-Haq in 1983, each of these boards has been in operation since the late 1950s. The boards determine the curriculum of the Islamic schools registered with them, provide examination questions, grade examinations, and issue graduation certificates and diplomas. There are approximately 10,000 institutions of Islamic education registered with these five boards. Roughly 70 percent are Deobandi, 16 percent are Barelvi, 5 percent are Jamaat-i-Islami, 4 percent Ahl-i-Hadith, and 3 percent Shia. The differences between these schools of Islam will be explained, briefly, below. Over the past two decades, the fastest growing Sunni madaris seem to be those of the well-patronized Jamaat-i-Islami (Rahman 2004: 79).

THE RECENT MADARIS ORDINANCES

General Pervez Musharraf, as the Chief Executive of Pakistan, promulgated the Pakistan Madrasah Education (Establishment and Affiliation of Model Dini Madaris) Board Ordinance in August 2001. The Ordinance, hereafter referred to as the Model Dini Madaris Ordinance, created the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board with the responsibility of establishing new, exemplary dini madaris and danal uloom and overseeing those existing dini madaris and danal uloom that choose to affiliate with the Board. The Board is based in Islamabad. The Model Dini Madaris Ordinance also established a Pakistan Madrasah Education Fund. The Model Dini Madaris were to be semi-autonomous, public corporations to demonstrate to existing madaris how to modernize and to train a new generation of liberal-minded ulema [religious scholars]. The approach of the pre-September 11, 2001 Model Dini Madaris Ordinance might be characterized as enabling.

General Musharraf promulgated the second ordinance related to madaris, the Dini Madaris (Regulation and Control) Ordinance in June 2002. This second Madaris Ordinance, hereafter referred to as the Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance, requires all dini madaris and danal uloom to register with the government and to make regular financial declarations. The dini madaris and danal uloom that registered with the Board would receive scholarships for their students. Dini madaris and danal uloom that do not comply would be closed. The approach of the post-September 11, 2001 Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance might be characterized as controlling. Ulema opposition to the Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance has prevented it from being implemented.
Each ordinance was promulgated as an Extraordinary Ordinance, indicating the high importance that the government attached to reform of institutions of Islamic education. Each ordinance was also promulgated before the October 2002 general elections that produced the present National Assembly and provincial assemblies. The Ordinances, therefore, promulgated by a military government, did not receive the broad public support or the critical study that an elected government might have generated. It is not surprising, therefore, that they need to be revised, as will be argued below.

**IMPACT OF ORDINANCES ON ISLAMIC EDUCATION REFORMS**

The impact of the Model Dini Madaris Ordinance has been positive but quite limited. The impact of the Dini Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance has been extensive but largely counter-productive. A poorly designed administrative structure rather than insufficiency of ulema is the greatest limitation to the Model Dini Madaris Ordinance. However, very recent initiatives suggest that there may be positive changes in the near future.

The counter-productive element of the Dini Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance stems from its heavy-handed approach and its requirement that all institutions of Islamic education integrate parts of the National Curriculum into their curricula. The present National Curriculum is largely the product of the military government of General Zia. Those parts of the National Curriculum that are required to be added to the curricula of institutions of Islamic education—Civics, Pakistan Studies, Social Studies, and Urdu—are sectarian, highly biased against religious minorities and against India, and glorify the military and the use of violence for political ends (see Nayyar and Salim 2002). Indeed, the National Curriculum may give greater sanction to intolerance toward religious minorities, to sectarianism, and to violence toward perceived enemies than do the curricula in the madaris.

**REGISTRATION OF EXISTING MADARIS**

While the richness and variety of Islamic expression in Pakistan defies easy categorization, one might, for convenience, distinguish between three major Sunni traditions. The Deobandi tradition has its roots in the “shock” of the British response to the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (see Robinson 2000). British forces responded to the Mutiny by expelling Muslims from several Indian cities and destroying or occupying Muslim places of learning and worship. The danal uloom established in 1867 at Deoband, in Uttar Pradesh, was designed to protect Muslim education from Western incursion and to extract and eliminate practices from the Muslim community that it regarded as un-Islamic. The Bareli tradition, established soon after the danal uloom at Deoband and named after Raza Ahmed Khan of Bareli, also founded a danal uloom, in Uttar Pradesh, which affirmed the devotional practices that the Deobandi school sought to eliminate, such as worshipping pir [living Muslim saints] and offering prayers at the graves of revered teachers. The Jamaat-i-Islami has later origins. Syed Abu A’la Maududi, a prolific writer, founded the Jamaat-i-Islami as a political party in 1941. The Jamaat-i-Islami, a leading member of the opposition Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, [United Action Council] now ruling the Northwest Frontier Province and the Karachi Metropolitan Government, aims to combat corruption and immorality by establishing an Islamic state capable of imposing justice and morality.

Many leaders from Islamic boarding schools have evidenced a strong demand for reform of their institutions, contrary to elite perceptions. Nearly 500 Islamic education institutions applied for affiliation with the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board in 2003, its first full year of operation. Had the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board conducted its meetings in 2004 as mandated by the Model Dini Madaris Ordinance, there could be a hundred institutions of Islamic education affiliated to the board.

Islamic institutions that affiliated with the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board include some of the largest and most highly respected. Further, these institutions represent the entire spectrum of Muslim traditions in Pakistan. The Barevi-oriented Jamiat ul Uloom Rasuliyah, in Faisalabad, one of Pakistan’s oldest institutions of Islamic learning, established in the 1930s, affiliated itself with the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board. The well-known Deobandi Jamia Abu Huraira of Maulana Abdul Qayoom Haqqani, in Nowshera, has also affiliated with the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board. And the danal uloom degrees given by the Jamaat-i-Islami affiliated Fikr-i-Maududi [Maududi’s Thoughts] Institute in Lahore are now recognized by the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board as equivalent to the Bachelor of Arts.
There is, however, significant resistance to the government's attempts, represented by the Dini Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance, to control institutions of Islamic education. An association of madaris, the Ittehad Tanzeemat Madaris Deenia [Religious Madaris Organization Alliance], was formed to protest and oppose the coercive dimensions of government's reform efforts. All five wiqafa participated in the formation of the Ittehad Tanzeemat Madaris Deenia. Member madaris have declared that they will refuse government scholarships for their students. According to some authoritative estimates, the Ittehad Tanzeemat Madaris Deenia may represent as many as 15,000 madaris. However, most of the members of the association are principals and teachers at relatively small madaris.

**Establishment of New Model Dini Madaris**
The government's own orders and regulations related to the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board have not been met. The Model Dini Madaris Ordinance requires the chairman of the Board to hold meetings of the Board at intervals of no longer than six months. However, the Board has not met since January 10, 2004. Since its inception, the Board has not had a permanent chairman or secretary.

The government's orders and regulations related to the establishment of new madaris have also not been substantially fulfilled. Three Model Dini Madaris were established under the Ordinance, in Karachi, Sukkur, and Islamabad. The Islamabad Model Madrasah was established for the education of girls; the Karachi and Sukkur Model Madaris were established for the education of boys. These three institutions were not given adequate authority, staffing, or financing to perform as mandated. To date, no permanent principals have been appointed. Until recently, the same person was appointed principal of both the Karachi and Sukkur madaris. The principal of the Islamabad Model Madrassah has been replaced four times. Those in charge of the three madaris have not been given authority to hire staff or allocate resources. Instead, they must appeal to the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board in Islamabad. Facilities are sub-standard. All three Model Dini Madaris are housed in the Hajj Directorate's hajji [pilgrimage to Mecca] camps. During the Hajj season, the camps are very noisy and packed with people on their way to and from Mecca. In Karachi, the Pakistan Army Rangers are permanently camped at the New Hajji Camp. The Rangers have even forcibly occupied part of the premises of the Model Dini Madrassah. The presence of heavily armed men, occupying a part of the madrassah premise, is not conducive to study.

There is considerable misinformation issued about the model madaris. Occasionally, a Pakistani newspaper will report that the government intends to establish several dozens of model dini madaris. In February 2004, it was reported that the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board had announced that it would establish 98 Model Dini madaris. In March 2005, it was reported that additional Model Dini Madaris would be established in Lahore and Multan, in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province; in Quetta, in Balochistan; and in Peshawar, in the Northwest Frontier Province. However, the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board claims to have no knowledge of such plans. Some speculate that KNI, the press service behind these reports, has been fed these stories to give the false impression that the establishment of model madaris is proceeding quickly.

**Islamic Education in Private and Government Schools**
Islamic education makes up a large part of the general education imparted in government and private schools. The National Curriculum includes Islamiyat [the study of Islam] as one of the mandatory subjects for Muslims. Additionally, there is a great emphasis on Islam in the Civics, Pakistani Studies, Social Studies, and Urdu sections of the National Curriculum (see Nayar and Salim 2002). According to some ulama, the Islamiyat taught in government and private schools focuses on the most militant and intolerant portions of the Quran and Ahadith [sayings and practices of the Prophet] while the most tolerant and enlightened passages are ignored. This bias can be traced to the 1980s, when Pakistan was home to millions of Afghan refugees and front-line state in the fight against Soviet aggression. Just as militant prayer leaders in the armed services and militant teachers in government schools were promoted in the 1980s, it is possible to promote moderate prayer leaders and teachers today.

The private schools with the widest reach in Pakistan are those run by Islamic associations and Islamic foundations, some affiliated with Islamic political parties, not those that are most visible in the affluent sections of Pakistan's larger cities, which generally follow the Cambridge or Oxford curriculum. These private schools are not madaris. But educators in many of these private schools, by their own account, would like to raise children in the ideology of their political party or in a particular sect of Islam.
It is a mistake to assume that only Islamic boarding schools are involved in Islamic education. Thousands of private schools, using either the Cambridge or Oxford curriculum or the National Curriculum, or both, impart a predominantly Islamic education. Yet very little attention has been focused on the curriculum or pedagogy in these sectarian and political party-oriented private schools (see Candland 2005).

**Madaris in the Context of General Education**

Reform of Islamic education and institutions of Islamic instruction must proceed from the recognition that Islamic boarding schools and Islamic education are an integral part of national education in Pakistan. Reform efforts based on the assumption that national education must remove discussion of religion from the educational curriculum are not only impractical. Avoidance of religious subjects in national education and weakening of the Islamic education sector are neither likely to improve tolerance and understanding between people of differing faiths nor diminish violence in Pakistan or abroad.

Reform of Islamic education must also recognize that the present “backwardness”—in administrative, curricular, and financial terms—of institutions of Islamic instruction is a direct product of a highly polarized educational system. As Tariq Rahman aptly puts it:

> The madrassa students regard their Westernized counterparts as stooges of the West and possibly as very bad Muslims if not apostates. The Westernized people, in turn, regard their madrassa counterparts as backward, prejudiced, narrow-minded bigots who would put women under a virtual curfew and destroy all the pleasures of life as the Taliban did in Afghanistan (Rahman 2004: 150–151).

In this context, it should be recognized that the promotion and subsidy of elite education is responsible for much of the “backwardness” of the institutions of Islamic education. Most of Pakistan’s children have been entirely neglected by the state’s educational system (see Candland 2001). The madaris have done a remarkable job of reaching a large sector of the Pakistani public with virtually no government support and very modest funding from the public. However, they have educated this neglected sector largely within a sectarian tradition and have not inculcated moderation and tolerance. At the same time, when the government has involved itself in the madaris sector, as under General Zia ul-Haq, the consequences have been detrimental to the cause of education.

Moderately minded leaders in the field of Islamic education need to be made full partners in the reform of madaris and Islamic education in non-madaris educational institutions. Pakistan’s experience with the reform of Islamic education demonstrates that such reforms, to be effective, cannot be imposed. Ulema themselves will determine whether the government’s attempts to reform Islamic education succeed or fail. A coercive approach is likely to fail.

The suggestion that all ulema are against reforms seems to be designed to excuse the clumsiness in and the delay of government reform attempts. Just as it benefits some opposition politicians to claim that the attempt at reforming Islamic education is a plot by the U.S. government to weaken Islam, it benefits other governing politicians to suggest that their attempts at reforming institutions of Islamic education are being waged against the opposition of recalcitrant and backward ulema. Many ulema are in favor of reform. Indeed, many madaris have already integrated social studies and natural sciences into their curriculum.

What is needed for successful uplift of institutions of Islamic education is not the promulgation of more ordinances but constructive conversations between accomplished ulema and senior government officials. The government already has the authority—through the Societies Act of 1860—to regulate and control institutions of Islamic education. The Societies Act requires all educational institutions to register with provincial governments and to make regular financial declarations. Thus, the Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance’s requirement that institutions of Islamic education register and disclose their accounts irritated educators at Islamic educational institutions.

**Recommendations**

Greater attention to the model dini madaris could have a strong influence on the entire reform program. The government could appoint qualified ulema—like the principal of the Model Dini Madressah Karachi—as administrators and educators at these madaris and give them regular appointments and the prospect of promotion. The government could also provide model dini madaris with permanent facilities. The government
could involve educators at these institutions in significant conferences and press events—as was successfully done in a conference on abolishing sectarianism and promoting enlightened moderation at the Sindh Governor’s House in March, 2005. Model dini madaris administrators and educators could also be invited to be external examiners in Islamiyat examinations at government colleges and universities.

Further, the government might ask qualified ulema and university professors in Islamiyat to develop an alternative curriculum for Islamic educational institutions. The faculty of Islamic and Oriental Studies at the University of Peshawar and the staff of the National Research and Development Foundation in Peshawar have extensive experience in and promising proposals for consultations leading to such an alternative curriculum. The present program for a new curriculum in Islamic educational institutions merely adds National Curriculum textbooks—many of them substandard and biased against minorities—to the existing curricula in Islamic educational institutions. The real problem in the Islamic educational institutions is not that students do not learn computers and natural sciences. Many madaris, darul uloom, and jama do teach these subjects. But a natural science education is not a guarantee of an enlightened mind. Indeed, many of those most committed to violence in the name of Islam were educated in the natural sciences. The real problem in these schools is that students do not learn how to relate with other communities in a culturally diverse country and a globally interdependent world.

The Quran is full of recommendations and insights on how to relate peacefully with other communities through goodwill and tolerance. Of course, those looking for justifications for violence can find them in the sacred texts of any religion (see Candland 1992). The purpose of an alternative curriculum for Pakistan’s Islamic educational institutions would be to develop a curriculum based on the enlightened and tolerant messages of Islam. Ulema and Islamic educators in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Turkey have already succeeded in framing such a curriculum and, thereby, in engaging Islamic educational institutions in their countries in national development programs, including community health and income generation programs. Scholars from these countries could be consulted while crafting an alternative curriculum for Islamic education institutions in Pakistan.

The Pakistan Madrasah Education Board would function better if it had a permanent chairman and secretary, who are respected ulema, and regular meetings of the Board, Academic Council, and Ordinance Review Committee. The Board also needs to develop its own examination papers. The Pakistan Madrasah Education Board might also function better if it—and the authority and financing for both the operation of new Model Dini Madaris and the regulation of existing institutions of Islamic education—were transformed to a newly created Islamic Education Cell within the Ministry of Education. Presently, the administrative authority and the funding for reform of Islamic education belong to different ministries. The Ministry of Education receives funds—largely from foreign sources—for the reform of Islamic education. The Pakistan Madrasah Education Board is prohibited from taking funds from foreign sources. The Ministry of Religious Affairs is authorized—according to the Dini Madaris Regulation and Control Ordinance—to administer reforms. Adding to the confusion over administrative authority, there are Sub-Directorates of Religious Education [Dini Madrasah Education Boards] in the provincial ministries of education.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs does not have experience or expertise in education. Indeed, the ministry does not have the ability to administer an ushr [Islamic charity based on land holdings] program, despite being entrusted with that task, through the Zakat and Ushr Ordinance, more than 25 years ago. The administration of zakat [Islamic charity based on capital holdings] is the principal occupation of the ministry. Further, the present chairman of the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board, the Federal Secretary of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is neither a graduate of an Islamic educational institution nor an educator.

The creation of an Islamic education cell within the Ministry of Education, the transfer of the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board to that cell, and the appointment of a person who has an Islamic educational background and the rank of State Minister as a full-time chairman of the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board could reduce redundancy and guarantee that reform of Islamic education is treated as an national educational priority. The appointment of full-time staff knowledgeable of systems of Islamic education to the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board would also improve its chances of success. If the aim of the Madaris Ordinances is “to improve and secure uniformity of standards of education and [to integrate]
Islamic education imparted at *dini madaris* within the general education system,” as the Model Dini Madaris Ordinance says (GOP 2001: 1), then it makes sense for the Pakistan Madrasah Education Board to have the staffing, status, and autonomy that could make such a goal possible.

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