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Reform School:

Madrassa Education and the Charade of Reform

By Nicholas Schmidle

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NOT FAR FROM LAHORE'S chic cafés and art galleries, class is in session at Darul Uloom Al-Muhammadiyah. A couple hundred boys, each one crouched over an ankle-high bookstand, are gathered in a sunken room made of crusty cinder blocks sprouting rebar, rocking and rolling to the sound of the Quran. They are reciting Islam's holy book, chapter by chapter, in its original text, even though none of them speak or understand more than a few words of Arabic. Collectively, their voices fill the bunker and mimic a Gregorian chant: *AAAMMAALLAA BAKHAALLAMM AAAMMAALLAA HAARRAALLAAMM AAAMAALLAA*. In order to stay awake through these marathon memorization sessions, they sway back and forth like the weighted arm of a metronome.

Meanwhile, in an air-conditioned office upstairs, the principal of Al-Muhammadiyah, Hafiz Amanullah, is boasting about the ornaments of progressive education strung throughout his *madrassa*: a well-stocked and air-conditioned library; subscriptions to English- and Urdu-language newspapers for the students to read; a dozen or so computers, all of them equipped with Windows XP; and a Guest Book, complete with a complimentary note scripted by the ranking U.S. diplomat at the American Consulate in Lahore.

Amanullah, a man in his mid-30s with meticulously gel-sculpted hair and a jaw-line-hugging beard, doesn't fit the mold of your average madrassa teacher. His father founded Al-Muhammadiyah in 1975. When he died, Amanullah inherited the family business. One minute, he is, in typical fashion, blasting American policies in the Muslim world. The next, he is waxing philosophical on Islamic cosmology. ("Quran says we have conquered the sun and the moon, and while modern science later conquered the moon, no one ever conquered the sun. That's because Allah conquered the sun.") He advertises his madrassa, at times, as if he were a used car salesman. But just after he's done begrudging American incursions in Afghanistan and Iraq, he grovels for money. "Now that you have seen what we do, could you convince your Institute of Current World Affairs to please donate money to our school?" he asks.

In a twisted and convoluted way they already are, I tell him. Al-Muhammadiyah teaches a sect of Islam known as *Ahle Hadith*, an ideological cousin to Wahhabism. Wahhabism is the ultra-puritanical version of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. Because the Ahle Hadiths and the Wahhabis take a similar view of Islam, hundreds of Ahle Hadiths from Pakistan (and India), including Hafiz Amanullah and his father, have attended renowned Saudi institutions such as the Islamic University of Al-Madinah. For the Ahle Hadiths, another perk of these close doctrinal bonds has been the inflow of Saudi petrodollars. When you trace it back, much of this money comes from Americans standing at the gas pump. That bunker-like classroom with the shoots of rebar? It isn't dilapidated and falling apart. It's under renovation. Perhaps this is the reason why Amanullah is unbothered when I mention that Wahhabism is considered a bad word in the West. (Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 September 11 bombers were Saudis of Wahhabi backgrounds.) "There is no real



Students at Karachi's Jamia Binoria taking a break after lunch.

difference between us and the Wahhabis," he says.

Amanullah eventually takes a break from pouring me with Coca-Cola (we finish three 2-Liter bottles during the hour) and contemplating Islam and the Universe in order to take me on a tour of the madrassa. Upstairs, a few dozen teenage students are finding their public-speaking voices in two rectangular classrooms made to simulate congregation halls. All of the students here, like the ones reciting Quran downstairs, attend Darul Uloom Al-Muhammadia for free. Regardless of a student's socioeconomic background, madrassas, as a rule of thumb, cover room and board. It's part of their allure. "As far as NGOs go, they [madrassas] are doing one of the best jobs around," says Ijaz ul-Haq, the Minister of Religious Affairs and point man for dealing with the more than 11,000 madrassas in Pakistan. "And this is not an easy job to do." (In a 2004 essay, Dr. Tariq Rahman, author of *Denizens of Alien Worlds: A Study of Education, Inequality and Polarization in Pakistan*, claimed that, "76.6 percent [of madrassa students surveyed] belonged to the poorer sections of society.") Occasionally, the madrassas provide students with clothes and, in some cases, stipends for extremely poor students to bring home to their families over vacations and breaks.

Looking out over one of the packed classrooms, Amanullah describes the oration hour as "a Sunday afternoon tradition." It encourages the students, he says,

to stand up in front of a crowd and speak their minds. It's good practice, in other words, for becoming a mullah. "We make them defend various positions, including other sects...sometimes I even assign them the task of defending the United States Government," he adds with a self-congratulatory smile. In one of the two rooms, an adolescent boy with whiskery chin hairs and a peach-fuzz mustache explains, in Urdu, the hypocrisy of President George W. Bush's democracy rhetoric. In the other "hall," a captivated audience listens to a gangly teenager who's more akin to a poor kid playing left-field in t-ball than a venomous preacher on a soapbox yell out, in crisp English: "You must have *jihad* in your grip! If you have *jihad* in your grip, you cannot be defeated! Not by the Jews or the Hindus or anyone else!" Despite my desire to stay and listen, Amanullah suddenly seems in a rush.

"Come," he says, "There is more to show you."

JEWES AND THE HINDUS, however, aren't the only ones with cause to be concerned about what's going on inside of Pakistan's madrassas. Earlier this year, I spent several months touring the madrassas around Pakistan. I visited almost two dozen seminaries in more than five cities, as well as several in small towns throughout the North West Frontier Province. No two were exactly alike. Some were totally benign and their teachers explained how they respected the United States and what Washington was trying to do in defeating terrorism. (Those ones were, ad-

mittedly, in the minority.) They felt that the United States, in short, had gotten a bum rap as a result of all the “War on Terror” business. Other seminaries, however, admitted propagating sectarian teachings and sending students to fight Americans in Afghanistan. Regardless of their political differences, hardly any of them were ready to enlist in a government-led effort to pass reforms. When I brought it up, madrassa teachers either railed against encroachments on their independence or, the more confident and nonplussed of the bunch, rolled their eyes and smirked at the mention of major madrassa reform.

Most of the Taliban bigwigs came from madrassas scattered throughout the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). (Technically, *talib* means schoolboy, though few parents describe their non-madrassa children as talibs anymore because of the connotation the word has acquired in recent years.) “Mullah Omar is a brave and courageous person,” says Maulana Hasan Jan, the head of Jamia Imdad-ul-Uloom Islamia in Peshawar and a longtime friend of the Taliban leader. “I even went to Afghanistan before the U.S. invasion started to discuss things with him. He is a good Muslim,” he added. Before founding Jamia Imdad, Hasan Jan, a tall, fleshy man with eyeglasses the size of Petri dishes, spent a few years teaching at Darul Uloom Haqqania.

Haqqania is a sprawling seminary a few hours’ drive from the Afghan border. Of all the *madrassas*, it is perhaps most responsible for churning out *mujaheddin* and Taliban. The head of the seminary there, Maulana Sami ul-Haq, once boasted to a journalist that, “Eighty percent of the

commanders fighting the Russians [during Soviet-Afghan War] in the Pashtun areas had studied at Haqqania.” In the same interview, recorded in Ahmed Rashid’s best-selling book *Taliban*, Sami ul-Haq explained his role as advisor to the Taliban: “Before 1994 I did not know Mullah Omar because he had not studied in Pakistan, but those around him were all Haqqania students and came to see me frequently to discuss what to do. I told them to start a student movement. When the Taliban movement began I told the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence, the main Pakistani intelligence agency], ‘let the students take over Afghanistan.’” (Omar was later given an honorary degree from Haqqania.)

Those students eventually established an Islamic state in Afghanistan and hosted bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, the American military busted up the Taliban government in Kabul and Kandahar, but the Taliban way of thinking never went away. American policymakers were stuck: what was going on inside the madrassas and what, if anything, could be done to counter their influence? Moreover, were they *really* responsible for filling the ranks of the Islamic militants who comprised America’s number-one enemy in the “Global War on Terror?” In a widely published Pentagon memo from October 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wrote, “Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?” The public became convinced that these Islamic schools were the source of the world’s evil. “Madrassa reform” became another post-9/11 buzzword.



And Islamabad, arguably Washington's most prized ally in the "War on Terror," pledged to take a hard line.

Years later, little had changed. Then, on July 7, 2005, four bombers, three of Pakistani origin, blew themselves up in the London transport system during the morning rush hour. Fifty-two people died. Two of the four bombers had apparently just arrived in London fresh from a few weeks "immersion program" at a madrassa in Lahore. The event transformed the madrassa debate, and now, in addition to pressure from Washington, London and the rest of Europe voiced concerns. Shortly thereafter, President Pervez Musharraf banned foreign students from the madrassas and promised to crack down on extremist teachings. The West read these statements as evidence that Musharraf was finally coming around to see the dangers posed by the madrassas.

Contrary to common understanding, however, Musharraf's campaign to reform the madrassas began just a few months after he seized power in a coup on October 12, 1999 — almost a full two years before the Taliban, al-Qaeda, or madrassas became the topic of dinnertime discussion in American homes. "September 11th put an end to the 'Model Madrassa Scheme,'" says Dr. Mehmood Ghazi, the Minister of Religious Affairs in Musharraf's government from early 2000 until August 2001. During this period, Ghazi spearheaded a comprehensive madrassa reform program. The Model Madrassa Scheme proposed to build a handful of "ideal" madrassas that, with time, would eventually monopolize the one thing madrassas want most: official recognition of their degrees. However, Ghazi suggests that these days, any sign that the government is serious about introducing reforms is purely illusory. The aftermath of September 11, and the resulting pressure from the West to clamp down on the madrassas retarded, rather than sparked, the drive to reform.

ON THE MIDDLE FLOOR of a three-story house in one of Lahore's posh neighborhoods, Hafiz Hasan Madni is stretched out in a chair with his long legs stiffened and crossed at the ankles. Madni, the Managing Director of Jamia Lahoria Islamia and Editor of its monthly journal, *Mohaddas*, sports a beard and a boyish grin. He's chatty. Minutes into our conversation, he describes a recent trip he took to the United States on behalf of the



Lunchtime at Karachi's Jamia Binoria

State Department's International Visitors Leadership Program. "Your cities have the cleanest streets and the nicest restaurants," he says. "Really, the United States is a good nation for its own citizens, but unfortunately Americans don't think of non-Americans as humans. That's why we have more powerful values than yours."

Like Darul Uloom Al-Muhammadia across town, Madni's Jamia Lahoria Islamia follows the Ahle Hadith tradition. The Ahle Hadiths are notoriously quick to criticize other Muslims for *bid'a*, or "innovative" practices. They regard any diversions from the strictest form of Sunni Islam as "innovative" — and thus, blasphemous. "Our emphasis," Madni explains, "is on the original texts and original purity. Our teaching is completely dependent on the Quran and Sunnah [sayings of the Prophet as recorded in the hadith]." And what about the Shia? "Shi'ites are not good followers of the Holy Prophet," he says. "If someone says Quran is not the Holy Word of God, like many Shi'ites do, they are not proper Muslims."

Also like Amanullah, Madni has spent a considerable amount of time studying at the Islamic University of Al-Madinah. "Saudi Arabia is the only proper Islamic society. Its education system, judicial system, and society all follow Islamic codes," Madni says. "The purpose of a judicial system and legal system is to keep the peace. If you look at Saudi Arabia, there is very little crime. You know why? Because those who graduate from madrassas are automatically appointed judges. They know best how to implement Islamic law. This is why I can say that they have a proper Islamic system."

About an hour later, when a *muezzin* calls the faithful to pray, Madni and the 15 or 20 other people floating

around the research center at Jamia Lahoria Islamia dart for the mosque in fire-alarm fashion, leaving me alone to browse the magazines stacked in an adjoining room. There are literally thousands of recent titles to choose from. Madni later brags that his institution subscribes to almost all of the 4,000 Islamic magazines published in Pakistan. But they are in no apparent order, so I scan the covers to see if something catches my eye. One jumps out. The glossy front cover shows a tank, decaled with Indian, American, and Israeli flags, crushing a field of flowers symbolizing "Islam." It's a copy of *Voice of Islam, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba's* (LeT) English-language publication, from 2003. (LeT was labeled a terrorist organization in December 2001, and subsequently banned by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.) I flip to an article near the back entitled "Jihadi activities of a Mujahid in Jammu and Kashmir." The story is a first-person account of a mujaheddin who crossed into India to launch attacks against the Indian army. Minus the myriad typos, it reads like a John le Carre novel. The protagonist/author/terrorist killed a few soldiers, was wounded himself, and eventually limped, crawled and sneaked back to safety in Pakistan.

When Madni returns after the prayer, I ask him about the magazine. He shrugs his shoulders. This is a library, he says with his trademark innocent grin. We don't screen for content. "But that doesn't mean we agree with what they say. There are so many scholars not supporting this way of [jihadi] thinking," he says. "This is not the time for jihad. This is the time of our growth and our education."

On the other side of the room, a handful of young students from Jamia Islamia Lahoria sit around a desk flipping through bulky volumes of *hadith*. One of them, Asim Javed, is a 21-year old with acne and a nervous habit of cracking his knuckles. Like the others, he is working on a research project. His assignment? To discover what the hadith have to say about *taharat*, or, according to Asim, "proper purging of the body."

"And what do they say?" I ask.

Madni interrupts to explain. "If you, for instance, are holding a baby girl who happens to pee on your arm, you are obliged to wash the entire side of your body before praying. But if a baby boy urinates on you, hadith says you can just sprinkle water on the area where he peed," he says while Asim nods along. "The Prophet obviously wasn't aware of the scientific facts, but it is now medically shown that male and female urine have different chemical compositions. Modern science proves that female urine is more acidic." Asim slouches in his chair and looks at his lap.

I pose a question that I know Asim will have to answer for himself: "What made you decide to originally come to a madrassa?"

"In the beginning," he says, "my parents wanted me to complete *hifz*, then go on to work." *Hifz* is the

first step of an Islamic education. It involves memorizing the Quran, a task that takes anywhere between one and three years. (The students in the Memorization Bunker at Darul Uloom Al-Muhammadiyah were all *hifz* students.) According to Maulana Pir Saifullah Khaled of the Jamia Manzoor-ul-Islamia madrassa in Lahore, those students who have completed *hifz* become the ultimate defenders of the faith. "During their Occupation of India, the Britishers were sometimes caught throwing Qurans into rivers, burning them, and tearing the pages out," he says. "In one instance, a cleric called over a young boy who was a *hafez* [one who has successfully memorized the Quran]. 'You can tear away all the pages,' the cleric said while pointing at the boy, 'but all this text is written in his chest.'"

When Asim first went to the madrassa in his village in Punjab, his two older brothers were also sent off. Their parents weren't motivated by any grand designs of raising a family of mullahs. They were simply too poor to feed that many mouths every night. The financial factor, explains Amir Rana, is one of the primary reasons for the recent surge in madrassa attendance. Rana, Director of the Pak Institute for Policy Studies (PIPS) and author of *The A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, says: "One reason [for attending a madrassa] is that there are special scholarships offered to the poorest parents that could pay as much as 500 to 600 Rupees (U.S.\$8 to \$10) a month. A poor family with five or six kids can make 2000 to 3000 Rupees a month from that alone," he adds. Such thinking probably compelled Asim's parents, at least at first, to send their three boys to a madrassa. "But we didn't have enough income with my brothers and I not helping my parents farm their fields," says Asim, "and my older brothers went home. Because I was the youngest, I got to stay."

After completing *hifz*, Asim enrolled in the advanced madrassa program known as *dars-i-nizami*. *Dars-i-nizami* dates back hundreds of years, but its current curriculum was contrived at Darul Uloom Deoband in Deoband, India, in 1867. The madrassa at Deoband birthed the Deobandi school of thought, the most widespread and influential of Pakistan's five major sects, which include the Ahle Hadith, the Shia, the Barelvis, and Jama'at-i Islami. The *dars-i-nizami* curriculum covers an eight-year program, which, after completion, propels madrassa students from being known as taliban to being Islamic scholars, or ulema. Asim is in his seventh year. He has taken courses in Arabic grammar, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), hadith, English, logic and philosophy. Unlike anyone else in his family, he reads and writes Urdu, as well as Arabic and English. "Now," he says, "I want to teach people about Islam."

Dr. Syed Husain M. Jafri finds Asim's answer a telling — and worrisome — indication of the future of madrassa studies. Jafri, a professor of Islamic Studies at the Aga Khan University in Karachi and a former madrassa student himself, says that the madrassas are "simply no longer the same caliber they were fifty years ago." Back then, "they were producing scholars." A *dars-i-nizami*

graduate, for instance, could always become a fatwa-issuing member of ulema, but he was equally qualified to work in academia, or go on to become an engineer. Today, the career path of a madrassa student is more fixed: preach in a mosque, teach in a madrassa, or open your own mosque or madrassa.

But that doesn't necessarily mean someone can't get a dynamic education. Take Asim Javed. Every afternoon, after he completes several hours of madrassa studies, he changes mental gears and starts thinking about computers. That's because he and several other advanced students at Jamia Islamia Lahoria are pursuing Bachelor's degrees privately with professors and tutors from Punjab University. At the end of dars-i-nizami, in other words, Asim will not only be able to speak several languages, but he will have a college degree from a state institution to show for it. Madni is in the final edits of his Ph.D. thesis on "Islam and Computer Science" from the Computer Science Department at Punjab University. Similarly, to provide their students with a non-religious skill set, Darul Uloom Al-Muhammadia works closely with the Technical-Vocational Training Authority, or TEVTA.

While, for some, secondary education programs like Asim's at Punjab University or TEVTA undermine criticisms that madrassa students are inevitably "parochial" and "narrow-minded," Dr. Mehmood Ghazi, the former Minister of Religious Affairs, thinks this side of the debate misses the point. Graduates still, he contends, have no robust grasp of the world. These "after-school" programs even come to them — they never have to actually leave the confines of the seminary. "The biggest problem of the madrassas at this point," says Ghazi, "is their aloofness from the mainstream, [and their] creation and continuance of a class in society distant from the main culture of the country and inconsistent with national unity."

One of the most obvious examples of how the madrassas are fostering a culture that is "distant" and "inconsistent" with national unity is their propagation of sectarian teachings. Sectarianism is the discrimination, hatred, or killing on the basis of sect. The term is most often used to describe violence between Shi'ites and Sunnis, the two primary sects in Islam. Jafri's most serious charge against the madrassas today is that they are "producing parochial, narrow-minded, and sectarian people." "No madrassa," he says, "even teaches Islamiyat (Islamic studies) anymore... they only teach their own *maslik* (sect): if it's Barelvi, it teaches Barelvi; if Salafi, it teaches Salafi; if Shia, it teaches Shia; and if Deobandi, it teaches Deobandi. All this sectarianism," Jafri continues,

"started at Binori [Town madrassa]. They started the Sunni-Shia fighting in Karachi...and today, it is one of the greatest centers of jihadi teachings in the country."

THE MINARET AND THE walls of Binori Town are made of sandstone the color of dried, pink rose petals. The madrassa is located just off the corner of a busy intersection. A few students mill about in front of the seminary. Binori Town's talibs are reputedly temperamental. When one of the school's most respected teachers was assassinated in 2003, the student body spilled out into the streets, throwing bricks, torching tires, and ransacking a nearby police station. On this spring morning, I dodge a couple of fruit carts and a few sidewalk book sellers clogging the entrance, but otherwise encounter no resistance.

Like Sami ul-Haq's madrassa, Binori Town is surrounded with jihadi folklore. Hundreds of students were reportedly sent to fight alongside the Taliban in autumn of 2001. Then, following his escape from Tora Bora in December 2001, Osama bin Laden purportedly received medical treatment here. ("Do you see any medical facilities anywhere around here?" the headmaster asks me.) And Daniel Pearl, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who was abducted and later beheaded by Islamic militants in Karachi, was apparently stashed somewhere on the premises before being taken to another part of the city.

Dr. Abdul Razzaq Sikander is the principal at Binori Town. He has a henna-died beard that shows grey at the roots and he leans on a cane to walk. Despite his physical frailty, Sikander is sharp and unswerving in his arguments. He makes no attempt to advertise any reforms his



The courtyard at Darul Uloom Haqqania, where the Taliban learned their stuff.

madrassa might have adopted in recent years. “There is no reason the madrassas should be reformed,” he says. “We have been doing this for hundreds of years and we are teaching the religion that we believe to be the true religion. Article 18 of the UN Charter says everyone has the right to teach their religion...this is what we are doing.” Sikander’s irascibility is indicative of the Deobandi madrassas. The Deobandis have more than a hundred years opposing, first, the British Raj in India, and now, the government in Islamabad. Of the more than 11,000 madrassas in Pakistan, at least 8,000 belong to the Deobandi tradition. Their numbers alone are emboldening. Dr. Ghazi describes them unequivocally as being “the most difficult [of the five sects] to deal with.”

“Why do just these students have their rights denied?” Sikander asks me. “Why are we the center of attraction? Why not the Jewish institutes? Or the Christian institutes? Basically, [efforts to reform the madrassas] shows that Western powers are trying to rule Muslims in every respect. In the West, gays and lesbians have rights. Why don’t these madrassa students have any rights?”

“But,” I ask, “I think that the objective of the madrassa reform efforts has been to diversify the students’ knowledge. How has this denied them their rights?”

“Young boys come to Binori Town because they want to become experts in Islam,” Sikander explains. “They don’t want to become engineers or doctors. If they wanted to do that, then they would have gone to a specialty engineering or medical school. This is no different. So why is the government trying to tell students that, ‘If you want to specialize in medicine, that’s fine. But if you want to specialize in Islamic studies, you should diversify?’”

When the interview ends, the dars-i-nizami student who had been translating my discussion with Sikander walks me to the door by the fruit-carts and the booksellers. Saeed is in his early 20s and British-born, a fortunate exception, he tells me, to the nationwide ban on foreign students in madrassas. After he gets his degree, he plans to return to the U.K. I inquire about the grueling schedule — juggling studies, praying, and, occasionally, translating for Sikander. A smile. “You know what the best thing is after a long day, when your brain is completely fried?” he says. “I love to lie in my bed, put on my headphones, and listen to [techno D.J.] Paul Van Dyk.” The Prophet Mohammad, I figure, never had anything bad to say about Trance music.

Students like Saeed certainly don’t seem “aloof” from mainstream society. He is perfectly up to date on the latest cricket news, world news, and music trends. But his political and religious ideas are what worry policymakers in Islamabad and the West. Hafez Hasan Madni of Jamia Lahoria Islamia, for instance, says that the “problem” with madrassas “is not a problem from our perspective. People talk about a Clash of Civilizations, but the madrassas represent a Clash of Ideas. Madrassas are a source of



A couple of Pashtun students at a madrassa in Shir Garh, NWFP.

new ideas, and the world is simply not accepting the pure ideas given by the madrassas.”

THE PERSON REponsible FOR navigating through this thicket of conflicting ideas is a tall, mustachioed man by the name of Ijaz ul-Haq. In August 2005, President Musharraf named Haq the Minister of Religious Affairs, a job that carries the Sisyphean task of implementing madrassa reforms. The walls of Haq’s Islamabad office are covered in signed-and-framed photographs of him shaking hands with foreign dignitaries, most of whom are Arab sheiks and princes, regaled in flowing robes and red-and-white checkered headdresses. Directly behind Haq’s chair, a few photos show his father, former President and longtime military dictator General Zia ul-Haq, clutching the shoulders of Saudi royals. (Neither Ijaz ul-Haq nor his father bear any relation to Maulana Sami ul-Haq of Darul Uloom Haqqania.)

It’s been well documented that, during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the chummy relationship between the Saudi government and General Zia fueled the madrassa boom in Pakistan. The Western and Arab worlds were awash with anti-Communist sentiments after the Red Army invaded Afghanistan. They worked together to spawn the growth of madrassas in Pakistan as an opportunity to educate Muslims about the tenets of jihad — and push them to fight in the anti-Soviet jihad taking place in Afghanistan. In 1979, there were roughly 1,700 madrassas in the country. A decade later, that number jumped to 3,000. Today there are almost 11,000.

What is less well known about this period is that in 1979, General Zia initiated Pakistan’s first large-scale attempt to reform the madrassas. The reasons were twofold: first, being an ardent Islamist himself, Zia took a personal interest in the Islamic education system, which he saw as lacking; second, the ulema contended that their madrassa degrees (which they awarded following the completion of dars-i-nizami) should be recognized by the government as being on par with a Master’s degree.

Zia agreed to take this request into consideration — on the condition that the madrassas undergo a series of reforms.

To carry out what Dr. Ghazi calls a “very important initiative,” the government established a joint commission of educators, government officials, and ulema named the Halepota Commission. The Commission was tasked with drafting a law outlining the registration process for madrassas. Ghazi, who acted as an occasional consultant to the Commission, says the potential for a positive outcome was there. But he also warned them not to be seen as infringing on the madrassas’ autonomy at any point. “‘For God’s sake,’ I told them, ‘never suggest that the madrassas should be taken over by the Commission or brought under control of the Commission,’” he says, “‘If you do it, your whole exercise will be a failure.’”

Six months later, the Commission’s deliberations ended and the secretary and chairman set about drafting a resolution. But in the final copy, they added a not-so-subtle disclaimer that the government should take over the madrassas and control the madrassas. After hearing the news, the ulema disowned the report and backed out. “The ulema simply said ‘No, we didn’t agree to any of these things’ and that was it,” recalls Ghazi.

For almost 20 years, the debate over madrassa reforms elicited little interest in Islamabad. The madrassas, in fact, funneled zealots into Afghanistan, first, on behalf of the anti-Soviet jihad, and second, on behalf of the Taliban, providing the Pakistani government with the “strategic depth” it had long desired next door. Meanwhile, a 1982 decree recognized madrassa degrees as equivalent to a Master’s degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies, albeit without any guarantees or commitments to reform on the part of the ulema.

Then, in the aftermath of his October coup, General Musharraf cobbled together a National Security Council composed of the four military service chiefs, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, and five civilian experts in law, international relations, national affairs, economics, and Islamic studies or Sharia. Ghazi was tapped as the Islamic expert, an apt platform to try and bring madrassa students back into the “mainstream.” This dovetailed with Musharraf’s “Enlightened Moderation” campaign. “I suggested that, number one, the government should establish ‘model madrassas’ in different parts of the country with all changes and modernizations that we wanted,” he says. That meant modifications in the dars-i-nizami syllabus and the insertion of compulsory subjects such as English, mathematics, social studies and general science.

And so the plan took shape as a curriculum for the model madrassas was drawn up. A few government folks and representatives from each of the individual madrassa boards formed a madrassa board. The aim was to get the model madrassas up and running in a way that all parties

agreed that their degrees would be universally accepted as valid. After that, the new madrassa board would also have the sole legitimacy to recognize the degrees from other madrassas as being valid or not. “The ulema were listening to me because they had known me for decades,” says Ghazi. Things were moving forward. “For those [madrassas] that sought affiliation [with the board to have their degrees recognized], they would have to adopt the changes proposed by the board...and have their final examinations conducted by the board.” In this way, the new board — with its unofficial government oversight — would have an “indirect role in the laying down the syllabus and awarding degrees, without touching the administrative autonomy or financial independence of the madrassas.”

But Ghazi’s plan hit a wall when it came time to implement his ideas. He became frustrated. A month before September 11, 2001, he stepped down as Minister of Religious Affairs, a position he had served in since early 2000, when Musharraf reshuffled the National Security Council, dissolving the position of advisor for Islamic affairs and making Ghazi the Minister for Religious Affairs. The exact reason for his departure remains unclear. He was succeeded by Owais Ahmad Ghani, who stayed on for a mere three months. Then the Ministry remained without a Minister for almost two years. In 2005, Ijaz ul-Haq took the job.

The irony of Ijaz ul-Haq now trying to control a phenomenon unleashed by his father more than two decades ago is hardly lost on anyone. When I bring this point up with madrassa teachers, they too marvel at the irony, before shrugging their shoulders as if to say, “What difference does it make who tries to reform us?” When I bring this up outside the madrassas, some point out the total futility of whole project — as if it has far surpassed the point of no return. “I told the Minister not to waste his money,” Dr. Jafri says blithely. “No one can reform these madrassas. You can make these people more dangerous. If you teach them how to operate a computer, they will only become more dangerous terrorists.” Still, Ghazi admits that Ijaz ul-Haq is “in a better position [to do something positive], compared to me and others, because of the goodwill his father had with the ulema. Many of them were his father’s friends and allies.”

Reluctant to have his job portrayed as being too easy, Haq cautions me, from across the big desk in his office, that tampering with the madrassas is bound to encounter stiff resistance. “They are doing a great social service in Pakistan,” he says. “That being said, we have them on their back foot” — his way of saying *they are on the heels* — “now. They want status...and we can get everything we want from the registration process. You want to go see for yourself?” he asks. “Let’s go to Akora Khattak [the town where Maulana Sami ul-Haq’s Haqqania is located] tomorrow morning. You won’t find a Kalashnikov anywhere.”

But at Haqqania, one madrassa teacher only smirks

at the mention of Ijaz ul-Haq's name and the notion that his madrassa is "on its back foot." "There is no pressure from the government at all," Maulana Yusuf Shah says, in a cocksure, disconcerted tone, as he claws through his beard. "Our government is only trying to please America and Bush...otherwise, they have never interfered in the madrassas."

This sentiment is widespread across the country, and particularly so in the Deobandi madrassas, where a "come-after-us-if-you-dare"-type attitude prevails. Meanwhile, in Islamabad, it appears that a prime opportunity has been squandered. Ghazi says, looking back over the past six years since he began drafting a comprehensive plan for madrassa reform, that "perhaps the government simply isn't interested anymore. You see, unless you bring someone [into a job] who is personally interested in a project, in our country it doesn't move."

"But is this a personal or institutional lack of interest?" I ask.

"I think it's both. But definitely on the part of Ijaz ul-Haq. Frankly speaking, I don't know what his priorities are," Ghazi says. "But he has not taken as much interest in madrassas as would be expected from the son of General Zia ul-Haq."

WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS moving sluggishly and yielding little by way of results, non-governmental groups have gotten into the madrassa game. Since the 1970s, the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), an Islamabad-based think tank run by a senator from Jama'at-i Islami, has been holding roundtable discussions with leading ulema to discuss the ins and outs of madrassas. Then, in February 2004, it launched the first of a series of one- and two-week long seminars to discuss, collectively with the ulema, ways to address four areas that IPS fingered for attention: physical sciences, social sciences, contemporary issues, and "skills," an amorphous category that includes communication skills, human resource skills, and others. Rashid Bokhari, the Research Coordinator at IPS at the time, oversaw these seminars in detail.

Bokhari is an easygoing, sometimes absent-minded, guy in his late 30s. At first glance, it's difficult to imagine him in the good graces of the madrassas; he's got a Dr. Strangelove hairstyle, a dry sense of humor, and a Dangerfield-esque, Back-to-School-kind of persona. Earlier this year, after 11 years at IPS and fed up with its Islamist leanings, Bokhari left the institute and joined the Washington, DC-based International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD). Since 2004, ICRD had been partnered with IPS, though it remained "behind the scenes." ICRD's secrecy and stealth, at the time, were necessary. "These madrassas eye everything from

America with great suspicion," he adds.

But two years on, ICRD is working out in the open — and doing so with a whole new philosophy. Instead of being focused entirely on the curriculum, books and the drive to "mainstream," ICRD's main issue is with the way that the students are thinking — or, in some cases, not thinking — about the texts. Says Bokhari: "We want to change the focus from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning. ICRD's thinking is that if we can change the way people are looking into the texts — by teaching new methodologies, creative thinking, critical thinking, and pedagogical skills — we can induce a change." To do so, Bokhari and co. are running an initial round of "workshops" for madrassa teachers and administrators. From this crop of maulvis, they are "picking out the brilliant ones" to give excess training and attention to. If all goes according to plan, these "master trainers" will be qualified to hold workshops on their own. "With time," Bokhari says, "there will be a shift." That doesn't mean, however, that Bokhari doesn't imagine obstacles along the way.

For instance, I ask, will being an American institute put a limit on ICRD's ability to affect widespread change? "We have tried to make it as clear as possible [to the madrassas] that, 'we are not against your existence, we want to see the madrassas flourish and to serve the social and religious needs that only they are capable of serving,'" Bokhari says.

In May, ICRD held its first, entirely independently run madrassa workshop at a hotel in Islamabad. The attendees came from Deobandi madrassas in Baluchistan, and many of the ulema present were known Taliban sympathizers. Until the last day of the workshop, no one knew that the whole gig had been financed and organized by an American organization. According to Bokhari, "they took it [the news / revelation of an American hand] pretty well." He continues, "It always helps when we explain that we are only trying to expose the students to new methods of teaching that improve their ability to study the text themselves and to reach their own conclusions. We repeatedly tell the ulema 'we are trying to make your students leaders instead of followers.'"

Regardless of his own faith in the program, Bokhari is careful not to deceive anyone — in the madrassas or in the West. "We realize our limitations," he says. "This is a slow, long, gradual process...you cannot bring about change in one day." What about the benchmarks of progress? "We just want to expand these students' horizons and expose them to the modern world." Contrary to the prevailing rhetoric being bandied about in madrassas, science classes and computers with Windows XP aren't sufficient to usher a student into the modern world. But a health dose of critical thinking skills are a step in the right direction. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS
Current Fellows and their Activities

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times'* Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Nicholas Schmidle (February 2006-2008) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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