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Islamic Religious Schools, *Madrasas*: Background

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Summary

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Islamic religious schools known as *madrasa*s (or *madrassah*s) in the Middle East, Central, and Southeast Asia have been of increasing interest to U.S. policy makers. Some allege ties between madrasas and terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda, and assert that these religious schools promote Islamic extremism and militancy. Others maintain that most madrasas have been blamed unfairly for fostering anti-Americanism and for producing terrorists. This report provides an overview of madrasas, their role in the Muslim world, and issues related to their alleged links to terrorism. The report also addresses the findings of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the "9/11 Commission") and issues relevant to the second session of the 110th Congress. Related products include CRS Report RS22009, CRS Report RL33533, CRS Report RL32499, CRS Report RS21695, CRS Report RS21457, CRS Report RL32259, and CRS Report RS21432. This report will be updated periodically.

Overview

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Islamic schools known as *madrasa*s have been of increasing interest to analysts and to officials involved in formulating U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Madrasas drew added attention when it became known that several Taliban leaders and Al Qaeda members had developed radical political views at madrasas in Pakistan, some of which allegedly were built and partially financed by donors in the Persian Gulf states. These revelations have led to accusations that madrasas promote Islamic extremism and militancy, and are a recruiting ground for terrorism. Others maintain that most of these religious schools have been blamed unfairly for fostering anti-U.S. sentiments and argue that madrasas play an important role in countries where millions of Muslims live in poverty and state educational infrastructure is in decay.

Background

Definition. The Arabic word *madrasa* (plural: *madaris*) generally has two meanings: (1) in its more common literal and colloquial usage, it simply means "school"; (2) in its secondary meaning, a madrasa is an educational institution offering instruction in Islamic subjects including, but not limited to, the Quran, the sayings (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and law. Historically, madrasas were distinguished as institutions of higher studies and existed in contrast to more rudimentary schools called *kuttab* that taught only the Quran.[1] Recently, "madrasa" has been used as a catchall by many Western observers to denote any school — primary, secondary, or advanced — that promotes an Islamic-based curriculum. In many countries, including Egypt and Lebanon, madrasa refers to any educational institution (state-sponsored, private, secular, or religious). In Pakistan and Bangladesh, madrasa commonly refers to Islamic religious schools. This can be a significant semantic marker, because an analysis of "madrasa reform" could have different implications within various cultural, political, and geographic contexts. Unless otherwise noted in this paper, the term *madrasa* refers to Islamic religious schools at the primary and secondary levels.

History. As an institution of learning, the madrasa is centuries old. One of the first established madrasas, called the *Nizamiyah*, was built in Baghdad during the eleventh century A.D. Offering food, lodging, and a free education, madrasas spread rapidly throughout the Muslim world, and although their curricula varied from place to place, it was always religious in character because these schools ultimately were intended to prepare future Islamic religious scholars (*ulama*) for their work. In emphasizing classical traditions in Arabic linguistics, teachers lectured and students learned through rote memorization. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the era of Western colonial rule, secular institutions came to supersede religious schools in importance throughout the Islamic world. However, madrasas were revitalized in the 1970s with the rising interest in religious studies and Islamist politics in countries such as Iran and Pakistan. In the 1980s, madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan were allegedly boosted by an increase in financial support from the United States,[2] European governments, Saudi Arabia, and other Persian Gulf states all of whom reportedly viewed these schools as recruiting grounds for anti-Soviet mujahedin fighters.[3] In the early 1990s, the Taliban movement was formed by Afghan Islamic clerics and students (*talib* means "student" in Arabic), many of whom were former mujahedin who had studied and trained in madrasas and who advocated a strict form of Islam similar to the Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.[4]

Relationship between Madrasas and other Educational Institutions. Madrasas, in most Muslim countries today, exist as part of a broader educational infrastructure. The private educational sector provides what is considered to be a quality Western-style education for those students who can afford high tuition costs. Because of

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[1] See "Madrasa" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965-); "Madrasah," in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).

[2] Mary Ann Weaver, "Children of the Jihad," *New Yorker*, June 12, 1995.

[3] The term *mujahedin* refers to Islamic guerrillas, literally "one who fights in the cause of Islam."

[4] See CRS Report RS21695, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyyah*.

their relatively lower costs, many people turn to state schools, where they exist. However, in recent years and in more impoverished nations, the rising costs and shortages of public educational institutions have encouraged parents to send their children to madrasas.[5] Supporters of a state educational system have argued that the improvement of existing schools or the building of new ones could offer a viable alternative to religious-based madrasas. Others maintain that reforms should be institutionalized primarily within Islamic madrasas in order to ensure a well-rounded curriculum at these popular institutions. The U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) 2003 strategy paper *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World* advocates both of these viewpoints.[6]

Curriculum. Although some madrasas teach secular subjects, in general madrasas offer a religious-based curriculum, focusing on the Quran and Islamic texts. Beyond instruction in basic religious tenets, some argue that a small group of radicalized madrasas, specifically located near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, promote a militant form of Islam and teach their Muslim students to fight nonbelievers and stand against what they see as the moral depravity of the West.[7] Other observers suggest that these schools are wholly unconcerned with religious scholarship and focused solely on teaching violence.[8] The 2003 USAID strategy paper described links between madrasas and extremist Islamic groups as "rare but worrisome," but also added that "access to quality education alone cannot dissuade all vulnerable youth from joining terrorist groups."[9]

Other concerns surround more moderate ("quietist") schools, in which students may be instructed to reject "immoral" and "materialistic" Western culture.[10] The static curricula and dated pedagogical techniques, such as rote memorization, used in many quietist schools may also produce individuals who are neither skilled nor prepared for the modern workforce. Defenders of the madrasa system view its traditional pedagogical approach as a way to preserve an authentic Islamic heritage. Because most madrasa graduates have access only to a limited type of education, they commonly are employed in the religious sector as prayer leaders and Islamic scholars. Authorities in various countries are considering proposals for introducing improved science and math content into madrasas' curricula, while preserving the religious character of madrasa education.

Socio-Economic Factors. Madrasas offer a free education, room, and board to their students, and thus they appeal to impoverished families and individuals. On the whole, these religious schools are supported by private donations from Muslim believers through a process of alms-giving known in Arabic as *zakat*. The practice of zakat — one

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[5] Supplemental costs associated with school uniforms, supplies, and textbooks make student participation in Pakistan's state-run education system unaffordable in some areas.

[6] *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World,* USAID Issue Paper No. 2, June 2003.

[7] Husain Haqqani, "Islam's Medieval Outposts," *Foreign Policy* no. 133, Nov./Dec. 2002; Anna Kuchment et al., "School by the Book,"*Newsweek*, Mar. 11, 2002.

[8] Some writers have implied that all *madrasa*s are harbors of militancy. See, for example, Jessica Stern, "Preparing for a War on Terrorism," *Current History* 100, no. 649 (2001): 355-357; and Alan Richards "At War with Utopian Fanatics," *Middle East Policy* 8, no. 4 (2001).

[9] *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World, op. cit.*

[10] Haqqani, "Islam's Medieval Outposts," *op. cit.*

of the five pillars of the Islamic faith — prescribes that a fixed proportion of one's income be given to specified charitable causes, and traditionally a portion of *zakat* has endowed religious education. Almost all madrasas are intended for educating boys, although there are a small number of madrasas for girls.

Examples of the Current State of Madrasas

Role of Persian Gulf States.[11] In recent years, worldwide attention has focused on the dissemination of donations to Islamic charities and the export of conservative religious educational curricula by governments and citizens in the Persian Gulf. Concern has been expressed over the spread of radical Islam through schools, universities, and mosques that have received donations and curricular material from Persian Gulf governments, organizations, and citizens. These institutions exist around the world, including South, Central, and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, western Europe, and the United States. Some view the teaching of religious curricula informed by Islamic traditions common in the Gulf as threatening the existence of more moderate beliefs and practices in other parts of the Muslim world. However, some argue that a differentiation should be made between funding to support charitable projects, such as madrasa-building, and funding that has been channeled, overtly or implicitly, to support extremist teachings in these madrasas. Critics of Gulf states' policies have alleged that Persian Gulf governments long permitted or encouraged fund raising by charitable Islamic groups and foundations linked to Al Qaeda.[12] Several Gulf states have strengthened controls on the activities of charities engaged in overseas activities, including madrasa building and administration. Several Islamic charitable organizations based in Gulf states continue to provide assistance to educational projects across the Muslim world, and channels of responsibility between donors and recipients for curricular development and educational control are often unresolved or unclear.

Pakistan.[13] Hosting over 12,000 madrasas,[14] Pakistan's religious and public educational infrastructure are of ongoing concern in the United States. In an economy that is marked by extreme poverty and underdevelopment, costs associated with Pakistan's cash-strapped public education system have led some Pakistanis to turn to madrasas for free education, room, and board.[15] Others favor religious education for some of their children, whose siblings may be encouraged to pursue other professions. Links between Pakistani madrasas and the ousted Afghan Taliban regime, as well as alleged connections between some madrasas and Al Qaeda, have led some observers to consider the reform of Pakistan's madrasa system as an important counterterrorism tool and a

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[11] For more on Saudi Arabia, see CRS Report RL33533, *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*, and CRS Report RL32499, *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*.

[12] Glenn R. Simpson, "Unraveling Terror's Finances," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 24, 2003.

[13] For more on education in Pakistan, see CRS Report RS22009, *Education Reform in Pakistan*.

[14] Pakistan's National Education Census (NEC) reported in October 2006 that 12,153 out of 12,979 madrasas had provided necessary information to the government. Registration procedures continue. *The News* (Islamabad), Oct. 12, 2006.

[15] Chris Kraul, "The World Dollars to Help Pupils in Pakistan," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 14, 2003.

means of helping to stabilize the Afghan government.[16] In recommending increased U.S. attention to "actual or potential terrorist sanctuaries," the 9/11 Commission's final report singled out "poor education" in Pakistan as "a particular concern," citing reports that some madrasas "have been used as incubators for violent extremism."[17] In September 2006, Afghan president Hamid Karzai called on Pakistan to do more to prevent the use of madrasas by extremists and terrorists.

These reports received new and more urgent attention following reports that one of the four suicide bombers that carried out the July 2005 terrorist attacks on the London transportation system had spent time at a Pakistani madrasa with alleged links to extremists. In response, Pakistani authorities renewed plans to require all madrasas to register with the government and provide an account of their financing sources. The government had previously offered incentives to madrasas that agreed to comply with registration procedures, including better training, salaries, and supplies. Madrasa leaders reportedly agreed to the registration and financial accounting requirements in September 2005, but succeeded in preserving an anonymity provision for their donors.

As of January 2007, over 12,000 of Pakistan's estimated 13,000 madrasas had registered with authorities. In a more controversial step, the Pakistani government also demanded that madrasas expel all of their foreign students by December 31, 2005. Of an estimated 1,700 foreign madrasa students, 1,000 had reportedly left Pakistan by January 1, 2006. In August 2006, Pakistani authorities announced their intent to deport some of the remaining 700 foreign students if they did not obtain permission to remain in Pakistan from their home governments: the visas of those with permission reportedly were extended.

Some nationalist and Islamist groups have resisted the government's enforcement efforts, and authorities have made statements indicating that they do not plan to use force or shut down noncompliant madrasas in order to enforce the directives.[18] An air-strike on a madrasa near the border with Afghanistan in the Bajaur tribal region killed 80 reported militants on October 30, 2006, and sparked massive protests across Pakistan.[19] In July 2007, Pakistani security forces raided a girls madrasa related to the conservative Red Mosque after individuals affiliated with the facilities refused government orders to stop vigilante enforcement of religious social codes. Over 100 people were reportedly killed in related clashes.

In September 2007, the U.S. Department of State reported in its annual religious freedom report that "in recent years many [Pakistani] madrasas have taught extremist doctrine in support of terrorism." The report identified "unregistered and Deobandi-controlled madrasas in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and

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[16] "Afghan Leader Condemns Pakistani Clerics," *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, Sept. 15, 2003.

[17] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Final Report, p. 367.

[18] Salman Masood, "Pakistanis Back Off Vow To Control Seminaries,"*New York Times*, Jan. 2, 2006.

[19] Anwarullah Khan, "Al Zawahri Visited Attacked Pakistani Madrasa in Past," *Reuters*, Oct. 31, 2006.

northern Balochistan" and "Dawa schools run by Jamat-ud-Dawa" as being involved with teaching extremism or supporting terrorist organizations.[20]

Other Countries of Interest. Currently, the popularity of madrasas is rising in parts of Southeast Asia. For example in Indonesia, home to the largest number of Muslims in the world, almost 20%-25% of primary and secondary school children attend *pesantren*s (Islamic religious schools).[21] Indonesian pesantrens have been noted for teaching a moderate form of Islam, one that encompasses Islamic mysticism or Sufism. Authorities in Bangladesh have expressed concern about the use of madrasas by a network of Islamist activists being investigated in connection with a number of attempted and successful bombing attacks across the country. A number of madrasa students were detained in connection with the investigations.

Current U.S. Policy and Legislation

Executive agencies and Congress have shown increasing interest in improving U.S. outreach and addressing educational challenges in the Muslim world in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (the "9/11 Commission") addressed education issues in the Islamic world in the context of its recommendations to identify and prioritize actual or possible terrorist sanctuaries and prevent the continued growth of Islamist terrorism. Relevant sections of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (P.L. 108-458, December 17, 2004) address many of the concerns reflected in the 9/11 Commission's final report regarding the improvement of educational opportunity in the Islamic world. Section 7114 of the act authorizes the President to establish an International Youth Opportunity Fund to improve public education in the Middle East.

Examples of action taken to effect educational changes in Islamic countries include USAID's September 2002 commitment of $100 million over five years for general education reform in Pakistan. The Administration requested $259.664 million in FY2008 foreign operations funding to support ongoing education assistance programs in a number of Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Morocco. The Administration requested $118.670 million for similar programs in South and Central Asia, including programs in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

In the 110th Congress, Title XX of P.L.110-53, the Implementing the 9/11 Commission Recommendations Act of 2007 (signed August 3, 2007), amends and re-authorizes appropriations for an International Muslim Youth Opportunity Fund originally authorized by Section 7114 of P.L. 108-458. The law also requires the Administration to submit an annual report to Congress on the efforts of Arab and predominantly Muslim countries to increase the availability of modern basic education and to close educational institutions that promote religious extremism and terrorism. A separate report is required on U.S. education assistance and the status of efforts to create the authorized Fund.

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[20] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, International Religious Freedom Report 2007 - Pakistan , September 14, 2007.

[21] Ronald A Luckens-Bull, "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32, no.3 (2001):353.