

## MADRASSAS RISING: EDUCATION, SECURITY, AND U.S. RELATIONS WITH PAKISTAN

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When the 9/11 Commission released its report on July 22 of this year, one of its many recommendations was for the United States to “make the difficult long-term commitment to the future of Pakistan.”<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that President Pervez Musharraf continues to risk life and legitimacy by publicly promoting moderation, the Commission urged the U.S. to aid his administration in curbing extremism by maintaining its level of financial aid and implementing comprehensive reforms, ranging from military assistance to the promotion of education. Experts in the field have argued that focusing efforts on building a strong infrastructure of education will encourage general economic growth in the country, thereby fostering a generation of well-educated children who will have much more of a stake in society that will preclude their joining terrorist activities in droves. As South Asia expert Stephen P. Cohen points out: “[T]he potential supporters of terrorism [in Pakistan] include the large pool of unemployed college students and graduates; the threat here lies in the fact that the numbers of such supporters will grow steadily if the economy remains stagnant and population growth continues out of control.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, as the United States channels more and more funds to Pakistan as a partner in the war on terror, the question remains: Is the Pakistani government truly doing

everything it can do to eliminate the threat of radical madrassas?

It was only after September 11<sup>th</sup> that the United States government understood the widespread proliferation and impact of Islamic schools, known as *madrassas*, across the Islamic world. Since then, the U.S. has considered various ways of countering the proliferation of radical madrassas, and, specifically, the Saudi Arabian funding of such schools. As examined below, *madrassas* evolved from centers of Islamic learning to schools that incorporated secular training, and then to the current focus on Islamic education only, particularly in Pakistan and Indonesia. The mission of most madrassas in Pakistan is to prepare students for religious duties, and the curriculum usually includes classes on the Koran, Islamic law, and jurisprudence - logic and the Prophet’s traditions. In the lower grades, students are taught to be Hafiz-e-Koran (one who memorizes the Koran in its entirety) and Qari (one who can recite the Koran with correct pronunciation and tone). Alim, the scholars/teachers of Islam, are produced at the highest levels of *madrassas*, and anyone who emerges as an Alim has

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a certificate equivalent to an M.A. degree in Islamic studies or Arabic from a regular university. One who graduates from a *madrassa* at grade 10 is allowed to declare *fatwas* (religious edicts). The modern sciences and other secular subjects are often noticeably absent from many Pakistani *madrassa* curricula, heightening concern in the rest of the world that graduating students are only qualified to take jobs in the religious sector. Languages are taught not for their communicative value, but for the role they play in understanding the Koran. Therefore, Arabic is heavily emphasized, but taught from extremely old texts with little practical use. Students memorize the texts and any accompanying commentary, but do not learn the language conversationally or even grammatically.

The history of *madrassas* in South Asia is one of evolution. Although Islamic rule came to the Indian Subcontinent in the early eighth century, the earliest known *madrassas* were not recorded in Northern India until the thirteenth century. The curriculum was based on memorizing the Koran, which is considered to be the highest achievement for a Muslim as it guarantees him and his family a place in heaven. South Asia's own *madrassas* were largely focused on the purification of the faith for the purposes of knowledge. In the early eighteenth century, a group of *ulema*, or scholars, in India developed the first standardized *madrassa* curriculum called the *Dars-e-Nizami*, of which modified versions are still used throughout *madrassas* today. There was no preaching of violent *jihad* within this curriculum; instead, math, science, and reading were emphasized so that students might become lawyers, judges, and administrators. However, after the end of British rule and the partition of 1947, *madrassas* in India remained tied to these original curricular leanings, while those in the newly formed Pakistan took on an

increasingly aggressive and hard-lined approach as the nation struggled to define itself as "Islamic," apart from India. This often meant the reduction or elimination of secular subjects and pedagogy based on rote memorization of the Koran with minimal critical thinking or analysis. There are currently five broad types of *madrassas* in Pakistan, four of which belong to the majority Sunni sect and one belonging to the minority Shi'ite sect. In terms of extremism, the two streams of *Deobandi* and *Ahle-hadith* are considered the most important.

Although the number of *madrassas* remained in the low hundreds throughout most of Pakistan's independence, the mid-1970s saw their numbers surge as a result of the national government's failure to provide an adequate education to the growing population of school-aged children. During the 1980s, the military dictator and stringent Islamist General Zia ul-Haq focused on moving Pakistan into an Islamic state, giving *madrassas* the impetus to alter their curricula to emphasize the obligation and rewards of violent *jihad*. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 provided the backdrop for such a *jihad*, and *madrassas* were heavily financed by the Pakistani government and the American CIA, which was footing the bill for the war to oust the Russians from Afghanistan. The CIA essentially funded the training of *Mujahidins* to fight the war on the ground, and huge numbers of young boys from refugee camps along the border were educated and trained in *madrassas*. One cannot underestimate the importance of those short-sighted policies of the United States, which provided strong support for the proliferation of these schools in order to counter the communist ideology the U.S. Government feared might penetrate the border of Afghanistan. Scores of *madrassas* sprung up on the Afghan-

Pakistan border, teaching students to fight the “Godless” Soviets, and it was the students emerging from these schools who eventually became the soldiers and leaders of the Taliban. However, the U.S. did not anticipate that *madrassas* would spread throughout the whole nation of Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

Once the Soviet Union was defeated in Afghanistan, the military dictatorship collapsed in Pakistan, and subsequent governments were unable to control the *madrassas* financially. However, the *madrassas* themselves did not collapse; rather, their spread continued unabated, largely due to uninterrupted funds from private charities, individuals, and foreign governments. Gulf oil money from countries like Saudi Arabia sustained the *madrassas* not only in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan along the Afghan border, but also in the city of Karachi and in rural Punjab.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Uzma Anzar, an education specialist at the Academy for Educational Development, points out that “an interesting product of this transition in the Islamic education system in Pakistan is that after the fall of the Russian empire, the focus of hatred in *Madrassas* shifted from Russia to the west in general.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the patrons of these schools weigh heavily on decisions affecting curriculum. In interviews with a group of principals of *madrassas*, she discovered that when they proposed the teaching of secular subjects specifically to provide students with marketable skills, they were quickly prohibited from doing so by funders in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

When the United States imposed economic sanctions on Pakistan in the 1990s in response to its nuclear testing, the economy and, therefore, educational infrastructure were left in shambles. For the poor, *madrassas* offered the only real opportunity to educate their children, with free boarding, food, and a chance to avoid the crumbling govern-

ment-funded secular schools. In the meantime, the schools were encouraged by Pakistani governments as a way of relinquishing few public dollars to education.

Pakistani former diplomat and journalist Hussain Haqqani, now a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, points out the only 7,000 Pakistani children attended *madrassas* twenty years ago; that number has risen to approximately two million today. It is clear that the factors delineated above, including the government’s inability to provide a quality education for its citizens, political instability, the war in Afghanistan, and continued funding of religious education by outside sources, contributed to the rise. In 2002, the International Crisis Group released a report stating that one-third of Pakistani children attend *madrassas*. Nobody is sure exactly how many schools exist, but Pakistan’s minister for religious affairs put the figure around 10,000 or higher. One of the major reasons for the uncertainty is that many *madrassas* do not register with the government and, therefore, remain uncounted.<sup>6</sup>

Today in Pakistan, *madrassas* flourish in impoverished areas and local parents are forced to send their children either to these schools or to none at all. Courses often focus on rote memorization of Islamic texts but offer nothing by way of a modern curriculum that incorporates math, science, or English and other languages, ensuring that an entire generation of young men will be versed in little beyond the Koran, with no marketable skills that can propel them and their nation forward on a path of economic development. Although this problem is particularly acute in Pakistan, it exists throughout Indonesia and is also true of extremist schools in other Islamic nations, although places like Egypt have done a much better job

of including practical secular subjects that will allow their students to obtain employment.

Another major issue of concern is Saudi Arabia's involvement in the proliferation of the most extreme types of *madrassas*. Conservative schools within Saudi Arabia teach from books that often denounce any ideology not adhering to the extreme *Wahhabism* that dominates the country. Wahhabism is a strict form of Islam that includes a literal interpretation of the Koran. Strict Wahhabis believe that all those who do not follow their form of Islam are heathens and enemies, and critics argue that the extreme rigidity of this sect has led to the distortion of Islam for violent purposes. Saudi Arabia also spreads radical Islam by funding schools, universities, and mosques in other countries, including Pakistan and Bangladesh. Some have argued that such practices undermine moderate Islam as it is practiced around the globe, especially when the money goes to schools that only teach the strictest Islamic studies without incorporating secular subjects in the curriculum. *Deobandi madrassas* went even further by trying to change the way Islam itself was taught to students. Along with dropping secular subjects like math and science, which many *madrassas* were doing, the syllabus was narrowed significantly to ensure that the interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, were based on the polemical and radical beliefs of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi developed with Saudi funding and spread through Saudi controlled foundations such as the World Muslim League.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is imperative to distinguish between funding provided for charitable activities such as the building of *madrassas*, which is essentially school construction, and the funding of a rad-

ical or violent curriculum within those *madrassas*, which teaches the rewards of violent *jihad* against any non-believers. Most *madrassas* do not provide military training or education. Even pro-*jihad* ones play just a supporting role to militant movements by inciting a fervor that convinces students to join such movements. And while *madrassas* by their nature do promote sectarian differences and, therefore, may contribute to strife in that way, they still play an important role in the societies in which they exist. They provide free basic literacy and instruction in subjects such as jurisprudence. Clergy emerging from these schools conduct ceremonies and rituals and also run the mosques that are essential to the community. *Madrassas* also dispense religious counseling and rule on various community matters. Moreover, because charity and philanthropy are central to Islam, *madrassas* provide shelter and education for poor people and are often the headquarters of humanitarian work and also coordinators of philanthropic giving. Nonetheless, *madrassas* globally, especially ones supported by Saudi funding, have caused alarm within the United States Government.

In 2002, General Musharraf's government in Pakistan promised to reform *madrassas* by cracking down on ones that preach violence, pushing the remaining ones towards moderation and integrating them into the public school system. In doing so, it would comply with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1373 as an anti-terrorism measure. Musharraf announced an initiative, the *Deeni Madaris Ordinance* (Voluntary Registration and Regulation) of 2002, aimed at curtailing the extremist influence of *madrassas*. The reforms included:

\* A five-year, \$1 billion plan introduced in 2003 aimed at including

modern, secular subjects such as mathematics on syllabi and bringing *madrassas* under the scrutiny of the Education Ministry.

- \* A U.S. Agency for International Development commitment of \$100 million to rehabilitate public schools.
- \* A 2002 law requiring *madrassas* to audit their funding and foreign students to register with the government. The number of foreign religious students has since dropped from thousands to hundreds as the government is issuing and has renewed fewer visas to religious students.
- \* Establishing model *madrassas* that would provide modern, useful education without promoting extremism.

The United States is providing cash flow to support the Pakistan government-initiated reforms while providing visible support for public schools in that country. A closer look at U.S. funding of education in Pakistan reveals the extent to which the government believes in Pakistan's importance as an ally in the war on terror. USAID has signed four grant agreements with the Government of Pakistan that total more than \$300 million, including: education (\$100 million); health (\$115 million); democracy/governance (\$38 million); and economic growth (\$53 million). In addition to its programs in basic education, democracy, economic growth, and health, USAID provided a cash transfer of \$600 million in FY 2002 to the Government of Pakistan from funds made available under the *Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act* (P.L. 107-38). USAID also provided \$188 million to Pakistan in FY 2003 to buy down \$1 billion of Pakistan's international debt. In FY 2004, USAID plans to provide another \$200 million for debt relief. In FY 2004, Pakistan received direct money from the *Foreign*

*Appropriations Bill* only through supplemental provisions. However, President Bush's request for \$300 million for economic assistance in that country was fully funded for FY 2005, and this is in addition to the \$300 million already provided for through the Foreign Military Funding provision.<sup>8</sup>

USAID touts the success of its early education program initiative, Creating Democratic Schools Program, in Pakistan. The program trains teachers, provides resources, and engages families and communities in democratic education. While USAID makes no mention of such efforts acting as a counter to the *madrassas* school system, it is clear that the U.S. government's interest lies in ensuring quality public education and teaching in Pakistan to deter parents from sending their children to *madrassas*. The successes delineated by USAID center largely on the improvement of teaching and pedagogy, as opposed to discussing the impact the program has had on reducing the influence of *madrassas*. However, the results are questionable, at best. As Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wondered aloud in a 2003 memo to staff leaked to the American media, the question is whether American fighters are eliminating extremist fundamentalists on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan as fast as *madrassas* are pumping out new foot soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

USAID has contracted several groups to carry out certain projects in Pakistan. The World Bank, for example, has done several education-centered projects including the implementation of a National Education Assessment System, and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) was given a four-year \$60 million project to implement Pakistan's Education Sector Reform Plan. The thrust of the project is building capacity within the education

system through programs like teacher training. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) has also received funding from the U.S. Government to encourage improvements in secular education throughout the Arab world.<sup>10</sup>

In the meantime, it is difficult to assess the positive impact, if any, of Pakistan's own reforms because the program implemented in 2002 called for voluntary submission to regulation, leaving countless *madrassas* that chose not to comply. The clergy in Pakistan are vehemently opposed to government regulation for fear of "secularization" of their schools. Even those who agree that *madrassas* need reform are extremely reluctant to introduce secular ideas into their curricula. Moreover, the Musharraf government faces what all previous military governments in that country have faced: a reliance on their domestic alliances with the clergy as a means of securing legitimacy and power. Alienating the clergy means losing an essential part of the power base.

Experts across the field have pointed out that while eliminating the *madrassa* system is impossible, and ultimately undesirable because it plays a socially important role in the Islamic world. The United States must make a priority of bolstering the secular education infrastructure if there is to be any hope of ensuring that the poorest students do not end up in radical *madrassas* that preach violence. However, the International Crisis Group (ICG), which has been closely monitoring the situation, also argues that militancy is only a part of the *madrassa* problem because most do not provide actual military training, but rather act as a recruiting ground for militants by planting extremist ideology into the minds of youngsters.

Many concur that Pakistan has simply not lived up to its promises to monitor

*madrassas* and introduce secular subjects into their curricula, while shoring up the national public education system. The ICG's South Asia director, Samina Ahmed, argues that Musharraf's government has continued receiving billions in aid money from the United States while having little to show for it. Most *madrassas* remain unregulated, a national curriculum has not been developed, and the government has not stopped the abuses of *madrassas* and their most extremist leaders. Only three model *madrassas* exist with 300 students, while 1.5 million children still attend unregulated *madrassas*. Further-more, very little has been done to crack down on the financing of *madrassas*. Ahmed points out that such failures not only harm the world's efforts to combat terrorism but also encourage sectarian violence and extremism that threatens Pakistan itself.

The situation is not without hope. The latest recommendations from the ICG provide a useful starting point and, if adopted by all parties, could bring about real change. A few key recommendations are for the Pakistani government to:

- \* Impose mandatory registration and regulation of *madrassas* and close *madrassas* run by banned groups.
- \* Tie grants for *madrassas* to their compliance with regulations.
- \* Commit to improving the public school system by increasing expenditure to four percent of GDP as recommended by the U.N. and by increasing spending on social sector development to make school more accessible to teachers and students, particularly in urban and rural areas.

- \* Take political and legal action against extremist organizations seeking to disrupt reforms.
- \* Suspend initiatives to coordinate madrassa curricula with the public school curriculum, until the Curriculum Wing completes a comprehensive review and reform of the curriculum to ensure that historical inaccuracies and material encouraging bias and hatred are eliminated and that Islamic references be limited to courses on Islam so as to respect the rights of non-Muslim students.
- \* Decentralize decisions on educational content, improve monitoring capacity of provincial education departments, and devolve authority over education to districts.
- \* Follow through with making English compulsory by providing schools with adequate materials and training.<sup>11</sup>

The recommendations for donor governments like the United States include to:

- \* Holding the government to its stated commitment to madrassa reform.
- \* Conditioning aid on the Pakistani government, meeting benchmarks for increased spending on education, and monitoring spending in the education sector.
- \* Urging the government to improve its curriculum
- \* Providing quality English texts and support local producers of such texts.
- \* Calling upon Pakistan to sign

the International Convention for the Suppression of Financing Terrorism.<sup>12</sup>

Whether these recommendations will be heeded depends on the political will of both Pakistan and the U.S. to commit to real change which, regretfully, neither has demonstrated. Although Musharraf has undoubtedly felt intense pressure from the U.S. Government to reform the *madrassas* system, the Pakistani defense for slow change has been that reforming the *madrassas* is difficult and dangerous and therefore requires patience. However, experts argue that the longer the *madrassas* proliferate without regulation, the less support there will be change. Along with the complying with the ICG's recommendations, the U.S. should apply pressure on the Pakistani government to shift its spending by changing the aid it provides Pakistan to emphasize development rather than military priorities. Pakistan cannot afford to spend 30 percent of its budget on the military when it needs to focus on other aspects of development, including education and infrastructure.

This is an opportunity for the United States to fight terrorism in a preventative fashion. Rather than battling extremism in war as the only option, the government can promote education so as to prevent increased recruitment into terrorist organizations. Education, or lack thereof, is actually a security threat and must be dealt as such, rather than seen as a negligible component of a broader "war on terror." In addition, the U.S. cannot afford to simply take Pakistan's word that all is being done to reign in extremist *madrassas*, but must closely monitor the situation and change the nature of its financial aid. As for Pakistan, it is clearly in the government's best interest to do everything in its power to bolster its education system so as to curb the rampant poverty

in that country, promote economic growth, and ensure that its citizens will be well educated and employable, and therefore less likely to join extremist movements. Both the Pakistani and American governments must immediately confront the *madrassa* problem head-on with more than just words, before it further spirals out of control.

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