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The Enduring Madrasa Myth

C. CHRISTINE FAIR

In a 2000 article for *Foreign Affairs*, Harvard’s Jessica Stern made the then-novel claim that Pakistan’s madrasas (religious seminaries) were weapons of mass instruction, churning out jihadists by the thousands. At the time, ubiquitous images of hordes of young boys bobbing up and down as they memorized the Koran encouraged a facile stereotype that madrasas brainwash their charges with extremist ideology. The events of 9/11 and Pakistan’s recurrent role in global Islamist terror further fostered the belief—in political, analytic, and some scholarly circles—that Pakistan’s madrasas are the nurseries of global jihad.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States, in its zeal to identify and extirpate the root causes of terrorism, orchestrated an international campaign to pressure Pakistan to shut down madrasas with links to militant groups. Washington called on Islamabad to reform the institution of the madrasa by broadening its curriculum to include nonreligious subjects such as mathematics, the sciences, and Pakistani studies.

In an effort to buttress the country’s chaotic government educational sector and ostensibly to lure madrasa students back to public schools, the United States invested more than \$100 million in Pakistan’s Ministry of Education. Washington wanted Islamabad to reform the public school curriculum, expand schools, and invest in teacher training. More than 10 years later, Pakistani and American officials have both conceded to this author that these funds cannot be accounted for.

Madrasas remain a worrying issue for US policy makers concerned about the terrorism threat that Pakistan continues to present both in the region and beyond. Yet the widespread acceptance of the

purported ties between Islamic schools and militancy in Pakistan relies on a number of empirically flawed assumptions and assertions regarding the prevalence of madrasa enrollment, parental educational preferences, the relationship between madrasa and non-madrasa education, and the roles that madrasas play in fostering militancy.

In fact, ongoing debates over Pakistan’s madrasas are focused on the wrong set of questions. Reframing this debate is important because the staying power of madrasa-related myths has significantly affected US policy in the region and has even undermined those within Pakistan who seek to reform the educational system.

MOUNTAINS FROM MOLEHILLS

Stern’s thesis derived from a common error: She visited key madrasas associated with the Deobandi interpretive school of Islam—madrasas that have long had ties to jihad—while not appreciating the variation in seminaries across Pakistan and across different religious interpretations. The madrasas she visited had backed the anti-Russian “jihad” in Afghanistan with US, Saudi, and Pakistani support.

Following the publication of Stern’s provocative essay and the terrorist strikes of 9/11, the International Crisis Group (ICG), in a much-heralded 2002 report, asserted that approximately *one third* of Pakistan’s students attend madrasas full-time. The ICG’s Samina Ahmed testified before Congress on the urgent need to sever the madrasa-terrorism connection by mainstreaming Pakistan’s madrasas and investing in the country’s formal education sector.

Despite the eloquence of Ahmed’s arguments, her organization’s claims were based on suspect data and a serious mathematical error. To arrive at its estimate of the madrasa market share, the ICG obtained estimated enrollment figures from Pakistan’s government. Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi,

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at that time the minister of religious affairs, estimated that between 1 million and 1.7 million students attended Pakistan's madrasas. But the minister could have had no way of knowing the number of madrasa students with any degree of accuracy: There has never been any centralized database of madrasas in Pakistan, much less one that includes enrollment figures.

Despite reinvigorated efforts to register madrasas, an accurate estimate of their number remains elusive. The minister, moreover, could not have known if those students attended full-time or part-time, and/or in conjunction with nonreligious schools. Nonetheless, the figure was taken at face value.

Even more egregious, in calculating the percentage of all students attending madrasas, the ICG made a significant arithmetical error. To estimate the fraction of total students that attend madrasas, the ICG needed an estimate of all enrolled students. Instead of using as its denominator the 19.92 million students enrolled in Pakistan's government primary schools, the ICG dropped a digit and recorded the total of students as 1.92 million. Assuming that the ministry of religious affairs provided a vaguely accurate number (itself a stretch), correcting the ICG's mistake puts madrasa enrollment at 5 to 7 percent of Pakistan's total students.

Pakistan's Federal Bureau of Statistics (FBS) routinely conducts national-level household economic surveys. Fortunately for scholars of educational choice in Pakistan, the FBS seeks information on full-time enrollment of children in private, public, and religious schools. (Enormous gender disparities persist in enrollments generally, with 56 girls attending primary school for every 100 boys doing so. Boys likewise are far more likely to enroll in madrasas than girls, especially at higher levels of Islamist education, because women are not employed as religious scholars.)

Using FBS data from 1991 to 2001, a 2005 study by Pomona College's Tahir Andrabi and others estimated that madrasa enrollments account for less than 1 percent of Pakistani children attending school *full time*. Because household surveys may omit important populations (for example, children in orphanages), the study's authors adjusted their estimates upward to account for such exclusions. Even when assuming that all orphans attend

madrasas, they found that no more than 3 percent of Pakistani children attend religious schools full time. This estimate comports with more recent survey-based findings, which found that in 2004 a mere 2.6 percent of children between 5 and 9 years of age attended madrasas.

The empirical research also undermines popular claims that madrasas are expanding dramatically in Pakistan. Naturally, like the number of private and public schools, the number of madrasas will increase along with the country's population of school-age children. The proper metric to assess the growth of madrasas, therefore, is not the number of the schools, even if such an accurate figure were available. Rather, the correct metric is the trend in market share, or the percentage of children attending religious rather than public or private schools.

Examining the market share of these three educational sectors between 1991 and 2005, we find that madrasa enrollment was stable, not increasing. Throughout this period, public schools account for nearly 70 percent of students, and private schools close to 30 percent, with madrasa enrollment merely a rounding error in comparison. A 2009 study by Andrabi and others found that the only segment of Pakistan's educational market that is expanding is the private sector, mostly at the expense of the public school sector.

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PARENTAL CHOICE

Amid wild speculation about the burgeoning number of Pakistani madrasas and their supposed legions of aspiring terrorists, scholars and analysts also continue to misunderstand how parents make decisions regarding education. The 2005 study by Andrabi and others not only found madrasa utilization to be very low overall; it also found that the vast majority (75 percent) of all households that send one child to a madrasa employed combinations of private and/or public schools for their other children. Only one-fourth of the small number of madrasa households used madrasas to educate all of their children.

This is consistent with previous work on Pakistan's educational market, which suggests that parents selectively invest in their children: Those with greater potential are likely to be sent to a public or private school, while those with less academic

potential may go to a madrasa. Madrasa education is not a road to great riches, but graduates are not likely to be unemployed. Many madrasa graduates obtain employment from other madrasas, mosques, or religious political parties.

Work by this author and others has found that Pakistani parents do not send their children to madrasas out of poverty, as is often claimed. In fact, household economic data from the FBS show that madrasa and public school children come from families with very similar economic profiles, with one major exception: Madrasas attract many more students from the wealthiest strata than do public schools.

The prevailing narrative that madrasas are schools of last resort not only erases the agency of Pakistani parents, but also demonstrates a lack of understanding of the country's educational market. Officials with the US Agency for International Development, it has been shown, did not even bother researching the demands of the educational market before undertaking programmatic initiatives in Pakistan. This is unfortunate, for if we do examine data on parental choice, we find that Pakistani parents send their children to madrasas not for economic reasons, but because they want their chil-

dren to have an Islamic education. In this sense, Pakistani parents may be no different from parents in the United States and elsewhere who send their children to parochial schools or even choose homeschooling in order to shield their children from influences that they find objectionable.

The strong belief that madrasas disproportionately influence students to embrace violent extremism likely stems from these same erroneous assertions about the ubiquity of madrasas and their ostensibly growing market share. In fact, the vast majority of madrasa students also attend private or public schools. Families in Pakistan may send children to a madrasa (or a primary religious school called a *maktab*) to ensure that they can properly recite the Koran or even commit it to memory. These students are not so dissimilar from Christian children who go to Bible study or catechism classes, or Jewish children who attend Hebrew school.

This author, working with analysts at the RAND Corporation, analyzed a 2010 survey of 3,130 Pakistani males between the ages of 18 and 30. While nearly one third of that sample had attended a madrasa at one point in their lives, the vast majority (78 percent) did so in conjunction with

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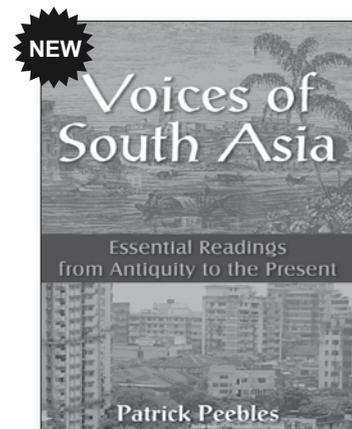
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attendance at a public school, and another 16 percent while also enrolled in a private school. (Some students attended both public and private schools at different points in their lives.) Only 11 percent of this sample had attended a madrasa exclusively.

Equally important, these data show that young men who attended madrasas in conjunction with other schools had educational attainment rates similar to those who did not attend madrasas. Similarly, the 829 young men who attended madrasas in conjunction with either public or private schools were as likely as those who had received only secular schooling to be literate and to be capable of doing simple arithmetic.

The respondents in the sample who attended madrasas exclusively still fared better than those who did not receive any kind of schooling. While 6 percent of the young men who did not attend any school could read Pakistan's national language (Urdu), 82 percent of madrasa-only educated respondents could read Urdu. Whereas only one in three respondents who never attended school could do simple arithmetic, all of the madrasa-only respondents could do simple math.

JIHADIST SYMPATHIES

A prestigious Pakistani scholar of language and politics, Tariq Rahman, has examined the degree to which teachers and students in Pakistan's religious, public, and private schools differ in their attitudes about minority and women's rights and the efficacy of armed struggle. Rahman found that madrasa students are more likely than students in the other two school systems to support violent extremism. However, he also found that students in the far larger public school system evince high degrees of support for violence.

For example, whereas 60 percent of interviewed madrasa students supported the use of open war to take the disputed Kashmir region, 40 percent of students from Pakistan's Urdu-medium public schools, and 26 percent of students in private schools, held the same view. A similar pattern held when students were asked whether they supported taking Kashmir through the use of jihadist proxies: 53 percent of madrasa students shared this view, compared to 33 percent of those in public schools and 22 percent in private schools. While the madrasa students show consistently higher support for political violence, public school students, who comprise some 70 percent of the educational market, display worrying levels of support for the same policies.

If parental choice is important, as this author and others believe, then we have to ask whether madrasas produce militants—or more extreme parents choose madrasas for all or most of their children. Given the rarity of households that use madrasas to educate all of their children, something is clearly different about them, and there is some evidence that more extremist households choose madrasas for their children.

In a 2008 study in which this author participated, we examined survey data derived from interviews with 140 Pakistani households with at least one slain Islamist militant. We found that the fraction of children in a household enrolled in madrasas correlated positively with the household's propensity to bless the jihadist's decision to join a jihadist group. In other words, households with higher utilization of madrasas were more likely to support relatives' militant ambitions.

MAKING OF A TERRORIST

The United States and its allies have struggled to identify the root causes of terrorism. Popular wisdom suggests that poverty and/or a lack of education motivate support for violent Islamist politics in Pakistan and elsewhere. Such a construct has some appeal, since the United States and its partners have considerable resources that they can deploy with the objective of mitigating poverty and enhancing employment prospects. Unfortunately, these views and resulting policy approaches persist despite a proliferating body of literature that discredits them.

Part of the difficulty in understanding the characteristics of terrorists is that many of the extant studies are necessarily based on data sets made up of successful or nearly successful terrorists. Databases tend not to include information about failed terrorists. And would-be terrorists who were so incompetent that they never raised suspicion will not appear in such databases. Thus, most scholarship on the supply of terrorists is based on data about the "successes."

The counterterrorism consultant Marc Sageman, for example, has found that international terrorists are not more likely to be poor or uneducated. However, given his focus on international terrorists, such a finding should not be surprising. After all, it requires some degree of social sophistication and financial resources to obtain a passport. The visa process for the United States or a European country imposes further financial and educational criteria. It may well be the case that poorer

or less educated persons want to be terrorists but that, as long as the supply of aspiring terrorists exceeds demand, terrorist organizations can select the best recruits.

While such empirical challenges inhibit counterterrorism research generally, they are even more problematic in Pakistan. Pakistan's system of law enforcement runs the gamut from disastrously incompetent to infiltrated by terrorists and their sympathizers. Worse, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and the army have long raised and nurtured legions of Islamist militants to execute Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan and India. When these proxies go rogue and conduct attacks in Pakistan, no official is terribly interested in, or even capable of, determining who they were or where they came from. Journalists who investigate such connections risk their lives to do so.

When Pakistani terrorists conduct operations abroad (for example, in India or Afghanistan), the complicity of state agencies with the organizations undertaking such attacks creates a strong disincentive for the government to aid investigations. Given the enduring ties between the Pakistani state and jihadists, there likely will never be a comprehensive database of captured terrorists that will allow us to accurately assess ties between militancy and madrasa education.

However, there are reasons to believe that Pakistan's madrasas do matter, even given that they educate a mere fraction of Pakistan's young men and that (far more numerous) public school students also seem to have a propensity to support political violence.

ALUMNI ASSOCIATIONS

To begin with, a large percentage of militant organizations in Pakistan belong to the Deobandi school of Islam. Deobandi militant groups have overlapping membership with each other and with various factions of the Deobandi movement's political party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. And these militant organizations have long drawn from an archipelago of Deobandi madrasas and mosques. The organizations include the Afghan Taliban (or "Students," so named because of their connections to the madrasas), the Pakistani Taliban, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami. They

also include groups that have historically focused on killing Shiites, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

A relatively incompetent terrorist can be used for less sophisticated missions, such as grenade attacks or suicide attacks on Shiite places of worship, because there are fewer downsides to failure for these organizations. Groups engaging in violence against such targets need not always achieve spectacular fatalities to make the targeted community feel unsafe and persecuted. An attack of any size will receive ample media coverage and, in Pakistan, that coverage may actually be critical of the victims and the faith they profess.

Given these groups' historic ties to madrasas, a madrasa background may signal to an operational planner that a potential terrorist has the necessary credentials and affiliations to conduct an attack. Indeed, where we do observe consistent links between madrasa education and militancy, it is in the context of these Deobandi organizations. A strong word of caution is needed here: Many of the so-called madrasas that have been disrupted or even bombed in Pakistan's tribal belt or Pashtun-dominated Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have not been proper madrasas per se but rather militant facilities called madrasas for operational security reasons. Nonetheless, madrasa ties to militancy seem to be most intense

within these Deobandi groups.

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) represents the other extreme. LeT is easily the region's most sophisticated terror organization, capable of launching complicated attacks deep within India. Sometimes these operations, known as fedayeen attacks, are erroneously called "suicide attacks," when a more appropriate description would be "high-risk missions." And LeT is famous for *not* using madrasa students.

This author, working with West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, has overseen the construction of a database of some 800 LeT *shaheed* (martyrs), built from militant "martyr" biographies. While we cannot say how representative these militants are of the whole organization (much less of those who wanted to join LeT but were rejected), the vast majority of them were exceedingly well educated compared to the average Pakistani male. While the majority of LeT militants had at least a tenth-grade education, overall male attainment in Pakistan is about six years, with considerable

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dramatically in Pakistan.*

variance between rural and urban areas and across and within provinces. The militants were far more likely than Pakistani males generally to have post-secondary education.

The difference in personnel recruited by Deobandi militant groups and LeT likely reflects those organizations' human capital needs. LeT, with its established record of producing intensive terror deep in India's heartland, has operational requirements that are far more onerous than those of most of the Deobandi terrorist groups. However, even the Deobandi militant groups tend to use inside assistance, rather than poorly skilled madrasa alumni, to execute attacks on high-value targets such as military and intelligence installations.

LABOR MARKET TRENDS

Rather than trying to ascertain whether or not (or even simply assuming that) madrasas produce terrorists, scholars would be better served by thinking of terrorist recruitment as a labor market in which organizations attempt to recruit the right person for the right job. Depending on the target, the complexity of the attack, and operational security requirements, the "right" terrorist may be either a madrasa graduate who is relatively dispensable or a "high-quality" terrorist with a significant degree of training.

Having had the opportunity to examine terrorists' notebooks captured in India, this author was

struck by the mathematical skill, competence in chemistry, and knowledge of English required to build an improvised explosive device from publicly available ingredients.

Unfortunately, the singular focus on madrasas has precluded such an understanding or even an appreciation of the important opportunity that Pakistan's nonreligious schools present to terrorist recruiters. Worse, by doggedly insisting that Pakistan take action against madrasas, the United States has confused educational policy with law enforcement. After all, the Pakistani authorities are familiar with many of the madrasas that are tied to militant organizations because the state has long overseen these groups. Shutting down specific madrasas is a law enforcement and intelligence issue.

Washington's overly broad approach, which many Pakistanis view as anti-Muslim or even secularizing in its agenda, has tainted by association the efforts of educators in Pakistan who seek to reform madrasa and public school curricula. Such reformers believe the madrasa system does not prepare religious scholars to be relevant in a modern Muslim state and fosters sectarian enmity. Equally important, the public school curriculum does not adequately prepare Pakistan's youth to obtain gainful employment, or foster a human capital environment that would attract foreign investment and aid economic growth. ■