

# INTERRELIGIOUS Insight

A journal of dialogue and engagement

July 2006 Edition

## Inside the Madrasas

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

*This article is PART ONE of a longer piece which appeared first in The New York Review of Books, Volume 52, Number 19, December 1, 2005 ([www.nybooks.com/articles/18514](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18514)). PART TWO will follow in the October edition of this journal.*

Shortly before four British Muslims, three of them of Pakistani origin, blew themselves up in the London Underground on July 7, I traveled along the Indus River to Akora Khattack in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Here, straddling the noisy, truck-thundering Islamabad highway, stands the Haqqania, one of the most radical of the religious schools called *madrasas*.

Many of the Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, were trained at this institution. If its teachings have been blamed for inspiring the brutal, ultra-conservative

Akora policymakers most fear and dislike incarnation of Islamic law that that regime presided over, there is no sign that the Haqqania is ashamed of its former pupils: instead, the madrasa's director, Maulana Sami ul-Haq, still proudly boasts that whenever the Taliban put out a call for fighters, he would simply close down the madrasa and send his students off to fight. In many ways, then, Khattack represents everything that US in this region, a bastion of religious, intellectual, and sometimes – in the form of the Taliban – military resistance to Pax Americana and all it represents.

A dust storm was blowing as we crossed the Indus just below the massive ramparts of the fortress of Attock, once the great bulwark protecting India against incursions from Afghanistan. The road was lined with poplars. In the distance towered the jagged dragons' backs of the blue Margalla Hills; a graveyard lay to one side, its green grave flags fluttering in the breeze. A few kilometers beyond the river stood a ramshackle line of buildings, all built in a crude modern concrete version of Mughal architecture. Washing was hanging up to dry from the roofs and verandas of the dormitory blocks, and in the main courtyard students were bustling around. All were male, all wore turbans, and all were heavily bearded.

Maulana Sami proved, however, to be an unexpectedly dapper and cheery figure for a man supposed to be such an icon of anti-Western hatred. He wore a blue frock coat of

vaguely Dickensian cut, and his neatly trimmed beard was raffishly dyed with henna. He had a craggy face, a large outcrop of nose, and the corners of his eyes were contoured with laughter lines. I was ushered into his office and introduced to his two-year-old granddaughter, who was playing happily with a yellow helium balloon. I remarked that there did not seem to be much evidence of the Haqqania suffering from the crackdown on centers of radicalism promised by President Musharraf. Sami's face lit up:

"That is for American consumption only," he laughed cheerfully. "It is only statements to the newspapers. Nothing has happened."

"So," I asked, "you are not finding the atmosphere difficult at the moment?"

"We are in a good, strong position," replied Sami. "Bush has woken the entire Islamic world. We are grateful to him."

Sami smiled broadly: "Our job now is propagating Islamic ideology. We give free education, free clothes and books. We even give free accommodation. We are the only people giving the poor education."

Sami paused and his smile faded: "The people are so desperate," he said. "They are fed up with the old ways in Pakistan, with the secular parties and the army. There is so much corruption. Musharraf only fights Muslims and follows the wishes of the West. He is not interested in the people of Pakistan. So now everyone is looking for Islamic answers – and we can help provide that. Only our Islamic system gives justice."

For better or worse, the sort of change in political attitudes that Sami ul-Haq has overseen from his madrasa in Akora Khattack is being reproduced across Pakistan. An Interior Ministry report after September 11 revealed that there are now twenty-seven times as many madrasas in the country as there were in 1947: from 245 at the time of Independence, the number shot up to 6,870 in 2001.<sup>1</sup> A significant proportion of these are run by, or connected to, the radical Islamist political parties such as the MMM, which under Sami's vice-presidency have just imposed a Taliban-like regime on Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, banning the public performance of music and depictions of the human form. The one exception to this, bizarrely, is the image of Colonel Sanders outside the new Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in Peshawar. This was apparently because the Colonel was judged to be sporting a properly Islamic beard, and so was spared the iconoclasm imposed elsewhere.

The Islamic political parties are quite clear about the benefits that can accrue to them by controlling places of education. The headquarters of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Lahore, for example, doubles as a madrasa where two hundred students receive a Koranic education with a distinctively political spin. On a visit this summer I found one maulana preaching a sermon on the subject of President Musharraf's obedience to US dictates and his willingness to abandon the Taliban. A spokesman for the party told me quite explicitly:

*the political transformation our madrasas are bringing about is having a massive effect on the future of Pakistan. The recent success of the Islamic parties is very much associated with the work we do in our madrasas.*

Across Pakistan, the tenor of religious belief has been correspondingly radicalized: the tolerant Sufi-minded Barelvi form of Islam is now deeply out of fashion in Pakistan, overtaken by the sudden rise of the more hard-line and politicized reformist Deobandi,

Wahhabi, and Salafi strains of the faith.

The sharp acceleration in the number of these madrasas first began under General Zia ul-Haq at the time of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, and was financed mainly by the Saudis. Although some of the madrasas so founded were little more than single rooms attached to village mosques, others are now very substantial institutions: the Dar ul-Uloom in Baluchistan, for example, is now annually enrolling some 1,500 boarders and a further 1,000 day-boys. Altogether there are possibly as many as 800,000 students in Pakistan's madrasas: an entire free Islamic education system running parallel to the moribund state sector.

A mere 1.8 percent of Pakistan's GDP is spent on government schools. As a result, 15 percent of the schools are without a proper building; 40 percent without water; 71 percent without electricity. There is frequent absenteeism of teachers; indeed many of these schools exist only on paper. Last year when Imran Khan, the former Pakistan cricket captain turned politician, investigated the government schools in his constituency, he found that 20 percent of those on the rolls did not exist at all, while 70 percent of those that did were semipermanently closed.

In education Pakistan is lagging behind India in the most striking way: in India 65 percent of the population is literate, and the number rises every year; in the new budget, the Indian education system received a substantial boost of state funds. But in Pakistan only 42 percent are literate, and the proportion is falling. Instead of investing in education, the Pakistan military government is spending money on a new fleet of American F-16s for its air force. The near collapse of government schooling has meant that many of the country's poorest people who wish to improve their children's hope of advancing themselves have no option but to place the children in the madrasa system, where they are guaranteed a rigidly traditional but nonetheless free education.

Madrasas are probably now more dominant in Pakistan's educational system than they are anywhere else; but the general trend is one that is common throughout the Islamic world. In Egypt the number of teaching institutes dependent on the Islamic university of al-Azhar increased from 1,855 in 1986 to 4,314 ten years later. The Saudis have stepped up their funding so that in Tanzania alone they have been spending \$1 million a year building new madrasas. In Mali madrasas now account for a quarter of the children in primary schools.<sup>2</sup>

Seen in this wider setting, Sami ul-Haq and his madrasas raise a number of important questions: How much are these madrasas the source of the problems which culminated in the Islamist attacks of September 11? Are madrasas simply terrorist factories? Should the West be pressing US client states like Pakistan and Egypt simply to close them down?

In the panic-stricken aftermath of the Islamist attacks on America, the answers to these questions seemed obvious. Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld were not known for their agreement on matters of foreign policy, but one thing that they were united upon was the threat posed by madrasas. In 2003 Rumsfeld posed the question: "Are we capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrasas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?" A year later Colin Powell described madrasas as a breeding ground "for fundamentalists and terrorists."

Since the revelations that three of the four future British Muslim suicide bombers visited Pakistan in the year preceding the July 7 attack, the British press has been quick to follow the US line on madrasas, with the Sunday Telegraph helpfully translating the Arabic word madrasa as terrorist "training school" (it actually means merely "place of education"), while

the Daily Mirror confidently asserted over a double-page spread that the three bombers had all enrolled at Pakistani “Terror Schools.”

In actual fact, it is still uncertain whether the three bombers visited any madrasas while they were in Pakistan: madrasas only entered the debate because the bombers told their families they were going to Pakistan to pursue religious studies, just as they told them they were going to a religious conference when they set off to bomb London. According to sources at the prime minister’s offices in Downing Street there is in fact no evidence that any madrasa was visited by any members of the cell at any point on their journey. Still less is there any proof that madrasas were responsible for “brainwashing” the trio, as the British press assumed after the bombings. Instead there is considerable evidence to show that the trio were radicalized in Yorkshire through the Islamist literature and videos that were available beneath the counter of their local Islamic bookshop. And while it is now certain that the group made contact with al-Qaeda in Pakistan, there is no reason to assume that a madrasa acted as the conduit.

In this case, as in so many others, the link between madrasas and international terrorism is far from clear-cut, and new research has been published that has challenged the much-repeated but intellectually shaky theory of madrasas being little more than al-Qaeda training schools. It is certainly true that many madrasas are fundamentalist and literalist in their approach to the scriptures and that many subscribe to the most hard-line strains of Islamic thought. Few make any effort to prepare their students to function in a modern, plural society. It is also true that some madrasas can be directly linked to Islamic radicalism and occasionally to outright civil violence. Just as there are some yeshivas in settlements on the West Bank that have a reputation for violence against Palestinians, and Serbian monasteries that sheltered war criminals following the truce in Bosnia, so it is estimated that as many as 15 percent of Pakistan’s madrasas preach violent jihad, while a few have been said to provide covert military training. Madrasa students took part in the Afghan and Kashmir jihads, and have been repeatedly implicated in acts of sectarian violence, especially against the Shia minority in Karachi.

It is now becoming very clear, however, that producing cannon fodder for the Taliban and educating local sectarian thugs is not at all the same as producing the kind of technically literate al-Qaeda terrorist who carried out the horrifyingly sophisticated attacks on the USS Cole, the US embassies in East Africa, the World Trade Center, and the London Underground. Indeed, a number of recent studies have emphasized that there is a fundamental distinction to be made between madrasa graduates – who tend to be pious villagers from impoverished economic backgrounds, possessing little technical sophistication – and the sort of middle-class, politically literate global Salafi jihadis who plan al-Qaeda operations around the world. Most of these turn out to have secular and technical backgrounds. Neither bin Laden nor any of the men who carried out the Islamist assaults on America or Britain were trained in a madrasa or was a qualified alim, or cleric.

The men who planned and carried out the September 11 attacks have often been depicted in the press as being “medieval fanatics.” In fact it would be more accurate to describe them as confused but highly educated middle-class professionals. Mohamed Atta was an architect; Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s chief of staff, was a pediatric surgeon; Ziad Jarrah, one of the founders of the Hamburg cell, was a dental student who later turned to aircraft engineering; Omar Sheikh, the kidnapper of Daniel Pearl, was a product of the London School of Economics. As the French scholar Gilles Kepel puts it, the new breed of

global jihadis are not the urban poor of the third world so much as “the privileged children of an unlikely marriage between Wahhabism and Silicon Valley, which al-Zawahiri visited in the 1990s. They were heirs not only to jihad and the umma but also to the electronic revolution and American-style globalization.”<sup>3</sup>

This is also the conclusion drawn by the most sophisticated analysis of global jihadis yet published: *Understanding Terror Networks* by a former CIA official, Marc Sageman. Sageman examined the records of 172 al-Qaeda-linked terrorists, and his conclusions have demolished much of the conventional wisdom about who joins jihadi groups: two thirds of his sample were middle-class and university-educated; they are generally technically minded professionals and several have a Ph.D. Nor are they young hotheads: their average age is twenty-six, most of them are married, and many have children. Only two appear to be psychotic. Even the ideologues that influence them are not trained clerics: Sayyid Qutb, for example, was a journalist. Islamic terrorism, like its Christian and Jewish predecessors, is a largely bourgeois enterprise.

Peter Bergen of John Hopkins recently came to similar conclusions when he published his study of seventy-five Islamist terrorists involved in anti-Western attacks. According to Bergen, 53 percent of the terrorists had a university degree, while “only 52 percent of Americans have been to college.”<sup>4</sup> Against this background, it should not have come as a surprise that the British Muslim bombers attended universities and that one drove a Mercedes.

It is true that there are several examples of radical madrasa graduates who have become involved with al-Qaeda: Maulana Masood Azhar, forexample, leader of the jihadi group called Jaish-e-Muhammad and an associate of bin Laden, originally studied in the ultra-militant Binori Town madrasa in Karachi. A madrasa dropout took part in last year’s bombing of Musharraf’s convoy. In Indonesia, the Bali bombings were the work of the Lashkar-i-Jihad group, which partially emerged from a group of Salafi madrasas in Indonesia.

By and large, however, madrasa students simply do not have the technical expertise necessary to carry out the kind of sophisticated attacks we have recently seen led by al-Qaeda. Instead the concerns of most madrasa graduates remain more traditional: the correct fulfillment of rituals, how to wash correctly before prayers, and the proper length to grow a beard. All these matters are part of the curriculum of Koranic studies in the madrasas. The graduates are also interested in opposing what they see as un-Islamic practices such as worshiping at saints’ graves or attending the Shia laments called marsiyas, for the death of the Prophet’s son-in-law Ali at the battle of Kerbala.<sup>5</sup>

Their focus, in other words, is not on opposing non-Muslims or the West – the central concern of the global jihadis – so much as fostering what they see as proper Islamic behavior at home, the personal law governing which is a central subject of madrasa teachings. In contrast, few al-Qaeda agents seem to have more than the most perfunctory grasp of Islamic law or learning. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence that bin Laden himself actually despises what he sees as the nit-picking juridical approach of the madrasa-educated ulema (clerics), regarding his own brand of violent Islamism as a wholly more appropriate answer to the problems of the Muslim world.

This was graphically illustrated when, shortly after September 11, bin Laden told a group of visiting Saudis that the “youths who conducted the operations did not accept any fiqh [school of Islamic law] in the popular term, but they accepted the fiqh that the Prophet Muhammad brought.” It is a telling quote: bin Laden showing his impatience with legal

training and the inherited structures of Islamic authority. The hijackers, he implied, were taking effective practical action rather than sitting around discussing legal texts. As such he set himself up as a challenge to the madrasas and the ulema, bypassing traditional modes of religious study and looking directly to the Koran for guidance.

A brilliant discussion of bin Laden's usurpation of the role of the madrasa-based ulema can be found in the illuminating essay *Landscapes of the Jihad*, by Faisal Devji, who teaches at the New School. Devji points out just how deeply unorthodox bin Laden is, with his cult of martyrs and frequent talk of dream and visions, all of which derive from popular, mystical, and Shia Islamic traditions, against which the orthodox Sunni ulema have long struggled. Moreover, bin Laden and his followers "routinely attack the most venerable clerics and seminaries, accusing them of being slaves of apostate regimes.... They also issue their own legal opinions or fatwas without possessing the learning or clerical authority to do so."

All this highlights how lacking in intellectual sophistication the debate about al-Qaeda still is. Again and again, we are told that terrorism is associated with poverty and the basic, Koranic education provided by madrasas. We are told that the people who carry out this work are evil madmen who hate our wealth and our freedoms, and that no debate is possible as they "aim to wipe us out" (as one British cabinet minister told the BBC after the attacks on London). That the hostility of the Islamists may have links with US foreign policy in the Middle East, especially the Anglo-American adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, is consistently denied, despite the explicit video testimony to the contrary by both al-Zawahiri and Mohammad Sidique Khan, one of the London bombers.<sup>6</sup>

In reality al-Qaeda operatives tend to be highly educated and their aims explicitly political. Bin Laden, in his numerous communiqués, has always been unambiguous about this. As he laconically remarked in his broadcast timed to coincide with the last US election, if it was freedom they were against, al-Qaeda would have attacked Sweden. The men who planned the September 11 attacks were not products of the traditional Islamic educational system, even in its most radical form. Instead they are graduates of Western-style institutions. They are not at all the protégés of the mullahs.

RECENT BOOKS referred to in this article:

Saleem H. Ali, "Islamic Education and Conflict: Understanding the Madrassahs of Pakistan". Paper presented at the US Institute of Peace, June 24, 2005.

Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, Columbia University Press, 349 pp., \$29.50.

Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, translated from the French by Pascale Ghazaleh, Harvard University Press, 327 pp., \$23.95.

## NOTES

1 There is considerable disagreement over the number of madrasas in Pakistan and the proportion of the country's students they educate. Most authorities agree that the number of madrasas has greatly increased in recent years, and a widely quoted report by the International Crisis Group in July 2002 indicated that there could be as many as ten thousand madrasas in Pakistan educating over a million and a half students. This was, however, challenged by a March 2005 World Bank report based on government census figures that puts the figure much lower and suggested that less than 1 percent of all

Pakistanis were educated in madrasas. There now seems to be some consensus that the ICG slightly exaggerated the scale of the problem, while the World Bank report seriously underestimates it. A recent survey by Saleem Ali of the University of Vermont argues that the true figure probably stands somewhere between these two reports. See Saleem H. Ali, "Islamic Education and Conflict: Understanding the Madrassahs of Pakistan," a paper presented at the US Institute of Peace, June 24, 2005.

2 Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, p. 93; see the review by Max Rodenbeck, "The Truth About Jihad," *The New York Review*, August 11, 2005, which also discusses several other books mentioned in this article.

3 Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, p. 112.

4 Peter Bergen, "The Madrasa Myth," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2005.

5 See Olivier Roy, "Has Islamism a Future in Afghanistan?" in *Fundamentalism Reborn: Afghanistan and the Taliban*, edited by William Maley (New York University Press, 1998). See also Barbara Metcalfe's excellent "Piety, Persuasion and Politics: Deoband's Model of Social Activism," in *The Empire and the Crescent: Global Implications for a New American Century*, Ed., Aftab Ahmad Malik (Amal, 2003), p. 157.

6 On September 1, al-Jazeera aired a video recorded by Mohommad Sidique Khan before his suicide bombing. His statement included the following words: "Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war."

*William Dalrymple is an acclaimed writer who lives in New Delhi. His most recent book, White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India, won the Wolfson Prize for History. He is now at work on a biography of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor.*