

NOREF Policy Brief

Taking Stock: Madrasa Reform in Pakistan¹

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Executive summary

Searching for the roots of terrorism after the attacks of 9/11, the world's attention turned to Pakistan and to Pakistan's religious schools, the "madrasas". This put pressure on the Pakistani government to reform the madrasas and ignited a long standing debate on the role of religious education in Pakistan and its links to radicalisation and militancy. This policy brief argues that the madrasa debate is not premised on a fair description of reality. The madrasa sector is diverse. The majority of Pakistan's madrasas are moderate institutions, concerned with promoting Islamic beliefs and knowledge. This makes it important to distinguish between moderate and militant madrasas. Madrasas must be seen as part of an Islamic tradition of learning, not primarily as political groups, but rather as socio-cultural institutions that are revered by many in Pakistan today.

The madrasa community has resisted state interference and rejected government control over curricula in favor of the authority of religious experts. Likewise, madrasas are wary of financial dependence on the government, which is associated with state control. The government's ambiguous relationship to militant groups is also condemned by madrasas who argue that the government is clamping down on moderate schools, while madrasas known to have links to militant groups are protected and therefore operate freely.

The recent accord signed by the nation-wide Federation of Madrasa Boards and the Minister of Interior in October 2010 is a promising step forward in improving madrasa-government relations. It sets the terms for government-approved madrasa syllabi, for granting religious education boards the same status as other education boards, and prohibits madrasas from teaching or publishing "any literature that promotes militancy or spreads sectarianism". While there are clearly areas of disagreement, there is an interest within the current madrasa leadership to cooperate with the government, as long as this cooperation does not compromise the madrasas' independent position. The sector is well organised and operates as a unified group, which potentially could facilitate sector-wide reform.

Dealing with the rise in militancy is a huge challenge, which involves a much broader strategy than a narrow focus on madrasas and their reform. Moderate madrasas, if engaged in a process based on respect and dialogue, represent an untapped potential. If encouraged, moderate madrasas could help reduce sectarian conflict and the incidence of violence, and identify and promote solutions leading towards a more peaceful coexistence. A blanket condemnation of madrasas could end up serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy, contributing to the radicalisation of moderate madrasas.

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¹ This policy brief draws partially on the NOREF policy paper: Kaja Borchgrevink "Pakistan's Madrasas: Moderation or Militancy? A stocktaking of the madrasa debate and the reform process", Oslo, NOREF, 2011.

Introduction

Why is there so much controversy over the madrasas? Are madrasas radicalising and recruiting youth for militant groups? Can change among the moderate schools help curb the influence of the more radical schools? What are the main challenges and opportunities for reform? Can third parties play a constructive role in this process?

Searching for the roots of terrorism after 9/11, the world's attention inevitably turned to Pakistan, and to Pakistan's religious schools, the "madrasas". There are strong historical – as well as etymological – links between the students of certain madrasas and the Taliban movement. The word Taliban – which literally means 'the seekers of knowledge' – is also commonly used for the students of Islam. The movement emerged from a network of madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan – which has contributed to madrasas being portrayed as 'terrorist factories'. Several reports by think tanks and in the media claimed firm links between madrasas and militancy; madrasas for many are the symbol of radical Islam,

The madrasas and the government have reached agreement on a number of issues critical to reform.

and a central focus in a much broader debate on the relationship between Islam and militancy.

A madrasa reform process, launched by President Pervez Musharraf in

2001, met resistance from the madrasa leadership. However, almost ten years later, the madrasas and the government have reached agreement on a number of issues critical to reform, namely uniform curricula which includes secular subjects, registration of madrasas with the madrasa boards and recognition of Pakistan's madrasas boards by the government.

This report will examine more closely the Pakistani madrasa sector and some of the common assumptions that are guiding the current debate. It will conclude with suggestions for possible policy interventions and identify challenges and opportunities for madrasas reform.

The Madrasa challenge

Much of the policy literature on Pakistan's madrasas concludes with a number of critical allegations, which include: (1) an alarming growth in the number

of madrasas and students; (2) close links between madrasas and militancy; (3) students are being socialised into adopting radical "jihadi" mindsets; and (4) madrasas are providing outdated and poor quality education of little relevance to today's world. Despite their centrality to the madrasa debate, each of these allegations fails to give a fair description of the realities in the various madrasas.

Alarming growth?

The number of madrasas and students has increased significantly over the last 30 years, from some 300 schools at independence in 1947, to an estimated 20,000-30,000 schools today. Iqramullah Jan, a Ministry of Religious Affairs official, asserted that at the end of 2010, there were approximately 19,500 madrasas registered with the government. Common estimates of the total number of madrasas, including unregistered madrasas, are approximately 30,000². This increase, coupled with alleged links to terrorism, has resulted in the view that all madrasas are training militants; hence, the number of madrasas and madrasa students is a key issue in the madrasa debate. Recent research, however, finds that the growth is not as rapid as earlier indicated.³ While the sector is still growing, the private school sector is growing faster, and the increase in madrasas is small compared to that of the education sector overall. Assessing the alleged links between madrasas and militancy, Winthrop and Graff conclude that "contrary to popular belief, madrasas have not risen to fill the gap in public education supply and have not been one of the primary causes of a recent rise in militancy"⁴.

Links to militancy?

A number of articles and reports published right after 9/11 contained allegations about the role of Pakistani madrasas in promoting radical Islam and contributing to militancy. Madrasas were often

2 Masooda Bano "Contesting Ideologies and Struggle for Authority: State-Madrasa Engagement in Pakistan", *Religion and Development Research Programme Working Paper 14*, Birmingham: International Development Department, University of Birmingham, 2007; Christine C. Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge: Militancy and Religious Education in Pakistan*, Washington, D.C., United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008.

3 Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, Asim Ijaz Khwaja and Tristan Zajonc, "Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data.", *Comparative Education Review* 50 (3), 2006; Rebecca Winthrop and Corinne Graff, "Beyond Madrasas: Assessing the Links between Education and Militancy in Pakistan", Washington, D.C., Center for Universal Education at Brookings, 2010, p 17.

4 Winthrop and Graf, *Beyond Madrasas*, 2010, p 48.

described as “terrorist factories” and “universities of *jihad*”. Undoubtedly, there are clear links between certain Pakistani madrasas and militant groups, past and present. The politicisation of religion in Afghanistan and Pakistan - particularly the radicalisation of certain political groups over the last 30 years - has turned some madrasas into arenas where radical Islamist groups create popular support for their distinct interpretations of political Islam, advance particular political agendas, and recruit for militant groups and actions. Such direct linkages, however, are confined to a limited number of madrasas among the some 20,000-30,000 madrasas currently existing in Pakistan. Most madrasas do not produce militants, remain outside of politics and emphasise the provision of religious education to their students. The focus on militant madrasas obscures the fact that the majority of the madrasas are moderate schools which do not propagate militancy.

Socialisation to jihad?

Do madrasas play a role in creating support for radical ideas and violent actions? Do they foster intolerance? Pakistan has a problem with religious sectarianism, with tensions between Shias and Sunnis, but also between different Sunni groups. So called “*jihadi*” literature – texts that propagate violence - is not part of the madrasa curricula, although refuting other beliefs is part of the madrasa tradition. Many madrasa leaders recognise that promoting sectarian differences in madrasa education is a problem, and they actively condemn the use of violence. Another assumption is that madrasas represent closed environments which socialise students into adopting intolerant mindsets. However, madrasas are not alone in teaching intolerance. A survey of attitudes among Pakistani students conducted by Tariq Rahman finds that attitudes towards *jihad* and the use of violence among students and teachers in government schools differs only marginally from those of students and teachers in madrasas.⁵ The prevalence of such attitudes may reflect a more general trend in Pakistani society, which is not exclusive to madrasa education. Contrary to common conceptions, few Islamist militants have been educated in madrasas; most come from

secular schools and universities.⁶ The strong focus on madrasas as a breeding ground for militants and terrorists may in fact have diverted attention away from both the main drivers of radicalisation and the main arenas for recruitment to militancy and terrorism.

Outdated and irrelevant?

Madrasas are also frequently criticised for providing poor quality education and for using a curricula that is of little relevance in today’s world. The traditional madrasa curricula, the *Dars-e Nizami*, used by most of South Asia’s madrasas, still forms the core of the religious curricula in Pakistan. There are, however, great variations among the different madrasas in Pakistan in terms of access to resources, quality of teaching, and the subjects they offer to students. Some of the larger and better-known madrasas are well equipped in terms of human and financial resources, but most of Pakistan’s madrasas are small, modest institutions, with fewer than 100 students, and a minimal budget.⁷ This has implications both for the quality and the relevance of the education offered. Many of the smaller schools are too poorly equipped to offer their students a quality education. Generally, the madrasa leadership recognises the need for making their education relevant to society today. This, however, is partly a question of what one believes is relevant and partly a question of competence and resources.

A focus on madrasas as a breeding ground for terrorists may have diverted attention away from the main locus and drivers of radicalisation

To address the issues related to madrasa education in Pakistan, and to move forward with current madrasa reform initiatives, it is critical to start from an informed understanding of what madrasas are, how they are organised, what they teach and what role they play in Pakistani society.

6 United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), “Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001–2007)”, Kabul, UNAMA, 1 September, 2007; Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge*, 2008, p 68.

7 Candland, Christopher, “Pakistan’s recent experience in reforming Islamic Education”, in Jamal Malik (ed.), *Madrasas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?* London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p 107.

5 Tariq Rahman, “The Madrassa and the State of Pakistan: Religion, Poverty and the Potential for Violence in Pakistan”, *Himal South Asian*, February 2004.

Pakistan's madrasa sector

A Reflection of the religious landscape

Pakistan is a Muslim majority country (97%), divided roughly into 20% Shia and 80% Sunni. All main denominations and sub-groups have their own madrasas including the Shia, Sunni *Ahl e Sunnat* (Barelvi) and *Deobandis*, as well as the Saudi-inspired *Ahl al-Hadith*, and the Islamist *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Since the late 1950s, the madrasas have organised themselves in madrasa boards along sectarian lines. The boards are responsible for registration and accreditation of madrasas, as well as for curricula and examinations. In 2001, the five sectarian boards came together and formed a national union, the *Ittehad e Tanzeemat Madaris e Deeniya* (ITMD), or the Federation of Madrasa Boards. The purpose was to strengthen intra-sectarian collaboration and represent common madrasa interests vis-à-vis the government.

Social or political institutions?

The Taliban movement developed from a network of madrasas in Pakistan, and certain schools are known to have recruited directly for the Taliban. This has contributed to the portrayal of madrasas as institutions which pursue political agendas and are firmly linked to political parties and sectarian groups. However, madrasas are not primarily political institutions. Most madrasas are concerned with imparting and protecting Islamic belief and knowledge - playing important social and cultural roles in their communities.⁸ The majority of Pakistan's madrasas are community-based institutions. They respond to the demand for religious education in the communities where they exist, and on which they are dependent for financial support.

The Value of religious education

Most madrasas offer free education, as well as free board and lodging. Observers often see madrasa education as a choice of last resort, catering mainly to poor children who otherwise would not receive any education. Christine Fair, however, finds that

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the “poverty argument” holds little weight; while madrasas attract many students from low-income families, madrasa students are “not generally poorer than those students in public schools”.⁹ Fair also finds that both those from the wealthiest *and* the poorest families are slightly overrepresented in the madrasa.¹⁰ For some, madrasa education is the preferred choice.¹¹ Madrasa education is valued because it teaches not only religious subjects, but also values and codes of conduct that are appreciated and sought after. We also often see that one child is enrolled in a madrasa, while their siblings are enrolled in state-run or private schools.¹²

The Reform agenda

In 2001, President Musharraf initiated a new madrasa reform process to register and regulate Pakistan's religious schools. For almost ten years, the madrasas resisted reform, and the whole initiative was deemed a failure - both among government and madrasa representatives. Recent developments, however, offer some room for optimism.

On 7 October 2010, the ITMD and the Minister of Interior signed an accord formalising collaboration on a number of key reform measures, including the introduction of uniform curricula standards with contemporary subjects, compulsory registration with the madrasa boards and minimum standards for awarding certificates. The agreement signifies a new commitment by the government and the madrasas to collaborate on a number of issues where mutual contention had earlier stalled the reform process. Although this does not amount to a full legal enactment of a comprehensive madrasa reform, it is a promising step forward in madrasa-government relations.

Since Independence in 1947, the Government of Pakistan has wanted to mainstream the madrasa sector. Yet, no government has been successful

⁸ Kaja Borchgrevink, “Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education”, *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO, 2010.

⁹ Fair, C. Christine, “Militant Recruitment in Pakistan: A New Look at the Militancy–Madrasah Connection”, *Asia Policy* 4, 2007, pp 113–115.

¹⁰ Fair, *The Madrasa Challenge*, 2008, pp 32–33.

¹¹ Nelson, Matthew J., ‘Muslims, Markets, and the Meaning of “Good” Education in Pakistan’, *Asian Survey* 46(5), 2006, p 711.

¹² Andrabi et. al., *Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan*, 2006, p 447.

in reforming the madrasas. Rather, the Pakistani government and military have often relied on the support of the clergy to legitimise government policy and have even patronised militant religio-political groups to secure Pakistan's geostrategic interests in Kashmir and Afghanistan.¹³ The relationship between the government and the madrasas is therefore ambiguous and has been marked by distrust.

Since the 1980s, discussions of madrasa reform, commonly referred to as "mainstreaming", have regularly taken place (Bano 2007). The first reform project took shape in 2003 when the ambitious Madrasa Reform Project (Teaching of Formal Subjects in *Deeni Madaris*) was developed with the objective of introducing secular subjects and providing grants for teachers' salaries, teaching materials, and sports equipment in 8,000 madrasas over a five-year period (2003–2008). The 5.75bn Pakistani Rupees (PKR)¹⁴ project was funded by the Government of Pakistan's Public Sector Development Programme; however, it was widely believed that the funds originally came from the United States. Weary of government interference and particularly of US Government funding, the madrasas were reluctant to join the project. Only 461 madrasas joined and only 254mn PKR (approximately 3mn USD) was expended in five years, after which the project was closed down.¹⁵

The government and the madrasas generally agree on the need for reform; however, both the starting point and the objective of the reform process are qualitatively different. At the heart of these different motivations, objectives and approaches to madrasa reform, lies the value accorded to religious education. The madrasas want reform to enhance the quality of the religious education offered, the status of such education, and to make madrasa education more relevant to society today. The Government of Pakistan wants reform that introduces more contemporary subjects, regulates what is taught in the schools and makes madrasa education more relevant to society today, while also moderating potential radical influences. Foreign

governments, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, have mainly placed pressure on Pakistan to reform the madrasas as a way of curbing radicalisation, militancy and terrorism. Thus, the motivations, objectives and strategies for reform are varied depending on the actor.

The Pakistani government and military have often used the clergy and militant religio-political groups to secure Pakistan's geostrategic interests in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

The majority of Pakistan's madrasas are independent private institutions which the government has little control over. The government can exert greater control over madrasas through registration, oversight and ultimately, by closing down the madrasas. Until 2005, madrasas were registered on a voluntary basis, under the Social Organisations Act of 1860. In 2005, registration with the government was made obligatory, and madrasas were required to reveal their funding sources. The madrasas saw these measures as an attempt to assert stronger government control over the madrasas and as a threat to the independence of the institutions. Negotiations between the madrasas and the government resulted in an amendment to the Social Organisations Act in 2007. According to the amendment, madrasas have to sign a declaration stating that they shall not teach or publish any literature that promotes militancy or spreads sectarianism. They are also required to submit regular financial reports. In return, the government had to concede to two central ITMD demands: (1) the madrasas that were already registered did not have to comply with the new reporting requirements and (2) financial reports did not have to reveal the madrasas' funding sources. After this, registration of madrasas picked up, and currently some 19,600 madrasas have registered with the government.

Pakistan has a growing problem with Islamist militancy and sectarian groups, which is now affecting all strata of Pakistani society. The government sees a need to clamp down on madrasas that are known to have links to militant groups or to be involved in militancy —whether in Pakistan and/or abroad. The government has banned a number of militant groups, as well as various types of publications - hate material and *jihadi* literature - by

13 Winthrop and Graf, *Beyond Madrasas*, 2010, p 9.

14 At the time of this report was written, 5.75bn PKR was equivalent to 66.9mn USD.

15 Van den Bosch, Kees, Bilquis Tahira and Tahseenullah Khan April, "Islamic Education in Pakistan: Introducing government approved subjects", 2008, p viii.

these groups. The government should concentrate its efforts on enforcing this ban. Inasmuch as most madrasas are not militant or radical, but are schools concerned with protecting and maintaining an Islamic scholarly tradition and culture, the growing demand for religious education in Pakistan makes it particularly important to distinguish those schools with links to militant and radical groups from those which have none. Ignoring this distinction may contribute to worsening relations with moderate religious schools and to deepening further the polarisation between the government and religious milieux.

Third party engagement

Several initiatives to support change within Pakistan's madrasas are currently underway. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in Islamabad is working on capacity building and institutional development in the sector. The Washington-based organisation, International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), works with the ITMD to assist madrasa leaders in expanding the curricula and diversifying teaching methods through capacity building and exposure visits abroad. The aim of these visits is to encourage learning from the experiences of other Muslim education systems.¹⁶

The growing demand for religious education in Pakistan makes it important to distinguish between schools with militant and radical links from those which have none.

The Government of Norway has supported the Government of Pakistan in introducing non-religious subjects in madrasas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North-West Frontier Province - NWFP) through the Basic Education Improvement Project (BEIP). The total budget for this project was 72.6mn NOK (13.6mn USD) of which madrasa support was one component with a total budget of 1.3mn NOK (approx. 243,000 USD).¹⁷ This support

to madrasas has received negative press coverage in Norway. There have also been allegations of links between some madrasas receiving support and the *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP). These links have not been proven; however, it was difficult to establish whether some of the schools in the Swat Valley had been taken over by the TTP in 2007. The Norwegian support to madrasas has been appreciated by both the Government of Pakistan and the madrasa leadership, which believes this kind of support is needed to enable smaller schools to introduce a mixed curricula. Still, the negative attention to the programme within Norway entails high political costs for the Norwegian government, and it now appears unlikely that the program funding will be continued. This illustrates the risks – and the potential political costs – of supporting reform in a sector which is stigmatised, both in Pakistan and internationally.

In terms of a local Pakistani perspective, the sensitivity of the subject limits the role for third party engagement in madrasa reform. Foreign support can easily be cast as an attempt at influencing the reform process or as direct interference by outsiders – with potentially-harmful effects. As with the large-scale US support programme mentioned earlier, the madrasas were reluctant to participate in the government programme because it was viewed as having a foreign agenda. According to madrasa leaders and government officials involved in the Madrasa Reform Programme, an estimated 225 million USD in US financial support for education projects in 2003 contributed to the reform processes being seen as having a foreign-driven agenda.¹⁸

Yet, other experiences with madrasa support programmes, reveal that US organisations can engage constructively with the madrasa sector, as long as they approach the matter sensitively and with a low profile. The madrasas do not reject foreign support to madrasa reform altogether, but reform is seen as an internal or domestic matter. The terms of engagement must be defined in a dialogue between the Government of Pakistan and the madrasas.

16 International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, *ICRD Update*, October 29, 2010. http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=357&Itemid=135, Accessed 30 November 2010.

17 Van den Bosch, et.al, *Islamic Education in Pakistan*, 2008: 20; Are Knudsen and Arne Strand, *Review of the Norwegian support to Madaris in NWFP and Prospects for further Collaboration with Madaris*, Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute 2010, p 1.

18 Van den Bosch et al., *Islamic Education in Pakistan*, 2008, p 20.

Conclusion: challenges and opportunities for reform

This policy brief has argued that the madrasa debate is not premised on a fair, unbiased description of reality. Madrasas must be seen as part of an Islamic tradition of learning, not as primarily political groups, but rather as socio-cultural institutions that are revered by many in Pakistan today. The madrasa sector is diverse, and madrasas are shaped by the particular socio-political context in which they exist. The learning tradition is not stagnant, but rather subject to constant debate and negotiation within and among the madrasas, in the surrounding communities and vis-à-vis the government.

Challenges

Madrasa independence: Pakistan's madrasas are private institutions, independent of state support. The madrasa community has resisted state interference, and attempts to control religious matters - not least in education - are seen as outside the legitimate domain of the state. Government control over curricula is resisted because most madrasa leaders insist that the curricula be decided by religious experts. The madrasas also resist financial dependence on the government, which is seen as potentially enhancing its control.

Political will: Many in the madrasa sector have become disillusioned with the government. They view the reform process as being hampered by red tape and a lack of political will. The government's ambiguous relationship to militant groups is also condemned by madrasa leaders who argue that the government is clamping down on moderate schools, while madrasas known to have links to militant groups are protected and therefore operate freely.

Capacity: The main challenge to madrasa reform involves reaching out to the many smaller madrasas, which lack the resources and the ability to implement changes following reform. A lack of teaching resources, equipment and basic facilities complicates the ability of many madrasas to introduce more-standardised government curricula.

Opportunities

Platform: The need for reform is recognised by both the Government of Pakistan and the ITMD.

The recent accord signed between the ITMD and the Minister of Interior on 7 October 2010 sets the terms for a government-approved syllabus for the madrasas and for having religious education boards granted the same status as other education boards. Furthermore, the agreement specifies that "no madrasa shall teach or publish any literature that promotes militancy or spreads sectarianism". This is a promising step forward in madrasa-government relations and demonstrates a willingness to compromise and work together.¹⁹

Leadership open to change: The current ITMD leadership wants to make madrasa education more relevant to society today and is open to reform. While there are clearly areas of disagreement, there is an interest within the current madrasa leadership to cooperate with the government, as long as this cooperation does not compromise the madrasas' independent position. The sector is well organised and works as a unified group, which potentially could facilitate sector-wide reform.

Resistance to militancy: Religious leaders of all denominations criticising the work of *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan and Pakistani *jihadi* groups are being targeted by militant groups. This is forcing the madrasas to work more closely to oppose sectarianism and militancy and may be contributing to enhanced collaboration among the various sectarian madrasas boards and between madrasas and the government. The madrasa leadership and the ITMD have openly declared their commitment to stop radicalisation and militancy.

The Moderate majority: The majority of Pakistan's madrasas are moderate institutions, concerned with promoting Islamic beliefs and knowledge. This makes it important to distinguish between moderate and militant madrasas. Dealing with

Norwegian support to madrasas has been appreciated by the Pakistani government and the madrasa leadership, but the internal political costs for the Norwegian government raise serious doubts about the future of programme funding.

¹⁹ ICRD website http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=357&Itemid=135

the rise in militancy is a huge challenge, which involves a much broader strategy than narrowly focusing on madrasas and their reform. Moderate madrasas, if engaged in a process based on respect and dialogue, represent untapped potential. If encouraged, moderate madrasas could help reduce sectarian conflict and the incidence of violence, and find solutions to peaceful coexistence. A blanket condemnation of madrasas could end up serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy, contributing to the radicalisation of moderate madrasas.

External support: Experience shows that foreign support to madrasa reform has enabled schools to teach secular subjects. Such support - when open and collaborative in nature - is welcomed by the madrasas and the government. By furthering this support, foreign governments can contribute to creating more moderate madrasa environments, enhancing the quality of the education offered and constructively curbing radicalisation and militancy.

Further reading

Andrabi, Tahir, Jishnu Das, Asim Ijaz Khwaja and Tristan Zajonc, 2006. *Religious Enrollment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data*. *Comparative Education Review* 50 (3): 446-77

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Winthrop, Rebecca and Corinne Graff. 2010. *Beyond Madrasas. Assessing the Links between Education and Militancy in Pakistan*. Center for Universal Education at Brookings.