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Islamic Religious Schools, *Madrasas*: Background

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Summary

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Islamic religious schools known as *madrasas* (or *madrassahs*) in the Middle East, Central, and Southeast Asia have been of increasing interest to U.S. foreign 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 provides an overview of *madrasas*, of their role in the Muslim world and issues related to their alleged financing by Saudi Arabia and other external donors. Related CRS products include CRS Issue Brief IB93113, CRS Report RS21457, and CRS Report RS21432. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Overview

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Islamic schools known as *madrasas* have been of increasing interest to analysts and to officials involved in formulating U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East, Central, 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 the educational infrastructure is in decay.

Background

Definition. The Arabic word *madrasa* generally has two meanings: 1) in its more common literal and colloquial usage, it means “school”; 2) in its secondary meaning, a *madrasa* is an educational institution offering instruction in the 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* which only taught the Quran.¹ Recently, “*madrasa*” has been used as a catchall denoting any school - primary, secondary, or advanced - that promotes an Islamic based curriculum. However 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,² European governments, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom reportedly viewed these schools as recruiting grounds for the anti-Soviet Mujahedin³ fighters. In the early 1990s, the Taliban movement was formed by Afghani 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 Wahhabism⁴ practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Relationship between *Madrasas* and other Educational Institutions. *Madrasas*, in most Muslim countries today, exist as part of a broader educational infrastructure. For those who can afford the high tuition costs, there is a private educational sector where students can receive what is considered to be a quality Western-style education. Because of 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*. Supporters of a state educational system have argued

¹ 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).

² Mary Ann Weaver, “Children of the Jihad,” *The New Yorker*, June 12, 1995.

³ The term *mujahedin* refers to Islamic guerrillas, literally “one who fights in the cause of Islam.”

⁴ The word “Wahhabi” is derived from the name of a Muslim scholar, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791). Wahhabism is the one of the more conservative forms of Sunni Islam. At its core, it stresses the absolute unity of God and a return to a pure and orthodox practice of Islam, as embodied in the Quran and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

that the improvement of existing schools or the building of new ones could offer a viable alternative to the 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 Report on "Strengthening Education in the Muslim World," both of these viewpoints are advocated.⁵

Curriculum. Although there are a few schools that 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 on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, are spawning a militant form of Islam and calling on Muslims to fight nonbelievers and stand against what they see as the moral depravity of the West.⁶ Other observers suggest that these schools are wholly unconcerned with religious scholarship and focused solely on teaching violence.⁷ 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."⁸

One source reports that even in more moderate ("quietist") schools, students are often instructed to reject the "immoral" and "materialistic" Western culture.⁹ 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 be given to specified charitable causes, and traditionally a portion of *zakat* has endowed religious education.¹⁰ Almost all *madrasas* are intended for educating boys, although there are a small number of *madrasas* for girls.

⁵ "Strengthening Education in the Muslim World," USAID Issue Paper No. 2, June 2003.

⁶ Husain Haqqani, "Islam's Medieval Outposts," *Foreign Policy*, Nov./Dec. 2002, iss. 133; Anna Kuchment, et al, "School by the Book," *Newsweek*, March 11, 2002.

⁷ Some writers have implied that all *madrasas* are harbors of militancy. See, for example, Jessica Stern, "Preparing for a War on Terrorism," *Current History* 100, iss. 649 (2001): 355-357; and Alan Richards "At War with Utopian Fanatics," *Middle East Policy* 8, iss. 4 (2001).

⁸ "Strengthening Education in the Muslim World," *op. cit.*

⁹ Haqqani, "Islam's Medieval Outposts," *op. cit.*

¹⁰ The traditional *zakat* is one-fortieth of a person's wealth, but there are varying Quranic interpretations of this point. See Jonathan Benthall, "Financial Worship: The Quranic Injunction to Almsgiving," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 1(London, 1999): 27-42.

Examples of the Current State of *Madrasas*

Role of Saudi Arabia. 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.¹¹ 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.¹² Shortly thereafter, the government vowed to remove objectionable parts and to train teachers in promoting tolerance, but skeptics 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 even in 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, which the U.S. government has identified as responsible for the September 11 hijackings.¹³ In 2003, the Saudi government announced that it was banning private charities and relief groups from donating money overseas, until new regulations are instituted to ensure that the money is not being channeled to terrorist organizations.¹⁴ The extent to which these government regulations will be effective remains to be seen.

Pakistan. Hosting over 10,000 *madrasas*,¹⁵ Pakistan's educational infrastructure has been of recent concern in the United States. Facing an economy that is marked by extreme poverty and underdevelopment, many Pakistanis have turned to *madrasas* for the

¹¹ 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.

¹² John Duke Anthony, "The American-Saudi Relationship: a briefing by HRH Prince Saud al Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs," *Gulfwire Newsletter*, October 13, 2002.

¹³ Glenn R. Simpson, "Unraveling Terror's Finances," *Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2003.

¹⁴ Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency Implements New Regulations Regarding Charities," Press Release on June 12, 2003, available on the website of the Saudi Arabia Embassy at [http://www.saudiembassy.net/press_release/releases/03-PR-0612-SAMA.htm], visited on October 27, 2003.

¹⁵ "Strengthening Education in the Muslim World," *op. cit.*

free education, room, and board.¹⁶ However, because of links between Pakistani *madrastas* and the ousted Afghan Taliban regime, as well as alleged connections of some *madrastas* to Al Qaeda, some observers consider the reform of Pakistani schools as an important component of combating anti-U.S. terrorism and in helping to stabilize the recently-formed Afghani government.¹⁷ Offering financial incentives, the Pakistani government is encouraging *madrastas* to register as part of what it portrays as an attempt to monitor their curricula and to ensure that *madrastas* are not promoting violence. After encountering initial resistance, in July 2003, the Pakistani government announced a plan to reward those *madrastas* that comply with registration procedures with additional benefits, including better teacher training, salaries, text books, and computers.¹⁸

Other Countries of Interest. Currently, the popularity of *madrastas* 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 *pesantrens* (Islamic religious schools).¹⁹ In contrast to most *madrastas*, Indonesian *pesantrens* have been noted for teaching a moderate form of Islam, one that encompasses Islamic mysticism or Sufism. However, the Saudi-based charity al-Haramayn, some branches of which have been named by the U.S. government as conduits for terrorism, reportedly was operating some educational institutions in Indonesia²⁰ prior to the Saudi government's 2003 order requiring al-Haramayn to close all of its operations worldwide.

Qatar, a country which officially adheres to the Wahhabist brand of Islam, has expressed intentions to overhaul its primary and secondary school system by introducing more modern instruction and reducing the number of classes in Islamic studies and Arabic. This reform project, part of which is being administered by the RAND Corporation, aims to promote religious tolerance, accountability and decision-making, while preserving Qatar's cultural identity.²¹ Some Muslim critics, expressing a widespread sentiment in the Middle East and in the Islamic world, resent such reforms, alleging that they are dictated by the United States and are disrespectful of the native Islamic heritage.²²

¹⁶ Chris Kraul, "The World Dollars to Help Pupils in Pakistan," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2003.

¹⁷ "Afghan Leader Condemns Pakistani Clerics for Training Taleban Fighters," *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, September 15, 2003.

¹⁸ "Madarassah Reform in Pakistan," website of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. [<http://embassyofpakistan.org/pb5.php>], visited on October 27, 2003.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Jane Perlez, "Saudis Quietly Promote Strict Islam in Indonesia," *New York Times*, July 5, 2003.

²¹ Erik W. Robelen, "U.S. Institutions Help Shape Education in the Islamic World," *Education Week*, May 28, 2003.

²² Susan B. Glasser, "Qatar Reshapes its Schools, Putting English over Islam," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2003.

Current U.S. Policy and Legislation

In September 2002, USAID committed \$100 million over five years for general education reform in Pakistan. The Research Triangle Institute (RTI), a U.S.-based, non-profit corporation, has received a USAID contract for \$60 million of this aid to implement USAID's Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) project in Pakistan.²³ The United States also has committed additional resources through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which received \$29 million in FY2002 and \$90 million in FY2003 (through P.L. 108-11).²⁴ One of MEPI's goals is to encourage improvements in secular education throughout the Arab world, and MEPI's draft strategies have registered concern over the rising enrollment in Islamic schools (*madrasas*).²⁵ The Bush Administration is requesting \$145 million for MEPI in FY2004. The House Committee on Appropriations has recommended \$45 million for MEPI and for "Islamic outreach" programs in the FY2004 Foreign Operations Bill (H.R. 2800). The Committee cited the "importance of education, training and exchanges" but stated that "these funds must be apportioned more equitably between Arab Muslim and non-Arab Muslim nations" (H.Rept. 108-222). The Senate report (S.Rept. 108-106) on Foreign Operations appropriations (S. 1426) supports the Administration's full budget request for MEPI.

Recent congressional hearings have examined the possible relationship between *madrasas* and terrorist-financing.²⁶ There appears to be some legislative interest in improving outreach and educational programs throughout the Muslim world. For example, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations report (S.Rept. 108-39) on the FY2004 Foreign Relations Authorization Act (S. 925) supports "an effective campaign to counter credible reports and observed evidence of growing anti-Americanism, especially in the Islamic world." Both S.Con.Res. 14 and H.Con.Res. 242, resolutions "expressing the sense of Congress regarding the education curriculum in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," criticize the educational system in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, H.R. 3137, a resolution "to prohibit assistance or reparations to Cuba, Libya, North Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria," lists several specific charges against Saudi Arabia, calling the country "the center of Wahhabism, the ultra-purist, jihadist form of Islam."

²³ The Bush Administration's FY2004 Request for Economic Support Funds (ESF) in Pakistan, under which educational programs would be administered, is \$200 million.

²⁴ CRS Report RS21457, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*, by Jeremy Sharp.

²⁵ "The Middle East Partnership Initiative Programming Guide," USAID/Asia & Near East Bureau and Department of State/Near East Affairs, June 2003.

²⁶ These include the *Hearing on Terrorism Two Years After 9/11*, Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism, and Government Information, September 10, 2003 and the *Hearing on Terror Financing*, Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, July 31, 2003.