

Chapter 10

Preventing Terrorism from Students of Extremist Madrasahs: An Overview of Pakistan's Efforts

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Historically, madrasahs as religious teaching institutions have held a position of esteem and significance in the Indian subcontinent. Since Pakistan's independence, madrasahs have played a significant role in not only providing religious education, but also offering free board and lodging to many of the country's poorest children. Overtime, their numbers have grown, owing to a number of national and international factors. After 9/11, a debate on regulating madrasahs and their curriculum gained strength, as links connecting extremist and terrorist elements operating in the country with these institutions were found. A number of government measures to introduce reforms and regulate madrasahs in Pakistan have been announced to date, but have mostly been unsuccessful - largely due to a lack of political will. This chapter examines the evolution, landscape, and features of the current madrasahs system and efforts to streamline them, the obstacles in their implementation, along with an overview and evaluation of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies related to madrasahs and, to a lesser extent, mosque reforms. The social setting of madrasahs and their role in education, politics, radicalization and terrorism is also discussed in some detail.

Keywords: madrasahs, radicalization, religion, extremism, terrorism, education, reforms, mosque, Pakistan

Madrasah (religious seminary; plural: madrashas or madaris) is an Arabic word which literally means a certain type of educational establishment. It is one of the oldest Muslim institutions and its purpose is to teach and impart knowledge and wisdom to members of society. Madrasahs have existed in the sub-continent for a long time. During the colonial rule of the British, the *Ulema* (religious leaders) and their madrasahs played a leading role in the resistance against imperialism. When Pakistan became independent in 1947, around 247 religious seminaries existed. Until the 1970s, they were viewed as peaceful educational institutions working for the betterment of society in Pakistan. Many of the older madrasahs had well-established reputations for producing serious Islamic thinkers, while others provide welfare services to the poor by offering their sons free religious education, lodging, and food.¹

However, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the purpose of these religious institutions was diverted intentionally to resist Russian influence by waging a jihad against the foreign occupation forces. During that time, around 1,000 madrasahs were established². The mushrooming growth of madrasahs in the 1980s was linked to the Afghan war. A *Jihadi* mindset emerged in madrasahs as the US and Saudi Arabia were funding the mujahedeen against the Soviet occupation. However, in the late 1980s, the US suddenly withdrew from the region after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan was left alone to deal with the seeds of radicalization sowed in its home and backyard. This vacuum led to the growth of radical and extremist tendencies and mindset in Pakistan, especially in the madrasahs. The phenomenon of *Talibanization* also took roots. Consequently, this created hatred and resentment among the radicalized youth of madrasah in Pakistan and they began to consider the West as a threat to, and enemy of, Islam.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attack by Al-Qaeda, Pakistan was pressed hard by the US to take part in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) which once again brought madrasahs into the limelight, but this time their perceived image was negative. Western policymakers criticized madrasahs and held them responsible for fuelling extremism in society. Pakistan's decision to join the GWOT changed the social and security landscape of Pakistan. It also led to a renewed debate in Pakistan about the role of madrasah and the need for reforming the more than 37,500 Madrasahs currently operating in Pakistan.

It is no secret that madrasahs have a political role in society as well. Major religious political parties have their own network of religious seminaries which they run by funding them. These religio-political parties often use their madrasahs and their students for political purposes or to pressure governments through staging protests. Hence, the socio-political impact of these religious seminaries cannot be ignored; they have long-term consequences. There is also a great deal of controversy as to what type of role madrasahs ought to perform in society.³ According to Christopher Candland, it is the government which needs to recognize and determine madrasahs' role in society by giving them appropriate attention.⁴ Yet that is easier said than done. Qasim Zaman has highlighted repeated failures in reforming madrasah and attributed these to radical elements in Pakistani society who sought to boycott the government's reform agenda.⁵ A number of steps to reform madrasahs in Pakistan have been taken in the last two decades, but they have indeed achieved much less than one could expect due to a lack of political will and stiff resistance from religious circles. However, from 2010 onwards, the country's counterterrorism strategy has led to a renewed focus on madrasah reforms. Mapping, streamlining and regulating the religious seminaries have been the buzzwords on policy agendas. However, it has also been observed that the phenomena of terrorism and extremism cannot be attributed to madrasahs and their students alone, since there have been a number of instances where college educated individuals have become radicalized and have taken part in terrorist acts. This chapter seeks to examine the role of madrasahs in radicalization to violent extremism and the government of Pakistan's prevention efforts.

Evolution of Madrasahs in Pakistan

The growth of religious seminaries in Pakistan should be seen in the light of political and socioeconomic factors. When Pakistan became independent on 14 August 1947, only 247 madrasahs existed, according to official figures⁶. In 1975, there were 100,000 seminary students in Pakistan; in 1998 their number stood between 540,000 in Punjab alone.⁷ In the 1980s, Pakistan's support for the US against the Soviet Union turned the madrasahs from hubs of education to centres promoting Islamic extremism. As mentioned before, their number mushroomed during the Soviet-Afghan war. Pakistan bore direct consequences of the Afghan war as the country played a major role in resisting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Religion was used as a tool, as the Afghan War was termed by Pakistan's military ruler General Zia-ul-Haq as jihad (holy war). During Haq's tenure (1978-1988), the number of religious seminaries increased to 2,831.

General Zia was politically allied with Islamist parties. He encouraged them to motivate their members to join this "holy war" against the Soviets. The clout of these religious parties grew multi-fold during the 1980s as they enjoyed both religious and political backing. Afghanistan's Taliban movement has roots in these religious seminaries, as a number of Taliban leaders were educated there. Many of Pakistan's religious parties translated their influence on the ground by opening their own madrasahs. They often received funding from both the West and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for providing education to the children of millions of Afghan refugees who had fled war in Afghanistan.

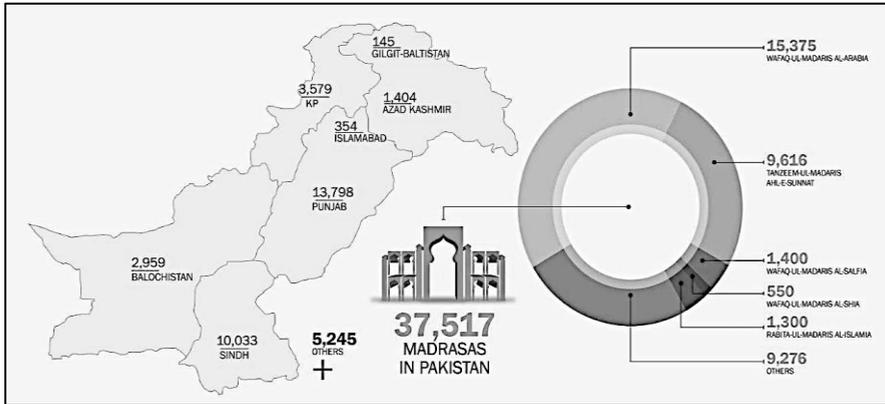
Although the Afghan war ended in the late 1980s, the number of religious seminaries continued to increase. This increase in their numbers is also attributed to various socioeconomic reasons. These religious seminaries provide free board and lodging to their students, and it is tempting for the economically downtrodden to send their children there. According to Pakistan's military spokesperson, more than 30,000 madrasahs are operating in the country, in which an estimated two and half million children are currently enrolled.⁸ However, according to a study conducted by a Karachi-based research centre, the Majlis-e-Ilmi Foundation Pakistan, the number of madrasahs in the country is even higher, exceeding 37,517 in 2018 as seen in their image below.⁹ According to the statistics released by this research centre, 28,241 madrasahs are functioning under the five central boards of the Ittehad-e-Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP), whereas the remaining 9,276 are operating under different independent bodies which include Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Jamia Muhammadiyah Ghausia, Itihad-ul-Madaris, Wafaq Nizam-ul-Madaris, Al-Huda International, as well as others.¹⁰ According to the foundation's report, 354 madrasahs are operating in Islamabad, 13,798 madrasahs in Punjab, 10,033 in Sindh, 2,959 in Balochistan, 3,579 in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and 1,404 in Azad Jammu Kashmir.

Landscape of Madrasahs and their Impact in Society

There is no doubt that madrasahs are considered to be important institutions in Islamic societies, but this also applies to mosques. Besides worshipping, the mosque traditionally has held the title of seat of learning - in addition to being a community centre in Muslim societies. Similarly, the madrasah has historically been considered not only as a source for imparting religious education to the masses, but also for training and equipping imams (religious leaders) and for their role in mosques. The religious leaning of these imams is very much dependent upon the thinking of madrasah or from the sect they belong to.

Historically, society's elite used to study in these religious institutions, but today, due to the prevalence of formal education systems and modernization, the mosque and madrasahs have become merely political tools for the elite. Religious leaders, politicians, and even those

Figure 1. Yousafzai 2019



holding state power do not hesitate to use these institutions and the name of religion for advancing their own political agendas and gains.

Madrasah’s affiliations with political, sectarian and militant organizations affiliations with madrasahs are a cause for concern. Such affiliations may drive their administrations and their students towards assuming an increased role in society.¹¹ Friday sermons from the mosque are an important event for the Muslim community as Muslims listen to the narratives of imams on various religious and social topics. These sermons play an important role in shaping the public opinion regarding various issues in daily life. In addition, the interaction between people and imam five times a day during prayers further enhances the impact of his words and affects people’s psyche. Since the imam’s sermons are monitored, he is careful with his words and the speeches he delivers to the public.

The donors of the religious seminaries are businessmen, social workers, and other society members. This relationship is considered very strong, as it is believed that making an economic contribution to religious causes is beneficial for both donors and recipients.

Nowadays, with the increasing number of madrasahs in society, some donors use madrasahs to get appropriate legal verdicts (*fatwa*¹²) on different social issues to advance their personal and sectarian interests. However, it is hard to establish proof regarding influencing verdicts. For instance, the Punjab police need the assistance of intelligence agencies as well as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to collect solid evidence against corrupt seminaries for possible legal action. Over 12,000 seminaries are operating in Punjab alone, with almost half of them being unregistered.¹³

A misperception exists in the society that madrasahs are entirely charity-based organizations. For the most part, they are associated with one of five religious educational boards, which are sectarian in orientation.¹⁴ On the other hand, religious seminaries consider themselves as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many of the madrasahs now own property and are making investments for profit.

The Madrasah System in Pakistan

Madrasahs in Pakistan mostly belong to the two major sects of Islam i.e., the Sunnis and the Shias. Sunni Islam is further divided into three sub-sects: Deobandi, Barelvi, and Ahl-i-Hadith. Apart from these, some religio-political parties like Jamat-e-Islami, run their own madrasahs.

In order to oversee the educational curricula being imparted in these madrasahs, five independent boards were established, based on these different sects. These boards are responsible for finalizing the syllabus, conducting examinations and awarding degrees in the respective madrasahs. Pakistan's Higher Education Commission recognizes the degrees awarded by its approved Wafaq/Tanzeem ul Madaris.¹⁵ Following are some of the details of the Central Board of Madrasahs in Pakistan.¹⁶

Wafaq ul Madaris: The largest number of Islamic seminaries globally are run by Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia in Pakistan. It has its headquarters in Multan.¹⁷ From its inception in August 1959, the total number of madrasahs working with Wafaq-ul-Madaris grew to 19,491 by August 2018. More than 8,000 Iqra Schools and 10,000 seminaries from around the country are associated with it. It is affiliated with the Deobandi school of thought. It has an approved syllabus, conducts regular examinations, and awards degrees to its students.

Tanzeem ul Madaris: The Tanzeem ul Madaris was established in 1960. Its headquarters are in Lahore. It represents the Bareilvi school of thought. About 10,000 madrasahs associated with the Bareilvi exist in the country.¹⁸ In 2019, more than 200,000 students attended examinations under the Tanzeem ul Madaris.

Wafaq ul Madaris (Shia): The Wafaq ul Madaris (Shia) came into being in 1959 in Lahore. It is associated with the Shia school of thought. The board has its own syllabus, conducts its own examination regularly, and awards degrees.

Rabta-tul-Madaris-al-Islamia: The Rabta-tul-Madaris-al-Islamia was formed in 1983 by the revivalist religio-political party of the country Jamat-e-Islami (JI), but the board was only recognised by the government of Pakistan in 1987.¹⁹ Since its inception, the JI has stated that its education board is not affiliated with any sect or group. Subjects of politics, economics, and history are taught in their madrasahs, along with traditional Quranic education in their bid to modernize their education system. Its headquarters are located in Mansoor, Lahore.

Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Salafia: The Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Salafia, formed in 1955, caters to the Ahl-i-Hadith school of thought. They adhere to Quran and Hadith very strictly and have their own system of examination and awarding degrees.

The largest association of seminaries in the country is the Ittehad-e-Tanzeemat-e-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP) also known as the Union of the Religious Education Organizations. It was formed in 2005. Five constituent boards came together to form the ITMP to effectively negotiate with the government.

Analysis of The Curriculum of Madrasahs

When the role of madrasah as a teaching institution is being analyzed, one cannot ignore the importance and relevance of the curriculum being taught in the seminaries. The curriculum currently being taught in the seminaries is called *Dars-e-Nizami*. It was developed by an 18th century scholar, Mulla Nizamuddin Sihalwi, from the Farangi Mahal madrasah, located in the now Indian city of Lucknow.²⁰ Traditional madrasahs adhere to it except for those of the Shia part of the population. The text of its syllabus dates back 500 years or more. Owing to the inability of the majority of students to understand Arabic texts, this course is taught with the help of commentaries and interpretations done by medieval scholar Hanafi Ulema. The original text is memorized by students, often without a complete understanding of the context or the meaning. As a result, students are unable to develop analytical abilities, and grow up with a narrow understanding of the scripture and the world. This fact has been highlighted by local scholars who opine that this traditional technique of learning and teaching at madrasahs should be changed, as it reflects a stagnation of knowledge.

Another problem with the curriculum being taught at religious seminaries is the issue of animosity towards other schools of thought, both secular and religious. With a curriculum that is suspected of glorifying violence in the name of Islam while ignoring basic history, science

and math, that part of Pakistan's public education system has become a major barrier to defeat extremist groups.²¹ As Rebecca Winthrop and Corninne Graff noted, the majority of madrasahs do not impart any secular or vocational training, but they have rigid curricula emphasizing rote memorization. It has been argued - albeit based on limited evidence - that they deliberately educate their students in narrow worldviews and the rejection of Western ideas, and do not train them sufficiently for the real world.²² Injecting advanced subjects and modern research in the curriculum could bring this system at par with the modern educational system.

There are two major issues with the curriculum of madrasahs. Firstly, the rigid interpretation of all the concepts according to the doctrine of a particular sect and school of thought, which considers all other interpretations as inauthentic. This tends to spread hate and divisions in society. Secondly, the concept of jihad in Quran and Hadith is arguably misinterpreted and misunderstood in the existing curriculum: it urges students to embrace militancy when it comes to spreading their faith, which is not the true concept of jihad.

The curriculum needs to be revamped in this regard in order to eliminate this kind of interpretation. Political will and intent needs to be displayed to enforce the necessary changes on the ground. This process will take time but in the long run should prove beneficial to both students and the state.

Prospects of Reforms

Contrary to popular notions, the drive to bring reform to madrasahs in Pakistan precedes the events of 11 September 2001. In fact, then Army Chief and President General Pervez Musharraf wanted to limit the influence of these religious institutions. The National Education Policy 1999-2000 encompassed a reform program for madrasahs which the government wanted to implement. It included bridging the existing gulf between formal education and the education offered by madrasahs; equating their scholastic achievement degrees with the ones of the formal education system; recognizing them and providing them with books on research and reforms; and striving for an integrated system of national education.²³

In line with this policy, certain steps were taken which included *The Pakistan Madrasah Education Board Ordinance, 2001*. This ordinance, promulgated on 18 August 2001, sought to "secure registration, regulation, standardization and uniformity of curricula and standard of education of the *dini* (religious) madaris, imparting specialized Islamic education in Pakistan with the general education system."²⁴ Unsurprisingly, this ordinance could not achieve its objectives mainly due to the lack of enforcement and opposition from religious circles.

Implications of 9/11 and Madrasah Reforms

The events following the attacks of 11 September 2001 led to a number of developments. Renewed attention was given to madrasahs, their structure, curriculum, and working. Demands for reforms started building up, as non-reformed madrasah operating outside the ambit of the state were widely seen as training grounds for terrorists and extremists. Nevertheless, the government of Pakistan faced stiff resistance from conservative religious clerics who viewed the proposal to reform madrasahs as a Western move to control or alter the religious teachings of Islam.

Madrasah Reform Program

In 2002, the government of Pakistan launched the "Madrasah Reform Program" (MRP). MRP was said to be a five-year program to mainstream 8,000 madrasahs with a budget of Rs 5,729.395 million.²⁵ The Ministry of Education was tasked with introducing subjects like

English, general science, and mathematics at the primary level, and then teach computer science, economics etc. at the secondary level, in order to bridge the gap between the different educational systems existing within the country. It also included steps to increase interaction between formal and informal education systems of education as well as equipping madrasahs with computers. However, the reform program was not successful, due to the lack of capacity to utilize funds as well as the lack of implementation and coordination. Secondly, the madrasah leadership was hesitant to trust the Ministry of Education, and there was friction with the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

In 2005, the “Madrasahs Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance” was issued by the government, seeking to bring madrasahs under the supervision of the state. It stated that no madrasahs would be able to function without registering themselves. They were also tasked to submit audit reports on their organization. In addition, the 2005 ordinance called for putting an end to hate speech which incited sectarian or religious tensions.

Post National Action Plan, 2014

A standard mechanism of registration of madrasahs was drafted after consultation with the ITMP and the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) in the National Action Plan (NAP) document. It was observed that more than 190 madrasahs were foreign funded.²⁶ Similarly, 182 madrasahs were closed down immediately as they were found to promote militancy in the country and to have connections with militants and proscribed organizations.²⁷ There is still a long way to go as mere registration of madrasahs will not be enough. Since the madrasah system is not getting any direct assistance from the government of Pakistan, little control can be exercised. It is a well-established fact that donors always influence the receiving institutions. Government should arrange extensive training programmes for teachers and those who qualify should get some special pay package.²⁸ The system should be controlled federally at the initial stages, and then it may be delegated to the provinces once the desired results are achieved. Initially the central government could set up some model madrasahs in big cities and that role model could then be applied uniformly in other parts of the country.

Resistance to Reforms?

On the national level, there is public support to streamline madrasahs and introduce reforms, however, the government faces resistance in this regard. The pushback comes mainly from the powerful religious parties who run a network of madrasahs, but do not want any government involvement. There have been numerous attempts to bring reforms to streamline madrasahs, but they were unsuccessful mainly due to the stiff resistance from conservative circles and a lack of political will.

Madrasahs and their Impact on Society

Madrasahs see themselves as custodians of the teachings of Islam as they provide free education and shelter services to society. Madrasahs face a multitude of challenges in preparing students for life in rapidly modernizing societies and emerging globalized knowledge economies.²⁹ There are multiple factors that lead to producing an extremist and radicalized mindset in the madrasahs, including economic vulnerability, social divisions and discord, sectarian differences, using religion for political purposes, and misinterpreting religion - especially the concept of jihad.

Jihad has been used by fundamentalists, with varying intensity, as a unifying and energizing force.³⁰ In some madrasahs, the minds of students are radicalized in such a manner

that they are ready to participate in acts of violence, which they see as their religious duty. Madrasah students are sometimes told that it is their duty to stop any “immoral” activity and raise arms against any entity which deviates from the righteous path. By such indoctrination, vulnerable young minds are prepared to join the “Holy War.” In addition, the leaders of some of these sectarian outfits incite their followers and students through hate speeches and literature to create disharmony in the society.

Madrasah and Politics

The affiliation of madrasahs with religious political parties can be traced back to the inception of Pakistan. Before the era of 1980, religious political parties were running madrasahs as charity- based organizations and as a service for society. After the decade of the 1980s, many madrasahs heavily focused on a jihad-oriented curriculum. In addition, sectarian differences were emphasised in these religious institutions, as most of their funding was originating from Sunni-majority countries in the Middle East. This led to an increase in radicalization and polarization in society.

The religious political parties also divided themselves on the basis of sects, and extended their presence in madrasahs. It resulted in a politicization of these religious institutions, and the original purpose of imparting religious education has been largely lost.³¹ According to a survey conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, a majority of the madrasahs have an affiliation with political parties. The majority of these religious seminaries are themselves also eager to play a role in politics, e.g., by supporting candidates in elections. For example, Azhar Husain Rizvi, an independent candidate backed by Labbaik Ya Rasulallah, a coalition of Islamist groups, won six percent of the vote by campaigning on a platform supporting strict blasphemy laws.³² It is pertinent to note here that the involvement of madrasah students in politics distracts them from their primary objective of education. This affiliation leads to a rigid mindset, and eventually results in the formation of extremist narrative. Affiliation with any single political party or sect, makes students unable to think beyond party lines.

Streamlining Madrasahs

Pakistan has been grappling with terrorism and violent extremism for more than a decade. The country has suffered immense physical and economic losses due to these phenomena. Over the years, the demand to take strict measures to eliminate terrorism and extremism has not only arisen domestically, but there has been a significant international pressure on Pakistan in this regard as well. Since the number of terrorist attacks increased in the country, especially after 2001, it was repeatedly found that most of the perpetrators were madrasah students who had been coerced into picking up weapons. As more details about this connection started to emerge, emphasis on the need for streamlining madrasahs also arose. There have been a number of proposals, institutions, and policies suggesting reforms in the last two decades, but limited success in this domain has been achieved.

The Current Situation of Madrasahs

Serious work towards registration and regulation of madrasahs started after the NAP. The current government of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party - which took reins of the country in 2018 - announced in an election manifesto that it would “map out and register all seminaries across Pakistan including information on finances, and introduce literacy and mathematics teaching as formal subjects within the madrasah curriculum.”³³ Since taking power, PTI has made some headway in this regard. In March 2019, the government announced

that it had assumed control of 182 religious schools, and detained 182 people in its bid to take strict action against banned groups.³⁴ Furthermore, the (now former) spokesperson of the military, Major General Asif Ghafoor, said during a media talk, “The government of Pakistan ... has decided that these madrasahs will be mainstreamed.”³⁵ He further added that in this drive, the country plans to take control of over 30,000 madrasahs where over 2.5 million children are studying, and introduce a modern educational curriculum so that the children studying in these religious institutions will be well equipped to deal with the contemporary world.

The current curriculum format of (the majority of) madrasahs is still mainly based on memorization of the Holy Quran. As a result, madrasah students remain behind in terms of practical skills when compared with those who have studied in colleges and universities. Madrasah graduates have very limited employment opportunities as almost the only work they can find - if they are lucky - is to teach Islamic studies or Arabic in schools or become madrasah teachers themselves. Some become imams, but the majority remains unemployed and become frustrated owing to the lack of employment opportunities. As a result, a socio-economic division is created in the society which creates disharmony, and is a threat to national cohesion. Another challenge for the state of Pakistan is to control hate speech, as madrasahs often serve as a breeding ground for radicalization and the development of extremist tendencies, especially where vulnerable young minds are concerned. They are used by militant outfits for their own ends in the name of religion. However, it should be remembered that most madrasahs are not involved in any illicit activities. As Major General Ghafoor said, “just 100 madrasahs have been found involved in violent activities, while the rest are a good and effective source of education for children.”³⁶

In May 2019, the country’s Education Minister, Shafqat Mahmood met with the leaders of the country’s five Madrasah boards, to carry forward the process of reforms, and place them under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. The minister also promised to assist madrasah operators in opening bank accounts, the registering process, as well as providing help in processing visas of foreign students who seek admission there. The spokesperson of Wifaqul Madaris Al-Arabia (one of the five Madrasah boards), Maulana Ibrahim Sakargahi said, “It was our long-standing demand that the responsibility[...]should be given to the Education Ministry.”³⁷

Funding to Streamline Madrasahs

One of the biggest issues ahead of streamlining madrasahs is to ensure their financing. Pakistan, which is already in the middle of an economic crisis, has expressed its intent to bear the financial burden of major madrasah reforms. Major General Ghafoor said “Pakistan would pay for the madrasahs by diverting cash to education from the cost of anti-terrorism security operations, which are less necessary because militant attacks have sharply declined in recent years.”³⁸

A senior official from the Ministry of Education echoed the military spokesman’s statement and said that “the government will bear the financial burden to introduce these major reforms in Madrasahs which are a major source of education for poor children.”³⁹ These statements are indeed heartening, and signals an intent of the state of Pakistan to take out spoiler elements from the society.

Madrasahs and Terrorism

There are two broader aspects of terrorism when one looks at these through the lens of madrasah reforms. First is the transnational, and the second is the homegrown form of the

terrorism. There is a widespread perception in the country that the renewed friendship with the US following the 9/11 attacks was being driven solely by America's need for Pakistani cooperation in the Global War on Terror.⁴⁰

Western experts on this subject link transnational terrorism to global jihad, and consider it a threat particularly targeting the West. However, the facts on the ground offer a different picture. No major attack carried out in the West has been traced back to anyone who attended a Pakistani madrasah. However, according to a report of the UN Security Council Monitoring Committee on Al-Qaeda in May 2020, up to 6,500 Pakistani nationals currently fight in Afghanistan on the side of the Taliban against government forces and their foreign backers.⁴¹ In general, madrasahs in Pakistan have been more involved in domestic sectarian violence than in transnational activities after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. Yet the domestic impact has been significant, especially in the more isolated parts of the country which have the highest potential for radicalization.⁴² The issue became prominent with the emergence of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, an organized terrorist group which escalated sectarian tensions in the country as it mostly targeted the Shi'ites.

In addition, some madrasahs in the (former) tribal areas played an important role in hiring vulnerable young people and training them to be terrorists. It has been observed that the seminaries which had ties with proscribed organizations were often involved in facilitating terrorist attacks in Pakistan. At least 299 madrasahs have been found to be involved in terrorism and sectarian activities in Punjab alone.⁴³ Terrorists often take refuge in certain seminaries where they have also been caught many times. There is a very close link observed between certain religious institutions and sectarian violence. All Muslim sects happily claim that their sect is the *naji* ("saved one") and the "others" are destined for hell.⁴⁴ This division, based on ideology and religious arguments is a major obstacle when it comes to drafting a reform plan that can be applied uniformly to all madrasahs in Pakistan.

Some madrasahs in Pakistan pretend to be working as national universities and claim that they can discuss Islamic jurisprudence to promote harmony in the society. Their claim is difficult to validate. They do not promote religious pluralism; rather their efforts revolve around the rejection of other schools of thought and the promotion of their particular school of thought. This sectarian divide is perhaps the biggest hurdle when it comes to reforming the process of education.

An Overview of Pakistan's Post-9/11 Counterterrorism Strategies Regarding Madrasah and Mosque Reforms

The events following the 9/11 attacks brought global attention towards the alleged role of madrasahs, and led to a discussion on their impact. As the War on Terror evolved, there was also a gradual increase in terrorist activities inside Pakistan. Some of those terrorist attacks against the state and its institutions in Pakistan were conducted by people who had been informally schooled and indoctrinated in madrasahs to act against the state and its institutions. This led to renewed calls of regulating all madrasahs operating in Pakistan. Almost all sections of society started calling for the need to scrutinise their financial channels, regulating their syllabus, and register them so that a better eye could be kept on these seminaries. Madrasahs were viewed by many people as a backward educational institution and its students were looked down upon by those who received their education in formal schools. Calls for reform grew stronger. For this purpose, many policy proposals and rounds of talks were held between officials and the ITMP, but they could not achieve a consensus. Ultimately, the National Internal Security Policy (NISP 2014-18), then the NAP (2014), and then the second National Internal National Security Policy (2018-2023) formally included regulation, reform, and mainstreaming of madrasahs as specific agenda items.⁴⁵

National International Security Policy (NISP 2014-18)

The NISP 2014-18 was Pakistan's first ever national security document. The 64 points in the policy were approved by the federal cabinet in 2014. The scope of the report was defined to be focused on internal security. A need for developing a national narrative was also highlighted in the report to counter non-traditional threats with the help of religious scholars, the intelligentsia, educational institutions, and the media.⁴⁶

For the first time, the NISP 2014-18 categorically stated that the "Madrasah system cannot be excluded from the internal security parameters of the country."⁴⁷ Five issues were addressed:

1. **Identification of root causes inside madrasahs involved in radicalization:** The NISP 2014-18 clearly stated that some madrasahs were involved in spreading extremism inside the country. As madrasahs usually have an outdated curriculum, the students which passed from these informal centres have limited employment opportunities as opposed to those with formal education. This factor led to the breeding of contempt and frustration among the vulnerable madrasah-educated youth. They were more prone to anti-state elements who could misuse or radicalize them. Initially, this observation was limited only to boys studying in these madrasahs, but "after the Jamia Hafsa incident has brought madrasahs for women also under the microscope of security analysts."⁴⁸ The document highlighted how madrasahs were competing with each other for influence in the country. The complete rejection of other beliefs and sectarian indoctrination plays, according to the NISP 2014-18, a critical role in dividing society and adding emotive fuel to existing divisions in the society.⁴⁹ Therefore, madrasahs and mosques remain important focal points for the government to stop the flow of violent extremism in the country, as a number of terrorists were madrasah students.
2. **Mapping, integrating, and mainstreaming mosques and madrasahs:** Most of the madrasahs involved in radicalization operate outside the realm of government structures and national law. The main target of extremists, terrorists, and anti-state elements are national integration and harmony. The policy document called for mapping the existing as well as new madrasahs and mosques as it would help in mainstreaming them with the rest of the educational institutions in the country. NISP 2014-18 called to "include broad based Madrasah and mosque integration process in the mainstream education system so that students and alumni of these institutions can also become active members of a plural society and play a positive role in the national economy being part of a productive workforce."⁵⁰
3. **Stemming the financing of terrorism in the name of madrasahs:** The NISP 2014-18 emphasized "some troublesome aspects of these madrasahs, which impinge on national internal security, include financing from unidentified sources; publication and distribution of hate material."⁵¹ According to the NISP, it should become possible for the Federal Board of Revenue and taxation department to distinguish between legal and illegal flow of money by involving banks in monitoring the flow of money to suspected organizations.
4. **Legal Reforms:** *The NISP 2014-18* called for a review of the regulatory capacity of the state to monitor, evaluate, and prevent the misuse of existing laws under which mosques and madrasahs are functioning.⁵²
5. **NACTA's Responsibility to Implement the NISP 2014-18:** Whereas the NISP 2014-18 called for better oversight and regulation of madrasahs and mosques, NACTA, which was established in 2009, was tasked with its implementation.⁵³

NACTA's Directorate of Research and Coordination was, inter alia, tasked with madrasah mapping, legal reforms and policies of mosques and madrasahs related to internal security.⁵⁴

National Action Plan (2014)

Following the tragic attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar on 16 December 2014, in which 150 people, mostly students, were killed by the Taliban, a broad consensus was agreed upon by all major stakeholders to eradicate terrorism and clamp down on its funding and infrastructure. As a result, a 20-point NAP⁵⁵ was set up. Registration and regulation of madrasahs became action point number 10 in this NAP.

National Internal Security Policy (2018-2023)

Among other things, the second National Internal Security Policy document (NISP 2018-2023) emphasizes the continuing need for madrasah and mosque reforms. The report states that significant success has been achieved as far as the mapping of madrasahs was concerned, with over 90% of religious seminaries (*madrasahs*) now identified and counted. It was also noted that efforts to introduce wide-ranging madrasah reforms were well underway.⁵⁶ The following elements stand out in the NISP 2018-2023:

- **A new national narrative:** A new national narrative was introduced, calling for “a tolerant, inclusive and democratic polity.” It emphasizes that cultural and religious diversity will be the most significant pillars of this narrative. Furthermore, it also states that a “comprehensive National Narrative against extremism and terrorism predicated on acceptance of plurality, diversity and tolerant teachings of Islam will be prepared and disseminated.”⁵⁷ In light of this new national narrative, the curricula in schools and madrasahs would be adjusted accordingly. The Departments of Education, the Higher Education Commission and NACTA were tasked to ensure implementation.
- **Radicalization and militancy not limited to madrasahs:** *The NISP 2018-2023* highlights that there is sufficient evidence indicating that radicalization and militancy is not just limited to madrasahs or its students. In fact, people from affluent backgrounds, with modern educational qualifications, are also vulnerable targets of the radical narratives.
- **Adoption of minimum national standards:** The policy document calls for an adoption of minimum national standards to be set for madrasahs as well as public and private education institutions.⁵⁸
- **Uniform registration and regularization of madrasahs:** The policy document states that a uniform registration and regularization of madrasahs in all provinces will be guaranteed, and provinces would accordingly devise legislation to undertake madrasah reforms and streamline them.

Some proposed reforms for madrasahs and mosques include:

- **Conditional State Assistance to Madrasahs:** The policy document states that State funding has to be linked with financial auditing, the adoption of a national curriculum, the teaching of science subjects, and an institutionalized examinations system;⁵⁹ *Assistance in Switching from Madrasah to Mainstream Education System:* It has been stated in the policy document that “avenues to switch from Madrasah to the mainstream education system will be created at a level equivalent to years 5 and 10 of schooling.”⁶⁰
- **Increased Collaboration between Madrasah and Mainstream Educational Systems:** In order to remove misconceptions, promote harmony, and to encourage a positive exchange of ideas, increased collaboration between madrasahs and mainstream educational systems was proposed, including both student and teacher exchange programs, and joint academic as well as extra-curricular events;
- **Mosques as Centre of Guidance and Learning:** *The NISP 2018-23* also states that mosques will be reformed and made into centres of guidance and learning. In addition,

narrative and guidelines for the Friday prayer sermons approved by the government in consultation with the religious scholars should be prepared, stressing, inter alia, the importance of civic values in the sermons. A pilot program was to be launched in the city of Islamabad.

- **Training of Imams:** *The* NISP 2018-23 announced that “a committee of religious scholars (with representation from all schools of thought) will be established for the formulation of recommended syllabi, examination and training for Imams.”⁶¹ Under the supervision of this committee, and overseen by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, a special training program would be offered to imams. Furthermore, the expertise of imams would be ensured by an examination conducted by the state. The ones who qualify would be given a monthly stipend by the government.
- **Funding to Set up Libraries at Mosques and Centres for Islamic Studies:** Under the guidance of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, assisted by the committee of scholars, the policy document announced that government funding would be provided to establish libraries at mosques and centres for Islamic studies.⁶² To ensure transparency, these funds would be audited by the government.

Evaluation of the above Counter-Strategies

In 2014, when the first NISP (2014-18) was announced, it was considered a landmark document. These 64-point laid out comprehensive plans and reforms focusing on improving the national security situation of the country. In this policy document, NACTA was given various responsibilities to implement the action points on the ground. However, following the terrorist attack on the Army Public School Peshawar, a new 20 points action plan by the name of “National Action Plan” was adopted, and NISP was rendered inconsequential as NAP de facto took NISP’s place.

Following these two policy directives, with regard to regulating madrasah reforms two steps were taken by NACTA:

- **Madrasahs Data and Registration Forms:** In consultation with the ITMP, NACTA devised the “Madrasahs Data and Registration Forms”.⁶³ The objective behind this step was that only registered Madrasahs would be allowed to operate and function in the country.
- **Curriculum and Equivalence Mechanism:** In order to revisit madrasah curricula and so as to give an equal formal status to its degrees, two committees were established. They included members from the ITMP. According to NACTA, the “first committee is working under heads of Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education and the second committee is working under chairman Higher Education Commission (HEC) regarding grant of equivalence certificate to Wafaq-ul-Madaris for Sanad Shahadat ul Aamawa Khasa.”⁶⁴ Extensive deliberations have been taking place by these committees.

The second NISP (2018-2023,) like its predecessor, is extremely broad in its scope. Instead of being narrowly focused, the plan seems to be too ambitious. However, the policy document includes positive ingredients, especially regarding madrasah and mosque reforms.

The madrasah regulation reform, especially in terms of its mapping, has achieved considerable success. According to a NACTA report presented in April 2019, the geo-tagging of the majority of the madrasahs in Pakistan has been completed.⁶⁵ 90 percent of madrasahs have been registered in Punjab, with all of them geo-tagged. In addition, geo-tagging of 85% of the madrasah in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) has been achieved; 80% of those in Sindh; 75% of the ones in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK); 60% of Baluchistan’s madrasahs; and 100% of those in Islamabad had been completed.⁶⁶ With this report, the government also issued a warning that all unregulated madrasahs would be closed. There

remain concerns, especially regarding channelling of external financial flows to madrasahs. However, some progress has also been made in this domain.

NISP (2018-2023) was passed in the last days of the previous government. The need of the hour is that it should be given time by the new government to be fully implemented rather than giving in to the temptation to come up with a new counterterrorism strategy document of its own. Pakistan cannot afford any further delays in the domain of preventing and countering terrorism.

Conclusion

Historically, madrasahs have played a significant role in the development of the socio-political fabric of Pakistani society. Yet, it is a sad reality that over time, some of these religious seminaries deviated from their original purpose of imparting knowledge and helping the poorer and more vulnerable segment of society. They allowed themselves to become instruments of various national and international political actors and agendas. Streamlining of these madrasahs by introducing reforms, and bringing them in line with the more modern and secular national educational system of Pakistan is the need of the hour. It will not only help curb extremist and sectarian tendencies, but also benefit millions of students by enabling them to be better prepared when entering the job market. Over the years, the state of Pakistan has introduced a number of counterterrorism measures to lay a framework for reform and regulation of the religious seminaries. However, there has been a serious lack of implementation. The madrasah system has and can be an asset for Islamic societies, but it must be protected from extremist militancy. Madrasahs must be restored to their original status of educational institutions which promote Islamic core values like social harmony and moderation. All stakeholders ought to unite and prioritise this issue for the benefit and betterment of the people of Pakistan.

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