

NOREF Report

Pakistan's Madrasas: Moderation or Militancy? The madrasa debate and the reform process

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Introduction

Why have the madrasas become a subject of such controversy? What roles do madrasas play in Pakistani society? What are the main challenges and opportunities for madrasa reform? Since 11 September 2001, Pakistan's madrasas have received much attention from the media, policy analysts and politicians. The bulk of the literature has asserted strong links between madrasas and militancy. Madrasas have thus become the focus of a much larger debate on Islam and militancy. This security discourse has placed the most radical madrasas in the spotlight and has left out the moderate, non-militant and non-political madrasas. From a broader policy implication perspective, one can more constructively and fruitfully approach the "madrasa challenge" by looking at the diversity of schools existing in this sector, in terms of size, financing, and theological and ideological positions, as well as at their links to political groups. This report presents the core issues in the debate and identifies some of the challenges and opportunities for reform.¹

The paper is based on a review of existing secondary source literature and primary sources, including 17 interviews with madrasa leaders in Pakistan, Pakistani government officials, as well as academics, analysts and journalists who in different ways have analyzed madrasa reform or the related debate. The interviews were conducted in April and May 2010 and February 2008. (See Annex 1 for list of interviews).

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¹ A NOREF policy brief, "Taking Stock: Madrasa Reform in Pakistan" (Kaja Borchgrevink and Kristian Harpviken, July 2011), identifies and discusses policy measures that can help promote the development of moderate madrasas and ways this could be supported

1. The Development of the Pakistani madrasa sector

Coming from the Arabic verb “*darasa*” (to study), “madrasa” in contemporary South Asia refers to a school that imparts Islamic knowledge. “Madrasa” is used by the Government of Pakistan as a generic term for higher level Islamic education institutions including madrasa “*dar ul uloom*” (meaning ‘house of knowledge’ or high schools) and “*jamia*” (university). The education system is organized in terms of the following levels and grades: “*ibtidaya*” which consists of the first to the fifth grades of primary education; “*mutawasitah*” consisting of the sixth to eighth grades of middle school; “*thanviyah-e-ammah*” consisting of the ninth and tenth grades; “*thanviyah-e-kassah*” comprising the 11th and 12th grades; “*aliya*” refers to the university Bachelor’s degree (consisting of the 13th and 14th years); “*alimiyah*” is the Master’s degree (being the 15th and 16th years); and “*takmeel*” refers to advanced post-graduate education.² The madrasas differ from the “*dar ul hifaz*” - commonly called “Quran schools” – teaching children elementary lessons in Islam, as well as memorization and recitation of the Quran.

Pakistan’s madrasas are part of a modern South Asian madrasa tradition developed in the Indian subcontinent under Islamic reformist thinkers and the “*ulema*”, educated Muslim religious scholars, during the 19th Century. Still the majority of madrasas in South Asia have a shared foundation in the “*Dars-e Nizami*” curriculum.³ Inspired by European

education models, higher education institutions like the *Dar ul Uloom Deoband* (founded in 1867) were established as Islamic alternatives to British-run universities. The madrasa institution developed as a modern Islamic institution of learning, in reaction to waning Muslim power and the British and Hindu-dominated education system in colonial India. As such, the modern South Asian madrasa emerged as a politically motivated initiative to protect and advance Muslim culture and traditions. With time, however, the madrasa sector has developed into a myriad of different institutions, representing different theological and ideological positions, and links to politics. Some madrasas are closely linked to political parties, while others remain out of politics all together.

The Pakistani madrasa sector mirrors the religious landscape of Pakistan: all main Islamic denominations and sub-groups have their own madrasas including the Shia, the Sunni *Ahl e Sunnat* (Barelvi) and the Deobandis⁴, as well as the Saudi-inspired *Ahl al-Hadith* or *Ahl e Hadith* (salafi), and the Islamist *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Since the late 1950s, the madrasas have organized themselves in madrasa boards (“*wafaq*”) following sectarian lines responsible for registration and accreditation of madrasas, as well as madrasa curricula and examinations. The Deobandi and Barelvi denominations have the highest number of madrasas, with some 11,700 (65%) and 5,400 (30%) respectively of the total of 18,015 madrasas reported by the wafaqs in 2008.⁵

Table 1: The Pakistani madrasa boards

Sect	Sub-sect (maslaq)	Madrasas Board (wafaq)	Board established	Wafaq HQ
Sunni	Ahle e Sunnat (Barelvi)	Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Ahl-e Sunnat-wal-Jamaat	1959	Karachi
Sunni	Deobandi	Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia	1959	Multan
Sunni	Ahl e Hadith	Wafaq-ul-Madaris	1955	Faizalabad
Islamist	Jamat e Islami	Rabta-ul-Madaris Al Islamiya	1983	Mansoor, Lahore
Shia	Jaffari Twelver Shia	Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Shia	1960	Lahore

2 Exams in the various religious subjects are given by the central madrasa education board for each sect. See C. Christine Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge: Militancy and Religious Education in Pakistan*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008, p 52.

3 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) and *shari’ah* (Islamic law).

4 The Pakistani Deobandi tradition has a distinct development of its own, diverging from the madrasa *Dar ul Uloom* at Deoband in North India. See Kaja Borchgrevink, “Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education”, *PRIO Paper*, Oslo, PRIO, 2010; Sana Haroon, *Frontiers of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland*, London, Hurst & Co, 2007.

5 Kees Van den Bosch, Bilquis Tahira and Tahseenullah Khan, *Islamic Education in Pakistan: Introducing government approved subjects*, Report 2008-2, April 2008, p 12.

Box 1: The schools of thought

Pakistan has a 97% Muslim majority, divided into approximately 1/5 Shia and 4/5 Sunni Muslims. There are a number of sub-sects within Sunni and Shia Islam. The five main sects– with their own madrasa boards – are described below.

- **The Ahl e Sunnat, or Barelvi**, is the largest Sunni sect in Pakistan, making up some 80% of Pakistan Sunni population. Founded by Ahmed Raza Khan Barelvi in India in 1880, the Barelvis are often associated with the Sufi tradition, defending traditionalist Islamic beliefs and practices from the influence of reformist movement like the Deobandi and the Ahle Hadith.
- **The Deobandi** sect is the second largest Sunni sect in Pakistan, making up some 20% of the Sunni population. Following the Hanafi legal school, the Deobandis represent a reformist tradition within South Asian Sunni tradition, originating in India in the 1850s, and seeking a return to the pure fundamentals of Islam.
- **The Ahl e Hadith** (also known as *Wahabi* or *Panj Piri*) is a South-Asian reformist movement promoting a return to the first generations of Islam, 'the *salaf*'. Ahl e Hadith is close to the Saudi Arabian *Wahabi* school of thought, following the Hanbali jurisprudence. It has been influenced and supported by salafist ideological patrons from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, particularly since the Afghan *jihad*.
- **The Islamists** are primarily represented by the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JI) political party, founded by the Islamist ideologue Mawlana Maududi in 1941. Breaking with more traditionalist schools of thought, the Islamists rearticulated Islam as a modern ideology promoting a pious but modern and progressive Islamic state.
- **The Shia, represent** approximately 20% of Pakistan's Muslims. The majority is 'twelver' Shia and follows the Jafari legal school. Minority Shia sects include the Ismaili and Bohra communities.

The Madrasa debate

Over the last few years, interest in Pakistan's madrasas has generated a significant amount of literature. These writings fall into two distinct categories: a predominantly policy-oriented series of studies and reports mainly addressing the relationship between madrasas and militancy; and scholarly studies placing the Pakistani madrasa within the South Asian tradition of Islamic education.

The bulk of this literature is policy-oriented. A number of studies has been published that clearly identify madrasas as security threats. An International Crisis Group (ICG) study from 2002 became highly influential.⁶ It presented "key evidence" of high numbers of madrasa students and links to militant groups at a time when Pakistan and India were on the brink of war following an attack on the Indian parliament in November 2001. However, the report was critiqued for overestimating the numbers of madrasa students. Factual errors in the ICG report were disclosed in a World Bank study in 2005.⁷ Estimating the total madrasa enrolment at between 1 and 1.7 million, ICG 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 corrected the figure to 3%. By that time, however, the original ICG report had been quoted widely.

Contradicting the ICG position, a number of studies have scrutinized the data and the alleged links to militancy, arguing that while it is possible to establish links between certain madrasas and militant groups and actions, these links are limited to a few schools with historical ties to radical groups. This argument is further strengthened by Winthrop and Graff who conclude that "the majority of madrasas have neither a violent nor an extremist agenda".⁸

8 Rebecca Winthrop and Corinne Graf, *Beyond Madrasas: Assessing the Link between Education and Militancy in Pakistan*, Working paper 2, Center for Universal Education at Brookings, 2010, p 18. The early critics of madrasas include Jessica Stern, "Pakistan's Jihad Culture", *Foreign Affairs* 79(6), 2000, pp 115–126; Peter Singer, *Pakistan's Madrasahs: Ensuring a System of Education Not Jihad*, Brookings Institution Analysis Paper 41, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Pakistan: Madrasahs*, 2002; International Crisis Group (ICG), *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, Asia Report No. 95, Brussels, ICG, 2005. Nuancing the debate are C. Christine Fair, "Militant Recruitment in Pakistan: A New Look at the Militancy–Madrasah Connection", *Asia Policy* 4, 2007, pp 107–134; C. Christine Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge*, 2008; and Andrabi et al, *Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan*, 2005.

6 International Crisis Group (ICG), "Pakistan: Madrasahs, Extremism and the Military", *Asia Report* No. 36, Brussels, ICG, 2002.

7 Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, Asim Ijaz Khwaja & Tristan Zajonc, *Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data*, Washington, DC, World Bank, 2005.

Besides Western-dominated contributors to the international policy debate, many Pakistani authors have also produced a considerable volume of writing on Pakistani madrasas. This writing can be divided into the mainly Urdu language publications of the Pakistani *'ulema'*⁹ on the one hand largely defending the position of the madrasas from the inside, and publications by Pakistani think tanks on the other. The Institute of Policy Studies, linked to the Islamist political party *Jamaat-e-Islami*, has produced some comprehensive reports in Urdu and English and is involved in policy consultations with the various madrasas.¹⁰ Other more liberal-oriented Pakistani think tanks, like the Pakistan Institute of Peace, are taking a more critical view of the madrasas in their writing on terrorism in Pakistan.¹¹

An altogether different body of literature has developed that situates Pakistan's madrasas within South Asia's Islamic education traditions more generally. The writings describe the diversity of traditions, the various social, cultural and political roles that the madrasas play and how the madrasa tradition is constantly changing, shaped by the particular context in which it exists.¹² Yet, ethnographic studies from Pakistan's madrasas are still few. Masooda Bano's study of a regular Deobandi madrasa in Rawalpindi is an enlightened contribution.¹³ She provides valuable insights

into the organization, politics and daily life of a madrasa, situates the institutions within a tradition of Islamic learning that is revered in Pakistani society and points to the very complex position that madrasas hold in Pakistan today. Researchers such as Mareike Winkelmann, Mariam Abou Zahab and Masooda Bano provide important insights into female madrasa education in South Asia, which is marginal, but growing.¹⁴ Masooda Bano uses her insights from ethnographic case studies of a number of Pakistani madrasas when discussing the madrasa–state relationship in the context of madrasa reform.¹⁵ Apart from this study, there is little engagement between policy-oriented and ethnographic literature.

Numbers games: Diversion of debate

The numbers of Pakistani madrasas and their enrolment rates have been the subject of much controversy and debate in recent years. Both definitional issues ('what is a student?', 'what constitutes a madrasa?') and a lack of reliable data, make it difficult to establish how many schools and graduates exist. In examining various reports since 2001, estimates of madrasa student enrolment numbers range from less than half a million to over two million students.¹⁶ Some 19,104 madrasas were registered with the government in March 2010.¹⁷ The number of Pakistani madrasas

9 For overview of some Urdu writings see Tariq Rahman, "The Madrassa and the State of Pakistan: Religion, Poverty and the Potential for Violence in Pakistan", *Himal South Asian*, 2004, <http://www.himalmag.com/2004/february/essay.htm> accessed 24 April 2010.

10 Khalid Rahman and Syed Rashad Bukhari, "Religious Education Institutions (REIs): Present Situation and the Future Strategy", *Policy Perspectives*, Vol 2, No.1, Islamabad, Institute of Policy Studies, 2005.

11 See for example Muhammad Amir Rana, "Mapping the Madrasa Mindset: Political Attitudes of Pakistani Madaris", *Conflict and Peace Studies*, Vol.2, Jan-Mar 2009, No.1, Islamabad, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, 2009.

12 Examples include Robert W. Hefner & Muhammed Qasim Zaman, eds., *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007; Metcalf, Barbara Daly, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860–1900*, Karachi, Royal Book Company, 1982; Noor, Farish A., Yoginder Sikand & Martin van Bruinessen, *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, Amsterdam, ISIM/Amsterdam University Press, 2008; Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India*, New Delhi, Penguin India, 2005; and Zaman, Muhammad Qasim, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2002.

13 Masooda Bano, "Beyond Politics: The Reality of a Deobandi Madrasa in Pakistan", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18(1), 2007, pp 43–68.

14 "Girls' madrassas expanding at a dramatic rate", *The Daily Times*, 16 May 2009 http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009%5C05%5C16%5Cstory_16-5-2009_pg7_4 accessed on 24 May 2010. Mareike Jule Winkelmann, *From Behind the Curtain: A Study of a Girls' Madrasa in India*, Amsterdam, ISIM/Amsterdam University Press, 2005; Mariam Abou Zahab, "Between Pakistan and Qom: Shi'i Women's Madrasas and Transnational Networks" in Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikand & Martin van Bruinessen, eds., *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2008, pp 123-140; and Masooda Bano, *Female Madrasas in Pakistan: A Response to Modernity*, Religion and Development Research Programme, Working Paper 45, Birmingham, International Development Department, University of Birmingham, 2010.

15 Masooda Bano, *Contesting Ideologies and Struggle for Authority: State–Madrasa Relations in Pakistan*, Religion and Development Research Programme Working Paper 14, Birmingham, International Development Department, University of Birmingham, 2007.

16 Christopher Candland, "Pakistan's recent experience in reforming Islamic Education" in Jamal Malik, ed, 2008. *Madrasa in South Asia: Teaching Terror?*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p 102.

17 Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Religious Affairs, "Overview of madrasas registration", 31 March 2010.

that are not registered with the government is unknown. Common estimates range from 20 000 to 30 000.¹⁸ However, media reports frequently quote the highly inflated numbers found in the ICG study from 2002. Many studies have also relied on unverifiable secondary sources.¹⁹ The most comprehensive examination of the size and significance of the religious education sector in Pakistan is the World Bank-study by Andarbi et al from 2005, where the authors use established data sources together with their own data collected for a broader study on education enrolment in Pakistan. The Andrabi-team found that the Pakistani madrasa sector is small in comparison to the public and private education sectors, and that it accounts for less than 1 percent of overall enrolment in the country.²⁰

The number of madrasas has grown since independence when there were recorded some 245 madrasas in the country, to some 19,104 in 2010.²¹ The madrasa sector is still growing, though not significantly, compared to the growth in private schools,²² indicating that madrasas are not as prominent in Pakistan's educational landscape as earlier research suggested. Yet, the dispute over numbers has been a core issue in the debate.

Militants and moderates

Searching for the roots of international terrorism after 9/11, attention soon turned to Pakistan's madrasas. Quantifying the numbers of madrasas and madrasa students can be seen as a way of quantifying the

“terrorist threat”. Estimates placed the numbers of schools affiliated with extremist religious/political groups at 10-15%.²³ However, given the existing uncertainty regarding the number of madrasas, such an estimate is dubious and problematic. Yet this percentage has been repeatedly referenced in policy and media reports.

Links between militant groups and certain madrasas in Pakistan are well established;²⁴ however, these are limited to a small portion of the madrasas.²⁵ Assessing the alleged links between madrasas and militancy, Winthrop and Graff conclude that “contrary to popular belief, madrasas have not risen to fill the gap in public education supply and have not been one of the primary causes of the recent rise in militancy”.²⁶ There is a legitimate demand for religious education in Pakistan,²⁷ and therefore one should be careful not to generalize about the role of madrasas in religious militancy. Thus, one should “be cautious about discriminating between the radical element among madrasa institutions and those that are peaceful”²⁸. Searching for an explanation for the rise in militancy in Pakistan, the two authors move beyond the madrasas and find that one needs to scrutinize Pakistan's education challenges more broadly.

Framed in a security discourse, the one-sided focus on the links between the high number of madrasa students and militancy has contributed to creating a picture of the Pakistani madrasas as controversial “*jihadi* factories” and “terrorist dens”. Drawing on crude and sensationalist images of the madrasas and focusing the debate on the numbers of schools and students has added little insight into the “madrasa phenomenon”. Rather, it has contributed to divert the madrasa debate from issues of substance: What is taught in the madrasas? Why are students choosing madrasa education? Who are madrasa students, teachers and supporters? What

18 Government of Pakistan, Overview of madrasas, 2010; Religion and Development Research Programme, *Rethinking Madrasa Reform in Pakistan*, Policy Brief 1, University of Birmingham, 2009, p 1. http://94.126.106.9/r4d/PDF/Outputs/ReligionDev_RPC/Policy_Brief_1_2009.pdf accessed 10 November 2010

19 For a discussion on the use of Pakistani intelligence reports and the widespread practice among media and analysts of using unverifiable secondary sources and a lack of established statistical methodologies, see Andrabi et al, *Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan*, 2005: 8.

20 Andrabi et al., *Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan*, 2005, p 12. The Andrabi-team also found that madrasa enrolment is highest in the districts bordering Afghanistan, but that it still comprises less than 7.5% of all children enrolled in school. It should be noted that The Federally Administrated Tribal areas were not part of the study from 2005.

21 Ministry of Religious Affairs, *Report*, quoted in Fair, *The Madrasas Challenge*, 2008, p 50; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Religious Affairs, “Overview of madrasas registration”, 31 March 2010.

22 Winthrop and Graf, *Beyond Madrasas*, 2010, p 48.

23 Singer, *Pakistan's Madrasahs*, 2001, p 3.

24 Fair, *The Madrasas Challenge*, 2008, p 41; Qandeel Siddique, “Weapons of Mass Instruction? A Preliminary Exploration of the Link Between Madrasahs in Pakistan and Militancy”, Oslo, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2009, p 21-38.

25 Borchgrevink, *Beyond Borders*, 2010, p 56; Fair, *The Madrasas Challenge*, 2008, p 67.

26 Winthrop and Graff, *Beyond Madrasas*, 2010, p 48.

27 Matthew J. Nelson, “Muslims, Markets, and the Meaning of “Good” Education in Pakistan”, *Asian Survey* 46(5), 2006, p 711.

28 Winthrop and Graff, *Beyond Madrasas*, 2010, pp 18, 48

is the status and what are the roles of madrasas in Pakistani society? How can madrasas become better institutions of learning?

2. Continuity and change in religious education

The political role of the madrasa has been the main focus and concern of policymakers, analysts and the media. However, Masooda Bano's ethnographic study of a Deobandi madrasa in Rawalpindi finds that "their social milieu is completely ignored".²⁹ By keeping a narrow focus on the madrasa's political role and linkages, one runs the risk of missing out on the broader picture, which is important to develop appropriate policies.

Diversity of institutions

Pakistan's madrasas constitute a highly diverse sector in terms of size, financing, level of education offered, theological and ideological positions and links to political parties. Access to resources and funding varies greatly between the different schools. Building on Islamic ideas of charity and the importance of education in Islam, most madrasas offer free education, as well as free lodging and board. Commonly, Pakistan's madrasas are private institutions funded by charity, private donations and income generated from religious endowments ("waqf"), such as income from shops and rent on property. The Islamic tradition of charitable donations has contributed to the growth of the madrasa sector. Some madrasas receive government-administered Islamic alms ("zakaat"). Traders – or "bazaaris" – are traditional supporters of madrasas, and have contributed to the development and growth of some of the bigger madrasa complexes in Pakistan. Pakistan has a number of big university-style madrasas, which attract students from all of Pakistan and from abroad. These are large institutions built on the idea of an ideal Islamic society not only offering education, but health care and other facilities.

The majority of Pakistan's madrasas are, however, modest in size and resources.³⁰ Many are housed inside or adjacent to the local mosque. These madrasas are funded by the communities; the local imam is commonly the head of the madrasa and former students are employed as teachers either

on a voluntary basis or on minimal wages. Private madrasas are dependent on community support to exist and to grow.³¹ This relationship gives the madrasas legitimacy in the community that government-funded schools often do not have.³² The community aspect is critical also for larger madrasas. In her study of the madrasa in Rawalpindi, Bano finds that

the madrasa remains primarily a spiritual and social entity in which the alim (pl. 'ulama') builds his authority through continual interaction with the community: there are substantial checks on that authority since the community's support for madrasas is not motivated by blind ideological conviction, but by very rational calculations about his [the alim's] efficiency and personal commitment.³³

Masooda Bano identifies the migration of prominent 'ulema from India after Partition in 1947, as creating a strong patronage base for madrasas among the Pakistani public, which is 97% Muslim. The supremacy of Islam in the Pakistani constitution explains the strong emphasis of the 'ulema on protecting their vision of an Islamic education. Few madrasa leaders are political leaders as such, but some have strong links to political parties and leadership. Historically, there are strong links between the main Islamist and Deobandi political parties, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JI) and the *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam* (JUI), and madrasas associated with these denominations. These links are utilized by political parties, for example, to mobilize mass demonstrations.³⁴

Madrasa students

The press often paints a picture of young and poor madrasa students being brainwashed through rote learning, creating a generation of students embracing "jihad" (commonly translated as "struggle" or "holy war"), and having little knowledge of the contemporary world. A common assumption of the current policy debate is that the madrasas (offering free education, board and lodging) cater to poor students who otherwise would not have access

²⁹ Bano, *Beyond Politics*, 2007, p 43.

³⁰ Candland, *Pakistan's recent experience*, 2008, p 107.

³¹ Bano, *Beyond Politics*, 2007, p 60-64.

³² Borchgrevink, *Beyond Borders*, 2010, p 22.

³³ Bano, *Beyond Politics*, 2007, p 43 – 44.

³⁴ Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge*, 2008, p 65.

to education.³⁵ However, madrasa students are a diverse group. Poverty or a lack of alternative forms of education is not the only reason why students choose madrasa education. Some families from higher-income groups also choose religious schools, sometimes as a supplement to other forms of schooling.³⁶

Analysts and government officials point out that the lack or poor quality of education provided in Pakistan's public schools is contributing to the growth of madrasas in Pakistan. Looking at enrolment in Pakistani madrasas, the Andrabi-team discovered a more complex picture, which suggests that families who are not interested in madrasa education abandon the education system altogether rather than sending their children to a religious school.³⁷ This could also indicate that parents who chose Islamic education do so precisely because it offers a different, Islamic alternative. Understanding who the students are and why they choose religious education is important for madrasa reform to be successful.

Religious education is valued in itself

What is more, this general picture disregards the value placed on religious education itself. The madrasas teach a worldview based on values, norms and codes of conduct that are revered by many in Pakistan. For those who choose a madrasa education for themselves or for their children, it provides not only religious knowledge, but a value system that sets it apart from other, non-religious forms of education. Some families choose madrasa education because it is seen as the most appropriate form of schooling, and having a child with a religious degree grants the family prestige.

Matthew Nelson's study of local educational demands in Rawalpindi finds that 41% of the respondents had religious education as their top priority.³⁸ The study also found that there is a considerable discrepancy between the people's preference for religious

education and the *perceptions* of popular educational preferences by people working for donor agency education programs.³⁹ This correlates with Bano's critique of the current madrasa debate and reform policies, which she describes as being based on normative judgments about what type of knowledge and education is valuable and worth promoting in society.⁴⁰

Transnational networks

Pakistan's madrasas belong to transnational networks of learning. Having some of the most well-established madrasas in the region, Pakistan's madrasas also attract religious students from abroad. The Pakistani madrasas enjoy a high standing among Muslim students from neighbouring Afghanistan, but also attract students from Central Asia, as well as Uyghur students from North West China, and others from South East Asia and the Pakistani Diaspora in the West.⁴¹

The student-teacher relationship is central in the madrasa tradition. Religious students at the advanced levels seek out the madrasas known to host particular religious scholars specializing in their field of interest. The student-teacher relationships and links to fellow students remain important after the students finish their studies. These relationships make up informal networks of religious students, teachers and scholars across the country and abroad. The transnational character of these religious networks has come under increasing scrutiny after it was established that one of the perpetrators of the London bombings on 7 July 2005, had spent time in a madrasa in Pakistan. Pakistan's madrasas were conceived as a transnational security threat by Western governments, leading to enhanced pressure on the Government of Pakistan to reform the schools.

3. The State and the quest for reform

A new initiative to reform Pakistan's madrasas was undertaken by President Musharraf in early 2001. The reform saw increased attention from foreign

35 The 9/11 Commission, "The 9/11 Commission Report: The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States" (2004). <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/index.htm> Accessed 10 November 2010, p 21.

36 Andrabi et al., *Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan*, 2005, p 447; Nelson, *Muslims, Markets*, 2006, p 711.

37 Andrabi et al., *Religious School Enrolment in Pakistan*, 2005, p 19.

38 Nelson, *Muslims, Markets*, 2006, p 710.

39 Ibid., p 711.

40 Bano, *Beyond Politics*, 2007, p 44.

41 Borchgrevink, *Beyond Borders*, 2010, p 41; ICG, *Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military*, 2002, pp 22-23; and Z. Haider, "Sino-Pakistan Relations and Xinjiang's Uyghurs: Politics, Trade, and Islam along the Karakoram Highway", *Asian Survey* 45 (4), 2005, p 523.

governments after the attacks of 11 September 2001, and again, after the London bombings in 2005. This has resulted in pressure on the Pakistani Government to reform the religious schools. However, the reform has so far been deemed a failure, among both government and madrasa representatives.⁴² A recent agreement between the government and the madrasa leadership signed in October 2010 may mark a new beginning.

Education has a central place in Islam and among Pakistani Muslims, and provisions for Islamic education have been part of Pakistani education policy since the founding of the country in 1947.⁴³ Yet the relationship between the state and religion and the state's role in religious education has long been an area of contention. Religious education reform – and the idea of 'mainstreaming' religious education into the regular secular education system – has been an issue of debate and disagreement since 1947. At first, attempts were made to introduce regular subjects into the madrasas and to nationalize the religious education sector.⁴⁴ Then, as part of the Islamisation process initiated by General Zia ul Haq in the 1980s, some madrasas were given an enhanced status and government support. Funding was channelled from the government-administrated *zakaat* funds and from various foreign interests using some madrasas (particularly in Afghan refugee camps and in the border regions) as a recruiting ground for the Afghan resistance against the Soviets.⁴⁵

The Pakistani Madrasa Education Ordinance, 2001, and the Dini Madrasa Ordinance, 2002, proposed to reform and regulate madrasas. The madrasa reform was primarily focused on registering the madrasas with the government and on reforming the curriculum by introducing secular - or "worldly" ("*duniyat*")

- subjects.⁴⁶ The ordinances were promulgated as Extraordinary Ordinances before the October 2002 General Election for the National and Provincial Assemblies. Coming from a military government without an elected parliament, the ordinances did not gain significant public or political support.

Madrasas Education Board

One of the key issues in the debate between madrasas and the government relates to the establishment of madrasa education boards with the authority to set curriculum, give exams and issue degrees. The recognition of madrasa education boards by the government has been a central demand by madrasas, which will not subscribe to any reform that does not recognize their boards (*wafaq*). As noted above, Pakistan's madrasas have been organized by denomination in madrasa boards since the late 1950s. The nearly 20,000 Pakistani madrasas which have been registered with the government are affiliated with one of the five sectarian madrasa boards. Education boards are governmental in Pakistan, and the government is reluctant to recognize private boards (although a recent exception to this is the newly established Aga Khan Education Board)⁴⁷. The existing private madrasa boards currently arrange exams in religious subjects; while for non-religious subjects, madrasa students need to take exams administered by the provincial government education boards, if they want to receive recognized degrees. The madrasas want to establish a madrasa education board similar to the Aga Khan Education Board, using the government-prescribed curricula for regular subjects.

With the Pakistan Madrasa Education Ordinance, 2001, the Government of Pakistan proposed creating a government board to organize the madrasas, but failed in the process to involve the schools. The madrasas consequently refused to participate, with the result that the board was never established.

42 Irfan Bukhari, "PEMB fails to deliver", *The Nation*, 19 January 2009. <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/Regional/Islamabad/19-Jan-2009/PMEB-fails-to-deliver>, accessed 24 April 2010

43 Government of Pakistan, *National Education Policy*, 2009. http://www.infopak.gov.pk/National_Education_Policy_2009.pdf accessed 21 August 2010.

44 Reform of religious education was attempted under the military rule of Ayub Khan (1958 -1969) who wanted to introduce worldly subjects in the madrasas. Under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) attempts were made at nationalizing the religious education sector.

45 Borchgrevink, *Beyond Borders*, 2010, p 40; Mariam Abou Zahab & Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks. The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p 13.

46 Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge*, 2008, p 82.

47 "Aga Khan University Examination Board is a Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education established by Aga Khan University in response to demand from schools for more appropriate school examinations. AKU-EB was founded in August 2003 in accordance with Ordinance CXIV of the Government of Pakistan to offer examination services for both the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) throughout Pakistan and abroad. It offers its qualifications both in Urdu and English." <http://www.aku.edu/AKUEB/intro.shtml>, accessed 15 August 2010.

Instead the five-madrasa board constituted its own body, the *Ittehad e Tanzeemat Madaris e Deeniya* (ITMD), or “the federation of madrasa boards”. According to Qari Muhammad Hanif Jalandhry (Chairman of the Deobandi *Wafaq* and Representative of the Deobandi *Wafaq* in the ITMD), the ITMD was established to coordinate among the different sectarian madrasa boards (*wafaq*) “to have one syllabus, one education system, give exams on the same day - to avoid cheating - and to work together on government relations”.⁴⁸ The formation of a madrasa education board was later agreed by the government and the madrasas in 2007, but it stalled with the change in the country’s leadership. After the emergency declared by General Musharraf, new political priorities emerged and the madrasa reform was left in shambles.

Registration

Up to 1994, madrasas, like other civil society organizations in Pakistan, registered voluntarily with the government under the Societies Registration Act of 1860. Under Benazir Bhutto in the 1990s, registration of madrasas was stopped to curb their proliferation.⁴⁹ Wanting recognition, the madrasas protested and demanded registration. Under Musharraf, madrasas and the government agreed to recommence registration, but after 9/11, growing mistrust between the parties stalled the process. The Societies Registration Act of 1860 was amended in 2005 to make madrasa registration with the government obligatory. In addition, the madrasas were required to file a declaration stating that they would not teach or publish any material that spread militancy or hatred and would file a copy of their audited accounts on an annual basis.

The new registration initially required that the madrasas reveal their funding sources. The madrasas were willing to provide the government with audited accounts, but not information on individual contributions, rejecting what they saw as a foreign-driven agenda. Arrests and detention of people by US authorities made the madrasas

particularly reluctant to provide such information. According to Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) official Iqramullah Jan, religious actors feared the government was too close to the US Government and that madrasas that registered would be closed.⁵⁰ The madrasas saw registration not as an attempt at regulation, but as an effort to enhance government control.

When the government withdrew the demand for disclosing funding sources, the madrasas started registering again, and the process picked up after 2007. The government now maintains that “the reporting will take account of how much they [the madrasas] receive, and from where and how it was spent.”⁵¹ The ICG criticizes the initiative for being toothless measures merely to satisfy donor demands.⁵²

Breakthrough?

With the arrival of the Zardari Government replacing General Musharraf’s regime in 2008, madrasa reform was transferred from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) to the Ministry of the Interior (MoI). The move reflected the priority given to security, rather than the educational rationale of the reform, and was not well received by the madrasas. Yet, discussion continued and resulted in a landmark agreement between the government and the madrasas. On 7 October 2010, the ITMD and the Minister of the Interior signed an accord formalizing collaboration on a number of central issues including uniform curriculum standards and the introduction of contemporary subjects in the madrasas, madrasa registration, and standards for awarding madrasa degrees. While the madrasa reform was not a full legal enactment, it constituted a promising step forward in madrasa-government relations. The agreement will lead to a government-approved syllabus for the madrasas, and the religious education boards will be accorded the same status as other educational boards. Further, the agreement specifies that “no madrasa shall teach or publish any literature that promotes militancy or spreads sectarianism.”⁵³

48 The ITMD resistance to collaborate with the government, is partly explained by its being based in the Ministry of Education and partly because the initiative was run by Lt. Gen. Javed Ashraf Qazi, former Director General of the Pakistani intelligence services, the Inter Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). (Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge*, 2008, p 82).

49 Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge*, 2008, p 83.

50 Interview in Islamabad, 29 May 2010.

51 Interview with Wakil Ahmed Khan, the Chair of the now-defunct Pakistan Madrasas Education Board, 3 May 2010.

52 International Crisis Group, “Pakistan: Karachi’s Madrasas and Violent Extremism”, *Asia Report No.130*, Brussels, ICG, 2007, p 19.

53 http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=357&Itemid=135 accessed on 10 November 2010.

Measures of reform

With the aim of mainstreaming madrasa education within the national Pakistani education system, curriculum reform has become one of the main pillars of the government's madrasa reform agenda. Most of Pakistan's madrasas use some version of the *Dars-e Nizami* curriculum, containing canonical texts going back to the Tenth Century. The madrasa curriculum is often criticized for being outdated and for contributing to sectarianism and militancy. According to Dr Tariq Rahman, Professor of Pakistan Studies at Quaid-i-Azam University, however, it is not the *Dars-e Nizami* curriculum that is critical to the politicization or radicalization of madrasa students. He argues that the *Dars-e Nizami* "tends to disengage one from the modern world, rather than engage with it".⁵⁴ Contemporary concerns - such as heresies in the Muslim world, the conspiracies of non-Muslims against Muslims, the crusades of the west against Palestine, Kashmir, Iraq and Afghanistan - are unrelated to this curriculum.

Rahman believes that the art of theological debating - the tradition of "*munazara*" - is more critical. Through theological debates between the different denominations, madrasa students learn "the skills of rhetoric, polemic, intonation, quotation and arguments of their own sub-sect to win an argument"⁵⁵. According to Rahman, these are real life debates. The *munazara* debates are important because they offer a bridge between memorization and using knowledge to debate issues of contemporary relevance. Madrasa teachers and mosque preachers use the skills learned for *munazara* in their sermons. Hence, politically-aware Muslims, not just madrasa students, are influenced by this tradition.

The brainwashing of religious students through the dissemination of so-called "*jihadi* literature" - propagating hatred - is another concern. This *jihadi* literature, purportedly flourishing in Pakistan's madrasas⁵⁶, is actually not a product of the madrasas, but produced and distributed by militant *jihadi* groups. According to Tariq Rahman, "the link between madrasas and terrorism is not in the

curriculum used in the madrasas".⁵⁷ The militant Islamic movements publish their own *jihadi* texts or magazines. These publications are not part of the formal curriculum, but are sold outside mosques and madrasas and in the bazaar. In Rahman's words, "it is the informal link to the madrasas that is important".

Refutation of other beliefs (known as "*radd*" in Urdu) is part of the Islamic tradition in Pakistan, and madrasas of all the major denominations commonly teach "comparative religion" where students are taught to refute the views of other denominations.⁵⁸ Madrasa critics blame the tradition of "*radd*" and related literature for contributing to sectarian conflict. Raghieb Hussain at the Bareilvi madrasa, *Jamia Naeemia*, in Lahore has said: "Somehow the critics are right. Every sect thinks they are on the right path and, so believe it is necessary to rectify their [the students'] views while teaching students ... this is somehow part of creating conflict"⁵⁹. Hussain believes that "the debate should remain among the clerics. It has been spread out to the common people, to the ones who do not have full knowledge. It is more harmful for the society... [thus] it is at the lower level [of society] that we see tension".⁶⁰ Qari Mohammad Hanif Jalandhry, considers that "differences between religious sects are natural, but [they] should not escalate into bloodshed and conflict".⁶¹ These issues present some serious challenges to the madrasas and the Government of Pakistan, which clearly needs to deal with them.

Responding to Militancy and Sectarianism

The madrasa leadership in Pakistan recognizes that there is a problem of Islamic militancy and sectarian violence in the country that is linked to religious groups. The ITMD presents itself as a coordinating body that--in spite of sectarian differences between the members of the board--is jointly fighting the growth in both sectarianism and militancy among Islamic groups. The rise and intensification of Islamic militancy and sectarian violence in Pakistan over the last years have also affected the religious leadership.

54 Tariq Rahman, "Madrasas: the potential for violence in Pakistan?", Jamal Malik, ed, *Madrasa in South Asia: Teaching Terror?* London and New York, Routledge (61-84), 2008, p 67.

55 Ibid.

56 ICG, *Madrasas and militancy*, 2002.

57 Interview in Islamabad, 28 April 2010.

58 Rahman, *Madrasas: the potential for violence*, 2008, p 68 -70.

59 Interview in Lahore, 5 May 2010.

60 Interview in Lahore, 5 May 2010.

61 Interview in Karachi, 4 May 2010.

Working to reduce sectarian conflict is part of the agenda of the ITMD. According to Qari Mohammad Hanif Jalandhry, the Deobandi *wafaq* refutes sectarian conflict and works with “the ITMD to provide harmony and peace” saying “there should be efforts to reduce conflict where possible. The ITMD works to mitigate and remove conflict through meetings, speeches and by condemning conflicts and acts of violence and bloodshed”.⁶²

While sectarian parties have been banned by the government, the ITMD is despondent over the government’s inability or unwillingness to close down illegal groups. According to Raghbir Hussain, “[t]he government should take action and eradicate these groups. They have weapons and they do nasty things in their areas. The government should take action or the tension will remain in society - not only in Punjab, but all over the country”.⁶³ Qari Mohammad Hanif Jalandhry calls on the government to take action against *jihadi* literature: “It is the government’s responsibility to stop the militants [...] we discourage our students to read jihadi literature, but [we] have no legal authority to stop this”.⁶⁴

Religious leaders of all denominations who speak up against the *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic militants are being threatened and killed. On 16 April 2007, Mawlana Hassan Jan, a Deobandi cleric from Peshawar was killed after publicly denouncing the methods used by the TTP. On 12 June 2009, Mawlana Sarfrazullah Naeemi, a senior Barelvi cleric and head of the *Jamia Naeemia* madrasa in Lahore, was killed by the TTP after issuing a *fatwa* or religious opinion declaring TTP’s methods un-Islamic and condemning the killing of innocent people in suicide bomb attacks. The *fatwa* was endorsed by 59 scholars of different denominations. The continued killings of clergy critical of the TTP have left the madrasas leaders fearing for their lives, but the madrasa boards (*wafaqs*) are still resisting the “Talibanisation” of the madrasas. According to Mufti Munib ur Rahman, President of the *Tanzeem ul Madaris* (Barelvi) and the head of the ITMD, the ITMD has agreed to reject the inclusion of militant madrasas on their madrasa boards, and he draws attention to the decision of the *Wafaq-ul-Madaris-al-Arabia* (Deobandi) to terminate the memberships of the *Jamia Hafsa* madrasa associated with the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) in Islamabad after the siege of *Lal Masjid* in 2007.⁶⁵ (See Box 2).

Box 2: The Red Mosque confrontation – and its effects

In July 2007, the Red Mosque, one of Islamabad’s main Deobandi mosques and frequented by religious and political elites, became the focus of a confrontation between madrasa students and Pakistani security forces. The mosque had gradually become more radical, openly voicing pro-Taliban sympathies and calling for the introduction of Sharia. Students of the madrasas associated with the mosque, the *Jamia Hafsa* and the *Jamia Farida*, had started to take things into their own hands by kidnapping prostitutes and setting fire to music shops. On 3 July 2007 madrasa students clashed with nearby security forces, announcing that their mosque had been attacked and mobilized with arms. It resulted in a day-long shoot-out, and a dramatic confrontation that only ended with the storming of the Red Mosque by the Pakistani Army seven days later. The storming resulted in the death of the deputy cleric Mawlana Abdul Rashid and 106 other madrasa students.

The storming of a mosque sent shockwaves through Pakistan. The situation created intense debate in religious circles; moreover, many secular Pakistanis criticised General Musharraf for choosing a violent end to the situation. Militant groups, used to having support from the Pakistani state, saw it as a threat and as a breach of an unwritten contract. The government’s mishandling of the situation won the two madrasas support among students at other madrasas. The termination of *Jamia Hafsa*’s membership in the *Wafaq ul Madaris* (Deoband) was condemned by madrasa students, as well as by other Deobandi madrasas.

Source: Siddique, Qandeel, “The Red Mosque operation and its impact on the growth of Pakistani Taliban”. Oslo, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2008, p 36-28; interviews in Islamabad, May 2010.

62 Interview in Karachi, 4 May 2010.

63 Interview in Lahore, 5 May 2010.

64 Interview in Karachi, 4 May 2010.

65 Interview in Karachi, 4 May 2010.

The ITMD has also asked the government to take action against militant groups. The ITMD believes the government is clamping down on non-militant madrasas to show results and blame the police for attacking peaceful madrasas because they can't stand up to the hardliners, whom they see as well equipped with weapons and money.

Quality and relevance of madrasa education

Another aspect of this debate relates to the quality and relevance of the education offered in madrasas. Madrasa education is frequently criticized for being substandard and of little relevance to contemporary society. There are, however, significant differences in terms of the education offered in Pakistan's various madrasas. Many of the larger schools are well organized and well equipped; they follow a standardized curriculum and hold regular examinations. Madrasas such as the *Jamia Naeemia* (Barelvi) in Lahore, the *Dar ul Uloom Naeemia* in Karachi (Barelvi) and the *Khair-ul-Madaris* in Multan (Deobandi), already offer a worldly education besides the religious subjects.

Mufti Munib ur Rehman, President of *Tanzeem ul Madaris* Pakistan (Barelvi), finds it reasonable that the Pakistani Government and the world community want regular subjects included in the curriculum, declaring that "we know the requirements of the modern age; it is necessary to know English and to communicate to the community. There is no conflict; we are ready to accept, but the Government is not ready to trust us with the responsibility".⁶⁶ The madrasas' central interest is in improving the quality and standing of religious education. While many of the larger institutions already offer other worldly subjects, madrasas are still concerned that the government's idea of mainstreaming religious education will favour generalist education at the cost of religious specialization.

For scholars looking for the roots of militancy, integrating the national curriculum into the madrasa curricula presents no simple remedy to cure Pakistan from the rise in militancy. Largely developed during General Zia ul Haq's military rule (1979–1988), the national curriculum is still marked by Zia's Islamisation policies, which present Pakistan

as a nation of Islam and identify non-Muslims - particularly Hindus and India - as the enemy.⁶⁷ In one of Tariq Rahman's earlier surveys of attitudes in the Pakistani education system, he finds that the attitudes towards *jihad* and the use of violence among students and teachers in government schools do not differ considerably from those of students and teachers in madrasas. This finding suggests that the prevalence of such attitudes may reflect a more general trend in Pakistani society, rather than being exclusive to madrasa education.⁶⁸

Candland also argues that "the national government curriculum may give greater sanction to intolerance towards religious minorities, to sectarianism and to violence towards perceived enemies than do the curricula of the madaris [madrasas]".⁶⁹ Tariq Rahman also emphasizes the need to reform the national curriculum and produce textbooks that don't present a picture of "the other" as "*kafir*" (infidel).

4. Challenges to reform

Madrasa Independence

Pakistan's madrasas are predominantly private institutions, and the independence of the madrasa institution is integral to its identity.⁷⁰ The madrasas see themselves as sustainers of a particular religious tradition, existing outside the purview of the state. Government control and madrasa reform initiatives have been firmly resisted throughout Pakistan's history. The core of the madrasa tradition – the education of children and training of religious leaders and clergy in the "true interpretation of religion" – lies in the curriculum. Thus, madrasas resist government control over curriculum because they believe that the curriculum in religious schools ought to be decided by religious experts. The madrasas' main interest is in protecting the standing of religious education, and the sector is generally distrustful of government reform.

The madrasas also oppose any financial dependence on the government. The majority of Pakistan's madrasas are financed by charity: local communities, business

⁶⁷ Rehman, *Madrasas: the potential for violence*, 2008, p 79.

⁶⁸ Rahman, *Denizens of Alien Worlds*, 2004, p 175.

⁶⁹ Candland, *Pakistan's recent experience*, 2008, p 106.

⁷⁰ Alexander Evans, "Understanding Madrasahs: How Threatening Are They?", *Foreign Affairs* 85, 2006, p 14.

⁶⁶ Interview in Karachi, 4 May 2010.

men and religious-ideological patrons, at home and abroad. This philanthropy is critical to the madrasas' existence. The madrasas regard financial dependence on the government as leading to government control. Pakistan's madrasas are part of a transnational religious tradition, which relies upon transnational flows of ideas, people and finance which, in turn, pose additional challenges to government reform. The resistance to register and open madrasa accounts to government scrutiny may partly reflect loyalties to their financial supporters - some of whom form part of transnational networks, including foreign Muslim supporters.⁷¹ While several analysts allege strong links between madrasas and foreign funders, it is difficult to estimate and establish the level of funding from abroad. While madrasas are willing to accept a certain degree of government regulation and oversight, they will not risk losing their independence – particularly if such regulation is seen as part of a foreign agenda.

Capacity constraints in the small-scale institutions

There are considerable variations among the schools in the madrasa sector, not only in terms of sectarian and ideological linkages, but also in terms of size, organisation and access to resources. This affects the madrasas' ability to implement government reform programmes. The larger well-established schools have already introduced 'worldly' subjects as part of the curriculum. These schools are part of the policy debate through the sectarian madrasa boards and the ITMD. The real challenge to madrasa reform may be in reaching out to the many smaller madrasas, which lack the resources and ability to implement the required changes following reforms. Lacking teachers, teaching materials and basic facilities, the introduction of the regular government curriculum may be beyond the means of these smaller madrasas.

Government ambiguity

It is not only madrasas that are resisting some of the government reforms; the government itself seems to be split internally on the matter. In her study of government-madrasa relations in Pakistan, Bano found the government unwilling to engage fully in reform. She argues that the government already has regular contact with most madrasas, and through visits by district-level officials, the government has

an overview of who attends madrasas, how they are financed and what is taught.⁷² However, the Pakistani leadership, both political and military, has repeatedly utilised the religious establishment to gain legitimacy and support for its policies. Even secular-minded Pakistani leaders have chosen to use rather than challenge religious orthodoxy, and militant religious groups have been patronised by the army to "secure geostrategic objectives in Kashmir and Afghanistan."⁷³

The government position is also seen as ambiguous by the madrasa leaders, who are critical of the government clamping down on moderate schools, while madrasas known to have links to militant groups are perceived to operate freely. The relationship between the Pakistani state and the religious institutions is thus marked by distrust. The government is mistrustful of the madrasas' reluctance to provide access to their financial accounts. The madrasas, for their part, are wary of the government's intentions behind the reform, which is seen as serving a foreign agenda. In order to move the process forward, the madrasas and the government must build trust between them.

Politicised madrasa debate

Madrasas are a subject of controversy in Pakistan, as well as in the West. The secular Pakistani elite, which dominate Pakistani think-tanks, view the madrasas as bastions of obscurantism. These liberal elites are highly critical of madrasa education and particularly of the foreign support and intervention from Western countries - be it the US, UK or Norwegian Governments - on their behalf. From its first report on madrasa and militancy in 2002, the ICG has had a consistently critical view of religious education and institutions. In an interview in Islamabad on 28 April 2010, terrorism and security analyst Amir Rana at the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) voiced his concern about support for Pakistan's madrasas. He believes that "by funding the madrasas you will create another monster" and asked for foreign donors to invest in public "regular" education. Rana emphasised that "it is necessary to counter, not strengthen, the Islamic narrative". Believing engagement will strengthen the madrasas, these think tanks repeatedly call for disengagement with the sector overall.

⁷² Bano, *Contesting Ideologies*, 2007, p 25-26.

⁷³ Winthrop and Graf, *Beyond Madrasas* 2010, p 9.

⁷¹ Winthrop and Graf, *Beyond Madrasas*, 2010, p 13.

5. Conclusion

In the current polarised political situation, with the *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan and militant Islamic groups on one side and the government on the other, the madrasas are increasingly forced to take sides. If the government plays its cards right, it may be able to benefit from a situation where the most hardcore Islamist militants end up alienating the moderate madrasa leadership in Pakistan. The situation, however, is complex and delicate. As a symbol of Islamic traditions, the madrasas have been situated in the midst of the battleground of ideas. Post 9-11 and in light of international political developments, Pakistan's madrasas – and madrasa reform – became part of “the war on terror”.

This has contributed to the securitisation of the madrasa debate. On the one side are those who want to curb the spread of radical Islamist ideas and militancy; on the other, are those who want to protect and advance Muslim culture and the independence of religious institutions, and who feel misrepresented in a debate about militancy. A madrasa debate marked by broad generalisations, unhelpful inaccuracy and at times outright sensationalism, does little to enhance our understanding of Pakistan's madrasas, and the educational challenges facing the Government and people of Pakistan.

Not all militant. While links exist between certain madrasas and militant groups and actions, these links are limited to a few schools with historical ties to militant groups. The growing demand for religious education in Pakistan behooves us to avoid overgeneralisations in which all madrasas are branded with the characteristics of a few.

The madrasa sector is not without challenges. The madrasa leadership in Pakistan is very aware of the elements linking Islamic militancy and sectarian violence to certain religious groups and parties. Sectarian teachings and *jihadi* literature present serious challenges to the madrasas and the Government of Pakistan and will need to be addressed more seriously by both sides. The madrasas must stand up to militant groups, while the government should also sort out its ambivalent relationship to these groups.

Continuity and change. While the canonical texts of the *Dars-e Nizami* curriculum are integral to the madrasa tradition, the national madrasa leadership

is willing to incorporate other regular subjects in the madrasa curriculum and teaching. In fact, many madrasas have already done so. The *jihadi* texts are not part of the official madrasa curriculum, although they are widely available in the market. If the problem is the informal links between madrasas and militants, perhaps the narrow focus on curriculum reform is a misguided way to tackle the broader challenges of radicalization. The government and the madrasas need to collaborate to tackle the influence of militant groups and their recruiting among madrasa students.

Other radicalization arenas. Research finds that madrasas are not the only arena for radicalisation in Pakistan today; intolerant worldviews are also fostered through the national government curriculum.⁷⁴ Further, research shows that few terrorists are madrasa students and that recruitment by militant groups happens through a number of channels.⁷⁵ The strong focus on madrasas as the main breeding ground for militants has resulted in less attention being paid to other drivers and arenas of radicalisation.

The agreement signed between the Ministry of Interior and the ITMD in October 2010, is a promising step. The madrasa leadership and the government agree that the madrasa sector, and the Pakistani education system more generally, are in need of change, in terms of the educational content, and the management and quality of facilities. Yet reform proposals are government-led initiatives and not unlike other government reforms, remain a top-down process, involving limited consultation with the main stakeholders: the madrasas and the religious community.

The madrasas are concerned that their voice will not be heard and that mainstreaming religious education will compromise the position of religious subjects. There is a need to balance the various interests and demands on both sides, and concessions will need to be made. The current situation presents an opportunity to take the reform process further and should not be missed.

⁷⁴ Winthrop and Graf, *Beyond Madrasas*, 2010, p 41; Rahman, *Madrasas: the potential for violence*, 2008, p 175.

⁷⁵ Fair, *The Madrasas Challenge*, 2008, p 67- 68; Borchgrevink, *Beyond Borders*, 2010, p 55.

Appendix 1: List of people interviewed

Mr Tauqir Shah, Islamabad, 8 February 2008
Mr Rizwan, Norwegian Church Aid, Islamabad, 11 February 2008 and 27 April 2010
Dr Khalid ur Rahman, Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, 11 February 2008 and 29 April 2010
Dr Tariq Rahman, Professor of Pakistan Studies at Qaid e Azam University, 28 April 2010
Mr Amir Rana, Pakistani Institute of Peace Studies, Islamabad, 28 April 2010
Mr T. M. Kursehi, Ministry of Education, Curriculum Wing, Islamabad 29 April 2010
Mr Iqramullah Jan, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Islamabad 29 April 2010
Dr Hanif, Ministry of Education, Project Wing, Islamabad 29 April 2010
Mr Imtiaz Gul, Analysts Centre for research and Security Studies, Islamabad, 30 April 2010
Ms Sadia Khalid, Journalist, The News, Islamabad, 30 April 2010
Mr Shehryar Fazli, International Crisis Group, Islamabad, 30 April 2010
Mr Vakil Ahmed Khan, Pakistan Madrasas education Board, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Islamabad. 3 May 2010
Qari Muhammad Hanif Jalandhry, Chairman of the Deobandi wafaq and representative of the Deobandi wafaq in the ITMD, Karachi, 4 May 2010
Mufti Munib ur Rahman, president of the Tanzeem ul Madaris (Barelvi) and the head of the ITMD, Karachi, 4 May 2010
Mr Raghieb Hussain, Jamia Naeemia, Lahore, 5 May 2010
Mawlana Abd ul Malik, Jamat e Islami, Manssora Lahore, 5 may 2010

Appendix 2: Glossary

dar ul hifaz – place teaching memorization and recitation of the Quran.
dar ul uloom - 'house of knowledge', high school
jamia - university
madrassa (sg.)/ madares (pl.) – religious seminary
maslak – creed
maslak – creed
mawlana – Islamic religious leader
wafaq – madrasas board
waqf (sg.)/ awqaf (pl) – religious endowment
zakaat – Islamic alms