



# CURBING MILITANCY: REGULATING PAKISTAN'S MADRASSAS

*Humaira Israr*

*Thousands of madrassas in Pakistan remain completely unregulated by the government and their sources of funding unknown while many more thousands offer an education to their students with bleak employment prospects, which increases their vulnerability to poverty and extremism. Humaira Israr argues that the Pakistani government needs to show greater resolve to register, regulate, and reform the country's religious seminaries to curb connections with militancy.*

In January 2015, the Pakistani government unveiled its 20-point National Action Plan (NAP) aimed at tackling terrorism in the country. Along with measures such as the re-verification of mobile phone users and trial of terrorism offences, NAP also resolved to register and regulate madrassas (religious seminaries) to curb militancy and extremism. Yet an absence of commitment and lack of capacity to implement reforms have hitherto thwarted such intentions. Failure to strengthen government oversight of madrassas and their sources of funding, as well as to equip students with a more modern education, will continue to endanger the security of Pakistan.

## Madrasas and Militancy

While initially hubs of education, both religious and secular, madrassas subsequently emerged as “trust institutions” providing social services such as food, shelter, clothing, and free religious education to their students. Their appeal increased in regions where public provision of services was lacking. Thus in a country where 60 percent of the population earn less than two dollars a day, many parents have opted to send their children to madrassas where they hope their children will not only obtain shelter and food but also the opportunity to learn the basics of the religion. Studies have shown that the vast majority of students join madrassas for economic reasons and only a small minority for religious reasons.

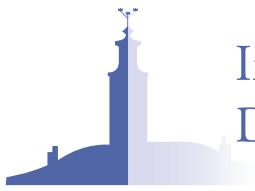
Whereas some reports such as the Annual Status of Education Report Pakistan 2011 suggested no direct link between madrassas and militancy, a negative perception of madrassas as “incubators for violent extremism” became cemented post-9/11 when they were linked to Islamic

militancy. One incident in particular reinforced this perception when, in July 2007, the Red Mosque in Islamabad (which demanded the imposition of Sharia law in the country) together with an adjacent unregistered female madrassa became scene of a bloody confrontation with government forces that resulted in dozens of casualties [ed. the precise number is disputed].

Pakistan's National Internal Security Plan (2014-18) has since confirmed involvement of some, not all, madrassas in extremism. Problematic aspects include the presence of a considerable number of unregistered madrassas, funding from undisclosed sources (including from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar), and the publication and distribution of hate material. It has been acknowledged that a large number of terrorists either are or have been students of madrassas where they were indoctrinated to take up arms against the state. The issue is further exacerbated by the lack of subsequent employment opportunities that an exclusively religious education entails: poverty and dearth of prospects make madrassa students easier targets as extremist recruits.

It is important to recognize that madrassas are not homogenous entities. Divided along sectarian and political lines, there are five types of madrassas in Pakistan which follow their own exclusive texts based on their own sectarian interpretation of Islam. While militancy cannot be associated to one particular type, a study by the Brookings Institute in 2010 found that 82 percent of students belonging to the Sunni Deobandi school of thought (which has a large following in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan) see the Taliban as role models.

An additional problem is that some madrassas have become politicized, with political parties such as Jamiat e



Ulema Islam (which is pro-Afghan Taliban) fostering links with certain madrassas which serve as their vote banks and provide a core of student activists. This has the result of promoting a narrow sectarian agenda among students that also incites sectarian violence. Accordingly, it is clear that some of Pakistan's madrassas have been exploited by internal and external actors for their own vested interests. .

## Lack of Regulation and Oversight

The very large number of madrassas as well as the fact that there exist two different bodies for registration complicate the issue of their monitoring and oversight. Ittehad-e-Tanzeemat-e-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP), an umbrella organization of madrassas, has reportedly 35,337 registered madrassas hosting nearly 3.5 million students; by comparison the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony has 22,052 registered madrassas.

More worryingly, there exist an estimated 8,249 unregistered madrassas (registered neither with the ITMP nor the government) hosting approximately 300,000 students. Not only is their religious affiliation, source of funding, and location largely unknown, but the absence of government checks and monitoring leaves the students entirely under the control of the madrassa administration. It is these madrassas that are most likely to fall into the ambit of militancy.

Various governments have tried to tackle the issue of reforming the madrassas but with little success. Post 9/11 madrassa reforms began under former President Pervez Musharraf. In 2001 the government created a Pakistan Madrassa Education Board (PMEB) to establish a network of model madrassas and regulate others. However, to date, only three model madrassas (teaching modern subjects such as computing alongside religious subjects) have been established—two in Sindh and one in Islamabad. Other initiatives such as the Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance 2002 (in which the government promised funding to madrassas registering with the state) have also fallen short due to an absence of political will and vested interest in reforming the madrassas.

In 2009 the government decided to introduce a Madrassa Regulatory Authority under the Ministry of Interior but this was rejected by the ITMP. Moreover, whereas in 2010 the government succeeded in inking an agreement with the ITMP to introduce contemporary subjects in seminaries, the draft legislation was never shared by the govern-

ment with the ITMP and the reform thus never happened. A key stumbling block in this regard has been the fraught relationship between the ITMP and the government, with the former resisting further regulation.

## National Security Plan

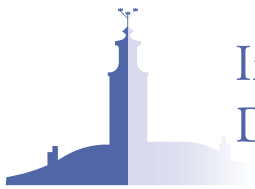
Recently, the government in its National Internal Security Policy 2014-18 has renewed its resolve to map all the madrassas and mosques in Pakistan to stem the spread of violent extremism. The government plans in this regard to integrate mosques and madrassas in the national and provincial educational establishment by mapping and thereafter mainstreaming existing and new madrassas as well as private sector educational institutes.

In January 2015 the Minister for Interior Affairs and the representative of ITMP agreed to form a separate committee for registration of madrassas and launch a crackdown against those that have direct or indirect link with the ongoing militancy in Pakistan. Both the ITMP and government agree over the existence of thousands of unregistered functional madrassas in Pakistan.

And yet, despite the lapse of 18 months since the launch of NISP, translating plans on paper to actual implementation have been lacking amidst a lack of commitment and capacity to enforce reforms. Indicative of this failure is that Abdul Aziz, head of the Red Mosque that launched war on state in 2007, was not only reinstated in the same mosque, but he is also heading 27 madrassas in Punjab with 5000 students under his supervision, and he has even named a seminary library after Osama bin Laden.

## Needed Steps toward Reform

First and foremost, political and administrative will to reform the entities is needed involving a number of stakeholders; after all the security of Pakistan and the future of millions of students is at stake. The government should provide a timeline for the registration of madrassas under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, and thereafter launch a crackdown on the unregistered ones. The government should also increase scrutiny of international and national NGOs and their link with the madrassas. It has rightly decided to route the financing of the madrassas through the government system which necessitates policy measures to register, regulate, and monitor their financial sources. While the task of registration and regulation should



fall under the portfolio of the religious ministry, the actual monitoring of madrassas for security purposes falls within the ambit of the Ministry of Interior.

There is also need to cut the ties between madrassas and political parties. If madrassas are educational entities then they logically should not have any link to political parties. Furthermore, the fact that it is poverty that forces students to take shelter in madrassas should also be addressed. Students of madrassas should thus be included in the national social safety net program currently active in Pakistan. Introduced by the government in 2008 the program provides income support to selected families earning less than US\$67 a month, but there is no focus on madrassa students.

The curriculum of all the five madrassa types should also be approved by the government with responsibility exercised by a number of stakeholders including the provincial education ministries, Ministry of Interior, ITMP, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In so doing, attention should be paid to the intellectual orientation, structure of content, methodology of teaching, and the relevance of madrassa curriculum to the educational needs of modern Muslim society. Teacher training and their qualifications should also be taken into account while reforming the madrassas.

Continued failure to effectively carry out the above measures—which necessitates cooperation among government ministries—will leave millions of madrassa students vulnerable to militancy and extremism.

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