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Madrasa Workshop
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Report

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Madrasa Workshop

As a joint effort of the ISIM, the Felix Meritis foundation in Amsterdam, and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), a workshop on madrasas, or Islamic religious seminaries, was held on 16 May 2002 in Amsterdam. Following the attacks in the United States and the ensuing war in Afghanistan, the perception of the madrasa as a training camp for jihad regained strength and was linked to the debate on the position of Islamic education in the West. The workshop presented a bird's-eye view of the history and role of madrasas in Pakistan, Indonesia and Europe, and addressed a number of related current issues.

In his opening speech, Khalid Masud (academic director, ISIM) gave an overview of the history of the madrasa institution in the Muslim world, reviewing a large portion of the scholarly work that has been done on the topic. Moreover, the opening address established the link with the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, which marked the advent of the New War on Terrorism and gave rise to a new interest in the madrasas in many parts of the world. After the 11 September events, madrasas were mentioned frequently in the media, often in the form of allegations stating that the madrasas form breeding grounds for such terrorist activities carried out in the name of Islam.

This workshop on madrasas provided an opportunity for the four speakers to present their ongoing work from a regional perspective. During the first session, Jamal Malik (see Malik, p.20–21) introduced the participants to the Pakistani context, concluding that the New War discourse on the 'axis of evil', a heading under which these days the madrasas are also often mentioned, ignores the far more complex reality of this Islamic institution of learning. According to Malik, religious schools provide a space for education and cultural-religious survival for the deprived in Pakistan, who suffer from social poverty, conflict, and oppression. Hence, the basis of the madrasa is not terrorism, in Malik's opinion, though he admitted that the institution potentially lends itself to promoting terrorism and violence. Nevertheless, an outright criminalization of the madrasas is not an option in the Pakistani context either. Martin van Bruinessen reflected on the history of the Indonesian *pesantren*, stating that, even though they are conservative in outlook, the religious schools stand opposite to fundamentalist Islam. Furthermore, Van Bruinessen put forward the idea that teaching students how to think contextually forms part of the madrasa education, which gives rise to a rather pluralist attitude among the

students. The conclusion was that also the Indonesian *pesantren* are facing a crisis regarding their regeneration, even though they are well integrated in the larger societal context.

Philip Lewis shifted the focus to Europe, presenting his findings with regard to Muslims in Britain, and addressing the question of whether through madrasas in the UK a religious leadership can be established that is able to interact with the wider social context. Lewis described three ways in which the madrasas relate to their social context, namely through isolation, engagement, or resistance. Moreover, Lewis mentioned new professional trajectories for madrasa graduates, such as rendering service as chaplains in hospitals and prisons, and the new career trajectory of the 'freelance imam'. However, despite the innovative spirit, it turned out that the (Deobandi) resistance model has become paradigmatic in the British context. Thijl Sunier spoke about madrasas in the Netherlands, against the background of the ongoing national debate on whether or not such institutions hamper the integration of migrants into Dutch society. Interestingly enough, in the Dutch context the concern for integration seems to prevail over the fear of violence stemming from Qur'anic

mosque schools and vocational training facilities for imams, as they are to be found in the Netherlands. What is perceived as problematic about the presence of such institutions is that first of all funding confessional schools is detrimental to Dutch secularism, and moreover a complex of questions regarding civic incorporation and citizenship arises. In the end, the question of whether Islamic education should be public or private in the Netherlands is a highly subjective one.

To round off the programme, Peter van der Veer (co-director, ISIM) moderated the general discussion, summarizing the main points that were addressed in the respective presentations. Future trajectories and employment difficulties of madrasa graduates, the issue of women and madrasa education, and the question of whether and where violence comes into play against the background of the allegations made, crystallized as the main issues for further scrutiny at the end of the workshop.

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