

# *Arguing Pakistan in Late Colonial India: The Political Thought of Shabbir Ahmad Usmani*

## Abstract

In recent years, scholarship on Modern South Asia has witnessed a vehement debate break out over the meaning of Muslim nationalism and the demand for Pakistan. The debate centers around the role of seminary-trained Muslim scholars, the ‘ulama, in shaping popular imaginations of Pakistan. One major scholar, Shabbir Ahmad Usmani (1887–1949), has emerged as the key figure who articulated Pakistan as an ‘Islamic State’, encapsulated in his use of the metaphor, ‘New Medina’. This article presents a different reading of Usmani’s political thought. I argue that Usmani deferred the promise of an Islamic mode of governance, regarding Pakistan as holding the potential for a remarkably democratic Islamic politics. Usmani’s argument for Pakistan ultimately reached the same conclusions as the modernist leadership of the Muslim League, but through different means and for different ends. While Usmani engaged extensively with medieval and early modern Muslim juridical and political discourses, his engagement was inflected in crucial ways by the power of modern political categories. The article shows how this encounter of modern political categories with Islamic intellectual thought both imposed constraints and offered opportunities for Usmani. By analyzing a range of Urdu speeches, letters, and writings by Usmani and his detractors published in various parts of North India around the time of the 1945-46 elections, this article highlights Usmani’s novel contribution to the political debate in late colonial India. In doing so, it sheds new light on the ways that Pakistan was being popularly imagined in the years immediately before its creation.

## Bio

Hasan Hameed is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at Princeton University. His research focuses on Muslim intellectual and cultural history in colonial India and post-colonial South Asia. Before coming to Princeton, he read Modern South Asian Studies at Oxford University, where he was the Vicky Noor Scholar from Pakistan. He received his undergraduate degree in Social Sciences and Liberal Arts from the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) Karachi, as the Jawed Akhai Gold Medalist. He is passionate about Urdu poetry, home-cooked food, and modern continental philosophy.