



## PAKISTAN'S MADRASSAS: THE NEED FOR INTERNAL REFORM AND THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

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The rise of Islamic militancy in Pakistan during 2008 and 2009 and the resulting military operation in the Swat valley can be traced back to the inculcation of radical ideologies among the youth in the Frontier region. There has been considerable disagreement among analysts about the role of educational institutions, such as madrassas,<sup>2</sup> in terrorism. In 2005, Peter Bergen and Swaty Pandey, in an influential series of articles, stated that concern over Islamic education was all a 'madrassa myth.' Basing their analysis on a controversial World Bank study about the actual number of madrassas in Pakistan, Bergen and Pandey had argued that "while madrassas are an important issue in education and development in the Muslim world, they are not and should not be considered a threat to the United States." This is because of their relatively small number and since terrorists who attacked the West had largely not been educated in madrassas.<sup>3</sup>

However, since many of the Swati militants and their minions have been traced back to madrassas, the pendulum has swung again. As NATO supply lines are targeted by such militants in Pakistan, analysts are now also discovering that civil strife in the Frontier region of Pakistan can be just as dangerous for Western interests. Madrassas are indeed a significant part of the conflict equation that needs to be considered dispassionately.

Focusing on the core problem of curricular reform and the career placement of graduates can provide us a path out of the current policy ambivalence about madrassas.

Most recently, there has been a tendency for analysts to suggest that madrassas can simply be ignored because they are relatively few in comparison to government or private schools.<sup>4</sup> Such an approach is also misguided because it assumes that the absolute percentage of madrassas has some relationship to conflict development and also works under the false premise that merely building better alternative schools will move students away from madrassas. The strategy of 'draining the swamp' by establishing sparkling government schools alongside madrassas, which appears to be the current approach from development donors, is likely to have limited success. Madrassas will immediately resort to a defensive strategy of labeling the government schools in conspiratorial terms and still be able to recruit students quite zealously from religious families. Investment to improve education is needed across Pakistan in all kinds of schools, including madrassas. The only way to solve the madrassa problem is to engage in a process of reform that focuses on pluralism and conflict resolution skills that should be facilitated by the Pakistani government with the assistance of other Muslim countries and ulema.

This memorandum aims to provide recommendations to the Pakistani government and civil society as well as to U.S. policy makers and the international donor community regarding the international donor community regarding madrassas in Pakistan. It is important to note that the madrassas are located all over Pakistan in rural and urban areas. However, some of the more prominent madrassas are located in urban centers such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, or in moderately sized urban centers of southern



Punjab. Unlike the relatively “lawless” tribal areas, these madrassas exist in areas where the writ of the Pakistani government remains fairly strong. Students from even the tribal areas and remote parts of the Northwest Frontier Province are often sent to these madrassas for schooling, and thus a reform strategy presented in this policy brief is clearly implementable within the current dynamics of Pakistani state control.

## NEED FOR ACTION

No doubt madrassas have served an important social purpose across South Asia. Pakistani madrassas, if properly managed, can also provide an important safety net similar to other civil society organizations. However, neither the Pakistani government nor U.S. policymakers can be complacent about the situation in Pakistan’s madrassas for the following reasons:

- a) Madrassa graduates have limited employability because their skill-set is relatively small compared to other school graduates because of an outdated curriculum.
- b) Often, modernity in madrassas is equated with access to computers and good infrastructure. However, such attributes without proper curricular changes only make the madrassa graduate potentially more vulnerable to recruiting by internet-based extremist organizations.<sup>5</sup>
- c) Even though a vast majority of madrassas are not linked to any international terrorist organizations, they tend to perpetuate an exclusionary worldview both within Islamic sects and with reference to other Faiths.
- d) While the absolute number of madrassas is a fraction of the total number of schools in Pakistan, their impact is still large in the most isolated parts of the country that have the highest potential for radicalization.

The Pakistani government should take a lead role in any effort at madrassa reform but can be assisted by foreign governments in constructive ways in this regard as well. Reformist Islamic organizations are now rising all over the world and information exchange between such groups and madrassas in Pakistan can be facilitated by foreign organizations; this can be in the form of joint workshops and other opportunities for mutual interaction that are often not possible without donor assistance across vast expanses of the Muslim world. Several Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, view Pakistani clerics with great suspicion due to the country’s reputation as an incubator for extremism. Thus, they are reluctant to grant visas to religious scholars for visits. Western organizations can help provide some measure of assurance for such interactions by facilitating the process. It is also useful for Western donors to be engaged in such processes to monitor progress in conflict reduction. Bridging the reform agenda of madrassas directly with access to viable livelihoods and development projects is also a viable path of action for U.S. and other foreign agencies.

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## METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

This memorandum is based on an empirical study of madrassas in Pakistan conducted by the author under a grant from the United States Institute of Peace.<sup>6</sup> Primary data on madrassa demographics, curriculum, and sectarian adherence were collected by establishment surveys of all madrassas in the two case study regions -- Ahmedpur (a rural area in Southern Punjab) and Islamabad (the capital city). This comparison provided rural-urban contrast for analysis. Structured and semi-structured interviews were held with the following stakeholders: managers and teachers at madrassas and schools; leaders and officials of local government; alumni of madrassas and notable donors from the community; senior government officials in the Ministries of Interior, Home, Education, and Religious Affairs at the federal and provincial level; members of the Pakistan Madrassa Education Board (established during the Musharraf years) and law-enforcement officials who have records of any complaints of sectarian violence from madrassas. Special arrangements were made for anonymous interviews with the Criminal Investigation Department and Crises Management Cell (departments responsible for anti-terrorism operation) to determine any direct linkages between madrassa graduates and terrorist/criminal activity.

## FINDINGS

Madrassas are clearly an important social institution across the Muslim world and are often described by proponents as the Muslim world's largest network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, the noble purpose of education and enlightenment for which madrassas were originally intended, has been challenged by various sectarian elements within Pakistan. There is very limited regulatory oversight of madrassas. In an attempt to verify madrassa registration, the study team for the empirical analysis on which this memorandum is based conducted an establishment survey of every single madrassa in one district of rural Punjab, Ahmedpur, and found that only 39 out of 363 surveyed madrassas were registered with the government. Registration is essential as a basic measure of accountability and tracking of institutional performance and needs to be controlled for quality of the teaching and student grades in national examinations. In the same study region, there were 465 government schools of which 69 (almost 13 percent) were closed due to non-availability of teachers or teacher absenteeism. Most rural areas have a similar problem of teacher absenteeism due to a lack of monitoring and enforcement by school authorities, which leads to suboptimal education being offered by the state and a greater reliance on madrassas. This study also found evidence of a link between a large number of madrassas and sectarian violence, particularly in rural Punjab. Ties with international terrorism are found in a few politically charged madrassas, but this is not as systematic a problem as the sectarianism fostered by madrassas. Analysis of police arrest data for sectarian attacks between Shias and Sunnis clearly shows that sectarian activity in areas of greater madrassa density per population size was found to be higher, including incidents of violent unrest. The number of madrassas has increased over a ten year period by around 30%, and in some areas they are competing with government and secular private schools for enrollment.

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Many madrassas are residential and cater to relatively poor students in these areas. However, in urban madrassas, this pattern is not always followed as affluent families may also send their children to madrassas for disciplinary and theological reasons.

The number of madrassas is also increasing in both rural and urban areas. Unfortunately, most urban observers in Pakistan tend to cast aspersions on “foreign elements” for any sectarian activity, without conducting in-depth analysis of causality. While Iran has funded Shi’i madrassas and Saudi Arabia has funded Salafi and Deobandi madrassas, there is no other external linkage to be determined with regard to the violence observed on religious festivals and other occasions.<sup>7</sup> Sectarianism is a serious and palpable internal challenge for Pakistan, and madrassas in this case study were found to be contributing to this challenge. At one level this is more of an internal challenge for Muslim countries like Pakistan or Iraq rather than a direct contributor to international terrorism. Nevertheless, we are living in a world of increasing connection between domestic politics and international networks that are fuelled by discontent at multiple levels. Averting a cognitive clash between sects as well as between civilizations thus requires a recognition of the linkages between these political spheres. The worldview of the madrasa graduate is often exclusionary and there is a tremendous need to inculcate the Islamic tradition of pluralism in these institutions.<sup>8</sup>

A review of madrasa newsletters and other narratives within their establishment revealed a strong tendency to claim victimization of Muslims, often with erroneous information from spurious and prejudicial sources. Misinformation campaigns at all levels of society must be curtailed through transparency on the part of Western governments and donors. For example, the issue of civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict has been used as an easy recruitment strategy by many extremists since there has been a reluctance on the part of NATO forces to give clear and transparent assessments of “collateral damage.” Similarly, the use of funds for various development projects from donors needs to be clearly articulated to the populations so that misinformation about how the funds are being used to fuel conflict cannot gain hold.

The power of conspiracy theories in the context of education and specious arguments and pseudo-science must not be underestimated. However, the receptivity of students to such conspiratorial narratives is largely due to the perpetuation of so many unresolved territorial and political conflicts in the Muslim world. To facilitate this effort, Western governments must pay more attention to regional political conflicts in such regions. In particular, conflicts that have a clear historical connection with colonialism must be addressed in ways similar to Portugal’s approach in resolving the East Timor territorial conflict. Providing alternative historical narratives through a revitalization of foreign policy efforts to resolve disputes in Kashmir, Chechnya, the Middle East, and Africa will limit the recruiting power of radical elements.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

President Obama's announcement of a revised strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan on March 27, 2009, suggests the importance of education in reducing the threat of terrorism in the region. In his list of development examples that U.S. assistance could provide, schools were first, followed by roads and hospitals.<sup>9</sup> However, at present, it is not clear how educational investment and reform will be facilitated by the U.S. Government in any way different from previous attempts under the Bush Administration. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), between 2002 and 2007, the educational programs of the agency totaled more than \$255 million "to reform and revitalize all levels of Pakistan's education system," and currently these programs "benefit more than 600,000 children and 60,000 teachers." The appropriation for the education program in Pakistan until 2012 amounts to around \$90 million which is to be implemented by USAID's partner, the American Institutes of Research, spanning around 10,000 schools.<sup>10</sup> However, there is a general impression that none of this investment can be targeted at the estimated 15,000 madrassas directly because of U.S. Government restrictions on funding religious institutions. Nevertheless, indirect support could be offered through capacity-building programs for teachers across all sectors, including madrassas. Indeed, USAID has previously supported such programs for madrassas in East Africa, which have been fairly successful.<sup>11</sup>

There are concerns from some analysts about the strategic benefit of such an approach in Pakistan. The Heritage Foundation advised the Bush Administration to "refrain from getting involved in Pakistan's broader madrassa reform efforts and accept that many of the traditional madrassas serve a useful purpose in educating Islamic intellectuals and providing shelter and food for impoverished youth."<sup>12</sup> There is also the potential argument that any U.S. assistance will only fuel further conspiracy theories of "neocolonialism." Although such narratives are widespread in Pakistan, the absence of any positive intervention, as was the case after the Russo-Afghan war, fueled equally negative allegations of abandonment. Interviews during fieldwork for this study revealed that appropriately channeled assistance, which is not interventionist or divisive, but rather inclusive, devolved and focuses on livelihoods and conflict reduction through local organizations, will positively engage most madrassas and the radical clerics will be marginalized.

A number of policy options to address the issue are available within the Pakistani government as well, but will require clear leadership and a willingness to take some political risks. In the case of the Pakistani government's madrassa reform strategy, the sine qua non is to have a formal regulatory mechanism for the guaranteeing efficacy of all educational institutions and ensure quality control whether it is private secular schools or madrassas. This should cater to registration, create concomitant statutory obligation on the registered entity and its sponsors by way of governance, financial accountability, and responsibility towards society.

The reform effort should inter alia provide for the following six elements – the first three points pertain to policy reform by the Pakistani government while the latter three are areas where international assistance can be of direct relevance.

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- Registration of madrassas as well as private schools for quality control purposes is essential. However, to give more credibility to the effort, this process is best managed at the provincial level rather than the federal level with regular audits by a national independent education board, which should have the resources from multiple donors to conduct such audits for all schools (public and private).
- Inclusion of local council representatives in the management committee or board of directors of the madrassa wifaq (federation) is needed in order to ensure that the local citizenry are involved in the workings of the madrassa. This mandate should be enforced by the madrassa registration authorities to prevent madrassas from being driven by ideological agendas that are divorced from the communities in which they operate schools.
- The madrassa curriculum needs to be reformed to highlight pluralistic traditions in Islam, particularly in dealing with differences of opinion between faith traditions. Specific teaching modules on conflict resolution or diversity of thought can be developed in this regard. In addition, there should be a clear option for students to undertake studies that can grant them admission and placement in higher education institutions or vocational training programs.
- Career placement of madrassa graduates should be encouraged through apprenticeship programs in which the madrassa graduates can find a way to teach their religious ideals while also contributing as productive members of society.<sup>13</sup> Examples of such apprenticeships could be in the health services sector and disaster relief management. Such programs can be supported by international donors as they would be independent of the madrassa itself, but also include the local business community.
- Exchange of possible practices and ideas between schools and madrassas within Pakistan and abroad can be facilitated by U.S. and other foreign institutions<sup>14</sup>. The role of Islamic seminaries in other parts of the Muslim world that have been able to provide a more inclusive and professionally attenuated curriculum should be considered. The experiences of some Indonesian pesantren that have recently reformed their curricula internally may be particularly instructive.<sup>15</sup>
- Efforts should be made to respond to any misinformation being circulated around madrassas through their newsletters and web sites about various foreign interventions in the Muslim world. Within the United States, the Office of Public Diplomacy should consider specifically reviewing madrassa literature and responding directly to madrassa establishments to clarify any misunderstandings or erroneous information about foreign interventions policy.

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Madrassas have a noble history of use in furthering the cause of science and learning in medieval Islam, but that tradition has been largely forgotten in Pakistan because of a relatively uneducated theological establishment taking over the administration of most madrassas. However, the current radicalization of madrassas in Pakistan should not lead us to give up in despair. In other parts of the Muslim world, madrassas have served an appropriate educational purpose. For example in West Bengal, India, a survey of Islamic schools in January 2009 found that because of the higher quality of education at madrassas, even non-Muslims were actively enrolling in them.

This was remarkably akin to how, in Pakistan, many Muslim families send their children to Christian schools because of the high quality of teaching and discipline. Hindu enrollment in several Bengali madrassas, for example, was as high as 64 percent because many of these institutions offered vocational training programs.<sup>16</sup> Such examples can certainly be emulated in Pakistani madrassas as well. We should not give up on madrassas but rather help bring them back to their heyday of pluralistic learning.

Public school curricula must be improved as well and the accessibility and quality control of these institutions in rural areas augmented. Islamic education must remain a part of the curriculum in government schools but provided in the context of global religious studies. This will provide greater incentives for parents to consider mainstream schooling while not feeling that religious awareness is being compromised. Towards this end, governments of Muslim-majority countries may indeed have to take an uncompromising stance towards the most radical theologians who would oppose any conciliatory or ecumenical approaches. However, such radical elements must still be given due process in their curtailment rather than giving them further fodder for claiming victimization. As the momentum towards pluralism in Islamic learning grows, the radicals will be marginalized. There are already some positive moves from the ulema in Pakistan. Religious clerics from both the Deobandi Tablighi Jama'at and the Barelvi Sunni Tehreek have publicly rejected the Taliban approach to Islam in recent statements. Madrassas such as the venerable Jamia Ashrafia in Lahore are now willing to initiate specific teaching modules that stress the importance of non-violence and respect for other faith traditions.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from these possible actions, the international community should also have a more humane vision of madrasa children and address their needs as those of any other child. In the words of retired General Talat Masood, a distinguished observer of Pakistan's foreign policy and a renowned peace activist: "the people in madrassas are neither demons nor heroes... they have insecurities, pain, hopes and frustrations... they are human beings just like us."<sup>18</sup>

The challenge of preventing cooptation of Islamic institutions by external interests for political conflict, while preserving their independence and social service is reaching a critical juncture in Pakistan and across the Muslim world. A multifaceted strategy is essential to tackle this challenge – one which accepts the empirical insights that are provided by research and avoids sensationalistic or sanguine accounts of the problem.

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- <sup>1</sup> Hadith narrated in Sahih Bukhari, *Kitab Ar-Riqaq* (Book 76, Chapter 18, Hadith number 470). Translation by Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Muslim World League, 1980.
- <sup>2</sup> The word “madrassa” in Arabic refers to any school. However, for the purposes of this report, we are using the broader Western connotation of the word that refers to specific Islamic religious schools or seminaries.
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey, “The Madrassa Myth,” the New York Times, June 14, 2005; See also a longer version of this article by the authors titled “The Madrassa Scapegoat,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Tahir Andrabi et al, “The Madrassa Myth,” *Foreign Policy*, June 2009, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4958](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4958).
- <sup>5</sup> See Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).
- <sup>6</sup> The full study has been published in book form: Saleem H. Ali, *Islam and Education: Conflict and Conformity in Pakistan’s Madrassas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- <sup>7</sup> Deobandi refers to a sub-sect within Sunni Islam in South Asia which arose at the Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband, a notable madrassa in India during the eighteenth century. The Salafi movement (whose adherents also refer to themselves as the Ahle-e-Hadith) in contemporary times is equivalent to the movement of the Saudi cleric Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab which wanted a return to primordial and traditionalist interpretations of Islam. Deobandis and Salafis share a puritanical zeal against Sufism and other pluralistic worldviews within Islam.
- <sup>8</sup> Of particular relevance in this regard is educating students to have critical thinking skills and how to respond to disagreements without violence. There are Islamic approaches to the issue of nonviolence that deserve further attention. For a review of such sources see Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace-Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2004).
- <sup>9</sup> President Obama’s speech on March 27, 2009. He stated specifically: “I am calling upon Congress to pass a bipartisan bill co-sponsored by John Kerry and Richard Lugar that authorizes \$1.5 billion in direct support to the Pakistani people every year over the next five years--resources that will build schools, roads, and hospitals, and strengthen Pakistan's democracy.”
- <sup>10</sup> USAID Web site, accessed March 30, 2009, <http://www.usaid.gov/pk/education/index.htm>.
- <sup>11</sup> See for example, USAID support for the Madrassa early Childhood Development program in Kenya available at [http://www.usaid.gov/ke/ke\\_progdevan/programs.html](http://www.usaid.gov/ke/ke_progdevan/programs.html).
- <sup>12</sup> Lisa Curtis, “U.S. Aid to Pakistan: Countering Extremism through Educational Reform”, 8 June 2007, available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/asiaandthepacific/hl1029.cfm>
- <sup>13</sup> Some madrassas are initiating such efforts of their own accord. For example, the madrassa of Pir Karam Shah near Sargodha (northern Punjab) is providing facilities to students in order to pursue university degrees after graduation.
- <sup>14</sup> U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations such as the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy have played a positive role in this regard by training madrassa teachers to promote pedagogy that incorporates pluralism. Details at: <http://www.icrd.org>. The U.S. Institute of Peace is also currently involved in a similar effort through their Religion and Peacemaking initiative. Information about this initiative is available at <http://www.usip.org/religionpeace/index.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> For a fair analysis of political Islam in Indonesia, refer to pesantren graduate Bahtiar Effendy’s book *Islam and the State in Indonesia* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004). For an example of a reform effort in an Indonesian pesantren see Saleem Ali and Haris Hidayat, “The Greening of Islamic Politics,” *Policy Innovations*, August 2008, available at <http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/innovations/data/000068>.
- <sup>16</sup> India National Network of Education, 20 January 2009, available at [http://indiaedunews.net/West\\_Bengal/More\\_Hindus\\_than\\_Muslims\\_in\\_some\\_West\\_Bengal\\_madrassas\\_7227](http://indiaedunews.net/West_Bengal/More_Hindus_than_Muslims_in_some_West_Bengal_madrassas_7227).
- <sup>17</sup> Interview conducted by author with Maulana Fazal-ur-Raheem, deputy emir, Jamia Ashrafia, Lahore, Pakistan May 20, 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> Aijaz Ahmed, “Madrassas: A Make-Belief World,” Asia Times Online, January 2003, available at [http://www.atimes.com/South\\_Asia/EA14Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/South_Asia/EA14Df01.html).