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Turning *Madrassas* against Radicalism

The Impact of Pakistani Religious Schools in Central Asia and what Afghanistan can do to counter it

Increased suicide bombings in Afghanistan unveil the real impact of the teachings of Pakistani madrassas (private religious schools, also known as *madaress* which is the plural of *madrassa* in Arabaic) on young religious students. Until now, Pakistan's military government has intentionally diverted international focus from the country's extremist religious parties that run these madrassas and constitute a strong support for the military's political agenda in the region. Pakistan's military junta, with financial help collected from some of rich Arab countries, has sown the seeds of a dangerous policy: that of creating, supporting, and manipulating numerous religious schools throughout Pakistan, schools that now threaten the stability of the region. In fact, the former Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and a decade-long liberation war provided the opportunity of rapprochement between two distinct and divergent movements in Islam. The moderate, traditional, apolitical, and non-violent Deobandi School entered into a contract with the politically motivated, extremist, and intolerant Salafi school. The hybrid of the two resulted in Taliban-type movements with now enjoys a strong sanctuary in traditionally moderate Central and Southeast Asian countries. With impunity and political immunity, the leaders of Pakistan's extremist religious parties nurture, protect, and promote these movements in the region. Pakistani religious schools are de facto factories, producing fanatic clergy for Sunni Muslims in traditionally moderate Hannafi schools, the dominant school in the majority of Central and Southeast Asian countries.

Among the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, the Hannafi school is the most moderate one. Its founder, Imam Abu Hanifa, had his ancestral roots in Afghanistan and is considered the founding father of Islamic jurisprudence because he established the foundations for interpretation of Islamic laws. People in Central and Southeast Asia adhered to this school because its interpretation of Islamic doctrine was compatible to the spirit and nature of the people. People in the region were also greatly influenced by the teachings of other important religions such as Buddhism and Zoroastrian and the Hannafi School has preached respect and tolerance vis-à-

vis other religions. Over the centuries tolerance in Hannafi School provided an atmosphere of understanding between Islam and other religions in the Indian subcontinent. It was in India that the Deobandi School originated and soon became major school in training clergy throughout the region; Afghan clergy have also been trained in Deobandi Schools. The partition between India and Pakistan—and the most recent developments in the region, such as the Afghan war and Kashmiri conflicts between Pakistan and India—have contributed to the emergence of a new type of religious schools in Pakistan.

The common denominator for unity among different ethnic groups in Pakistan is Islam. Pakistan as a relatively new country does not have a long history that binds its different ethnic groups. Therefore, Pakistan's military has always used Islam as a state policy to keep the unity of the country. After the cessation of Bangladesh and emergence of strong leftist movements, Pakistan's military established a policy of promoting Islam within the army. General Zia-Ul Haq's grasp of power accentuated this policy, and the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union provided financial means and political support for the military government to directly develop, fund, and monitor the expansion of religious schools throughout Pakistan.

In addition to Pakistanis and Afghans, many young militant from the region, as far away as Chechnya, joined these famous religious schools. What attracts young militants from Chechnya and Central Asian countries to Pakistan is, indeed, the religious teaching in line with the Hannafi school. Therefore, the danger of religious militancy and political Islam has moved from the Middle East to Pakistan, where the influx of religious students from the region increased the regional impact of Pakistani madrassas.

In addition to theology, students in the Deobandi schools were traditionally taught archaic algebra, outmoded astrology, and literature. Nowadays, under direct influence of Salafi thinkers, madrassas in Pakistan focus on politics, religious differences and extremism. In fact, these new Pakistani religious schools have been producing well-indoctrinated young religious warriors. Their military training and real combat experiences in Afghanistan against former Soviet and Afghan communist troops, as well as during the internal conflict, provided them excellent military skills. Their skills convinced Pakistan's military leaders to use them in the same pattern against the Indian army in the disputed Kashmir territory. With the help of Pakistan's military, these religious schools became paramilitary schools and an increasing number of students from Chechnya and Central Asia have enrolled in them. The emergence of Taliban as a politico-military movement and their ability to rule Afghanistan met the strategic objective of Pakistan's military, which consisted of a friendly government in Afghanistan as well as entrée into Central Asian republics from northern Afghanistan. But the involvement of foreign fighters and their radical interpretation of Islam clashed with traditional Afghan values.

During more than two decades of war in Afghanistan, no single suicide mission and no terrorist attack—even against Russian families living in Afghanistan—was committed. Except for a few bloodthirsty and tyrant Mujahidin leaders and commanders, acting on direct orders from countries in the region, the majority of Mujahidin spared the lives of innocent people, even those of Afghan army conscripts. Traditionally, forgiveness is an important part of Afghan culture and religious teachings.

Since the fall of Taliban regime, we have seen suicide attacks and beheadings in Afghanistan. The new suicide attacks, adopted by Pakistani extremists, constitute a stern warning. If this new phenomenon becomes widespread and meets no theological challenges it will threaten the stability of the region. Afghans, as strict followers of the Hannafi school, are forbidden to commit suicide. But since the majority of Afghan clergy frequent Pakistani religious schools, Pakistani religious leaders could well undermine that sentiment.

To counter religious influence of the Pakistani madrassas in the region, it is very important to monitor these religious schools closely. Every foreign graduate of these schools is a potential – fanatic – religious leader in their country of origin. Graduates of Pakistani madrassas are slowly replacing an older generation of clergymen as Imams and religious leaders in mosques throughout Afghanistan. Because of their link to the Pakistani madrassas, they could follow a similar extremist trend in their teachings in Afghanistan.

It is time that religious education becomes institutionalized in Afghanistan in order to wrest the monopoly on madrassas' from the radical schools in Pakistan. The government ought to implement and closely follow these new madrassas' curriculums. A network of free Afghan madrassas should be created to train future clergy inside Afghanistan as opposed to training them in Pakistan. Afghanistan, because of its historic and cultural link with Central Asia, could become a moderate center for religious studies in the whole of Central Asia. Similarly, better-funded and better-organized religious schools inside Afghanistan could attract a large number of young Pashtuns living in Pakistan. With institutionalized modern religious schools for the followers of Hannafi school, Afghanistan could become the model of a moderate Islamic nation in the region.

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