

Teaching Religion, Taming Rebellion?

Religious Education Reform in Afghanistan

In the wake of 9/11, madrasas and religious education have become subjects of great controversy. The strong historical and etymological links between madrasa students ('taliban' – literally, 'the seekers of knowledge') and the Taliban movement that emerged from a network of Pakistani and Afghan madrasas in the 1990s has contributed to madrasas being portrayed as 'terrorist dens' and 'jihad factories'. The growing insurgency in Afghanistan – and particularly the increase in the use of suicide attacks, coupled with the recruitment of Afghan religious students from Pakistani madrasas to the Taliban – has brought the topic of religious education to the centre of the Afghan state-building agenda. In response, the Afghan government has initiated a comprehensive reform of the Islamic education sector. But, are the links to militancy substantiated? And, what can the government of Afghanistan and its foreign supporters do to enhance oversight of and collaboration with Afghanistan's religious schools?

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A Diversity of Institutions

There exists not one religious education system within Afghanistan but rather a ‘madrasa sector’, with a range of madrasas offering religious education at different levels. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the term ‘madrasa’ is commonly used to refer to schools providing religious education at secondary-school level or higher; the term is based on the Arabic root ‘darasa’, which means ‘to study’. These institutions educate children in the basic tenets of their religion, train the lower-level clergy, and qualify religious scholars and legal experts. In 2007, there were 336 madrasas registered with the government. The figure for private madrasas is not known, but is likely much higher.

The madrasa sector reflects Islam in Afghanistan: the Sunni and Shia sects and various Sunni schools of thought (such as the revivalist Deobandis and Ahl-e-Hadith, Arab salafi-inspired Wahabis and modernist Islamist ideologies) are all represented. The majority of Afghanistan’s Sunni madrasas follow the Hanafi legal tradition and are linked to the Deobandi school of thought developed from the Dar ul Uloom Deoband (established in North India in 1867).

There is a clear divide between public and private schools, along with significant differences between individual madrasas in terms of size, funding sources and ideology.

Afghanistan’s Sunni madrasas comprise a highly heterogeneous group, ranging from small community madrasas to large government institutions. Some are funded privately by local communities in Afghanistan or by the Afghan diaspora; some are funded entirely by the Afghan state; while others are funded by ideological patrons. Common for most Sunni madrasas is that they use a variant of the Dars e Nizami curriculum traditionally used by Sunni madrasas across South Asia.

Government Reform

Both the content and the quality of madrasa education have been the subject of considerable debate and criticism in Afghan and foreign media. On one side are issues related to the quality and relevance of the religious education offered within Afghanistan; on the

other are issues related to the government’s lack of control over the sector, and particularly the fear of Pakistani madrasas radicalizing Afghan youth.

In 2006, the Afghan government devised a comprehensive plan to improve Islamic education in Afghanistan. With its ‘Strategy for the Development of Afghanistan’s Centers of Excellence: Model Schools for a Holistic Education’, the government aims to improve the quality and relevance of religious education through curriculum reform, teacher training and the provision of teaching materials; to increase access to religious education *within Afghanistan* by building and equipping new schools across the country; and to enhance oversight and control through registration of all madrasas with the government and certification of private madrasas.

So far, the focus of the reform has been on improving the state’s capacity to deliver Islamic education. Through regulation and reform, the government seeks to enhance its oversight over the madrasa sector and what is taught in the schools, and at the same time to reduce the number of Afghan students seeking religious education from madrasas in Pakistan. The strategy is guided by a fear of madrasas teaching violence and hatred, and of radicalization of Afghan youth in Pakistani madrasas. It presents a vision of an Afghan Islamic education system with no linkage across the border to Pakistan.

Reception by the Ulema

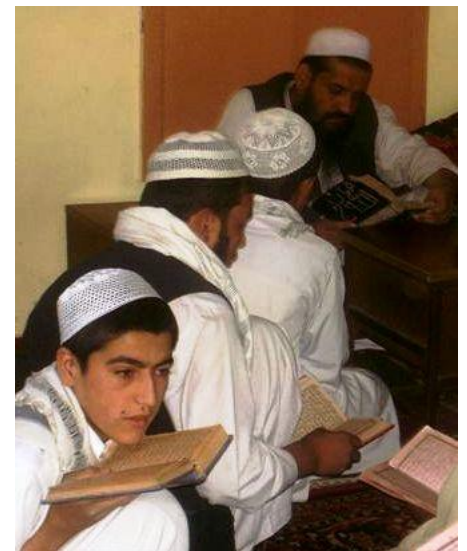
Many ulema, madrasa principals and teachers share some of the government’s concerns over the quality of the religious education offered in Afghanistan. Lack of the resources required for the provision of high-quality education – including teaching material, school buildings and equipment, and teachers’ salaries – is a frequently raised issue in discussions with madrasa personnel. The government’s religious education initiative, however, has been given a mixed reception, reflecting the fact that the Afghan ulema comprise a diverse group, with diverging views on state–madrasa relations. Some mullahs welcome the initiative because they believe the sector is in need of change and because the sector generally lacks funding and has seen little support from the government

in recent years. Others are highly critical of what they see as government interference and control in an area they consider to be outside the purview of the state.

Who Are the Madrasa Students?

The image of madrasa students is often one of poor children with no other means of education. Interviews with current and former madrasa students in Afghanistan, however, reveal that students at madrasas come from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and that the reasons for families choosing madrasa education are varied and include:

- poor quality of education in regular schools
- lack of trust in government schooling
- preference for religious education
- specific career opportunities
- culturally appropriate education for girls
- supplement to other schooling.



Students at Kabul madrasa. Project photo.

Why Do Afghan Students Go Abroad?

A combination of factors has encouraged Afghans to seek religious education abroad, and particularly in Pakistan. One obvious reason for Afghan religious students to go abroad is that Afghan madrasas and universities do not offer higher-level religious degrees. Some Afghan universities offer bachelor’s degrees in Islamic Studies, but for any higher degree Afghans must travel abroad. Furthermore, graduates from private madrasas are generally not accepted by Afghan universities

and must go abroad if they wish to pursue bachelor's degrees. The reduced investment in government madrasas during the period of communist rule and over three decades of armed conflict have also left many of the public madrasas in poor condition. In addition, it is not only the availability but also the quality and reputation of the religious education offered that are important when Afghan students are making decisions on whether to study abroad.

Both public and private madrasas are part of transnational networks based on a common system of knowledge, values and religious authority. Madrasas are linked to institutions abroad through flows of people, ideas and finances. The networks are chiefly informal and personal, based around the student-teacher relationship. For higher-level studies, students seek out well-reputed teachers in their particular field of interest. This practice is part of the South Asian madrasa tradition, where student-teacher relationships are more important than institutional affiliations. The direction of movement of students is from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Subsequently, Afghan students return to Afghanistan as religious teachers and scholars, bringing with them new contacts and ideas.

Do Madrasas Produce Militants?

Post-9/11, the alleged link between madrasa and militancy has been the focus of many media and policy reports. The relationship, however, is more complex than is often suggested. From existing research on Pakistan's madrasas, we detect five possible links between madrasas and militant groups: (1) madrasas can play a role in recruitment; (2) madrasas can function as 'organizational bases'; (3) madrasas can be used as 'transit points' for militants; (4) madrasa leaderships can have close links to militant groups; and (5) madrasas can provide military training facilities. However, it is difficult to establish the actual role of madrasas in radicalization processes. Recruitment to militant groups happens in a number of different ways: through madrasas, through religious leaders and networks, through radical groups, but also through family and kin networks, as well as through regular educational institutions, such as government schools and universities.

The various madrasas represent different interests, interpretations of Islam, ideological sympathies or links to political parties. Some Afghan madrasas openly support the Taliban, while others support the current government. The politicization of religion in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and particularly the radicalization of certain political groups over the last 30 years, has turned particular madrasas into a means through which radical Islamic groups can mobilize militarily for political ends. Yet, most madrasas do not produce militants but remain focused on providing religious education to their students.

The 'fundamentalist' Deobandi school of thought – which seeks a return to the fundamental tenets of Islam – is often viewed as sympathetic to the Taliban. Yet, apolitical madrasas exist – even among the Deobandi schools – supporting neither the current government nor the militant Islamic opposition. Association with 'Deoband' does not in itself signify radical attitudes.

Policy Measures

Curriculum Reform

Outdated curricula of little relevance to today's world and dated teaching methods focusing on memorization and rote learning in Arabic – a language with which few Afghan students are familiar – are among the main criticisms of madrasa education in Afghanistan. Yet, the core of the madrasa tradition – education of children and training of religious leaders and clergy in the 'true interpretation of religion' – lies in the curriculum. Questions about what should be taught in religious schools, and who should decide this, are therefore central to any religious education initiative or reform. There are disagreements over the question of content, where some – particularly within government circles – would like a standardized broader curriculum that includes non-religious subjects, while others – especially among the clergy – favour the right of madrasas to define their own curricula, in line with the traditions of their respective schools of thought. Madrasas have shown willingness to introduce regular subjects. Earlier religious education reforms have caused considerable controversy in Afghanistan. Curriculum reform – if imposed from above – could trigger a backlash. This calls for a consultative proc-

ess conducted with sensitivity and respect for diverse interests.

Government Registration

The government has had little oversight over the madrasa sector, particularly the private schools. While some schools have well-established courses, curricula and highly educated teachers, others are less well organized. There have been no criteria for who can establish a private madrasa, no standards for curricula, and no means for ensuring the qualifications of teachers. Registration of madrasas in a central government registry is one of the new measures that have been introduced. Registration, however, is often confused with regulation, something that is strongly resisted by the madrasas.

Recognition of degrees and certificates from private madrasas and religious educational institutions abroad is an issue of considerable importance to Afghan madrasas and religious students. A process of approval for private and foreign degrees could be used as a means of gaining greater insight into the curriculum and teachings at the private madrasas, as well as a way of influencing students in their choice of school. Establishing a self-regulatory authority for the private madrasas in Afghanistan may provide an alternative way of ensuring quality through the introduction of a standardized curriculum, examinations and certification.

Coordination

There exist no formal mechanisms for interaction and coordination between Afghanistan's public or private madrasas and the government, or among the various madrasas themselves. Organizational structures could be a means of improving contact both among the madrasas and between madrasas and the state. Afghanistan may draw on the experience of madrasa boards (wafaqs) in Pakistan, where different religious sects and subjects are represented in individual boards, as well as working together in an intersectorian national coordination body.

Government Oversight

The transnational character of religious education – combined with the recruitment of Afghan youth to militancy in certain Pakistani madrasas – presents challenges to the Afghan state, as well as to its reform ambitions. Poli-

cies restricting the movement of people – such as the visa requirements currently imposed by Pakistan – have had some effect in reducing the number of Afghan students going to Pakistan, though such an approach has not stopped the practice. Afghan students continue to go to Pakistan to study because of the good reputation enjoyed by Pakistan’s schools and teachers. Cooperation with Pakistan to identify which schools Afghan students are studying at in Pakistan is one way of improving oversight.

Protection

The volatility of the current security situation – and particularly attacks on religious leaders standing up to the militants – is affecting the madrasa reform process. Sections of the Afghan ulema could potentially play a role in dealing with both the government and the Taliban, but such a role is becoming increasingly risky. Religious actors that support neither the government, nor the Taliban, nor any other militant Islamic group are in a precarious position and are often forced to take sides. In order to create a more inclusive process, the government must find ways of providing a space for these ‘middle ground’ ulema – offering them protection and giving them a place at the table.

Key Challenges to Reform

Government reform efforts – which are top-down by nature – are likely to produce contention and disagreement among the different stakeholders. Reform of religious education, a sensitive issue for many of those involved, raises a number of challenges.

There is great divergence in the motivations for reform and the value placed on religious education among the different stakeholders in the reform process. The gov-

ernment strategy aims to curb the radicalization of Afghan students in Pakistani madrasas and to educate an Afghan clergy by teaching the government’s moderate version of Islam. The clergy, for its part, would like a reform that enhances the quality and the standing of religious education – the position of religious teachers and institutions both within society and vis-à-vis the state. This divergence represents a major challenge to religious education reform and calls for an inclusive process with due consideration for the diverse positions.

Government-imposed reform is a challenge to the independence of religious institutions and has been met with scepticism among the Afghan clergy. A key challenge for the government will be to identify measures that are acceptable to religious scholars and the madrasa sector, particularly to those within the many private madrasas that are currently outside the government’s control.

The transnational and networked character of the madrasa sector, involving a high degree of reliance on personal contacts and loyalties spanning state borders, poses a number of challenges to government reform.

Key Policy Recommendations

In its strategy, the government sets out to engage the madrasas in a consultative process to change Islamic education in Afghanistan. Both the government and the madrasa sector are open to change. This could represent a first step in a gradual transformation. The question is what the change should entail and how it best can be accomplished.

● **Inclusive process:** There are many competing Islamic schools of thought, and all have their own madrasas. A reform process needs to take account of this and to find ways to

include all actors in the sector. This is particularly important if the government wants to reach out to actors that are not in favour of the government’s current Islamic education initiative.

● **Consultations:** Religious education reform is a challenge to the independence of the ulema. This makes the issue highly contentious in some circles, necessitating an inclusive and consultative process. A reform is unlikely to succeed if the government insists on being at the helm of the transformation. Lessons from Pakistan’s madrasa reform process suggest that any reform initiative must be based on consultation and collaboration with religious leaders and madrasa leaderships.

● **An Afghan-led process:** Afghan religion and culture are commonly seen as internal issues, making foreign support to religious education reform a sensitive issue. International involvement could easily be seen as an intrusion into internal matters and cause more harm than good. Support for education reform should be given to facilitation and research, in support of Afghan-led processes. Policy formulation and institution-building ought to be driven by Afghans.

● **Afghan model:** There are lessons to be learned from other countries with considerable madrasa sectors, such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Yet, a model for organization in the Afghan madrasa sector needs to be tailored specifically to suit the Afghan context.

● **Long-term commitment:** Building viable alternatives that can compete with the well-reputed madrasas in Pakistan will require considerable time and energy. It will need continuous engagement of the various stakeholders in a process of dialogue, consultation and collaboration. A long-term commitment will be required for any attempt to bring about change in Afghanistan’s religious education sector.

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THE PROJECT

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