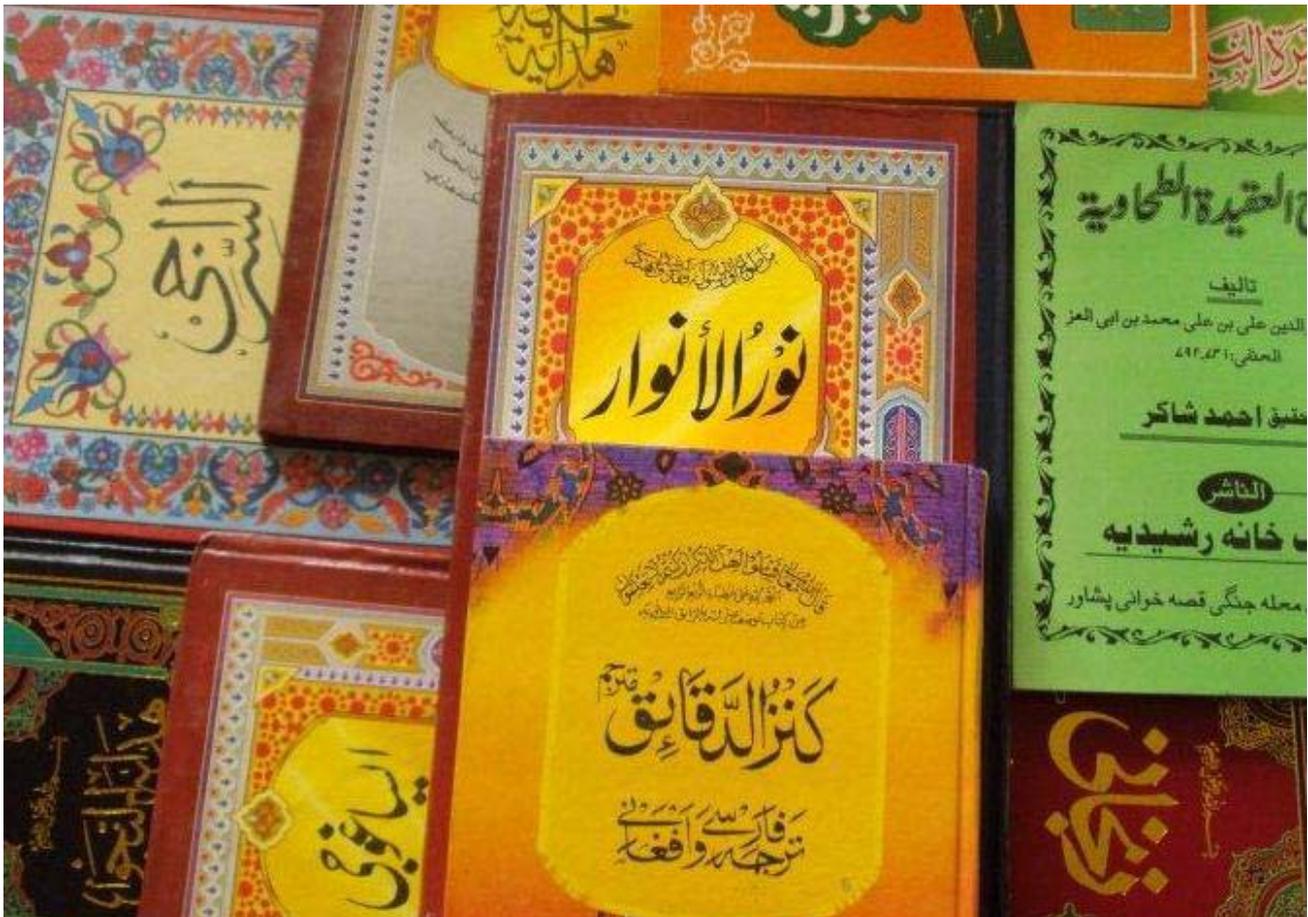


Religious Institution Building in Afghanistan: An Exploration

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway
Visiting Address: Hausmanns gate 7

Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSCW)
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway
Visiting Address: Hausmanns gate 7

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Mohammed Osman Tariq

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Mohammed Osman Tariq



Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
Hausmanns gate 7
PO Box 9229 Oslo
NO-0134 Oslo, Norway
Tel. +47 22 54 77 00
www.prio.no

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About the author: Mohammad Osman Tariq is a consultant with diverse experience ranging from being a fighter (Mujahid) in 1980s against the USSR invasion to working with various national and international development organizations in Afghanistan. Tariq holds a Master in Governance and Development from University of Sussex. His earlier research has been published online. Tariq can be reached at elyastariq@yahoo.com

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Overview of the report

The findings in this report are mainly based on interviews conducted with madrasa and government representatives in 2010.

Section one takes a closer look at the current status of madrasas registration, the government motivations and strategy for introducing the measure and how it is received by the madrasas.

Section two outlines and discusses the key elements in a madrasa reform and identifies the main opportunities and challenges to reform.

Section three outlines a number of alternative models for institution building in the Afghan madrasa sector.

Section four brings out the conclusions and proposed next steps.

Summary

In 2006 the Government of Afghanistan initiated a process to modernize the curriculum and enhance the government's oversight over the religious education institutions. So far the government's achievements have been limited.

This report builds on the project 'Trans-border Religious Networks: The Case of Religious Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan', which set out to further explore the diversity of the madrasa sector in Afghanistan and to identify potential alternatives for religious institution building in Afghanistan. This report reflects the outcome of this exploration.

I. The institutional landscape

There exists not one religious education system in Afghanistan. Rather, the sector is characterized by a variety of educational institutions offering religious training at different levels. There is a clear divide between public and private schools, but also substantial differences between various private and public schools in terms of size, ideology and resources. The majority of the madrasas, however, are private schools that are not registered with the government or any private body. There exist no recognized coordinating body for private madrasas in Afghanistan and there is no structured mechanism by which the government can interact with these schools. The government has limited insight and influence over the running of the majority of the schools, and there are no formal channels to use for constructive dialogue between the government and the schools.

Registration

The entry of madrasas in a central government registry is part of the new policy introduced in 2006, making it obligatory for all madrasas to register with the Ministry of Education (MoE) before the end of 1389 (March 2011). As of October 2010, some 700 official madrasas are registered with the MoE. In addition, 15 private madrasas have registered with the government. There exist several competing understandings of what makes a madrasas official, something that suggests that the new government policy either is unclear, or poorly communicated to the madrasa sector.

Recognition of religious degrees

Recognition of degrees and certificates from private madrasas and religious educational institutions abroad is an issue of considerable importance to Afghan religious students. Currently, madrasa graduates who want to obtain a higher degree in Afghanistan are only qualified to apply for further studies in the Sharia and education departments of Afghan universities. To have their qualifications recognized by the Afghan government, graduates from private madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan need to take a government exam. One positive development is the new procedures passed by the MoE and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in November 2010 that allow 14th grade madrasa graduates into the 3rd year of universities.

Curriculum reform

There is recognition of, and openness to, the need for curriculum reform, yet there are no clear agreements over how to reform the curriculum. To develop one basic madrasa curriculum that will be acceptable to the different Islamic schools of thought can only be done through a consultative process. It was stressed that any reform needs to be based on thorough and broad consultations with clergy, madrasa principals and teachers. Failing to stimulate that dialogue may undermine the reform. One of the greatest challenges to reform will likely be to amend the curriculum in a way that is acceptable to the different religious schools, including the private ones that have been unaffected by previous curriculum reforms.

2. Opportunities and challenges to madrasa reform

This report reflects a broad specter of opinions about reform in the madrasa sector. Some of the **main obstacles to reform**, as identified by those interviewed for this study, include:

- Too strong focus on registration and regulation of madrasas have made madrasas skeptical to reform;
- Madrasas have limited trust in the government's intention for the reform;
- The madrasas believe the government shows little appreciation of religious education and religious leaders;
- The madrasas believe the MoE lacks interest and commitment to reform;
- There are limited financial resources within the madrasa sector to facilitate and carry out a reform;
- The madrasas are concerned about corruption in the government, and that this will negatively affect madrasas that register with the government;
- Religious actors are afraid of losing authority and influence;
- Madrasas are reluctant to engage in reform because they conceive collaboration with the government as a potential threat to their security, while they receive little protection from the government.

The main obstacles for madrasa reform seem to stem from the lack of cooperation between the state and the madrasa sector. Limited interaction and poor communication have made the madrasas generally distrustful of the government, and of its intentions to reform. A process of basic trust-building may be required to establish collaboration.

The main opportunities for reform that have been identified can be summarized as follows:

- Afghan ulema, madrasa principals and teachers seems to be recognizing the need for reform - also of the curriculum - at this point in time;
- The madrasas are not satisfied with the situation as it currently is, and want change;
- Madrasas are popular with the people and new madrasas are established regularly, indicating demand for religious education;
- The government recognizes the importance of religious institutions and scholars and of finding ways of improving collaboration with the private madrasas;
- Madrasa students and teachers studying and working abroad are returning to Afghanistan. Bringing with them experience and knowledge from their time in exile they have diversified the madrasa sector in Afghanistan and made it more open to change;
- There are experiences from other countries that can be drawn upon (such as the Ittehad e Tanzeemat Madaris e Deeniya (ITMD), or 'the federation of madrasa boards', the Al-Azhar university in Egypt and Jamia Qum in Iran);
- Modern technologies exist, which can easily be introduced, and which will ease the transition.

3. Institution building

The lack of organizing or coordinating bodies in the Afghan madrasa sector suggests that there are both real needs and great potentials for institution building. The need for a governing body for the thousands of private madrasas and institutions currently existing across the country is recognized by most of the respondents. The potential roles of a madrasa board as identified by the informants to this study include: (i) coordination, communication and cooperation between madrasas, (ii) advocate for madrasas' interests; and (iii) a platform for cooperation between madrasas and the state.

A number of different models emerged through this consultation process: (i) A fully governmental body overseeing the madrasas; (ii) a semi-governmental body with madrasa representation; and (iii) a self-governing madrasa body.

It was emphasized by the majority of the respondents that a decision should be based on nationwide public consultations with religious scholars, ulema, madrasa principals (muhtamims) and teachers. Establishing a madrasa board would present a new arena for madrasa-state interaction, and can be seen as an opportunity for the state to redefine their relationship with the religious sector. It would send a positive message to the madrasas if the government proves its willingness to collaborate with the ulema on new terms.

The majority of the people interviewed for this report are positive about drawing on the experience from neighboring countries, including Pakistan, and to find ways by which these can be modified for the Afghan context. Afghanistan can also draw on the experience from other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey.

The madrasa governing body ought to be established with the full involvement of all madrasas from around the country. A bottom-up approach should be applied and the process should be initiated and led either by a respected and unifying non-state actor or on the initiative of the private madrasas themselves. For such a body to be accepted and useful for the madrasas it is of paramount importance that it is owned by the madrasas. Both state and non-state actors and stakeholders can assist in the madrasas reform process by:

- Giving financial support;
- Providing logistical support;
- Arranging exposure and exchange visits for ulema and muhtamims of madrasas to other countries; and
- Bringing popular ulema from other countries to Afghanistan.

For the reform to succeed it needs to be based on an honest and transparent process. Sufficient funding needs to be made available to follow up with concrete actions.

Introduction

Background to the study

Building on the project ‘Trans-border Religious Networks: The Case of Religious Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan’,¹ this project set out to further explore the madrasa sector in Afghanistan and identify potential alternatives for religious institutions building in Afghanistan. This report reflects the outcome of this exploration.

The new government strategy

Both the content and the quality of madrasa education have been the subject of debate and criticism in Afghan and foreign media. On one side are issues related to the quality and relevance of the religious education offered; on the other, issues related to the government’s lack of control over the sector, and particularly the fear that education in Pakistani madrasas is radicalizing Afghan youth. In 2006 the Government of Afghanistan initiated a process to modernize the curriculum and enhance the government’s oversight over the religious education institutions.

Ministry of Education National Education Strategic Plan 1385–1389:

Programme 5: Islamic Education

Overall Goal: To develop a modern broad-based Islamic education system for all Afghans.

Principal targets:

- Develop a modern curriculum for Islamic education.
- Provide access to modern Islamic education for 90,000 students across the country by 1389.
- Establish a national cadre of qualified Islamic educators.
- Establish and equip centers of excellence in Islamic education with access for girls and boys in each province.

Source: Excerpts from the ‘Ministry of Education National Education Strategic Plan 1385–1389’, Kabul: Ministry of Education, 2006:72-77.

To meet these challenges, the MoE has devised an ambitious strategy to regulate and reform Afghan madrasas and address the question of their transnational links.² The government aims to improve the quality of religious education through curriculum reform, teacher training and the provision of teaching materials; to increase access to religious education in Afghanistan by building and equipping new schools across the country; and to enhance government oversight and control by registration of all madrasas with the government and certification of private madrasas.

Findings from the research project ‘Trans-border Religious Networks: The Case of Religious Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan’³ indicate that knowledge about this initiative is scant

1 The project ‘Trans-border Religious Networks: The Case of Religious Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan’ studied the role of (Sunni Islamic) religious education in Afghanistan, the Afghan-based madrasas (religious schools) as part of a transnational system of education and the links between madrasas and political radicalization and militancy. It involved 16 case studies of madrasas in Afghanistan (13) and Pakistan (3) and interviews with madrasa graduates having all or part of their education from Pakistan. The project findings are presented in Borchgrevink, Kaja, 2010. ‘Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education’, PRIO Paper. Oslo: PRIO and Borchgrevink, Kaja & Kristian Berg Harpviken, 2010. ‘Teaching Religion, Taming Rebellion’, PRIO Policy Brief 7, Oslo: PRIO.

2 The main documents are ‘Ministry of Education National Education Strategic Plan 1385–1389’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a) and the ‘Strategy for the Development of Afghanistan’s Centres of Excellence: Model Schools for a Holistic Education’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006b).

3 Borchgrevink, 2010.

outside of the few government madrasas that have been established after 2001, and that where it is known, it is commonly viewed with scepticism. Experience from the Pakistani madrasa reform initiated by President Musharraf in 2001 to mainstream, regularize and register all Pakistani madrasas shows that consultation has been key for the reform to be accepted among the religious actors, and that consultations should precede any major reform initiative.

There are a number of questions that would need to be addressed for a religious education reform to be successful in Afghanistan. One central question is how to win trust among the religious scholars, teachers, students and parents, where there is great potential for learning from the successes and failures of the madrasa-reform in Pakistan, and from similar reforms in India and Bangladesh.

Through consultations with relevant stakeholders from the madrasa sector and the government the author has identified opportunities and challenges to religious education reform, and has solicited views on how to undertake 'madrasa reform' in Afghanistan.

A note on methodology

Building on the findings from the qualitative study constituting the project's first phase, the proposed second phase has had a strong focus on consultation. Mohammad Osman Tariq has conducted a number of consultations with relevant people in Afghanistan to solicit opinions on madrasa reform and the needs and potential for institution building in the religious education sector. This has been supplemented by interviews with key people in the madrasa sector and relevant people in the government.

46 in-depth interviews and two focus group interviews were held. In total 64 people were interviewed including religious leaders, madrasas leaders, teachers and students as well as representatives of relevant government institutions, including officials from the Ministry of Irshad, Hajj and Awqaaf and the Ministry of Education. Interviews were made with informants from the provinces of Balkh, Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, Khost, Logar, Panshir and Wardak. Care was taken to include informants from both Sunni and Shiite sects, as well as from Deobandi and Salafi sub-sects. Out of the 64 informants only two were women, one Sunni and one Shiite. Almost three out of ten informants were associated with the state and seven out of ten were associated with private madrasas or worked as imams in village mosques.

1. Mapping the institutional landscape of madrasas in Afghanistan today

Knowledge about the religious education sector in Afghanistan is surprisingly limited. Findings from the project ‘Trans-border Religious Networks: The Case of Religious Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan’ found that:

- There exists not one religious education – or madrasa – system in Afghanistan. Rather, the sector is characterized by a variety of educational institutions offering religious education at different levels, within different religious orientations, with distinct pedagogies, and variegated (but mostly limited) relationships to politics.
- There is a clear divide between public and private madrasa, and also substantial differences between the various private and public madrasas in terms of size, ideology and resources.
- The majority of the madrasas, however, are private and not registered with the government or any private body.⁴
- There exist no recognized coordinating body for private madrasas in Afghanistan (similar to the madrasa board or *wafaaq ul madaris* in Pakistan) and there is no structured mechanism for government–madrasa interaction.
- The government has limited oversight and influence over the running of the majority of the schools, and there are no formal channels to use for constructive dialogue between the government and the schools.

1.1. Madrasa registration

Registration of madrasas in a central government registry is part of the new policy introduced in 2006 making it obligatory for all madrasas to register with the Ministry of Education (MoE) before the end of 1389 (March 2011).⁵ This section will take a closer look at the current status of madrasas registration, the government’s motivations and strategy for introducing the measure, as well as how it is received within the madrasa sector.

Lack of government oversight of the mainly private madrasa sector is an area of concern for the government. The government has had little influence and oversight of the madrasa sector, particularly the private schools. While some schools have well-established study courses and curricula, and highly educated teachers, others are less well organized. There have been no rules for who can establish a private madrasa, no criteria for curricula, and no means for ensuring the qualifications of the teachers.⁶

As of October 2010, some 700 official madrasas were registered with the MoE. In addition 15 private madrasas have registered with the government. The majority of Afghan madrasas have not registered with the government, and the government target has not been met. This suggests that

⁴ No figures exist for the number of private religious schools in Afghanistan, but it is likely that if one include the small village based religious schools in the count that several hundred if not thousands of madrasas exist across the country.

⁵ The main documents are ‘Ministry of Education National Education Strategic Plan 1385–1389’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006a) and the ‘Strategy for the Development of Afghanistan’s Centres of Excellence: Model Schools for a Holistic Education’ (Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, 2006b); and the Religious Sector Strategy of ANDS 1387-1392 (ANDS, 2007: 27-41).

⁶ See Borchgrevink 2010 for more details on this.

the madrasas may be reluctant to register and/or that the new registration requirement have been poorly communicated to the madrasas.

There has been limited coordination between the different government ministries and departments dealing with registration of religious institutions including the madrasas. Some of the private madrasas have been registered with the Ministry of Irshad, Haj & Awqaf (MIHA). A few madrasas have been registered with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). While all of these are official institutions, registration within the different ministries give the madrasas very different status, rights and obligations.⁷

According to officials from the MoE's Islamic education section, madrasas become official when they register with the MoE, introduce the official curriculum (the existing one), have qualified teachers, introduce the official grade system and class based tuition. It is the responsibility of the MoE to provide text books for secular contemporary subjects such as geography, English, Pashto, and Dari. The other criterion for registering a madrasa with the MoE is to have at least 25 students per class and appropriate facilities and teaching material. After a private madrasa register with the MoE, the list of enrolled students needs to be submitted to the MoE.

Government madrasas are provided with teaching facilities and student accommodation, the textbooks required by the curriculum, salary for teachers, management support and other operational costs by the MoE. The private madrasas registered with the MoE do not receive such support.

Uncertainty about what makes a madrasa 'official'

Most of the madrasa informants consulted for this report identify the MoE as the responsible institution for madrasa registration. However, for many of the madrasa representatives interviewed it seems to be unclear what makes a madrasa 'official' and the requirements mentioned by informants for a madrasa to be official are many and varied. Many seem to consider a madrasa being official when it is registered with the Islamic Section of the MoE. Informants also mention a number of administrative and management requirements which make a madrasa official. These include: government curriculum, qualified teachers, government administrated examinations, organized administrative system for student registration and other administrative work, organization of students in grades as well as fixed timetables and teaching periods. Other informants believe that an official madrasa is a madrasa that uses the government curriculum and have teachers, principal, building and other necessities provided by the government. Others, again, believe that providing accommodation and living costs for students by the government makes a madrasa official. The provision of books and other teaching materials by the MoE are also mentioned as an indication of a madrasa being official. The same is the case when a madrasa offers regular (non-Islamic) subjects such as mathematics, English, computer-science, geography, and so on, as a complement to the traditional madrasa curriculum. That there exist several competing understandings of what makes a madrasa official suggests that the government policy and information on the issue either is unclear or poorly communicated in the madrasa sector.

Receive little in return from registration

A general sentiment among the madrasa informants interviewed for this report is that they have received little in return for registering with the government. Some madrasas report that the salaries of the teachers have been covered by the government. Some argue, however, that since they have registered with the government – and now should qualify as an 'official madrasa' – they

⁷ Registration with the MIHA and MoJ provides the madrasas with an official certificate of registration with the MIHA but does not qualify for government support in terms of teachers' salaries, text books etc. MIHA also does not have the authority to accredit for accreditation of students' graduation documents.

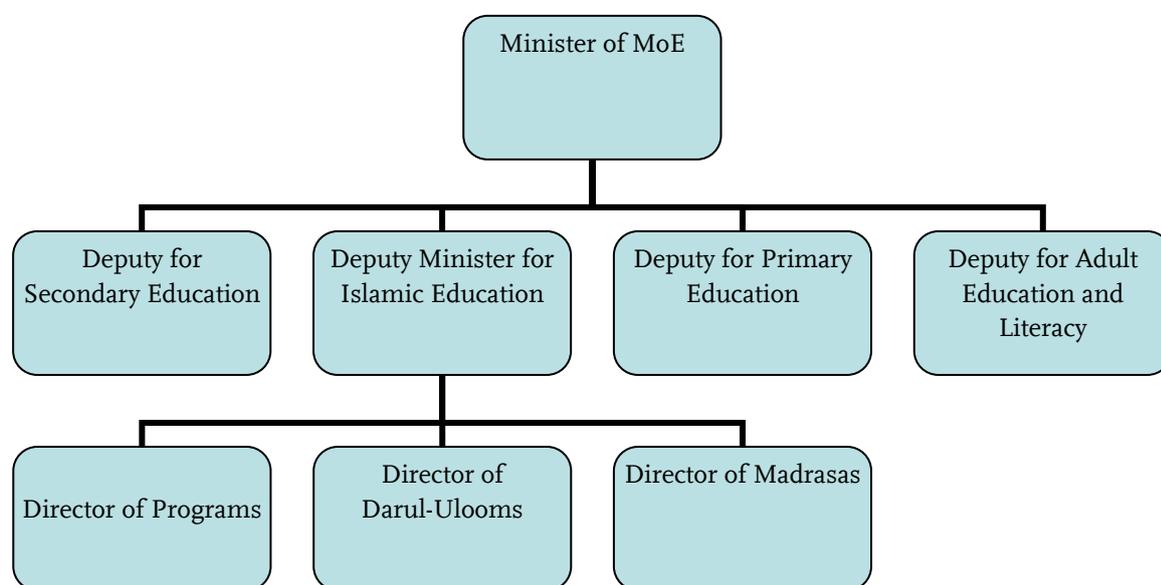
expect to have more financial support from the government to cover accommodation and living costs for the madrasa students, and for purchasing land for expansion.

Pressured to register

Threats and intimidation emerge as some of the main reasons for why some madrasas have registered with the MoE's Islamic Education Section. According to the principals of some madrasas that are registered with the MIHA, registration with MIHA has been one way to protect themselves from daily and weekly investigations by the National Department of Security (NDS), which search for teachers and students with links to militant groups. Because there are no requirements under the MIHA to submit profiles of the students and teachers to the government, registration with MIHA is not any longer sufficient to keep the NDS at bay. Under the new MoE registration scheme, madrasas are required to provide profiles of students (including their father's name, their permanent address, and grades in the madrasa) and teachers (resumes and graduation documents recognized by the MoE), which are entered in a central registry in the MoE. After registration with the MoE, the madrasas will be able to have a sign indicating that the school is registered with the MoE. The NDS claims the need to obtain information – also on security related issues - through the MoE and not from the madrasas directly. The NDS can still arrest suspected teacher and students, but from their homes, not from the madrasas. Some of the madrasa representatives interviewed for this study are of the opinion that the government is using the NDS to pressure madrasas to register with the MoE.

Need for enhancing the capacity of the MoE

The government's new policy has doubled the number of government madrasas since 2006, and has necessitated an enhancement of the capacity of the Islamic Education Section in the MoE. As a result, the MoE has changed its structure and upgraded the earlier department for madrasa to an Islamic Education Section. This section has the following structure:



The Department of Madrasas and the Department of Dar ul Ulooms are responsible for the official educational institutions, but also for the registration of private madrasas with the MoE. The Department of Programs is responsible for implementation of plans and programs that have been approved by the Islamic Education Section.

So far the MoE has been unable to provide for many of the registered madrasas. The MoE activities are largely limited to collecting lists of madrasa students and teachers and to sign the graduation documents of the official madrasa graduates. This has made madrasa representatives

concerned about the ministry's capacity to follow up on the strategy and to question how the ministry will be able to deliver texts books, services and support to the many private madrasa that they demand register – thousands in numbers.

There is limited interaction between unregistered private madrasa and the Islamic Education Section. Assessment of private madrasas is first done when a private madrasa applies for official registration. Unregistered madrasas only deal with the MoE in relation to the examination process for their graduated students and this interaction is for the most limited to the individual madrasa students who are sitting government exams to have their qualifications recognized by the government.

1.2. Recognition of madrasa degrees and certificates

Recognition of degrees and certificates from private madrasas and religious educational institutions abroad is an issue of considerable importance to Afghan madrasas and religious students. Yet, the recognition of certificates from private madrasas in Afghanistan has a number of challenges attached to it:

- 1) the madrasas do not have a standardized curriculum;
- 2) the madrasas do not follow a standardized grade system; and
- 3) the madrasas do not have regular classes, but offer more individually tailored tuition.

Introducing government exams for all madrasa graduates⁸

After the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, the new government dismissed and disqualified documents and certificates that had previously been officially accepted,⁹ and made it obligatory that the individuals pass a written exam by the Islamic Education Department of the MoE to get a recognized proof of qualification. Exams are offered both at national and regional levels.¹⁰ Exams are given for 12th grade and 14th grade students. It is obligatory to pass the 12th grade exam before one can sit the 14th grade exam. Female madrasa graduates from Pakistan have not been permitted to take the exam.¹¹

Graduates from official madrasas

Graduation certificates and documentation from the official madrasas registered with MoE are recognized by governmental departments and ministries. Some of these madrasas offer 14 grades (which equals the second year of a university bachelor degree). However, until recently, madrasa students that had passed the Loya Dowra (Dowra Hadith), which is equal to a MA in some Islamic countries, and passed the MoE exam of 14th grade, were only admitted to the 2nd year of universities. This was seen as a highly discriminatory practice by madrasa representatives and students. In November 2010 new procedures were passed by the MoE and Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) allowing 14th grade madrasa graduates in to the 3rd year of universities.

The 14th grade certificate is recognized by some state institutions, including the Supreme Court and the governmental departments. There are, however, few opportunities for madrasa graduates to be employed in public institutes dealing with religious issues, such as MoE, Ministry of Irshad, Haj & Awqaaf (MIHA) and other government institutions. Madrasa graduates are rarely being

⁸ The exam system was established in 1992 after collapse of communist regime and has continued until now but with varied methods of examination (oral and written) this period.

⁹ The attitude towards graduation documents from private Afghan madrasas and Pakistani madrasas have changed over the years. During Burhanuddin Rabbani's regime (1992-1996) certificates from certain political/jihadi parties' madrasas were recognized by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education. Later a commission was established by the Ministry of Education's Islamic Education Department, made responsible for assessing and evaluating the graduation documents of graduates from private or foreign madrasas by conducting oral exam of these individuals. The same process continued during the Taliban period and most of madrasa graduates had their documents and certificates recognized in the 1990s.

¹⁰ The exam at the national level is given every month, and at the regional every quarter.

¹¹ Two female madrasa graduates are interviewed for this research: one is graduated from Ma'adul Banaat (Sunni), located in Shamshato Camp of Peshawar, one studied in Iranian Madrasa and now teaching as lecturer in one Shiite religious private University located in Kabul

employed by secular and modern public institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and others.

Graduates from private madrasas

It is only the certificates and examinations from the MoE that are recognized by the government. Documents from madrasas registered with the Ministry of Irshad, Haj and Awqaaf (MIHA) and other departments, or from unregistered private madrasas, are not recognized by the MoE, the MoHE or other government bodies. Graduation certificates from Pakistani madrasas, which are recognized by the Government of Pakistan, are also not accepted by the Government of Afghanistan.

A madrasa graduate who wants to obtain a higher degree in Afghanistan is only qualified to apply for further studies in the Sharia and education departments of Afghan universities. Passing the new government exam is the only way students from private madrasas can have their degrees recognized by the government of Afghanistan. Also, graduates from foreign madrasas need to pass these exams to get their qualifications recognized, especially those from madrasas in Pakistan, both those from Afghan refugee madrasa and Pakistani madrasas.¹² Even degrees that in some places are considered equal to a Master of Arts degrees, such as the international certificate issued by the Pakistani Wafaq ul Madaris al Arabia of Pakistan (the madrasa board of the organization of the Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan) are not recognized by Afghan authorities. This is considered an unfair treatment and has caused grievances among the madrasa students.

Reception of the exams by the madrasa sector

The exams have not been well received among the clergy, who are sceptical to the exam administration and its procedures. Some of the main concerns are with the background and outlook of the people placed to administer and develop the exams, who are graduates from Saudi Arabian Islamic schools and therefore perceived to have negative attitudes towards the Afghan madrasa tradition linked to Deoband. The exams are criticized for being designed on the system existing in Saudi Arabia.

Results from the new government exam between January 2002 and February 2008 showed that of the some 16,000 private madrasa graduates who took the exam, only 10% passed the exam.¹³ Among the ones failing the exam were both senior madrasas teachers and highly esteemed religious scholars. This has made clergy, madrasas administrators and graduates distrustful of the examination procedures and management. The exam is criticized for having questions from subjects that are not taught in the Afghan and Pakistani madrasas, for placing the graduates trained in private Afghan and Pakistani (Deobandi) madrasas at a disadvantage, and the process has been criticized for lack of transparency. Further, one informant pointed out that there are no requirements for documentation from a private madrasa to register for the exam, which means that anyone can claim to have studied in a private madrasa and attend the exam.

1.3. The curriculum reform process

Both the content and the quality of religious education are issues of debate and contention. The core of the madrasa tradition – education of children and training of religious leaders and clergy in the ‘true interpretation of religion’ – lies in the curriculum. Curriculum reform, if imposed from above, could create a backlash. One of the greatest challenges to reform will likely be to amend the curriculum in a way that is acceptable to the different religious schools, including the private ones that have been unaffected by previous curriculum reforms.

¹² Iranian graduates documents are accepted by the government and the graduates do not need to pass any exam.

¹³ Interview with Dr. Mohammad Yosuf Niazi, February 2008

The process for developing a new official madrasa curriculum

In 2006, the MoE established a department for developing a curriculum for official madrasas and hired new technical personnel for this purpose. The new curriculum department was established under the leadership of Dr. Mohammad Yosuf Niazi (also responsible for the private madrasas exam process, discussed above),¹⁴ currently the Minister of Irshad, Haj and Awqaaf.

Later the same year, when the Minister of Education post was taken over by Mr. Hanif Atmar, the MoE sought donors to fund development of the new curriculum for official madrasas. This followed the MoE's new strategy of strengthening the Afghan state's national capacity to deliver religious education in order to stop Afghan students going abroad, guided by the assumption that this would reduce insurgency if a sufficient number of madrasas are established in Afghanistan.

Some of the informants in the madrasa sector were concerned that Mr. Niazi's own background in religious studies in Saudi Arabia has contributed to graduates from religious educational institutions in Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Egypt being hired as technical advisors and consultants for the curriculum reform process. This, they believe, means that the group responsible for developing the new curriculum consists mainly of people from other traditions than the Hanafi Deobandi tradition which is common in most of Afghanistan's madrasas. The group promoted a curriculum drawing on curricula used in Saudi Arabia, Sudan and other Islamic countries outside of South Asia.

The group did not consult principals and teachers from Afghanistan's official or private madrasas in the process. Rather, the group used the resources available for trips to countries such as Jordan and Iran. This happened despite the fact that early on in the process some members of the group questioned whether a curriculum drawing from non-Afghan (non-South Asian Dars e Nizami) traditions will be acceptable even for the official madrasas.

The very first draft of the new official madrasa curriculum was ready in early 2009. This coincided with a conference of religious scholars and madrasa personnel arranged by the NGO PACT-Radio in Jalalabad on 29–31 March 2009, entitled 'Religious Madrasas in the Modern Age'. The MoE was invited to be involved in the conference agenda. The conference was attended by some eighty scholars from official and private madrasas and provided a timely opportunity for the MoE to present the new curriculum to the participants of this conference – and receive their feedback.

The Deputy Minister of Education Siddiqullah Patman, at that time responsible for the Islamic Education Department, opened the conference and the new curriculum was presented. The new curriculum was not received well. It was seen as being Salafi—not following the Hanafi Deobandi tradition, the most dominant tradition in both private and official madrasas in Afghanistan—and therefore not acceptable to Afghanistan's many Deobandi madrasas. It was therefore rejected by all the official and private madrasas representatives in the conference. This rejection was reflected in the joint declaration issued at the end of the conference.¹⁵ The ministry officials withdrew from the conference before it concluded. This is an example of how a costly programme can fail by not involving the concerned stakeholders thoroughly in the process. The new curriculum did not survive the first test, and has so far not been introduced in any official madrasas.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mr. Niazi has BA in Islamic studies from Islamic University of Madina-tul-Munawara and MA and PhD from University of Ummul Quraa in Makka-tul-Mukarramah in Saudi Arabia. He spent more than ten years in Saudi Arabia during this study program.

¹⁵ Conclusions of the conference are available on the Islamic University of Afghanistan's website: <http://www.afghanjamiya.org/en/stand-alone-pages/religious-madrassahs-in-the-modern-age.php> (accessed 17 March 2011).

¹⁶ According to Mowlavi Abdul Salam Abid, Director for Programs in the Islamic Section of MoE, in a meeting with the author in Kabul 20 on November 2010, the MoE wanted to test the curriculum in two madrasas in 2010. This, however is delayed as books still need to be printed and qualified teachers brought in from abroad.

Other initiatives to reform the madrasa curriculum

At the same time, a number of initiatives to explore opportunities for madrasa curriculum reform have been taken by individual private madrasas, as well as groups of private madrasa teachers and other concerned people in different parts of the country.

The madrasas sector is not static, nor is the education they offer. Without a fixed, standardized curriculum, the private madrasas have altered their curriculum individually. The basic Islamic subjects – such as Interpretation of Holy Quran, Hadith and Fiq), which are the concerns of many curriculum revisionists, are part of the Dars e Nizami curriculum. Most madrasas teach these subjects, including Arabic grammar (sarf and nahwa). Other subjects such as mantiq (logic), hikmat (method), riyazee (old math) are taught by some, but not all madrasas. Many of those who want to revise the curriculum of the private madrasas agree to remove the latter set of subjects. Some madrasas have also introduced new subjects such as history of Sharia (tarikh-ul-tashri), Afghan history, English, Arabic and computer sciences. One example of a madrasa reforming its curriculum independently is from the Madrasa Qasimia located in the Old City of Kabul (shifted from Peshawar as part of the post-1992 repatriation), where they have introduced English to the curriculum by revising the Intercom curriculum textbooks,¹⁷ commonly used in Afghan refugee schools, and making them appropriate for the local context by replacing Western names with Muslim names and changing the pictures.

By institutions supported by donors' funds

One initiative to revise the madrasa curriculum was made by John Butt and the NGO PACT-Radio.¹⁸ With funding from the UK Government, PACT-Radio arranged a national level conference in Jalalabad on 29–31 March 2009, entitled 'Religious Madrasas in the Modern Age' (also mentioned above). Around eighty religious scholars from all regions of the country participated, the majority from official madrasas invited by the MoE. Religious scholars were also invited from India, Pakistan and Uzbekistan to participate in the conference, but only one scholar from Pakistan ended up coming.¹⁹ The conference was a joint event by the MoE and PACT-Radio and was attended by the MoE leadership and officials from the Islamic Education Department. PACT-Radio wanted to solicit the opinions of the clergy about the status and situation for the private madrasas in Afghanistan. The MoE aimed to have the new madrasa curriculum approved by the religious scholars. As mentioned above, however, the curriculum was rejected by both official and private madrasas because it was not based on the Dars e Nizami. As an alternative, and to take the process further, a working group was constituted by the clergy. However, these efforts have not been sustained at the national level, but have continued in the eastern region and in Nangarhar province in particular. The process has faced a number of challenges, one being that it has been led by a non-Afghan Islamic scholar. This issue was brought up in the second working group meeting in Kabul in mid 2009. As a consequence, John Butt decided to establish the new institution in Jalalabad instead of in Kabul.²⁰

17 The Intercom curriculum is an international English learning curriculum introduced to Afghans during refugee time in Peshawar, used by the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

18 PACT Radio is established and run by John Butt, an Englishman who during the colonial period in Peshawar converted to Islam at the age of 18. He is a graduate from the Dar ul Uloom Deoband. He has worked for the BBC Pashto Service for some years and later established PACT Radio in Peshawar and some of the FATA agencies. In recent years the service has been expanded to the Afghan border region. Butt was an observer in both the Emergency and Constitutional Loya Jirgas.

19 Mufti Mohammad Azam from Pakistan participated. Other well-known clergy such as Dr. Shir Ali Shah from Haqqania, Shaikh Taqi Osmani from Karachi Darul Uloom and others were invited but did not participate.

20 John Butt decided to establish an institute called Jamia-tul-Uloom-ul-Islamia in Jalalabad city which has a different curriculum with some new subjects, especially vocational trainings. This is funded by the British Embassy in Kabul. Recently its office in the popular official madrasa Najmul Madaris in Nangarhar was burned by insurgents. This is likely due to the close cooperation with the MoE and provision of vocational training to other official madrasas in Nangarhar. Yet, Butt still plans to establish another institute in Kandahar city. This was reported by Mowlavi Abdul Salam Abid, Director for programs in the Islamic Section of MoE, in a meeting with the author in Kabul 20 on November 2010.

Madrasa-led initiatives

Another initiative to arrange nation-wide consultations for curriculum reform was arranged by Qari Habibullah Baghlani, the muhtamim of a madrasa in Nahreen District of Baghlan province. On his invitation, some one hundred religious scholars from around the country gathered to discuss the possibility of developing a common curriculum acceptable to all of Afghanistan's madrasas. No agreement was reached. However, the religious leaders agreed that there is a joint interest in coming together to take the curriculum reform process further, which in itself was an important outcome. A number of lessons can be drawn from these initiatives:

- **Need for a working committee:** The number of ulema involved has been too high to be able to work on actual revisions of the curriculum. One possible solution to this is therefore to establish a working committee which, after going through the curriculum, can suggest possible changes. (They can, for example, present three different versions of the curriculum to the next joint gathering.)
- **Careful composition:** Care needs to be taken when the composition of the working committee is made, to ensure it is as representative, credible, legitimate and transparent as possible. Nominations should reflect the various schools of thought and also the variation existing within the Deobandi tradition.
- **Requires time:** Quite naturally, many madrasa representatives believe that their curriculum is the best and the one that should be made common to all madrasas. However, the curricula of most madrasas belonging to the South Asian tradition are based on the same foundation (the Dars e Nizami), so the differences are not impossible to overcome. A curriculum reform process will require time and probably lengthy discussion before an agreement can be reached.

2. Opportunities and challenges to madrasa reform

There is general agreement among both the government and the madrasas that reform is required. The madrasa representatives welcome overall reform of the madrasas including revisions of the curriculum, and governance and management systems. In the words of one informant: ‘there have to be changes, we cannot use and continue with the three to five-hundred years old curriculum. There has to be revision to make it [the curriculum] relevant and practical’. One of the most common reasons for supporting a reform put forward by religious scholars and madrasa personnel is to make madrasas updated and upgraded according to the requirements of the day. The madrasa representatives themselves see the need to keep track with the progress made in other sectors of society; to meet the requirements of the current century in terms of new technologies and other scientific and education related developments.

In this section we identify, based on the interviews conducted with madrasas and government representatives, the key elements in madrasa reform, as well as the main opportunities and challenges to reform.

2.1. Key elements of madrasa reform

2.1.1. Reform of the curriculum:

Revision of the curriculum is a core issue in madrasa reform – and at the centre of the debate over what it should involve. The curriculum is part of what unifies most of Afghanistan’s madrasas. Drawing on the same curriculum is what defines the South Asian madrasas tradition, and is what makes madrasa education qualitatively different to other types of education.

Yet, the introduction of modern, worldly subjects such as sociology, literature, geography, history, politics and information technology is considered a key element of madrasa reform by respondents, both from the madrasas and the government. Some concrete examples are as follows:

Syllabus/subject revision: many of the respondents emphasized the need for an updated curriculum, relevant for the current students and the needs of society today. This would involve adding new subjects and removing old ones that are not useful anymore. Examples include removing *mantiq*, *hikmat* and Greek philosophy books that do not match the modern state of the philosophy in the 21st century, and to introduce computer science and English. Education should not be limited to religious subjects but provide knowledge relevant to modern ways of living, including management and politics.

Textbook revision: Some of the respondents emphasized the need for revision of the textbooks as an important part of reform and pointed to the fact that subjects taught in madrasas have remained unchanged for 500 years and that some of the textbooks – such as Fiq’s books that were written according to the requirements and needs of the time – do not reflect the needs of students today.

A holistic approach to knowledge: some informants stressed the need for knowledge not only on religious issues, but on all aspects of life from worship to business, politics and trade.

The motivations and interests in a curriculum reform are many and varied. The one thing that are agreed upon and that cannot be changed, however, is the importance placed on the study of the Holy Quran and Hadith. It seems all other subjects are open for discussion.

Some believe that the introduction of a new curriculum in the official madrasas will contribute to widening the gap between official and private madrasas, and call for the introduction of one common curriculum for both private and official madrasas.

*Sectarian or non-sectarian curriculum?*²¹

There are numerous interpretation of Islam in Afghanistan and broad disagreement over whether there should be an aim to develop a curriculum that can be acceptable to all madrasas regardless of sectarian affiliations. One respondent suggested a unified curriculum for all madrasas, while others said that they want two different curricula, one for Shiite and one for Sunni school of thoughts. Others again suggested having a common core curriculum for all schools that complements wider curricula of sectarian orientation.

The need for curriculum reform is recognized by both the madrasas and the government, yet there is no clear agreement over how to move forward in order to reform the curriculum. Many respondents believe a nationwide consultation process is needed to collect ideas and opinions from a broad range of religious scholars. The issue of sectarian curricula will likely remain a contested issue, which requires further consultation. Whether it is possible to develop one basic madrasa curriculum that will be acceptable for the different schools of thought can only be decided through a consultative process.

2.1.2. Class-based tuition

Introducing class-based tuition in the madrasas is mentioned as an important element in madrasa reform. The methods of teaching in the madrasas are traditionally tailored to the needs of the individual student and the teacher-student relationship is central. Introducing class-based tuition, with the students enrolled in classes from 1st to 12th or 14th grade, would imply a radical change in the methods of teaching in the private madrasas. Opinions on this are mixed: some favor the old system—and the uniqueness of having individually tailored tuition—while others believe it is time to reform the system, to make it similar to the system of regular government schools.

2.1.3. Standardized criteria and fixed exams

Introducing standardized criteria and fixed exams is another potential area for reform. The traditional focus on the individual's needs and abilities is also reflected in the lack of fixed exams and graduation criteria in the private madrasas. Traditionally students proceed at their own pace, completing the obligatory texts at their own pace. Some consider this a weakness of the madrasa system, making it difficult to distinguish the successful students from the unsuccessful ones. This illustrates how different the approach to teaching is in the madrasa tradition, where the student-teacher relationship is more central than in a regular class-based school.

The madrasa teachers and religious scholars are concerned that the quality of religious education will suffer if a standardized system is introduced. In the madrasa tradition, a student uses the time required to complete the central texts. Teachers are not tied by teaching schedules, timetables and competing texts and subjects. There is concern that the introduction of additional subjects and curriculum will reduce the time available for religious subjects. Some madrasas

²¹ Note here that the majority of the respondents belonged to the Sunni Hanafi school of thought and placed importance on the need for a Hanafi based curriculum. The overall majority of Sunni Muslims in Afghanistan follows the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.

representatives do not see how it would be possible to have time for deep religious studies if this is fixed in a standardized system and are concerned it would weaken the education of religious scholars.

2.1.4. Financial support to madrasas

Introducing reforms – such as a new curriculum, teacher training etc. – implies new financial costs, and therefore requires funding. Financing, however, is a sensitive issue.

Since most madrasas rely on charity for their existence and daily running, government financial support could be a means to establish contact with the madrasas. Some madrasas openly express interest in receiving support from the government, and believe the government should provide more and better support to the madrasas. Some have, for example, expressed the need for more land in order to expand their madrasas and enroll more students.

Many religious leaders and madrasa administrators are concerned about government initiatives that are encroaching on the independence of religious institutions, and are highly cautious of government initiatives that may be seen as interfering in madrasa internal affairs, tightening the grip on the madrasas' independence. Collaboration with the government is also viewed as a security threat by the madrasas, which are placing themselves at risk of anti-government insurgents' attacks. The government, on their side, views the madrasas financial independence as a concern.²²

There are a number of issues that the government needs to be cautious of in regard to financing:

- Madrasas are commonly sceptical of support that has strings attached;
- Independence from the state is a critical part of the madrasas tradition in South Asia as it provides an alternative to regular 'worldly' schooling;

Government financing of madrasas in Pakistan have had mixed results. Madrasas have been reluctant to take money from the state because it is seen as a way of buying the madrasas. The madrasa leadership does not trust that they will be able to remain independent if they take government money. Foreign funding is particularly sensitive.

2.2. Major constraints to madrasa reform

Some of the main obstacles to a reform, as identified by the respondents for this report, include:

Focus on registration and regulation

The focus of the reform is seen as being mainly on registration and regulation of the madrasas, to enhance the government's oversight and control of the sector, and not as a process to enhance the quality of madrasa education. This is perceived by madrasa representatives as an attempt by the government to gain control without giving anything in return. Registration is seen as a way for the government to co-opt the private madrasa sector.

Lack of trust in government systems and intentions

Some respondents are wary of individuals holding government positions central to the madrasa reform having a secular outlook and negative opinion of religious education. Some even suspect that those in charge of the reform are actively working against the improvement and growth of the religious education sector.

No recognition of private madrasa degrees

The madrasas want recognition of madrasa certificates and introduction of recognized higher level degrees BA, MA and PhD in the madrasa sector. The current government accreditation system for madrasa graduates are not trusted by the madrasa sector.

Little appreciation of religious education and religious leaders

The sense that there is little appreciation of religious education and lack of respect of religious leaders needs to be noted. Religious leaders and madrasa teachers and student feel discriminated against by government officials (for their clothing, etc.).

Lack of interest and commitment to reform in the MoE

Many religious leader and madrasa principals are of the opinion that the government is not placing much importance on the reform. They view the people employed in the ministry for this task as lacking interest and commitment to the reform, and that the government is not allocating sufficient resources to implement the new strategy. They are afraid that, as with other government initiated projects that lack priority and commitment by the government, the madrasa reform will not be conscientiously carried through.

Limited financial resources

Lack of or limited access to financial resources is another constraint facing both private and official madrasas. Independent financial support exists, but it is often insufficient to enable the madrasas to implement comprehensive reform measures. Reducing the madrasas' financial opportunities is seen by many as a strategy to weaken them and thereby strengthening the government's position to set conditions for the running of the schools. Some respondents believe the government will curb private financing of madrasas and force them to register with the government.

Foreign funding

Securing donor funding for religious education is also recognized as a challenge, as many foreign donors are reluctant to engage with religious actors or get involved in religious education reform. Many may not have the political backing in their home countries to engage with Islamic actors.²³ But foreign funding is also a highly sensitive subject as seen from an Afghan perspective, where support could be seen as an attempt at influencing or even co-opting religious actors.

Corruption

Corruption – especially administrative corruption and impunity with corruption within the state institutions – is another challenge for madrasa reform. The high level of corruption within the government makes madrasas reluctant to be associated with the state. There is limited trust in the state's financial dealings and many madrasas' representatives are concerned about support to madrasas being diverted into corruption.

Religious actors afraid of losing authority and influence

Some religious leaders and madrasas principals may be resisting reform because they are afraid of losing authority and influence. This makes it all the more important to consult with these actors and to make both the rationale behind reform and the concrete objectives of the reform transparent, and to make information about the process widely available. Comprehensive and

²³ However, the foreign government political representatives present in Afghanistan have recently shown interests in supporting the madrasa sector (in spite of the legal implications as well as their own reluctance to fund madrasas). The US government, for example, seems eager to support the religious sector, but is restricted by the US constitution; which has legal implication for US funding agencies including USAID. They struggle to find such a mechanism that can open for the US government financial support to the madrasa sector. USAID, 2009. 'Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding Toolkit'. Available at: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/conflict/publications/docs/Religion_Conflict_and_Peacebuilding_Toolkit.pdf.

broad consultations with muthamims and ulema from private and official madrasas from all parts of the country are considered key for a madrasa reform process to be successful.

Security threats and lack of protection

Security threats, both from the state security sector and international coalition forces, are another major problem currently facing private madrasas. It seems the government believes they can pressure the madrasas to register, which is complicating the relationship between the government and the madrasas. It is more likely that the madrasas will be interested in collaborating with the government if the actual terms of the collaboration are improved, and if the government finds ways to improve the security situation for madrasas.

2.3. Opportunities for reform

While there are many obstacles to reform at present, does the above discussion also indicate that there are a number of opportunities for collaboration and to take the reform process further? The main opportunities for reform that have been identified can be summarized as follows:

- Afghan ulema, madrasa principals and teachers seems to be welcoming a reform – also of the curriculum – at this point in time;
- The madrasas are not satisfied with their situation as it is, and want change;
- Madrasas are popular with the people and new madrasas are established regularly, indicating demand for religious education;
- The government recognizes the importance of religious institutions and scholars and of finding ways of improving collaboration with the private madrasas;
- Madrasa students and teachers studying and working abroad are returning to Afghanistan. Bringing with them experience and knowledge from their time in exile they have diversified the madrasa sector in Afghanistan and made it more open to change;
- There exists experience from other countries that can be drawn on (such as the Ittehad e Tanzeemat Madaris e Deeniya (ITMD), or ‘the federation of madrasa boards’, the Al-Azhar university in Egypt and Jamia Qum in Iran);
- Modern technologies can easily be introduced.

As the above discussions reveal there are several opportunities for reform in the private madrasa sector. Perhaps the most important factor is that the main stakeholders have showed interest and are open to reform.

Some of the concrete measures which have been identified, that can facilitate reform of Afghanistan’s private madrasas, are:

- To provide basic teaching materials and equipment such as textbooks and stationary. This will enhance trust between madrasas and the state – the state needs to show that it is committed and interested in the madrasas;
- To recognize the status of private madrasa teachers by providing and bringing their salaries up to the level of teachers in official madrasas and government schools;
- To provide accommodation and living costs for private madrasa students to keep them from going door to door in search of food.

3. Alternative models for institution building

The lack of organizing or coordinating bodies in the Afghan madrasa sector suggests that there is both real need and great potential for institution building. Based on consultations with representatives from the government, ulema, madrasas leadership and teachers, we have identified a number of alternative models for institution building in the Afghan madrasa sector. When exploring alternative models of madrasa coordination and organization we have considered aspects related to governance (should these be governmental or private bodies?), level of centralization (what is the need for centralized and/or decentralized organization?), and denominations (should the organization be denominational or interdenominational?).

Currently, the private religious education sector can be described as disorganized, unsupported and vulnerable – lacking a platform for inter-madrasa coordination and collaboration and for constructive interaction with the government and other external actors outside the madrasa sector.

- The need for a governing body – or madrasa board – for the thousands of private madrasas and institutions currently existing across the country, is generally agreed by all respondents.
- It needs to be decided how this body should be organized, what its mandate should be and what legal status it should be given.

3.1. Roles and responsibilities of a madrasa board

The potential roles of a madrasa board, as identified by the informants to this study, include:

- Coordination, communication and cooperation between madrasas
- Advocate for the madrasas' interests
- A platform for cooperation between madrasas and the state

3.1.1. Coordination, communication and cooperation between madrasas

Currently there is little coordination, communication and collaboration between the different madrasas. There are opportunities to improve the way madrasas work together, learn from each other's experiences and support each other. This can contribute to enhance the quality of religious education by improving the curriculum and teaching methods, and to develop a standardized curriculum and teaching methods that will enable recognition of madrasa degrees by the government.

3.1.2. Voice and advocacy

A madrasa board can work as a representative of the madrasa sector vis-à-vis the state and other actors. It can present and look after the interest of the madrasa sector and advocate for their rights and privileges. Cooperation and coordination between madrasas can help madrasas have a common stand in relation to other stakeholders and can help madrasas' advocacy work on different levels. Examples of issues that can be dealt with by a madrasa board, mentioned by the informants, are:

- Make sure madrasas are involved in development of governmental exams for religious studies
- Advocate for recognition of madrasa degrees by the government
- Enhance the status and salaries of madrasa teachers' status
- Increase the finances available to the madrasa sector
- Protect madrasas from intimidation and harassment from security sector agencies (such as the NDS, the army)

3.1.3. A platform for communication, coordination and cooperation

Until now, the cooperation between madrasas and the state has been limited. Cooperation has mainly been informal and based on personal contacts and there exist few formal and organized forums or channels. Creating space for madrasas and state interaction without the involvement of the security agencies could potentially facilitate interaction between these sectors and open for dialogue, which could contribute to enhance the different parties' knowledge and understanding of each other's perspectives and interests in a madrasa reform. The majority of the respondents agreed that such an institution could play a role as a communication and coordination hub between madrasas and the state.

Some respondents believe that establishing a madrasas governing body for interaction between the state and madrasas will contribute to improve the relationship between the government and the madrasas, provide a channel for information and thereby reduce intimidation of the madrasas by the NDS. The oversight of private madrasas affairs should be with the education authorities not with the NDS.

Respondents view the current situation as marked by misunderstandings and distrust between the private madrasas and the government, creating a void between the private and public sector. This gap is also believed to contribute to recruitment to the insurgency, who in a polarized position present themselves as fighting for 'a just (Islamic) cause'. An Asia Foundation survey from 2009 finds that 56%, the majority of Afghan people, have sympathy with the motives of insurgency in the country.²⁴ One respondent said that silencing of the ulema and madrasas – to not talk critically about the government and the state – can lead to people turning against the state. Historically, the Afghan ulema have shown the ability to mobilize massive support against the state when the position of religion has been under threat such as when the ulema raised against King Amanullah's modernization policies in the 1920s. Including the ulema in policy processes may reduce tension and the potential for uproar. A madrasa board could be a first step towards greater inclusion of the ulema in public affairs. If the ulema see themselves as part of the system, it is likely that they will be more supportive of it, and reduce the chances that the state will be targeted in the name of religion.²⁵ Establishing a madrasa board would present a new arena for madrasa-state interaction, and can be seen as an opportunity for the state to redefine their relationship with the religious sector. It would send a positive message to the madrasas that the government is willing to collaborate with the ulema on new terms.

Benefits

Some of the benefits of organizing madrasas in a madrasa board that have been identified by the respondents can be summarized as follows:

- Unite the madrasas
- Promote positive competition between the madrasas
- Contribute to improve relations between people and state

Challenges

Some of the respondents are more pessimistic, and believe it will be difficult to establish a madrasa board that will be representative of all madrasas with their different interests and agendas. It is likely that a new body like a madrasa board will face some challenges initially. The proponents of a board, however, are of the view that if the private madrasa representatives and the government support the process, these challenges could be overcome.

²⁴ The Asia Foundation (2009), *Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People*

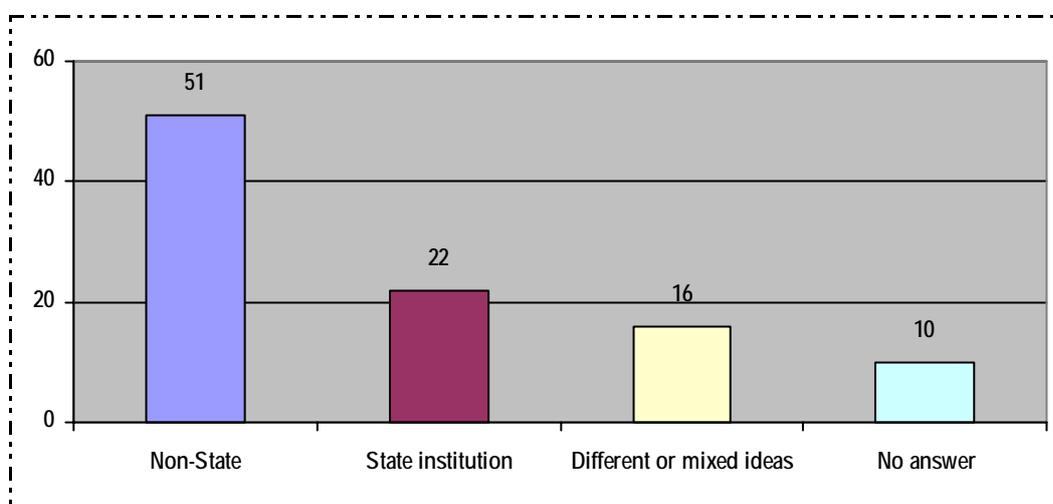
²⁵ This statement is given by a group of religious scholars in a meeting with Ambassador Theodor Eliot (earlier US Ambassador to Afghanistan), Serena Hotel, 23 September 2010.

3.2. Organization

What shape should a madrasa board take? A number of different models emerged through this consultation process:

- A fully over-seeing governmental body
- A semi-governmental body with madrasa representation
- A madrasa self-governing body

In response to the question of whether a madrasa governing body should be a governmental or non-governmental body, about half of the respondents (51%) preferred the institution to be a non-governmental body independent of the state. Around one-fifth (22%) supported the idea that this institution be governmental, because they believe it is likely it will receive more support from the government. The remaining group (16%) held a range of different opinions: among which some proposed to establish a semi-governmental institution with considerable representation from the private madrasas. The remaining 10% of the respondents did not answer this question.



3.2.1. Independent body

The respondents favoring a non-governmental body presented a variety of reasons in support of their suggestion. The main reasons for why the governing body should be non-government are as follows:

Lack of trust in the government

Private madrasas lack trust and confidence in the state institutions' ability and interest in supporting and advocating the rights and interest of the private madrasas. Many are therefore of the view that a governing body for the private madrasa ought to be a non-governmental entity, and have as one of its main functions to work as a point of contact between the madrasas and the government and other stakeholders.

Madrasas wants independence

The majority of Afghanistan's madrasas are private institutions. While many are open to closer coordination between the madrasas and the government, many are also wary of government control and interference in what is considered 'internal matters' and issues that they believe should be decided by qualified people within the madrasa sector and the clergy.

Lack of government capacity to take on this task

Another concern raised by the madrasas is over the ministry's capacity to take on this task. After the ministry made registration with the government mandatory for all madrasas in Afghanistan, only 15 private madrasas have registered with the MoE. The main increase in registered madrasas comes from the government established madrasas which has increased from 336 in 2006 to 700 in 2010.²⁶ The sector representatives are not impressed with the performance of the ministry and complain about lack of government support after registration. They believe the ministry is ill-equipped to handle a huge governmental madrasa sector. At the moment there seems also to be confusion about what registration with the government actually implies, both in terms of what the government expects from the madrasas and what they are prepared to deliver of services and support.

3.2.2. Semi-governmental institution

A significant proportion of the respondents favoring a semi-governmental body are of the opinion that a decision can only be made after further consultation with the religious community, including ulema, madrasa principals and teachers, and said they would go with the outcome of a nation-wide consultation on the matter. This includes the view of the Minister of Education Mr. Ghulam Farooq Wardak.

3.2.3. Government body

Other respondents, mainly from the government, believe it is the responsibility of the government to establish such an institution. Particularly, respondents from government institutions were of the view that a madrasa board ought to be in accordance with Afghan policies and saw no real need to draw on other countries' experiences.

The people favoring a government body are of the view that a non-governmental body will receive less support from the state than a governmental body. This group also thinks that all private madrasas should be registered with the state and that no madrasas should be allowed to operate privately and outside of government control.

3.3. Centralized or decentralized?

The overall majority of the people consulted for this report seem to recognize the need and benefit of establishing an institution to manage affairs of common interest to all private and official madrasas in Afghanistan. Should such an institution be centralized at the national level or should it be sub-national, or a combination of both? A number of different ideas and opinion emerged through the consultations.

3.3.1. A national level body with provincial level branches

Nearly half of the respondents (41%) suggested that a national level body with branches at the provincial should be established, equipped with a clear mandate and terms of reference. They believe that the large number of private madrasas existing in Afghanistan will require an organization with capacity and staff to reach out to madrasas across the country, also in very remote areas. Some even proposed that the structure should be three-tiered, stretching down to the district level. Some informants stressed the importance of establishing a neutral body, above particular sectarian, ethnic and ideological interests.

One model proposed is to bring together representatives from all madrasas in each province in a provincial level commission/board/shura and ask this to select or elect representatives for a national level body. For this it could be useful to learn from Pakistan's experience.

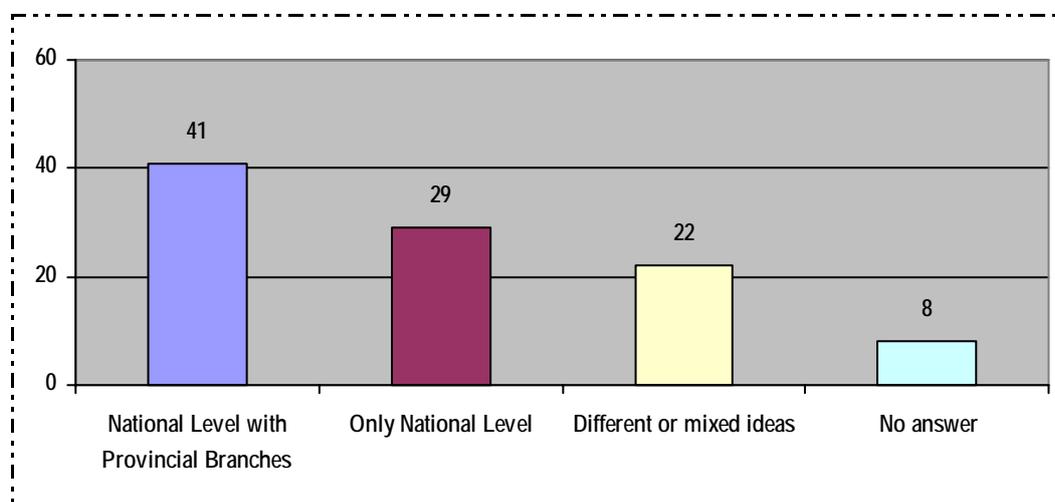
²⁶ These numbers were given to the author by the MoE in 2010.

3.3.2. A national level body

The other group believes that a national level body would be sufficient. They are of the view that madrasas are able to handle their task well at provincial and district levels and see the task of a coordinating body being limited to communication and resolving challenges and problems at the national or central level. They believe national level tasks are important for madrasas to secure the future position of madrasas. Some respondents in this group (mostly non-state religious actors) want to have a body established with sufficient power and authority to influence the government decision not only on madrasas related issues but also on other social and political issues where there are needs.

3.3.3. Requires further consultation

Other informants were of the opinion that this decision should be based on a nation-wide public consultation with religious scholars, ulema, madrasa principals and teachers. Nation-wide public consultation is also supported by those who favor the first two options.²⁷ It was suggested that a pilot process in one province could be a useful test, which if successful could be expanded to other provinces, or exercised at the national level.



3.4. Sectarian or non-sectarian bodies?

Afghanistan's Muslim population is divided into Sunni and Shiite. Sunni is the majority with some 85% of the population. The overall majority of Afghan Sunni Muslims follow the *Hanafi* school of Islamic jurisprudence, which is also what is recognized as the official Sunni school in the Afghan Constitution. The leading Sunni sub-sect is the Deobandi school of thought spreading to Afghanistan from the Indian sub-continent.²⁸ Other sects include the Salafi²⁹ school of thought influenced by Saudi Arabia during the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation. The Salafists are in a minority (mainly found in parts of Kunar and Badakhshan provinces), but growing.

Asked to express their opinion about whether the Sunni and Shiite should organize together or in separate madrasa boards, almost half of the respondents (43%) preferred to have **one board uniting both Sunni and Shiite madrasas**. The main reasons for this are:

- To keep the people and the country united
- To avoid making religious sects another division along identity lines (linguistic and regional divisions already exist)

²⁷ It should be noted that the three last questions concerning 17, 18 and 19 are not answered by most of the respondents belonging to the Shiite sect. These are mainly lecturers at the Shiite university recently established by Sheikh Mohammad Asif Mohsini (one of the ex-Jihadi leaders), with foreign financial support.

²⁸ See Borchgrevink 2010 for a more detailed overview of the development of the Deobandi school in Afghanistan.

²⁹ They are part of the Sunni. Tradition in Afghanistan

- A joint madrasa board can have proportionate representation and establish means to handle issues common to all madrasas as well as those specific to the different sects and sub-sects

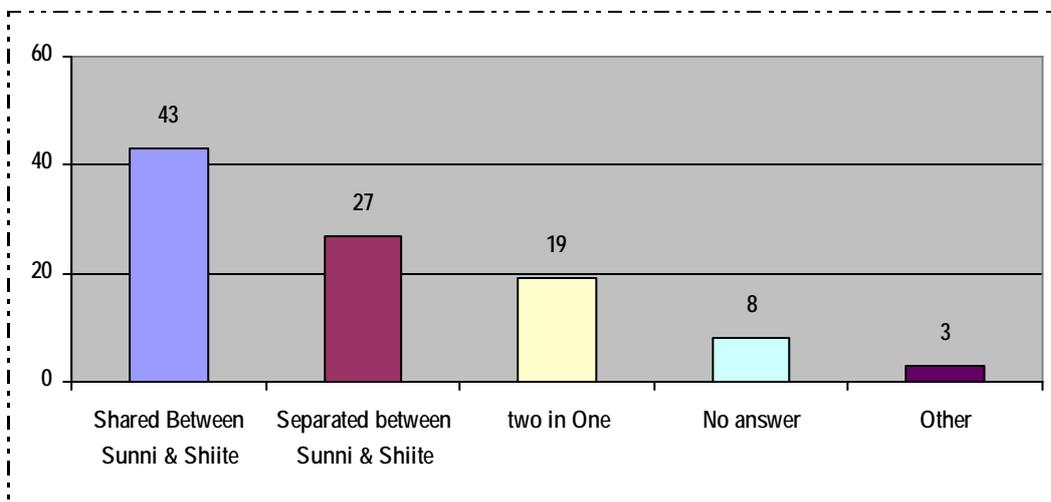
Some 19% of the respondents favored a **‘two-in-one institution’**, e.g. one entity with two departments, one for Sunni and one for Shiite. The main argument for having one organization is that the organization it will represent all religious education institutions which are part of a religious community and share many of the basic principles and ideas, and have common interests, needs and demands vis-à-vis the state. Particular sectarian issues can be managed separately.

- They believe that having two separate institutions can be misused for political purposes and carry the risk of reinforcing sectarian divides.
- Recommend further national consultation get advice from madrasa principals and teachers, religious scholars and the imams in the mosques.

The respondents who preferred **two separate institutions to be established**, one for Sunni and one for Shiite madrasas, made up some 27%. The main arguments put forward were:

- A joint Sunni- Shiite body is premature and can result in increased sectarian tension and conflict;
- Lack of knowledge of the other sect prevents having one joint Sunni-Shiite institution, at least to begin with;
- Some of the informants believe that a joint Sunni-Shiite institution can be established at a later stage.

Some three percent held various other opinions but all agreed that further consultations are needed before one can make any final decisions on this issue.



3.5. Experience from other countries

Potentially there is a lot to learn from the organization of madrasas in Pakistan, including the Pakistani madrasa boards (wafaq ul madaris) organizing the various schools of thought and establishing common standards to ensure quality (such as a standardized curriculum, examinations and accreditation), and the fairly new federation of madrasa boards (ittehad-e-tanzeemaat-e-madaris deenia), to coordinate between the various madrasa boards.

Experience from Pakistan:

Some of the respondents, being graduates from Pakistani madrasas, believe there is a lot to learn from the experience of the Pakistani madrasa boards. The Pakistani madrasa boards have an overseeing role: they monitor all private madrasas to ensure the quality of both the management and the education offered at the madrasas. They are in charge of a set curriculum, responsible for arranging exams in religious subjects and issue degree certificates. Pakistani madrasas are organized in five sectarian boards: 1) Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia (Deobandi); 2) Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Ahl-e Sunnat-wal-Jamaat (Barelvi); 3) Rabta-ul-Madaris Al Islamia (Jama'at Islami); 4) Wafaq-ul-Madaris Ahl e Hadith (Salafi/Panjpuri); and 5) Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Shia (Shia). These are, again, organized in an all-madrasa board that has become the main point for interaction between the madrasas and the Government of Pakistan.

Registration of madrasas with the government has formed part of Pakistan's madrasa reform initiatives. In Pakistan, however, the registration measure was met with scepticism and resistance by the madrasas, and seen as a means of getting oversight and control over students, teachers, curriculum and finances.³⁰ Unless care is taken to include the ulema and madrasa representatives in the process, measures to register and regulate the private madrasa sector could also be met with scepticism – or rejection – by the madrasas in Afghanistan.

The majority of the people interviewed for this report is positive about drawing on the experience from neighboring countries, and find ways that these can be modified for the Afghan context. Many of the respondents from the madrasa sector have experience with the Pakistani madrasa system that they believe are valuable for the Afghan context. The government seems to be somewhat sceptical about drawing on Pakistan's experience, possibly because of the political tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan at the time of interviews. The Minister of Education, Ghulam Farooq Wardak, suggested that Afghanistan look to the experience of the Imam-Hatip Schools in Turkey. Other respondents mentioned that Afghanistan also can draw on the experience from other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

Afghan led process – for the Afghan context

There is little experience with madrasa reform to draw on in the Afghan context. Yet respondents from the madrasa sector stressed the importance of focusing on the outcomes of consultation with Afghan ulema about this process, and to use the experiences from other countries as secondary input. Problems are often solved through a traditional council (jirga and shura), and the Bunyaad e Ulema (the religious foundation) could possibly play a role in this process.

The madrasa governing body ought to be established with the full involvement of all madrasas from around the country. A bottom-up approach should be applied and the process should be initiated and led either by a respected and unifying non-state actor or on the initiative of the private madrasas themselves. For such a body to be accepted and useful for the madrasas it is of paramount importance that it is owned by the madrasas. Initiating a process through a 'bottom-up' approach will help establish a credible and transparent process, making it more likely that the madrasas will support it.

Support to the process

Both state and non-state actors and stakeholders can assist in the madrasa reform process by

- Giving financial support;
- Providing logistical support;

³⁰ See Masooda Bano, 2009. 'Rethinking madrasa reform in Pakistan' Religion and Development Research Programme, Policy Brief 1, 2009. Birmingham: International Development Department, University of Birmingham

- Arranging exposure and exchange visits for ulema and muhtamims of madrasas to other countries; and
- Bringing well respected ulema from other countries to Afghanistan.

For the reform to succeed it needs to be based on an honest and transparent process. Sufficient funding needs to be made available to follow up with concrete actions.

4. Conclusion and proposed next steps

A number of concrete proposals to take the process further have been put forward by the respondents:

Working committee

One way of getting a process started could be to establish a working group that with the help of non-state actors would solicit further opinion about reform from various stakeholders. Potentially, such a working group could pave the way for a more formal institution that could oversee and govern Afghanistan's madrasas, work as a coordination body and advocate for madrasas interest vis-à-vis the state and other actors.

National level conference

It was recommended that this process be initiated from a respected and well established religious institution at the Kabul level and that provincial level madrasas nominate their representative for a national level conference through a consultative process. The outcome of a national level conference could be shared in provincial conferences. This could be a first step towards establishing a more permanent governing body for private madrasas and prepare the ground for a national institution.

Exposure visits

A national level conference can appoint working groups or committees to travel on exposure visits to other Islamic countries to learn from their experience with madrasa management and reform. Particularly relevant are places such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, which all belong to the same South Asian madrasa tradition, have sizable madrasa sectors, and hold diverse experience with madrasa sector development, madrasa-state relations and religious education reform.

Nationwide survey

Without an overview of the sector, however, it is difficult to assess the quality and level of religious education currently available in Afghanistan. A nationwide survey is required to get an overview of existing schools, their current status and condition to distinguish between those schools that offer basic religious studies for children and those that are offering higher level Islamic education and thus qualify as 'madrasa'.

Broad consultative process

The majority of the respondents recommended that these questions be dealt with by an initial consultation processes at the national and provincial levels.

Legal status

Law and regulations to guide a madrasa board need to be developed and endorsed by the parliament.

Revision of Policy

Establishing a madrasa governing body may require a revision of the government's Islamic education policy as well as a reformulation of the Islamic education strategy to include measures for management and governance of Afghanistan's private madrasas. The Minister of Education has suggested a group of religious scholars and experts be supported to help the ministry revising

the Islamic Education part of the Ministry's of Educations five year strategy³¹ to develop a better approach for the governance of the private madrasas.³²

Much seems to be in place for taking the madrasa reform process further in Afghanistan. Both the madrasas and the government are open to reform and to establishing a governing body for the madrasa sector. Yet the process is in its initial stage and will require considerable investment both in terms of time and resources. Madrasas are frequently attacked by both insurgents and security forces, and intimidated by the NDS. This would need to be replaced with a process of trust-building between the madrasas and the government. Establishing a madrasa governing body could serve as a platform to improve madrasa–state relations.

31 Government of Afghanistan, 2006. Ministry of Education National Education Strategic Plan 1385–1389', Kabul: Ministry of Education

32 Meeting with the Minister of Education on 3 July 2010.

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Religious Institution Building in Afghanistan: An Exploration

The findings in this report are mainly based on interviews conducted with madrasa and government representatives in 2010.

Section one takes a closer look at the current status of madrasas registration, the government motivations and strategy for introducing the measure and how it is received by the madrasas.

Section two outlines and discusses the key elements in a madrasa reform and identifies the main opportunities and challenges to reform.

Section three outlines a number of alternative models for institution building in the Afghan madrasa sector.

Section four brings out the conclusions and proposed next steps.

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stitutions', which is available from www.prio.no.