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U.S. Aid to Pakistan: Countering Extremism Through Education Reform

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A strong and effective education system in Pakistan will help to ensure that the country steers toward a path of stability, moderation, and prosperity in the years to come, and should therefore be a top priority for Washington in its relations with Islamabad. Lack of adequate education opportunities in Pakistan has contributed to the development of extremist ideologies that have fueled terrorism and sectarian tensions as well as stifled economic growth. Fostering development and reform of the public education system will not only contribute to Pakistani economic prosperity and social tolerance, it will help improve the image of the United States by demonstrating American interest in the human development of average Pakistani citizens.

Today I will focus my remarks on the strengths and weaknesses of current U.S. assistance programs to Pakistan's education sector, as well as the role of the madrassa (Islamic religious school) in contributing to militancy in Pakistan over the last decade.

Pakistan's Failing Education Sector

Pakistan's public education system has suffered from neglect and politicization over the last 30 years. The overall adult literacy rate for the population above the age of 15 is about 43.5 percent, while the rates for Sri Lanka and India are 92 percent and 61 percent, respectively. Female literacy rates in Pakistan are abysmal, standing at about 32 percent.¹ Barely 10 percent of children complete 12 years of schooling. With a population growth rate well over 2 percent, Pakistan is set to add another 100 million people to its current

Talking Points

- Encouraging the development of a strong and effective education system in Pakistan that will help steer the country toward a path of stability, moderation, and prosperity should be a top priority for Washington in its relations with Islamabad.
- The U.S. should program more of its aid to Pakistan for specific projects rather than continue to provide the bulk of our economic assistance in the form of a direct cash transfer to the Pakistani government.
- Congress should require that at least two-thirds of our total economic support be in the form of project assistance related to education, health, and economic and democratic development.
- Washington will need to encourage Pakistan to crack down on those madrassas that continue to promote extremist violence and sectarian policies that lead to terrorism and the destabilization of Pakistani society.

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population of 160 million over the next 25 years. About half of this population will be under the age of 18. These demographic trends demand that Pakistan implement significant reforms to its education system and raise literacy rates and skill levels so that these young people can play a productive role in the future economy.

The World Bank and a number of donor agencies spent billions of dollars on a “Social Action Program” for Pakistan during the late 1980s through the 1990s. After a decade, the program failed to achieve basic objectives such as increasing school enrollment rates at the primary level and bringing education to remote parts of the country. The program failed because it did not address problems such as corruption and inefficiency within the Pakistani education bureaucracy.² The World Bank’s experience should serve as a cautionary tale to the U.S. and other international donors by demonstrating that merely throwing resources at the education sector is unlikely to bring positive results, and that convincing the Pakistani government to reform its own institutions is a necessary part of the process.

U.S. Education Assistance to Pakistan: Targeting Critical Areas

U.S. assistance to primary education and literacy in Pakistan has more than doubled—from \$28 million in fiscal year 2004 to \$66 million in fiscal year 2005. The impact of the findings of the 9/11 Commission report issued in July 2004 on the importance of educational opportunity in the Middle East and South Asia to uprooting terrorist ideology, and increased congressional oversight of U.S. aid programs to Pakistan contributed to the increase in education spending. The Fiscal Year 2008 State Department Congressional Budget Request includes \$52 million for general education programs and an additional \$50 million for earthquake reconstruction of schools and health facilities. The 2007 Emergency Supplemental Budget Request calls for another \$110 million to develop Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), including the education sector. Through a program started in

2003, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) already is constructing and furnishing 65 primary, middle, and high schools in five agencies of the FATA. The Japanese Government is partnering with the U.S. government on this project and constructing an additional 65 schools in the Tribal Areas.

USAID’s education program in Pakistan provides training, technical assistance, and infrastructure for government officials, citizens, and the private sector to deliver high-quality education throughout the country. The program is currently focusing on selected impoverished districts in the Sindh and Baluchistan provinces in addition to the FATA (see above). The Basic Education Program benefits over 367,000 Pakistani children and USAID has so far trained over 16,000 Pakistani teachers and administrators. USAID also provides funding for needs-based scholarships for higher education and grants for Fulbright scholarships for post-graduate degrees in the U.S.

USAID education programs also focus on empowering the local community by fostering partnerships between parents and teachers that improve accountability for the children’s education. I had the opportunity to visit a USAID-funded girls’ school on the outskirts of Islamabad in late 2005. Through a grant of only \$1,500, USAID inspired the people of this community to establish a Parent–Teacher Association and to build a library for the school that serves over 500 students.

While this kind of outreach at the grassroots level is necessary, Washington also needs to encourage the Pakistani government to follow through on its own reforms. The government of President Pervez Musharraf launched its Education Sector Reforms (ESR) in January 2002, but has been unwilling to commit substantial resources to reforming the education sector. For example, the government has yet to follow through on its commitment to raise the education budget to four percent of GDP in line with United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization recommendations.

1. Shahid Javed Burki, “Educating the Pakistani Masses: The World Needs to Help,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 19, 2005.
2. *Ibid.*

One of the major problems with Pakistan's public education sector has been the endemic corruption within the system, which has led to the phenomenon of "ghost schools," i.e. teachers not showing up to teach classes but only to collect their paychecks. The U.S. can help by supporting teacher training programs and encouraging greater accountability through community involvement, but the Pakistani government will have to do its part to limit corruption and inefficiency within the system.

Role of the Madrassa in Islamic Militancy in Pakistan

The role of the madrassa in Pakistan and its contribution to Islamic militancy has been the subject of intense debate in U.S. academic and policy circles. Observers have been unable to agree on the actual numbers of madrassas and madrassa students in Pakistan, and some studies reveal that the international media has exaggerated these figures during the last few years.³ A World Bank study from 2005, for example, says Pakistani madrassas account for less than 1 percent of total academic enrollment in the country.⁴ In April 2002, Dr. Mahmood Ahmed Ghazi, the former Pakistani Minister of Religious Affairs, put the number of madrassas at about 10,000, with 1.7 million students.

While most madrassas in Pakistan are not churning out terrorist foot soldiers, there are a handful of religious seminaries that promote anti-West, pan-Islamic, and violent ideologies. Many of the older madrassas have well-established reputations for producing serious Islamic thinkers, while others provide welfare services to the poor through free religious education, lodging, and food. A madrassa student learns how to read, memorize, and recite the Quran, and those with advanced theological training become Ulema (religious scholars). Each of the different schools of Islamic thought in Pakistan, including the Sunni Deobandis, Bareilvis, Ahle-

Hadith (Salafi), and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) as well as the Shiia, runs its own seminaries.

From a counterterrorism perspective, U.S. policymakers should focus their attention on the handful of madrassas in Pakistan that have well-established links to terrorism. These madrassas are likely well known to the Pakistani authorities and increasingly to U.S. intelligence and policy officials, and deserve special focus in our counterterrorism policies. The Darul Uloom Haqqania located near Peshawar in the Northwest Frontier Province, for example, served as training ground for Taliban leaders and a recruiting center for Pakistani militants fighting in Kashmir.⁵

Other madrassas connected to violent militancy are located in the southern port city of Karachi as well as in the province of Punjab and have also contributed to sectarian tensions in the country. The banned Kashmiri militant organization Jaish-e-Muhammad (JEM, or "Army of the Prophet") and Sunni sectarian organization Sepah-e-Sahaba (SSP, or "Army of Companions of the Prophet") are headquartered in southern Punjab. These organizations have close institutional links with the Taliban and have been involved in terrorism against Indian and Western targets, including the murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in 2002; the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight that landed in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in December 1999; and the kidnapping and murder of five Western hostages, including American citizen Donald Hutchings, in 1995.

These madrassas and associated militant groups have an interdependent relationship in which the militant groups provide armed backing for the madrassas, and the madrassas in turn provide motivated recruits for the militant organizations.⁶ The recently jailed leader of a fertilizer bomb plot in England—British citizen of Pakistani-origin Omar Khyam—was reportedly inspired and trained by Pakistanis involved in militancy in Kashmir. In

3. In Arabic the plural form of madrassa is *madaris*; however, this testimony will use a simplified English version of the word, *madrassas*.
4. Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, Asim Ijaz Khwaja, and Tristan Zajonc, "Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data," *Working Paper Number: RWP05-024*, March 3, 2005.
5. Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 77.
6. Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 2003), pp. 230–231.

addition, one of the suicide bombers who carried out the July 7, 2005, bombings of the London transport system reportedly spent time at a Pakistani madrassa. Convincing the Pakistan government to completely close down these dangerous militant groups and to sever their links with the madrassas should be the centerpiece of our counterterrorism policies in Pakistan.

Madrassas in Pakistan are financed either by voluntary charity, foreign entities, or governments. The Saudi Arabian organization, Harmein Islamic Foundation, reportedly has provided substantial financial assistance to the Ahle-Hadith madrassas, which have provided fighters to the banned Kashmiri militant group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LET). The Ahle-Hadith madrassas emphasize the Quran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammed) and oppose folk Islam and practices such as celebrating the anniversaries of saints or the distribution of food on religious occasions.⁷ The large madrassa complex supporting LET is located in the town of Muridke outside of Lahore and is well known for preaching hard-line views on Islam. Since the Pakistan government officially banned LET in 2002, the group has changed its name to Jamaat-ul-Dawa and played a significant role in assisting victims following the October 8, 2005, South Asia earthquake, demonstrating its ability to operate freely within Pakistani society.

President Musharraf's government has had little success with its attempts to assert greater government authority over the madrassas. In August of 2001, the Musharraf government promulgated the "Pakistan Madrassa Education Board Ordinance 2001" to establish three model madrassa institutions in Karachi, Sukkur, and Islamabad that would include English, math, computer science, economics, political science, law, and Pakistan studies in their curricula. Through the "Voluntary Registration and Regulation Ordinance 2002," the government promised funding to madrassas that formally registered with the government. In a more controversial

step, the Pakistani government demanded that madrassas expel all foreign students by December 31, 2005. Islamist groups vehemently resisted the government's efforts, however, and authorities backed down and made public statements indicating that they would not use force or shut down non-compliant madrassas to enforce the directives.⁸

The Minister for Religious Affairs, Ejaz ul-Haq, son of the late former President Zia ul-Haq, is responsible for implementing madrassa reform. It was Zia ul-Haq's Islamization policies in the 1980s that resulted in an expansion of the madrassa network to support the Afghanistan jihad against the Soviets and that incorporated militant interpretations of Islam into the public school curriculum. Minister Ejaz ul-Haq has so far been reluctant to confront the prominent religious parties that have ties to foreign-funded madrassas and are resisting government reform.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

- **The U.S. should begin to program more funds for specific education and development projects** rather than continue to provide the bulk of our economic assistance in the form of a direct cash transfer to the Pakistani government. Since 2004, the U.S. has provided \$200 million annually to Pakistan in the form of direct budgetary support. We have established a consulting mechanism with the Pakistan government to try to ensure a portion of this money is spent on the health and education sectors. However, we cannot fully ensure that this U.S. taxpayer money is contributing to economic and human development in Pakistan. The U.S. also reaps very little public diplomacy benefits with the broader Pakistani population from this large amount of aid, which most Pakistanis view as mainly benefiting the Musharraf regime. Congress should require that at least two-thirds of our total economic support fund assistance be in the form of USAID project

7. Saleem H. Ali, *Islam and Education: Conflict and Conformity in Pakistan and Beyond* (Burlington: University of Vermont), study completed under a grant from the United States Institute of Peace, and currently under review for publication as a book, pp. 59–60.

8. Christopher M. Blanchard, "Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background," Congressional Research Service, January 10, 2006, at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS21654.pdf (June 5, 2007).

assistance related to education, health, and economic and democratic development.

- **While continuing to help train teachers and increase the quality of education in Pakistani schools, Washington also will need to encourage Islamabad to implement systemic reform of public education** in order to make a significant impact on education outcomes, such as increased literacy and enrollment rates and decreased dropout rates. U.S. policymakers and aid officials need to take to heart the results of the failed World Bank efforts from the 1980s through the 1990s to avoid repeating similar mistakes. Pushing for systemic reform may require the U.S. to increasingly use benchmarks with the Pakistani government in order to encourage greater efficiency and transparency within the education bureaucracy.
- **Washington will need to encourage Pakistan to crack down on those madrassas that continue to promote extremist violence and sectarian policies that lead to terrorism and the destabilization of Pakistani society.** The Pakistani authorities should clean house in any madrassas found to have links to international terrorist incidents and make clear that those individuals who provide protection or safe haven to al-Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups will be held to account. The Pakistan government's refusal to detain or punish key terrorist leaders because of their links to the Kashmir militancy signals a degree of tolerance of terrorist activity and provides a permissible environment for groups that collaborate with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The Pakistani authorities likely know which madrassas

are supplying militants for terrorist training. We should use skillful diplomacy to persuade the Pakistani government to reform or close down these schools.

- **The U.S. should refrain from getting involved in Pakistan's broader madrassa reform efforts and accept that many of the traditional madrassas serve a useful purpose** in educating Islamic intellectuals and providing shelter and food for impoverished youth. While a few Pakistani madrassas represent an international terrorist threat and deserve American scrutiny and condemnation, most madrassas should be left alone.

To conclude, U.S. efforts to encourage education reform and development in Pakistan should be consistent, sustained, and multi-pronged. Ensuring transparency and efficiency in the education bureaucracy is equally important to encouraging local community involvement and accountability in the day-to-day functioning of individual schools, especially in poor, rural areas. The development of a strong and effective education system in Pakistan is central to promoting moderation, tolerance, and economic development. Convincing the Pakistani government to take firm action against the handful of madrassas supporting violent extremism also is necessary, not only for the future stability of Pakistan, but also to prevent future international terrorism.

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