

Testimony of Azhar Hussain

Vice President for Preventive Diplomacy, International Center for Religion and Diplomacy

Public Hearing of the
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on
PAKISTAN: The Threat of Religious Extremism to Religious Freedom and Security

Tuesday March 17, 2009, 10 a.m. - 12 p.m.
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2358-C

Introduction

I would like to thank Chairwoman Gaer, the Vice Chairs, and the distinguished commissioners for the privilege of sharing my experiences and insights before this commission at such an appropriate time of crisis and uncertainty. Religious intolerance in Pakistan can be found on many levels. The impact of discrimination against minority Muslim and non-Muslim communities cannot be adequately expressed by statistics or reports. I will confine my testimony to issues regarding the madrasa sector and its collective religious sponsorship. I can see from the list of witnesses that this hearing has assembled distinguished experts to address the other dimensions of religious intolerance in Pakistan.

Recent Developments Pertaining to Religious Freedom

Madrasas are vital to the social life of Pakistanis. They are meant to transmit religious learning and ethical and moral training in a disciplined environment. But in some instances, Pakistani madrasas have been changed from places meant to preserve the Islamic way of life and knowledge to institutions used to mobilize for political influence. The mutual suspicions of the government and the madrasas exacerbate the challenges of reform efforts by the government of Pakistan or the international community. Madrasas cultivate hatred of secular government, Western cultures, members of different faiths, and members of different Muslim sects. But this change in madrasa culture began since the 1980's and is a recent phenomenon.

As you are probably aware, the prospects for a climate of religious tolerance in Pakistan have dimmed considerably in many areas. Just last Friday a report by the International Crisis Group (ICG)¹ cited statistics from the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies indicating a 746% increase in terrorist, insurgent, and sectarian attacks from 2005-2008. To put this figure into perspective, last year in Pakistan there were nearly six terrorist attacks a day. It should be noted that these figures did not include 1,336 deaths resulting from ongoing sectarian conflicts in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) last year.

¹ International Crisis Group, *Pakistan: The Militant Jihadi Challenge*, (Islamabad/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 13 March 2009), 3.

While some madrasas have certainly contributed to the instability of Pakistan, responsibility cannot be primarily placed on the madrasa community as a whole. The number of madrasas actively training their students for militant jihad is small. However, extremist elements in each of the four sects—Deobandi, Bareilvi, Ahle-Hadith (Wahhabi), and Shia—have at times been exploited to overshadow the more moderate elements of the madrasa system. In an environment where the extremist elements are gaining power, even the moderate madrasa leaders, though they form the majority, face the danger of being branded “infidels” or “US agents” and of threats to their lives if they speak out against extremism. In 2007, Maulana Hassan Jan, a Taliban-linked religious leader, was killed after denouncing suicide bombings as contrary to Islamic teachings.²

The Madrasa Debate

Many experts have begun to question both the size of the madrasa community and its significance to overall Pakistani terrorism. I will only say that claims of 50,000 madrasas operating in Pakistan are exaggerated and that the majority of madrasa graduates do not engage in acts of terrorism. Technologically advanced and intricately coordinated terrorist attacks are rarely conducted by former madrasa students. Regarding the madrasa population, 16,000 madrasas had been registered with the Pakistani government as of 2007, with general estimates of the total madrasa population ranging from 20,000-25,000.³

The madrasa system of Pakistan fills a gap created by the lack of investment in and regulation of the public education system. But this is not the madrasas’ primary function. Madrasas are the religious seminaries of a country with a Muslim population of at least 95%. Even in our country, with universally accessible public education of good quality, there are more than 7,600 Catholic schools alone, according to the US Department of Education⁴. Public education in Pakistan is in great need of assistance and reform, but this would only have a minor impact on the size of the madrasa system. I would certainly not suggest that madrasa reform should take priority over our efforts to provide aid to the public education system, but some madrasa reform is a critical component to the stability required to create the environment for the improvement of education and tolerance in Pakistan, which will lead to greater security both domestically and globally.

Madrasa Ties to Sectarian Terrorist Organizations

What we do know is that the terror organizations in Pakistan most relevant to this hearing—those established with the sole focus of denying freedom for those religious practices they deem unacceptable—have direct ties to madrasas. Madrasas associated with these organizations are the minority. However, there are significant minority issues that we must acknowledge.

² Carlotta Gall, “Political Paralysis Lets Pakistan Militants Thrive”, *New York Times*, 10 October 2007.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/10/world/asia/10pakistan.html?pagewanted=print>

³ International Center for Religion & Diplomacy, *Madrasa Enhancement and Global Security: A Model for Faith-based Engagement*, (Washington, DC: 2008), 46, 48.

⁴ <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oi/nonpublic/statistics.html>

Organizations such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), described in a 2005 ICG report, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*⁵, as “currently responsible for most anti-Shia acts of terror,” were both founded by former madrasa students.

Most of the Taliban leadership, including Mullah Omar, trained at the Darul Uloom Haqqania⁶, one of the largest and most militant madrasas in Pakistan with an average graduating class of 3,000 students each year⁷.

Even groups led by men of higher education (such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), believed to be responsible for the recent attacks in Mumbai) operate at least 50 madrasas in Pakistan⁸.

US Religious Engagement and Development Efforts in Pakistan

Because of the support by some madrasas and religious parties in Pakistan for the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups, the United States has been reluctant to support engaging religious actors in Pakistan. However, this began to change slightly in 2007, when the newly-appointed Ambassador Anne Patterson began engaging religious leaders, notably Maulana Fazlur Rehman, in part because it became evident that the religious political bloc was maintaining electoral sway and that the religious parties were there to stay. It is critical to deepen and sustain US engagement in the long term, so that the mistakes made during the Soviet-Afghan war are not repeated.

To complicate the issue further, USAID to this region has often not been implemented effectively because of security issues, shortage of staff, lack of effective coordination with local officials, and, perhaps most critical, failure to engage religious and madrasa leaders in the buy-in process. After five years and significant funds spent, there is very little on-the-ground development impact of USAID missions. Targeted aid to the FATA and the NWFP is particularly necessary, but it can also raise the suspicions of religious and madrasa leaders as to “why here, why us, why now.” Thus, there needs to be a robust strategy for engaging madrasa, religious, tribal, and opinion leaders first and securing their acceptance before launching a full-scale development effort.

Another challenge is sustaining engagement and development programs once begun. In ICRD’s five years of madrasa engagement, we have seen that madrasa leaders, once engaged, often become passionate about implementing change, improving the quality of education in their schools, and making greater efforts to promote peace. However, if engagement and support do not continue, this passion can easily turn to bitterness and resentment. Thus, a key challenge is to sustain engagement and to meet expectations that have been created. I will now turn to what we have learned from our own experience with madrasa engagement over the past five years.

⁵ International Crisis Group, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, (Islamabad/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 18 Apr 2008), 3

⁶ William Dalrymple, “Wahhabi radicals are determined to destroy a gentler, kinder Islam,” *The Observer*, 8 March 2009.

⁷ Ziauddin Sardar, “Pakistan: The Taliban Takeover,” *New Statesman*, 30 April 2007

⁸ Kim Barker, “For alleged supporter of terror in Pakistan, it's business as usual,” *Chicago Tribune*, 26 Dec 2008 <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-pakistan-crackdown_barkerdec26.0,5582486.story>

ICRD's Experiences and the Role of Madrasa Enhancement in Global Security

Given the position of respect and influence that madrasa leaders, as religious authorities, often command among their students and their larger communities, madrasas have tremendous potential to shape the influence of Pakistan's future religious leaders and the development of Pakistani society more generally. Yet all too often, the potential contributions of madrasas to peacemaking have been overlooked. Previous efforts at madrasa reform have met with little success owing to the approach and a lack of political will by the Pakistani government as well as the suspicion and resistance of the madrasas themselves. Perceived threats to the madrasas' identity, or to Islam more generally, have only fostered a sense of urgency to build more madrasas and led to their explosive growth.

In 2004, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) began its Pakistan Madrasa Project, a unique initiative to engage Pakistani madrasa teachers and faculty in training programs that would give them the skills to improve both the academic and psychological development of their students. Our workshops encourage the expansion of madrasa curricula to include subjects such as the physical and social sciences, transformation of pedagogy to promote critical thinking (as opposed to rote memorization), and a great emphasis on religious tolerance, human rights, and conflict resolution.

ICRD has found that the most effective way to stimulate madrasa leaders to embrace change is by appealing to Islamic values. This approach also encourages madrasa leaders to expand their horizons by drawing upon the past accomplishments of these religious schools. In the training workshops, madrasa leaders reflect on Islamic values relating to peace and tolerance and the role they played when the madrasas were the unrivaled bastions of learning excellence a thousand years earlier. For many madrasa leaders, it is their first opportunity to discuss Islamic principles, education, and philosophy with educators from other Muslim schools of thought and to reflect on the past successes of Islamic education. The ICRD approach is succeeding because the madrasa leaders themselves have recognized the benefits of reform, have been inspired to improve their own education, and have assumed significant ownership of the process.

Although initially subject to a high degree of suspicion, ICRD's efforts have been well-received by the madrasa leaders and have thus far involved over 2100 madrasa teachers and administrators from more than 1300 madrasas. Participants of our workshops have included members of each of the religious sects that sponsor these schools, with representation from every province in Pakistan as well as the FATA and Azad Kashmir. We are now getting more requests directly from the madrasa leaders for further training than we are able to accommodate at our current level of resources. These requests are coming even from the more "radical" madrasas, such as those which trained Taliban leadership and are now seeking guidance on how to teach principles of peace to the children of these Taliban. Both male and female madrasa leaders are also now requesting ICRD training for the female teachers of girls' madrasas, something the men had once strongly opposed. Madrasa leaders have also asked for assistance in securing the resources needed to equip their schools with computers, textbooks, and teachers in the new disciplines.

Madrasa leaders graduating from our programs have demonstrated their ability to be powerful agents of peace, from initiating their own training programs on interreligious cooperation, tolerance, and peace education to risking their lives to stop religiously-motivated violence and extremism.

The following examples are illustrative:

- *In an initiative that grew out of an ICRD madrasa workshop, one Muslim leader initiated a series of interfaith workshops bringing together Pakistani Muslim and Christian leaders to explore how they could cooperate in reducing religious extremism and discrimination in the country. Following this program, Christian and Muslim leaders visited mosques and churches together to speak to the congregations, and participants resolved to hold meetings with key individuals in more “radical” areas to advocate interfaith cooperation and the reduction of extremism.*
- *A commander of the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (now Jamaat-ud-Dawa) was present at one of the above interfaith workshops. He had learned the Qur’an as a young child in a madrasa and now teaches it to hundreds of his own students every day. At the conclusion of the workshop, he stated: “I have read the Qur’an my whole life, but after this workshop, I realize that until now I have missed the true soul of the Qur’an. There are so many Qur’anic verses that talk about peace, reconciliation, and coexistence with other religious communities in a way that makes them feel completely safe with Muslims. But what my madrasa education taught me about the Qur’an was quite different—it made me feel that Islam was constantly under threat and that I needed to defend it, so naturally I felt I needed to actively put down other religions or sects that aren’t consistent with my beliefs . . . After having this experience, I want to help my students appreciate the different religious groups of people who live in our community and our country. My kids need to know that only through being peaceful can they spread true Islam . . .” A few weeks later, we returned to find him teaching these ideas to his students, proclaiming that he needed to rectify his past errors and turn his kids from the direction of violence toward peace.*
- *During a different workshop at a madrasa widely known to be a major al-Qaeda feeder, a question was raised about whether attacks in Kashmir were permissible under Islam. After the moderator indicated that they were not, intense debate ensued among the madrasa leaders which, in turn, led to a consensus conclusion that the fighting was politically motivated but not religiously sanctioned. Now these same leaders are trying to figure out how to tone down the militancy of their graduates.*
- *In one of our recently-initiated women’s workshops for female teachers of Deobandi girls’ madrasas in Balochistan, some of the women mentioned that their sons are actively involved in fighting in Afghanistan. Initially many of these teachers also believed it was their duty as Muslim women to support their sons in waging jihad against “the infidels who are taking over Afghanistan.” However, at the end of the workshop, many of these women indicated that their minds had been changed. The following statement by one of these madrasa teachers is indicative: “After my experience here, I personally will go back and talk to my two sons and tell them not to fight anymore, because I realize that this is not Islamic jihad . . . I have realized that it is only through personal struggle and hard work that we can rebuild our countries, and I will make this a regular part of my teaching . . . You can talk to all the male madrasas you want, but if you don’t engage us female teachers, it will be very hard to*

stop the fighting. As mothers and sisters, it is we who can influence the men more than anyone else.”

- *One of ICRD’s madrasa partners also played a key role in negotiating the release of the Korean Christians taken hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2007—engaging the captors by appealing to Islamic principles.*

Working on the ground in Pakistan for the past five years, I have become convinced that, if constructively engaged, madrasas can play a powerful role in reducing religious extremism and discrimination in Pakistan. Such engagement should focus on empowering madrasa leaders who want to promote tolerance and reduce religious extremism with the skills and resources to do so, and to engage their fellow madrasa leaders to do the same. What must be avoided wherever possible is lumping the non-radical madrasa majority in with the radical minority, attempting to marginalize the madrasas, or threatening or attacking the madrasas, which creates defensiveness and in some cases severe reactions which exacerbate extremism.

Recommendations for the US Government

- US policymakers should pursue a multi-track approach with an emphasis on long-term stability and the human development of the Pakistani people. The short-term objectives are needed to counter security concerns, but not at the cost of a longer-term vision of sustained engagement.
- US aid to Pakistan should be integrated with the targeted goals and objectives of the Pakistani constitution, especially in areas of human rights, religious tolerance, and educational priorities consistent with democratic principles (see appendix for excerpts from this constitution):
 - The US funds should support the Pakistani constitutional rights protecting the religious and social practices of all religious and ethnic groups. This could be achieved by appropriating funds specifically for training programs that promote tolerance for religious and ethnic diversity. In a deeply divided society, these measures could provide much-needed awareness. They would also allow the United States to support something that does not appear to be simply a “US agenda”, but that is supporting the values of Pakistan’s own constitution for the good of the Pakistani people.
 - Local issues of injustice that enrage madrasa and religious leaders and motivate extremism should also be addressed. For example, lack of accessible and affordable legal services, particularly in rural areas, has led some religious leaders to take the law into their own hands to fill what is lacking in the justice system—this serves as a rallying point for extremists. The United States should support the development of community-based legal councils that could provide free services at the village/town level. Each district should have a least one (perhaps more in rural areas) public defender who could provide free services to those in need of legal representation. The existence of these services should be clearly communicated to the public, offering an appealing alternative to violence.

- Our financial aid to Pakistan should not be tied to any one political leader or party. We must use “soft power” to demonstrate sincere concern for the people of Pakistan.
- Additional alternatives need to be developed for monitoring US funding to Pakistan. Monitoring by the US embassy and various consulates often slows or halts development progress, as the mobility of these agencies is severely hindered by security concerns. This creates confusion and exaggerated feelings of corruption since the Pakistani population perceives that US funds are being used by the Pakistani government and they are not receiving the benefits.
- The US government should invest at least \$50 million toward enhancing Pakistan’s madrasas, channeling this educational aid through competent and trusted NGOs which already have a proven track record of success in engaging madrasas.
 - A comprehensive needs assessment conducted in partnership with the madrasas themselves.
 - Systematic pedagogical training of madrasa teachers. By itself, official inclusion of “contemporary” subjects in madrasa curriculums is insufficient to make a meaningful difference. Even more critical are (1) ensuring that all subjects are taught in a way that promotes genuine learning and skill development and (2) an educational environment that promotes tolerance, human rights, and peace and which works against intolerance and violence.
 - A system of madrasa accreditation and teacher certification put in place to ensure that madrasas are meeting mutually agreed-upon educational standards. Pakistani universities and teachers’ colleges should be funded to create specialized programs to engage madrasa teachers within their communities for certification in teaching tolerance, modern pedagogy, and leadership skills. (Toward this end, ICRD has been working with the University of Karachi to develop Pakistan’s first Madrasa Teacher Training Institute.)
 - Vocational training programs for madrasa students, emphasizing locally-relevant employable skills development. At the district level, scholarship programs should be created to enable madrasa students and teachers to attend public universities or vocational centers.
 - Selected scholars of each sect should be engaged to develop an enhanced integrative curriculum for their respective sects, after receiving training in research methodology and engaging in a study of best practices in various educational fields and contexts. These scholars would then work within a mechanism or subcommittee of a newly-created Inter-Madrasa Board (which would be under the joint leadership of both the Pakistani government and the madrasa leadership) to ensure that these curricular recommendations inform the development and enhancement of the madrasa curriculums on an ongoing basis.
 - Funding for the necessary resources (textbooks, content-specific and pedagogical training of teachers, facilities, etc.) to modernize the madrasas and enable them to

teach each of the curriculum courses effectively, in accordance with standards agreed to by both the madrasas and the Government of Pakistan.

- Deepening of the level of madrasa exposure to and engagement with other countries and cultures through overseas study and exchange visits. The International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) should expand efforts to bring Pakistani religious leaders to the United States, and efforts should be made to enhance the program by facilitating dialogue with IVLP alumnae in Pakistan.
- In all of these initiatives, special effort should be made to engage the more radical madrasa leaders as well as the moderates, as it is the radicals who have the greatest power to reduce extremism. Marginalizing the radicals will only increase their sense of being under threat and their perceived need to continue promoting radicalism.
- In addition, wherever possible, the United States should avoid airstrikes on madrasas, as these destroy trust and often lead to severe responses. For example, one religious leader “praised” recent US airstrikes, saying that he had previously had difficulty in finding fighters for his battle against America. He said, “Because of you [ICRD] we hadn’t had a new recruit in three or four months. After that missile [fell on a madrasa in Pakistan], thanks be to Allah, it is easy for us to get many recruits now.”
- Rather than seeking to eliminate or marginalize madrasas, we should engage them and work with them in enhancing the quality of their education.

Appendix: Excerpts from Pakistan’s Constitution

- Wherein the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam, shall be fully observed;
- Wherein adequate provision shall be made for the minorities freely to profess and practice their religions and develop their cultures;
- Therein shall be guaranteed fundamental rights, including equality of status, of opportunity and before law, social, economic and political justice, and freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship and association, subject to law and public morality;
- Wherein adequate provision shall be made to safeguard the legitimate interests of minorities and backward and depressed classes;
- Wherein the independence of the judiciary shall be fully secured;
- So that the people of Pakistan may prosper and attain their rightful and honoured place amongst the nations of the World and make their full contribution towards international peace and progress and happiness of humanity :

Now, therefore, we, the people of Pakistan,

Cognisant of our responsibility before Almighty Allah and men;

Cognisant of the sacrifices made by the people in the cause of Pakistan;

Faithful to the declaration made by the Founder of Pakistan, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, that Pakistan would be a democratic State based on Islamic principles of social justice;

Dedicated to the preservation of democracy achieved by the unremitting struggle of the people against oppression and tyranny;

Inspired by the resolve to protect our national and political unity and solidarity by creating an egalitarian society through a new order;