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Immersion Program

Can a Ten-day Workshop for Madrassa Teachers make a Difference?

By Nicholas Schmidle

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CONSIDERING THE AUDIENCE, I was caught slightly off guard when a middle-aged woman dressed up like a five-foot-piece of salt-water taffy — pink heels, pink purse, pink pants, pink tunic (and, of course, headscarf) — approached the podium and began expounding on the virtues of Adam Smith's economic philosophy. In front of her, 25 mullahs sat around a U-shaped table in the conference room of a Karachi hotel, scribbling furiously in their notebooks, craning their necks to see the whiteboard and peering over one another's shoulders to be sure they hadn't missed any salient points amidst the deluge of unfamiliar names. They all hailed from a remote part of Pakistan, wearing a variety of checkered turbans and shawls. Some donned colorful, hand-stitched prayer caps studded with hundreds of tiny mirrors. The woman in pink, a Doctor in Islamic Jurisprudence from Karachi University (where she teaches in the Department of Quran and Sunnah), explained the core tenets of capitalism. And she had a surprising message: free market economy and "the invisible hand" are totally compatible with Islam. In his time, she reminded them, the Prophet Muhammad was out busting up monopolies himself.

Last fall, when Hafez Khalil Ahmed first invited me to attend a ten-day *madrassa* workshop he planned for early December, I had no idea what to expect. Ahmed, a soft-spoken, 30-something man with freckles, a wide neck, and a full, but not scruffy, beard, runs a large madrassa, or Islamic seminary, in Quetta, the provincial capital of Baluchistan in southwestern Pakistan. His madrassa is just a few hours' drive from Kandahar, Afghanistan; it doubles as the regional headquarters for Jamiat Ulema-i-Islami (JUI), a hard-line political party and stalwart supporter of the Taliban.

Since 2001, the connection between madrassas like Ahmed's and Islamic militancy has been a source of intense debate. Most of the top leaders of the Taliban government in Afghanistan graduated from Pakistani madrassas. Mullah Omar, head of the Taliban and self-declared *amir ul momineen*, or "leader of the faithful," didn't actually attend one — but he was still given an honorary degree from Darul Uloom Haqqania, a sprawling madrassa with more than 3,000 students, located about a two-hour drive from the Afghan border. A June 2000 piece in the *New York Times Magazine* described Haqqania as a "jihad factory." In other articles, Pakistan's madrassas have been called "dens of terror" or "jihad universities." In October 2003, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld distributed a memo throughout the Pentagon that asked: "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?"

Ahmed was once a firebrand himself; after September 11, he was filmed leading a procession through the streets of Quetta, chanting "Long live Sheikh Osama" and "Long live Mullah Omar." But then, after hearing more and more Afghans criticizing the Taliban's rule, he changed his mind. "We thought the people of Afghanistan supported the Taliban," he told a reporter that fall, "but

we were wrong.” Since then, he’s made it his mission to convince anyone who will listen that the Taliban’s ideas are backwards and misleading. Ahmed says he is “trying to correct wrong perceptions about Americans, especially American people.” To begin, he targeted those he knows best: madrassa teachers.

According to Ahmed, the aim of the ten-day workshop, titled “Deeni Madaris [religious madrassas] and the Modern World,” was to “close the huge gap [existing] between these [religious] people and the rest of society.” He believes that exposing the mullahs to new ideas and encouraging interfaith dialogue offers a way to do it. “These people have been left alone in the cave of time,” one lecturer at the workshop told me. “Now they are being woken up to this bizarre reality, where they can’t be put on hold on the phone because there is music playing in the background” — Islamic fundamentalists consider music un-Islamic — “and they can’t even stand in an elevator.” Such stories could almost pass for comedy if the issue — that is, the minds of a generation of young men and women — weren’t so serious.

When I arrived in the gaudy lobby of Karachi’s Mehran Hotel the first week of December, I expected to find a rag-tag bunch of big-bearded men, with pained expressions on their faces as they sat through dull, exhausting lectures. Previous interactions with madrassa teachers convinced me that they wanted little part in the debate over how to reform their schools.

My first assumption was correct: they do, in fact, have bushy beards. In the lobby of the hotel, plenty of other guests stopped to stare as the *ulema*, or religious scholars, passed in their tunic-and-baggy-pants attire. But so that the attendees didn’t become bored and tune out, Ahmed invited a dynamic and impressive cast of speakers.

His idea was to induce a kind of shock therapy; judging by the expressions on the mullah’s faces when the woman in pink first entered the room, he succeeded. Two days after the Adam Smith lecture, a Shi’ite Muslim scholar proposed a provocative, unorthodox way of reading the Quran, borrowing heavily from Jacques Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction. Derrida, a staunch atheist, believed that the meaning of texts is fluid and subject to infinite interpretations, depending on the reader, his/her history, his/her environment, the time, etc. “In the Quran, Allah told us to go on *hajj* [pilgrimage to Mecca] in caravans on camels. But times have changed,” said the scholar, who had studied both in Najaf, Iraq, under Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and at the University of North Carolina, researching the Synoptic Gospels. “Besides the *kalma* [profession of faith], everything in the Quran is moving.”

HOW DID AHMED CONVINCED a bunch of set-in-their-ways mullahs to leave their madrassas and villages for two weeks to come and hear lectures trumpeting the virtues of America and Western civilization?



Abdul Rauf and Rahim Khan, from Noshki, Baluchistan, pose during a tea break.

“Because of my background, people don’t refuse when I ask them to come,” he said. Personal connections and family influence go a long way in Baluchistan’s tribal society; contemporaries of Ahmed’s deceased father respect him for that, and younger generations look to their elders for guidance. Plus, Ahmed’s madrassa, the political party JUI, and all of the mullahs who attended the workshop belong to the Deobandi sect, the same school of thought that Mullah Omar, the Taliban, and most people residing in Pakistan’s border areas subscribe to. And in Pakistan, sectarian affiliations are nearly as important as tribal ones. So Ahmed, armed with these natural advantages, invited just the kinds of people that conservative teachers from Sunni madrassas don’t typically interact with: women (especially ones who favor hot pink), Shi’ites (who many Deobandis consider infidels), and even a blonde, blue-eyed American (yours truly).

Ahmed isn’t organizing these workshops alone. (December’s was the third in the last six months.) Someone has to pay, and that’s where the Washington, DC-based International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) comes in. ICRD has a record of faith-based conflict resolution in places like Sudan and Iran. In Pakistan, their strategy is to take small groups of mullahs, immerse them in seminars like the one on Adam Smith, and to then sit back and let these new ideas germinate. While the American, British, and Pakistani governments have spent tens of millions of dollars trying to reform Pakistan’s madrassa system at a macro-level, ICRD has opted for a more cost-effective — and perhaps fruitful — alternative.

Islamabad’s most recent effort at handling the daunting task of madrassa reform consisted of proposing a trade-off: any madrassa that registers with the Ministry of Religious Affairs is given the status of a university, which means that its degrees are recognized as equivalent to those handed out at a secular school. Technically, registration is designed to oblige the madrassas to teach “modern” subjects like science, computers, English and math. Yet at least two major problems have cropped up: one, government officials think that checking “registered” beside the name of a madrassa indicates that it’s on the path to reform; and, two, many of the madrassas



In the latter half of the conference, the group often broke into four-person teams for breakout sessions.

have ignored their end of the deal.

Another factor that some think is impeding progress is specific to the person in charge of the government's program, Ijaz ul-Haq. Haq is the Minister of Religious Affairs and the son of former President and longtime military dictator General Zia ul-Haq. With funding and support from the CIA and Saudi Arabia, General Zia oversaw the boom of madrassas in Pakistan during the 1980s. Not only is it ironic that the son is now tasked with controlling a phenomenon unleashed by his father, but many question whether younger Haq has the will. I asked one of Ijaz ul-Haq's predecessors whether the government's lethargy is due to an institutional lack of interest — or a personal one. "I think it's both," said Mehmood Ghazi, who served as Minister of Religious Affairs from early 2000 until August 2001. "But definitely on the part of Ijaz ul-Haq. Frankly speaking, I don't know what his priorities are. But he has not taken as much interest in madrassas as would be expected from the son of General Zia ul-Haq."

More than 14,000 registered madrassas are spread across Pakistan. I have visited several dozen, and while Ijaz ul-Haq boasted to me that "we have them on their back foot" and that "we can get everything we want from the registration process," I have seen little impact from four years of government programs. What Dr. Abdul Razzaq Sikander of the Binori Town madrassa in Karachi told me was typical: "We have been doing this for hundreds of years and we are teaching the religion that we believe to be the true religion." On the issue of introducing non-Islamic subjects into the curriculum, Sikander replied, "In the West, someone studying to become a doctor doesn't have to take an engineering class. Why should our specialists have to take other courses [like science or math or English]?"

The approach pursued by Ahmed and ICRD doesn't focus on quantifiable goals like "number of madrassas registered" or "number of computers per madrassa." Instead, they aim to effect a change in the overall approach inside the madrassas regarding how Islam is taught and how the outside world is portrayed. By keeping the numbers of participants small, Ahmed and ICRD try to create an environment where attendees are relaxed and willing

to admit mistakes. On the third day of the workshop, a burly, lumberjack-esque mullah from a village an hour from the Afghan border raised his hand. "How have we left the guiding principles of Islam and created all these problems for ourselves?" he asked. One of the seminar instructors had just explained that Wal-Mart regularly outperforms the entire national economy of Pakistan. It created a stir in the room. One store? Versus our whole country? "Is there a way out of this hole?" the lumberjack wanted to know. His humility smashed my prior characterization of madrassa teachers as arrogant and uncompromising. These workshops may be conducted on small scale for now, but with all of these teachers returning to their madrassas, each of them with several hundred students, the impact could be tremendous.

Abbas Hussein, a specialist in training teachers, presided over the second half of the workshop. He introduced myriad methods and techniques for teachers to engage their students. One of the goals of the workshops, said Rashid Bokhari, the ICRD representative in Pakistan, is to "shift the focus from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning." According to Hussein, a man in his fifties whose brilliance would be intimidating if it weren't for his disarming, Pee Wee Herman-style laugh, the biggest deficiency in madrassa education is the lack of interactive learning. "Usually, all these teachers do is yak, yak, yak," he told me. Without interaction or debate, "everyone — students and teachers — suffers from 'arthritis of the categories.'" Age-old concepts, or "categories," are passed down from teacher to student, untouched by contemplation or reflection. Students then pass them down to their students, and so on. To question a concept is perceived as an affront to the teacher. "This is a mental disease of the age we live in," said Hussein.

Hussein told the mullahs that, amidst their intense (he tactfully used the word "dedicated") focus on Islam, they were neglecting parts of their brain. To illustrate this, he sketched out Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligence on the board. Gardner's theory classifies nine types of intelligence: verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential. Currently, Hussein said, a madrassa education utilizes only a few. The mullahs agreed. They eventually all concurred that teaching non-Islamic subjects *could* be



Abbas Hussein in the middle of a lecture on Multiple Intelligences.

beneficial for their students' intelligence. Some of them told me afterwards that they planned to incorporate science and math into their teachings as soon as they got home.

Later, I asked Hussein how he thought the ulema absorbed Gardner's theory. "I expected more resistance from them," he admitted. "I have been to similar workshops in the past and been asked if Howard Gardner is a Jew."

I WAS SNACKING ON TOMATO-AND-MAYONNAISE breakfast sandwiches one morning when a mullah grabbed my hand. The previous night, while flipping through the channels on the television in his room, he had "paused" on WWE, or World Wrestling Entertainment. Now he looked at me with a quizzical expression: What is the deal? Are those women with the watermelon boobs *really* their wives? Why don't the guys in spandex bleed more when they get smacked on the head with a foldable chair? Finally, he had the chance to put his questions to a flesh-and-blood American. "I have seen foreigners in the market in Quetta," he said, "But you are the first who I have shaken hands with and eaten with." With all the Stars-and-Stripes being waved in the crowd, he naturally assumed that Pro Wrestling was an American pastime. I explained that WWE isn't real, and no, not all women in the United States wear flag-printed bikini tops in public. He looked a little disappointed, as if his idea of grossly behaving Americans was somehow less complete.

On one of the last days, we took a field trip to St. Thomas Theological College, the second-largest Protestant college in Pakistan. We went on foot, and immediately had to weave through eight lanes of Karachi traffic — which really means at least ten to twelve "lanes" of cars, motorcycles, rickshaws and buses. The mullahs shuffled across the street, giggling as their turbans unraveled and sandals went flying off their feet. When we arrived at the church, Dr. Pervaiz Sultan, the middle-aged, spectacled principal of St. Thomas, welcomed us into a classroom. The mullahs squatted in children's chairs at knee-high desks. Once we were all seated, five men filed into the room. They assembled behind a table with a harmonium and a pair of Tablas, and broke into hymnal. I couldn't



This maulana from Quetta said that, although his anger towards American has subsided, he still has many Afghan students at his madrassa whose homes in Afghanistan have been destroyed during airstrikes over the past four years. "The United States military has bombed their villages and killed their sisters. Who am I to tell them not to react?"



Maulana Mohammad Amin (seated) reviewing the assignment, to write out a daily itinerary for instruction, with Abbas Hussein.

make out the verses, but the chorus repeated: "*Badshah Aye,*" or "*The King has Come.*" With the exception of one or two of the teachers, who couldn't bear to watch and fumbled with their phones, most of them had fixed their gaze on the singers. On the walk back to the Mehran Hotel, I asked Abdul Rauf, a small-framed man wearing a hand-stitched, turquoise prayer cap, whether he had ever seen live music before. He shook his head. "That was my first time even in a church," he said. He pursed his lips and made the face of someone who is pleasantly surprised — but can't quite admit it.

The final day of the workshop, Maulana Mohammad Amin, one of the senior-most workshop participants and a squat man with a maroon, henna-stained beard, stood at the same podium where the woman in pink had stood before. During a five-minute speech, his voice rose and fell with the dramatic flair of a Baptist preacher. He goaded his fellow mullahs to act, to inspire a revival in Islamic education. "This is now *our* responsibility," his voice boomed. "We have to ask ourselves: how can we better educate our children? In the future, we will go forward with new techniques and new thoughts." He admitted that he will "always be lukewarm to the idea of 'modern' education," but that "we cannot bring good religious and social change until we accept [these subjects]."

Mohammad Amin paused and then added: "This week, a lot of my misperceptions have melted away. We had a lot of bad information about our own political and religious leaders. I am angry I believed this. Just as the West has bad information about us, we had bad information about the West." All 25 of the mullahs listened intently, nodding and scratching their beards. A few mumbled *al hamdulilla*, "praise Allah," under their breath. It seemed that some things were sinking in. □

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