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Madrasa in Asia

YOGINDER SIKAND

Five papers presented at the workshop dealt with madrasas in South Asia, home to the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. Adil Mahdi, a doctoral student at the Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, spoke about the Indian madrasa and the spectre of "terrorism." He argued that unlike the case of certain madrasas in Pakistan, not a single madrasa in India has been involved in "terrorist" activities. Numerous madrasas played a leading role in India's freedom struggle. Yet, the Indian state and the media have mounted a relentless campaign to demonize the madrasas as "anti-national." Mahdi also spoke about the Deoband's links with the Taliban, arguing that although the two shared a common vision, they differed in matters of strategy. The rise of the Taliban to power, he stressed, owed less to their Deobandi ideology, than to political factors, including the support given to the Taliban by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

Dietrich Reetz of the ZMO spoke about the changes in the Deobandi madrasa following its split in 1982. Countering the stereotype of Deobandi madrasas as hostile to change, he noted the reforms recently introduced at the Dar ul-Ulum, including the setting up of departments of English and computer applications. Regarding the Deobandis' links with other groups, Reetz argued that the Deobandi ulama were more concerned with countering other Muslim groups than with non-Muslim communities. He also spoke of the efforts of some Deobandis in promoting dialogue with Hindus.

Girls' madrasas in contemporary India are a fairly recent development. Mareike Winkelmann of ISIM dealt with the case of a Deobandi girls' madrasa in Delhi, showing how, by providing free education that was also culturally relevant, such madrasas are playing an important role in promoting literacy among girls from poor families. Although its curriculum is conservative in terms of its vision of gender relations, the madrasa affords new spaces for Muslim girls, including involvement in the reformist Tablighi Jama'at, arguably the largest Muslim movement in the world today.

Farish Noor's paper dealt with the case of over a dozen Indonesian and Malaysian students at two madrasas in Karachi, Pakistan, who were recently deported to their countries and arrested on charges of being involved with "terrorist" groups. These students have been denied a fair trial by their governments, who, Noor claimed, appear to have joined hands with the US to clamp down on dissenting Islamic movements, branding them all as "terrorist." This must be seen in the context of the complex links between the US and governments in Muslim countries allied to it, for both of whom the talk of madrasas as "dens of terror" has come in handy to clamp down on internal opposition. The agenda for reforming the madrasas has, unfortunately, today come to be linked with the question of countering "terrorism." Yoginder

During the last week of May this year ISIM, in collaboration with Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin, organized a two-day workshop on the theme *The Asian Madrasa: Transnational Linkages and Real or Alleged Political Role*. The nine papers that were presented at the workshop looked at madrasas in different Asian countries in the context of the ongoing debate on "terrorism."

Sikand's paper focused on efforts being made today by ulama and Muslim activists in India to introduce modern subjects in the curriculum, excise subjects and books that are considered irrelevant, and introduce reforms in teaching methods. Noorhaidi Hasan of the Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, dealt with the Salafi or "Wahhabi" madrasas in contemporary Indonesia. He traced the evolution of the Salafis in Indonesia and their adversarial relations with the Shafi'i ulama, Sufis, and abangan or "lax" Muslims. He noted that some Salafi madrasas have been receiving generous support from Saudi Arabia, linking this to the Saudis broader goal, which they shared with the US, of promoting a conservative, status quo, literalist Islam to counter anti-monarchical tendencies in Muslim countries following the Iranian Revolution. He spoke of the involvement of some Salafi madrasas in Indonesia in the militant Lashkar-i Jihad movement and in the 2002 bombings in Bali, after which, he noted, some of them have been banned by the government. Following the events of 11 September 2001, he added, Saudi financial support to Indonesian Salafi madrasas has significantly declined, leading to a crisis in the Salafi camp.

Martin van Bruinessen's paper focused on the pesantren system of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. He noted that although a few pesantren in the country could indeed be said to be militant, this was hardly true of the vast majority. The radicalization of some Indonesian pesantren must be seen in the wider political context, and as a consequence of the suppression of opposition movements by the Indonesian state.

In her paper on Islamic education in China, Jackie Armijo of Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, examined the growth of madrasas across the country in a climate of greater religious freedom. Some of these are part-time schools that allow their students to simultaneously study at regular schools and colleges. Madrasas in China, except in the province of Sinkiang, she said, are not a platform for anti-government propaganda. She also referred to a number of Chinese Muslims who have studied in Iran or in Arab countries and their role in setting up Islamic schools in China after completing their studies abroad.

Christine Hunner of the University of Bochum, Germany, dealt with Islamic education in contemporary Azerbaijan. Because of decades of Soviet rule, she said, few Azeris have a sound knowledge of Islam, although Islam remains an integral part of Azeri identity. She looked at new ways of imparting Islamic education in Azerbaijan, including the newly established Islamic Theological Faculty at the University of Baku and Islam University in Baku, in which both Shias and Sunnis study together. She also reflected on the possible political implications of the Turkish government's promotion of a specifically Turkish form of Islam in programs in this Shia majority country.

Overall, there seemed to be a near unanimity among the participants about the fallacy of labelling all or even most madrasas as "dens of terror," although they pointed out that some madrasas in certain countries can be said to be militant or even terrorist. Further, it was also generally agreed that intellectual and financial links have long existed between madrasas in different countries, and that most madrasas with transnational connections have had nothing to do with terrorism, although some certainly have. Some participants stressed the need to look at the phenomenon of militancy in certain madrasas as, at least partly, a reaction to state terror and to Western, particularly American, hegemony. Stressing the need to counter misleading stereotypes, the participants underlined the need for more empirically grounded studies of madrasas and their transnational linkages.

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