

PAPER

Madrassa reforms: the debate

Mujtaba Muhammad Rathore

Abstract

The post-Peshawar attack debate on regulating madrassas is similar to those carried out since the inception of war against terrorism in 2001. As with those attempts, this one may fail too, simply because government's policy towards madrassas is reactive, unilateral, and mired with inconsistencies. The policy tends to draw a simplistic line between madrassa and extremism, ignoring the different shades of debates offered in this regard. The author revisits the debate on madrassas. Moreover, madrassa reforms, the paper notes, entail a broad range of issues including their registration and regulation of students and their curriculum. All these issues should be explored, but in a step-by-step approach, argues the author, and by taking madrassa administrators on board.

Madrassa reforms: The debate

Mujtaba Muhammad Rathore

In the wake of December 16th 2014 attack in Peshawar, the government adopted 20-point National Action Plan (NAP), aimed at countering militancy and extremism from the country.¹ One of those points relate to the “registration and regulation of madrassas” or Islamic seminaries, which have been blamed by many for promoting violent sectarianism, extremist ideologies and insecurity in Pakistan (ICG, 2005). The madrassa authorities view the clause as yet another unproductive attempt. If for nothing else, they ask the government to stop looking at all madrassas through the same lens.

So far, the government and madrassa authorities are not on the same page on madrassa reform. They need to be. Madrassa reforms, a must for countering extremism in the long run, include a range of issues,

including checking foreign inflow of money and students. Without any priority list on what needs to be done first and how, progress on madrassa reforms hits snag. A step-by-step approach can help the government and madrassa administrators overcome bitterness and achieve tangible outcomes.

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To be sure, the importance of streamlining madrassas is realized about many madrassa authorities, one of them desiring the issue be the government’s top priority.

Unfortunately, the secretary general of Wafaqul Madaaris al-Salfiya said,

¹The National Action Plan was established by the government in January 2015 to crack down against terrorism. It provides the framework for the twenty-

first Constitutional Amendment which established speedy trial military courts for offences relating to terrorism.

the government is not “persistent” on its policy, adding that “whenever there is a burning issue, the madrassas becomes central point of discussion, but when normalcy restores, the government altogether neglects the issue.”²

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The security context

- *Militancy*

Experts argue that militancy from madrassas didn’t emerge on its own, but was rather exported by extraneous forces, especially from late 1970 onwards. Since Afghan war and Iranian revolution, in 1979, Sunni madrassas in Pakistan were made overtly militarized. In 1990s, madrassas played a critical role in waging jihad in Kashmir and fanning sectarian fires in Pakistan; outside, in Afghanistan, madrassa students, or

Taliban, established a new regime in mid-1990s.

Security expert Amir Rana (2004), in his book on jihadi organizations in Pakistan, explored their linkages with madrassas. International Crisis Group (ICG), an international think-tank, has reported how madrassas recruited fighters for Afghan war and fed sectarian violence in Pakistan, too (ICG, 2002; ICG, 2005). Some scholars have presented empirical evidence to these ends. Out of 363 madrassas in southern Punjab’s Ahmadpur sub-district, investigated academic Salem H. Ali, majority promoted sectarianism (Ali, 2005).

On the other hand, some studies have challenged the role of madrassas in militancy. American scholar Christine Fair, for instance, questions any direct link between madrassas and militancy. In any case, since 1991, she argues, madrassas’ market share has stayed same or declined. Yet, she claims that madrassas could possibly produce students who are more likely to support militancy than students in mainstream schools are (Fair, 2008).

²Author’s telephonic interview with Maulana Qari Yasin Zafar, Secretary

General of Wafaqul Madaaris al-Salfiya. April 13th 2015.

Madressas are often charged for indirectly backing violent means (Abdullah, 2015), by having ties with terrorists and providing them sanctuaries (Azeem, 2015).

The Ittehad Tanzeemat-e-Madaaris Pakistan (ITMP), a coalition of five *wafaqs* (religious educational boards) subscribing to Deobandi, Bareilvi, Ahl-e-Hadith, Shia and Jamaat-e-Islami schools of thoughts, expressed reservations on the National Action Plan's clauses pertaining to madrasa reforms, arguing that linking militancy with religion is wrong.

A madrasa official said that if a person visits a madrasa and stays there as a student or as a guest of a student, it is difficult for the administration to identify them. In such circumstances, the madrasa should not be considered culpable for an individual's actions.

For one, they question the sole focus of NAP on religious-based militancy.

³Author's telephonic interview with Mufti Muneebur Rehman, President Ittehad Tanzeemat-e-Madaaris Pakistan and President Tanzeemul Madaaris. April 14th 2015.

Mufti Muneebur Rehman, ITMP's president, said that while "NAP talks about religious terrorism," it is "silent on ethnic, linguistic and other types of terrorism", adding that "all types of terrorism should be part of this plan."

Mufti Muneeb, for instance, said the "ITMP support the government, and action should be taken against those madressas which are involved in terrorism, irrespective of their religious affiliation."³ Likewise, Qari Muhammad Haneef Jalandhari, Secretary General of Wafaqul Madaris al-Arabia, said the state should "pinpoint" madressas involved in militancy and then take measures.⁴ Allama Niaz Hussain Naqvi, Vice President Wafaqul Madaaris Al-Shia, said that "the government should not blame all madressas for involvement in terrorist activities; it is necessary to identify such institutions those have links with any kind of militancy, and we support the government in this

⁴Author's telephonic interview with Qari Muhammad Haneef Jalandhary, Secretary General of WafaqulMadaaris al-Arabia (Deobandi) and Principal of Jamia Khairul Madaaris, Multan. April 14th 2015.

regard.”⁵ Maulana Yasin argued that they have “time and again” asked the government to take action against those involved in terrorist activities.⁶

A madrassa official said that if a person visits a madrassa and stays there as a student or as a guest of a student, it is difficult for the administration to identify them. In such circumstances, the madrassa should not be considered culpable for an individual’s actions.

Overall, madrassa authorities stress for transparency in identifying terrorists in madrassas. On concrete evidence of suspects, the government should take action but the law enforcement agencies must first contact the madrassa administration and inform them about suspects and keep intact sanctity of the seminary by sending only a few personnel to detain them rather than raiding the madrassa in full force.⁷

They differ on modalities, nonetheless. The debate draws strong argument that anti-terrorism policy related to madrassas in security paradigm should be focused only on those madrassas involved in

violent activities. Madrassa authorities agree with the government over taking action against such kind of madrassas.

Much of the controversies arise between the government and madrassa authorities over the issues as how to orchestrate an operation against involved summaries because the action is considered as an attack on their sovereignty and independence.

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⁵Author’s telephonic interview with Allama Niaz Hussain Naqvi, Vice President of Wafaqul Madaaris Al-Shia. April 13th 2015.

⁶Author’s interview with Qari Yasin Zafar.

⁷Author’s interview with Qari Haneef Jalandhary.

seminaries. Wafaqul Madaaris al-Arabia asserts they do not have any sympathy for any madrasa that is involved in nefarious activities but find it difficult to identify terrorists.

Tanzeemul Madaaris, on the other hand, concedes that the security agencies should have complete authority to arrest any suspects hiding in any madrassas by ensuring credibility of madrassas to avoid maligning them. “Tanzeemul Madaaris does not impart education of hate and violence and if any institution involved in such activities, it is the responsibility of the government and law enforcement agencies to shut down these seminaries.”⁸

- **Sectarianism**

Madrassas play a primary role in furthering sectarian divides in the society. Much of it has to do with the sectarian foundation of madrassas. Thus, even though basic curriculum remains uniform across many madrassas, it is taught on different sectarian lines in different madrassas.

Most madrassas have disassociated themselves from sectarian outfits,

though. Yet, these too do not deny the role of clerics in promoting sectarianism. However, because madrassas do not give education of violence, some argue, it is necessary to impose ban on those clerics who stir hate in society.⁹

Yet, many Deobandi madrassas continue having well-established links with sectarian groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Similarly, some Shia madrassas have affiliation with sectarian groups like Sipah-e-Muhammad (ICG, 2005).

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Scholar Christine Fair emphasizes that sectarianism does not inevitably lead to violence, which derives from externalities that propel violence between religious groups depending on external strategic interests and objectives (Fair, 2012).

For instance, when it comes to political participation, students from

⁸Author’s interview with Mufti Muneebur Rehman.

⁹Author’s interview with Allama Niaz Naqvi.

madrassas naturally side with religious parties of their sects; at times, such politics erupt into violence, hence the oozing out of sectarian bloodshed.

The principal of Jamia Salfiya Faisalabad, Maulana Qari Yasin Zafar says “establishment of politico-religious organizations on the basis of sect is not right, and overwhelmingly madrassas are against sectarian violence.”

One attempt to bring all sects under one umbrella is through Ittehad Tanzeemat Madaaris. ITMP argues that they are trying to create consensus in curriculum and system by promoting commonalities.

Madrassa administrators realize that sectarianism is an alarming issue for them. It damages their cause of education. Many of them think that every sect should follow the proverb of “neither leaving one’s sect nor disturbing other’s.”¹⁰

Qari Muhammad Haneef Jalandhari, Principal Jamia Khairul Madaaris

Multan, wishes that “the system of education in religious seminaries should not be based on sects” but a long history of sects does not allow it in present days. Differences of opinion, he argued opens new debate; however, madrassa should avoid imparting education on sectarian lines.

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It is rather external political actors who want to tap the existing manpower of these madrassas to their political ends. Madrassas, when affiliated with political and sectarian organizations, shape radical ideas among their students.

• Radicalization

On two grounds, some madrassas are deemed to be involved in promoting extremist and radical ideologies. One, the subject of “jihad” taught at

¹⁰ Author’s interview with Qari Yasin Zafar.

the madrassas stimulates the students to join jihadi outfits. Two, rigid political views set in intolerant attitude among the students.

Teaching about jihad doesn't necessarily translate into readying students for jihadi outfits. Madrassas deem teaching on jihad as obligatory in Islam.

When it comes to participating in jihad, one madrassa administrator argued that it is up to the state to declare jihad. "If everyone wage jihad on his own," he reasoned, "the country will plunge into anarchy."¹¹ Another administrator, Lahore's Jamia Naeemia agrees. "The army of the state is the only institution that can wage jihad with the permission of the state."¹² Many argued that there is no need of non-state actor to wage jihad.¹³ Maulana Qari Hanif Jalandhary recommended that the Council of Islamic Ideology should guide the people regarding critical aspects of jihad in present circumstances.¹⁴

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manpower of these madrassas to their political ends. Madrassas, when affiliated with political and sectarian organizations, shape radical ideas among their students.

A study conducted by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), an Islamabad-based independent think-tank, revealed that the political attitudes of madrassas align with the mainstream political behaviour. According to study, majority of madrassas have political affiliation, thereby denying the students the ability to tolerate other views (Rana, 2009). Many students join violent sectarian and militant outfits to fulfill their agenda. To overcome such intolerance, reconciliation among politico-religious parties can be opted for.

Registration and regulation of madrassas

A key issue pertaining to madrassas is streamlining them. Some issues under this category include registration of madrassas, illegal

¹¹Author's interview with QariYasin Zafar.

¹²Author's interview with Dr.Raghib Naeemi, Principal Jamia Naeemia. Lahore. April 12th 2015.

¹³Author's telephonic interview with Maulana Abdul Malik, President of Rabita-tul-Madaaris. April 7th2015.

¹⁴Author's interview with Qari Haneef Jalandhary.

construction of mosques, and entry of foreign students.

- **Foreign funding**

Seminaries in Pakistan have been charged with furthering the agenda of their foreign donors. Because such donors espouse different sectarian ideologies, the seminaries they support too end up feeding sectarianism in Pakistan.

The recently-announced National Action Plan (NAP) attempts to overcome any gaps in financial regulations. The Foreign Office in Pakistan has clearly said that funding by private individuals and organizations to private entities through informal channels is being brought under tighter scrutiny to choke off any possibility of financing for terrorists and terrorist organizations” (Wasim and Syed, 2015).

According to government’s documents, during 2013-14, nearly 12 countries provided up to 300 million rupees to about 80 seminaries in

Pakistan. Moreover, it is not that funds are transferred by countries alone. Often, individuals or institutions from abroad send funds to madrassas, without any proper checkup, it is alleged.

Dr. Syed Muhammad Najafi, a Shia scholar, pointed out that according to the Shia jurisprudence, 5 percent of the whole wealth has to be collected from the (Shia) community and submitted to *mujtahid* for distribution among Shia madrassas and the needy people in the entire world.¹⁵

To the madrassa authorities, state intervention into their financial accounts is a redundant exercise. Maulana Qari Yasin Zafar says that the government is well-informed about foreign funding and donation. Few madrassas, out of thousands, receive foreign funds.¹⁶ In any case, other administrators reasoned, they already submit their annual audit reports.¹⁷

“If a foreign country send donation, it should be come through government channel.

¹⁵Author’s telephonic interview with Dr. Syed Muhammad Najafi, Principal of Jamiatul Muntazir, Islamabad. April 3rd 2015.

¹⁶Author’s interview with Qari Yasin Zafar.

¹⁷Author’s interview with Qari Haneef Jalandhary.

Such funds can be easily tracked.”

beneficiary of foreign funding” but without any “audit system”.¹⁹

As of the individual funding, Qari Muhammad Hanif Jalandhary stated that “philanthropists in Pakistan” are the major sources of income for madrassas. Yet, if overseas Pakistanis want to donate, they should, he said. A religious cleric said that foreign countries extend facilities related to health, education and food on ground of Islamic brotherhood through welfare institutions.

Mufti Muneebur Rehman calls that some mechanism for funding should be charted out and distributed among madrassas.¹⁸ One such way was proposed by Qari Yasin. If a foreign country send donation, he said, it should be come through government channel. Such funds can be easily tracked.

Some of them think that the focus on foreign funding of madrassas is a play of anti-madrassa lobby. Qari argued that if the government wants to keep tabs on madrassas’ funds, similar rule should also be applied on non-governmental organizations, which, according to Qari, are “major

• Registration

One issue is about “irregular” registration of madrassas. No proper mechanism of madrassa registration exists.

In the past, seminaries were registered as charity organizations under Societies Registration Act 1860. The registration requirement, however, was removed in 1990. The issue rose to prominence during Musharraf’s regime in 2000s.

Unregistered seminaries add into security problems, it is said.

At that time, madrassa authorities and government agreed to initiate a plan of registration and to conduct audit of accounts of madrassas through independent auditor firms. However, the process dragged on, partly because of government’s lack of will.

As of now, a large number are unregistered. The exact figure of madrassas is unknown. The figures

¹⁸Author’s interview with Mufti Muneebur Rehman.

¹⁹Author’s interview with Qari Yasin Zafar.

quoted by five *wafaqs*, boards, are of the registered madrassas.

Only recently, in light of the National Action Plan (NAP), the government introduced a new pro-forma for madrassa registration. Madrassa authorities reject the form for its “illogical questions”.

They argue that registration should be a done in a proper way.²⁰ Madrassa administrators have never refused registration, argues Qari Muhammad Haneef Jalandhary.

Only recently, in light of the National Action Plan, the government introduced a new pro-forma for madrassa registration. Madrassa authorities reject the form for its “illogical questions”.

They point towards a process the madrassa authority and the government adopted in 2005. “We are ready to adopt that process”, Qari said, adding that if the “government wants to include new clause in the registration law, the madrassas are

ready to cooperate with the government.”²¹

Other schools of thought also pointed out that department of education should look into the registration matter as educational institutions are looked into.

- **Land grabbing and illegal construction**

Another issue is about the illegal construction of mosques and seminars, often by grabbing someone else’s land (Shah, et al., 2015). In Karachi, some mosques and madrassas got so much power in their communities that those institutes became major power brokers. In Islamabad, about 305 mosques/madrassas had been illegally constructed whereas 69 madrassas/mosques had “encroached upon, on average, 100 square yards each” (Asad, 2015).

Challenging these mosques and seminaries then become a touchy issue, thereby making such constructions more or less a permanent feature.

²⁰Author’s interview with Mufti Muneebur Rehman.

²¹Author’s interview with Qari Haneef Jalandhary.

In fact, when the government tried to release captured land the cleric occupied in the name of mosques and madrassas, seminaries administrators reacted strongly, terming the government's action as "anti-Islam".

Authorities complain that the government has failed in formulating any mechanism ensuring admission of foreign students in religious seminaries.

However, this is not to say that all clerics are into land grabbing. Instead, the major portion of clerics condemned the act of land grabbing. They argue that building mosques or madrassa at controversial land is prohibited in Islam.

- **Foreign students**

At one point of time, students from more than 64 countries including the United States, United Kingdom, India, China, Russia, and Afghanistan were enrolled in madrassas in Pakistan.

Prevailing security threats have forced the government to send back many foreign students to their native countries. To enroll foreign students, madrassas were supposed to obtaining No-objection Certificates (NOCs) from foreign ministry. Many countries also grew reluctant in permitting their students to educate in Pakistani seminaries.

Over the years, their number has dwindled significantly.

Madrassa authorities demand that the government should treat foreign students of madrassa and of other educational institutes on equal footing. Dr. Raghbir Naeemi says that these days, the foreign students "seeking to get madrassa education prefer India instead of Pakistan" because of "strict policy" the government had adopted.²²

The government, in consultation with representatives of madrassa boards should evolve a strategy to enhance interaction among madrassas of different sects.

²²Author's interview with Dr. Raghbir Naeemi.

Authorities complain that the government has failed in formulating any mechanism ensuring admission of foreign students in religious seminaries. Qari Muhammad Haneef Jalandhari lauded that “it is an honour for the country to host foreign students, because after completion of education, foreign students serve as ambassadors of Pakistan in their respective countries.” He argued that the “*wafaqs* are ready to play their part for addressing reservations of foreign countries.”²³

- **Curriculum**

When it comes to madrasa curriculum, the debate revolves around two issues: curriculum is not up to date to the requirements of modern era, and two, the text reeks badly of hate material, which often feed sectarianism and extremism.

The curriculum in madrassas, called as Dars-e-Nizami, comes with a long history in the subcontinent. The main subjects in the curriculum include the Quran, *hadith*, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), Arabic language,

literature, rhetoric, logic and philosophy.

Even though the interpretations offered are sectarian, the curriculum per se doesn't directly indicate violence.

The government, in consultation with representatives of madrasa boards should evolve a strategy to enhance interaction among madrassas of different sects.

All madrasa boards have agreed to include modern subjects in curriculum in addition to religious education. They, however, demand that the government grant madrasa boards the status of other educational boards issuing other degrees. Beside this, they are jointly compiling a book on peace education; the book will be part of madrasa curriculum.²⁴

Conclusion

The government needs to come with a consistent policy towards madrassas. Madrasa authorities, in spite of their differences with the government, are ready to sort out the issue. To undertake reforms, the

²³Author's interview with Qari Haneef Jalandhary.

²⁴Author's interview with Qari Yasin Zafar.

government should chart out a priority list of their security concerns

from madrassa; those lost can then be worked upon in consultation with madrassa administrators. The process of negotiation can be greatly facilitated, once the government stops leaving the impression of painting all madrassas with the same brush. To be sure, not all indulge in violence.

At the same time, madrassa administrators should be open to reforming themselves by transforming radical ideologies with more tolerant and peaceful ones. Even if deep-rooted sectarian divides may take time for complete elimination, a culture of intra-faith can produce at least some semblance of sectarian harmony. Madrassa authorities should strive to produce the minds who, after graduation, offer their best services to the state and society.

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