

Madrasah Education System And Terrorism: Reality And Misconception

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Abstract

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Islamic schools known as madrasah 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. Madrasah drew added attention when it became known that several Taliban leaders and Al-Qaeda members had developed radical political views at madrasah in Pakistan, some of which allegedly were built and partially financed through Saudi Arabian sources. These revelations have led to accusations that madrasah 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 madrasah play an important role in countries where millions of Muslims live in poverty and the educational infrastructure is in decay. This paper aims to study a misconception of the role and functions of Islamic traditional religious schools which have been linked with the activities of terrorism. The study will be specifically focus on practice of the traditional Islamic school, which is locally called as 'madrasah system'.

Keywords: *madrasah, terrorism, Islamic schools*

INTRODUCTION

The September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York changed the international politics, security and law. The attacks gave rise to the new catchword of war against terrorism, which has been universally accepted as a new millennium global threat. The call for global participation against terrorism was led by George Bush, President of Unites States who had fiercely declared the September 11 terrorist attacks as '*the war of the first war of the twenty-first century*'.

Since then, terrorism has been regarded as the number one issue in international agenda on peace and security (Kimmo Nuotio 2011). However, the fight against terrorism by the international nation has been criticized by many commentators as it mainly targeted at Islamic countries (Mohamed R. Hassanien 2008). Many Islamic dominated countries have been blamed for nurturing and supporting the activities of the terrorism around the world. The ground for this notion was founded on the allegation that a substantial number of terrorist acts are perpetrated by or upon Muslims, or within Islamic lands (David Aaron Schwartz 1991).

The Muslim's countries were subjected to military operation by international communities, led by western countries such as United States and Britain. Iraq and Afghanistan for example, two Muslim dominated countries, were invaded by military operation sanctioned by United Nation in the name of the war against terrorism. At certain point, it seems the international fight against terrorism is in fact turn out to be a war against Islamic countries. Islamic religion and its teaching were misunderstood as a religion which propagates its followers to regard non-Muslim as enemy and a threat to the Islamic religion (Liaquat Ali Khan 2005). The misconception of Islamic teaching, such as the concept of *jihad*, religious freedom and minority rights under Islamic law, has been identified as the main reasons that contribute to a clash between the Islamic civilization and the modern world order (Parvez Ahmed 2007).

More significantly, some analysts pointed out that traditional religious school system called '*madrasah*', which have been in practice in many Muslim dominated countries for many years, as a root for terrorism threat (Armando Spataro 2008). These traditional schools were alleged to seed the religious extremism among their students. In Indonesia, for example, there is allegation that the terrorism activities are headed by certain Muslim clerics, such as Abu Bakar Bashir, who are also the founders and teachers of the traditional religious schools.

Unlike modern schools, this traditional religious school mainly focuses on the teaching of pure Islamic teaching in various aspects. These schools are unique in the sense they remain popular among traditionalists Muslims all over the world despite the fact they still maintain the traditional method of study. These schools can be found at various parts in Muslim dominated countries such as Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia and others.

DEFINITION OF MADRASAH AND TERRORISM

Madrasah is an Arabic term derived from the root word '*dars*', which connotes a learning process carried through drill lesson. Also derived from the same root are '*mudarris*' – meaning a male teacher, while '*mudarrisah*' is a female teacher – and '*dirrasah*', meaning studying or studied subject (Ismael, Ahmad 1995). The Arabic word '*madrasah*' generally has two meanings:

- (i) In its more common literal and colloquial usage, it means 'school';
- (ii) In its secondary meaning, a *madrasah* 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, *madrasah* were distinguished as institutions of higher studies and existed in contrast to more rudimentary schools called 'kuttab' which only taught the Quran (E.J. Brill, 1965). Recently, *madrasah* has been used as a catchall denoting any school – primary, secondary, or advanced – that promotes an Islamic based curriculum. Technically, *madrasah* generally refers to Muslim private schools with core emphasis on Islamic studies and Arabic literacy. It is a privately-operated school which relies on the support of the local community or foreign donors, particularly from Islamic or Muslim countries.

Madrasah vary from country to country or even from town to town. They can be a day or boarding school, a school with a general curriculum, or a purely religious school attached to a mosque (Febe Armanios 2003). However in many countries, including Egypt and Lebanon, *madrasah* refers to any educational institution (state-sponsored, private, secular, or religious). In Pakistan and Bangladesh, madrasah commonly refers to Islamic religious schools. This can be a significant semantic marker, because an analysis of madrasah reform could have different implications within various cultural, politica, and geographic contexts.

It is important to know what the definition of terrorism is. This is simply because without definition, one could neither identify an act of violence as terrorist nor condemn that act. However, to date, there is still disagreement amongst the scholars as regard to specific definition of terrorism. Literally, terrorism means 'policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted; the employment of methods of intimidation; the fact of terrorizing or condition of being terrorized' (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). It also refers to a criminal act that influences an audience beyond the immediate victim.

As regard to technical definition of terrorism, there are various different definitions given by scholars. Many definitions have been proposed, but none of them is uncontroversial. The definers are still disagreeing on what should be included in a definition of terrorism. Among the definitions of terrorism given by the scholars:

- (i) *Professor Christopher Blakesley*: Terrorism means violence committed by any means; causing death, great bodily harm, or serious property damage; to innocent individuals; with the intent to cause those consequences or with wanton disregard for those consequences; and for the purpose of coercing or intimidating some specific group, or government, or otherwise to gain some perceived political, military, religious, or other philosophical benefit (Mirna Cardona 2009).
- (ii) *M. Cherif Bassiouni*: Terrorism refers to individual or collective coercive conduct employing strategies of terror violence which contain an international element or are directed against an internationally protected target and whose aim is to produce a power-oriented outcome (David Aaron Schwartz 1991).

There are various reasons canvassed by the scholars to justify the difficulty in determining the definition of terrorism. One of the main grounds frequently cited by them is the changing nature of terrorism, since no definition can cover all of what a prospective terrorist might do (Nicholas J. Perry 2004). Despite the differences in determining the definition of terrorism, some scholars maintain that the controversies among scholars and politicians about the very nature or terrorism

are generally artificial (Cyrille Begorre-Bret 2006). This is due to the reason that the act of terrorism may still be identified by referring to the certain variable factors.

Basically there are at least eight primary factors that can be regarded as attributes of terrorism namely, violence, the required intention, the nature of the victims, the connection of the offender to the state, the justice and motive of their cause, the level of organization, the element of theatre and the absence of guilt (George P. Fletcher 2006). These determining factors serve as a useful guideline in order to determine whether the act amount the act of terrorism or vice versa.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MADRASAH

As an institution of learning, the *madrasah* is centuries old. One of the first established *madrasah*, called the *Nizamiyah*, was built in Baghdad during the 11th century A.D. Offering food, lodging, and a free education, *madrasah* 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 19th and early 20th centuries, in the era of Western colonial rule, secular institutions came to supersede religious schools in importance throughout the Islamic world. However, *madrasah* 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, *madrasah* in Afghanistan and Pakistan were allegedly boosted by an increase in financial support from the United States (Mary Ann Weaver 1995), European governments, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom reportedly viewed these schools as recruiting grounds for the anti-Soviet *Mujahedin*¹ 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 *madrasah* and who advocated a strict form of Islam similar to the Wahhabism² practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Currently, the popularity of *madrasah* 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) (Ronald A Luckens-Bull 2001). In contrast to most *madrasah*, Indonesian *pesantrens* have been noted for teaching a moderate form of Islam, one that encompasses Islamic mysticism or Sufism.

MADRASAH AND TERRORISM: AN OVERVIEW

¹ The term ‘*mujahedin*’ refers to Islamic guerrillas, literally ‘one who fights in the cause of Islam’.

² 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.

The world and the media turned their attention towards the *madrasah* only after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as there was a growing perception that terrorism in the Middle East, Central, and Southeast Asia region is fueled by these *madrasah*. Although several studies have been undertaken to analyze the *madrasah* curriculum and its impact on the students, the role and attitudes of *madrasah* teachers, and the challenges they face, have largely been neglected.

Traditionally, *madrasah* are Islamic learning institutions, aimed at building a generation of Islamic scholars and leaders. The word ‘*madrasah*’ means ‘center of learning’ in Arabic. They provide free religious education, boarding and lodging. For these reasons, they are essentially schools for the poor.

Madrasah have become a potent symbol as terrorist factories since the September 11 attacks, evoking condemnation and fear among Western countries. The word first entered the political lexicon when the largely *madrasah*-educated Taliban in Afghanistan became the target of a U.S.-led strike in late 2001. Although none of the September 11 terrorists were members of the Taliban, *madrasah* became linked with terrorism in the months that followed, and the association stuck.

For Western politicians, a certain type of education, such as the exclusive and rote learning of the Quran that some *madrasah* offered, seemed to be the only explanation for the inculcation of hate and irrationality in Islamist terrorists. In the July 2004 report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, commonly known as the 9-11 Commission, *madrasah* were described as ‘incubators of violent extremism’, despite the fact that the report did not mention whether any of the 19 hijackers had attended a *madrasah* (Norton, 2004). In the summer of 2005, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld worried about *madrasah* that ‘train people to be suicide killers and extremists, violent extremists’ (Donald Rumsfeld 2005). As the U.S. marked the fourth anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the autumn of 2005, several U.S. publications continued to claim that *madrasah* produce terrorists, describing them as ‘hate factories’ (Alex Alexiev 2005).

Yet, careful examination (Peter Bergen, Swati Pandey 2006) of the 79 terrorists responsible for five of the worst anti-Western terrorist attacks in recent memory – the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the Africa embassy bombings in 1998, the September 11 attacks, the Bali nightclub bombings in 2002, and the London bombings on July 7, 2005 – reveals that only in rare cases were *madrasah* graduates involved. All of those credited with masterminding the five terrorist attacks had university degrees, and none of them had attended a *madrasah*. Only 11 percent of the terrorists had attended *madrasah*.

One of the central concerns of researchers across the globe in recent years has been the propagation of jihad by radical *madrasah*, and whether the way these institutions have defined the term is an authentic representation or not. In this debate, some have argued that the *madrasah* are distorting the meaning of jihad; that they are using Islam as a stepping stone and that since Islam in the Qur’an condemns killing innocent civilians and damaging properties in war, terrorism has no place in Islam (K. Malik 2005).

MADRASAH EDUCATION SYSTEM: STRUCTURE, CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

Islamic education has a long history. In the broadest sense, Islamic education developed along with the emergence of Islam itself. In the history of Arab society, the arrival of Islam made a major transformation to the educational system. This is because the pre-Islamic Arab societies had no formal education system. Education that takes place can be said to be more informal, and this was more to do with Islamic development, dissemination and cultivation of trust and other worship.

The Islamic learning process at that time was held in the homes of ‘*Sahabah*’ and some of the most famous is the Darul Arqam (Malaysia). However, when the Muslim community has been formed, then the learning process was held in the mosque which was known as ‘*halaqah*’. This was the beginning of the formal education in Islam where the resurgence of *madrasah* took place. Throughout the Islamic history, the educational system in *madrasah* has given special emphasis on areas of fiqh, tafsir and hadith and also provides space for the mind to perform ‘*ijtihad*’.

Although Islam essentially made no distinction between the values of religious studies and general knowledge, but in practice, the rule is given to the knowledge of religion. Apart from that, if viewed solely from the religious angle in a limited sense, the supremacy and dominance of the religious knowledge in some extent presumably contains positive implications. This makes the transmission of the rule of Shariah which is the core of Islam, from the early generations of Muslims to the next generation be “more secure”.

In *madrasah*, the teachers teach secular subjects to blend together with the Islamic tenet, or in other words *madrasah* offer a religious-based curriculum, focusing on the Quran and Islamic texts during teaching secular subjects (Uzma Anzar 2003). The fact explained some *madrasah* have evolved from the centers of Islamic learning to the centers of secular knowledge acquisition, to the current state of greater emphasis on Islamic teachings only. This is especially true for *madrasah* in Pakistan and some parts of Indonesia. It is supported by some Muslim Ulama in emphasizing that secular knowledge should be taught in light of the knowledge revealed in the Quran.

The common curriculum in *madrasah*, in all regions, is the Islamic studies and acquisition of greater understanding of Islamic principles that govern routine lives of the Muslims. Therefore, subjects such as *Fiqa* (Islamic law), *Hadith* (Prophet’s saying), *Sunnah* (Prophet’s traditions) and *Tafseer* (interpretation of the Quran) form the crux of *madrasah* curriculum. Whereas, most *madrasah* in Pakistan teach only religious subjects, many *madrasah*, such as the ones in Egypt, Indonesia and Bangladesh, also teach secular subjects as additional subjects in their curriculum.

From observation on the *madrasah* education system all over the world, the main functions of *madrasah* which are identified are:

- (i) as an institution to transmit the religious knowledge (*tafaqquh fi al-din*) and values of Islam;
- (ii) as an institution of social control; and
- (iii) as an institution of social engineering and cultivation of the next generation.

ROLE OF RADICAL MADRASAHS IN TERRORIST ATTACKS

It is true that most *madrasah* are peaceful and serve a constructive role in societies where education is often a privilege rather than a right, and where, as in Pakistan, the state has increasingly released mass education and student welfare to *madrasa* as it continues to spend many times more on the military. Yet this overlooks the fact that elsewhere, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, *madrasah* such as al-Mukmin, Lukman al-Hakim and al-Islam have been vitally important in furthering the mission of some of the most volatile terrorist groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), in efforts to attack American, Australian and other Western-related interests.

In fact, the majority of JI terrorist attacks—including the Christmas Eve bombings of 2000 and Bali I in 2002, as well as the Jakarta Marriott bombing in 2003 and the Australian Embassy attack in 2004 (which involved JI members but were not institutionally JI)—have been staffed and led by individuals associated with radical *madrasah*. To explore these competing claims and to address the *madrasah* question systematically, data was recently analyzed from the ongoing Global Transnational Terrorism (GTT) Project (Marc Sageman 2002). Overall, the findings demonstrate that attendance and other forms of association (teaching, socializing or attending lectures) with JI-linked radical *madrasah* are correlated with both participation and role in JI terrorist attacks. By using aggregate level data on Indonesian education rates, it is clear that JI-linked *madrasah* attendance rates of the jihadists that took part in the Bali I, Marriott and Australian Embassy bombings are 19 times greater than the highest estimated rates of the general population. Using an ordered logic statistical analysis of 75 jihadists involved in the same operations, we found that JI-linked *madrasah* attendance is associated with a greater role in JI terrorist operations, decreasing the probability that a jihadist will take a low level role on a terrorist operation by more than 19% and increasing the probability that a jihadist will play a major role by 16% (Justin Magouirk 2008).

Al-Islam (in Tengulun, East Java), was established in 1992 by the father of three of the main Bali bombing plotters (Ali Imron, Amrozi and Mukhlas) and modeled on the famous al-Mukmin school in Ngruki (Solo, Central Java) created by JI founder Abdullah Sungkar and his colleague Abu Bakr Ba'asyir. After Sungkar's death in 1999, Ba'asyir became al-Islam's patron and officiated at graduation ceremonies. After the Bali bombing, Ba'asyir said that he believed the victims of the bombing would go to hell, and that the bombers and plotters were heroic mujahidin (Emir 2005).

THE MISCONCEPTION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOLUTION

A widespread rumour contending *madrasah* as being a place for breeding terrorists is no laughing matter and prompt solutions need to be put in motion to cleanse the image of *madrasah* as a place where Islamic religion is being preached. Here are some recommendations worth considering.

Campaign

The main objective of this campaign is to clear doubts on the role of *madrasah* since *madrasah* has been perceived as breeding terrorists and fostering anti-social element after 9/11 attack. It aims

at shedding some light on the true role of the *madrasah* to the world that they are merely religious centers committed to peace.

As what has been done in Bangalore, India, The Dakshina Kannada unit of the Students' Islamic Organisation of India (SIO) convened a 9-day campaign called “*Shaantigagi Madrasa*” following suspicions raised in the aftermath of the recent attack in the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore condemning the terrorist attack in the IISc and regretting the death of the scientists. The convener of the campaign, Abdul Shukur said that *madrasah* are religious centres committed to peace and aim at inculcating spiritual values among the youth. Teachings of love and reverence and human values are imparted in these centres. The ability to declare oneself a patriot is also part of person's character. Students are taught ideals of patriotism, equality and brotherhood on a purely religious and spiritual platform. Students in *madrasah* are also taught about human rights and religious practices. They are also taught about cleanliness, building good character and steps to memorise the Quran so that they can understand and grasp its teachings.

Media

It is always agreeable that in order to solve a problem, we must take into account its root causes. For this matter, it is suffice to say that, media should be blamed for misconceiving *madrasah* by spreading hearsay worldwide and turns them into fact. As media was utilized as a mind-setting device to bent public's judgment that *madrasah* is harbouring terrorists and a threat to a security, the role should be to reverse the general misconception among people that *madrasah* is the nurturer of Islamic radicalism and as training centers for jihadi militants and terrorists to clarify its true system.

Media works like magic when it spreads false accusation against *madrasah*, and that is for sure how it will work then when it is used to disseminate promotion of campaign, interviews, articles, journals of a common purpose – to clear doubts overwhelming the *madrasah* system and its linkage to terrorism.

Joint Programmes

All *madrasah* need to work together as a ‘team’ in quashing negative thoughts about its system. Federations of *madrasahs* of the different sects can be more pro-active in promoting inter-sectarian dialogue and joint programmes, particularly at the local level and involving *madrasah* teachers and students. These programmes should be able to educate people about how *madrasah* can be a solution, not a threat to world peace. Also, the *madrasah*'s joint programmes should not only portray the teachings of Islam, but also go beyond that, for example, teachings of secular subjects, training of teachers and inter-*madrasah* exchange students and teachers.

As a matter of fact, International Center for Religion and Diplomacy's (ICRD) work with over a thousand *madrasah* administrators and teachers has led to trainings in human rights, religious tolerance and secular subjects, which the trained *madrasah* teachers subsequently used to coach colleagues in other *madrasah*.

Reformation

Since *madrasah* is not usually open to wider scrutiny, there must be something ‘fishy’ going on within its walls – raising insufficient and simplistic understanding of its systems. People tend to conclude that if *madrasah* system is much closed, then suspiciously, it might be doing something that it does not want the world to find out. Thus, there is a need to reform its conservative system through co-ordination, standardisation, or modernization to open people’s eyes that *madrasah* is definitely not something they thought it was.

These humble recommendation can be achieved if serious effort is put in reality and *madrasah* itself must be ready to accept these changes for the sake of Islam.

CONCLUSION

It becomes clear for anyone who studies the history of the rise and fall of the nations that unity, welfare and brotherhood have played a key role to make people achieve success, grandeur and respect. Disunity, lack of brotherhood, selfishness, injustice and non-corporation are such diseases that destroy the whole community. Mutual understanding, unity of the society and the accord of the nation are such matter that Islam exhorts its followers to bring them into their life. Islam encourages them to act on them (Muhammad Sajid Qami 2005). And it is the same concept in *madrasah* and Islam not to teach terrorism. So it is not right to link the *madrasah* with terrorism.

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