Order Code RS21654
Updated February 10, 2005

Islamic Religious Schools, *Madrasas*: Background

Christopher M. Blanchard
Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Islamic religious schools known as *madrasa*s (or *madrassah*s) in the Middle East, Central, and Southeast Asia have been of increasing interest to U.S. policy makers. Some allege ties between madrasas and terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda, and assert that these religious schools promote Islamic extremism and militancy. Others maintain that most of these religious schools have been blamed unfairly for fostering anti-U.S. sentiments and for producing terrorists. This report[1] provides an overview of madrasas, their role in the Muslim world, and issues related to their alleged financing by Saudi Arabia and other donors. The report also addresses the findings of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the "9/11 Commission") and issues relevant to the 109th Congress. Related CRS products include CRS Report RS22009, CRS Issue Brief IB93113, CRS Report RL32499, CRS Report RS21695, CRS Report RS21457, CRS Report RL32259, and CRS Report RS21432. This report will be updated periodically.

Overview

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Islamic schools known as *madrasa*s have been of increasing interest to analysts and to officials involved in formulating U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Madrasas drew added attention when it became known that several Taliban leaders and Al Qaeda members had developed radical political views at madrasas in Pakistan, some of which allegedly were built and partially financed through Saudi Arabian sources. These revelations have led to accusations that madrasas promote Islamic extremism and militancy, and are a recruiting ground for terrorism. Others maintain that most of these religious schools have been blamed unfairly for fostering anti-U.S. sentiments and argue that madrasas play an important role in countries where millions of Muslims live in poverty and state educational infrastructure is in decay.

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[1] This report was originally written by Febe Armanios. It has been updated by Christopher Blanchard to include information relevant to the 109th Congress.

Background

Definition. The Arabic word *madrasa* generally has two meanings: (1) in its more common literal and colloquial usage, it simply means "school"; (2) in its secondary meaning, a madrasa is an educational institution offering instruction in Islamic subjects including, but not limited to, the Quran, the sayings (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and law. Historically, madrasas were distinguished as institutions of higher studies and existed in contrast to more rudimentary schools called *kuttab* that taught only the Quran.[2] Recently, "madrasa" has been used as a catchall by many Western observers to denote any school — primary, secondary, or advanced — that promotes an Islamic-based curriculum. In many countries, including Egypt and Lebanon, madrasa refers to any educational institution (state-sponsored, private, secular, or religious). In Pakistan and Bangladesh, madrasa commonly refers to Islamic religious schools. This can be a significant semantic marker, because an analysis of "madrasa reform" could have different implications within various cultural, political, and geographic contexts. Unless otherwise noted in this paper, the term *madrasa* refers to Islamic religious schools at the primary and secondary levels.

History. As an institution of learning, the madrasa is centuries old. One of the first established madrasas, called the *Nizamiyah*, was built in Baghdad during the eleventh century A.D. Offering food, lodging, and a free education, madrasas spread rapidly throughout the Muslim world, and although their curricula varied from place to place, it was always religious in character because these schools ultimately were intended to prepare future Islamic religious scholars (*ulama*) for their work. In emphasizing classical traditions in Arabic linguistics, teachers lectured and students learned through rote memorization. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the era of Western colonial rule, secular institutions came to supersede religious schools in importance throughout the Islamic world. However, madrasas were revitalized in the 1970s with the rising interest in religious studies and Islamist politics in countries such as Iran and Pakistan. In the 1980s, madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan were allegedly boosted by an increase in financial support from the United States,[3] European governments, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom reportedly viewed these schools as recruiting grounds for anti-Soviet Mujahedin fighters.[4] In the early 1990s, the Taliban movement was formed by Afghan Islamic clerics and students (*talib* means "student" in Arabic), many of whom were former Mujahedin who had studied and trained in madrasas and who advocated a strict form of Islam similar to the Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia.[5]

Relationship between *Madrasa*s and other Educational Institutions. *Madrasa*s, in most Muslim countries today, exist as part of a broader educational infrastructure. The private educational sector provides what is considered to be a quality Western-style education for those students who can afford high tuition costs. Because of

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[2] See "Madrasa" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965-); "Madrasah," in the*Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).

[3] Mary Ann Weaver, "Children of the Jihad," *New Yorker*, June 12, 1995.

[4] The term *mujahedin* refers to Islamic guerrillas, literally "one who fights in the cause of Islam."

[5] See CRS Report RS21695, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyyah*.

their relatively lower costs, many people turn to state schools, where they exist. However, in recent years and in more impoverished nations, the rising costs and shortages of public educational institutions have encouraged parents to send their children to madrasas.[6] Supporters of a state educational system have argued that the improvement of existing schools or the building of new ones could offer a viable alternative to religious-based madrasas. Others maintain that reforms should be institutionalized primarily within Islamic madrasas in order to ensure a well-rounded curriculum at these popular institutions. In the Agency for International Development's (USAID) 2003 *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World*, both of these viewpoints are advocated.[7]

Curriculum. Although some madrasas teach secular subjects, in general madrasas offer a religious-based curriculum, focusing on the Quran and Islamic texts. Beyond instruction in basic religious tenets, some argue that a small group of radicalized madrasas, specifically located near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, promote a militant form of Islam and teach their Muslim students to fight nonbelievers and stand against what they see as the moral depravity of the West.[8] Other observers suggest that these schools are wholly unconcerned with religious scholarship and focused solely on teaching violence.[9] A recent study by USAID denotes the links between madrasas and extremist Islamic groups as "rare but worrisome," but also adds that "access to quality education alone cannot dissuade all vulnerable youth from joining terrorist groups."[10]

One source reports that even in more moderate ("quietist") schools, students are often instructed to reject the "immoral" and "materialistic" Western culture.[11] Some Western and Islamic educators also express concern that these quietist madrasas, with their defined curricula and dated pedagogical techniques, such as rote memorization, produce individuals who are neither skilled nor prepared for the modern workforce. Defenders of the madrasa system view its traditional pedagogical approach as a way to preserve an authentic Islamic heritage. Because most madrasa graduates have access to only to a limited type of education, they commonly are employed in the religious sector as preachers, prayer leaders, and Islamic scholars.

Socio-Economic Factors. Madrasas offer a free education, room, and board to their students, and thus they appeal to impoverished families and individuals. On the whole, these religious schools are supported by private donations from Muslim believers through a process of alms-giving known in Arabic as *zakat*. The practice of zakat — one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith — prescribes that a fixed proportion of one's income

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[6] Supplemental costs associated with school uniforms, supplies, and textbooks make student participation in Pakistan's state-run education system unaffordable in some areas.

[7] *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World*, USAID Issue Paper No. 2, June 2003.

[8] Husain Haqqani, "Islam's Medieval Outposts," *Foreign Policy* no. 133, Nov./Dec. 2002,; Anna Kuchment et al., "School by the Book,"*Newsweek*, March 11, 2002.

[9] Some writers have implied that all *madrasa*s are harbors of militancy. See, for example, Jessica Stern, "Preparing for a War on Terrorism," *Current History* 100, no. 649 (2001): 355-357; and Alan Richards "At War with Utopian Fanatics," *Middle East Policy* 8, no. 4 (2001).

[10] *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World, op. cit*.

[11] Haqqani, "Islam's Medieval Outposts," *op. cit.*

be given to specified charitable causes, and traditionally a portion of *zakat* has endowed religious education.[12] Almost all madrasas are intended for educating boys, although there are a small number of madrasas for girls.

Examples of the Current State of Madrasas

Role of Saudi Arabia.[13] In recent years, the dissemination of Saudi Arabian donations to Islamic charities and the export of a Saudi educational curriculum have received worldwide attention. Although in Saudi Arabia itself, schools teach subjects beyond religious studies, conservative Islamic teachings permeate the Saudi educational system structure. Viewing Saudi Arabia with greater scrutiny following the events of September 11, experts have maintained that Saudi school curricula foster anti-Western and anti-Semitic sentiments. Saudi official textbooks also reportedly denounce Shi'a Islam as well as any popular Islamic practices that do not agree with Wahhabi beliefs.[14] In response to such allegations and following a review of schoolbooks in 2002, the Saudi foreign minister stated that, in light of a Saudi government survey, 5% of the material was considered "horrible" and 10% questionable, while 85% called for understanding with other religious faiths.[15] Shortly thereafter, the government vowed to remove objectionable parts and to train teachers in promoting tolerance, but skeptics continue to question the extent to which the government is willing or able to instill reforms in its schools.

On the global front, concern has been expressed over the spread of radical Islam through Saudi-funded schools, universities, and mosques, which exist in many countries including Bangladesh, Bosnia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and the United States. Some view the teaching of Saudi Wahhabism as threatening the existence of more moderate beliefs and practices in other parts of the Muslim world. However, there are those who argue that a differentiation should be made between funding to support charitable projects, such as madrasa-building, and funding which has been channeled, overtly or implicitly, to support extremist teachings in these madrasas. Critics of Saudi policies allege that the Saudi government has permitted or encouraged fund raising by charitable Islamic groups and foundations linked to Al Qaeda.[16] In February 2004, Saudi Arabia established the Saudi Nongovernmental Commission on Relief and Charity Work Abroad,[17] which will oversee international charitable activity and serve as "the sole

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[12] The traditional *zakat* is one-fortieth of a person's wealth, but Quranic interpretations of this point vary. See Jonathan Benthall, "Financial Worship: The Quranic Injunction to Almsgiving," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 1 (London, 1999): 27-42.

[13] For more on Saudi Arabia, see CRS Issue Brief IB93113, *Saudi Arabia: Current Issues and U.S. Relations*, and CRS Report RL32499, *Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Financing Issues*.

[14] Information on accusations against the Saudi curriculum, in addition to the contents of Saudi schoolbooks can be found in Michaela Prokop, "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education," *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (London, 2003):77-89.

[15] John Duke Anthony, "The American-Saudi Relationship: A Briefing by HRH Prince Saud al Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs," *Gulfwire Newsletter*, October 13, 2002.

[16] Glenn R. Simpson, "Unraveling Terror's Finances," *Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2003.

[17] *Agence France Presse*, "Saudi Arabia to Create Body for All Charity Abroad," Feb. 28, 2004.

vehicle" through which all private Saudi donations marked for international distribution will flow in the future.[18] As of February 2005, the Commission was not operational.

Pakistan.[19] Hosting over 10,000 madrasas,[20] Pakistan's religious and public educational infrastructure have been of recent concern in the United States. In an economy that is marked by extreme poverty and underdevelopment, costs associated with Pakistan's cash-strapped public education system have led many Pakistanis to turn to madrasas for free education, room, and board.[21] Links between Pakistani madrasas and the ousted Afghan Taliban regime, as well as alleged connections between some madrasas and Al Qaeda, have led some observers consider the reform of Pakistan's madrasa system as an important component of combating anti-U.S. terrorism and in helping to stabilize the recently-formed Afghan government.[22] In recommending increased U.S. attention to "actual or potential terrorist sanctuaries," the 9/11 Commission's final report singled out "poor education" in Pakistan as "a particular concern," citing reports that some madrasas "have been used as incubators for violent extremism."[23] The Pakistani government has offered financial incentives to madrasas as part of what it portrays as an attempt to monitor their curricula and to ensure that madrasas are not promoting violence. In July 2003, the Pakistani government announced a plan to reward those madrasas that comply with registration procedures with additional benefits, including better training, salaries, and supplies. The Pakistani government's registration efforts have been met with resistance from nationalist and Islamist groups, however.

Other Countries of Interest. Currently, the popularity of madrasas is rising in parts of Southeast Asia. For example in Indonesia, home to the largest number of Muslims in the world, almost 20-25% of primary and secondary school children attend *pesantren*s (Islamic religious schools).[24] Indonesian pesantrens have been noted for teaching a moderate form of Islam, one that encompasses Islamic mysticism or Sufism. However, the Saudi-based Al Haramain Islamic Foundation, a now defunct charity whose Indonesian branch had been designated by the U.S. government as a conduit for terrorist financing, reportedly had been operating some educational institutions in Indonesia.[25]

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[18] Adel al-Jubeir, "U.S. and Saudi Officials Hold a News Conference on a Major Development in the War on Terrorism," Federal Document Clearing House Transcript, June 2, 2004.

[19] For more on education in Pakistan, see CRS Report RS22009, *Education Reform in Pakistan*.

[20] *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World, op. cit.*

[21] Chris Kraul, "The World Dollars to Help Pupils in Pakistan," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 14, 2003.

[22] "Afghan Leader Condemns Pakistani Clerics," *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, Sept. 15, 2003.

[23] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Final Report, p. 367.

[24] Ronald A Luckens-Bull, "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32, no.3 (2001):353.

[25] Jane Perlez, "Saudis Quietly Promote Strict Islam in Indonesia," *New York Times*, July 5, 2003.

Current U.S. Policy and Legislation

Executive agencies and Congress have shown increasing interest in improving U.S. outreach and addressing educational challenges in the Muslim world in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (the "9/11 Commission") addressed education issues in the Islamic world in the context of its recommendations to identify and prioritize actual or possible terrorist sanctuaries and prevent the continued growth of Islamist terrorism. Relevant sections of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (P.L. 108-458, December 17, 2004) address many of the concerns reflected in the 9/11 Commission's final report regarding the improvement of educational opportunity in the Islamic world. Section 7114 of the Act authorizes the President to establish an International Youth Opportunity Fund to provide financial assistance for the improvement of public education in the Middle East.

Examples of action taken to effect educational changes in Islamic countries include USAID's September 2002 commitment of $100 million over five years for general education reform in Pakistan. The United States also has committed resources through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which received $90 million in both FY2003 and FY2004 (through P.L. 108-199).[26] MEPI encourages improvement in secular education throughout the Arab world, and MEPI's draft strategies have registered concern over the rising enrollment in madrasas.[27] The Bush Administration requested $150 million for MEPI in FY2005. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2005 (P.L.108-447) provides $75 million in Economic Support Funds for MEPI, in addition to $4 million for "scholarships and direct support" to American educational institutions in Lebanon. The Act also provides $6.75 million for the operation of the Center for Middle Eastern-Western Dialogue in Istanbul, Turkey, which grants educational scholarships.

In the 109th Congress, the proposed Targeting Terrorists More Effectively Act of 2005 (S. 12) echoes the concerns of the 9/11 Commission's final report and states that it should be the policy of the United States to "dramatically" increase the availability of basic education in the developing world and to work to raise $7 to $10 billion annually to fund education programs in Islamic countries. The bill would require the Secretary of State to submit an annual report on the efforts of countries in the developing world to increase the availability of basic education and to close educational institutions that promote religious extremism and terrorism. The bill authorizes $1 billion in development assistance for international education programs in FY2006, and such sums as may be necessary for FY2007 and FY2008. The bill also authorizes such sums as may be necessary for the U.S. contribution to the International Youth Opportunity Fund for FY2006-2008. The bill has been referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

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[26] CRS Report RS21457, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*, by Jeremy Sharp.

[27] "The Middle East Partnership Initiative Programming Guide," USAID/Asia & Near East Bureau and Department of State/Near East Affairs, June 2003.