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PAKISTAN'S MADRASSAHS: ENSURING A SYSTEM OF EDUCATION NOT JIHAD

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Pakistan's religious schools, Madrassahs, trace their traditions back through nearly a thousand years of Islamic teaching. Over the last decades, however, they increasingly have played a role contrary to their original intent. Founded as centers of learning for the next generation of Islamic scholars and clerics, the schools now increasingly dominate the education sphere. The present danger is that a minority of these schools have built extremely close ties with radical militant groups and play a critical role in sustaining the international terrorist network. Madrassahs' displacement of a public education system is also worrisome to the stability of the Pakistani state and its future economic prospects.

While the religious schools are a matter for internal Pakistani policy, America does have a vested interest in ensuring both that Pakistan is able to fulfill its obligations in the education sphere and that terrorist training schools are closed. To succeed in countering the negative influence of those Madrassahs, which have been hijacked by extremists, the US must provide dedicated aid to education reform efforts, and also explore the possibility of a broadened program designed to combat the culture of violence. This will include providing both increased cultural contacts and economic hope. Efforts to combat terrorism will not be successful unless they also deal with the underlying institutions that support the threat.

THE MADRASSAH SYSTEM CHANGED

Madrassahs are Islamic religious schools, whose traditions date back almost a thousand years. Within Pakistan, there has been a relative boom in their number over the last two decades. For most of the Pakistani state's history, they numbered in the low hundreds for the entire country and focused on training the next generation of religious leaders and functionaries.

During the 1980s, however, the Madrassah system underwent a complete change. The Zia regime in Pakistan, in an attempt to gain support from religious groups, began to administer a formalized zakat (Islamic religious tithing) process. Money was now automatically deducted from bank balances and dispersed at the local level to institutions deemed worthy of support by religious leaders, creating new incentives for opening religious schools. At the same time, the war in Afghanistan brought from across the border millions of refugees and the radicalism of a

jihad movement. Thousands of new Madrassahs were formed, now supported by foreign donations from rich individuals and Islamic charities, mainly from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. The schools also acted as orphanages for the many parentless victims of the war.

Today, there are as many as 45,000 such schools within Pakistan (the exact number has never been determined), ranging in size from a few students to several thousands. Importantly, these new schools tend to teach a more extreme version of Islam than what had been propagated before. They combine a mix of Wahabism (a puritanical version of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia) with Deobandism (a strand from the Indian subcontinent that is anti-Western, claiming that the West is the source of corruption in contemporary Islamic states and thus the laws of state are not legitimate).

With no state supervision, it is up to the individual schools to decide what to teach and preach. Many provide only religious subjects to their students, focusing on rote memorization of Arabic texts to the exclusion of basic skills such as simple math, science, or geography. Students graduate unable to multiply, find their nation on a map, and are ignorant of basic events in human history such as the moon landing.

- *Why The Boom*

The result is that the Madrassah system has changed in outlook, at the same time that it has expanded in number and influence. The reason for the Madrassahs' new centrality stems from the weakening of the Pakistani state. As corruption and debt burdens built up over the last two decades, the government education system in Pakistan has come to the brink of failure. While the law promises all children an education, reality does not. Pakistan spends only 2% of its gross national output on public education, one of the lowest rates in world (just behind Congo in UNDP rankings), and the results reflect it. Government-run schools are generally considered horrendous. They often lack teachers, books, electricity, running water, and even roofs. A significant number are ghost schools, which exist only as budget line items for corrupt bureaucrats to draw money from. Many administrators receive their jobs only through political connections; other teachers regularly go on strike for pay. The result is that the Pakistani literacy rate is, at best, estimated only around 40%.

The rich elite in Pakistan responded to this government pullback by sending their own children to an expanded number of private schools, which are considered far superior. However, the poor cannot afford the private schools, which is where the Madrassahs stepped in. With no better options, poor parents send their sons to Madrassahs, where they receive at least some education. Some Madrassahs provide food and clothes, and even pay parents to send their children, further increasing their enticement.

Thus, the Madrassahs became immensely popular by targeting the lower class and refugee populations, whom the Pakistani state has failed to provide proper access to education. The example of Dur-ul-Uloom Haqqania, one of the most popular and influential Madrassahs (it includes most of the Afghani Taliban leadership among its alumni) illustrates. It has a student body of 1500 boarding students and 1000 day students, from 6 years old upwards. Each year over 15,000 applicants from poor families vie for its 400 open spaces.

CONCERNS WITH THE MADRASSAH SYSTEM

There are three primary apprehensions over the expansion of the Madrassah system. The first deals with the dangerous potential of a fraction of the schools, while the latter two convey broader, longer-term concerns with the state's retreat from the public sphere and the resulting implications.

- **Schooling Violence**

The primary worry with the explosion of Madrassah system is not with the schools in general, but the implications of the radical minority of them. Around 10-15% of the schools are affiliated with extremist religious/political groups, who have co-opted education for their own ends. These schools teach a distorted view of Islam. Hatred is permissible, jihad allows the murder of innocent civilians including other Muslim men, women, and children, and the new heroes are terrorists. Martyrdom through suicide attacks is also extolled. Many of the radical religious schools also include weapons and physical training in their regimen, as well as weekly lessons on political speechmaking (where anti-American rhetoric is memorized). The students are uneducated, young, dependent on the schools, and cut off from contact with their parents for years at a time, and thus highly susceptible to being programmed towards violence.

These schools have become the new breeding ground for radical Islamic militants, where the next generation is trained and groomed. Their graduating classes form an integral recruiting pool for transnational terrorist and conflict networks. For example, both the Taliban and the more extreme Kashmiri terrorist groups found their roots in the young boys from crowded refugee camps taught at radical Madrassahs. The 55th Brigade, made of up foreigners recruited by Usama bin Laden's Al Qaida terrorist organization to fight in Afghanistan, also drew from the schools. Such radicalized schools were originally allowed to flourish by the government because the militant groups were seen to serve Pakistani interests in Kashmir and Afghanistan. The situation has now changed.

This yearly pipeline of recruits has dangerous implications for security both inside Pakistan and abroad. Pakistani Madrassah students from the more militant schools have become the primary soldiers in the internal sectarian conflicts that have reached increasing levels of violence. Rather than acting as religious centers of cooperation, the leaders of various schools have issued edicts against other groups, giving an imprimatur to violence. For example, within North West Frontier Province, Sind, and Baluchistan, their statements have played a key role in turning localized Shia-Sunni disputes into a real threat to the nation as a whole.

Pakistani students from this minority of Madrassahs have also raised the level of violence elsewhere. They are regularly sent abroad to serve in conflicts in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and a number of other wars decided by the school leaders to be part of the jihad. Their influence at both the strategic and tactical level in these wars should not be understated. In 1997, when a Taliban offensive stalled, the Haqqania Madrassah completely shut down. It sent its entire student body across the border to fight, helping the attack to succeed. Similarly, their role in supporting groups fighting India over the Kashmir, including those thought responsible for the

recent parliament attacks, has raised tensions between the two nuclear powers to dangerous levels.

An added concern is that the student pool in many of these radical Madrassahs is made up of foreigners as well, and thus lays the seeds of conflict elsewhere. This internationalizes their virulent influence. As much as 10-50% of the students in certain Madrassahs are from abroad, coming from regions at war such as Afghanistan, Chechnya, and the Philippines. These students return with new influence and a changed outlook, helping to worsen the levels of violence in their home states. This 2nd generation of conflict leaders tend to be more aggressive in their tactics and less willing to compromise or negotiate.

Equally important are the numbers of students in Pakistani Madrassahs who come from states with emergent Islamic extremist groups. These include students from China, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. The return of these students can further radicalize local groups and tip the decision balance towards violence.

- **Challenging The State**

In a broader sense, though, the general boom in the Madrassah system indicates a decay in governance that may ultimately effect regional stability. The Madrassahs expanded inversely with the retreat of the Pakistani state. That is, the religious schools are filling a void in a basic area of social services where the government has failed. The parallel is found in other essential areas such as clean water, health care and even law and order, all of which many of the radical groups that sponsor Madrassahs now also provide to new constituents. In essence, the secular welfare state has been privatized to those with a dangerous agenda of their own.

This role reversal between the public sphere and private radical groups is worrisome in two regards. Extremists tend to thrive in an environment where the state has retreated and has no program for improvement. Their message gains traction and appeal that it would otherwise not. A more moderate populace normally might not be sympathetic to radical voices, but, at a loss in times of distress, will listen to their message. Through offering free education and aid distributed through clean schools, compared to the limited contact most have with sub-par government institutions, the leaders of these organizations gain both a receptive audience and evidence of their own superior credentials to lead.

Secondly, the radical groups are following the successful model (used in revolutions from China to Cuba) of replacing government institutions with ones linked to their own groups. As people become both more reliant upon and even integrated within private social service systems provided by these groups, their reasons for loyalty to the state are diminished. Such new, parallel institutions also provide a means to mobilize against the state and pressure or disrupt its policies. For example, the Madrassahs provide a common pool of protesters, the thousands of students themselves, who are brought out to oppose the Pakistani government on almost any issue, ranging from support for the US to new taxes on small businesses. They even pressure the outcome of court cases. This pool also gives radical leaders an important resource with which to strike deals and bargains with other segments of society.

- **Hurting Economic Prospects**

The over-expansion of the Madrassah system also has negative implications for Pakistan's long-term economic development. Despite going to school for eight years, the graduates of most Madrassahs have no acquaintance with needed subjects like economics, science, or computing. While this was not a concern when the schools were filling their intended purpose of training religious scholars and leaders, such restricted education is not optimal for the general populace. Most Madrassah students, consequently, graduate school outside the mainstream of the 21st century.

In a sense, the system is a pyramid scheme of sorts. That is, the schools produce a stream of unemployed young men, wholly dependent on the support of others. They have skills only to be imams or assistants at mosques, despite the fact that there are not enough jobs in these areas for them. Either more schools must open, thus expanding the problem, or the young men are sentenced to perpetual unemployment, or even worse. Many of the radical schools unsurprisingly encourage students who cannot find jobs to fulfill their spiritual obligations instead by joining radicalized conflict groups. This feeds back into the risk that the system presents to local and global stability.

As the Madrassahs have grown in number and taken on a primary role in Pakistan's education system, the results do not bode well for the country's future economy, which is already struggling. A greater percentage of its young men, what should be the most productive part of its population, is both functionally and economically illiterate. This means that local and foreign investment is stymied. Analysts make a pointed comparison in the Indian education system's focus on vocational skills and cite it as a rationale for directing hi-tech jobs and capital just across the border. As Pakistan attempts to match its neighbor and uplift itself from debt burdens, an increasingly unskilled labor force is a liability.

The general result is that the Madrassah system's dominance in general education hurts its own believers. The idea that a course of study exclusively focused on religion is the only way in Islam is a misreading of both accepted teachings and history. More than 40 years ago, Pakistan's most important Islamist, Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, warned against an education that focuses solely on religion at the exclusion of outside knowledge. "Those who choose the theological branch of learning generally keep themselves utterly ignorant ... [of secular subjects, thereby remaining] incapable of giving any lead to the people." Equally, Islam's historic height of power came at a time when Muslim scholars were on the cutting edge of international economics, education, and science. Thus, if the Madrassahs leave millions unequipped for the new century, Pakistan will be sentenced to stay behind by its very own system of education.

WHAT CAN THE US DO?

The Madrassahs represent an exceptionally complex policy challenge, of the type that often bedevil US efforts in the region. On one hand, the prevailing system of education is obviously a domestic political issue that falls within the scope of the sovereign Pakistani state. Moreover, the Madrassahs are religious schools and thus considered a matter internal to Islam. At the same time, the general dominance of the schools present challenges to a close and increasingly

important American ally, as well as certain direct dangers from the more radical ones towards US interests.

The US has a limited array of policy options to respond to the risks that the Madrassahs' expansion have presented. They run from advocating the closure of the more radical schools to more nuanced programs designed to deal with the underlying culture of violence.

- **Avoid The Trap Of School Closure**

The most direct approach would be to lobby the Pakistani government to close the Madrassahs linked to propagating violence. The center of American concern is not with Madrassahs in general, but only the most extreme 10-15%, so shutting them down would not undermine the entire education system.

This option is a non-starter, however. Even if the Pakistani government was willing to make such an aggressive step at this time of tension (unlikely), any such direct move against the schools could potentially backfire and hasten the collapse of the Pakistani state. The religious factions would obviously see the US as behind the effort and may attempt to use it as the catalyst for a holy war that would risk toppling the existing regime. Closure of the schools, at the behest of the US, would be seen across society as move on Islam. Unlike the issue of US bombings across the border, Madrassah leaders and students would take to the street with potential broad public support.

The army's willingness to support any such operations is also questionable. Even if ordered by senior leadership (who tend to have been trained at foreign and/or private schools), its line troops could balk at the orders to crush the protests. Moreover, at least a small number of the officers in the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate) were recruited from the Madrassahs, particularly in the period of 1990-93. Any direct operation against the schools themselves could undermine the military's unity and, hence, its role as a bulwark of the secular Pakistani state. Thus, the most direct approach against the schools would ironically enough realize the radicals' own goals of tearing Pakistan apart in violence.

- **Support Government Registration**

Another option is to support the registration and co-option of Madrassahs. The Musharraf regime recently announced new regulations that would license the schools, require them to teach a broad curriculum and not just the tenets of militant Islam, and forbid them to engage in arms training. All foreign students in the schools would also have to get their governments' permission to attend. The US could support this effort by lobbying for the regulations' implementation and providing aid in their funding.

The announcement was a positive step in helping to ratchet down tensions between India and Pakistan in the recent crisis, but is unlikely to solve the issues at hand. The problem is that this policy has already been tried in limited form. In June 2000, the Pakistani government tried to register every Madrassah. The government's new licensing scheme similarly required that the schools' curriculum include modern disciplines, that they disclose sources of funding, get

permission to enroll foreign students, and stop sending their students to militant training camps. Only 4350, about one tenth, agreed to be registered and the rest simply ignored the statute. There was no incentive to register and no punishment if one did not.

A renewal of this effort does hold some promise in pulling some additional schools in, but the success will depend on giving an incentive and, specifically, focusing on the carrot not the stick. Any sort of severe punishment for a broad set of schools that do not agree with the new rules, such as closure, will likely cause the sort of general backlash discussed above. A better approach will be to offer inducements for schools to register, such as additional funding, at the very least, enough to replace foreign private sources.

- **Build Up The Competition**

The Madrassahs' takeover is rooted in poverty and the pullback of the state. In and of themselves, the schools are not the preferred option of many parents, but rather draw students from general desperation. As one prominent Pakistani newspaper notes, "No Pakistani in his right mind would even think of sending his child to a free Madrassah if he can afford to send him to a decent private school. This can be tested simply by offering a paid-for seat in a private school to the parent of a Madrassah-going child"

As a result, one obvious policy response is for the Pakistani government to stop ceding the education sphere and build alternative and superior options for the public at large. US aid can be critical in helping the cash-strapped government in this task of offering new choices to parents.

The first step would be to renew the existing public school system. A programmatic approach aiming at improving schools and ensuring access to all students, regardless of income, could be an important mechanism. It could both curb the radical Madrassahs' influence, as well as build support for the current regime among the common populace most affected.

As the US reconsiders its foreign and military aid provisions to Pakistan, this is a critical area where US dollars could make a difference. With over \$500 million planned in new American aid to Pakistan, there is certainly a place for dedicated programs supporting education reform. At the very least, aid in kind (books, computers, and other teaching materials) could be provided, to make sure that the assistance is received by those intended and not drained away due to corruption at higher levels.

Another manner that the US could aid in making the public system preferable is to provide food aid to be distributed at these schools. This would actually meld quite nicely with the goals of a bill being considered by Congress, originally supported by former US Senators Bob Dole and George McGovern, that would provide American aid funds to be targeted for school lunches in developing regions across the world. A number of NGOs run schools for the poor in Northern Pakistan, and local observers note that their enrollments had a drastic increase when meals were introduced. Many parents would prefer less radical schools, if only these schools also provided the lure of a free meal.

The Pakistani government could also focus on building new public alternatives to the now private system of Madrassahs. Following the successful models of other Muslim states such as Jordan, government-supported Alia Madrassahs can be established. Such schools teach the tenets of Islam, but also impart something beyond the solely traditional curriculum, providing education in mathematics, economics, etc. The regime could also co-opt certain Madrassah leaders and teachers by offering them better-paying positions within this more controlled environment. The US would do well to lobby for these schools, but should do nothing to implicate direct American government influence over them, and thus discredit their Muslim credentials. Only aid in kind should be provided, specifically of neutral materials that will engender good will, such as copies of technical books and basic teaching resources.

- **The New Cultural War To Be Won**

In the end, reforming public education is a problem for Pakistan to solve. The US can both encourage and aid the Musharraf regime in its efforts, but the final decision lies beyond the scope of American powers or responsibility. However, there may also be a space for more direct programs, outside formal public education, in which the US can play a helpful role.

A particular model to follow is the multifaceted, but relatively successful, efforts aimed at supporting good governance in the states that (re)emerged just after the Cold War. The post-Cold War transition has essentially been won in Eastern Europe. In the new war against terrorism, equal consideration should now be given to the transfer of such programs to crucial states elsewhere.

One area to explore is expanded American sponsorship of technical schools and centers of learning within Pakistan. Vocational training, even coming from abroad, would be highly popular and have the added benefit of spurring positive economic growth. At the same time, such training does not directly encroach on the religious sphere. A particular selling point should be American expertise in new technologies, which translates into transferable job skills. One possible pool to staff up these programs are the large numbers of Pakistanis, who had been American H-1B visa holders, but have since lost their jobs in the burst of the Internet Bubble. This subset of highly skilled, educated Pakistanis once represented a brain drain, but could now be a boon to their homeland.

Linkages between these vocational programs with local and foreign companies should be encouraged (with the potential inducement of tax breaks or reduced tariffs for corporations that establish ties and investments). They can also be linked with small enterprise development programs run by aid agencies and NGOs.

Such programs should not be thought of only as alternatives to an exclusionary education. Linkages can also be targeted with willing Madrassahs. This might help build up the lure of more moderate schools, as their graduates will be the ones who gain jobs. An internship program in Bangladesh provides an example of a novel model for such an effort. In this program, Islamic banks specifically recruit employees at Madrassahs, looking to integrate their graduates into the mainstream. Upon their hire, the recent graduates are provided with on-the-job training, in order to fill in gaps in their education. While limited, the endeavor has been highly successful. The

banks even cite the studiousness and piety of their new workers as a benefit to their own operations. At the same time, the students gain. As Matinuddin Ahmed, Vice President of *Al Arafah Islami Bank Ltd.*, the originator of the program notes, "A student who gets modern education and also knows about Islam performs better. He can make others understand what Islam is and help clear the misconceptions that linger even in educated minds. In this way he will perform a service to himself, his family, the society, and Islam itself." Encouraging such programs within Pakistan, through political and financial inducements, would be of great benefit.

Linked with these efforts, the US should do a better job of representing itself on the ground within Pakistan and the wider Central Asian region. Contacts between Americans and local citizens have been limited over the last decade and the US could both improve its standing and counter negative or misleading proclamations from radical groups by increasing its presence. Examples to explore include a reintroduction of the Peace Corps program (currently there are none, stemming from past sanctions and fears of violence), sending in local language speakers to work as teachers, setting up cultural centers with computing resources and libraries (countering one of the big attractions of the more well-funded Madrassahs), and promoting educational exchanges, such as paying for American Islamic scholars to speak within the region.

Besides the American government, NGOs and émigré groups, who will be less at risk from existing anti-Americanism, have a critical role to play in this effort. Small-scale education programs within the refugee camps, by groups such as Save the Children and Oxfam, have met with limited success in the past and should be promoted further. Another possible example is the globalization of NGO ambassadorial programs. There are many initiatives based in the US, which aim to transfer "how to" technical and managerial expertise to needed areas. One example is Freedom House's successful AVID program (American Volunteers for International Development). Through the program, the organization identifies, mobilizes, and sponsors qualified professionals who volunteer to work side-by-side with local counterparts in government, public administration, NGOs, media, business management, and finance. However, many of these programs currently have an exclusive Eastern European focus and ignore equal or greater needs in Central Asia. With the present crisis, NGOs, foundations, and other funding agents would do well to reexamine what role they can play in encouraging any positive efforts that link with the overall war on terrorism.

Conclusions

Madrassah schools are part of a noble tradition of Islamic religious learning. However, within Pakistan, their role has altered over the last two decades. They no longer focus on producing the next generation of religious scholars and clerics, but now dominate the education system as a whole, to the detriment of the nation.

The primary danger of this surge in Madrassah number and influence is that many of the more radical schools have become havens for extremist groups that teach militancy contrary to the tenets of Islam. They produce a yearly supply of students/recruits, who become tools in the hands of violent fundamentalists. At the same time, the general prevalence of such schools weakens both the Pakistani state and the nation's future economic prospects.

As the US Congress begins to contemplate the form of a new Marshall Plan to follow the fighting in Afghanistan, it should not ignore the sources behind our new foes. A parallel can be made to the aid that was provided to the nations of Western Europe after World War Two and to Eastern Europe after the Cold War. Just like these other battles, the war on terrorism is also a conflict of ideas and will.

The only way to end the culture of violence we now face is to undermine the institutions that sustain it. Radical groups require radical schools. A nuanced approach can be mounted towards the challenges that stem from militant Madrassahs. It will require a combination of support and encouragement to the Pakistani government towards reform in the education realm and an expansion of US foreign aid and NGO programs in the region. To be successful, it must be designed to encourage moderation, while at the same time supporting the long-term aspirations of the Pakistani people.