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Restoring faith in religious schools

By Phil Sands

The National (07.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (08.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – When a car bomb went off in Damascus last September, killing mainly civilians, antiterrorism officers found a network of private Islamic institutes had spiralled out of control. Now these religious academies are under strict new rules.

It was an unremarkable Saturday morning in Damascus, right up until 8.45am when the bomb exploded on the main airport road, killing 17 people and wounding more than a dozen others.

There had been previous bombs in Syria; there have been assassinations and political disappearances. But the assault of Sept 27 2008 was different. It was the deadliest of its kind for decades and, although apparently targeting a security service office, the victims were overwhelmingly civilian.

Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Turkey – Syria's neighbours – had all become more or less intimate with this type of attack and the repercussions; the immediate panic and confusion, struggling with mass casualties, the gruesome work of sifting through body parts to identify the dead, trying to hunt down the perpetrators.

Syria, however, was caught off guard. And if the numerous security agencies were blindsided by the bombing itself, they were also shocked by the results of their inquiry into how it happened.

Antiterrorism officers discovered that a network of influential private Islamic schools had spiralled dangerously out of control.

Religious schooling in Syria has expanded rapidly since 2005, when there were just 30 state-run religious education institutes with 7,000 students. According to official figures, by 2008 that number had risen to 127 Islamic academies with about 21,000 students.

However, it was the 32 private schools in Damascus that set alarm bells ringing. Although opened with government permission, they had for years been running largely unconstrained by rules or regulations. No firm system had ever been put in place to monitor their teachings or ideologies, or to prevent the spread of radicalism among their thousands of students.

Less than two months after the 200kg car bomb was detonated, Syrian state television aired the confessions of nine men and one woman, who said they had orchestrated and carried out the attack. All admitted to being members of Fatah al Islam, a Lebanon-based Sunni extremist group.

Fatah al Islam fought a bloody war against the Lebanese army in the Nahr al Bared refugee camp near Tripoli in 2007, a conflict that killed more than 300 people.

Among the Syria bombing suspects was Abdul Baqi Hussein, who claimed to be Fatah al Islam's security leader and to have carried out guerrilla attacks against the Americans in Iraq. He also said he had studied for two years at the Fatah institute in Damascus, one of the city's major private Islamic schools.

In his televised remarks, Hussein portrayed the institute as a magnet that "attracts many Arab and foreign students" who shared a "hard-line" Islamic ideology. It was at the school that his own militancy had been incubated, he said, and the place where he had met like-minded colleagues.

The mosque and teaching rooms of the Fatah institute are a short distance from the Christian quarter of the Old City and separated from Bab Sharqi, a major historical site and tourist landmark, by a congested road.

The institute was established in 1965 by Mohammed Salih Farfor and initially had 200 students. Today, it is administered by his son, Hussam Eddin Farfor, and has 5,500 students from around the world, including Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia, although most are Syrians from conservative Sunni families.

In the aftermath of the bombing it came under close scrutiny. Government investigators realised they had little information about key aspects of the school's operations.

It was teaching from a syllabus that had never been approved by either the ministry of education or the ministry of religious affairs.

Foreign students were not properly vetted by the security services, and little was known about teaching staff and their beliefs. Crucially, the sources of the institute's funding were unclear.

A senior figure within Syria's religious schools community, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the Fatah institute had an annual budget of some US\$3.3 million (Dh12m), and that the authorities had only been able to accurately trace a fraction of it back to its sources.

The rest came from unknown private donors.

When the televised confessions implicated the institute in the bomber's ideological development, there were public demands from secular elements of Syrian society that it be forcibly closed to prevent a spread of Islamic militancy.

Moderates inside the ruling elite reportedly harboured similar fears: that Syria's Sunni majority population – significant numbers of whom probably quietly advocate Syria being run as an Islamic state, rather than as a secular-leaning republic – may have passed the point where it could be controlled.

In an interview at the Fatah institute, Mr Farfor said the school taught a modern and moderate curriculum – including western philosophy and languages – and placed a heavy emphasis on tolerance. The bomber was an anomaly, he said, and had not learned violence there.

"We have a good history, one man cannot deform us," he said. "In the days of the Prophet Mohammed there were liars and hypocrites, do we blame Mohammed for that? This man does not represent our academy, we have good professors and students who become key figures in society, why does anyone want to delete our history?"

Mr Farfor pointedly warned against closing private Islamic schools, saying it would only serve to exacerbate problems of extremism, driving young Muslim scholars perilously out of sight.

"Let's teach the youth in the light, not let them go underground where they will get a fanatical or extremist interpretation of Islam," he said.

The Fatah institute was not the only Islamic establishment affected by the lax, confused government regulations. All of the private institutes were in a similar situation. The largest, oldest and most illustrious of the schools, the Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro Institute – also known as Abu Noor – has as many as 8,000 students enrolled at any one time, some 300 of whom are non-Arabs, from Indonesia, Malaysia, Russia and the former Soviet Union, Pakistan, Algeria and Morocco.

Its annual budget is about \$4.8m, much of which comes from a registered Islamic charitable foundation, al Ansar, which has declared annual finances of \$2.8m. The remaining funding for the Kuftaro institute, \$2m, comes from private donors whose identities are unknown to the authorities.

Such opaque financial arrangements opened the possibility that money was coming from ultraconservative Islamic groups that may have deliberately wanted to stir up militancy in Syria to undermine the regime. Sunni extremists have made it clear they consider Syria's largely secular authorities to be un-Islamic, a tension heightened because the ruling Syrian elite are Alawite, a sub-sect of Shia Islam considered heretical by Sunni hardliners. Damascus's close relationship with Shiite Iran has also angered Arab regimes and Sunni hardliners, all fearful that Shiism is spreading in the region and growing in power.

The large number of foreign students and private teaching staff exacerbated potential for trouble in the Islamic institutes. The combination of factors raised difficult questions for the Syrian authorities. "Where were they getting the money from?" asked one government official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "There were 1,000 private teachers, all paid much more than normal teachers, and they got their salaries from private sources, and we didn't evaluate them. There are about 500 foreign students who had visas without thorough checks of their backgrounds."

Private academies maintain that the overwhelming majority of students are peaceful and moderate. But one of the most well-respected schools admitted that foreign students are proving difficult to track. Again, speaking on condition of anonymity, a leading institute administrator said he had concerns before the bombing.

"The Syrian students are not so much of a worry, and most of the foreign students live on campus so we know what is happening with them. But one third of students live off campus and they are much harder to monitor. We don't know where they go, who they meet, what ideas they are getting. We'd rather they all lived inside the academy."

Of most immediate concern to the authorities, however, was the unregulated curriculum, which enabled some of the institutes to teach nakedly sectarian agendas. A member of a religious schools review committee, established in the wake of the bombing, said sectarian intolerance had been taught in classrooms.

"They did not have to have their books approved, or their curriculum," the committee member said, on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the subject. "In some Sunni schools they were using books that said it was against God for Muslims to visit the tombs and holy shrines, which are Shiite cultural practices."

“And some of the Hawza [Shiite religious schools] taught negatively about the caliphs who followed the Prophet, a criticism aimed at Sunnis.”

The impact of these teachings was to emphasise differences between Sunnis and Shiites, a dangerous subject, particularly following the sectarian bloodletting in Iraq between 2005 and 2007, and the perpetually simmering torment in Lebanon. Syria, with a mix of Sunni and Shiite Muslims, a sizeable Christian minority and various other communities, has been at pains to avoid igniting any sectarian fires on home soil.

Most of the problems arose because no single government ministry was ultimately responsible for the private religious schools. They were licensed by the ministry of religious affairs, funded by charities overseen by the ministry of labour and social affairs, and had broad curriculum directions mapped out by the ministry of education.

As the Islamic institutions quickly developed in size and number, the absence of clear regulations and co-ordinated oversight swamped the ability of Syria’s often-dysfunctional bureaucracy to keep track of what was going on. Laws governing religious schools were still based on a decree issued in the late 1950s, when Syria and Egypt were joined as the United Arab Republic, under the leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser.

The Sept 27 bombing came as a wake-up call to the authorities, underlining the need for quick and effective reforms. It also apparently galvanised normally obstinate ministries into actually taking action. Rather than closing any of the private schools, by the end of last year – a few months after the bombing – they were all brought under the direct control of the ministry of religious affairs.

A unified, government-approved curriculum was established in consultation with the institutes’ heads, removing all books that spread sectarian discord. Texts making disparaging remarks about either Sunnis or Shiites were prohibited from classes.

New financial regulations were introduced. Since the end of 2008 it has been a requirement that comprehensive, detailed accounts be submitted to a government finances committee for audit. Donations from charities no longer pass directly into the hands of the institutions, instead needing prior approval from government observers.

In an effort to draw a clear line between the funding charities and the schools, anyone working in a religious capacity within a private Islamic teaching institute is no longer allowed to hold an official position within a charity providing finance to that school.

Two other key changes are being implemented, concerning teachers and foreign students. Whereas overseas students used to be able to register for study at any school prepared to accommodate them, new regulations mean all foreign students will be compelled to register at a single centre, the Badr al Deen al Hasseni school in Damascus’s Old City.

Controlled by the ministry of religious affairs – which will also be responsible for obtaining entry visas and screening students – it will make it easier to identify any Islamic extremists. The days of the Abu Noor institute attracting hundreds of foreign students are effectively over.

Control over school staff will also be passed fully into government hands, with all teachers to be brought on to government payrolls, in effect nationalising staff at private religious schools.

“Each school will get its donations and money through a committee headed by an employee who works for the ministry,” Mohammad Bukheet, director of the religious

education department at the ministry of religious affairs, said in an interview with Syria Today magazine.

"We [the government] want to know where all monies are coming from and where and when they are being spent."

Mr Bukheet, who is in charge of day-to-day oversight of the religious schools, made it clear that private institutes would have far less freedom from now on. "We will be the decision-makers," he said. "We can now hire and fire any teacher and we will pay their salaries."

The religious schools have had little option but to embrace the changes ordered by Syria's authoritarian administration.

In November leaders of all the major private Islamic institutes were invited to meet with Bashar Assad, the Syrian president, to talk about the new regulations. According to one institute official, the president made it clear the schools were not under threat but that they had to be brought under a coherent legal framework. The president also reportedly said the raft of new controls would be tested for a year and then reviewed.

"The political leadership wants to lead by consensus on this," said the official. "It doesn't want a crackdown and the measures it has introduced are moderate, they respect our rights."

At the Kuftaro institute, Salah al Deen Kuftaro, the school director, said he supported the new rules.

"We are happy with the new measures. We work in a transparent way so we are not angry."

"I don't see these things as negative points. For example, with a unified curriculum approved by the government, it means our qualifications will be officially recognised. In the past we had graduates with certificates that were not accepted for government jobs." Mr Kuftaro also said the decision not to shut all private Islamic schools had been a moderate and sensible solution.

"We have to accept there has been a rise in Islamic sentiments in the region. We have to recognise that phenomena, not try to ignore it."

"To have our young people studying in our schools is better than them going to other countries where they may learn strange ideas or end up with teachers who tell them the real Islam is violent."

"We don't need people going abroad to return with radical and wrong ideas. The best solution is to have them studying in the open here in Syria."
