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Darul Uloom Deoband: Stemming the Tide of Radical Islam in India

Taberez Ahmed Neyazi

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Maulana Mahmood Madani of Jamiat Ulema-i-Hind with Yoga guru Baba Ramdev at Deoband

The growing threat of terrorism can be checked with the help of influential religious organisations and seminaries. The recent active involvement of Darul Uloom Deoband of India at the civil society level to build up movement against terrorism has yielded positive result. It is a strategy that can be replicated in other parts of the world.

AFTER THE killing of 13 people by Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan at Fort Hood in Texas, Thomas Friedman wrote in the *New York Times* on 28 November 2009 asking Muslims to present the real Islam before the world. “Whenever something like Fort Hood happens you say, ‘This is not Islam.’ I believe that. But you keep telling us what Islam isn’t. You need to tell us what it is and

show us how its positive interpretations are being promoted in your schools and mosques.” Friedman overlooks one fact: this positive projection of Islam has been going on within the Muslim world for a long time, but especially after September 11. He might want to begin with a look at Darul Uloom Deoband, an influential Muslim seminary situated in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India.

The changing Face of Darul Uloom

In February 2008, Darul Uloom Deoband denounced terrorism for the first time by saying: “The religion of Islam has come to wipe out all kinds of terrorism and to spread the message of global peace.” On 31 May 2008, it issued a fatwa declaring ‘terrorism as un-Islamic’. Since then Darul Uloom and its sister organisation Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (JUH, a socio-religious organisation working for the upliftment of Indian Muslims) have been regularly organising meetings and conferences denouncing terrorism and trying to build a movement against terrorism. This is a remarkable step as Darul Uloom, which came into existence in 1867, is not only the most influential religious seminary in India, but is also considered to be next in standing globally to the Azhar University in Cairo.

After September 11, Darul Uloom had come under the scanner because of its alleged role in influencing Taliban. Such perception of Darul Uloom emanated because of the training of important Taliban leaders such as Mullah Omar and Jalaluddin Haqqani in the supposedly Deobandi-style madrasa of Darul Uloom Haqqania, located at Akora Khattak in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). This has affected the image of Darul Uloom in India. At the United Nations Security Council in December 2008, Pakistan accused Darul Uloom Deoband of influencing terrorists in NWFP and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It urged the seminary to issue a specific fatwa asking the terrorists to stop killings.

Similarly, in an earlier report in August 2008, the second Administrative Reforms Commission headed by Congress leader M. Veerappa Moily said that in January 1994, Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Mohammed Masood Azhar Alvi arrived in India and had “interacted extensively with the leading figures of the Deoband Ulama”. But the linking of Deoband with the Taliban has been widely criticised and there is so far no evidence of direct links between Darul Uloom and Taliban.

Building Bridges with non-Muslims

Darul Uloom Deoband, with the help of JUH, has also been attempting to build bridges between Hindus and Muslims. It has not only opposed the idea of India as *Darul Harb* or an enemy country, but has also criticised the labelling of Hindus as *kafirs* or unbelievers, which has a derogatory connotation. In March 2009, it issued a fatwa declaring India as *Darul Aman* or a Muslim-friendly country where Jihad is meaningless.

At the same time, Darul Uloom has time and again shown its progressive stance on various social issues. It has supported the Women’s Reservation Bill which stipulates a 33 per cent quota for women in the Parliament and other elected bodies. In November 2009, it urged the community to fight against global warming. Such progressive ideology of Darul Uloom complements its recent activism against terrorism.

Many rallies and meetings have been organised by Darul Uloom and JUH all over India since February 2008 to condemn terrorism. In a meeting in Mumbai in February 2009, Darul Uloom declared suicide attacks to be un-Islamic. The impact of the fatwa against terrorism and its pronouncement in various public forums and meetings is visible. Religious leaders from the Hindu community have actively participated in such meetings. Yoga guru Baba Ramdev participated in one such meeting at Deoband in November 2009 which was attended by a mostly Muslim crowd of 500,000.

This has sent positive signals across all communities in India. At the same time, the media have also provided positive coverage to such public gatherings which was also praised by Maulana Abdul Hamid Noumani, Secretary, Press & Publication of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind.

Reactions to Deoband Fatwa against Terrorism

Indian Muslims, however, are divided over the need for a fatwa against terrorism. “It (the fatwa) just shows that the community is suffering from inferiority complex. There is no need for such a fatwa, as all Muslims know that our religion is against terrorism. What is the need for reassurance? And who are we reassuring?” questions Mufti Mohammed Mukaram, Shahi Imam of the Fatehpuri Mosque. But another prominent Islamic leader, Maulana Shaukat Qasimi Bastavi who is general secretary of Rabta Madarise Islamia, regards this as imperative in the light of the defamation of Muslims and Islam across the world. Syed Shakil Ahmad, a senior advocate of the Supreme Court and a member of JUH, avers that “when the whole community is being branded as terrorists, it is the job of the religious teacher and Ulama to tell what Islam is”.

When asked why it took such a long time after 11 September 2001 to declare a fatwa against terrorism, Maulana Arsad Madani of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind observed that “September 11 was a global event but it didn’t affect India directly. When terrorism reached Indian soil, we had to come out in the public and issue a fatwa against terrorism.”

By launching the campaign against terrorism, Darul Uloom has set an example to Muslims and madrasas in other parts of world in dealing with the radicalisation of Muslim youth. The pertinent question raised by Friedman has certainly been answered by Darul Uloom Deoband. In fact, the new Darul Uloom approach has been practised by many other Islamic groups and movements in other parts of the Muslim world such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey.

Taberez Ahmed Neyazi was until recently a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University from December 2009 to January 2010. He is currently a Visiting Fellow with the East-West Centre, Honolulu.