

Review

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THE MADRASSAH CHALLENGE: MILITANCY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

C. Christine Fair

United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington DC, 2008

Paper, 146 pages

Christine Fair's recent book about the Pakistani system of religious schools, madrassahs, presents a useful and well researched study of this oft referenced but misunderstood institutional aspect of Pakistan's educational system. In simpler descriptions, these madrassahs have been blamed in a general way for facilitating radicalism. In contrast to this lack of nuanced understanding, Fair's description laudably relies on extensive fieldwork and pulls together information from multiple strong and credible studies in the area to present an overview of the reality of madrassahs in the Pakistani context. In so doing, this book overall suggests a number of interesting conclusions, amongst these that the system of Pakistani madrassahs generally is not itself to blame for the production of militancy. The importance of Fair's study, however, is to be seen in its offering of a broader description and a nuanced understanding of the madrassahs in their context. These madrassahs are popular with members of different classes in Pakistani society. This reality is different from the stereotype of madrassahs recruiting the children of impoverished families and molding rigidity and intolerance in the minds of their graduates.

Fair paints a picture of the reality of the Pakistani context wherein Pakistani madrassahs educate on average less than one percent of Pakistan's full-time students. These are not all in attendance owing to poverty in their origins and impoverished choices in education. They are a very small section of the educational institutions compared to the larger system of state schools, where most students are placed to get the basics of their education. The picture is also clearer by study of militants, which reveals that they are largely not products of Pakistani madrassahs. What then is to be discerned of madrassahs in Pakistan?

Fair portrays a typical standard syllabus in the first appendix and a second appendix listing Arabic texts used in different subjects taught in the madrassahs, describing their authorship and what is known of when they

were originally published. Some of these date from centuries ago.

The madrassahs are not the only venue for Islamic education. What becomes clear in studying Pakistan's madrassahs is that, not only are they a small section of the educational sector, they also are diversified across many sectarian groups and Islamic movements. Therefore there is no uniform block of madrassahs belonging to one ideology or movement and no recent history of centralized ideological control. These can be further described as tending to have an archaic curriculum but the students of these need not be underestimated and they are not all from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. Although madrassahs are a small part of the educational sector, they often have political ties and can be a source of street power; they are alleged to be a source of a militancy problem.

The allegations and reality of a madrassah militancy problem need to be examined. Fair concludes that madrassah graduates may not be well represented in the ranks of observed Islamist militant organizations in Pakistan or in international terrorist groups but they merit continued scrutiny. Madrassahs in the tribal areas provide suicide attackers in Afghanistan. Research remains inconclusive and it remains very much an open question as to whether students from madrassahs wish to join militant organizations at a higher rate than students at other kinds of schools.

Madrassah products do seem involved in sectarian violence, some suicide attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Fair concludes that madrassahs likely foster demand for terrorism and may nurture communities that support the groups that perpetrate it. Evidence links madrassahs to sectarian terrorism in Pakistan. The whole phenomenon of madrassahs in Pakistan warrants attention and research, "continued scrutiny" as Fair phrases it. The fact that madrassah products are not apparent in representation in certain militant groups may be due to selection bias. Fair notes that demand for madrassah graduates for militant labor may increase if better quality candidates become unavailable.

Furthermore, and apparently rather insidious, is the possibility that efforts to curb the supply of graduates in an effort to curb terrorism may increase the popular support to militant groups. International pressure has brought about efforts at government reform of madrassahs. Even before September 11, 2001, Pervez Musharraf had sought to reform the madrassahs, supposedly to produce graduates more socially acceptable with

better employment options. Different interested parties have perspectives on what action and form the reform of these madrassahs should take and what results should be achieved. The government had its view and tried various programs to organize all the madrassahs under regional bureaucracies and these attempts at registration and control of the curriculum were resisted by organizations of madrassahs. Fair notes that registration is not uniformly resisted by madrassahs and many were registered when built and seek registration for certain benefits associated with it. Registration is used by police and intelligence officials to ensure that madrassahs do not engage in nefarious activities. In fact, the government went on to attempt to control content in madrassahs and the madrassahs resisted this along with resisting government funding with its strings attached

Fair notes that the madrassah personnel's viewpoints were quite different from the government's and these uniformly opposed reform imposed by the government. Registration was not an issue as many had already been registered but government funds were suspect. Madrassah administrators were also irritated over claims that foreign students were expelled to placate Washington's and other foreign capital's claims that madrassahs were used to cultivate terrorists. In fact, in contrast to the claim that there is no evidence of cultivating terrorists, arrests of persons associated with terrorism have been made at madrassahs. Foreign students are a significant section of some madrassahs.

Islamic scholars also have a perspective on these matters. Fair describes them as understanding hesitation towards reform but that the madrassahs and Islamic education have been in decline for a long time and they are producing scholars who are not intellectually equipped to guide the sort of Islamic state that Pakistan aspires to be. The Pakistani Islamic scholars interviewed appear to be rather savvy about the situation of Pakistani madrassahs.

Fair thinks that madrassah officials' concerns about government reform have to do with entrenched institutional and familial interests. Musharraf's efforts had been derailed because of his decreasing legitimacy and crisis of governance, his alliance with Washington, and an "increasing hostility towards the United States across all sectors of Pakistani society." The government sees its goals as clearly defined and madrassah officials see them as ill-defined, at worst a sideshow to placate Western countries obsessed with

madrassahs. Fair sees the government concerns with madrassahs' impact on society and interest in reform as legitimate but US involvement has hurt more than it has helped. Scholars and other interviewees see this as an internal Pakistani issue.

Fair states that resistance to government reform will continue not because of links to terrorism but because of vested interests; madrassahs are a lucrative business. Madrassahs will continue to foster a worldview which is sectarian, defending one particular ideological perspective, an outcome being the fostering of sectarianism. It cannot be concluded from the research whether madrassahs foster violent worldviews. Fair describes a solution as fundamental reform of curriculum based in consensus building which is the task of Pakistanis alone. This can not be imposed from the top down. Consensus building will be done tediously across wide swaths of Pakistan's religious elite and madrassah administrators while sustaining support from above.

Other religious organizations and groups are involved and Fair points to a policy choice in Pakistan of relying on asymmetric warfare: the real barrier is the will and capabilities of the government. Except in tribal areas, Pakistan can shut down any madrassahs with ties to militancy. Fair describes the challenge to the US and other Western interests of the "right mix" of incentives to persuade Islamabad of closing down madrassahs with any links to militancy and for reversing a decades-old policy of using jihadist proxies as instruments of its foreign policy. From this point onwards, Fair describes how the madrassahs can be reformed, suggesting following a model of parochial education as seen in the USA and elsewhere. She also suggests attitudinal testing of students and experimenting with incentives to encourage students to switch their choice of educational institutions to better options. Fair suggests that the international community could help by expanding the inventory of schools and high quality teachers, remaining sensitive to parental choice.

Fair concludes by calling for increased understanding by the international community of extant research on madrassahs. Government and non-government analysts should continue with their research. Overall, while providing some interesting points about the whole system, the conclusions of Fair's research would appear to be offering no clear way forward with any easy solution. The calls for international support for the expanded inven-

tory of books and providing high-quality teachers of appropriate gender seem to point toward a beneficial outcome. The best point coming from Fair's analysis is that madrassahs cannot be scapegoated for militancy and terrorism and that foreign pressure to control and change madrassahs has been counterproductive in terms of stirring up bad feelings about foreign meddling with a Pakistani problem. To what extent these Pakistani problems and concerns need to be solved by Pakistanis depends on who is being asked. The Pakistani system of madrassahs appears to need substantial help but foreign involvement risks possible suspicion and resistance. It is fair enough to say that Fair's description of a "right mix" will not be any easy consensus to reach if all concerned parties are involved in the policymaking. Consensus building in Pakistan about Islamic institutions has been increasingly difficult for many years.

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