Education, Policy and Reform: To what extent is Madrassah Education linked to Militant Activity in Pakistan

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The Madrassah tradition 'is one of the oldest institutions of learning in the Islamic world, originally designed to interpret Quranic and other religious texts.' [1] The tradition began in 11th century Iran, spreading to India by the 13th century thereafter consolidated under the Mughal Empire. The curriculum at this time combined rationalist subjects along with religious text interpretation. However, upon the establishment of British colonial rule, the 'role of madrassah education was further transformed in South Asia with the introduction of Western educational institutions and moreover by replacing Persian with English as the official language. Colonial rule thus made madrassah education irrelevant to the needs of the state and economy.' [2] This shift further saw the rise of *Dar ul Uloom Deoband*, a madrassah established in the 19th century whose *ulama* responded by focusing primarily on a puritanical school of Islamic thought. 'This school of thought has the largest number of madrassahs in South Asia today.' [3]

Since Pakistan emerged as a postcolonial nation in 1947, 'several educational plans and policies have been put forward without remarkable results.' [4] Pakistan came into being as a homeland for Muslim Indians therefore the current education policy promotes significant emphasis on Islamic education. [5] It has long been established that 'religion and politics are intertwined since the dawn of Islamic history, in accordance with the dictum that Islam is in its essence both 'religion and state.' [6] During the reign of Zia-ul-Haq, an 'Islamization' agenda saw dramatic rise in the number of madrassahs in the early 1980's. 'This period marks the birth of jihad culture in some Deobandi madrasas. As a consequence of the huge influx of Afghans into Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan war, along with Zia's decision to support the Afghans, a number of madrassahs became training centres for fighters in this war.' [7]

In the wake of 9/11, a number of critical reports concerning Islamic madrasahs and their curriculum have been produced by international observers in an attempt to decipher whether they incite hatred against other religions or motivate youngsters to engage in Jihad. [8] In compliance with US foreign policy, President General Pervez Musharraf's military government 'passed the *Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance* law in 2002, in an attempt to control religious extremism taught in madrassahs, which was subsequently rejected by most madrassahs, who resisted state interference in their affairs.' [9] In 2003, a proposed education reform plan, introducing formal and 'secular' subjects into madrassah curriculum was launched with the backing of USAID, involving the signing of a $100 million agreement in an effort to increase access to quality education throughout the country. [10] However, in 2012, it was reported that out of the approximately 40,000 madrassahs currently operating in Pakistan, only 10,000 are registered with the government. These statistics have further given rise to the claim that 'global Islamic militancy grows in

Pakistani madrassahs, which are functioning without government supervision and thus have become training camps of terrorists.' [11]

In this paper I investigate to what extent madrassahs are linked to militant activity in Pakistan, in light of the 'clear consensus that Pakistan's militants pose critical threats to regional and international security.' [12] Research to date has produced varying, inconclusive results, due to many factors such as the 'very limited regulatory oversight of madrassahs[13] along with restricted access to madrassahs in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. In order to decipher a conclusion therefore: state policy, reform, curriculum and socio-economic factors will be taken into account in this paper. Contrary to popular belief, I argue that madrassahs are not categorically linked to militant activity except for a minority in FATA which are 'deeply implicated in the recruitment of suicide attackers in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.' [14] I endeavour to demonstrate that while education is not the sole factor in extremism, further state reforms are required within the education sector in Pakistan, such as readdressing the sectarian nature of the curricula, particularly in madrassahs and public schools, which I argue promote intolerance and disdain for non-Muslims and religious minorities.

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There are three main educational sectors in Pakistan: public (government) schools, private schools and religious schools (madrassahs). Islamic education is a 'compulsory subject in Pakistan's public schools that educate more than 70 percent of students, whereas formal religious education is the focus of madrassas which educate less than 1 percent of Pakistan's students.' [15] While the government has offered financial assistance to madrassahs in an effort to 'expand their curriculum to include worldly subjects, so far very few – if any – have taken advantage of these subsidies.' [16] Masooda Bano states that funding for education along with the reform programme, implemented since 2002, has been met with distrust from the religious community: 'it being seen as part of US-led war on terror where the objective is to control the madrassahs rather than support them.'[17]

In 2009, a survey concluded that Madrassahs are funded by the philanthropy of civil society: 'Society owns this institution and supports it logistically and financially.' [18] In light of this autonomously run organization then, financed by localized charities and supporters, under the authority of an Imam: [19] what accountability mechanism is in place, if any, regarding quality of education? A report carried out by the *International Crisis Group* (ICG) argued that madrassahs produce indoctrinated clergymen, which in turn delivers graduates with narrow worldviews, lack of civic education, further leading to sectarian and international jihadi ideas. The report moreover states that the clerics in charge of madrassahs jealously

safeguard autonomy: because it gives them unchecked control of finances, their students and what they are taught.[20] I agree with Bano, however, who states that many of these surveys are based on selective interviews, and therefore cannot account for madrassah education as a whole.' [21] Writing in 2012, Safeer Awan recounts that due to American pressure to control the madrassah syllabus, Musharraf tried to change Pakistan's socio-cultural trajectories by bringing about changes to the national curricula. 'These measures however, proved cosmetic as no serious attempt was made to reform the educational system, particularly of madrassahs which remain controlled by the private sector and the state is oblivious to them.' [22]

The majority of madrassahs in Pakistan are 'associated with five boards: Sunni (Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadith, Barelvi and Jamaat-i-Islami) and one Shia.' [23] Rahman disclosed that because madrassahs teach their own *maslak* (interpretation of religion) makes their curriculum by definition sectarian. For instance, final year students at a *Barelvi* madrassah in Rawalpindi revealed that occasionally, teachers recommended supplementary reading material specifically for the refutation of the doctrines of other sects. [24]In order to approach the question as to what extent madrassahs are linked to militant activity, I find it a useful undertaking to investigate the question of 'curriculum.'

Scholarly research to date has produced varying, contradictory reports not only with regard to the extent madrassahs are connected to militant activity, but also in relation to madrassah curriculum. Bano states that it is reasonable to expect differences in relation to the syllabus on offer, when dealing with factors such as 'sectarian affiliation, reputation, number of students and geographical location. Also, madrassahs registered with the government are likely to differ from unregistered ones.' [25] In a case study of one *deobandi* madrassah in Rawalpindi, Bano found that although the main objective of the madrassah was to 'produce scholars of Islam, to spread the teachings of Islam and carry out welfare programmes for the needy, many secular subjects were also taught such as Mathematics, Science, English and Pakistan Studies.' [26] The study further found that the authority of the Imam was not above questioning, whereby donors and parents alike regularly checked the madrassah standards, competence and commitment of the board of management.

In contrast, Mamoun Fandy found that because the Pakistan government allocated just 1.8% GDP to education, meant that large segments of the rural population have no access to modern public schools for children. He further states that parents are left with the only option of sending children to madrassahs where 'interpretation of Islamic divine texts is left to the discretion of teachers who are unqualified, ill equipped and poor spirited.[27] He moreover states that 'fundamentalist teachers have infiltrated secular systems of education with the goal not to simply teach but to recruit. He therefore concludes that the crisis of education 'is not one of infrastructure, but what is being taught, how it is being taught and the people who are teaching it.' [28] Safeer Awan wrote that the national curricula in Pakistan Studies, Islamic studies,

history and Urdu have been designed to promote extremist ideology. According to an analysis of text book content (for 6th – 8th grade children), the findings revealed that: Only Muslim culture and Islam were promoted, and any divergence was condemnable; religion and nationalism are employed in the cause of war against all 'others', whether Muslim or not; peace and tolerance is minimized while war and jihad are glorified; narrow-mindedness is inculcated by ignoring the good qualities of the rest of the world and thus militant nationalism is ingrained in the minds of the young.' [29] In relation to madrassah text books, a 2011 report disclosed:

"While some madrassahs today are teaching 'secular' subjects, many still teach exclusively religious subjects. All of the secular subject texts books however, were originally written between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Non-Muslims were portrayed as either 'infidels, pagans, *dhimmis* (non-Muslims living under Islamic rule), or apostates. Non-Muslims were never described as citizens with the constitutionally-protected rights which accompany citizenship." [30]An extensive survey carried out in 2010 showed that although madrassah students exhibit intolerance, sectarianism and radical tendencies at a high level; 'public school students display similar tendencies, while students in elite English-medium private schools' fare better.' [31]

Economic circumstances also require consideration in this equation, as research has shown that 'a growing body of empirical literature confirmed that poverty and economic conditions are not directly correlated with the occurrence of terrorism.' [32] Christine Fair states that while 'poorer students do make up a larger percentage of student body at madrassahs, their socioeconomic profiles are similar to those in public schools. Notably, madrassahs also have a higher proportion of wealthier students than public schools.' [33] In contrast, however, Umbreen Javaid found that with immense poverty in Pakistan along with population increase, poor families send their children to madrassahs where education, food and shelter are free. He further states that these madrassahs, funded by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, local businessmen, religious parties and donors, convert poor children into fanatics with no logic or orientation, thus producing hard-core Islamic fundamentalists.[34] Bearing these diverse findings in mind, I now endeavour to analyse to what extent madrassahs are linked to militant activity in Pakistan.

It is generally perceived that 'global Islamic militancy grows in Pakistani madrassahs which are functioning without government supervision, and thus, have become training camps of terrorists.' [35] In 2012, a study was carried out involving sixteen madrassah religious teachers during the course of two focus group discussions, held at *deobandi* and *ahl-e-hadith* madrassas in Lahore.[36] Among many issues discussed, the focus group asserted that the Taliban movement was a resistance struggle against American oppression giving rise to resentful victims in the FATA whom in turn join the resistance movement. There was a general consensus among the group, that madrassahs play no part in militant activity. They further stated the role of

madrassahs in society was to 'deliver divine knowledge, accommodate the marginalized population, provide them with the basic amenities of life, manufacture peaceful literate citizens, and create opportunities of employment: thus helping the state.' [37] Further studies were carried out in 2011, involving interviews and focus group discussions with150 male madrassah students from each of the four provinces of Pakistan. The students proved extremely hostile towards some religious sects including Shia, Jews, Hindus and Ahmadis, although preference was shown for 'People of the Book.' Most felt religious minorities should not be invited to social events and should not intermingle with Muslims. The majority considered non-Muslims as enemies of Islam.[38]

A survey involving 141 militant families in Pakistan was carried out in 2004. [39] (Although this report is not as recent as the aforementioned, I consider the findings relevant and evidential through empirical study). Families from each of the four provinces of Pakistan, who had lost at least one son to militancy, were administered a comprehensive questionnaire to complete. Of the 141 families, only nineteen were recruited at a madrassah, the same amount was recruited at public schools. Fifty were recruited through friends, thirty-two at mosques, twenty-seven through proselytizing groups and thirteen from relatives. The remaining figures are unknown as respondents did not answer this question. The report found that 82 of the militants were very well educated by Pakistani standards, with at least a matriculation qualification. [40] These findings align with research that examined the backgrounds of 79 terrorists involved in recent anti-Western attacks, such as 9/11, 'which found that madrassah involvement was rare and further noted that the 'masterminds' of the attacks all had university degrees.' [41] This evidence also draws attention to the roll of public institutions where it is maintained that '40 percent of militant manpower comes from Pakistan's public schools and higher education institutions.' [42] Bueno de Mesquita found similar trends where he states that 'terrorists have levels of educational attainment slightly above the societal mean and are less likely to live in poverty than the average person.' [43] He further states, 'the terrorist organizations want to recruit only the most effective, highly skilled terrorists.' [44] Fair, however, suggests that for some groups, such as the Taliban or sectarian militants, recruits with a religious educational background may be preferred, further suggesting the historical link between *deobandi* madrassahs and Taliban membership. [45] This factor is further validated according to data gathered by the *United Nations assistance Mission to Afghanistan* along with other studies, where failed suicide attackers were young, illiterate and poor, and had been persuaded to become attackers having been plucked by madrassahs in Pakistan's tribal agencies. [46] Fair concludes that while madrassah products are not extensively represented in the ranks of militant groups, they do seem involved in sectarian violence and many in suicide attacks, and therefore do require continued scrutiny. [47]

CONCLUSION

Throughout my research which considered to what extent madrassah education is linked to militant activity in Pakistan, I found that while not categorically linked to extremist activity, their establishment and structure, based on their own *maslak*, nonetheless, makes their curriculum by definition sectarian . My methodology sought to analyse state policy, reform and socio-economic conditions, in consideration of a large quantity of empirical studies carried out by various scholars. I found that the education landscape in Pakistan exemplifies a diverse, multi-faceted, complex terrain, based on a three-tier class based system. Curriculum content, teaching methodologies and evaluation systems are entirely different from one another as these three school systems attract different classes of society. [48]

Without definitive government regulation, many madrassah institutions, funded through private philanthropy, employ teachers who 'have not had formal teacher training and also the content of their curriculum and delivery of subjects go largely unchecked.[49] 'Islam features prominently in the cultural and educational fabric of Pakistan,' [50] and as such, madrassahs 'are founded on sectarian lines:' [51] sectarianism therefore, 'poses a serious and palpable internal challenge for Pakistan.' [52] The residue of 'Islamisation' policies from Zia's time in office, which initiated a wave of sectarianism, continues to seep through the social fabric and subsequent renegotiation attempts by the Musharraf government failed to implement any serious reforms in the education sector. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, madrassahs in Pakistan became the focus of International attention, which further witnessed financial backing from the US urging the government to introduce reforms in the madrassah system.

Substantial research has shown little evidence to confirm that madrassahs, are linked to militant activity, apart from the FATA where recruitment of suicide attackers are often plucked from religious seminaries, in an area where there is little or no law enforcement. Empirical studies showed that the majority of militants are not schooled at madrassahs and are mostly highly educated men with university degrees. Although the vast majority of madrassahs cater for children of lesser off families; madrassahs also attract a higher proportion of children from wealthy families, more so than their public school counterparts. I have tried to show that the sectarian nature of madrassah education curricula poses concern. Although 'secular' subjects are being taught in many institutions, others teach exclusively religious subjects. Text books portrayed non-Muslims as infidels, pagans, *dhimmis* or apostates and were never described as 'citizens.' I furthermore tried to show that government public schools text books promote only Muslim culture and Islam; peace and tolerance are further minimized while war and jihad are glorified.

I agree with Amir Rana who recently wrote that the 'federal and provincial governments are not prioritising education in their development discourse.' [53]In my opinion, focusing on education alone will not resolve the issue of extremism due to the heterogeneous nature of this phenomenon. A closer look at domestic

backgrounds, which has been largely ignored in this equation, to decipher the attitudes and beliefs of parents and relatives may be another avenue worth addressing. I disagree that secularization of the entire education system is the answer to the problem, considering Islam is inherently part of Pakistani culture and the motivator in every sphere and aspect of domestic, social and political life. However, given the pluralistic nature of Pakistani society comprising of many ethnic communities and religious minorities, the curricula needs to be readdressed in recognition of the broader community to promote a more tolerant peaceful society.

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Angel Merisi is a freelance writer and poet. Qualifications to date include: BA (Hons.) Degree in Art History (focus on 15th - 17th Century Italian Masters). MA Degree in Contemporary Religions (Focus on Islam) At present, preparing to begin PhD research in Pashtun Studies.

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