
US EFFORTS TO REFORM EDUCATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

9/11 marked the beginning of a new age of transnational terrorism, a version that is mostly directed at the United States. Since then, US policy has placed much of its focus on combating terrorism and religious extremism throughout the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Specifically, as the background of the 9/11 terrorists was traced to Islamic *madrassas* (religious schools), many began to include education reform as one of the tools to combat terrorism. While the approach to combating terrorism has taken many forms including diplomatic and military efforts, this paper will focus on the economic and social development side of the war on terror, specifically US efforts to promote education reform in the Middle East. Many have cited the need to reform education in MENA as an area of vital interest to US national security by noting the connection between a lack of economic opportunity and education creating a breeding ground for terrorist organization recruitment. As Paul Salem points out, “The struggle for the future of the Arab and Muslim worlds that is being fought now will be won or lost not on the battlefield, but in the classroom.”¹ A deeper look into the issue will demonstrate that while the US has made a concerted effort to increase access to education in the region, it may not be the number of schools but the content of the curriculum that is most important for US interests. This paper will first explore the existing literature on the links between education and extremism. Then it will address the US motivation and strategies for education reform in MENA. This will be followed by a closer look at US education reform efforts in three Muslim majority countries in the region: Morocco, Egypt and Pakistan. As this paper will demonstrate, while the link between education reform and terrorism may not be definitive, US efforts to reform education in MENA are certainly successful in dealing with real-world

1 Paul Salem, “Education vs. Extremism,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09326/1015098-109.stm> (accessed November 22, 2009).

problems. Finally, a look at some policy prescriptions will serve as a recommendation for US action in the future.

Literature Review

There is a clear need for education reform in the Middle East. As Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE Rashid Al Maktoum has noted, “Sixty-five million adult Arabs are illiterate and two-thirds of them are women. More than 10 million Arab children between the ages of 6 and 15 are still not enrolled in any schooling, and on current trends this number will increase by 40 percent over the next decade.”² While there is a broad consensus that the current state of education in the Middle East is in need of serious reform, there is not a clear consensus on the impact of this situation on militant extremism or terrorism. Therefore, a look at some of the diverse existing literature on the subject will help provide a better contextual understanding of the issue. This discussion will begin with the work of those scholars concerned about the broad security threats derived from educational issues in the region, followed by a look at those who link terrorism more directly with education deficiencies. Specifically, this analysis will flesh out the distinction between the importance of increasing the quantity of education versus improving the type of education being administered in the region. The final school of thought will focus on those who assert the lack of causal connection between education levels and terrorism.

Paul Salem, Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, argues that education and its role in overall development are important in keeping the Middle East region secure, arguing that “without dramatic improvement at all educational levels, unemployment, illiteracy and income inequality will continue to worsen and the region will remain a danger to itself and its neighbors.”³ Salem notes that the unemployment rate in the region was 14 percent, even before the economic recession.⁴ Along with high population growth, Salem paints the economic development situation as dire. While he certainly notes the lack of education in many places, he also points out that the quality of the education is what is holding MENA back economically. As he states, “today’s job market demands skills based on problem-solving, critical thinking, modern languages and technology, but Arab educational systems generally remain traditional,

2 Rashid Al Maktoum, “Education vs. Extremism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 2009.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

rote-based and authoritarian.”⁵ Therefore, it is the type of learning occurring in Arab classrooms that is preventing the region’s development.

While Salem certainly makes a relevant point about the link between education and development, he does not directly link the lack of development with terrorism. Robison, Crenshaw and Jenkins on the other hand, do explore the link between terrorism and education. They note that, surprisingly, many of the terrorists involved in attacks in recent years had formal university education. Therefore, education alone is certainly not a preventative factor in terrorist recruitment. The authors explain this phenomenon by pointing out the nature of developing societies:

In developing societies, students in formal education may be culturally caught between two worlds, one traditional and the other modern. Given that schools and universities are often incubators for idealized views of the world, they expose the young to ideologies that promote radical change and social activism. Thus formal educational systems, particularly those that are not balanced by a dynamic economy and strong civil society, may provide recruiting grounds for radical causes.⁶

Therefore, based on this analysis, it seems that it is not just the prevalence of education, but the type of education that is important, and even then their existing social surroundings still have an immense impact on students’ decision to commit terrorist acts.

Isobel Coleman, a Senior Fellow on the Council on Foreign Relations, also notes the importance of the content of what is studied at universities in the Arab world. Similarly to Salem, she notes that “in some countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, curriculum control by Islamists has resulted in an inordinate emphasis on rote memorization of religious texts and insufficient development of marketable, practical skills.”⁷ She references the fact that 65 percent of the population is under the age of 25, leaving a large portion of the population struggling to find jobs and increasingly susceptible to recruitment by militant Muslims. Additionally, she remarks on the need to spread educational and employment opportunities to women. To this end, she cites the fact that “Coun-

5 Ibid.

6 Kristopher K. Robison, Edward M. Crenshaw and J. Craig Jenkins, “Ideologies of Violence: The Social Origins of Islamist and Leftist Transnational Terrorism,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (June 2006): 2011.

7 Isobel Coleman, “The Arab World is Experiencing the First Tremors of a Youthquake,” *Dallas Morning News*, http://www.cfr.org/publication/9809/Arab_world_is_experiencing_the_first_tremors_of_a_youthquake.html (accessed 5 February 2006).

tries in the Middle East with high female labor force participation have lower unemployment overall.”⁸ Coleman’s analysis is important to note because it emphasizes the need to increase the role of women in society, not just for moral or social reasons, but also because it is an important component of economic development in the region.

As Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova point out, many scholars and even politicians such as George W. Bush and Al Gore “have called for increased aid and educational assistance to end terrorism.”⁹ However, instead of educational or economic reasons, these authors point to “political conditions and long-standing feelings of indignity” as explanations for extremism.¹⁰ They also point out that many terrorist organizations prefer more educated recruits for suicide bombing. As Krueger and Maleckova state, “a high level of educational attainment is probably a signal of one’s commitment to a cause and determination, as well as of one’s ability to prepare for an assignment and carry it off.”¹¹ Therefore, not only does a high level of education signify more solid resolve toward the cause, but it also makes recruits more likely to successfully fit into a foreign environment to carry out their mission, as was the case with the 9/11 terrorists. However, while these authors do not foresee a positive correlation between the level of education and economic development, and the eradication of the extremists, they do suggest that “if the international community attempts to use education as part of a strategy to reduce terrorism, it should not limit itself to increasing years of schooling, but must also consider the content of education.”¹²

The above review has certainly demonstrated the diversity of the literature on this subject. It is difficult to ignore both the fact that MENA lacks a conducive environment for education and that education level alone may not be the strongest indicator for the likelihood of participation in terrorist activities. However, this also suggests that while the causal link between education and terrorism may still be up for debate, the one assertion that remains fairly consistent is that greater focus on the type of education rather than just the amount of education seems warranted.

US Strategy

8 Ibid.

9 Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, “Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 119.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 122.

12 Ibid. 142.

In his 2002 speech on the introduction of the Middle East Partnership Initiative, Colin Powell expanded upon the US strategy to address the war on terror in the Middle East:

“Our Partnership Initiative is a continuation, and a deepening, of our long-standing commitment to working with all the peoples of the Middle East to improve their daily lives and help them face the future with hope (...) Any approach to the Middle East that ignores its political, economic, and educational underdevelopment will be built upon sand.”¹³

He also emphasized the importance of spreading free markets and democracy in the region. This demonstrates that soon after 9/11, the Bush Administration determined the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to combating extremism in the region through economic, political, and educational reform. However, it is important to note that while the Bush administration intended to remove authoritarian regimes in order to “send liberty rippling through the greater Middle East” as Fukuyama and McFaul argue, “instead, autocratic regimes in the region have used the excuse of terrorism (Egypt, Pakistan) (...) to tighten autocracy.”¹⁴ However, as can be seen in this paper, the US still saw a strategic motive to retain relationships with these countries and in fact expanded its level of engagement with them.

As demonstrated in the literature review, a clear consensus has failed to form over the years on the impact of economic and education reform in deterring Islamic extremism. However, as the 9/11 Commission Report demonstrated, socio-economic explanations still pervaded the US government’s understanding of the extremist threat:

Pakistan’s endemic poverty, widespread, corruption, and often ineffective government create opportunities for Islamist recruitment. Poor education is a particular concern. Millions of families, especially those with little money, send their children to religious schools, or madrassahs. Many of these schools are the only opportunity available for an education, but some have been used

13 Colin Powell, “Sec. of State Colin Powell - The US Middle East Partnership Initiative,” *The Heritage Foundation*, December 12, 2002, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2002/12/Sec-of-State-Colin-Powell-The-US-Middle-East-Partnership-Initiative?renderforprint=1> (accessed 6 May, 2011).

14 Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul, “Should Democracy Be Promoted or Demoted?,” *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2007-08): 23-24.

as incubators for violent extremism.¹⁵

In its assessment of the situation, the Commission also recommended sustained aid in the areas of military support and education reform. This demonstrates the US government's sustained approach of using economic and educational reform as a tactic in the war on terror during the Bush Administration. However, it is important to note that this approach was certainly overshadowed by the oft-discussed militarily dominated tactics the Bush Administration is commonly known for in its promotion of democracy.

It seems that the Obama administration is taking a similar approach to fighting terrorism in terms of initiating social and educational reform in the region. As Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Josh Brennan stated in reference to President Obama's earlier speech, "he spoke of a 'broader engagement' with the world's Muslims, including the issues important to them: education, public health, economic development, responsive governance, and women's rights."¹⁶ However, he clearly points out that President Obama does not refer to this issue as a "war on terrorism" because terrorism is the tactic and he seeks to avoid confusing ends and means. Additionally, President Obama is clear that neither poverty nor lack of education causes terrorism. However, as Brennan states,

"...there is no denying that when children have no hope for an education, when young people have no hope for a job and feel disconnected from the modern world, when governments fail to provide the basic needs for their people, then people become more susceptible to ideologies of violence and death."¹⁷

Therefore, he asserts the administration's intention to take a comprehensive approach in order to prevent extremist groups from filling the voids left behind by local governments. As he puts it, extremists know these voids exist: "it is why they offer free education to impoverished Pakistani children, where they can recruit and indoctrinate the next generation."¹⁸ Even among two extremely

15 "The 9/11 Commission Report," *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, July 22, 2004: 367, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

16 John Brennan, "Brennan's Speech on: A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans," *Essential Documents, Council on Foreign Relations*, August 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/20001/>.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

diverse approaches from the two administrations, the importance of pushing efforts towards Middle Eastern education reform persists. As the programming description below will show, not only are these efforts important in theory but they are often quite successful in practice.

In addition to statements by administration officials, a look at implemented programs in the region will provide a further understanding of the US approach to education reform in MENA. In the Strategic Plan for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US Department of State, the seven overall Strategic Goals for the organizations' joint initiatives were laid out. One of the Strategic Goals is "Investing in People," which includes investment in areas such as health, social services and education.¹⁹ As the report states, "US educational assistance has been particularly valuable in establishing and extending a lasting, positive image of the United States."²⁰ This is a point that has been left unaddressed in previous discussions of the US presence in the Arab world. Since 9/11, the issue of the negative image of the US in the Arab world has been a popular topic for discussion. Many citizens in the US were left wondering why American's were so hated by people in the Middle East that they would commit atrocious acts of violence against innocent civilians. However, efforts to promote economic development and education reform can have a positive effect on the image of the US in the region. While there certainly is some fear of the US imposing its own cultural norms in the Middle East through its education initiatives, they are in fact often received well – as will be demonstrated in the discussion of the case studies.

Finally, there are three specific programs through which the US carries out education reform in the Middle East. The Middle East Partnership Initiative, which is implemented through the State Department, has overall goals to assist in "...efforts to expand political participation, strengthen civil society and the rule of law, empower women and youth, create educational opportunities, and foster economic reform throughout MENA."²¹ Specifically with regard to education, its goals include: (1) expanding access to education, especially for girls and women, (2) improving the quality of education, and (3) focusing on the development of skills that lead to jobs and opportunity.²² Similarly, USAID has an education initiative in the three cases studied in this paper, Morocco,

19 "Strategic Plan: Fiscal Years 2007-2012," *US Department of State and US Agency for International Development*, May 7, 2007: 12.

20 *Ibid.*, 25.

21 "Middle East Partnership Initiative," *US Department of State*, November 12, 2010, <http://mepi.state.gov/>.

22 *Ibid.*

Egypt, and Pakistan, as well as Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and the West Bank/Gaza. They also have an initiative that specifically directs work with religious and *madrassa* leaders. They work with religious leaders to develop workbooks for the students and promote formal education in addition to their religious studies at the *madrassas*. This initiative has succeeded in providing formal education at 500 *madrassas* to 48,000 children, half of them girls.²³ In addition to this initiative, USAID implements different education programs that vary by country and will be discussed in further detail in the case studies. Finally, there is the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition program, an initiative based in the US Department of Agriculture. It addresses the problem of students, mainly young girls, not being enrolled in school due to malnutrition or hunger. The program provides school meals, teacher training and related support in order to encourage malnourished children to attend school.²⁴ While the scope of this program does not include all countries in the Middle East, it has been successful in countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, both places where Islamic extremism is prevalent. A look at US efforts in three specific cases will provide a more in depth understanding of what types of programs the US is implementing with regard to education reform in MENA. While it is difficult to define a concrete measure of success for these education efforts, each case will loosely chronicle success in the following three areas: 1) aggregate numbers (of pupils enrolled, schools built, literacy rates achieved, etc., 2) curriculum or content input and 3) the reception of 1) and 2) by the local population.

Morocco

Morocco is one of the United States' oldest allies in the MENA region; in fact, Morocco was the first country to recognize the United States diplomatically in 1777. While it has traditionally been known as a moderate partner in the region and a possible model for Middle Eastern democracy, it is important to note that Morocco's educational shortcomings, especially for women, hold them back significantly. The Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) is a non-violent Islamist organization, but its prevalence is still cause for vigilance by the

23 "Issue Brief: The Role of Religious Leaders and Communities in Development Efforts in Asia and the Middle East," *USAID: From the American People*, November 2009: 8.

24 "Fact Sheet: McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program," United States Department of Agriculture, February 2009, <http://www.fas.usda.gov/excredits/foodaid/ffe/mcd-factsheet.asp>.

US.²⁵ Should either the economic or political situation in Morocco deteriorate, it could be a place for Jihadist terrorist groups recruiting either from the PJD or the other major Islamist group Justice and Charity. Therefore, the US has an interest in retaining its strong relationship with Morocco for regional geo-strategic reasons as well as security reasons to prevent the spread of extremism and promote democracy in the region. The US sees Morocco as a positive example of democracy, having successfully taken hold in an Islamic country.

With regard to education, Morocco is still struggling to improve its compulsory education, especially for girls. Morocco spends fifteen times more on higher education than compulsory education, and based on secondary school completion results, this disparity is immediately apparent. “Completion of primary school is 72 percent for girls and 79 percent for boys. However those percentages plummet to 23 percent for boys and 22 percent for girls at the secondary level.”²⁶ Additionally, while country-wide literacy rates are estimated at 39.6% among women and 65.7% among men, the female literacy rate in rural areas is estimated to be merely 10%.²⁷

USAID has had an assistance program in Morocco since 1953 and has spent over \$2 billion since its inception. From 2009-2010, USAID assistance increased from \$18 million to \$24.5 million.²⁸ This increase represents a demonstrated interest in continuing strong relations with Morocco. Specifically with regard to education, USAID’s approach is two-fold: (1) the “school-to-work” approach, which aims at creating close connections between training and employment at various post-middle school levels” and (2) “The basic education approach, which aims at improving retention rates and equipping ninth graders with portable and adaptable skills upon leaving middle school.”²⁹ USAID also works with local communities and businesses to improve the content of basic education and their programs are very well received by the Moroccan government. One of the successful USAID initiatives completed under the umbrella of the Middle East Partnership Initiative is Scholarships for Success.

The project offers 400 girls an opportunity to live near school, limiting their

25 Jeremy M. Sharp, “US Democracy Promotion Policy in the Middle East: The Islamist Dilemma,” *Congressional Research Service: The Library of Congress*, June 15, 2006, 10-11.

26 Stephen P. Heyneman, “The Quality of Education in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA),” *International Journal of Educational Development* 17, no. 4 (1997): 449-66.

27 “Background Note: Morocco,” *US Department of State*, January 2010, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm>.

28 “USAID: Morocco,” *US Agency for International Development*, November 2, 2010, http://www.usaid.gov/ma/programs/ed_overview.html.

29 Ibid.

need to travel long distances unaccompanied. In addition, girls are provided with dormitory management, tutoring, computers, and school supplies. Program evaluations indicate the impact of the program is felt well beyond its immediate recipients, as family members and friends of girls who already received scholarships express excitement about participating in the activity and staying in school.³⁰

Another example was through USAID literacy classes which prepared students with the basic business running skills. One female participant, Rachida, endured daily taunting on her way to school, but at the end declared, “Through this program, we women have paved the way to a new life.”³¹ Additionally, USAID notes that “as a testament to the program’s success, now even some of the men in the village who had taunted Rachida and her classmates want to attend literacy classes.”³² The success of these initiatives demonstrates how well the US programs are being received not only among the government, but among the Moroccan people. Finally, another area where the US has been involved in Moroccan education is through the Peace Corps, which has been active in Morocco since 1963. Over 4,000 volunteers have served in the country and worked in numerous capacities including education and English language training.

Egypt

The United States and Egypt have a long standing, but at times tumultuous relationship. As author Steven Cook notes, “Acute instability in Egypt would harm Washington’s capacity to operate effectively in the Middle East.”³³ Specifically, US concerns regarding Egypt include a strategic interest in short-notice access to the Suez Canal, the possibility of diplomatic support in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and cooperation on counterterrorism issues. Therefore, the US has a vested interest in maintaining a relationship with an Egypt that is stable and friendly to US interests. As Cook notes, however, there is uncertainty about what will happen after President Mubarak is no longer in office. The political uncertainty has been playing out “...against the backdrop of deteriorating social

30 “Global Snapshots: Morocco and Education,” *US Agency for International Development*, April 7, 2011, http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/snapshot/ane/morocco/morocco_ed.html

31 “Telling Our Story: Literacy Changes a Rural Woman’s Life,” *US Agency for International Development*, http://www.usaid.gov/stories/morocco/fp_mc_literacy.pdf.

32 Ibid.

33 Steven Cook, “Political Instability in Egypt,” *Council on Foreign Relations: Center for Preventative Action*, August 2009: 1.

and economic conditions that have been exacerbated by the global recession – an environment ripe for Egypt’s Islamist opposition to press its anti-regime agenda and pursue political power.”³⁴ All of this serves to emphasize the importance of continued US efforts to promote civil and secular education reform in Egypt. Even Egypt’s Minister of Education, Yousry El Gamal, expressed the importance of increasing access to education in his country while praising efforts by USAID. At the opening ceremony of a USAID school in El Baraka village, he stated that, “No real development in any country is possible without the focus on education – especially primary education from 6-18 years of age.”³⁵

The US has begun initiatives on a number of fronts to improve education in Egypt. They have initiated teacher and librarian training in order to modernize the way that children learn and to move away from “the old rote memorization of facts used in previous decades.”³⁶ They have also promoted parent associations to involve the community in education, funded construction of 34 new schools since 2000, trained 3,000 teachers, installed dozens of libraries with Arabic publications and expanded coverage for girls by building 70 new girls schools which enrolled a total of 39,323 female students.³⁷ USAID also covered a quarter of the total cost of constructing the American University in Cairo as well as providing scholarships for impoverished Egyptian students.³⁸ In one success story of a rural school being rebuilt for rural school children through a USAID initiative, Director of the renovated Hamata School Ahmed Hussein praised the efforts in speaking about the improvements that transformed a decrepit school into a functional one, stating that “Students and teachers have more self-respect. The students have even begun to make paintings to decorate the walls.”³⁹ This is an example of how the new infrastructure provided by the US for educational facilities has helped to reinvigorate previously dismal learning environments. Finally, they have also initiated the television program *AlamSimSim*, the Egyptian version of *Sesame Street*, which teaches literacy, numeracy and tolerance and is viewed by 85 percent of children under the age of eight.⁴⁰ It also seems that the efforts by USAID are well received by local

34 Ibid.

35 “Feature: Education, Egypt’s Children and Education Minister See Improved Schools,” *US Agency for International Development*, May 12, 2011, <http://egypt.usaid.gov/Default.aspx?pageid=456>.

36 Ibid.

37 “Education Overview,” *US Agency for International Development: Egypt*, <http://egypt.usaid.gov/Default.aspx?pageid=26>.

38 Ibid.

39 “Success Story, Rebuilding a School for Rural Children,” *US Agency for International Development*, http://www.usaid.gov/stories/egypt/ss_egy_school.pdf.

40 Ibid.

Egyptians. One Egyptian mother expressed her gratitude for US efforts by saying, “We know that the United States provided the computers and the school because the United States wants to help us (...) We are grateful for it.”⁴¹

Pakistan

While Pakistan typically falls outside of the MENA region, it is central to the debate regarding the impact of education on Islamic extremism. Itself a recipient of US education assistance, the case of Pakistan merits inclusion in this paper. One reason Pakistan is so important to the United States is because of its role in the US war in Afghanistan. The US relies on Pakistan to help keep pressure on the Taliban along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. In some cases this is referred to as the hammer and anvil strategy, where the US ‘hammers’ the Taliban towards the ‘anvil’ wall of Pakistan in order to corner the Taliban. Therefore, Pakistan is of strategic importance to the US. Additionally, because of the prevalence of Islamic *madrassas* in Pakistan, it has become a cause of concern for the US that some of these religious schools may be teaching militant ideology. This is an interesting departure in US strategy from that of the Cold War during the Afghan-Soviet war, in which the CIA actually helped fund some of these same Pakistani *madrassas* in order to train Islamists and convince them to fight with the mujahidin against the Soviets.⁴² Now, the US has a different view on *madrassas* and has an interest in ensuring they are not promoting extremism.

The number of *madrassas* that actually exists in Pakistan is a much debated issue. As Robert Looney notes, “In 1947, about 150 madrassahs existed in Pakistan. By 1971, this number had increased to 562. Another 30 years later, there were about 20,000.”⁴³ However, many authors such as Christine Fair claim that *madrassas* only comprise about 1 percent of full-time Pakistani students. Fair notes that while it is a small percentage,

“(...) small numbers can have large consequences, including sectarianism and connections to sectarian violence, the production of suicide attacks in Pakistan and elsewhere, the fostering of worldviews that are not conducive to

41 “Feature: Education, Egypt’s Children and Education Minister See Improved Schools,” *US Agency for International Development*, <http://egypt.usaid.gov/Default.aspx?pageid=456>.

42 Andrew Coulson, “Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World: Is There a Problem? What Can We Do About It?,” *Policy Analysis* 511 (March 11, 2004): 15-16.

43 Robert Looney, “Failed Economic Take-Offs and Terrorism in Pakistan: Conceptualizing a Proper Role for US Assistance,” *Asian Survey* 44, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2004): 786.

domestic or external peaceful coexistence, and in some isolated cases, other forms of militancy in Pakistan and beyond.”⁴⁴

Even with the existence of these mostly privately-funded *madrassas*, approximately 20 million school age children do not have access to quality education, and literacy rates are extremely low at 69 percent for men and 44 percent for women.⁴⁵ Finally, many point to the fact that even the publicly funded state schools still exacerbate the problem. A study by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute notes that textbooks are full of historical inaccuracies, promote insensitivity to other religions, encourage prejudice and incite militancy and violence.⁴⁶ Therefore, compared with the education systems in the previous two case studies, the Pakistani system warrants more immediate and comprehensive reform.

The US has implemented many programs to assist Pakistan in education reform through USAID. These programs have ensured that approximately 900,000 school aged children attend school, provided school libraries with 100,000 books and other educational materials, taught 2,500 basic language skills contributing to a 10 percent increase in literacy, supported 34 Pakistan-US university collaborations and sponsored 182 Fulbright programs.⁴⁷ USAID also aims to provide universal education in Pakistan by 2015. Additionally, in a similar approach to the successful *AlamSimSim* in Egypt, USAID recently announced \$20 million in funding for four years of a Pakistani version of Sesame Street called *SimSimHumara*, which hopes to reach 95 million people in Urdu and 56 other regional languages. Larry Dolan, Director of the education office at USAID for Pakistan, notes that “teaching kids early on makes them much more successful when they get to school. And this program will have the capacity to encourage tolerance, which is so key to what we’re trying to do here.”⁴⁸ Finally, congress even introduced a bill that dealt with the issue of *madrassas* in Pakistan:

44 Christine Fair, *The Madrassah Challenge: Militancy and Religious Education in Pakistan* (Washington DC, United States Institute of Peace, 2008), 95.

45 “Education Program,” *US Agency for International Development: Pakistan*, <http://www.usaid.gov/pk/sectors/education/>.

46 A.H. Nayyar and Ahmad Salim, “The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan,” *Sustainable Development Policy Institute*, 2003, http://www.sdpi.org/whats_new/reporton/State%20of%20Curr&TextBooks.pdf.

47 “Education Program,” *US Agency for International Development: Pakistan*, <http://www.usaid.gov/pk/sectors/education/>.

48 Saeed Shah, “Sesame Street comes to Pakistan,” *Guardian News and Media Limited*, April 7, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/07/sesame-street-pakistan>.

“In September 2009, the US Congress approved a new bill authorizing \$1.5 billion a year in nonmilitary aid for the next five years starting in 2010. While the bill does not earmark a specific amount for education, it is authorized to provide assistance in educational reform including programs for ‘development of modern, nationwide school curriculums for public, private, and religious schools’ and ‘support for the oversight of all educational institutions, including religious schools.’”⁴⁹

However, the challenges are greater in Pakistan as well. As Fair notes, “Pakistanis are deeply suspicious of US-supported efforts to reform Pakistan’s public schools, as they believe the United States seeks to de-Islamize the country’s educational system.”⁵⁰ However, Fair also points out that this is in fact part of the US goals. Therefore it seems that these initiatives in Pakistan are less welcome than in countries such as Morocco and Egypt.

Conclusion

This review of US education reform efforts in the Middle East has demonstrated that there are competing views about the impact of education on Islamic extremism. The traditional belief that poverty and lack of education in the Middle East leads to an increase in Islamic extremism seems to be at least partly adhered to by both the Bush and Obama administrations. However, it seems that the traditional views on the impact of education in the Middle East need to be reviewed. As Krueger and Maleckova have noted, many of the terrorists who staged well-known attacks have been educated at the university level and in their view, educated individuals may actually be more favorable to terrorist organizations. While this may be the case, it does not mean that US efforts to promote education reform in the Middle East have not been successful. As demonstrated in this analysis, there is certainly a need to improve education in the MENA region, not just an increase in enrollment and literacy, but also to improve the quality of the curriculum in order to keep the workforce competitive in a globalizing world. There is also a dire need to rectify the disproportionate access to education for young girls and women. US efforts can certainly go a long way to improve the situation in these areas.

While the public secular education curriculum needs to be reformed

49 Ibid.

50 Fair, 95.

in many cases to include critical thinking and vocational skills instead of the rote memorization that typically characterizes Arab education, the US should be wary about trying to reform madrassas. As Daniel Markey says, “madrassas have never been intended to be more than seminaries and to violate that tradition in the name of an education program seems to be misplaced.”⁵¹ It must be remembered that not all madrassas are militant, and that these institutions serve a vital religious education role for many members of the Islamic faith. Therefore, to avoid the perception of trying to impose its own secular education in the Arab world, the US should quietly put pressure on local governments to crack down on those madrassas known to promote extremist violence. Finally, it is important to remember that education is only one component of the US strategy in the Middle East. As John Brennan stated, “... any comprehensive approach has to also address ... the conditions that help fuel violent extremism.”⁵² Therefore, the approach must be multifaceted and include education reform as one pillar in a multi-pillar approach including socio-economic, military, and political methods of reform.

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51 Daniel Markey, “A False Choice in Pakistan,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (July-August 2007): 88.
52 Brennan, “A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans.”