



## MADRASA EDUCATION IN THE PAKISTANI CONTEXT: CHALLENGES, REFORMS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

*Zahid Shahab Ahmed*

### *Abstract*

*Educational institutions in Pakistan function under three separate systems – public, private and madrasas. The media and the government turned their attention towards the madrasas only after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as there was a growing perception that terrorism in the region is fueled by these madrasas. Although several studies have been undertaken to analyze the madrasa curriculum and its impact on the students, the role and attitudes of madrasa teachers, and the challenges they face, have largely been neglected. This paper is based on interviews and focused group discussions conducted with madrasa teachers in Pakistan to gauge what, in their view, is required to reform the system. It also provides some recommendations for directions that public policy could take in order to address religious radicalism.*

### *Author Profile*

*Zahid Shahab Ahmed, from Pakistan, is PhD scholar at the University of New England in Australia. He co-authored Attitudes of Teachers in India and Pakistan: Texts and Contexts (New Delhi: WISCOMP 2007). For the last five years, he has been actively engaged in conflict transformation projects at the regional level in South Asia. Correspondence: zahidupeace06@gmail.com.*

## MADRASA EDUCATION IN THE PAKISTANI CONTEXT: CHALLENGES, REFORMS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

*Zahid Shahab Ahmed*

### Introduction

Traditionally, madrasas are Islamic learning institutions, aimed at building a generation of Islamic scholars and leaders. The word 'madrasa' means 'center of learning' in Arabic. They provide free religious education, boarding and lodging. For these reasons, they are essentially schools for the poor.<sup>1</sup> "The madrasas of Pakistan are said to be the breeding ground for much of South and Central Asian militancy, but for the accusations made, there is precious little known about these seminaries and their students", notes Tariq Rahman.<sup>2</sup> The increased attention of the international media, particularly after the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and London in 2005, created pressure on the Pakistani government to address the root causes of global terrorism. This also encouraged the government to begin monitoring these educational institutions and to establish mechanisms for creating accountability.

### History of Madrasas Since 1947

Following the partition of India and the birth of Pakistan in 1947, a number of Ulema from Deoband migrated to Pakistan and established seminaries here. Two of these madrasas are believed to have played a prominent role in bringing a rigorous form of Islam to Pakistan in Akora Khattak (Darul Uloom Haqqania) and in the Banori township of Karachi.<sup>3</sup> Today, there are five distinct types of madrasas in Pakistan,<sup>4</sup> divided along sectarian and political lines. The two main

---

**Zahid Shahab Ahmed**, from Pakistan, is PhD scholar at the University of New England in Australia. He co-authored *Attitudes of Teachers in India and Pakistan: Texts and Contexts* (New Delhi: WISCOMP 2007). For the last five years, he has been actively engaged in conflict transformation projects at the regional level in South Asia. Correspondence: zahidupeace06@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> A madrasa student learns how to read, memorize and recite the Qur'an properly. Madrasas issue certificates of various levels. A madrasa university is called *Dar Ul Ulum*, (usually having hundreds of students) a primary school, a *Maktab*, (up to fifty students), and an integrated school with various levels is simply called a madrasa. The graduating students are called *Haffiz-ul-Qur'an* (those who memorize the Arabic text of the Qur'an) or *Qaris* (those who can recite Qur'anic verses with proper Arabic pronunciation). Those with advanced theological training are known as *Ulema* (Religious Scholar).

<sup>2</sup> T. Rahman, "The Madrassa and the State of Pakistan: Religion, Poverty and the Potential for Violence in Pakistan", *HIMAL South Asian* (February 2004, Kathmandu).

<sup>3</sup> S. J. Burki, "What we teach and how", *Dawn* (May 3, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The following five are recognized as Wafaq/Tanzem ul Madrasi/Rabit ul Madaris or Madrasa umbrella organizations: 1. Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia, 2. Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Ahle Sunnat, 3. Wafaq-ul-Madraris

branches of Sunni Islam in South Asia, Deobandi and Barelvi, dominate this sector. The doctrinal differences between these schools often seem irreconcilable in an educational setting. For example, the largest group of madrasas belongs to the Barelvi sect, known to be a rigid opponent of the Wahabbi doctrine as propagated by Saudi Arabia, Ahle Hadith/Salafi Muslims have their own schools, as do the Shias. The difference in demographically targeted recruitment and placement between these sects has not been evaluated.<sup>5</sup>

In Pakistan, some madrasas turned radical in the early 1980s, due to external influences; a brief analysis of this phenomenon is provided later. Consequently, during the Afghan-Soviet war, a culture of violence got entrenched in some of the madrasas in the country. Syed Nadir El-Edroos argues that “[a] major contribution to the militancy rampant in madrasas today was made in the 1980s. A study conducted by Patrick Belton shows how textbooks developed at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and published by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were used to encourage and justify the ‘holy war’ against the Soviets”.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the changing face of the madrasa and increasing radicalization in Pakistan can be directly traced to Zia-ul-Haq's rule, when the students of the seminaries were indoctrinated with a jihadi ideology and sent to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupiers. The same war-hardened zealots were used by Zia's military establishment in Indian-occupied Kashmir.<sup>7</sup> With state patronage, madrasas were established throughout the country in an unregulated fashion, leading to an enormous increase in their numbers. Quraishi reports that there are around 10,000 madrasas all over Pakistan, offering free education to over a million children who have been neglected by the government's failing school system.<sup>8</sup>

### External and Internal Donors

The origin of religious militancy in Pakistan can be traced back to the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. During that time, American funding and Pakistani assistance promoted the proliferation of a large number of militant

---

Al-Salfia, 4. Wafaq-ul-Madaris Shia, and 5. Rabita-ul-Madaris Al Islamia. There are also recognized individual madrasas, such as the Jamia Islamia Minhaj-ul-Qur'an, Jamia Taleemat-e-Islamia, Jamia Ashrafia, Darul Uloom Mohammadia Ghousia and Darul Uloom of Karachi.

<sup>5</sup> S. H. Ali, *Islamic Education and Conflict: Understanding the Madrasas of Pakistan*, submitted to Oxford University Press for publication (2005).

<sup>6</sup> N. El-Edroos, “Do we Need Madrasas?” *Daily the News*, Rawalpindi (May 4, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> A. Mir, “Test of will”, *Newline*, (August 2005)

<http://www.newline.com.pk/NewsAug2005/newsbeataug2005.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> A. Quraishi, “Pakistan's religious schools under fire”, *CNN World* (2002)

<http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/south/09/13/pakistan.madrasa/index.html>.

Islamist groups and madrasas in Pakistan. The USA needed the Islamic fundamentalists to 'wage jihad' against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and thus provided substantial funding to Pakistan, entrusted to its leader at that time, General Zia ul Haq. Owing to their strategic calculations of the times, the governments of Pakistan and the USA neglected the radical ideology and methods employed by the madrasas. All of this resulted in the formation of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and extremists groups in Pakistan, which led to the production and spread of sectarianism and violence as each act of sectarian killing provoked a cycle of revenge killings. Civilian governments failed to curb this violence, either because they lacked the will and the strength to do so, or because they wanted the militants to fight for Pakistan's corner in Indian Kashmir. That failure, in turn, allowed the religious militants to flourish and grow in strength.<sup>9</sup>

Madrasas are/were mainly funded by the USA and Saudi Arabia. The US government of that time funded an Afghan war against the Soviets, and Saudi Arabia funded anti-Shia Islam in Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> Some local philanthropists also sponsored madrasas. Financial inputs from *Zakat* and the Islamic ritual of Eid ul Azha can't be neglected. In principle, *Zakat* is given directly to the entitled individual beneficiary. However, in case of the madrasas, the quantity of funding is decided on the basis of student enrollment, with funds given not to individual students, but to the manager of the madrasa. This system gives an authority to madrasa officials over the use of *Zakat* money.

The idea of jihad was incorporated into the Pakistani curriculum after the Afghan war. At that point it suited Washington and their most favoured ally, Pakistan, to encourage and glorify the Mujahideen (the ones who perform jihad), or holy warriors. Accordingly, a university in the United States was asked to formulate textbooks for Pakistani schools. After the departure of Soviets from the region, the Mujahideen not only mutated into the Taliban but also outlived their usefulness. So the same American university has been given the task of removing glorified references to the Mujahideen,<sup>11</sup> under the cover of educational reforms. These constantly changing educational interventions have exposed the motives of the United States and have resulted in greater resistance from Pakistanis towards such reforms.

Islamic educational institutions have come under intense public scrutiny in recent years because of their perceived linkage to militancy. However, much of the research thus far has relied only on anecdotal accounts and investigative journalism. In particular, Pakistani madrasas have been the focus of much media

---

<sup>9</sup> I. Idris, *Pakistan's Sectarian Menace* (2003). <http://www.countercurrents.org/ipk-idris210803.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> M. V. Kamath, "Pakistan: Eye of the Storm", *The Free Press Journal*, (April 27, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Beena Sarwar, "Jehad and the curriculum", *She Magazine*, (March 31, 2004).

coverage.<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of 9-11, the overseas Pakistanis were shocked by the news that bombers were identified as British or Pakistani origin. It was also reported that one of the bombers was trained at a Pakistani madrasa. The link between radical madrasas and aggressive behavior against Western interests has also motivated many development agencies (INGOs) to focus interest on madrasa reforms.<sup>13</sup> Some prominent INGOs working on madrasa education/reforms in Pakistan are the Asia Foundation, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy and the United States Institutes of Peace. Most, if not all, of these INGOs work in collaboration with local partners to implement their projects.

Unfortunately, media propaganda has reinforced the link between terrorism and Pakistan's madrasas, targeting all madrasas. In reality, few studies that have been conducted have found that only a small minority of madrasas are involved in such activities and not all madrasas in Pakistan are poisoning the minds of youth.<sup>14</sup> Perceptions linking madrasas to terrorism arose when some radical groups made inroads into the system of madrasas, following the path laid by the politicization of textbooks and curriculum in public schools.

Madrasa reforms are becoming an uphill task for reformists in Pakistan, and a matter of great concern not only for the Pakistani government, but also for governments in neighboring countries. In early 2007, the prayer leader of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) and head of Jamia Hafsa madrasa, announced the enforcement of Islamic law (Sharia) in the premises of Jamia Fareedia and Jamia Hafsa in Islamabad. At this, the students of Jamia Hafsa, mostly girls, hijacked the Government's Children Library in Islamabad and warned the government of suicide attacks if any operation against the madrasas was initiated.<sup>15</sup> This was primarily to prevent the government from attempting any madrasa reforms and the demolition of illegally constructed mosques in Islamabad by the Capital Development Authority. Several other incidents since then, like kidnappings and suicide bombings, have been linked to radical elements from the madrasas.<sup>16</sup> However, not all *Ulema* (religious scholars) supported such activities. In fact, some, belonging to different schools of thought, strongly condemned the acts.<sup>17</sup> Civil society leaders have been angry over the failure of governmental writ in

---

<sup>12</sup> Ali, (2005) op.cit.

<sup>13</sup> R. Looney, *A U.S. Strategy for Achieving Stability in Pakistan: Expanding Educational Opportunities*, Center for Contemporary Conflicts, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA (2002).

<sup>14</sup> R. S. Singer, *Pakistan's Madrasa: Ensuring a System of Education not Jihad*, Analysis paper, Brookings Institution, Washington DC (2001).

<sup>15</sup> "Government Warned of Suicide Attacks In Case of Resistance: Qazi Court to Work in Pattern of Panchayat and Jirgas", *Daily Times* (April 7, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, details about a kidnapping by the radicals in "Punish Criminals, China asks Sherpao: Kidnapping in Islamabad", *Dawn* (June 28, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> "Ulema Condemn Kidnapping of Chinese", *The News* (June 29, 2007).

this particular case of religious extremism in Pakistan. Government authorities, have, for long, been avoiding getting into another conflict by saying that there will be collateral damage in case of any operation.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, only 10-15% of the madrasas in Pakistan are found to be affiliated with extremist religious/political groups who have co-opted education for their own need.<sup>19</sup> Pluralism and secularism have been neglected by these radical madrasas in Pakistan, which preach religious extremism and intolerance to the youngsters. The broader agenda of these groups is to propagate religion through the state and to ensure that it continues to dictate what policies are formulated.<sup>20</sup> They believe that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan should and must only follow the principles of Islam, since that was the basis of Pakistan's 'national identity' and the 'Two Nation Theory'.

Nevertheless, madrasas are the only hope of education for children, mostly boys, who would otherwise be deprived of any educational opportunities. Students between the ages of five and twenty-five pay nominal fees of 100 rupees per month (approximately one and a half US dollars).<sup>21</sup> When poor children see their basic needs being fulfilled at the madrasa, it is nearly impossible for them to rebel from the madrasa culture. According to a BBC report, people trained in radical madrasas in Pakistan have also been a part of sectarian violence over the last decade, during which hundreds of Shias and Sunnis have been killed.<sup>22</sup>

Understanding the dynamics of madrasa recruitment, funding sources and curricular differences between sectarian schools is therefore critically important.

### **Influence of Pedagogy and the Environment<sup>23</sup>**

Curricular content plays a crucial role in influencing young minds. However, pedagogical practices also ensure that students do, in fact, learn what they are intended to learn. The aim of this section is to highlight the significance of the pedagogical practices of the madrasas in consolidating their impact on the beliefs and attitudes of the young students. Individual madrasas decide autonomously what to teach and preach. Many of the madrasas only teach religious subjects to their students, focusing entirely on rote memorization of Arabic texts. This can

---

<sup>18</sup> Ishrat Hyatt, "Will there be an end to Lal Masjid imbroglio?", *The News* (June 6, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> S. Shah, "*Pakistan's Madrasas, International Policy Fellowship*", (2004) [www.policy.hu/shah/fellowship/proposal.pdf](http://www.policy.hu/shah/fellowship/proposal.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> L. Harding, "*Pupils at schools of hardliners seek war*", (2001) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/pakistan/Story/0,2763,554835,00.html>.

<sup>22</sup> BBC News "*Pakistan's Islamic Schools in the Spotlight*", (2005) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4683073.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4683073.stm).

<sup>23</sup> The analyses presented in this section is based on information available through secondary sources.

take place to the complete exclusion of basic skills such as simple math, science or geography.<sup>24</sup> As a result, most graduates of these madrasas acquire skills that do not fit well with the job market.

One of the central concerns of researchers across the globe in recent years has been the propagation of jihad by radical madrasas, and whether the way these institutions have defined the term is an authentic representation or not. In this debate, some have argued that the madrasas are distorting the meaning of jihad; that they are using Islam as a stepping stone and that since Islam in the Qur'an condemns killing innocent civilians and damaging properties in war, terrorism has no place in Islam.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these vociferous claims and equally strong counter claims, research into the attitude and beliefs of students from madrasas has revealed the extent of harm these institutions have inflicted on the minds of many young Pakistani and Afghani boys. A study<sup>26</sup> that gathered the views of madrasa students from Pakistan revealed that a fifteen-year-old Afghan refugee expressed his desire to fight against infidels. Another student expressed hatred against USA and his eagerness to fight against Americans. His classmate articulated a similar sentiment: "I will dedicate my whole life for jihad. It is compulsory for Muslims. I will kill enemies of Islam".<sup>27</sup>

The definition of Jihad has been distorted by extremists to manipulate young students for their own agendas. This has aggravated conflicts not only between Pakistan and other countries, but also within the country; and has resulted in violence against minorities and conflicts between various sects of Islam. Shia-Sunni differences in Pakistan have also been accentuated due to the training youth receive at sectarian madrasas. Pakistani madrasa students with an extremist mission have become primary soldiers in the internal sectarian conflicts that are increasingly turning violent.

The appeal of madrasas lies not only in the low costs involved, but also in their pedagogy. Most madrasas go beyond theory and involve youngsters in action, such as protests, lectures and sermons. This is very different from the knowledge students receive in other educational institutions, where pedagogy is restricted to classroom teaching. This practical methodology of training influences students very quickly and gives them a sense of purpose; a feel for 'doing'. In doing this,

---

<sup>24</sup> Singer (2001) op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance K. Malik, "Madrisas and enlightened moderation", Pak Tribune, (September 20, 2005) <http://paktribune.com/news/index.php?id=119691>.

<sup>26</sup> H. Rashid, "The University of Holy War", *BBC News* (October 2, 2003). [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/3155112.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3155112.stm)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

radical groups are following the successful model used in communist revolutions across the world, from China to Cuba. As people become increasingly dependent on and integrated within the private social service system provided by these groups, the motivation to remain loyal to the State is diminished. These new, parallel institutions, therefore, become means to mobilize people against the State whenever State policies go against the professed beliefs of the group. Students are often exploited and pitted against authorities, and in the process, they become increasingly radical and violent.

The curriculum used in madrasas **instills a sense of superiority** in the minds of students about Islam. This happens at the cost of the converse – inculcating respect for different belief systems. This results in generating hostility towards people of other religions. The ‘infidels’ are defined, discussed, understood and criticized in madrasas, within the global political frame and in terms of local community relations. This is where sectarian literature becomes instrumental in Pakistani madrasas. Examination of the syllabi and curriculum of the Pakistani madrasas shows that in the name of refutation, potent criticism of other sects and religious minorities, hatred towards other sects, and a siege mentality are imparted, from the very beginning of the schooling.<sup>28</sup>

### Madrasa Reforms

A very well-known Pakistani scholar, Tariq Rahman, says, “The madrasas are obviously institutions which have a blueprint of society in their mind. What needs explanation is that the madrasas, which were basically conservative institutions before the Afghan-Soviet war, are today both ideologically activist and sometimes militant”.<sup>29</sup>

Although the current government, lead by the Pakistan People’s Party is facing numerous challenges, the election manifesto of the Party in 2008 had clearly made a commitment that “madrasas will be reformed to be madrasas that impart knowledge to children”<sup>30</sup>. The issue of tackling religious extremism or indirectly, the issue of madrasa reforms in Pakistan has been on the agenda of the government.

Madrasa reforms in Pakistan were mainly initiated or speeded up with the dawn of the policy or philosophy called ‘enlightened moderation’. This policy was proposed and promoted by President Pervez Musharraf.<sup>31</sup> During the early days,

---

<sup>28</sup> A. Riaz, *Global Jihad, Sectarianism and the Madrasas in Pakistan*. Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore (2005).

<sup>29</sup> T. Rahman, op.cit.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Pervez Musharraf, “*Enlightened Moderation*” (2004) <http://www.presidentofpakistan.gov.pk/>

he explained his personal position on it by calling on the Muslim world to end violence, and on western powers (especially the United States of America) to seek to resolve all political disputes with justice and to assist the development of Muslim countries. Even then, many criticized Musharraf's vision of enlightened moderation. One of the biggest and oldest Islamic political parties of Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) had labeled this vision and its policies as a Western or American propaganda. Leaders of JI also argued that Islam, by nature, is a religion of enlightened moderation, and therefore, doesn't need any changes directed by the West under the guise of enlightened moderation in Pakistan. President Musharraf envisioned Pakistan to be a progressive, modern and moderate Islamic state, poised to take its place amongst the developed nations of the world. He desired the country's development not exclusively in the economic sense, but rather in a more holistic manner, including social, cultural and political dimensions. However, this all was done by Musharraf to extend his regime in the country and in response to pressure from Washington.

The Government of Pakistan took major steps towards creating an integrated and improved system of national education. This started with the increased allocation of funds in the budget (2003-2004) for universal primary education and literacy, and was intended to strengthen the existing education system and allow new schools to be opened. This it was believed would provide students with an alternative to madrasas. The envisioned program aimed at facilitating the introduction of modern subjects such as English, Mathematics, Pakistan Studies, Social Studies and General Sciences, from the primary to the secondary level. At the intermediate level, English, Economics, Pakistan Studies, and Computer Studies shall be made an integral part of the madrasa curriculum. In total, this program expected to reach some 8000 madrasas.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the project for the integration of the religious education system with the mainstream general education system aimed at: establishing and strengthening the lines of communication between the madrasas and the government; educating about 800,000 students (male and female) of 8000 madrasas in modern subjects from the primary to the secondary level; enabling them to reach colleges and universities; and also imparting training to 28,000 teachers to improve and update their knowledge of modern subjects and expose them to modern teaching methods and the use of audio-visual aids.<sup>33</sup> Somewhat related to this, the government intended to eradicate sectarianism and extremism in order to develop a tolerant and friendly atmosphere that is congenial to national cohesion and social harmony.

It was hoped that through this new madrasa reform program, the government

---

<sup>32</sup> "*Madrasa reform in Pakistan*", Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Washington DC, USA, (2005).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

would be able to address the challenges of extremism and sectarianism in Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan, through the Ministry of Education, has also implemented its somewhat 'secular' curriculum in the Qur'anic schools and madrasas in Pakistan. It is important to mention that not all Qur'anic schools and madrasas are registered with the Ministry of Education. Efforts are still in progress to register as many madrasas as possible, and to introduce some secular subjects into that type of education system.<sup>34</sup>

The debate over reform has primarily limited itself to exposing these religious institutions to non-Islamic/modern disciplines in the madrasa curricula. Since the promulgation of the Pakistan Madrasa Education Board Ordinance of 2001, three model schools were established at Karachi, Sukkur and Islamabad, where subjects like English, Mathematics, Computer Science, Economics, Political Science, Law and Pakistan Studies were taught. However, these model madrasas were not accepted by the majority as they were perceived to be reforms initiated at the behest of the West or the USA. Attendance at these model schools continues to remain low.

### **Pakistani Madrasa Teachers** <sup>35</sup>

Given this context of attempted reforms, a focused group discussion with madrasa teachers in Baluchistan revealed that while there was willingness among some of the teachers to bring about change in the system, others felt that the problem of radicalization cannot only be attributed to the madrasa curriculum. The blame is to be shared by the society which isolates graduates of the madrasas, leading to a sense of alienation.

The students' level of commitment to learning is another area that needs attention. Some believe that madrasa programs and curricula are highly developed and do not suffer from any major shortcomings. The problem lies in the lack of social acceptance of the students coming out of the madrasa system. The more serious concern is that in madrasas, only 10% of the students are committed to obtaining religious knowledge, while the rest are in the institution for other reasons. Out of the 90% who just live in madrasas and are not committed to religious learning about 55% are there because they don't want to return to their homes for various reasons, and the remainder are staying for the

---

<sup>34</sup> In Qur'anic schools, children learn by reading Arabic and memorizing the Qur'an. On the other hand, madrasas are of a more academic nature, where children are taught about Islam from the Qur'an and the Hadith (the teachings of Holy Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him). Some madrasas have also introduced other subjects such as Science, Math, Social Studies etc.

<sup>35</sup> The analysis in this section is based on interviews and focused group discussions with thirty madrasa teachers across the four provinces of Pakistan. It is important to note that most of these teachers do not acquire any formal training in education and receive their own religious education from within the madrasa system. Their monthly salaries vary between USD 30-150.

food and shelter they get or because their parents are unable to afford their formal school education. Of the 10% who are there for religious teachings, only 1% possess the intellectual capacity to grasp the religious teachings.<sup>36</sup>

Generally, madrasas are associated with people who are perceived as backward and who are not aware of scientific progress. This is one of the major reasons that reforms have looked to remove the fear of exposure to newer ideas, using teaching of modern/non-Islamic subjects. In this regard, a teacher from Baluchistan mentioned that one of the biggest challenges he faces as an English teacher is to convince his students about the utility of the subject. Most of his students believe that by learning Islam, they will go to heaven. A similar motive for learning English is absent and they are not convinced that learning English is important.

While in some of the other countries religious institutions are engaged in social work, madrasas in Pakistan have not been too involved in other kinds of social activities besides imparting education. For instance, some temples in India offer medical services in the form of inoculation campaigns, and are willing to allow the government to use their premises for creating awareness on health issues. While madrasa teachers appreciate such social engagement, their primary concern continues to be curricular reform. They stress the importance of translating certain important and relevant books from English into Urdu for their students. Most of them are open to accepting any contextually relevant change in their education system. The purpose of these reforms, in the view of the teachers, is that students who graduate from madrasas acquire the relevant skills to participate actively in the development of Pakistan.

Madrasas are open to embracing new changes, especially with regard to the introduction of new/modern disciplines into their curricula. However, they do demand trained and skilled teachers to teach those subjects. There are examples of madrasas now offering and encouraging their students to pursue higher education in other institutions, but the disciplines continue to remain closely associated to the core madrasa education - Islamic Studies, Arabic and Persian.

There are some exceptions to this general approach towards madrasa reforms. For example, the United Nations mandated University for Peace, Costa Rica has developed a peace education curriculum in the Islamic context (for madrasas).<sup>37</sup> The curriculum was developed in consultation with Islamic scholars, from 2005-2007. So far several South Asian madrasas, mostly from Pakistan and Bangladesh, have committed to integrating that curriculum into their existing

---

<sup>36</sup> An observation made by one of the madrasa teachers at the FGD.

<sup>37</sup> See [www.upeace.org](http://www.upeace.org).

courses.

Another example is Project L.I.G.H.T. (Learning Islamic Guidance for Human Tolerance), which was developed by a team of faculty and students from the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences in Leesburg. The main goal of this project is to empower ordinary members of the Muslim community through education on Islam's fundamental messages of tolerance, inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence for all people, and on personal skills to identify and address bigotry and discrimination. This project hasn't reached most of the global south yet, but lessons could be learned and content could be taken from such models.<sup>38</sup>

However, madrasa reform will require an equal focus on teachers' training along with curricular reform. One example of an institution attempting steps in this direction is the Dawah Academy of the International Islamic University in Pakistan, which offers professional courses to Imams, community leaders, new Muslims, etc. both at the national and international levels.<sup>39</sup> The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)<sup>40</sup> in Islamabad has collaborated with the Dawah Academy and is organizing seminars and workshops for madrasa teachers in Pakistan, with a focus on the psychology of education, pedagogy, peace education, tolerance, interfaith dialogue and harmony. Similarly, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy and the United States Institute of Peace are also working towards imparting training to madrasa teachers in Pakistan.

Institutional infrastructure and facilities are another area that needs immediate attention if the madrasas are to achieve their desired objective of imparting religious and secular education. Proper buildings, well equipped classrooms, lights, black/white boards, attractive textbooks etc., will need to be provided to many of these madrasas.

### **Future Directions**

This paper has attempted to flag some concerns about madrasa reform in Pakistan. Before any reform policy can be successfully implemented, there will be a need to further explore how the government can ensure the effective monitoring of this sector of education. Presently, madrasa reform programs are limited to merely registering these Islamic schools with the governmental authorities. What are some of the codes of ethics that will be acceptable to both the government and the madrasa administrators? What processes of accountability can be established, that ascertain a constant flow of communication between the authorities and the madrasas? What are some of the

---

<sup>38</sup> For Project L.I.G.H.T. documents see <http://www.upeace.org/system/cap/index.cfm?pagina=490>.

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.dawahacademy.org/>.

<sup>40</sup> See [www.ips.org.pk](http://www.ips.org.pk).

steps that can be taken to ensure that students currently enrolled in madrasas come out of their isolated state and are more consciously integrated with children in other schools? Based on discussions with all stakeholders in the process, can the government come out with an action plan that maps the process of reforms?

Looking beyond national solutions, are there innovative solutions that other countries in the South Asian region can contribute to the reform process in Pakistan? Are there lessons to be learnt from other contexts, for example, from Bangladesh and Indonesia?

These are some of the questions researchers could investigate. To conclude, there is no denying the fact that madrasa reforms are crucial for the development and progress of Pakistan, because graduates of most madrasas (despite going to school for eight years) have no understanding of important subjects like Economics, Science, or Computing. While this may not have been a serious concern few decades ago, in the current context, such restricted education may not serve the development needs of the nation. Nevertheless, the sustainability of the madrasa reform process will depend, in part, on political will, and partly on the success of poverty alleviation efforts.