

Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education

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Afghan madrasa
(project photo)

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Executive Summary

In the aftermath of 9/11, madrasas have become a subject of great controversy. In Afghanistan, it is commonplace to blame Pakistani madrasas for the recruitment of Afghan youths to militant groups. In response, the Afghan government has initiated a comprehensive reform of the Islamic education sector. However, despite the massive focus on the institution of the madrasa, very little analytical attention has been given either to Afghan madrasas or to the connections between religious education in Afghanistan and across the Pakistani border.

Madrasas – A Diversity of Institutions

In Afghanistan, there is a wide range of educational institutions offering religious education at different levels; hence it is difficult to talk about one religious education system as such. Religious education educates children in the basic tenets of Islam; trains the lower-level clergy (mullahs); and qualifies religious scholars (*ulema*) and Islamic legal experts. Some 339 official government madrasas were registered with the government of Afghanistan in 2007. The majority of Afghanistan's madrasas, however, are private institutions and remain independent – and in most cases also unregistered. It is therefore very difficult to give a credible estimate of the actual size of the madrasa sector. There is a clear divide between public and private madrasas, and significant variation among the different schools in terms of size, funding sources, sectarian and ideological affiliations, and transnational connections. Today, Afghanistan lacks institutions of religious education offering higher-level degrees and has few schools that are well known and might attract ambitious students who want to pursue higher-level studies. Most Afghan madrasas are fairly small and modest institutions, funded by contributions from their neighbouring communities.

Teaching Values and Worldviews

Madrasa education is qualitatively different from other forms of education – not only because the main focus is on the study of religious texts, but also because it teaches an Islamic value system, worldview and codes of conduct, reflecting ideals that are highly respected within Afghan society. Madrasa education is commonly free, but – contrary to common perceptions – poverty or a lack of alternative forms of education are not the only reasons why students chose madrasa education. Better-off families also send their children to religious schools, sometimes as a supplement to other forms of schooling. Many families, whether poor or better-off, would like at least one of their sons to pursue religious studies. Religious education is valued in itself. Some families choose madrasas education because it is seen as the most appropriate form of schooling.

The Links to Deoband

Afghan Sunni madrasas are part of a South Asian madrasa tradition, and most Afghan madrasas base themselves on some version of the *dars-e nizami* curriculum commonly used in madrasas across South Asia. The majority of Afghan Sunni madrasas are linked to the Deobandi school of thought. The Dar ul Uloom Deoband (established in North India in 1867) has influenced Afghanistan's religious education sector in two different ways. First, historically Afghan students have studied at the Dar ul Uloom Deoband, and the government of Afghanistan has relied on expertise from Deoband when establishing public madrasas in Afghanistan. Second, many private madrasas in Afghanistan have been associated with a Pakistani Deobandi tradition, with some of

these schools growing increasingly political and militant during the Afghanistan jihad in the 1980s.

Politicization of the Religious Schools

The politicization of religion during the Afghan jihad is clearly reflected in the growth and development of madrasas expressing a range of different ideological and political ties. In particular, the contribution to the emergence and growth of the Taliban (a term that means 'religious students') movement by certain Deobandi madrasas indicates strong ties between madrasas, radicalization and militancy. Association with the 'Deobandi school', however, does not in itself signify radical attitudes. Many madrasas are apolitical, supporting neither the current government nor the militant Islamic opposition. These apolitical madrasas are often threatened by the Taliban and other militant groups, and in this way dragged into the conflict and forced to take sides. This has silenced some parts of the ideological discourse, particularly the expression of viewpoints that are critical of the Taliban and its use of, for example, suicide attacks.

Transnational Links – to Pakistan and Beyond

Historical ties, particularly those developed during the Afghan jihad, have made Pakistan a natural place of study for Afghan religious students. Afghan madrasas form integral parts of transnational networks involving flows of students, teachers, thoughts and finances. Afghanistan lacks both institutions offering higher degrees and schools of international repute. It is common for religious students with ambition and talent to move from a smaller religious school to a larger and more famous institution, often abroad. The movement of students is mainly unidirectional – from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Afghan graduates, however, return from Pakistan to teach in Afghan madrasas or to establish their own schools, bringing with them new theological, ideological and political inspirations and contacts. Students' relationships to their teachers and links to their fellow students also continue to be important after they have finished their studies. These relationships create informal networks of religious leaders, scholars and students, also of a transnational character. Financial links exist between madrasas adhering to the same schools of thought, as well as between madrasas and diaspora communities in Pakistan, the Gulf and further afield. Common for these different transnational networks is that they are predominantly based on personal relationships between former students and teachers, and between madrasas and diaspora communities, rather than on formal institutional contacts. The informal nature of these contacts poses a number of challenges to government reform of the madrasa sector.

Moderates and Militants

Links between certain Pakistani madrasas and militant groups are well established, both historically and today. Some madrasas have been used by radical religio-political to create popular support for their distinct versions of Islam, to advance particular political agendas, and to recruit to militant groups and actions. In an attempt to decipher the relationship between madrasas and militancy, five main links between Pakistani madrasas and militant groups are identified in this report: (1) madrasas can play a role in recruitment to militant groups; (2) madrasas can function as an organizational base for militants; (3) madrasas can be used as transit points for militants; (4) the leaderships of madrasas can have close links to militant groups; and (5) madrasas can provide military training facilities. Recruitment to militant groups occurs not only through madrasas, but also through religious leaders and networks, directly by political parties and militant groups, and through family and kin networks, as well as through regular educational institutions, such as

government schools and universities. The politicization of religion in Afghanistan and Pakistan has meant that some madrasas have become a means through which radical Islamic groups can mobilize militarily for political ends. Yet, most madrasas do not produce militants, but do their utmost to keep politics at a distance, focusing on the provision of religious education to their students. Some Afghan madrasas – particularly in areas close to the Pakistani border – are linked with militant schools across the border, however. Afghan students in Pakistan are found in the whole range of madrasas in Pakistan, in the smaller community-based schools, in the madrasas in refugee camps, and in the larger madrasas, some which are famous for the quality of the education they provide, others renowned for their links to militant groups.

Reactions to Reform

The religious education sector in Afghanistan has suffered from three decades of war, and the need for enhancing quality in the sector is recognized by both the government, madrasa leadership and the clergy. However, the different stakeholders have very different motivations for reform. While the government wants to make the education offered in religious schools more relevant for regular employment by increasing non-religious subjects and training in practical skills, the focus of the religious establishment is on improving the quality and position of religious education within Afghan society. The government has initiated a comprehensive reform of the Islamic education sector, but the initiative is not well known outside the government madrasas. Where it is known, it seems to be met with reservation or mistrust. This is indicative of the current government's lack of credibility and legitimacy among religious actors. The general dissatisfaction with the government and its foreign supporters is increasing as the conflict is deepening; further increasing the likelihood that religious education reform will be met with suspicion among religious actors. Yet, ulema and madrasa personnel have demonstrated a willingness to reform the religious education sector as long as such reform is carried out with respect for established traditions.

Surprisingly, little scholarly attention has so far been given to Afghanistan's madrasas. To our knowledge, no recent surveys or in-depth qualitative studies exist. Little is known about why students and their parents choose religious education – and current policy aimed at changing the sector is based on assumptions that the present study has found to be only partially correct. In order to devise sound policy, it will be necessary to better understand what guides students' and parents' choices, as well as what motivates religious scholars and the government in relation to reform of the religious education sector.

Introduction

Do madrasas¹ produce terrorists? Are all madrasas fundamentalist? In the aftermath of 9/11, madrasas have become a subject of great controversy. Yet little is known about the madrasas of Afghanistan. This study sets out to find out more about Afghanistan's religious schools and to move beyond some of the most general stereotypes.

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' in the wake of 9/11, causing madrasas to make headlines in the popular press around the world.² 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. Afghan government and civil society actors commonly assume that lack of access to quality religious education in Afghanistan is the main factor at play when young Afghans seek education at madrasas in Pakistan (Borchgrevink, 2007). This has made it important for the Afghan government to influence what religious education is available to Afghans, and a number of assumptions inform the government's current reform initiatives in the religious education sector.

Religious education has a central position in Islam. However, while there exists no universal agreement over what Islam is among Muslims, a number of different schools and sects each believe that they hold the true understanding of Islam. As an important means of socialization – and of imparting social and moral values – religious education becomes relevant not only for the clergy, communities and families, but also for the state. What should be taught in religious schools? Who should decide this? Should there be an official version of Islam? Religious education lies at the heart of the debate about the relationship between the state and religion, and the role the state should play in defining religious curricula in particular.

Until recently, little attention has been given to Afghan madrasas and the relationship between religious schools across the Afghan–Pakistani border. The present study hopes to remedy that, shedding light on some of the most critical issues and providing some recommendations for policy.

Aims of the Study and Research Questions

The aim of the study is twofold: First, it sets out to inform policies and programmes for religious education through enhancing knowledge and understanding of both religious education in Afghanistan and the relationship between religious educational institutions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Second, it sets out to provide some insights into the role of religious education in cross-

¹ The term 'madrasa' is based on the Arabic root 'darasa', which means 'to study', and is related to 'dars', meaning 'lesson'. Technically, it therefore means an 'institution where lessons are imparted' – in other words, 'a school' (Noor, Sikand & Van Bruinessen, 2008: 9). In South Asia, 'madrasa' is often used as a term meaning a school that imparts Islamic knowledge. In Afghanistan a madrasa is often considered a school teaching secondary or higher religious education, and often the curriculum required for becoming a religious scholar.

² See, for example, Stern (2000); Singer (2001); ICG (2002).

border mobilization for political ends. In investigating these issues, we have posed the following research questions:

- What does the Afghan madrasa sector look like?
- Are Afghan-based madrasas parts of a transnational system of education?
- Do madrasas contribute to political radicalization and militancy?
- What are the obstacles and opportunities for state reform of the madrasas?

Methodology and Scope of the Study

This study is based on qualitative interviews with key informants, including madrasa teachers, current and former students, and religious leaders³ in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In collaboration with Afghan researchers, we have produced profiles of 16 madrasas – 13 in Afghanistan and 3 in Pakistan. These are qualitative case studies. It is not claimed that these are representative of all madrasas, but they were chosen to illustrate the diversity that exists among these schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

All of the madrasas in the case studies belong to the Sunni Islamic tradition.⁴ The smallest madrasa studied has only 50 students, whereas the largest has nearly 600. The oldest school was established in the 1930s and the newest in 2003. Among the thirteen madrasas studied in Afghanistan, four are governmental and nine are private institutions. The three ‘Afghan madrasas’ in Pakistan were all private.⁵ The madrasas are located in the Afghan provinces of Wardak, Kunduz, Khost and Herat, and in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (earlier North-West Frontier Province, NWFP) of Pakistan. Some of the schools are centrally located in provincial capitals or district centres; others are in remote rural locations.

The current political situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan makes the topic of research highly sensitive. Pakistani madrasas in particular have seen critical coverage in the popular press; certain madrasas (such as the Red Mosque in Islamabad) have experienced armed action by Pakistani security personnel; and the relationship between the army and the religious milieu is hardening following the ongoing military operations in Waziristan. All this contributes to religious actors becoming more sceptical and hostile towards outside researchers, making access to madrasas more difficult, both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan.

³ In this report, the term ‘religious leader’ encompasses both *mullahs* and *alim* (sg.)/*ulema* (pl.). In Afghanistan, an *alim* is also commonly referred to as a *mawlawi* or *mawlana*. In practice, the lines between *ulema* and *mullahs* are somewhat blurred, given the lack of a fixed hierarchy within Sunni Islam in Afghanistan. ‘Inflation’ has also occurred in the use of religious titles, as political leaders, commanders and other power-holders have taken on such titles without having any formal – or only very rudimentary – religious schooling. This was particularly common among the Taliban, where the ‘mullah’ title was adopted by Mullah Omar, for instance, who had only received very basic Islamic training from a local madrasa (Rashid, 2000).

⁴ The focus of this study is primarily on madrasas that follow the Sunni tradition. Sunni Muslims – who belong to the Hanafi School of Islamic law – form the majority in Afghanistan, making up about four-fifths of the population. The Shia minority makes up the remaining one-fifth. These are ‘Twelver’ Shia, following the Jafari School of Islamic law. In addition, Ismaeli Shia, Hindus, Christians and Jews make up less than 1% of the population.

⁵ In contrast to the madrasa sector in Afghanistan, all Pakistani madrasas are private, with the exception of a few model government madrasas established under President Pervez Musharraf.

To ensure the best possible data, we have collaborated with local Afghan researchers with good connections to religious milieus in different parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. We have worked with a range of Afghan researchers, including the research and peacebuilding organization Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU). Case-study questionnaires were developed together with the Afghan researchers who later collected data in the different areas.

A total of 113 informants were interviewed, of whom 58 were directly attached to the madrasas. The number of informants per profiled madrasa ranged from three to six (with one informant in one case) which gives an average of some 4.5 informants per madrasa. In addition, there were 57 other key informants, many of whom also provided information on the specific madrasas.

As already noted, the current situation makes it difficult to gather data, and possibly also dangerous for both researchers and individuals willing to participate in the research. Consequently, the data collected are biased towards those milieus to which our researchers have access and that are considered safe. None of the case studies are from the southern provinces of Afghanistan, as the security situation did not permit Afghan researchers to visit madrasas in this region. None of the schools currently express (at least openly) any affiliation with the Taliban or openly support violent actions.

Review of Existing Literature

Reviewing the existing literature about madrasa education in Afghanistan, we quickly realized – much to our surprise and in stark contrast to the body of writing about Pakistani madrasas – that exceptionally little research has been carried out on madrasa education in the Afghan context. The best English-language sources remain Olivier Roy (1986, 1995, 2002), Asta Olesen (1995) and Gilles Dorronsoro (2005), all focusing more broadly on Islam and politics in Afghanistan. No recent surveys or in-depth qualitative studies of religious education exist, though the work of Misbahullah Abdulbaqi (2008) and Yahia Baiza (2006) provide two sources of information, albeit rather limited.⁶ Abdulbaqi's article in the Pakistani journal *Policy Perspectives*⁷ represents a rare contribution to the English-language policy debate by an Afghan researcher. The article gives an overview of the development of Afghanistan's madrasas: it describes state–madrasa relations and madrasa reforms from the 1930s until the present, discusses the recent government initiative, and concludes with a number of concrete recommendations for improving the religious education sector in Afghanistan. Yahia Baiza's article presents a very brief – and superficial – overview of madrasa education in Afghanistan through history. The main work available in the Dari language, made available to us by our Afghan research partners, is Kamgard (1997), which relates the history of education in Afghanistan from 1747 to 1992. We have therefore reviewed the literature about madrasas in Pakistan, and in South Asia more generally, and will, where relevant, draw on this in our analysis.

Since 2001, the Pakistani madrasas have become a focus of attention both in the media, in policy circles and in academia. Existing writings fall into two distinct trends: On the one side is a predominantly policy-oriented series of studies and reports looking at the relationship between madrasas and militancy. A number of studies have been published that clearly identify madrasas as security threats, describing the schools as 'jihad factories' (e.g. Stern, 2000; Singer, 2001; ICG,

⁶ Neither of these articles contributes new empirical data, drawing mainly on the limited data available from the Ministry of Education and a limited numbers of interviews with Ministry of Education officials.

⁷ Published by the Pakistani Institute for Policy Studies, a think-tank associated with the Pakistani Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami.

2002, 2005). An International Crisis Group study from 2002 received particular attention in the debate: first, because it presented ‘key evidence’ of (1) high numbers of madrasa students and (2) links to militant groups ‘at a politically significant time’, when Pakistan and India were on the brink of war following an attack on the Indian parliament in November 2001 (Fair, 2008: 4); and again when it was criticized for inflating the numbers of madrasa students.⁸ Countering the ICG position, a number of studies – most notably work by Christine Fair (2007, 2008) and Andarabi et al. (2005) – have taken a critical look at the data and the assumed links to militancy, arguing that while it is possible to establish links between certain madrasas and militant groups and actions, these links are weak and limited to a few schools with historical ties to radical groups (Fair, 2008).

Concurrent to this, an altogether different body of literature has developed that situates Pakistan’s madrasas within South Asia’s Islamic education traditions more generally (Noor, Sikand & Van Bruinessen, 2008; Haroon, 2007; Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Sikand, 2005; Zaman, 2002). This follows in the tradition of Barbara Metcalf (1982). A few ethnographic studies of madrasas such as Bano’s (2007a) study of Deobandi madrasa in Rawalpindi and Mareike Jule Vinkelmann’s (2005) study of a girls’ madrasa in India also form part of this literature.

There is little connection between these two bodies of literature, however. One exception is provided by Masooda Bano (2007b), who uses her insights from her case studies of a number of Pakistani madrasas when discussing the madrasa–state relationship in the context of madrasa reform. In this study, we attempt to draw on both trends. We have applied the policy-oriented literature when addressing questions of student enrolment and recruitment, as well as links to radicalization and militancy. In addition, we draw on the more empirical, historical literature to place the Afghan madrasas within an existing tradition.

Data, Definitions and Related Challenges

While there has been much debate over and controversy around the numbers of madrasas and madrasa students in Pakistan, data about schools and enrolment in Afghan madrasas are almost nonexistent. There exists no registry for all religious schools within the government of Afghanistan. Official government religious schools are organized under the Ministry of Education, and some of the private schools are registered with the Department of Hajj and Religious Endowments. Details of the numbers of madrasas registered with the government are at best incomplete. No survey has been carried out on Afghan madrasas, and – to the best of our knowledge – no recent qualitative studies exist on the subject.

Definitions present a number of challenges for any attempt to measure the scope and spread of religious schools and students. What exactly is an ‘Afghan madrasa student’? To answer this, it is first necessary to define what a ‘madrasa’ is. A number of different religious education institutions exist, and the terms involved are often used interchangeably, particularly by the media. These includes lower-level religious schools teaching basic religious subjects and the Quran (known as *nazerah khwani* in Dari, sometimes called Quran schools in English), *dar ul hifaz* (schools specializing in memorization of the Quran) and *madrasas* (religious seminaries,

⁸ Factual errors in the ICG report were discovered by Andarabi et al. (2005). Estimating the total madrasa enrolment at between 1 and 1.7 million, the ICG (2002) claimed that this number represented 33% of all Pakistani children enrolled in schools. The ICG later recognized that the calculation was wrong by a factor of ten, and later corrected the figure to 3%. By that time the original ICG report had already been widely quoted.

normally offering secondary and higher-level education).⁹ Then, it is necessary to define what a student is. Is it someone currently studying? Is it someone that is completing a degree programme? Or someone that is currently enrolled in a school (but who may or may not be present)? Wishing to study ‘Afghan madrasa students’ in Pakistan in particular, we were also presented with another set of challenges in defining what makes an ‘Afghan student’? A long tradition of Afghans taking religious studies in Pakistan combined with a sizable Afghan refugee population makes it difficult to separate Afghan students (legal and illegal), settled refugees and Afghans born in Pakistan with Pakistani citizenship.

In this study, we will use the figures for government religious schools and school enrolment available from the Ministry of Education. No reliable data are available regarding private madrasas in Afghanistan. While taking care not to make any overly general claims, we believe the case studies can throw some light on the diversity of the schools that exist.

⁹ See the definition of ‘madrasas’ in the first footnote of this Introduction, and a more detailed overview of the institutions and levels in the religious education sector in Section 1, below.

1 Islamic Education in Afghanistan

Knowledge and learning have a central place in Islamic societies. Religious knowledge and training has been important since the days of the prophet Muhammed, who made seeking knowledge a duty for all Muslims. Since the Muslim Middle Ages, the madrasa has been central in transmitting religious knowledge. The first madrasa is believed to have been established in the 10th century in Khurasan (eastern Iran), from where the madrasa tradition spread to Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Spain and Northern India in the early 13th century (Hefner & Zaman, 2007). The modern South Asian madrasa tradition can be traced back to the Shah Waliullah (1703–1762) reformist movement in Northern India, which emerged in the 18th century as a reaction to waning Muslim power, threatened by colonial rule and a Hindu-majority society. European-inspired higher Islamic education institutions such as the Dar ul Uloom Deoband (founded in 1867) and the Dar ul-Uloom Nadwatul Ulema (founded in 1883) were established as Islamic alternatives to British-run universities, to strengthen the positions of Muslims through a revival of the pure fundamentals of Islam (Metcalf, 1982).

Afghanistan's madrasas belong to the South Asian tradition. Yet, the madrasas are shaped by the cultural and political settings in which they are located (Bano, 2007b). What makes the Afghan madrasas peculiar, or different from religious education sectors in other Muslim countries? This section will provide an overview the madrasa sector in Afghanistan. We will first take a look at the scope and spread of the schools, the organization of the sector, the curricula used in the madrasas, financing and relations to other actors, before trying to answer why students seek religious education.

Religious Education

Afghanistan has historically, particularly during the Timurid dynasty (1363–1506 CE), hosted some of the most prominent centres of Islamic scholarship and science in the Muslim world (Olesen, 1995: 43). Centres of Islamic learning in Balkh, Herat and Ghazni attracted scholars and students from far afield. Afghanistan's position as a leading centre of Islamic thought and scholarship declined after the division of the country between the Safavide and the Mughal empires and the Uzbeks in the north in the 1650s, however, and it has not hosted a significant centre of Islamic learning since. Yet, religious education has continued in various forms since that time. Islam not only provided the legal and moral basis of society, but all learning and education took place within an Islamic framework. Religious education remained the only education available in Afghanistan before King Amanullah introduced secular education in the 1920s. Religious and secular education have since existed side by side.

Religious educational institutions exist all over Afghanistan, with schools differing in terms of size, scope and access to resources, as well as in their appearances. Among the schools are some once-grand madrasas – including the Dar ul Uloom Arabia in Kabul and the Noor ul Madaris in Ghazni – as well as some new, modern facilities, such as the School of the Last Prophet, a new madrasa in Kabul founded by Ayatollah M. Asef Mohseni and financed by Iran. Most of the religious schools and seminaries found across the country, however, are much smaller, fairly modest structures, which commonly comprise a number of classrooms and dorms circling a courtyard. Others are housed in quarters belonging to mosques, and still others in the houses of local religious leaders.

Institutions

There exists not one religious education – or madrasa – *system* in Afghanistan. Rather, the sector is characterized by a variety of educational institutions offering religious education at different levels. Religious education provides basic religious teaching to children, trains religious leaders, and educates religious scholars in theology and law. The two most common institutions are the *dar ul hifaz* and the *madrasa*.

- The *dar ul hifaz* is a school specialized in teaching memorization of the Quran by heart. These are sometimes called Quran schools, because the focus is purely on memorization and recitation (*tajwid*) of the Quran. Recitation of the Quran is also a specialized skill. One who knows the Quran by heart is called a *hafiz*. One who knows how to recite the Quran is known as a *qari*.
- The *madrasa* is a school that imparts Islamic knowledge. Different to the *dar ul hifaz*, the madrasa normally offers secondary and higher-level religious studies with a comprehensive religious syllabus. Many madrasas offer Quran studies and basic religious classes to younger students in addition to the secondary and higher-level studies they provide.

Levels of Education

- *Basic religious education* is taught to children in the mosque. The teachers are the local imam or students from a nearby madrasa. It is not uncommon that younger girls (before they reach puberty) are taught religion in the mosque, or by religious teachers in their homes. The main focus at the basic level is normally the belief in the oneness of God (*kalima-e-towheed*) and prayers (*namaaz*), but the education provided also includes teachings about the fast (*roza*), pilgrimage (*hajj*) and religious tax (*zakat*) and some primary Arabic grammar (*sarf* and *nahwa*). There is no certificate for these studies. For most children, the study of religion at this level comes in addition to regular schooling. Some children move on to Quran studies in a *dar ul hifaz* or to further religious studies in a madrasa.
- *Primary and secondary religious education* is provided from the first grade to the fourteenth grade (approx. age 18). The government schools primarily offer religious education from the fourth grade onwards.
- *Higher-level religious degrees* include bachelor and higher degrees are offered at some of the larger and higher-level madrasas and at government universities, such as at the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Kabul.

The Public–Private Divide

The religious education sector in Afghanistan can be divided between the public and private schools. The government madrasas are known as ‘official madrasas’, *rasmee madaris* in Pashto or *madaris rasmee* in Dari. Private, unregistered ones are called *khusoosi madaris* or *madaris khusoosi*, in Pashtu and Dari, respectively.

Private madrasas: Religious education was a well-established tradition before the development of the madrasa institution, which is a modern educational institution built on the model of

European schools. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, religious education in Afghanistan has traditionally been formed around the teacher–student relationship and organized in ‘teaching circles’, or so-called *halaqa* in the Afghan context. Teaching circles still exist throughout Afghanistan and offer a supplement to the religious education imparted through madrasas and other formal institutions.¹⁰ The first private Afghan madrasas grew out of these circles. Among the most prominent were the Noor ul Madaris in Qala-e Jawad and Ghazni; Madrasa Imam Fakhruddin Razi and Madrasa Abdur Rehman Jami in Herat; Madrasa Fakhru Madaris and Madaris-e Hamidia in Tagab, Kapisa; and the madrasas of Hudkhel, Tarrakhel and Farza in Kabul. (Abdulbaqi, 2008; Olesen, 1995). These were formal institutions that employed teachers, using funds provided by the rich elders of society (Abdulbaqi, 2008). The early private madrasas operated without any government influence (ibid.). The majority of the private madrasas remain independent and are not registered with the government or any private body.

This also means that the private madrasas have largely been unregulated. Some of the private madrasas are registered with the Ministry of Hajj and Endowment, often at the provincial or district level, which means there is no centralized register for these schools. No figures exist for the number of private religious schools in Afghanistan, but it is likely that if one includes the small village-based madrasas and Quran schools, there are several hundred, if not thousands of religious schools in existence across the country.

Government Madrasas

To formalize higher religious education and to train judges in Sharia, official madrasas were established by the government during the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹ These institutions still exist, though years of conflict and neglect have left them in poor condition. Islamic education is administered by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Hajj and Endowment.¹²

BOX 1: The First Government Madrasas (Source: Olesen 1995: 187)

The eleven government madrasas established in the 1930s and 1940s were:

- Dar al ‘Uloom-i ‘Arabia, Kabul
- Madrasa-i Abu Hanifa, Kabul
- Fakhr ul-Madares, Herat
- Madrasa-i Jam-i Sharif, Herat
- Madrasa-i Asadiya, Mazar-i Sharif
- Madrasa-i Takharistan, Takhar
- Madrasa-i Abu Mulim, Faryab
- Madrasa-I Mohammadiyya, Kandahar
- Najm al-Madares, Jalalabad
- Dar al-Uloom-i Ruhania, Paktia

¹⁰ These teaching circles are called *darsi halqah* in Pashtu and *halqa-e-darsi* in Dari. Teachings in the *halqah* can be general or specialized and depend on the specialization of the scholar running the circle.

¹¹ The first faculty of Sharia was established at the University of Kabul in 1946 (Rashid, 2000). Later, a faculty of Sharia was also established at the University of Balkh. University level education falls under the Ministry of Higher Education.

¹² The *dar ul hifazes* and madrasas are administered by the Ministry of Education. The responsibilities of the Ministry of Hajj and Endowment in relation to religious education include: providing girls and boys with Islamic teachings in the mosques and holy places; *khanqas* (‘Sufi houses’); and testing Imams and preachers (Ministry of Hajj and Endowment, Afghanistan, 2007: 1)

Government Numbers

According to a recent Ministry of Education survey,¹³ there were some 336 Islamic schools in Afghanistan in 2007. In terms of numbers of students, these account for some 1.54% of the total 5,950,455 students registered at Ministry of Education and community based schools¹⁴ delivering primary and secondary education.

	No. of schools	% of schools to total schools	Male students	Female students	Gender ratio	% of male students	% of female students	Total no. of students	% of total students
<i>General education</i>	9,062	95.63%	3,667,862	2,008,089	0.55	64.62%	35.38%	5,675,951	95.39%
<i>Islamic education</i>	336	3.55%	84,446	6,916	0.08	92.43%	7.57%	91,362	1.54%
<i>Teacher training</i>	34	0.36%	9,156	5,138	0.56	64.05%	35.95%	14,294	0.24%
<i>TVET</i>	44	0.46%	9,321	1,045	0.11	89.92%	10.08%	10,366	0.17%
<i>Community-based education</i>			63,436	95,046	1.50	40.03%	59.97%	158,482	2.66%
Total	9,476	100.00%	3,834,221	2,116,234	0.55	64.44%	35.56%	5,950,455	1

Source: Ministry of Education, Afghanistan (2007: 16)

Fewer girls are enrolled in religious schools than in regular schools. Whereas girls made up 35.56% of the overall student population in 2007, they made up only 7.57% of the students in Islamic education. The percentage of young girls studying in Islamic schools from Grades 1 to 3 is 13%, compared to 3.87 % in Grade 6, indicating that levels of girls' enrolment in Islamic education drop with age.

Private schools are not part of these statistics. The total number of children enrolled in madrasas is therefore unknown and very difficult to estimate. The Ministry of Education has undertaken to register all private madrasas by 1388 (2009) (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a: 76), a target that is already missed.

Curriculum: The *Dars-e Nizami*

What a school teaches – its curriculum and teaching materials – is what sets religious schools apart from other schools, as well as being what makes the religious schools part of a 'South Asian madrasa tradition'. Part of what constitutes the South Asian madrasa tradition is the use of the same curriculum – the '*dars-e nizami*'. This syllabus was developed and organized in the Indian subcontinent under Islamic thinkers and ulema, such as Nizamudin Silhalvi (d. 1748) and Shah Waliullah (d. 1762) (Metcalf, 1982). The *dars-e nizami* syllabus includes studies in:

- *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis)
- *hifz* (Quranic memorization)
- *sarf* and *nahw* (Arabic syntax and grammar)
- Persian
- Urdu
- *taarikh* (Islamic history)
- *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence)
- *shari'ah* (Islamic law).

¹³ Ministry of Education, Afghanistan (2007).

¹⁴ These are the community based schools are registered with the government to implement regular primary education.

The *dars-e nizami* curriculum, or some adaptation of it, is used in the majority of Sunni madrasas in South Asia, including the Sunni madrasas of Afghanistan. Most of the madrasas in this study – both private and official – point out that they follow the ‘standard madrasa curriculum’. This is the basic core curriculum that students must master to become an ‘*alim*’, or trained religious scholar. This can be done either in a madrasa or through self-study.

*The Curriculum of the Government Madrasas*¹⁵

A formal curriculum for Afghanistan’s public madrasas was first developed in 1930 and has since gone through a number of revisions. The first curriculum introduced was developed with assistance from scholars from the Dar ul Uloom Deoband, based on the *dars-e nizami* curriculum. The subjects were mainly religious,¹⁶ but included some modern subjects – such as calligraphy, mathematics and Persian. This curriculum was revised in 1954, under the rule of Zahir Shah. The number of religious subjects was increased,¹⁷ and some modern subjects were introduced, including, history, geography, petition-writing and record-keeping, management training and financial affairs. Languages and contemporary science subjects were still excluded. A second revision took place in 1973 under President Daud Khan. The core subjects remained religious,¹⁸ but a number of modern subjects such as Pashto and English were added. This curriculum placed special emphasis on English and Arabic, and science and psychology were introduced in madrasas for the first time (Abdulbaqi, 2008). The duration of the programme was reduced to seven years, and students could be admitted to the sixth grade in a madrasa after passing fifth grade at a regular primary school. On graduation, students were awarded a 12th-grade certificate (*ibid.*).

In 2004, a third curriculum revision took place under President Hamid Karzai. This revision called for radical change in the madrasa curriculum. Under the new curriculum, madrasa students will be taught the same subjects as children at regular government schools until they reach the end of the third grade. From the fourth grade onwards, they are taught a special madrasa curriculum, which continues to include a mixture of religious¹⁹ and modern subjects, such as Pashto, Persian, English, history, geography, mathematics, calligraphy, science, pedagogy,

¹⁵ This section draws mainly on the work of Abdulbaqi (2008: 8–10), who gives a detailed overview of the various government curriculum reforms.

¹⁶ The religious subjects included *qiraat* and *tajweed* (recitation of the Quran and its correct intonation), *tafseer* (exegeses of Quran), hadith (sayings of the prophet Muhammed), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *usulul fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), *nahw* and *sarf* (Arabic grammar), *aqeeda* (beliefs/creed), Arabic literature, logic, *urooz-wa-qafia* (prosody), philosophy, *hikmat* (reason), *usulul hadith* (principles of Hadith), *ilmul-maani* (science of rhetoric), *ilm-ul-meeras* (science of Islamic inheritance) and history (Zahir & Ilmi, 1960: 83–87, cited in Abdulbaqi, 2008: 8).

¹⁷ The core subjects in the curriculum were religious. These included *nazera* (reading of the Quran), *tajweed*, *tafseer*, *hadith*, Arabic grammar, logic, *aqeeda*, *ilmul-kalam* (scholastic theology), Arabic literature, principles of jurisprudence, *qiraat* (recitation of the Quran), philosophy, principles of hadith, rhetoric, *tarikhi ul tashri* (history of legislation in Islam), *ilmul munazara wal jadal* (science of dialogue and debate), astronomy and physics (Abdulbaqi, 2008: 8).

¹⁸ These included *nazera*, *tafseer*, *hadith*, *tajweed*, *aqeeda* and *ilmul-kalam*, logic, principles of jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, Arabic literature, principles of Quranic commentary, principles of hadith, science of rhetoric, philosophy and *hikmat* (reason), and *ilmul meeras* (inheritance) (Abdulbaqi, 2008:8).

¹⁹ The religious subjects include *deeniya* (Islamic studies), *nazera*, *tafseer*, *hadith*, *tajweed*, *aqeeda* and *ilmul-kalam*, Islamic etiquette, principles of Hadith, principles of jurisprudence, logic, science of rhetoric, *ilmul-meeras*, *tarikhi ul tashri*, *seeratun nabi* (the life of the prophet Muhammed), *fiqh*, principles of Quranic commentary, philosophy and reason, history of Islam, Arabic grammar, Arabic language and literature, *hikmatul tashri* (wisdom behind legislation) and *qawaed fiqhia* (the rules of jurisprudence) (Abdulbaqi, 2008).

examination and evaluation, principles of speech, Afghan history, management and administration, psychology and sports (ibid.).

Curriculum of the Private Madrasas

The government has had little influence on the development of curriculum in the private madrasas. The core of the syllabus is, like in the government madrasas, based on the Deobandi *dars-e nizami* curriculum. The limited nature of the publishing and printing facilities available in Afghanistan means that most of the religious books studied in both public and private madrasas in Afghanistan have been printed abroad, in Pakistan and Iran. The textbooks for the *dars-e nizami* curriculum are used both in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Studies of the curriculum used in Pakistani madrasas have found that it is adapted by the various schools of thought to reflect their different sectarian orientations (Fair, 2008). In the absence of a central authority or fixed curriculum, it is likely that teaching materials that reflect sectarian and ideological views and differences will also form part of the curricula of Afghan madrasas. Studies from Pakistan report that hate literature, magazines, journals and audio visual materials such as CDs, VCDs and DVDs promoting and inciting hatred are frequent in some Pakistani madrasas (ICG, 2007; Siddique, 2009b), but it is difficult to ascertain whether such material is being used or circulated in Afghan madrasas. Under the Taliban in the 1990s, and still within some fundamentalist Islamic milieus, the use of audio and video material is considered un-Islamic. In addition, electronic equipment, such as DVD and VCD players, is not widely available in Afghan madrasas. Yet, audio and video materials are easily and inexpensively acquired in Pakistani bazaars.

The Mujahedeen Textbooks

While no curriculum reform took place during the war, the curriculum was affected in several ways by the Afghan jihad. With the aim of counterbalancing communist ideology, a new textbook series was developed by a committee of Afghan educators in Peshawar in the 1980s. Under the auspices of the seven-party alliance of jihadi parties, the textbooks explicitly used images of Islamic militancy as examples in the text. The production of these new schoolbooks – mainly to be used in refugee schools - was the responsibility of the Education Center for Afghanistan, a *mujahedeen*-operated entity (Davis, 2002). Other schools, supported by Saudi benefactors, were influenced by a Wahabi-inspired curriculum (Zahab & Roy, 2004). The Taliban neither developed a new curriculum nor prioritized the printing of new textbooks, as the '*jihadi*' teachings of the *mujahedeen* schoolbooks were also acceptable to them. These textbooks were still available in Kabul bazaars in 2002 (Davis, 2002).

Teaching Methods

The student–teacher relationship is an essential part of the Islamic education tradition. In public madrasas, students attend classes with other students, while in the private madrasas each student commonly studies individually under the teacher. The religious course of study, especially in private madrasas, is more flexible and individually tailored than is normally the case with regular class-based teaching methods, and the teaching is adapted to the individual student's abilities and learning pace. Typically, a religious student with ambitions and talent will move from a smaller religious school to a bigger and more famous institution, either within Afghanistan or abroad. The relationships to one's teachers and links to fellow students remain important also after students finish their studies. These relationships create informal networks of religious leaders,

scholars and students, which also have a transnational character. This makes the religious scholars and teachers associated with a particular madrasa key to that institution's success. According to one of our informants, a graduate from the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah, the Taliban went to Pakistan to recruit teachers they knew would attract religious students when they wanted to establish new madrasas in Kandahar and Kabul during their rule. The students soon followed.²⁰

Degrees and Certificates

There is no fixed degree system or standardized certification system for the madrasa sector. Government madrasas issue official certificates to their graduates (graduates of class 12 or 14). In private madrasas, students who complete their studies up to the *loya dowra* (the 'grand round', equivalent to the fourteenth grade) will normally qualify for the *dastarbandi* – a ceremony at which the students receive turbans from their teacher as a symbol of knowledge. In the past, the private madrasas had only *dastarbandi* ceremonies, but under influence from madrasas in Pakistan it has become more common for private madrasas in Afghanistan to also issue certificates. After the *dastarbandi* ceremony, students can use the title of 'mawlavi' or 'mawlana'. Higher-level specialization at private madrasas does not lead to any particular certificates, but confers a title that indicates the specialization concerned. A specialist in marriage-related law and jurisprudence will be a *mulla-e nikaah*, a specialist in hadith will be a *sheikh ul hadith*, while a person with several specializations will be called *mutabhir* or *bahrul uloom* (ocean of knowledge). Among the government madrasas, some issue certificates while others have a *dastarbandi* as part of the graduation ceremony.

The official madrasas were established to meet the government's need for well-qualified graduates with standardized and sufficient knowledge of Islamic law and jurisprudence to function as government judges (*kazi*), religious scholars (*muftis*) and teachers (Olesen, 1995: 187). Private madrasa graduates have traditionally found employment either as imams in mosques or as religious teachers. Because of the great respect and influence they enjoy within society, the government has used religious scholars to settle disputes among the public and has offered them positions in public-sector madrasas (Abdulbaqi, 2008). Private madrasa graduates have therefore been influential in government positions and as teachers in the public madrasas. Many prominent teachers in the government madrasas have been graduates of influential private madrasas (*ibid.*). However, at the present time, graduates from private madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan need to sit extra government exams to obtain government certificates that will allow them to apply for government positions or apply for higher studies at government institutions. A desire for recognition of their degrees is one of the reasons why some private madrasas welcome a reform process.

Madrasa–Government Relations

Relations between the clergy and Afghanistan's rulers have been marked by dependence and competition. Rulers have been dependent on the religious elites to gain religious legitimacy for their policies, while the clergy have been dependent on rulers to realize the Islamic state. As central religious institutions, the madrasas' relations to the state have been marked by the conflict and the many regime changes of the last 30 years.

²⁰ Interview with madrasa graduates from Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah, Kabul, 2008.

There is no formalized form of collaboration between the government and the private madrasas. The government has limited insight into and influence over the running of the majority of the madrasas, and there are no formal channels for dialogue between the government and the madrasas. Among themselves, Afghan madrasas are connected through informal networks of students and teachers. No coordinating body exists for madrasas in Afghanistan (in contrast to the ‘madrasa boards’, or *wafaaq ul madaris*, in Pakistan).²¹ Yet, this does not mean that the madrasas are disconnected or isolated. Madrasas form part of the communities within which they are located. There are strong links between madrasas and local people, politics and the government at the local level. The contact between government and madrasas is informal and based on personal relationships between madrasa educators and local government officials.

The Value of Religious Education: A Social and Cultural Institution

Madrasas are commonly well integrated within the communities in which they are located. Many of the smaller institutions in particular are viewed as belonging to the local community. The local imam is often the principal or main teacher of the smaller madrasas. At the larger madrasas, it is common for teachers to also work as imams in nearby mosques, on either a paid or a voluntary basis. The madrasas provide religious education to the local population, while the imams perform religious services for the communities, provide religious advice, and carry out the religious rites related to births, weddings and funerals.

Besides providing schooling in Islam, madrasas have important social and cultural roles. Madrasas have been instrumental in building, preserving and transmitting Islamic culture over generations (Noor, Sikand & Van Bruinessen, 2008: 9). While some grand and well-equipped madrasas exist, most Afghan madrasas are very modest institutions. Building on Islamic ideas of charity – and the importance of education in Islam – most madrasas offers free education, as well as free board and lodging. The seven private madrasas surveyed for this study all survive on private donations. Most madrasas receive food contributions, with communities contributing food to the students on a daily basis (*wazifa*), making financial donations (*chanda*), or providing one-tenth of their harvest in grain (*ushr*), while some madrasas receive offerings of animal skins and meat at the festival of *eid ul adha*. It is also common that local businessmen make financial contributions to madrasas. In this way, the extended community sustains the madrasas. Among the 16 madrasas surveyed for this study, the only madrasa that do not receive community contributions was a newly established government madrasa that has all its expenses covered by the government. Private madrasas that are not supported by the community do not survive. This gives the community-supported madrasas legitimacy among the local population, something that schools that receive most of their funding from the government or outside sources – whether these are political parties or foreign benefactors – do not have.

Islamic education has its own value system, which makes it qualitatively different from other, non-religious forms of education. It teaches a worldview based on values, norms and codes of conduct that are still highly valued by many Afghans.

²¹ In Pakistan, the madrasas associated with the five main Islamic schools of thought (Deobandi, Sunni, Ahl-e Hadith, Shia and Jamaat-e-Islami) are organized in madrasa boards responsible for the internal organization, oversight and control of the schools. The five madrasa boards have organized themselves into a federation, the Ittehad Tanzimat Madaris-e-Deeniya.

The Madrasa Students

Who are the madrasa students? And why do they choose madrasa education? A number of common assumptions exist about why Afghan children are enrolled in madrasas (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a; Borchgrevink, 2007). One commonly heard explanation for why they are popular is that poor families send their children to madrasas because these often offer board and lodging for free, and the families will therefore have fewer children to feed.²² In our case studies of Afghan madrasas, however, madrasa students seem to comprise a mixed group from different socio-economic backgrounds. No study has looked at this in the Afghan context; but, examining surveys from Pakistan, Fair (2008) concludes that the ‘poverty argument’ holds little ground. She finds that while madrasas cater to many students from low-income families, madrasa students are ‘not generally poorer than those students in public schools’ (Fair, 2007: 113–115). She also finds both the wealthiest *and* the poorest are slightly overrepresented at madrasa schools. Another interesting observation from the literature on Pakistani madrasas is that less than 25% of all madrasa-sending households send more than one child (Andarabi et al., 2005). In this light, madrasa enrolment can be understood as a diversifying household strategy. This matches our findings from Afghanistan, which indicate that madrasa students come from low- and middle-income families.²³

Another commonly given explanation for why children attend madrasas is that they represent the only form of education available. In Afghanistan, where schooling has been limited in many areas, it is plausible that some students or parents that would have preferred regular public education for their children have enrolled their children in madrasas for lack of an alternative. A study of enrolment in Pakistani madrasas shows a more complex picture. Investigating the links between low-income households and madrasa enrolment and between less-educated households and madrasa enrolment, Andarabi et al. (2005) find only weak associations in their data. They found that the most noticeable difference between ‘madrasa households’ and ‘non-madrasa households’ revolved around the proximity to private schools. To explore this further, the Andarabi team looked at parental choice in three scenarios: (1) locations where a madrasa and both private and governmental regular schools exist; (2) locations where a madrasa and either a private or a governmental regular school exist; and (3) locations where neither of the non-religious options exists. The main finding that emerged from this exercise was that in Scenario 1 the market share of private schools increased with income. Madrasa market share remained low (less than 1%, which is close to the overall madrasa enrolment rate in Pakistan). The most remarkable finding was that in locations with no regular school (private or governmental), overall school enrolment dropped from 70% to 40% among poor households, and from 87% to 68% among rich households (Andarabi et al., 2005: 18; Fair, 2008: 34). This suggests that families that are not interested in madrasa education quit the education system altogether rather than send their children to a religious school. It could also indicate that parents who chose Islamic education do so precisely because it offers a different, Islamic alternative.

Interviews with current and former madrasa students in Afghanistan reveal that there are many different reasons for choosing madrasa education also in Afghanistan. The main reasons we have identified are:

²² A Ministry of Education official cited by IRIN (2009) stated that: ‘Madrasas not only offer immunity from Taliban attacks but also provide free board and lodging to students and are thus more attractive to poor families than modern schools’.

²³ This is based on the qualitative assessments made by madrasa administrators and teachers in interviews for our case studies. Income levels data of madrasa students’ families in Afghanistan is not available.

- poor quality of education in regular schools
- lack of trust in government schooling
- preference for religious education
- career opportunities provided by religious education
- 'more appropriate' education for girls
- supplement to other schooling

Like the madrasas, Afghanistan's public school system has been subjected to various regimes and political ideologies. This has led to some Afghans being distrustful of government schools on account of corruption, political alliances and indoctrination. The communists in particular used schools for their political project (Wardak et al., 2007) and reduced the numbers of religious subjects taught. For this reason, some parents considered government schooling to be of poorer quality than that offered in private madrasas.

Perhaps the most important factor for enrolling children in madrasas is that religious education is valued in its own right and seen as an appropriate form of education. An interview with a group of students revealed that economic conditions are not usually the main reason why parents enrol their children in a *dar ul hifaz*. More important seems to be the religious education itself. It is considered of great benefit to a family to have a *hafiz* (one that has memorized the Quran) or a *qari* (one that is trained to recite the Quran) in the family. Some respondents stated that people believe that sending at least one child for religious studies will lead to a 'reward from God in this world and the life that will follow'.²⁴ We also found that in some cases religious education is only part of the education a child receives. Some madrasas students also attend regular schools besides their religious schooling. Furthermore, some madrasas also teach regular subjects throughout the year; others teach regular subjects in the winter months, when the government schools are closed for three months; and some students join madrasas only during the winter break. Some madrasa students also move on to regular schools after some years in a madrasa or *dar ul hifaz*.

Formal religious education in Afghanistan has traditionally been for males only. Some of the all-male schools have madrasas for females attached to them. However, it is much more common for boys to be given religious education than it is for girls, who are more often taught religious subjects at home (Wardak et al., 2007). Some parents consider it more acceptable for girls to be taught religious subjects by female teachers in culturally and religiously acceptable settings. For these girls, madrasa education represents the only opportunity to receive some education.

Concluding Remarks

There exists not one religious education system in Afghanistan, but a madrasa sector with a range of madrasas offering religious education at different levels. These institutions educate children in the basic tenets of their religion, train the lower-level clergy, and qualify religious scholars and legal experts. There is a clear divide between public and private schools, but also significant differences between various private and public madrasas in terms of size, funding sources and ideology. A few well-known, bigger schools exist, but the majority of Afghanistan's madrasas are fairly small and modest institutions. These cater to the needs of the local population in the area in which they are located and are funded by contributions from neighbouring communities.

²⁴ Interview with students in a *dar ul hifaz* in a Pashtun community in northern Afghanistan, February 2008.

As an educational institution, the madrasa is qualitatively different from other institutions, and imparts not only religious knowledge but a worldview, values and code of conduct that are appreciated in Afghan society. The madrasa is not only a religious tradition, but a socio-cultural institution sustained by local communities. Madrasas are shaped by the cultural and political settings in which they are located. And, while some madrasas have opted to stay out of politics, most schools reflect one of the various ideological positions developed in Afghanistan during the years of conflict – a point that will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

2 Ideology and Political Linkages

Some of the debates on religion and politics in Afghanistan mirror debates on the role of religion in international politics more generally, where a stronger political role for religion has emerged over the past couple of decades (Haynes, 2001). In this section, we will look at how history, politics and religion have been closely intertwined in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and how this has contributed to a politicization of the madrasas.

Islam in Afghanistan is a mix of formal, scholarly Islam, Sufi practice, and traditional and customary practices.²⁵ The religious landscape was dominated by various traditional expressions of Islam until the 1950s, when, inspired by the growth of Islamist thinking in Pakistan and Egypt, new ideological currents emerged in Afghanistan. These were reinforced by the Afghan resistance to the Soviet-backed communist regime, which – framed in the language of jihad – provided an impetus to the radicalization of the religio-political parties in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Religious revivalist movements in South Asia, such as the Deobandi²⁶, Ahl e Hadith²⁷ and Barelwi,²⁸ had no history of political radicalism or militancy before the 1980s (Roy, 1995). The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the intensification of the conflict with India over Kashmir gave the ‘lesser jihad’ – the fight for Islam against infidel forces – a renewed and very concrete meaning. A number of religious groups entered politics, some of which grew gradually more radical and started adopting violent strategies (Zahab & Roy, 2004). Holy war against the infidel occupiers became a common cause for Afghan and Pakistani political parties.

The process of Islamic radicalization and militarization benefitted greatly from state patronage under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977–88). After General Zia took power in Pakistan through a military coup in 1977, he initiated a process of Islamization of the country, promoting Sunni orthodoxy. As part of this Islamization process, Zia gave the government control over the Islamic tax and endowments (with the introduction of the Zakat and Ushr Ordinance, 1980), making part of this revenue available for the funding of religious schools (Hussain, 2007). Allying with the Pakistani Islamic religious parties, the Jamiat Ulema-e- Islam (JUI)²⁹ and Jamaat-e-

²⁵ Afghan religious scholars commonly divide Islamic practice between *Shariat* and *tariqat*.

²⁶ Seeking to return to the fundamentals of Islam, the Deobandis are one of the main fundamentalist movements in South Asia. The Deobandi school of thought belongs in the Sunni Hanafi tradition. It was developed by a group of Islamic reformists (the Shah Waliullah movement) who, in response to British colonial rule and Hindu-majority dominance, established a religious seminary at Deoband in North India in 1867 to protect Islamic traditions and values (Haroon, 2007).

²⁷ The Ahl e Hadith is an offshoot of the Shah Waliullah movement. It was referred to as Wahabism by the British, as well as by Sunni Hanafi clerics, in British India. It is commonly known as Panj Pir in Pakistan and Afghanistan, after the name of the village of some of the most influential leaders, located in the Swabi district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (Lizzio, 2006).

²⁸ Another South Asian revivalist movement in the Sunni Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, the Barelvi movement was started in 1880, based on the writings of Sayyid Ahmad Reza Khan. It emphasizes the primacy of Islamic law, but is still deeply influenced by Sufism – a key point of conflict with the Deobandi school.

²⁹ The JUI is the main Deobandi political party in Pakistan. An offshoot of the Jamiat Ulema-i Hind, the JUI was formed in Pakistan in 1947. Led by Mufti Mahmood, it was registered as a political party in Pakistan in 1964. It subsequently split into two groups in the 1980s: the JUI (F), the main faction, led by Mawlana Fazlur Rahman, and the JUI-S, led by Mawlana Sami ul Haq.

Islami (JI),³⁰ and with considerable support from foreign allies, Zia supported the networks of religious schools to boost the Afghan resistance.

The Shia clerical revolution in Iran also influenced religio-political developments in the region. To counter Iranian influence – and out of fear that the Shia revolution might spread to Pakistan’s Shia communities – Pakistani authorities allowed a number of Sunni Islamic militant groups to develop, which were also supported financially by several Arab Sunni countries (Zahab & Roy, 2004). This helped to fuel a Sunni–Shia rivalry inside Pakistan, which contributed to the militarization of sectarian groups within Pakistan.

A Typology of Political Islam

During the last 30 years of war in Afghanistan, religion has been highly politicized, while traditional expressions of Islam have been challenged by new and distinct religio-political movements. In order to place the various madrasas within this changing environment, we will use a typology of political Islam that is based on the work of Olivier Roy (1995) and Yahya Sadowsky (2006), identifying the following subgroups: ‘traditionalists’, ‘fundamentalists’, ‘Islamists’ and ‘neo-fundamentalists’.

Traditionalists

According to Sadowsky (2006), Islamic traditionalists are often represented by groups and associations of religious leaders, the traditional madrasa- or *halaqa*-educated religious scholars (*ulema*), and hereditary religious positions, such as Sufi masters (*sheik* or *pir*). In Afghanistan, the traditionalist clerical parties emerged among the Sufi networks and traditionalist ulema trained in private madrasas. Rising as part of the first resistance to the communist government and the Soviet occupation, these parties mobilized primarily on religious grounds. During the Afghan jihad, some of the traditionally oriented clergy became influenced by Islamic fundamentalists – Pakistani Deobandi and Wahabi ideologies in particular – and embraced a more directly political agenda.

Fundamentalists

Islamic fundamentalism refers to various reformist movements that call for a return to the true tenets of Islam as practised at the time of the Prophet. They generally refute local traditions and mystical practices, along with any modern interpretations of Islam. As Sadowsky (2006: 220) points out, fundamentalists commonly ‘share a mission that can both be revolutionary and reactionary’, as is the case with the Deobandi school as it developed in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Another fundamentalist movement is the South Asian Ahl e Hadith movement. Less influential in Afghanistan than Deobandism, the Ahl e Hadith school of thought was introduced to Afghanistan through local, rural mullahs, particularly in Kunar and Badakshan (Roy, 1995). Like the Deobandi school, Ahl e Hadith is a reformist movement – its goal is to return to the Quran and the Sunna – but it is stricter in that it rejects ‘borrowings and additions, syncretism, and to some extent mysticism’ (Roy, 1995: 20). Saudi-inspired Wahabism was introduced via Saudi Arabian patronage and missionaries during the Afghan jihad (*ibid.*).³¹ Ideologically, Wahabism is similar to the South Asian Ahl e Hadith. Wahabism and Ahl e Hadith are both considered salafist and often seen as identical.

³⁰ Pakistan’s main Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, was founded by Mawlana Abu A’ala Mawdudi in pre-partition India in 1941.

³¹ Wahabism was founded in Saudi Arabia by Abdul Wahab (1703–1792 CE) to cleanse the Arab bedouins of Sufism. Wahabism had little popularity among Afghans before the war (Rashid, 2000).

Islamists

The main Afghan Islamist parties – the Jamiat-e-Islami, Ittehad-e Islami³² and the Hizb-e Islami – emerged among university students and faculty in the 1970s in direct opposition to the Afghan king's slow democratization process. Inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan, who had pioneered a systematic modern Islamic ideology and a global pan-Islamist agenda, the Afghan Islamist parties were closely associated with the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami, drawing support from the intellectual, modern educated cadres. Breaking with traditionalist Islamic schools of thought, the Islamists rearticulated Islam as a modern ideology promoting a pious but modern and progressive Islamic state (Sadowsky, 2006).

Neo-fundamentalists

The most recent development is the rise of neo-fundamentalism, well illustrated by the Taliban as it reemerged in 2002. The new Taliban represents a hybrid development, mixing fundamentalist-type conservative values and radical actions inspired by global jihadists (Sadowsky, 2006: 222). Growing out of fundamentalist Deobandi networks, the neo-fundamentalists have been influenced by Arab Wahabi ideology, and increasingly by the global Salafi ideas of Al-Qaeda (Roy, 2002). Neo-fundamentalists seek a return to the fundamentals of Islam while emphasizing the importance of the Sharia. However, in contrast to fundamentalists, they embrace modern means of communication, actively using the media as a strategic tool, communicating through the Internet and mobile phones. Also their use of military tactics – specifically the use of suicide attacks - diverge from the fundamentalists; suicide is a practice seen as un-Islamic and rejected by many within the Afghan clergy.

'Politicization' of the Madrasas

The close ties between religion and politics in the shared history of Afghanistan and Pakistan are also reflected in the development of the countries' institutions for religious education, particularly the development of some of the most ideologically hardened madrasas in two countries. As indicated above, not all madrasas are linked to political parties. Owing to the politicization of religion in the Afghan war, however, many are associated with religio-political groups in some way, or have been at some point.

The early political mobilization against the Soviet occupiers took place within networks of traditionalist and Sufi based religious, as well as among Islamist-inspired students in the Muslim Youth Organization at Kabul University. Out of this grew what was to become the core of the Afghan Sunni Islamic resistance movement based in Peshawar.³³ On one side were the traditionalist religious parties, which included (among the Sunnis) the Haraqat Inqelab (led by Mohammad Nabi), the Afghan National Liberation Front (led by Sufi leader Sigbatullah Mojadeddi) and the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (led by Pir Gillani). On the other side were the Islamist parties – primarily the Jamiat-e-Islami (led by Burhanuddin Rabbani), Hizb-e Islami (led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar), the Hizb-e Islami (led by Mawlawi Khales) and Ittehad e

³² Ittehad-e Islami was the only Islamist party in Afghanistan that openly followed the Saudi Wahabi ideology. A Saudi-educated religious scholar, the party leader Sayyaf had ready access to Saudi financing during the war against the Soviet Union. He later sided with the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, gained a position in the Karzai government after 2001.

³³ The Pakistani government only permitted seven of the resistance parties to operate publicly, all with a Sunni religious platform, and insisted that all refugees had to be registered with one of these parties if they were to receive a refugee card and qualify for refugee assistance. A similar development took place among the Afghan Shia resistance based in Teheran.

Islami (led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf) – which initially recruited among students and faculty at the universities.

The Afghan jihadi parties found their allies in the Pakistani Islamic parties. The Islamists allied with the Jamaat-e-Islami, the fundamentalists with the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. Foreign funders channelled support to the Afghan resistance through the Pakistani Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which used its position to play up the differences between the various Afghan resistance parties in order to prevent the formation of a strong, unitary nationalistic Afghan resistance. The Islamist parties – and the Hizb-e Islami in particular – received the greater share of the international support, the traditionalist parties the smaller (Rashid, 2000).

For all parties, religious education became part of what they offered to the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan. With support from Pakistan, the USA, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, as well as some support from China and various European countries (Rashid, 2000; Hussain, 2007; Fair, 2008), a variety of institutions offering education at different levels were established in Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁴ In this process, the madrasas became directly involved in the politics of the jihad. Schools aligned with political parties and further expanded and reinforced their networks.

The Rise of the Religious Students

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the fall of the communist government in 1992, the traditionalist mujahedeen withdrew to their village mosques and madrasas, leaving the contest over power in Kabul to the Islamists. Continuous infighting between the jihadi parties and a steadily deteriorating situation in terms of law and order in the countryside, however, resulted in dwindling support for the Islamists. In response to this lawlessness, former commanders – primarily mullahs affiliated with Haraqat Inqelab and Hizb-e Islami (Khales) – teamed up with their religious students, or ‘taliban’, in Kandahar by summer 1994. They began by cleansing the area of abusive commanders and establishing security, thus clearing the way for what was to become an independent, politico-religious movement, ‘the Taliban’. The movement was supported by Pakistan,³⁵ and initially welcomed by the USA.

From 1994 onwards, the Taliban recruited mainly in madrasas in rural Pashtun areas between Ghazni and Kandahar (Zahab & Roy, 2004: 13). These frontier madrasas had been linked from before the war with a ‘parent network’ of Deobandi madrasas associated with the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, the main Pakistani fundamentalist party (ibid.). During the war against the Soviet Union, some of these frontier Deobandi madrasas were politicized and militarized in the 1980s, and their links with the Pakistani madrasas were strengthened. The curriculum was ‘Wahabized’ under the influence of Saudi benefactors. A gradual radicalization of the Taliban took place under the influence of Osama bin Laden in the 1990s (Zahab & Roy, 2004: 13).

The ‘Arab Schools’

The Islamist parties founded their own schools, often with the support of patrons in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. During the 1980s and 1990s, ‘Ma’had’ – schools influenced by Wahabi

³⁴ As a consequence, the numbers of madrasas in Pakistan increased significantly in the 1980s and 1990s. This is discussed further in Section 3, below.

³⁵ In addition to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Pakistan was later among the few countries that officially recognized the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

and Ahl e Hadith schools of thought, and commonly referred to as ‘Arab schools’ by Afghans – were established. Supported by various Saudi Arabian sources, these schools were commonly run by Islamic charities in collaboration with Afghan political groups. According to one informant, for example, the Kuwait-based Islamic charity Lejnat al Dawa al Islamia supported some 600 schools in Afghanistan.³⁶ The schools were funded by the charity, but in practice run by the Afghan Hizb-e Islami and its political activists. Most of these ‘Arab schools’ in Afghanistan have been closed down since 2001, when foreign Islamic charities were forced to close down their operations, accused of channelling funds to terrorists (Borchgrevink, 2007).

The Variations in ‘Afghan Madrasas’

As we have seen above, there are substantial differences between the various private and public schools in terms of size, resources, ideology and links to political groups. Based on our case studies, we have developed a ‘typology’ of the various madrasas in Afghanistan. Building on the earlier typology of political Islam presented above, it aims to show the links between the religio-political groups and the religious schools, while at the same time illustrating some of the variation among the schools in this sector. This typology is presented below.

Government Madrasas

The old government madrasas: These have existed since the 1930 and 1940s and have gone through a number of regime changes. Founded on the model of the Dar ul Uloom in India, these schools teach the official government curriculum, based on the *dars-e nizami Deobandi*. They are semi-governmental institutions established to educate the Afghan clergy and can be seen as carriers of the ‘official’ Afghan religious doctrine, traditions and heritage. The teachers in these madrasas come from various educational backgrounds. Many are educated in government madrasas or at the University of Kabul, while others have their training from private madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In these schools, you can still find teachers from the older generation that were educated at the Dar ul Uloom Deoband in India. Among these schools are some well-known national institutions, which draw students from all over the country (see Box 1 in Section 1).

The new government madrasas: Since 2001, the Karzai government has created a number of what we here call ‘new government madrasas’. These are newly established madrasas or previously existing private madrasas that have been converted to government madrasas since 2001. These madrasas are registered with the Ministry of Education, follow the official curriculum, and are commonly funded fully or partly by the government. They have been established either directly by the government or by religious scholars supportive of the current regime’s new Islamic education initiative. An example of this category can be found in Case 1, later in this section.

The Private Madrasas

Traditionalist private madrasas: This group encompasses a broad variety of schools that are chiefly apolitical in their orientation. Among these schools are both the esteemed old traditionalist private madrasas (see Case 2, below) and smaller, community- or tribal-based schools (an example of which is presented in Case 3, below). These smaller madrasas are often founded by the local

³⁶ Lejnat ud Dawa, a Kuwaiti-based Islamic charity, was operating a number of welfare and education projects for Afghans both inside and outside Afghanistan. It is on the USA’s list of terrorist organizations accused of channelling financial assistance to militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan; see http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/key-issues/protecting/charities_execorder_13224-i.shtml#l (accessed 2 March 2010).

community or imam, and located in the village mosque or other community quarters. They cater to the community's need for religious education and are commonly funded by local resources through rich community members and general community contributions. The students are mainly drawn from the local community or from nearby districts; the teachers are the local mullahs and senior religious students from the community.

Fundamentalist private madrasas: Growing out of the traditionalist networks, the fundamentalist private madrasas were politicized during the jihad. Linked ideologically to the Pakistani Deobandi tradition, some of these schools were associated with the Pakistani Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam during the Afghan jihad (Haroon, 2007: 205). Some of them played a significant role in the mobilization and formation of the Taliban. Many of the teachers in these madrasas were educated in Pakistani madrasas, such as the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah, and there are still strong bonds between fundamentalist madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. An example of this category of schools is a fundamentalist Deobandi madrasa in the Pashtun belt, illustrated in Case 1 of the 'Afghan Madrasas in Pakistan' in Section 3, below. Influenced by Salafist or global jihadist ideas, some of the private fundamentalist madrasas became *neo-fundamentalist* in orientation. An example of a neo-fundamentalist school would be a 'Taliban madrasa' linked to the Haqqani network in the Pakistani Tribal Areas.

Islamist private madrasas (or ma'had): Private Islamist religious schools emerged during the jihad, often funded by Saudi or other foreign benefactors. These schools are not part of the South Asian madrasas tradition as such, but based on the model of Arab religious schools. While a number of schools supported by Islamic charities have been closed down following allegations of funding terrorism, Islamist schools do still exist. One example is the case study of an Islamist girls' high school in Pakistan (see Case 2 of the 'Afghan Madrasas in Pakistan' in Section 3, below).

Afghan Madrasas: Three Case Studies

Below, we will take a closer look at three Afghan madrasas. These have been selected out of the 13 case studies made of Afghan madrasas. The three cases reflect well the variation in our data material and illustrate some of the characteristics outlined in the typology. The first school is a newly established pro-government school; the second is an old traditionalist private school unconnected to politics; the third is a traditionalist, tribal madrasa – a school supported by the extended community, both in Afghanistan and in the diaspora in the Gulf.

Case 1: A 'New Government Madrasa'

This is an example of a newly established 'government madrasa', taking advantage of the government initiative for Islamic education and the funding made available for new government religious schools. The madrasa was established in 2003 with support from the Ministry of Education. It is located in the centre of a major city in the north, built in conjunction with an existing mosque established more than 60 years ago by the district governors at the time. It has since been taken over by private management, but is still considered a 'government madrasa', as it is supportive of the government's religious education initiative, uses the government-prescribed curriculum, and receives financial support for teachers' salaries and teaching material from the government.

The madrasa is not affiliated with any political party, but supports the current government and its Islamic education policies. It enjoys good relations with the local people. Students and teachers participate in local events and assist the community in religious rites and festival. The madrasa also has good relations with religious leaders and scholars in the area.

The madrasa is officially registered with the government, and all its plans and activities are in accordance with the policy of the Ministry of. It offers classes from Grade 1 to Grade 14. Both religious and non-religious subjects are taught, and the curriculum and teaching methods are as laid down by the Directorate of Education.

More than 500 students study in the madrasa, mostly coming from the city and surrounding districts. Students travelling from further away stay at the madrasa hostel. Students attend classes until 4.00 pm every day, after which they repeat the lessons on their own. There are 120 girl students in Classes 1 and 2. Graduates of the 14th Class are issued certificates and can participate in the official Kankor exam to gain admission to government universities. None of the students have gone abroad for further studies, and individuals interviewed for the case study believe that facilities should be provided so that Afghan students can study in Afghanistan.

The school has 15 teachers, of which 6 are women. The teachers are employed by the Education Department. All of them are formally qualified, either with recognized graduate certificates or bachelor's degrees from institutions in Afghanistan. They are also trained in seminars arranged by the Directorate of Education. The madrasa receives a similar level of attention and assistance from the Directorate of Education as other government schools in the province. It has a library that contains around 3,000 religious and other educational books.

Education is free for the students. The madrasa receives sufficient funding from the government to make contributions from the community unnecessary. Salaries for all of the madrasa's employees and the running costs of the student hostel are covered by the Directorate of Education. The madrasa is not funded by other sources in Afghanistan or abroad. The madrasa has good experience with the Directorate of Education and remains positive and appreciative of the government's religious education initiative.

Case 2: An Old Traditionalist Private Madrasa in the North

This madrasa, located in a rural area in the north of Afghanistan, is an example of an old private madrasa in the Indian Deobandi tradition. It was founded in 1938 by a group of ulema, of whom one was a graduate from the Dar ul Uloom Deoband in India. The madrasa was built together with a mosque on land donated by the family of the local mowlavi. The building is a mud structure, typical of the area, with nine rooms sharing the courtyard with the mosque.

The history of the madrasas reflects the years of conflict and shifting regimes. The madrasa was destroyed during the Soviet invasion and reconstructed after the collapse of the communist regime. Under the Taliban, it was renamed and registered officially. After the Taliban, it again changed name. Currently the madrasa is led by a council of teachers and has no relations with any political party.

The madrasa has about 300 students, of which 75 are boarding students. Some 150 students study to memorize the Quran. The madrasa has two smaller branches teaching at the primary level, one for girls and one for boys. The students are mainly from nearby districts, but some also come from bordering provinces. Education, boarding and lodging are free. The students are from middle-income families. Some students also study at the district government high school.

The curriculum is based on the curriculum from Dar ul Uloom Deoband. Classes are offered from Grade 1 to Grade 12. All the teachers are Afghan, and all but two of them – who have certificates from Pakistani madrasas – have completed *dastarbandi* or *dowra-e-hadith* in Afghanistan. About one-third of the students continue higher religious studies after graduation. Before 2001, some 10% of the students continued further studies in Pakistani madrasas. Since 2001, this practice has stopped, and students join government madrasas in Afghanistan or the Sharia departments at the universities in Balkh and Kabul.

Local people have supported the madrasa at all times. They assist both financially and by donating animal skins at the *eid ul adha* festival, which the madrasa sells in the market. Monetary contributions are limited, as the community is generally poor, but the madrasa is supported by community elders, which contributes to the standing of the madrasa and provides protection to the school. Locals also give food, rice, oil and wood for heaters and cooking. In return for the help, some of the madrasa students teach Islam to local children. The madrasa has good relations with local ulema, who participate in events such as graduation and *dastarbandi* ceremonies.

The madrasa receives no financial support from the government, though it receives a monthly sum of 2,000 Saudi Rials (roughly equal to 500 USD) to pay for teachers' salaries from a Saudi sponsored Pakistani benefactors. The government has little influence on the running of the madrasa, but madrasa–government relations are friendly. The madrasa's leadership is well aware of the government's plans to improve religious education, which are seen as a welcome initiative. The madrasa has regular contact with the district governor and has tried to register with the government, but has not heard back from the Ministry of Education.

Case 3: A Traditionalist 'Tribal' Private Madrasa near the Border with Pakistan

This madrasa is located in eastern Afghanistan, some 15 km from the border with Pakistan. It is a 'tribal madrasa' in that it provides religious education to the children of the tribe, assists the tribe in religious issues, is governed by a tribal council, and is supported financially and morally by people of the tribe – both those living locally and those who make up the tribe's diaspora in the Gulf. The madrasa is built on the model of a modern school, with five classrooms, ten dormitories and a kitchen in a single-storey concrete building. There is also a mosque, which is used as a *dar ul hifaz*. Compared to other madrasas, this school is very well equipped, with educational materials as well as blankets, mattresses and chairs for the students, a generator for electricity, and a hand-pump-driven tube well for water. Modern water and sanitation equipment are also planned.

The madrasa was first established in 1956, but was shifted across the border to a refugee camp in NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) following the Soviet invasion. After the fall of the communist regime in 1992, the madrasa was re-established in Afghanistan. The founder – a graduate from the Dar ul Uloom Deoband in India – was the *khateeb* (leader of the Friday prayers) of the local tribe until he died. He started the madrasa by teaching students in the local mosque. The current principal is a hafiz who studied lower-level religious studies in Pakistan. He was earlier affiliated with Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar). Today, the madrasa has no political affiliations.

The school is an all-male school with approximately 250 students, of which approximately 70% are studying memorization of the Quran (for *hafiz*) and 30% are studying other religious subjects. The madrasa offers free education to its students. The students come from different provinces, such as Khost, Paktia, Logar, Parwan, Kabul and Ghazni, and include students from all levels of society. The madrasa has good relations with the local people, who participate in the madrasa students' *dastarbandi* ceremonies; the madrasa students teach Islam to local children and sometimes help resolve local conflicts.

The madrasa is private. It is not officially registered, though the government knows about it. The government, however, has no influence on the curriculum taught. The madrasa is not aware of the Ministry of Education's religious education strategy. Only religious subjects are taught at the school. The level of education is from primary to *dowra-e-khord*, with specialization offered in recitation of the Quran (*tajweed*). The school has relations with other madrasas both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. About one-third of the students go to Pakistan for further studies. The teachers are Afghan, and the majority of them received their certificates at Pakistani madrasas. New teachers are recruited by a joint commission of madrasa and tribal elders.

The madrasa receives no financial support from the government or other agencies. It is in an unusual economic situation owing to support from the tribe. The madrasa is supported by tribal elders, tribal traders and investors, particularly those based in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, and the people of the tribe. The support and assistance is in cash, equipment and food, but the madrasa is also politically and morally supported by the tribe. The land of the madrasa is given by the people as *waqf* (religious endowment), and the madrasa has a small budget provided by the tribal elders. Local people supply bread to the students, sometimes milk or vegetables, and occasionally a cow, goat or sheep. It is also common that people donate a tenth of their harvests (*ushr*) to the madrasa. Particularly rich people of the tribe support the madrasa. At *eid ul fitr* and *eid ul adha*, the madrasa receives large donations, particularly from the tribal diaspora in the Gulf, amounting to 'hundreds of thousands of Afghani' according to the informants.

Concluding Remarks

Religion and politics are closely intertwined in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, historically and today. This is also the case with the development of political Islam in the two countries, which is clearly reflected in the development of their institutions for religious education – particularly some of the most ideologically hardened madrasas. Not all madrasas are linked to political parties, but the politicization of religion in the Afghan war means many have been associated with religio-political groups at some point.

The case studies above show some of the variation existing among Afghan madrasas in terms of tradition, size, resources, ideological positions and political affiliations. The madrasas are clearly marked by shifting alliances, new ideological currents and regime changes. The case studies also show that there is considerable variety also among the Deobandi schools. The next section will look closer at the connection between the Deobandi schools of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

3 Linkages to Pakistan

Among Afghans, there is a long tradition of travelling to famous centres of Islamic learning in search of higher religious education. Historically, places such as Bukhara, Deoband, Peshawar, Cairo, Qoum and Najaf have been particularly important for Afghan scholars and religious students. Today, the most important places for Afghan Sunni Muslims are located in Pakistan. In this section, we will situate the Afghan madrasas within the South Asian madrasa tradition and examine whether Afghan madrasas can be seen as part of a transnational education system. We will thus take a closer look at the transnational dimension of religious education in Afghanistan, particularly at the connection between madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Dar ul Uloom Deoband and the South Asian Madrasa Tradition

The majority of Afghan Sunni madrasas are linked to the Deobandi school of thought. However, to be 'Deobandi' has come to mean different things. The Afghan madrasa sector has been influenced by the Deobandi school of thought in two major and quite different ways.

Dar ul Uloom Deoband, India

On the one hand, the relationship between the Dar ul Uloom Deoband in North India and the Afghan state was strengthened after Zahir Shah's ascent to the throne in 1933 (Olesen, 1995: 188). The official government madrasas set up in Afghanistan in the 1930s and 1940s were established with support from the Dar ul Uloom Deoband (Olesen, 1995: 187), and the Dar ul Uloom Deoband received financial support from Zahir Shah (Metcalf, 1982: 112). The Dar ul Uloom Deoband has since played a central role in educating the Afghan ulema, and has had considerable influence on Islamic education in Afghanistan. The Deobandi school of thought was dominant in all Afghan madrasas before the war (Roy, 1995: 19).³⁷ Dar ul Uloom Deoband was a popular place of study for Afghan religious students, and graduates from Deoband can still be found among the old generation of Afghan ulema. The numbers of Afghan students going to Dar ul Uloom Deoband for studies has decreased since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The introduction of visa restrictions for foreign religious students by the Indian government in 1998 (Sikand, 2005: 271) further reduced the number of Afghan students at Deoband. Nevertheless, a few Afghan students from esteemed religious families still study at this prominent institution.

The 'Pakistani Deobandi School'

On the other side has been the development of a 'Pakistani Deobandi tradition'. In Pakistan, 'Deobandi', according to Haroon (2008: 58), became a 'transferable and inheritable title conferred and assumed on and by any scholar or would be scholar that aligned himself with another Deobandi or, after 1920 with the Jamiat Ulema-i Hind', later to become the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Pakistan. A chain of 'Deobandi madrasas' was established in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas from the 1920s onwards (Roy, 1986). After the partition of India and Pakistan, Peshawar became the main place for Afghan students wishing to pursue advanced studies in the region

³⁷ An exception to this has been the influence of Wahabism in parts of the northeast, particularly Badakshan and Kunar, where the South Asian Ahl e Hadith (also called Wahabi) school of thought influenced sections of the religious leadership and madrasas from the 1950s (Roy, 1995).

(Roy, 1995). Certain madrasas such as the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah in Akora Khattak, and Jamia Zargari, Hadiqatul Uloom and Jamia Ashrafia, all in Peshawar in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (earlier NWFP), have been particularly popular with Afghan religious students.

The development of the 'Pakistani Deobandi tradition' has seen some central Deobandi schools taking a highly political role. The role of the madrasa in the Afghan resistance against the Soviet is contested. While there are accounts of certain schools being used by the mujahedeen parties, traditionalist and fundamentalist ulema were also criticized by the Islamist mujahedeen for not joining the fighting.³⁸ Haroon (2007: 24) reports that madrasas in the Tribal Areas provided 'simultaneous military and religious training'. She is careful to note, however, that 'the role, location, enrolment curriculum, and militant participation of *these* madrasa are deemed proven through a handful of journalistic accounts' (Haroon, 2007: 204n25).

During the 1990s, some of these schools became recruitment grounds for the Taliban. Influenced by Saudi Wahabi ideologies and Salafi-inspired global jihadism, the teachings at these Deobandi madrasa have been removed from the original reformist agenda of the Dar ul Uloom Deoband in India. The radicalization of certain Deobandi school in Pakistan, and their involvement in the Afghan jihad, also contributed to the politicization and radicalization of private Deobandi madrasas inside Afghanistan.

Not All Deobandi Schools Are Political or Radical

Afghan madrasas associating themselves with Deoband today belong to either of the two tracks of development of Deobandi tradition. Common for both tracks is that they still use at least some part of the Deobandi *dars-e nizami* curriculum. The ideology and outlook of these Deobandi schools, however, vary greatly. It is therefore important to note that, while it is probably true, as it has been argued that 'most mullahs (in Afghanistan) have been trained in Pakistani madaras aligned with this fundamentalist-leaning school' (Giustozzi, 2008: 44), does association with the Deobandi doctrine not necessarily indicate radical political views, links to militancy, or even links to political groups. In Pakistan, the Deobandi madrasa board – the Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Arabia Pakistan – is the largest association of madrasas, representing some 65% of all madrasas registered with the madrasa boards in Pakistan (Von den Bosch 2008), a highly diversified group of schools in terms of size, funding sources, ideological links and political affiliations.³⁹ This is similar to what we found in our case material from Deobandi schools in Afghanistan (see Section 2).

Apolitical madrasas exist, both traditionalist and fundamentalist in orientation, which support neither the current government nor the militant Islamic opposition. Many of these non-aligned madrasas have been pressured by the Taliban and other militant groups to side with them. In this way, apolitical madrasas are also dragged into the conflict and forced to take sides.

The Afghan–Pakistan Frontier

The Afghan–Pakistan frontier area has been significant in the developments in the region. The border area has long provided a space that is almost outside the control of either Pakistani or

³⁸ Interview with earlier Hizb-e Islami member, March 2010.

³⁹ See Masooda Bano (2007a) for an interesting ethnographic study of a 'regular Deobandi madrasa' in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

Afghan governments. The Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) has an independent status within Pakistan. While the tribes govern themselves, the government maintains contact through ‘political agents’ (representatives of the Pakistani government). Populated mainly by various Pashtun tribes that have fiercely resisted foreign invasions, the area became the frontline of operation for the Afghan resistance movement against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan (1979–89).

During the war against the Soviet, the area experienced an unprecedented development of infrastructure such as road and bridges, but also weapons depots and training camps (Haroon, 2007). The inaccessibility of the area for outsiders has made it an ideal hideout for the Afghan mujahedeen, the Taliban, and local and global jihadists. The mujahedeen parties established their training camps there with support of Pakistan, the USA and Islamic countries. In the mid-1980s, Arab Islamists arrived to take part in the jihad, and the camps were also used for training of Kashmiri fighters. The Arabs brought with them ideas about global unifications of Muslims, and through connections between Arab and Pakistani Islamists brought Arab militant organizations and ideology to Pakistani madrasas (Haroon, 2007: 205). Under these influences, some Afghan traditionalist religious leaders and networks became more fundamentalist, though many Afghans expressed less appreciation for the ideas than for the funding that accompanied them.

During Taliban rule the Tribal Areas was use as a channel for illegal good (including drugs, weapons and timber) going in and out of the country, and the global Islamists was provided shelter. After the fall of the Afghan Taliban regime in 2001, the Pakistani Tribal Areas became a safe haven for Afghan Taliban and Pakistani tribal militants (commonly known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) and a free place for Al-Qaeda militants and Pakistani jihadists.

The Growth in Pakistani Madrasas

Both the numbers of Pakistani madrasas and their enrolment rates have been the subject of much controversy and debate in recent years. Estimates of the number of registered madrasas vary greatly, from 12,980 (the official Government of Pakistan statistics; see Government of Pakistan, 2006: 24) to 18,015 (estimates given by the different madrasa boards; see Van den Bosch, 2008: 12). Many media reports have used the highly inflated numbers found in the ICG study from 2002 discussed earlier.⁴⁰ Many studies have also relied on unverifiable secondary sources.⁴¹ The most comprehensive examination of the size and significance of the religious education sector in Pakistan is the study by Andarabi et al. from 2005, entitled ‘Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data’, where the authors use established data sources together with their own data collected for a broader study on education enrolment in Pakistan. In this study, the Andarabi team finds that the Pakistani madrasa sector is small in comparison with the public and private education sectors, and that it ‘accounts for less than 1 percent of overall enrolment in the country’ (Andarabi et al., 2005: 3). They also found that madrasa enrolment is highest in the

⁴⁰ See Introduction to this report.

⁴¹ In his bestselling book *The Taliban* from 2000, Ahmed Rashid (2000: 89) reports that ‘in 1971 there were only some 900 registered madrassas, but by the end of General Zia ul Haq’s era in 1988 there were 8000 madrassas and 25 000 unregistered ones, educating over half a million students’. These estimates – as pointed out by Andarabi et al. (2005) – are based on Pakistani intelligence reports, illustrating a widespread practice among media and analysts of using unverifiable secondary sources and a lack of established statistical methodologies.

districts bordering Afghanistan, but that it still comprises less than 7.5% of all children enrolled in school.⁴²

The number of madrasas in Pakistan increased significantly during the Afghan war against the Soviet Union (1979–92). According to Andarabi et al. (2005: 5), ‘madrasa enrolment declined from 1940 to 1980 but increased during the religion-based resistance to the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets in 1979’. They found that ‘the largest jump in madrasa enrolment is for the cohort aged 10 in the period 1989-93 – coinciding with the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Taliban’ (ibid.).

The Refugee Experience

Thirty years of conflict and the consequent flight of Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan affected the Afghan religious education sector in significant ways. In the 1980s and 1990s, many religious schools were established to cater for the Afghan refugee population. Madrasas were established by private individuals and nongovernmental Islamic charities and welfare organizations (Abdulbaqi, 2008). Foreign support to the Afghan resistance movement channelled through the jihadi parties also funded networks of fundamentalist and Islamist madrasas inside and outside Afghanistan. The refugee camps have played a central role in providing Afghan refugees’ children with madrasa education. All the Afghan jihadi parties established schools in the camps under their control. During the 1980s, Hizb-e Islami built an extensive network of schools to secure a pool of new recruits to the party. Running around 250 schools with some 43,500 students, it controlled more schools in Pakistan than any other Afghan jihadi party.⁴³ According to Rubin (2002: 215), graduates from these schools went into the Hizb-e Islami’s conventional military force (‘the Army of Sacrifice’, or *Lashkar-e Isar*). The Afghan Islamist parties also established ‘jihadi universities’ in and around Peshawar. While many of these schools have since been closed down or moved to Afghanistan, there are still religious schools in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan.

Numbers of Afghan Students in Pakistani Madrasas

The number of Afghan students attending Pakistani madrasas increased significantly during the 1980s, particularly in the Balochistan and NWFP (today’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), which is where the majority of Afghan refugees settled and where the Afghan resistance movement in Pakistan was located. According to Malik (1996: 206), in 1982 some 9% of the total students in NWFP madrasas were Afghan. During the 1980s, no restrictions were placed on the entry of foreign religious students to Pakistan. Rather, government policy under Zia-ul-Haq granted Afghan students free movement, something that, according to the International Crisis Group (2002: 22), resulted in many Afghan students going to madrasas in Pakistani cities such as Karachi, Islamabad, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Quetta, besides Peshawar.

The Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah

Among the Pakistani Deobandi madrasas, the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah (in Akora Khattak, Peshawar district) has been particularly influential. Founded in 1947 by the Abd al Haq Akhorwi, a graduate from the Dar ul Uloom Deoband, the school quickly established itself as one of the

⁴² It should be noted that FATA was not part of the Andarabi team’s study from 2005.

⁴³ Rastegar (1991); cited in Rubin (2002: 215).

most important Deobandi schools in Pakistan (Malik, 1996: 205). Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah has a long tradition of educating Afghan students. Examining the Afghan student body at Haqqaniah, Malik (1996: 206–207) finds that the proportion of Afghan students increased dramatically from 1960 to 1985, from approximately 15% of the total student population in 1960 to approximately 60% in 1985. The school increased in terms of both students and financial expenditure during this period. It received funding from the Provincial Zakat Committee in the NWFP, as well as from Saudi benefactors (Malik, 1996: 205–206). The Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah became one of the most central Pakistani schools, contributing to the rise of the Taliban. The school has educated a number of figures within the core Taliban leadership,⁴⁴ was a key recruitment ground for Taliban fighters in the 1990s, and has been referred to as the ‘University of Jihad’ (Goldberg, 2000). Currently the school is headed by JUI leader Sami Ul Haq, a well-known supporter of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Why Afghan Students Go Abroad

A combination of factors has contributed to Afghans seeking religious education abroad and in Pakistan in particular. One obvious reason for Afghan religious students to go abroad is the lack of availability of higher-level religious degrees in Afghan madrasas and universities. Bachelor’s degrees in Islamic studies are offered in some universities, but for any higher degree Afghans must go abroad. In addition, graduates from private madrasas are generally not accepted by Afghan universities and must go abroad if they wish to take bachelor’s degrees too.

The reputation and quality of educational institutions are also significant factors. 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, which affects the quality – and reputation – of the Afghan schools. From our case studies, we know that students from both private and government madrasas in Afghanistan go to Pakistan for higher religious degrees. We find that Afghan students go to a variety of Pakistani schools, but that certain Pakistani madrasas are particularly popular with Afghan religious students – such as the Karachi Dar ul Uloom, the Imdad ul Uloom in Peshawar and the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah. Afghan graduates from Pakistani madrasas interviewed in Kabul in 2008 stated that quality of education is among the most important factors when students chose to go for studies to Pakistan, and this factor is also decisive for which madrasas they chose to go to. These Afghan graduates from Pakistani madrasas emphasized that the reputation of a particular madrasa, or a specific teacher, is the most important reason for studying abroad. They pointed out that some of the most popular teachers, such as some of the teachers at the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah, attract hundreds of students to their classes. In addition, interviews with mullahs carried out in 2006 revealed that formal degrees from known madrasas were recognized as a sign of quality among the Afghan clergy (Borchgrevink, 2007). From this we can conclude that, just as the quality and prestige associated with well-reputed Islamic scholars and specific institutions have influenced choices related to education in the past (Olesen, 1995: 43), they remain among the most significant factors in terms of explaining why Afghan students choose to study in Pakistan.

⁴⁴ According to Rashid (2000: 90), ‘in 1999 at least eight Taliban cabinet ministers in Kabul were graduates from Haq’s Dar-ul- Uloom Haqqani and dozens more graduates served as Taliban governors in the provinces, military commanders, judges and bureaucrats’.

The Situation Since 2001

Since 2001, thousands of Afghan students continue to travel abroad for religious studies every year, particularly to Pakistani madrasas.⁴⁵ One news report estimates the number of Afghan students in Pakistan in 2002 at around 16,000 (Haider, 2002). According to IRIN (2009), Afghan Ministry of Education officials have estimated that ‘tens of thousands of Afghan citizens are enrolled in Pakistani madrasas’. It has, however, become more difficult for Afghan religious students to go to Pakistan for religious studies, and assessments by Afghan religious leaders interviewed in Afghanistan in 2006 suggest that the numbers may have dropped (Borchgrevink, 2007). New visa requirements were introduced under President Musharraf to tighten control of foreign students, obliging madrasas to only accept new foreign students that have a certificate of permission from their own government and are properly registered with the Pakistani Ministry of Interior (ICG, 2002: 23). Religious leaders interviewed in Afghanistan in 2006 were of the opinion that the new visa requirements – which include a requirement to have an invitation from a madrasa – as well as the decrease in the number of places offering free boarding and lodging for Afghan students have made it more complicated and less attractive for Afghan students to study in Pakistani madrasas (Wardak et al., 2007). This has also made personal connections more important than was previously the case for Afghan students wishing to enrol in a Pakistani madrasa, and may have contributed to a drop in students seeking religious education in Pakistan (ibid.). Accusations of madrasa students being linked to terrorism and suicide attacks is another issue that may be contributing to a decline in the numbers of Afghan students wishing to attend Pakistani religious schools. It was pointed out by one informant that this has given madrasa education in Pakistan a bad name in some circles. Yet, Afghan students continue to go to Pakistan to study, and find ways to do so legally or illegally. Informants from a madrasa in Peshawar explained how some Afghan students in Pakistan use false Pakistani ID cards to be able to study in Pakistan. It is difficult to know how widespread this practice is.

The Indian and Pakistani Deobandi schools of thought have not been the only sources of influence on Afghanistan’s ulema and religious educational institutions. Egypt and Saudi Arabia have also been influential, not the least in the development of Islamist and Wahabi ideologies. Afghans have attended institutions of Islamic higher education in these countries, such as the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia and Al-Azhar University in Egypt. Al-Azhar, in particular, has been central for the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the development of Islamist political parties and associated institutions in Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with the schools and universities established by these. These relationships still exist, and there are plans to establish an Al-Azhar Institute for Islamic Education in Afghanistan (RFE/RL, 2009). As part of the association with Al-Azhar, 17 professors from Al-Azhar were hired to help improve the quality of teaching in the government madrasas by training of the madrasa teachers. Afghan religious students have also been sent abroad with government support since 2001. In 2006–07, 30 madrasa students went abroad, while 20 Islamic education teachers from both Sunni and Shia schools have been sent abroad on scholarships (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a).

⁴⁵ As discussed in the introduction, the protracted refugee situation for Afghans in Pakistan has made it very difficult to define ‘an Afghan madrasa student’. It is hard to estimate levels of Afghan student enrolment and numbers of Afghan graduating from Pakistani schools. Informal estimates by key informants in Kunduz suggest that between 500 and 1,000 students travel to Pakistan every year; in Wardak, the estimate is about 500 (Borchgrevink, 2007).

Transnational Links

The Afghan madrasas are not part of a formalized transnational system as such, but are linked to institutions abroad through transnational networks of people, ideas and finances. Afghan Sunni madrasas, both public and private, are part of transnational networks based on a common system of knowledge, values and religious authority. The networks, however, are predominantly informal and personal, based around the student–teacher relationship. For higher-level studies, students seek out well-reputed teachers in their field of interest. This practice is part of the South Asian madrasa tradition, where student–teacher relationships are more important than institutional affiliations. According to Robert Hefner (2007: 9) ‘the religious scholar was important because he linked the students to a chain of transmission reaching back in time to the moment of revelation itself’.

Afghan students go to Pakistan to study; madrasa graduates return to Afghanistan as teachers, religious leaders, scholars and judges; and Afghan and Pakistani madrasa students join militant groups operating in Afghanistan. The movement of people is mainly from Afghanistan to Pakistan, as few – if any – Pakistani students attend Afghan madrasas and few Pakistani teachers are working in Afghanistan. Through their various networks, religious students and teachers bring with them new experiences, practices, competencies and ideas.

Educational background has been a decisive factor in the organization of the Afghan clergy (Borchgrevink, 2007), with the main separation being between government-educated and privately educated scholars. The new generation of teachers returning after exile in Pakistan, however, has upset this order. Bringing with them alternative interpretations of Islam, new curricula and teaching methods, Afghan graduates returning from Pakistani madrasas to teach in Afghan madrasas influence the religious education imparted there. Informants in a large government madrasa in the north of Afghanistan reported that the ‘old generation’ of teachers (educated before the jihad) complained about how the new generation teachers educated in Pakistani madrasas had brought back a stricter, more fundamentalist, interpretations of Islam.

Thoughts and ideas flow freely across borders. Thoughts and ideas conveyed through people, curricula and teaching material move almost exclusively one way from Pakistan to Afghanistan, however. Afghanistan has few ‘home-grown’ religious thinkers. Both the Islamists and the Taliban have borrowed many of their main ideological texts from foreign sources (Roy, 1995). Even during the ‘successful’ Taliban regime, there was little export of religious ideas from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Thirty years of wars have left Afghanistan without any famous centres of Islamic knowledge and teachings – places to educate the Afghan clergy. Some Pakistani madrasas – and more specifically teachers – have developed a good reputation among Afghan religious students, and some have been very influential in educating the Afghan clergy.

With close connections between some schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is clear that financial flows also exist.⁴⁶ In the 1980s - when foreign funding to the jihad was channelled through religio-political networks and parties in Pakistan - financial assistance went from Pakistan to ‘sister institutions’ in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the Deobandi parties and madrasas in Pakistan supported the Deobandi-based Taliban. Saudi Arabia and other patrons from the Gulf funded schools run by Islamic charities in Afghanistan. While these were banned from operating freely after 2001, it is likely that financial flows still exist between foreign financial backers and

⁴⁶ Financing is commonly considered a sensitive issue, which makes it more difficult to verify the flow of money.

some Afghan madrasas. From our case studies, we also know that Pakistani religious parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, still support 'Afghan madrasas' in Pakistan financially.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is easier to gain insight into funding from communities. Just as many madrasas are supported financially by their local communities, so do members of Afghan diaspora communities in different ways also contribute financially to their community madrasas 'back home'. Madrasas might be recipients of remittances from workers abroad, as is seen in one of the case studies presented below, where a 'typical' community madrasa located in a rural Pashtun area receives money from Afghan community members working in the Gulf. In another of the case studies, a religious school (*dar ul hifaz*) is funded by Afghan relatives of the owner who have settled in the USA. A third case shows that Afghan madrasas might raise money by travelling to Pakistan to request 'chanda'⁴⁷ from 'their' refugee community in Pakistan – that is, a madrasa in Wardak asks for donations from Wardak refugees settled in Pakistan.

Afghan Madrasas in Pakistan: Three Cases

Below we will examine the cases of three Afghan madrasas in Pakistan. What we call 'Afghan madrasas' are religious schools that have been established and run by Afghans, and that predominantly serve the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan and students coming from Afghanistan. While many of these schools were established during the jihad, the case studies indicate that Afghan madrasas continued to exist in Pakistan after 2001 and that new Afghan madrasas have been established since then. Today, these schools also attract Afghan students from Afghanistan and cater to the local Pakistani population living in the community. The three madrasas presented here show some of the diversity among the schools in terms of age, size and political links.

Case 1: A New Afghan-Pakistani Deobandi Madrasa

Located in Akora Khattak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this 'Afghan' madrasa is run by an Afghan and primarily caters for Afghan students. The madrasa was established by an Afghan religious scholar from Paktia in 2003 to offer religious education to Afghan students and to cater for the needs of the local refugee population. Akora Khattak has an estimated population of some 15,000, of whom approximately 10% are Afghan refugees. The madrasa has 125 students, of which 80 are boarding students. The majority are from south-eastern Afghanistan, mainly from the provinces of Paktia and Khost. A few students are Pakistani and live in the school's neighbourhood.

The madrasa belongs to the Pakistani Deobandi tradition. It is a private madrasa and is formally registered with the government of Pakistan and the Deobandi madrasa board, as is common in Pakistan. The curriculum is prescribed by the Deobandi madrasa board and based on the classic curriculum of *dars-e nizami* common for most South Asian madrasas. In addition, Urdu, English and computer skills are also taught. The school has four computers and a collection of over 300 books. The madrasa has ten teachers, all graduates from two of Pakistan's most famous and prestigious Deobandi madrasas: the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah and the Karachi Dar ul Uloom. These last two schools are run by well-known political actors, Sami ul Haq of the Jamiat Ulema e Islam (S) and the Mufti Muhammad Rafi Usmani. The founders were earlier associated with one

⁴⁷ 'Chanda' is a financial contribution that can be given at any time, and can be of any size. It was not common in Afghanistan before the war, but is a practice taken from Pakistan that has become common among returned refugees.

of the traditionalist political parties, the Khudam ul Furqan (KF), which joined Harakat-e Enqelab and later the Taliban, only to distance itself in late 2001.

As is common in the madrasas, schooling and boarding are offered free to the students. The school is mainly financed through community contributions, which include raw materials, money and the skins of animals sacrificed during *Hajj* and *eid ul adha*. The community also contributes *wazifa*, where the students go door to door asking for food. The madrasas have also received some financial and material support from the Deobandi madrasa board. Patterns of continued education are unclear, but links via teachers to the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah and Karachi are strong.

Case 2: A 'Fundamentalist Madrasa' in the Pakistani Deobandi Tradition

This madrasa is situated in a crowded street in the old city of Peshawar. It is two-storey building with a big yard attached to it. Today, the madras has about 580 students, all boys, and almost half living in residence at the school. The majority of the students are from Peshawar city, many from the local neighbourhood itself.

The madrasa was established by an Afghan religious scholar in 1990, at a time when many religious schools were being established in Pakistan. The owner is a graduate from the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah and was formerly associated with Harakat-e Enqelab, an Afghan Islamic traditionalist party. The school follows in the Pakistani Deobandi tradition and is an example of a 'political madrasa' with ties to Islamic fundamentalist political milieus in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The school seems well connected within Pakistan. Most of the teachers are graduates from the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah or the Dar ul Uloom Karachi, and more than half of the students continue higher studies at these schools. To prepare themselves for further studies, students visit Haqqaniah and Dar ul Uloom Karachi in their holidays. Besides some contacts with Afghanistan, the madrasa has few links with abroad.

The madrasa follows the curriculum prescribe by the Deobandi madras board – the classical *dars-e nizami* curriculum⁴⁸ – in combination with modern subjects like English and computer skills, prescribed by the Pakistani government. The madrasa offers courses for memorization of the Quran, studies leading to the *dastarbandi* ceremony, and a specialization in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Because the owner is Afghan, the madrasa experienced some problems with registration with the government at first. The madras is now registered with the government of Pakistan, has provided a list of students to the government and is following a curriculum recognized by the government. The madras has also received two computers from the government.

The madras is built on land donated by the community and is run on the basis of community contributions, including money, foods, cereals and clothes. The madrasa provides free education and board to its students. It receives no official support from the government or other bodies. The madrasa has good relations with the local community around it. Senior students work as imams in nearby mosques and teach religion to the local children, both girls and boys. The madrasa teachers and students have good relations in the local community and are often invited to take part in local wedding celebrations and funeral ceremonies. About 10% of the students are Afghans. Owing to the new visa requirements for Afghan students introduced under President Musharraf in 2001, Afghan students are registered on the basis of forged Pakistani identity papers.

⁴⁸ The subjects taught include *tafseer*, *hadith*, *usool-e-hadith*, *fiqh*, *usool-e-fiqh*, *sarf*, *nahwa*, *ma'ani*, *tajweed*, *meeraas*, *manteq*, memorization of the Quran.

Case 3: An Islamist Girls' High School in an Afghan Refugee Camp in Pakistan

This Islamic high school is located in a refugee camp established for Afghan refugees close to Peshawar in the late 1970s. Pakistani authorities allocated the different Afghan jihadi parties their own camps to control, and this camp has been controlled by Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar). Despite since being banned by the Pakistani government, the party still enjoys support from the people in the camp.

The school, established in 2002, is a simple two-storey building with eight rooms. The founder is a religious scholar from the Afghan province of Kunar, educated in madrasas in Kunar and in Swat in Pakistan. The school is private and has no relations with either the Afghan or the Pakistani government. It is registered with the education department of Hizb-e Islami and is supported by both Hizb-e Islami and the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami. The school also receives Arab funding through Hizb-e Islami.

This is an all-female school, with about 385 students. It has eight teachers, five male and three female. The teachers are graduates from different madrasas in Pakistan and were hired by the education department of Hizb-e Islami. The school is known as a 'ma'had', or 'Arab school'. The curriculum is inspired by Saudi Arabian salafi ideas and the curriculum used in Saudi Arabian madrasas.⁴⁹ Besides religious subjects, students also study *ahkaamul bahs* (principles of research) and practise debating and rhetoric. Entry to the school is competitive. All students must have high school certificates to gain admission, and also need to sit an entry exam. Some four-fifths of the students continue with higher studies after graduation, commonly at the Jamiah Asariah in Peshawar, which is linked to Ahl e Hadith.

The founder has good relations with local residents, who support the school and are happy to have a place for higher Islamic education for their daughters in their neighbourhood. The school has good relations with other religious scholars and madrasas in the area, and its male teachers participate in events at other schools. The school is free. It provides no accommodation and caters mainly to girls in the local area. Some of the students at this madrasa teach other girls in their homes during the school vacations.

Concluding Remarks

Afghans continue to seek religious education abroad, as they have done for centuries. The number of Afghan students studying at madrasas in Pakistan increased significantly during the many years of conflict starting in 1979, particularly among Afghan refugees settled in Pakistan. The Dar ul Uloom Deoband has influenced the Afghan religious education sector in two different ways: First, Afghan students have studied at the Dar ul Uloom Deoband, and the government of Afghanistan has relied on expertise from Deoband when establishing public madrasas in Afghanistan. Second, many of the private madrasas in Afghanistan have been associated with a Pakistani Deobandi tradition, some of which grew increasingly political and militant during the Afghanistan jihad in the 1980s.

The politicization of religion during the Afghan jihad is clearly reflected in the growth and development of the madrasas sector. The contribution to the rise and growth of the Taliban

⁴⁹ The subjects taught include *Tafseer*, Translation of Holy Quran, Islamic Culture, *Shash Ketab*, *Uloom Hadith*, *Qudoree*, *Hadithul Ahkaam*, *Usool-e-Fiqh*, Arabic (Bain Yadaik), Nahwaul Wazih, Sarf, Aqaed, Fiqa Asaan, Tajweed, Kitabul Bahs (Arabic), *Aayatul Ahkaam*, *Usool-e-Tadrees*, *Siratul Nabi*, History of Khalafai Rashedeen. There are no opportunities for research studies in any specific fields.

movement by certain Deobandi madrasas demonstrates ties between madrasas, radicalization and militancy. However, these ties are personal rather than institutional. Association with 'Deoband' does not in itself signify radical attitudes. Apolitical madrasas exist also among the Deobandi schools, neither supporting the current government nor the militant Islamic opposition.

The reasons for why Afghans seek education abroad are more complex than is often suggested. Not only the availability, but the quality and reputation of the religious education offered are important when Afghan students decide whether to study abroad. Transnational networks are built around personal relationships, based on loyalty between students and teachers, rather than formal institutional contacts and arrangements; they include the flow of people, ideas and financial resources. The movement of people is mostly from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Afghan students return to Afghanistan as religious teachers and scholars, bringing with them new networks, knowledge and ideological inspirations.

4 Madrasas, Radicalization and Links to Militancy

Frequent claims of links between Pakistani madrasas and militancy in media and policy reports have caused many Afghan government and civil society actors to express strong concerns about the influence of Pakistani madrasas on Afghan youth (Borchgrevink, 2007). Pakistani madrasas are seen as ‘hate factories’⁵⁰ that ‘brainwash students and teach them religious extremism, armed jihad and hatred against the government in Afghanistan and the West’.⁵¹ This has placed the issue of madrasa education on the agenda of the Afghan government, informing its recent religious education reform initiative, which is aimed at curbing radicalization and recruitment to radical groups.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between Pakistani madrasas and militancy (Siddique, 2009b; Fair, 2008). Much less is known about the links to Afghanistan and the actual role madrasas play in recruitment to the Taliban and other militant groups operating in Afghanistan today.⁵² If the aim of reform of the Afghan madrasa sector is to curb the spread of radical ideas among Afghan youth, and to stop recruitment to militant groups, greater understanding of how madrasas contribute to radicalization and recruitment is essential. Drawing on existing literature, this section will take a closer look at the alleged links between madrasa education, radicalization, and links to militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵³ We will look at links between madrasas in Pakistan and radicalization and recruitment to militancy in Afghanistan especially, seeking to identify the roles madrasas play in this context.

Madrasas as Recruitment Venues

That Pakistani madrasas have been used as recruitment grounds for the Taliban since the early 1990s is well established (Rashid, 2000; Zahab & Roy, 2004). But, how important are madrasas in the recruitment to militant groups today? From existing studies of the Taliban and other Islamic networks (Zahab & Roy, 2004; Giustozzi, 2008, 2009) and of the relationship between madrasas and militancy (Siddique, 2009b; UNAMA, 2007; Fair, 2008), we can distinguish some main mobilization and recruitment paths, three of which involve religio-political environments: (1) recruitment of madrasa students in Pakistan and Afghanistan; (2) recruitment locally by local mullahs or through mullah networks; and (3) recruitment through religio-political parties and groups both locally and internationally.⁵⁴ Other recruitment paths are (4) through kin and community; and (5) through regular schools or universities.

⁵⁰ For instance, Afghanistan’s ambassador to the USA, Said Tayeb Jawad, described Pakistan’s madrasas as ‘hate factories’ to *Military.com* on 19 June 2007; see <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/06.20.2007embnewsmilitary.com.html> (accessed 21 May 2010).

⁵¹ Gulab Mangal, governor of Helmand province, speaking to Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN, 2009).

⁵² Three main insurgent groups make up the Afghan resistance to the current government and its foreign supporters. These are the Taliban Quetta Shura, headed by Mullah Omar, the Haqqani network, headed by Jalaluddin Haqqani and based in North Waziristan, and the Afghan Islamist political party Hizb-e Islami, headed by former jihadi commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

⁵³ This section is primarily based on existing literature, particularly reports by the United Nations Afghanistan Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA, 2007); Giustozzi (2008, 2009) Siddique (2008, 2009b) ICG (2002, 2005, 2007, 2009); Fair (2008, 2007); Zahab & Roy (2004).

⁵⁴ Including Afghan groups such as Hizb-e Islami, but also Al-Qaeda, Hizb ut Tahrir and the ‘Pakistani militant hub’ (Roy, 2001).

After the Taliban's clerical regime was overthrown during the US-led invasion of 2001, it did not take long before what has been called the neo-Taliban launched a new insurgency against the 'foreign infidel occupiers'. According to Giustozzi (2008), the Taliban regrouped and started their remobilization in 2002, recruiting volunteers from Afghan refugee camps, mosques, social gatherings – and madrasas – in the Pashtun areas around Quetta in Pakistan (Giustozzi, 2008: 37). These efforts contributed 'to provide an inexhaustible flow of new recruits as many Afghan families continued to send their children to study there' (at the madrasas in Pakistan)' (Giustozzi, 2008: 38).⁵⁵ The links between the Taliban and certain Deobandi madrasas remain strong, particularly among certain networks in the Tribal Areas and some radical Deobandi schools with links to militant groups spread across Pakistan.

The Frontier Madrasas

Ties between the Taliban and madrasas in the Afghan–Pakistan border areas were strengthened during the time of Taliban rule in Kabul (1996–2001). The Taliban drew young madrasa students into their ranks as fighters and commanders, establishing networks and bonds of loyalty between the militants and religious scholars and teachers (Haroon, 2008). Madrasas in the Tribal Areas known to have educated many of the new generation of Taliban are still headed by local supporters of central Taliban commanders, including the Jamia Dar ul Uloom Waziristan,⁵⁶ the Madrasa Gulshanul Uloom⁵⁷ and the Khalifa Madrasa near Miramshah, the latter two both in North Waziristan (Haroon, 2007: 211). Waziristan – and particularly madrasas associated with the Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani (the 'Haqqani network') – has been singled out as one of the most important recruitment grounds for individuals carrying out suicide attacks in Afghanistan (UNAMA, 2007: 66).

Radical Deobandi Schools

The Taliban is also drawing from existing networks among associates and sympathizers in Deobandi madrasas elsewhere in Pakistan. As described in Section 3, above, the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah played a key role in the mobilization of the Taliban in the 1990s by providing thousands of volunteers for the Afghan Taliban (Rashid, 2000; Zahab & Roy, 2004). It is still one of the most influential Deobandi madrasas linked to the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (S), and its leader, Mawlana Sami ul Haq, is a vocal sympathizer of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Other Pakistani Deobandi madrasas popular with Afghan students – such as the Binori Town madrasa in Karachi headed by Dr Abdur-Razzaq Iskander and the Khair ul Madaris in Multan, headed by Qari Jalandhry – have been instrumental in the mobilization and recruitment of students to radical political groups and their military wings, such as Jamat ud Dawa (JD),⁵⁸ Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)⁵⁹ and Jaish-e Muhammed (JeM),⁶⁰ as well as various Pakistani jihadi groups

⁵⁵ Giustozzi (2008: 38–39) explains this in terms of the lack of well-reputed madrasas in Afghanistan, and the attractive conditions offered by the Pakistani madrasas: 'The absence of prestigious madrasas in Afghan territory and financially advantageous conditions offered by some madrasas convinced Afghan families to send their children across the border.'

⁵⁶ Nek Muhammed, the Taliban's main commander in South Waziristan (until his death in 2004) studied for five years at the Jamia Dar ul Uloom, Waziristan.

⁵⁷ The madrasa was destroyed by Pakistani security personnel in March 2006; see Gul (2006).

⁵⁸ Jamat ul Dawa (earlier known as Lashkar e Tayyiba until that organization was banned in 2002) was an offshoot of the Markaz Da'wa wal Irshad, ideologically affiliated with Ahl e Hadith Wahabism. Funders studied in Saudi Arabia.

⁵⁹ Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan is a militant Sunni sectarian group, established in the early 1980s by Mawlana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. The group has been implicated in several militant attacks particularly targeting Pakistani Shia. The organization is banned in Pakistan.

operating mainly in Pakistan and Kashmir, but also in Afghanistan (Zahab & Roy, 2004). These madrasas are examples of famous Pakistani madrasas whose leaderships have close connections to militant groups. As discussed in Section 2, above, individual relations and loyalties are more important than formal institutional associations. Certain madrasas serve as a physical 'organizational base' for militant activity (Zahab & Roy, 2004), and function as a "gathering" place where militants, religious ideologues and potential recruits can interact' (Fair, 2007: 108). From these 'madrasa bases', volunteers are recruited to militant training and operations, including suicide attacks inside Afghanistan.

It is difficult to determine whether other madrasas actually function as training camps for militants, or whether the madrasas are mainly recruitment venues. During the 1980s, some of the frontier madrasas acted as bases for both military and religious training (Haroon, 2007: 204). Reports are still made of Afghan and Pakistani youth attend training camps in tribal areas. Pakistani militant groups, including Lashkar e Tayyiba and Jaish-e Muhammed, are known to have 'bases' at which one can find both madrasas and training camps, such as the Lashkar e Tayyiba Markaz near Muzaffarabad in Pakistani Kashmir (Siddique, 2009b).

Recruitment to Suicide Missions in Afghanistan

The anti-government insurgency in Afghanistan intensified in 2004, and since 2005 has seen a sharp rise in the use of specialized attacks, including suicide missions. There is no history of using suicide attacks in the Afghan jihad before the first such attack in 2001.⁶¹ Since then, however, there has been a steady increase in the use of this method, with as many as 123 suicide attacks being perpetrated in 2006 (UNAMA, 2007: 3). Yet, the method is not commonly accepted among either Afghan ulema⁶² or ordinary Afghans, and there are no suicide cults celebrating the martyrdom of Afghan suicide attackers, unlike those seen in Palestine and increasingly in Pakistan.⁶³

Who Are the Suicide Attackers?

The identity of suicide attackers is often hard to determine. The Afghan government and general public seem to be of the opinion that suicide attackers are foreigners, because suicide missions are 'culturally unacceptable to Afghans'. However, as pointed out by Hekmat Karzai (2006), such claims can be seen as part of a cultural reductionist argument explaining how Afghan youth are being trained – or brainwashed – in Pakistani madrasas. While Afghan police, intelligence

⁶⁰ Established in 2000 by Mawlana Masood Azhar after his release from prison in India, the Jaish-e Muhammed (JeM) has focused its main activities on the 'liberation of Kashmir'. JeM has been held responsible for the 13 December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi and has been banned in Pakistan since 2002. JeM is associated with the Deobandi schools of thought and is known to have support among the leadership of some central Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan.

⁶¹ The military commander of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah Masood, was killed by a suicide attack on 9 September 2001.

⁶² Suicide (*intahari*) is forbidden in Islam. The legality of becoming a martyr (*estish'hadi*) through a suicide mission is a contested and highly debated subject. A number of prominent Islamic institutions and religious leaders have issued fatwa against the use of suicide, including Al-Azhar and Dar ul Uloom Deoband. Mawlavi Hassan Jan, a highly respected Afghan Islamic scholar based at the Dar ul Uloom in Peshawar, was killed shortly after the issuing of the fatwa against suicide attacks, some believe as a direct consequence of issuing the fatwa.

⁶³ In Afghanistan, only 9% believe that suicide is 'always or sometime' justified as a means of waging jihad. In comparison, 70% support suicide missions in Palestine (Fair, 2008: 71nn11–12).

officers, foreign military personnel and UNAMA in the southern provinces are also of the opinion that the majority of the attackers are from Pakistan, or Afghans trained in Pakistan, many experts do seem to believe that perpetrators of suicide attacks in Afghanistan are increasingly of Afghan origin (UNAMA, 2007: 66). Profiles of suicide attackers made by UNAMA (2007: 6) portray the typical perpetrator as ‘young, uneducated and often drawn from madaris (madrasas) across the border in Pakistan’.

Exploring the connection between madrasas and militancy in Pakistan, Christine Fair (2008) analyses recruitment in terms of the types of activities and groups to which madrasa students are recruited. Fair posits that the theatre of operation defines the type of recruit required. More sophisticated and difficult missions require more highly skilled executors, while softer targets require less-qualified recruits. According to Fair (2008: 71–72), ‘Afghanistan has been a relatively easy theatre in which to operate ... before 2005 when the tactics of insurgents in Afghanistan began to evolve rapidly’.⁶⁴ The low levels of popular support for suicide among Afghans may indicate that it is difficult to find recruits for suicide missions. If militant groups are not in a position to select highly qualified candidates, they may select the best candidates available. For groups such as the Taliban, religiously motivated students may be the best candidates available. Fair concludes that although links between madrasas and militancy in Pakistan are ‘not observed beyond a handful of well-known and notorious madaris with historical connections to jihad’ (Fair, 2007: 116), many madrasas in fact ‘play a critical role in the insurgency in Afghanistan, especially in relation to suicide attackers operating there’ (Fair, 2008: 2).

Religious Scholars and Clerical Networks

In their various capacities as imams of mosques and principals and teachers at madrasas, religious scholars also play a role in recruitment to militant groups. Religious leaders use their position to call for jihad, but also to encourage and recruit individual *mujahedin* (holy warriors) or *estish’hadi* (those who will become martyrs). A case from the UNAMA (2007: 74) study reports how Amir – aged 15, born in Pakistan to an Afghan family from Gardez – was recruited for a suicide mission by a local mullah. Clerical networks are often the only ‘supra-communitarian network’ existing in many areas (Giustozzi, 2008: 44). This gives them a crucial role in promoting collective action beyond the community level. Post-2001, the first clerical networks that supported the neo-Taliban insurgency were in Zabul in 2003 (ibid). Clerics preaching jihad against the Afghan government and its foreign supporters have since been heard at mosques across the country (Borchgrevink, 2007).

Not all religious networks are supportive of the Taliban or violent jihad. Particularly in some areas with strong Sufi networks, such as in Paktika and Khost, the clergy remained unsupportive of the Taliban until 2006 (Giustozzi, 2008: 45). Clergy that are openly unsupportive of the Taliban are in a vulnerable position, however. The Taliban has actively – through persuasion or coercion – removed or co-opted existing religious authorities (Borchgrevink, 2007). Clergy unsupportive of the Taliban are threatened. Religious leaders have been killed, while mosques have been bombed and madrasas threatened.⁶⁵

Yet, it is not only religious authorities that are targeted by the Taliban. By killing tribal leaders and elders, the militants effectively break down old tribe- and kin-based loyalties. This makes it possible for new authorities to take over the traditional position of the elders. In this way, the

⁶⁴ Suicide attackers in Afghanistan are not as highly skilled as suicide attackers elsewhere, such as Palestine, and cause fewer deaths per attack that is the case in other places (Fair, 2008: 71).

⁶⁵ Interview with madrasa personnel in Wardak, 2008.

militant groups have taken control over local communities, particularly in the tribal areas in the Pakistan and Afghan border areas.

Religio-Political Parties and Groups

Afghan militant groups also have their own religious schools. The anti-government Afghan Islamist party Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar) calling for militant actions in Afghanistan, recruits both in Afghanistan and among the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan through schools and political offices. Despite being banned in Pakistan, Hizb-e Islami still has an extensive network of schools in Pakistan, such as in the Shamshato Refugee Camp (Marzban, 2007). According to a UNAMA (2007: 69) study, recruitment to militancy in Afghanistan also happens through the Hizb-e Islami in Pakistan. This is illustrated by the case of ‘Tahir’, aged 23, of Afghan origin, who grew up in the Shamshato Refugee Camp near Peshawar, which is known as a ‘Hizb-e Islami camp’. ‘Tahir’ was not a suicide bomber himself, but a member of a Hizb-e Islami group organizing an attack. According to the informant, the group is so well known that they do not need to actively look for new recruits, as young Afghan men from Jalalabad, Kunar and Gardez approach the office in Peshawar on their own initiative (UNAMA, 2007: 73).

Pakistani jihadi militant groups, such as Jaish-e Muhammed, are also known to rally support for the jihad in Afghanistan. One example given by Siddique (2009a) is the JeM’s use of a madrasa student to speak to his peers at the JeM conference in Bahawalpur in April 2008, a religious conference gathering thousands of JeM sympathizers – among them many madrasa students.

Recruitment Through Regular Schools and Universities

Religious schools are not the only place for recruitment to radical political groups. Educational institutions in general are socialization arenas, both in terms of the ideas imparted in class and as arenas for collective action, including mobilization and recruitment to political activity. Not unlike universities elsewhere, the University of Kabul has historically been an important recruitment ground for political activists. In the 1960s, both communists and Islamists recruited among university students and faculty. At the time of writing, Kabul University is again an arena for student politics, including recruitment to Hizb-e Islami and Hizb ut Tahrir (Giustozzi, 2010).

Socialization to Intolerance?

If not directly recruiting fighters and suicide attackers, do the madrasas play a role in creating support for radical ideas and violent actions – or ‘socialize to intolerance’? Socialization to intolerance is another concern frequently raised in the madrasa literature (Leirvik, 2008; ICG, 2007). The traditional madrasa – offering board and lodging for its students – is based on a model developed in the Middle Ages whereby the provision of education, health and other services is part of what constitutes an ideal Islamic society (Hefner, 2007). Some of the larger madrasas are still built on this model. These schools represent closed environments, where the students have little interaction with the outside world. Pakistani madrasas such as Jamia ul Uloom Islami Binori Town, Dar ul Uloom Binoria, and Jamia Dar ul Uloom Korangi, all in Karachi, are examples of madrasas that are built as ideal Islamic societies, where schooling, health facilities and other social services are found within the same compound. Like other types of boarding schools, these closed-environment madrasas may be more liable to promote distinct, and sometimes sectarian, worldviews. The Jamia ul Uloom Islami Binori Town, in particular, is criticized for cutting its students off from the rest of the outside world, for promoting distinct sectarian views, and for recruiting to militant Islamic groups, including Jaish-e Muhammed (ICG, 2007: 7). It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which madrasa education contributes to radicalization or whether

families that send their children already adhere to more radical ideologies. Drawing on the work of Andarabi et al. (2005), Fair (2008) posits that religion or ideology may be a more important factor for the 25% of the madrasa-sending households that send all their children to madrasas, than for the remaining 75% of madrasa-sending families, which apply a 'mixed strategy', sending only one child to a madrasa and the rest to other government or private schools. This could be an indication that families with strong religious beliefs are more likely to enrol their children in madrasas in the first place, and that, in terms of ideology, there is a correlation between a family's existing ideology and madrasa enrolment. If so, madrasa socialization may not be the main force driving radical attitudes. Still, even students from families with strong religious beliefs may become socialized into a more radical or militant direction in a madrasa influenced by such ideas.

Giustozzi (2008) argues that, by bringing students from various places together, madrasas contribute to the creation of new identities and loyalties among students, identities that go beyond kin and solidarity groups. This, however, is not particular to madrasas: regular schools and universities with mixed student bodies share this characteristic, and madrasas are not alone in teaching intolerance. A survey of attitudes among Pakistani students conducted by Tariq Rahman (2004) finds that the attitudes towards jihad and the use of violence among students and teachers in government schools are not that different from those of students and teachers in madrasas, indicating that the prevalence of such attitudes may reflect a more general trend in Pakistani society, and not be exclusive to madrasa education. Contrary to common conceptions, few Islamic militants have a background from madrasas; most come from regular secular schools and universities (UNAMA, 2007). This has also been the case with militant Islamic groups in Afghanistan. The Taliban and neo-fundamentalists operating in Afghanistan present a counter-example to this, however. Madrasas seem to play a more significant role in cross-border mobilization for militant action in Afghanistan (Fair, 2008).

Radicalization in Islamic politics must be seen in the light of local, regional and international political developments. Religio-political developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan have made the madrasa a vehicle for the promotion not only of sectarian worldviews, but also of specific ideologies and political agendas. This is reflected in the teachings of extra-curricular material in the schools. That certain madrasas teach their students to see the world in largely dualistic terms – 'Islam against the West' or 'believers against unbelievers' – is hardly surprising in view of the current political discourse. Noor, Sikand & Van Bruinessen (2008: 12) point out that even the radical madrasas must be understood in relation to the specific context in which they are located, and that 'the militancy they espouse may have less to do with the madrasa-system as such as with the specific political factors at the local or international level'. The fundamentalists and global jihadists have grown more similar to each other. While traditionalist and fundamentalist religious leaders opposed the modern ideas of the Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s, some of them are now using the same arguments as the global jihadists. The rhetoric of 'Islam against the West' or 'holy war against imperialist occupiers' is heard from actors belonging to very different Islamic traditions and ideological positions (Roy, 2001). It would be wrong to see radical madrasas as representative of all madrasas. In their study of political activism and transnational linkages among madrasas in Asia, Noor, Sikand & Van Bruinessen (2008: 11) find that the majority of madrasas are 'concerned mainly with the transmission of the Islamic scholarly tradition, and remaining aloof from political involvement'.

BOX 3: Jihadi media

Mobilization for jihad against foreign forces in Afghanistan – particularly against the United States - is well documented as part of the rhetoric and mobilization material used by Pakistani radical groups (Siddiqui, 2009). Audio visual materials such as cassette tapes, DVDs and VCDs speaking hatred, calling for jihad and celebrating the martyrdom of victims of the international military present in Afghanistan are easily available and inexpensive (Karzai, 2006). Even more easily available are sms and mms sent on mobile phones. Short video messages showing maltreatment of Guantanamo detainees and desecration of the Quran is rapidly circulated by mms. So are pictures of new martyrs of the jihad, the last wills of suicide bombers and pictures of civilian casualties. The Internet has offered access and means to share information: chat rooms for discussions and u-tube as an archive for ‘taranas’, or chants, in praise of jihad, holy warriors and martyrs, and other jihadi-videos. It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which jihadi literature and the use of new media actually contributes to radical action.

Links to International ‘Terrorism’

At the extreme, transnational religious space is used as a foundation for challenging the current regime, as well as the ongoing state-building project. The challenge to the state comes primarily from the Taliban, which uses safe ground in Pakistan and is closely integrated into networks and institutions that span the boundary between the two countries, as well as forming part of larger webs throughout the Islamic world. However, the Taliban does not challenge the idea of an Afghan state, unlike Al-Qaeda and some Islamist movements that promote the idea of one state entity for the whole *umma*, the global community of Muslims. Globalist Islamism is barely found in Afghanistan. Hence, politico-religious threats against the Afghan state rely on transnational opportunities for their operation, but do not challenge the existence of an Afghan state.

Links between Pakistani and Afghan madrasas and international terrorist attacks are also weak (UNAMA, 2007). In a study of the links between Pakistani madrasas and militant jihadism, Siddique (2009b) concludes that madrasas in Pakistan to various degrees are linked to local and regional forms of militancy, including ‘cross-border raids into Afghanistan’.⁶⁶ Pakistani madrasas are used as entry points for international jihadists on their way to training or fighting in Afghanistan. It is rare, however, for foreign jihadists to have a long-term stay in a madrasa (Roy, 2001). Visits are often limited to weeks and therefore cannot be seen as a catalyst for radical action in itself. In the opinion of Roy (2001), a stay in a training camp in Afghanistan has become something of an ‘initiation rite’ for the globalist jihadist.

The Madrasa–Militancy Link

The relationship between madrasas and militancy is complex. From the above, we can identify five types of links that can be observed between some Pakistani madrasas and militant groups: (1) a madrasa can play a role in recruitment; (2) a madrasa can function as an ‘organizational base’; (3) a madrasa can be used as a ‘transit point’ for militants; (4) the leadership of a madrasa can have close links to militant groups; and (5) a madrasa can provide military training facilities.

Qandeel Siddique (2009b: 47) argues that, lacking mainstream education, madrasa graduates are unlikely to be attractive to international terrorist groups, but that madrasas may ‘foster conditions

⁶⁶ In a recent study, Siddique (2009b) identifies four types of jihad and their relation to madrasas in Pakistan: links between Pakistani madrasas and (1) cross-border jihad; (2) attacks on the Pakistani state and security apparatus; (3) global jihadi groups; and (4) sectarianism in Pakistan.

that are conducive to public support for terrorism'. Fair (2007: 118), on the other hand, warns that Pakistani madrasas that 'combine religious curriculum with secular subjects could produce competent militant candidates'.

It seems that recruitment of Taliban fighters through madrasas is most common in the border areas, which are also the Taliban's traditional recruitment ground, and in certain madrasas elsewhere in Pakistan with links to the Taliban or other militant groups. However, it is difficult to demonstrate clearly that the direct *link between recruitment to militancy and madrasas* is particularly significant. As discussed above, recruitment takes place in many different ways, of which the madrasa is but one. In Taliban-controlled areas, the Taliban recruit everywhere – from madrasas, but also from mosques and by going from house to house.

Concluding Remarks

Links between certain Pakistani madrasas and militant groups are well established both historically and today. Some madrasas are used by militant religio-political groups to create popular support for their distinct versions of Islam, to forward particular political agendas, and to recruit to their militant groups and actions. Recruitment happens in a number of different ways: through madrasas, through religious leaders and networks, through radical groups, but also through family and kin networks, and through regular educational institutions such as government schools and universities.

Some of the Deobandi political madrasas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly the Dar ul Uloom Haqqaniah and associated schools, contributed substantially to the formation of the Taliban, and still support the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Deobandi madrasas in the tribal areas – particularly the Haqqani network – play a role in recruitment to suicide missions, as well as in recruitment to the ranks of the Taliban. Certain other Pakistani madrasas have well-established links to militant groups and are part of transnational networks that recruit Pakistani and Afghan madrasa students to militant groups operating in Afghanistan. Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the tribal areas have provided a safe haven for both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, as well as Al-Qaeda militants and other non-tribal Pakistani jihadi groups. Despite the differences in origins and motivations of the various militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it seems this development has contributed to deepening the links between these groups since 2001.

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 outside of politics and focused on providing religious education to their students.

5 Religious Education Reform

When the previous minister of education Hanif Atmar gave his inaugural speech to the Afghan parliament in 2006, the issue of madrasa education was central. By stressing the importance of improving Islamic education for Afghan youth inside Afghanistan, he won support among Afghan nationalists, as well as a range of Islamic traditionalists, fundamentalists and Islamists. Although the reasons and motivations differ for their support differed, this nevertheless indicated that importance is placed on religious education across the political spectrum.

The question of ‘madrasa reform’ brings out the diverging views on the role of religion in education, and the value of religious education in itself more broadly. Reform in the religious education sector raises important questions concerning the independence of religious institutions and the role of the government in religious affairs. That the religious education sector in Afghanistan is in need of change is a concern shared by many within the government and the madrasa sector. The question is what this change should entail, and how it can best be brought about.

This section will take a closer look at the government of Afghanistan’s initiative to reform religious education in Afghanistan since 2001. It will present the government’s plans and activities, consider reactions to the initiative among from the clergy, and discuss the challenges and opportunities to reform in the light of those reactions.

Background to Reform

After nearly three decades of armed conflict, much of the Afghan education sector was in ruins. This made education one of the main priorities in the reconstruction of the country after 2001.⁶⁷ Enhancing school enrolment, construction of new school buildings, printing of schoolbooks and teacher training have been among the government’s top priorities, heavily supported by the donor community.⁶⁸ Under the new Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from 2004, education is to be ‘consistent with the tenets of Islam’, and the responsibility of the Ministry of Education is extended to the operation of madrasas and the integration of religious and faith-based education in the overall system (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a: 37).

Article 17 of the 2004 Afghan Constitution further states that ‘the state shall adopt necessary measures to foster education at all levels, develop religious teachings, regulate and improve the conditions of mosques, religious schools as well as religious centers’. Yet, Islamic education was first given attention in 2006, when the minister of education – having secured his support in the parliament – presented the National Education Strategic Plan for Afghanistan (1385–1389).

The National Education Strategic Plan stipulates the government’s involvement in religious education in two main ways: first, through the inclusion of religious subjects (*Islamiyat*) in the regular school curriculum; and, second, through the purely religious education imparted through

⁶⁷ Education is recognized as being ‘among the most critical investments in Afghanistan’ in ‘Securing Afghanistan’s Future’, a government of Afghanistan/International Agency report; see Government of Afghanistan (2004).

⁶⁸ ‘The education sector has received limited donor support in view of the centrality of education in securing Afghanistan’s future. This imbalance urgently needs to be addressed to attain universal access to primary education over the longer term’; see Government of Afghanistan (2004: 14).

official government *dar ul hifazes* and madrasas. With this plan, the government set out ‘to develop a quality modern national curriculum for primary and secondary schools based on Islamic principles and values that will meet national, regional and International standards’. ‘Islamic education’ was included as a separate section within the plan, the overall aim being ‘to develop a modern, Islamic education system, based on principles of inclusion and tolerance for all Afghans’.

The Government Strategy

Both the content and the quality of madrasa education have been the subject of debate and criticism among Afghan and foreign media. On one side are issues related to the quality and relevance of the religious education offered; on the other, issues related to the government’s lack control over the sector, and particularly the fear of Pakistani madrasas radicalizing Afghan youth.

BOX 4: Ministry of Education National Education Strategic Plan 1385–1389:

Programme 5: Islamic Education

Overall Goal: To develop a modern broad-based Islamic education system for all Afghans.

Principal targets:

- Develop a modern curriculum for Islamic education.
- Provide access to modern Islamic education for 90,000 students across the country by 1389.
- Establish a national cadre of qualified Islamic educators.
- Establish and equip centers of excellence in Islamic education with access for girls and boys in each province.

Source: Ministry of Education, Afghanistan (2006a:17)

To meet these challenges, the Ministry of Education has devised an ambitious strategy to regulate and reform Afghan madrasas and address the question of their transnational links.⁶⁹ The government aims to improve the quality of religious education through curriculum reform, teacher training and the provision of teaching materials; to increase access to religious education in Afghanistan by building and equipping new schools across the country; and to enhance government oversight and control by registration of all madrasas with the government and certification of private madrasas.

Curriculum Reform

Outdated curricula of little relevance to today’s world and inefficient teaching methods focusing on memorization and rote learning in Arabic – a language with which few of the students are

⁶⁹ The main documents are ‘Ministry of Education National Education Strategic Plan 1385–1389’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a) and the ‘Strategy for the Development of Afghanistan’s Centres of Excellence: Model Schools for a Holistic Education’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006b).

familiar – are among the oft-heard critiques. Outdated curricula and teaching methods are seen as producing religious graduates who lack the necessary religious training or relevant skills to find employment in today's society, as well as contributing to an overproduction of 'mullahs'. The low quality of religious education is also seen, by the same critics, as leaving Afghanistan without knowledgeable and trustworthy religious leaders. According to this view, Afghanistan needs of a new cadre of religious scholars; madrasas need a new set of teachers; and the country requires a new cadre of Afghan-trained mullahs and ulema, teaching a moderate 'official' version of Islam. With its 'Strategy for the Development of Afghanistan's Centers of Excellence – Model Schools for a Holistic Education', the government aims to ensure that 'all graduates from the Centers of Excellence and particularly the Islamic education students are equipped with economically relevant marketable skills, allowing them to seek gainful employment upon graduation' (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006b: 8).

However, both the content and the quality of religious education are issues of debate and contention. There are disagreements over the content, where some – particularly in the government – would like a standardized broader curriculum, including more secular 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 and sects (*maslaq*). This reflects a more general divide in Afghan politics and public debate, between modernized moderate Islamic voices and secularists, on the one side,⁷⁰ and the more conservative religious establishment, in its various expressions, on the other. In terms of both curricula and pedagogical methods, education has to do with worldviews, with moral values and codes, and with heritage and tradition. The debate is not new. Historically, religious education reform has caused considerable controversy in Afghanistan, as seen, for example, in the clergy's resistance to the introduction of secular education by King Amanullah in the 1920s (Olesen, 1995). The religious milieu has resisted state interference and attempts to control religious matters that are seen as being outside the purview of the state. As pointed out by Evans (2006: 14), 'madrasahs as a whole are designed to transmit a religious tradition, and their independence is a core part of their identity'. 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. Curriculum reform, if imposed from above, could create a backlash. One of the greatest challenges to reform will likely be to amend the curriculum in a way that is acceptable to the different religious schools, including the private ones that have been unaffected by previous curriculum reforms.

Registration and Certification

Lack of government oversight is another issue often raised by critics of madrasa education, as well as an area of concern for the government. The government has had little influence and oversight in relation to the madrasa sector, particularly the private schools. While some schools have well-established study courses, curricula and highly educated teachers, others are less well organized. There have been no rules for who can establish a private madrasa, no criteria for curricula, and no means for ensuring the qualifications of the teachers. Registration of madrasas in a central government registry is part of the new measures introduced. Registration of madrasas with the government has formed part of Pakistan's madrasa reform initiatives. In Pakistan, however, the registration measure has been met with scepticism and resistance by the madrasas, and has been seen as a means of getting oversight and control over students, teachers, curriculum and finances

⁷⁰ According to an article in the *New Statesman*, 'Palwasha Kakar, a gender expert who has been researching in Afghanistan for two years, fears that the government's plans will backfire', because 'madrasas are so easily co-opted by the mullah system, by the Taliban system or Taliban-like ideas' (Burton, 2006).

(Bano, 2007b). Measures to register and regulate the private madrasa sector could also be met with scepticism –or rejection – by private schools in Afghanistan.

Transnational Challenges

Related to the lack of government oversight or control is the issue of religious education abroad, and threats of radicalization in foreign madrasas. In the words of Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, the Speaker of the Upper House of the Afghan parliament and a former jihadi leader: ‘In Pakistan some of our students are studying religious subjects and they have been also trained for terrorism.... If we have enough madrassas in Afghanistan, there will be no need for students to go to Pakistan. They will study here and real moderate Islam will be taught to them’ (cited in Loyn, 2008).

Besides providing Afghan children with high-quality religious education and educating a qualified cadre of Islamic scholars and teachers, the aim of the strategy is to make official religious education available for Afghans ‘at home’, so that Afghan youth do not need to travel abroad for religious schooling. Transnational religious actors and their institutions are increasingly seen as a threat to state sovereignty (Haynes, 2001). The Afghan state, wishing to bring religious education of its citizens under its own control, is no exception. Among the targets for where the ministry of education wants to be in 1389 are listed: ‘Madrasas teaching hatred and violence are no longer part of the system and Afghans are provided with broad-based Islamic education in-country’ and ‘cross-border madrasas are no longer part of the Afghan system’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006b: 2). The ministry’s strategy is clearly guided by a fear of madrasas teaching violence and hatred, as well as of radicalization of Afghan youth in Pakistani madrasas. The strategy presents a vision of an Afghan Islamic education system without any contacts across the border to Pakistan. Through regulation and reform, the government is seeking to enhance its oversight over the madrasa sector and what is taught in the schools, and to reduce the number of Afghan students seeking religious education from madrasas in Pakistan. In this sense, the government strategy can be read as part of the current nation-building project, which makes it essential to contain the religious education sector within the country’s national borders.

In an interview in 2008, the education minister at the time, Hanif Atmar, told the BBC: ‘We are critical of policies in the past. Actually it was a result of those policies to exclude these madrassas, keep them on the margin of the society, and then entirely hand them over to the fundamentalists’ (cited in Loyn, 2008). According to the government, the programme proposed by the ministry of education is ‘more than just an educational programme – it is a security programme’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006b: 2). A set of specific measures are designed to deal with what the government describes as the ‘rogue private madrasas’ in the sector and ‘to curb madrasa relation across the border in Pakistan and Iran’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a:76). These include regulating the use of certificates from foreign madrasas and evaluating foreign-educated students through examinations. Today, it is necessary for students to sit an exam at the Faculty of Sharia in Kabul if they wish to have their foreign degrees recognized by the government. Recognition of degrees and certificates from private madrasas and religious educational institutions abroad is also an issue of considerable importance to Afghan madrasas and religious students. In Pakistan, too, the issue of recognition of religious degrees is a central demand of the madrasas (b, 2007). A process of approval for private and foreign degrees could be used as a means to gain greater insight into the curriculum and teachings at the private madrasas and to influence students in their choice of school.

Improving State Capacity

Enhancing Afghan capacity to cater for religious students in Afghanistan is the key thrust of the government strategy. Afghan Education Minister Hanif Atmar declared on 23 August 2006: ‘We will build a pure Islamic education system in our country ... once the estimated \$30 million project is completed, there will be no need for Afghans to seek Islamic education abroad’ (RFE/RL, 2006). The focus on improving state capacity in delivering religious education shows that the government is cognizant of the value placed on religious education among people in Afghan society. In this study, we have found that students and parents choose madrasa education because they value religious education in itself. Religious education is seen as more culturally appropriate and grants a family considerable prestige (see Section 2).

What is less clear is whether this strategy of providing religious education in Afghanistan actually will stop students from going to Pakistan. As discussed earlier (see Section 3), interviews with Afghan graduates from Pakistani madrasas revealed that the reputation of a particular school is all-important when students are deciding whether to go to Pakistan for higher studies. To succeed in establishing madrasas of high repute, the government will need to attract prominent religious scholars to teach in them. While the government is eager to curb radicalization through establishing more madrasas in Afghanistan as soon as possible, the task of expanding the state madrasa system – and particularly building the reputation of the schools – is a long-term endeavour.

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 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 has, however, been given a mixed reception by the madrasas and the ulema. This signifies that the Afghan ulema comprise a diverse group, with diverging views on state–madrasa relations. Some mullahs welcome the Afghan Ministry of Education’s recent initiative because they believe the sector is in need of change, and that 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.

The National Education Strategic Plan (2006) spells out a strategy to ‘build broad-based consensus and political support through bringing Afghanistan’s key political, religious and academic figures into the process of consultation and discussion’. However, it seems that the reform initiatives are not widely known among the ulema, particularly those attached to private madrasas. Few of the informants from private madrasas interviewed for this study (personnel at one out of the eight private madrasas surveyed) had heard about the government’s initiative for religious education. The initiative is not well known outside the madrasas that have been established with government support, suggesting poor communication with the madrasas. Furthermore, personnel at all but one of the private madrasas surveyed for this study also expressed scepticism towards the government’s initiative – even those who had not heard of it before. Some expressed concern about rumours they had heard about the government dropping religious subjects from the regular government school curriculum while introducing non-religious subjects in madrasas. This was seen as a negative development for religious education, and as undermining the position of the ulema and their authority on religious matters. Such sentiments are similar to those found

among the Pakistani ulema. Looking at the experience of the madrasa reform process in Pakistan, Bano (2007b) found that Pakistan's ulema were suspicious of the government reform programme, which was seen as secularizing the madrasas rather than enabling madrasas to produce better scholars of Islam.⁷¹ This brings up what seems to be one of the most central points of contention in the debate about religious education in Afghanistan: diverging views between the Afghan state and the ulema in relation to the utility and value of religious education itself. In order to understand the opportunities and challenges presented by reform, it is necessary to understand what the motivations for reform are among the various stakeholders in the process. While many both in the government and among the madrasas agree on a need to improve religious education in Afghanistan, what is meant by this are very different things. This study has found that there seems to be a fundamental difference in the views on religious education and the value attached to religious education among the various stakeholders in the Afghanistan's reform process. The madrasas and ulema see madrasa reform as something that will strengthen the religious education sector by improving the quality of the education offered. The government strategy aims at making the education offered in religious schools more relevant for regular employment by increasing non-religious subjects and practical skills training. These opposing views present one of the key challenges to madrasa reform in Afghanistan.

Yet, though critical of the current reform, there are ulema that want to be part of a change process. In March 2008, religious scholars came together in Jalalabad to discuss 'traditional solutions to the modern age' – identifying not only the challenges but also the opportunities that reform presents.⁷² They concluded by establishing a working group and formulating a joint agenda, emphasizing the need for a reform of the curriculum that would keep the main religious subjects (particularly the central parts of the *dars-e nizami* curriculum), but include more 'worldly' subjects,⁷³ such as mathematics, history geography, computer science and colloquial Arabic, and the need to establish an independent central board to oversee exams and curriculum for the private madrasas. The deputy minister of education participated at the meeting, which indicates an interest in collaboration from both sides.

Outside Support

In terms of the finances required, the reform is also ambitious.⁷⁴ The Ministry of Education has solicited funding from various foreign governments, but many of these have, according to the previous minister of education, been prevented from providing funding because 'their rules won't allow it' (*APS Diplomat Recorder*, 2008). It seems, however, that the military provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) operated by various ISAF coalition countries do not have to abide by the same rules. The USA has funded madrasa and mosque construction through the PRTs in Khost and Paktika (Boone, 2008). The rationale behind this support to religious schools clearly echoes that of the Afghan government. Commander David Adams, head of the US PRT team in Khost, which has build two government madrasas in Khost province, told the *Financial Times* that

⁷¹ Scrutinizing the resistance among Pakistani ulema to the government's reform of Pakistani madrasas, Bano (2007b: 19) identifies obstacles at two levels: conceptual and practical. On the conceptual level are conflicting views on the very nature of knowledge held by the state and the senior ulema. On the practical level, the ulema resist the introduction of additional secular subjects, because these steal time from religious subjects, the core of religious studies.

⁷² A two day meeting to discuss the 'Religious Madrassahs in the Modern Age' of Islamic scholars was organized by PACT RADIO in Jalalabad, 29–30 March 2009.

⁷³ Regular, non-religious subject are often called 'worldly' rather than secular.

⁷⁴ According to the Five Year Development Budget Requested 1385–1389, the estimated budget for Islamic education was US\$3 million (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a: 119).

‘we would like to see small religious schools in every district so that parents don’t have to send their children over the border [to Pakistan]’ (cited in Boone, 2008). PRTs from other countries have followed suit, including the Spanish PRT in Badghis province⁷⁵ and the German PRT in Kunduz.⁷⁶ The clergy’s response to support from foreign militaries is mixed. Such support is welcomed by pro-government ulema and madrasas, but seen as a speculative counterinsurgency strategy by others, who resent foreign interference in religious affairs.⁷⁷ Support for the reform process from third-parties – particularly non-Islamic and Western actors – can both increase suspicion among ulema critical of foreign interference in religious affairs and contribute to increased attacks from anti-government groups.

The modern-technocratic elite – which occupies a central position in the Karzai government and leads the religious education initiative – has little credibility among many Islamic scholars. Growing dissatisfaction with the government and its foreign supporters increases the potential for religious education reform to be met with suspicion in the religious milieu. Afghan ulema are also wary that a position close to the Karzai government will put them at risk of attack from the Taliban and other anti-government groups unhappy with the foreign support.

Concluding Remarks

The Afghan government has devised a comprehensive plan to improve Islamic education in Afghanistan. So far, the focus has been on improving the state’s capacity for delivering Islamic education through the development of a new curriculum and the construction of more government madrasas in Afghanistan. Reform in the religious education sector is a sensitive issue and has been met with scepticism among the Afghan clergy. Government-imposed reform is seen as challenging the independence of religious institutions. A key challenge for the government will be to find ways of doing this that are acceptable to religious scholars and the madrasa sector, including the private madrasas that are currently outside the government’s control.

Policies restricting the movement of people – such as the visa requirements imposed by Pakistan – seem to have had some effect in reducing the number of students going to Pakistan, though they have not completely stopped this practice. Afghan students continue to go to Pakistan to study because of the reputation of Pakistani schools and teachers. Cooperation with Pakistan to keep better control of which schools Afghan students are going to is one possible way of improving oversight.

Introducing some type of self-regulatory authority for the private madrasas in Afghanistan may be a way of introducing some quality assurance, standardized curriculum, examinations and certification. Afghanistan may be able to learn from the experience of madrasa boards in Pakistan, where different religious sects are represented in different boards. This type of structure could represent a means to improve the level of contact both among the madrasas themselves and between madrasas and the state.

⁷⁵ *La Cerca* (2010).

⁷⁶ In Kunduz, the German PRT had funded part of the reconstruction of the main government madrasa (Borchgrevink, 2007).

⁷⁷ Interview with madrasa personnel in Wardak, 2008.

6 Concluding Remarks

In this report, we have attempted to shed light on the madrasa sector in Afghanistan. What we have found is a highly diverse sector. In conclusion, we will highlight what stand out as the main challenges and opportunities for change identified through this study.

Diversity

Though they all belong to a common South Asian Islamic tradition, Afghanistan's Sunni madrasas comprise a highly heterogeneous group, ranging from small community-based madrasas to large government institutions. Some are funded by contributions from the local population in the form of food, grain or animal skins. Others are funded entirely by the state. Some schools teach the government-approved curriculum, using regular government schoolbooks for non-religious subjects. Others hardly have books at all. The variations are great. Madrasas have been influenced by shifting alliances, regime changes and new political currents. They do not represent a unified sector, but rather a variety of highly different interests, interpretations of Islam, ideological sympathies or links to political parties. The close ties between religion and politics in Afghanistan have been reinforced by the Afghan jihad, which has politicized some of the madrasas and contributed to the radicalization and militarization of certain schools. Some openly support the Taliban. Others support the current government. Yet, most madrasas remain outside of politics altogether, concentrating their efforts on teaching their students and transmitting the scholarly Islamic tradition.

Myths and Misrepresentation

In media and policy reports, madrasas are often presented as backward institutions from the past, representing stagnation and obscurity. Of the many myths, the one that is potentially the most harmful is that all madrasas produce terrorists. Of course, the rise in militant activism is of grave concern for the people and governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as for the rest of the world. This should not be taken lightly, and efforts to understand the relationship between madrasas and militancy are crucial. Yet, it is misplaced to see radical madrasas as representative of all madrasas. The stereotyping of madrasas as 'terrorist dens' and 'jihadi factories' is a misrepresentation of the sector as a whole, and obstructive to efforts to engage madrasas in a process for change. Afghan madrasas are part of the South Asian tradition, founded to articulate a modern Islamic alternative to the colonial education system. This tradition is not inert but constantly evolving and reacting to the cultural and political environment in which it exists. This presents opportunities for change, something that has been confirmed by the Afghan ulema's expressed interest in reform of the Islamic education sector.

Government Reform

The government's efforts to engage the madrasas in an inclusive and consultative process to change Islamic education in Afghanistan could represent a first step in a new change process. It is doubtful, however, whether the government's initiative will be successful in reaching its set objectives through the course of action it has currently outlined. The government and the madrasas have very different motivations for engaging in reform. Rooted in a desire 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 strategy is founded on the political and security implications of madrasa reform. For their part, the clergy want to enhance the standing of religious education – the position of its teachers and institutions within society, and vis-à-vis the state. This shows a profound divergence in the values placed on religious education in itself, but also reflects a more general schism over the relationship between state and religion in Afghan society. The strategy challenges the clergy's position as upholders and protectors of religion, and is therefore unlikely to gain acceptance among the religious elite. The government's focus on strengthening the capacities of the state in delivering religious education – through curriculum reform, the training of teachers and the building of schools – faces a number of challenges due to the transnational character of the religious education sector, as well as its networked character, involving a high degree of reliance on personal contacts and loyalties. Establishing viable alternatives that can compete with the well-reputed madrasas in Pakistan is likely to require time and energy, and is unlikely to succeed if the government insists on being at the helm of the transformation.

Protection

In general, government reform is top-down by nature and likely to produce contention and disagreement among the different stakeholders. To bring about change in Afghanistan's religious education sector is a long-term endeavour that will require continuous engagement of the various stakeholders in a process of dialogue, consultation and collaboration. The government needs to balance the diverging views on religious education – both within and without the religious milieus – with sensitivity and respect. This is particularly important if it wants to reach out to actors that are not in favour of the government's current Islamic education initiative. Religious actors that support neither the government, the Taliban, nor any other militant Islamic group are in a precarious position, 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. Within such a space, the ulema could potentially play a role in dealing with both the government and the Taliban.

Changes from Within

By framing conflict in religious terms, religious actors can fuel conflict by calling for armed action and providing religious legitimacy to the use of violence. But, religious actors can also play a reconciliatory role in conflict environments, and also have a potential to do so in Afghanistan. The branding of the Deobandi tradition as a hallmark of radicalism and militancy has been countered by the original Dar ul Uloom Deoband in India. Defying allegations of links to the Taliban since 9/11, the Dar ul Uloom Deoband has actively denounced terrorism – including the use of suicide missions – as un-Islamic by issuing fatwas, and has opened for building bridges with non-Muslim communities in India (Neyazi, 2010). The experience of Dar ul Uloom Deoband can be seen as an example to follow. Can Afghan madrasas promote reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, and stem radicalization? In this, Afghanistan's religious education institutions have strong and longstanding transnational traditions to build on – including links to Dar ul Uloom in India, to Al-Azhar in Egypt, as well as to a number of non-militant Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan.

Glossary

<i>ahadith</i>	the reports of the Prophet
<i>alim (sg.)/ulema (pl.)</i>	higher clergy
<i>chanda</i>	financial contribution
<i>dar ul hifaz</i>	school teaching recitation of the Quran
<i>eid</i>	holiday to mark the end of the month of fasting
<i>eid ul ada</i>	Feast of the Sacrifice, holiday after the annual pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>farz</i>	the highest compulsory religious obligation
<i>fatwa</i>	religious decree (advice, not legally binding)
<i>fiq</i>	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>jihad</i>	holy war or struggle
<i>jirga</i>	tribal council
<i>madrasa</i>	religious seminary
<i>mawlana/mawlawi</i>	term commonly used for an <i>alim</i> in Afghanistan
<i>mujahed (sg.)/mujahedeen (pl.)</i>	fighter in the holy war
<i>mullah imam</i>	lower-level clergy; leader of a mosque
<i>qawm</i>	a solidarity group (ethnic, professional or other)
<i>qurbani</i>	animal offering at Eid
<i>Ramadan</i>	Islamic month of fasting
<i>Sharia</i>	Islamic Law
<i>shuras</i>	councils
<i>tabligh</i>	preaching
<i>tablighis</i>	preachers
<i>talib (sg.)/taliban (pl.)</i>	students – used for religious students; gave name to the Taliban movement
<i>ulema (pl.)/alim (sg.)</i>	the higher clergy
<i>umma</i>	the global community of Muslims
<i>urf</i>	traditional law
<i>ushr</i>	tithe or tenth; Islamic land tax
<i>waqf (sg.)/awqaf (pl.)</i>	religious endowment
<i>wazifa</i>	daily donation of food
<i>zakat</i>	Islamic tax

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Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education

Do madrasas produce terrorists? Are all madrasas fundamentalist? In the aftermath of 9/11, madrasas have become a subject of great controversy.

The growing insurgency in Afghanistan – and particularly the increase in 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. Afghans commonly blame Pakistani madrasas for the recruitment of Afghan youths to militant groups. In response, the Afg-

han government has initiated a comprehensive reform of the Islamic education sector, raising important questions about the independence of religious institutions and the role of the government in religious affairs. That the religious education sector in Afghanistan is in need of change is a concern shared by many within the government and the madrasa sector. The question is what change should this entail, and how can it best be brought about?

Little analytical attention has so far been given to the study of Afghanistan's madrasa and

the relationship between religious schools across the Afghan–Pakistani border. The present study hopes to remedy that, shedding light on some of the most critical issues and providing some recommendations for change in policy.

The report presents an overview over the madrasas sector in Afghanistan; scrutinizes the relationship between madrasas in Pakistan and Afghanistan; examines the relationship between madrasas and militancy in the Afghan context; and takes stock of the madrasa reform process.