

Modifying the Madrassa: Promoting Moderate Islamic Education

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POLICY BRIEF

Radical Islamists exploit weak educational systems in the Middle East and around the world to promote fundamentalist forms of Islam through economically self-sustaining private religious schools.¹ These schools are created with a one-time capital outlay and are sustained by a constant flow of revenue from community businesses built around the madrassa. Generally, graduates of radical madrassas fail to learn useful vocational skills, remain poor, and practice intolerant ideologies, making them ready recruits for radical organizations. Existing top-down approaches to reforming education systems in the Middle East have been unable to combat this grassroots problem. This brief - using Pakistan as a case study - proposes the creation of a micro-financing institution to fund financially independent, moderate schools based on the same economic approach currently used by radical Islamist groups.

Weak Public Education Systems

In establishing their schools, radical Islamist groups capitalize on weak, non-existent, or exclusionary public education systems in and outside the Middle East. These schools serve as holistic centers that cater to the physical, spiritual, and intellectual needs of their students. The madrassas teach the *Dars-e-Nazami* curriculum of over 20 subjects, half of which are religious.²

Case Study – Pakistan: The public education system in Pakistan is underfunded, overcrowded, and poorly administered. Rampant corruption deprives the public education system of much needed funds. Not surprisingly, 45% of Pakistanis are dissatisfied with government education services in their area.³ The following statistics illustrate the dire state of Pakistani public education:

- The Pakistani government spends 2.6% of its GDP on public education (ranking 155th out of 182 countries).⁴
- The World Economic Forum ranked Pakistan's basic education 128th out of 133 countries and higher education at 118th.⁵
- Over 12,737 educational institutions out of 164,579 public sector schools in the country are non-functional "ghost schools."⁶
- The system is under significant strain with only a 60% attendance rate.⁷

- The student-teacher ratio is more than 40:1 and worsening, compared to the worldwide average of 18:1.⁸

Madrassa Connections to Terrorism and Violence

Since the 1980s, radical madrassas in Pakistan have proliferated at a rapid pace. In January 2007, Pakistan's Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao announced that there were 13,500 madrassas, of which 12,006 had been officially registered with the government.⁹ This official count is conservative and is not a true representation of the proliferation of madrassas in Pakistan:

- One estimate places the number of madrassas in Pakistan closer to 73,000.¹⁰
- A study found that children in 2004 were 59% more likely to be enrolled in a madrassa than in 2002.¹¹

Jihadi Connection: Though not all madrassas are radical, 10-15% of them have been linked to radical Islamic organizations.¹² The radical madrassas have a large impact on the communities around them, producing "religious entrepreneurs" who justify violence against people who believe differently than they do.¹³ Another byproduct of radical madrassas are the creation of communities supportive of jihadi causes, which provide radicals with hideouts, meeting sites, logistical, support, or other assistance.¹⁴ Madrassas serve as a valuable recruiting tool for extremist organizations.

- Madrassas have been supported or operated by Egypt's *Ikhwan-ul Muslimeen*, Indonesia's *Jemmah Islamiya*, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, and the Philippines' Aby Sayyaf group, all of whom extend support to al-Qaeda.¹⁵
- The *Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Islam* madrassas provide a steady source of recruits for the Taliban.¹⁶

Sectarian Violence: The madrassa system promotes sectarian violence.¹⁷ Currently, five national networks of madrassas in Pakistan are vying amongst each other for prominence.¹⁸ This competition contributes to the proliferation of radical madrassas, which condones violent acts against other sects. These radical schools attempt to demonstrate their relative superiority by violently antagonizing those who believe in rival ideologies. A study of the Ahmedpur East region of Pakistan shows that as madrassa density per capita rises, incidences of civil unrest and violence also increase.¹⁹ Militant sectarian organizations closely associated with madrassas include: *Sipahe Sahaba Pakistan*, *Sunni Tehrik*, and *Jamaat-i-Islami* among many others.²⁰

The "Madrassa Model"

Islamist groups create madrassas that operate independent of an external funding source through constant revenue streams from community businesses. Beyond an initial capital outlay, madrassas fund their continued operation and subsidize education costs through the establishment of businesses. These businesses, built in areas around the madrassa, have led to the success and continued proliferation of these schools. The whole cycle starts again as graduated mullahs from these schools start madrassas in other communities.

Step 1: Real estate – Mullahs invoke a “divine right” to build madrassas on illegally occupied state and private land.²¹ The land taken is usually prime real-estate set-aside for park, commercial, or residential development. Communities may witness several land seizures as every sect claims their right to a mosque

Step 2: Initial Setup – Fundamentalist foundations often fund madrassa construction.²² Charitable donations (*zakat*) from local businessmen and Friday prayer services help finance operations during and after the initial construction. Once sufficient capital has been raised for the specific project, a mosque is constructed, quickly followed by an adjacent madrassa.

Step 3: Sustainable Economic Activity – Madrassas build clusters of shops in the surrounding area to provide a regular source of income. Madrassas run a variety of profit-bearing enterprises that allows them to be independent of any external funding source.

- One madrassa in Karachi, Pakistan “runs and owns a female madrassa, an English-medium Islamic school, a medical clinic, a restaurant, and a computer centre.”²³

Policy Options

Option A: Reform the Pakistani Public Education System

Last year, the U.S. government spent \$125 million on educational activities in Pakistan, mainly focused on improving higher education and reforming the Pakistani Education Ministry.²⁴ The U.S. approach is a top-down strategy that seeks to improve access to universities and enhance government management of the public education system. Since 2002, USAID has provided roughly \$700 million to reform Pakistani public education.²⁵ This money finances individual scholarships, supports teacher training, funds school construction, and subsidizes local and federal education ministries. Unfortunately, the Pakistani education system continues to underperform compared to peer countries of similar levels of per capita GDP per and shows few signs of improvement.

The top-down approach has failed in Pakistan because of corruption, weak government control in the countryside, and limited government accountability:

- Limited Accountability: No means exist to track funds distributed to the Pakistani government. USAID has sought to overcome this challenge by using NGOs currently operating in Pakistan to construct schools. However, education is not the top priority of many of these NGOs. They are generally American-based organizations that focus on other development related projects, but pursue educational ventures to increase their funding.²⁶ Funds could be more efficiently spent by supporting NGOs that specialize in education, instead of only having education as minor part of a wide range of other development projects.

- Corruption: Rampant corruption has limited the effectiveness of funds provided to the Pakistani government. Local Pakistani officials and administrators in the public education system consistently siphon off education funds for personal gain. As a result, the aid does not reach local education systems, particularly in the remote countryside. At best, top-down policies can only mitigate some of the effects of radical madrassas because they are unable to attack the root of a community-based movement.²⁷

Option B: NGO-Administered Schools

Regional and national NGOs working in Pakistan have successfully established schools, but have had difficulty sustaining operations beyond the first few years.²⁸ NGOs are beholden to the preferences of donors. They must change their focus and geographical region in order to secure funding.²⁹

- Funding: NGOs initially receive money from local, regional, and international donors to establish a school. When donors stop giving money for a particular school, NGOs move to other areas of donor interest, and newly-created schools are consequently left to fend for themselves. Many times, they abandon their schools after project cycles have run their course.³⁰
- Focus on Informal Education: Due to limited time and resources, many NGOs champion informal education. These schools generally try to establish “functional literacy,” giving their students the bare minimum education needed to be productive members of society. As a result, they fail to give their students skills that will garner them a job, or help them in their everyday life. This failure produces literate, but unemployed individuals who are susceptible to the propaganda of extremist groups.

Option C: Establish a Micro-Lending Institution - Adapting the “Madrassa Model”

Moderate Muslim education can directly compete with radical madrassas for students using the same economically self-sustaining model. To succeed, moderate schools must have an analogous funding source. This brief proposes the creation of a Middle Eastern micro financing institution (MFI) with the specific purpose of funding moderate Islamic and technical education using the "madrassa model".

- Step 1: Establish the Micro-Finance Institution – Moderate schools need a source of initial capital. MFIs, such as First MicroFinanceBank Ltd. of Pakistan, are not currently involved in establishing schools. A new regional MFI should be created whose specific purpose is the promotion of moderate religious and technical education. The MFI must be an independent organization, without any direct links to the United States. The new MFI could be created with the cooperation of existing

microfinancing organizations, such as the South Asian Microfinance Network and the Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance.

Step 2: Establishing a School – An established NGO operating in Pakistan requests funds from the new MFI.³¹ Initially, NGOs that fit certain criteria will be sought out by the MFI with a targeted marketing campaign. As the MFI becomes well known, it will no longer need to solicit applicants as other NGOs will seek this funding. With the funds, the NGO begins the process of community involvement, starting with creating village organizations and culminating in the construction of a school. This process ensures that the school meets the needs of the community and gives the community a stake in its success. The NGO will be responsible for teacher training and monitoring. In order to gain funding from the MFI, the NGO will have to meet the following criteria:

- Adopt the self-sustaining “madrassa model” through establishing community businesses that will financially support the school,
- Provide a moderate Islamic education along the lines of Aga Khan Educational Services curriculum,
- Provide a level of literacy and competency in math to a U.S. grade 6 equivalent,
- Incorporate a vocational training program into the school, and
- Provide teacher training.

Step 3: Sustainable Economic Activity – The MFI provides start-up capital for local businesses under the condition that a certain percentage of its revenue go to the operational and maintenance costs of the school. The community, as counterparty to the loan, ensures that businesses uphold their contracts. These enterprises mirror the madrassa’s administration-run businesses that support its operations.

Why the Model Will Work

Demand: Parents will send their children to these new schools because their improved accessibility and quality make them attractive alternatives to radical madrassa education. Studies in Pakistan repeatedly show that parents send their children to schools based on perceived quality and cost.³² Graduates will value education and be able to work in local businesses, creating a self-promoting mechanism.

Skill-Based Curriculum: The new schools would include practical education that is omitted from traditional madrassa curricula taught in many radical schools. Lessons in the new schools would stress moderate Islam in the context of the modern world.

- Lessons would stress the peaceful, tolerant roots of Islam, and highlight the tensions between militarism and Islamic law.³³
- Subjects would include: literature, math, sciences, morality and character-building, religious classes based on the Qur’an, Hadith and Fiqh, and technical skills education.³⁴

- Skills appropriate to help in regional industries and vocational training opportunities would prepare graduates for productive jobs in the community.

Accountability: The new schools have a multi-tiered accountability system that starts with a specific school all the way to the MFI. Community leaders and the village organizations responsible for the building of the school would be the first tier of accountability. The NGO is the second tier of accountability, maintaining contact with communities and providing regular support visits to the schools to ensure they are operating correctly. The third and final tier would be the MFI, conducting regular audits of the NGO's projects. The oversight system ensures that no extremist schools are funded with the institution's capital.

Government Response: Governments would have few reasons to oppose these new schools because they would fill a gap in a strained education system. Opening an alternative to public education increases overall enrollment without draining students from government schools.³⁵ The new schools would be registered with the central government, unlike radical madrassas.

Strengths and Complications: The proposed model is flexible, self-sustaining, and free from Western association. The project-by-project nature of the model allows for each school to conform to the needs of the community. Once the schools and businesses are running, they will no longer require any external funding. These schools will be viewed as a legitimate part of the community, not a tool of Western powers. Complications mainly center on the supervision of how granted funds are spent. A rigorous auditing mechanism that ensures the compliance of NGOs and the schools funded must be a key feature of this model.

¹ Examples of these fundamentalist forms of Islam are the Salafist and Deobandi ideologies.

² C. Christine Fair, *Islamic Education in Pakistan*, U.S. Institute of Peace (Washington D.C.: March 2006).

³ Anne Cackroft, Neil Andersson, Khalid Omer, Noor Ansari, Amir Khan and Ubaid Ullah Chaudhry, *Social audit of delivery of public services: Baseline survey 2002 National Report*, National Reconstruction Bureau, Pakistan. www.ciet.org

⁴ "Pakistan," CIA World Fact Book, 4 March 2010, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pk.html>> Accessed 22 March 2010.

⁵ *The Global Competitiveness Report 2009-2010*, Ed. Klaus Schwab, The World Economic Forum: Geneva, Switzerland 2009. <<http://www.weforum.org/pdf/GCR09/GCR20092010fullreport.pdf>>

⁶ Ghost schools are the result of fraudulent accounting practices. Government officials and local leaders siphon off funds meant for specific schools. Consequently, there are thousands of schools that exist on paper, yet do not serve a single student. Feisal Khan, "Corruption and the Decline of the State in Pakistan," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 15(2007): 224.

⁷ Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, and Asim Ijaz Kwaja, "Dime a Day: The possibilities and Limits of Private Schooling in Pakistan," *Comparative Education Review* 52(2008): 329.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremeism*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No 130, 29 March 2007: 5.

¹⁰ Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, "Madrassa: Breeding Ground of Jihadists," *Modern Ghana*, 30 March 2009, <<http://www.modernghana.com/newsp/208749/1/pagenum4/madrassa-breeding-ground-of-jihadists.html#continue>> Accessed 25 March 2010.

¹¹ Anne Cockroft, Neil Anderson, Deborah Milne, Kalid Omer, Noor Ansari, Amir Khan, and Ubaid Ullah Chaudry, "Challenging the myths about madaris in Pakistan: A national household survey of enrolment and reasons for choosing religious schools," *International Journal of Educational Development* 29 (2009): 344.

¹² Singer, P.W., "Pakistan's madrassahs: Ensuring a system of education not jihad," *Brookings Institutions Analysis Papers No. 14*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001.

- ¹³ C. Christine Fair, "Militant Recruitment in Pakistan: A New Look at the Militancy-Madrasah Connection," *Asia Policy* 4 (2007): 110.
- ¹⁴ Devin R. Springer, James L. Regens, David N. Edger, *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009: 140.
- ¹⁵ Zahid HJussain, *Frontline Pakistan*, New York: Colombia University Press, 2007: 83.
- ¹⁶ Frédéric Grare, "Islam, Militarism, and The 2007-2008 Elections in Pakistan," Carnegie Papers, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, No. 70, 2006.
- ¹⁷ Oddjørn Lirvik, "Religion in school, interreligious relations and citizenship: the case of Pakistan," *British Journal of Religious Education* 30 (2008): 146.
- ¹⁸ The five networks are: the Deobandi (puritanical originating from Darul Uloom Deoband), Barelwis (competing Sunni Muslim movement), Ahl-i-Hadith (puritanical, but closer to Wahabi or Salafi movements), Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamist party established by Abul Ala Maududi), and Shite madrassas.
- ¹⁹ Saleem H. Ali, *Islam and Education: Conflict and Conformity in Pakistan's Madrassahs*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009: 154.
- ²⁰ *Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremeism*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No 130, 29 March 2007.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 4.
- ²² One such organization, *Rabita Aalam-e-Islami*, is a known wahhabist foundation that has funded schools in Pakistan. The Al-Rashid Trust, a known radical group based in Karachi, has also funded many schools in Pakistan. "South Asia Terrorism Portal: Al-Rashid Trust," 2001. <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Al-Rashid_Trust.htm> Accessed 5 April 2010.
- ²³ *Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremeism*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No 130, 29 March 2007: 5.
- ²⁴ "USAID Pakistan: Education Factsheet," 10 January 2010, <www.usaid.gov/pk> Accessed 15 April 2010).
- ²⁵ "USAID Pakistan: Education Program," 3 March 2010, <<http://www.usaid.gov/pk/sectors/education/>> Accessed 5 April 2010.
- ²⁶ See: "USAID Pakistan Budget and Project Funding FY 2008 and First Quarter FY 2009," 4 March 2010. <<http://www.usaid.gov/pk/downloads/bud/ReportonObsandsubobsunsubobs.pdf>> Accessed 5 April 2010. "PEAKS - Central Asian Republics Basic Education Sector," 2010, <http://www.aed.org/Projects/PEAKS_CAsia.cfm> Accessed 5 April 2010; "American Institutes for Research: Education, Human Development, and the Workforce," <<http://www.air.org/ehd/default.aspx>> Accessed 5 April 2010; "Winrock International: Pakistan Projects," 2007, <<http://www.winrock.org/programs/country.asp?countryid=1318>> Accessed 5 April 2010.
- ²⁷ Griff Witte, "Poor schooling slows anti-terrorism effort in Pakistan; Critics say the public education system is poorly funded and boosts the establishment at the expense of academics," *The Washington Post*, Section A:18.
- ²⁸ Some examples of regional NGOs currently building schools in Pakistan include: Tameer-i-Millat, Asgharia Educational & Welfare Society, Tanzeem-e-Asatza, Pakistan Public Welfare Society, Sindh Graduate Association (SGA) Roshan Tara, The Citizen's Foundation, and Aga Khan Educational Services. See: Masooda Bano, Non-profit education providers vis-a-vis the private sector: comparative analysis of non-governmental organizations and traditional voluntary organizations in Pakistan," *Compare* 38 (2008): 471 – 482.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 480.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 479.
- ³¹ Refer to endnote 28 for a list of NGOs currently establishing schools in Pakistan.
- ³² Cockroft et al.; Nila Iram, Zakir Husain, Sofia Anwar, Ijaz Hussain, and Waqar Akram, "Determinants of Child School Choice in Punjab: Policy Implications," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 23 (2008):285 -293.
- ³³ Jacob Shapiro and C. Christine Fair, "Understanding Support for Islamist Militancy in Pakistan," *International Security* 34 (2010): 70-118.
- ³⁴ "Religious Education Institutions (REIs): Present Situation and the Future Strategy," *Policy Perspectives* Vol 2. Institute for Policy Studies: Islamabad. <<http://ips-pk.org/content/view/full/191/259/>>
- ³⁵ Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, and Ijaz Khwaja, "A Dime a Day: The Possibilities and Limits of Private Schooling in Pakistan," *Comparative Education Review* 52 (2008): 351.