

## The Madrassa Scapegoat

Madrassas have become a potent symbol as terrorist factories since the September 11 attacks, evoking condemnation and fear among Western countries. The word first entered the political lexicon when the largely madrassa-educated Taliban in Afghanistan became the target of a U.S.-led strike in late 2001. Although none of the September 11 terrorists were members of the Taliban, madrassas became linked with terrorism in the months that followed, and the association stuck. For Western politicians, a certain type of education, such as the exclusive and rote learning of the Qur'an that some madrassas offer, seemed to be the only explanation for the inculcation of hate and irrationality in Islamist terrorists.

In October 2003, for example, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld wondered, "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?"<sup>1</sup> In the July 2004 report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, commonly known as the 9-11 Commission, madrassas were described as "incubators of violent extremism," despite the fact that the report did not mention whether any of the 19 hijackers had attended a madrassa.<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 2005, Rumsfeld still worried about madrassas that "train people to be suicide killers and extremists, violent extremists."<sup>3</sup> As the United States marked the fourth anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the autumn of 2005, several U.S. publications continued to claim that madrassas produce terrorists, describing them as "hate factories."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, careful examination of the 79 terrorists responsible for five of the worst anti-Western terrorist attacks in recent memory—the World Trade

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 29:2 pp. 117–125.

Center bombing in 1993, the Africa embassy bombings in 1998, the September 11 attacks, the Bali nightclub bombings in 2002, and the London bombings on July 7, 2005—reveals that only in rare cases were madrassa graduates involved. All of those credited with masterminding the five terrorist attacks had university degrees, and none of them had attended a madrassa. Within our entire sample, only 11 percent of the terrorists had attended madrassas.

**None of the apparent masterminds of the five terrorist attacks had attended a madrassa.**

(For about one-fifth of the terrorists, educational background could not be determined by examining the public record.) Yet, more than half of the group we assessed attended a university, making them as well educated as the average American: whereas 54 percent of the terrorists were found to have had some college education or to have graduated from university, only 52 percent of Americans can claim similar academic credentials.

Two of our sample had doctoral degrees, and two others had begun working toward their doctorates. Significantly, we found that, of those who did attend college and/or graduate school, 48 percent attended schools in the West, and 58 percent attained scientific or technical degrees. Engineering was the most popular subject studied by the terrorists in our sample, followed by medicine.

The data raise questions about what type of education, if any, is actually more likely to contribute to the motivation or skills required to execute a terrorist attack. Researchers such as Dr. Marc Sageman have argued that madrassas are less closely correlated with producing terrorists than are Western colleges, where students from abroad may feel alienated or oppressed and may turn toward militant Islam.<sup>5</sup> Given that 27 percent of the group attended Western schools, nearly three times as many as attended madrassas, our sample seems to confirm this trend. The data also show a strong correlation between technical education and terrorism, suggesting that perpetrating large-scale attacks requires not only a college education but also a facility with technology. This type of education is simply not available at the vast majority of madrassas.

These findings suggest that madrassas should not be a national security concern for Western countries because they do not provide potential terrorists with the language and technical skills necessary to attack Western targets. This is not to say that madrassas do not still pose problems. To the extent that they hinder development by failing properly to educate students in Asian, Arab, and African countries and that they create sectarian violence, particularly in Pakistan, madrassas should remain on policymakers'

minds as a regional concern.<sup>6</sup> A national security policy focused on madrassas as a principal source of terrorism, however, is misguided.

## **The Truth about Terrorist Education**

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“Madrassa” is a widely used and misused term. In Arabic, the word means simply “school.”<sup>7</sup> Madrassas vary from country to country or even from town to town. They can be a day or boarding school, a school with a general curriculum, or a purely religious school attached to a mosque.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of our study, “madrassa” refers to a school providing a secondary-level education in Islamic religious subjects.<sup>9</sup> We examined information available in U.S., European, Asian, and Middle Eastern newspapers; U.S. government reports; and books about terrorism to determine which of the 79 terrorists responsible for the five major attacks attended such madrassas. In the one instance when a terrorist was found to have attended a madrassa and later a university, we classified him as a graduate of both types of schools. Attacks in which information about the terrorists’ education was scant, such as the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* and the 2004 Madrid train bombings, were excluded from the study.

### **THE 1993 WORLD TRADE CENTER BOMBING**

On February 26, 1993, a truck bomb exploded in the parking garage beneath the twin towers of the World Trade Center, killing six people and injuring more than 1,000. Ringleader Ramzi Yousef had hoped the bomb would kill tens of thousands by making one tower collapse onto the other. The 12 men, including Yousef, responsible for this first World Trade Center bombing were the best educated of any group we studied. All of them had some college education, with most having studied in universities in the Middle East and North Africa, and two having graduated from Western colleges. The spiritual guide of this terrorist cell, the Egyptian cleric Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, had a master’s degree and had started on his doctoral dissertation at Al Azhar University in Cairo—the Oxford of the Islamic world. Yousef, the mastermind of the plot and the nephew of the operational commander of the September 11 attacks, obtained a degree in engineering from a college in Wales. None of the attackers appeared to have attended a madrassa.

### **THE 1998 AFRICA EMBASSY BOMBINGS**

On August 7, 1998, nearly simultaneous bombings at the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya killed 224 people. The attacks were the largest

perpetrated by Al Qaeda at the time and catapulted the group and its leader, Osama bin Laden, into the public eye. The 16 attackers who orchestrated the bombings were found largely to be part of a local Al Qaeda cell. This group of men had one Western-born member, Rashed Daoud al-Owhali, who hailed from Liverpool and claimed to have been indoctrinated not at a madrassa but by audio tapes about the Afghan jihad. Recent attacks in Madrid and London have shown that immigrants and the children of immigrants living in Europe may be more dangerous than far-flung madrassa graduates. Sageman, along with scholars such as Olivier Roy and Robert S. Leiken, have noted that living in the West alienates many immigrants and has a strong correlation to Western-based terrorist activity.<sup>10</sup> The Africa group demonstrates another trend that later reappeared in the 2004 Madrid bombings: the formation of ties between the undereducated (and easily influenced or even criminal) and the well educated. Seven of the 16 plotters in the Africa group attended college, with two, Wadih El-Hage and Ali Mohamed, attending Western schools.

### **THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACKS**

In the most devastating terrorist attack to date, 19 hijackers crashed three planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, with a fourth plane crashing in rural Pennsylvania; nearly 3,000 people were killed. The four pilots who led the September 11 attacks all spent time at universities outside of their home countries, three of them in Germany. As the 9-11 Commission detailed, the plot took shape in Germany as they were completing their degrees.<sup>11</sup> The lead hijacker, Muhammad Atta, had a doctorate in urban preservation and planning from the University of Hamburg-Harburg in Germany. The 15 “muscle hijackers” vary in educational background. Little is known about some of them, including Khalid al-Mihdhar, who met the pilot, Nawaf al Hazmi, while fighting in Bosnia. Indeed, several of the terrorists we studied, if they were not well educated, were so-called career jihadists with experience fighting in regions such as Bosnia and Afghanistan. Still, even of the muscle group, six of the 15 had completed some university studies. Finally, we also examined the so-called secondary planners, who had overall control of the operation, many of whom were longtime Al Qaeda operatives, and found that all of them had attended college in Europe or the United States. Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, the operational commander of the September 11 attacks, had obtained a degree in engineering from a college in North Carolina.

Despite the fact that much of the information about the educational backgrounds of the September 11 planners and pilots has been widely re-

ported, otherwise sophisticated analysts persist in believing that they were the products of madrassas. In his 2005 book *Future Jihad*, Walid Phares, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Florida Atlantic University and a frequent commentator on U.S. television, explained that Wahhabism “produced the religious schools; the religious schools produced the jihadists. Among them [were] Osama bin Laden and the nineteen perpetrators of September 11.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, bin Laden did not attend a religious school when he was growing up in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, studying instead at the relatively progressive, European-influenced Al Thagr High School and later at King Abdul Aziz University, where he focused on economics.<sup>13</sup> From what is available on the public record, it seems that none of the 19 hijackers attended madrassas.

**Madrassas should not be a national security concern for Western countries.**

#### **THE 2002 BALI NIGHTCLUBS BOMBING**

Islamist terrorists attacked two tourist hotspots in Bali in October 2002, killing more than 200. As was the case with the Africa embassy bombings, the Bali attack was aimed at Western targets, in this case tourists, in a non-Western country. Yet, unlike the previous examples, Bali is the only terrorist attack to have been perpetrated in part by terrorists who attended madrassas. Nine of the 22 perpetrators attended the Al Mukmin, Al Tarbiyah Luqmanul Hakiern, and SMP Pernalang pesantren—Islamic schools of a kind particular to Indonesia. Most Indonesian madrassas are part of the state school system and teach a broad range of subjects. Pesantren, however, such as Al Mukmin, operate outside of this system and are generally boarding schools. The curriculum at pesantren usually focuses on religion and often offers practical courses in farming or small industry.<sup>14</sup> This constellation of schools, particularly Al Mukmin, provided many recruits to Jemaah Islamiyah, the militant Islamist group that seeks to create fundamentalist theocracies in countries across Southeast Asia.

Even in the Bali attacks, however, five of the 22 members of the group had college degrees, particularly the key planners. The mastermind of the Bali plot, Dr. Azahari Husin, who was killed in a shootout with Indonesian police in November 2005, obtained his doctorate from the University of Reading in the United Kingdom prior to becoming a lecturer at a Malaysian university.<sup>15</sup> Noordin Muhammad Top attended the same Malaysian school. The third mastermind, Zulkarnaen, also known as Daud, studied biology at an Indonesian college. Azahari and Top are also suspected of involvement in the 2005 Bali bombings that killed 22 people.

## **THE JULY 7, 2005, LONDON BOMBINGS**

The July 7, 2005, bombings of three subway stations and a bus in London killed 56 people, including the suicide bombers, and were the work of home-grown British terrorists with suspected Al Qaeda ties.<sup>16</sup> The initial news coverage of the attack featured hyperventilating reports that the four men responsible had attended madrassas. One such piece in the *Evening Standard* stated that three of the bombers attended madrassas, which it termed “haven[s] for so-called Islamic warriors.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, three of the four suicide attackers had some college education, and none attended a madrassa until adulthood, when their attendance consisted of brief visits lasting for periods from a few weeks to a few months. The suicide bombers made a conscious decision to travel halfway around the globe to attend radical Pakistani madrassas after they had already been radicalized in their hometown of Leeds in the United Kingdom.

Of the four suicide attackers, Hasib Hussain, a man of Pakistani descent, attended Ingram Road Primary School in Holbeck and began his secondary education at South Leeds High School. Although he did not take his postsecondary school subject exams, he held a GNVQ, or vocational degree, in business studies. He visited Pakistan in 2003, when he was likely 16 or 17, after making a pilgrimage to Mecca. It was around this time that, back in England, he began socializing with two of the other bombers, Shehzad Tanweer and Muhammad Sidique Khan, with whom he frequented the Stratford Street mosque and the Hamara Youth Access Point, a teenage center in Leeds. Khan and Tanweer have similar backgrounds of elementary and secondary education in the United Kingdom. Khan later studied child care at Dewsbury College, and Tanweer studied sports science at Leeds Metropolitan University. Similar to Hussain, Tanweer traveled to Pakistan to study briefly at a madrassa in 2004, at the age of 21. The fourth bomber, Jamaican-born Germaine Lindsay, attended Rawthorpe High School in Huddersfield in the United Kingdom and converted to Islam at the age of 15.<sup>18</sup> Local influences appeared to play a far greater role in the radicalization of these young men than did their brief trips to Pakistani madrassas.

## **Where Are Terrorists Really Educated?**

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History has taught that terrorism has been a largely bourgeois endeavor, from the Russian anarchists of the late nineteenth century to the German Marxists of the Bader-Meinhof gang of the 1970s to the apocalyptic Japanese terror cult Aum Shinrikyo of the 1990s. Islamist terrorists turn out to be no different. It thus comes as no surprise that missions undertaken by Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups are not the work of impoverished, undereducated

madrassa graduates, but rather of relatively prosperous university graduates with technical degrees that were often attained in the West.

Bin Laden, Al Qaeda's leader, is the college-educated son of a billionaire; his deputy, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, is a surgeon from a distinguished Egyptian family. Ali Mohamed, Al Qaeda's longtime military trainer, is a former Egyptian army major with a degree in psychology who started work on a doctorate in Islamic history when he moved to the United States in the mid-1980s. Other Al Qaeda leaders worked in white collar professions such as accounting, the vocation of Rifa'i Taha, a leader of the Egyptian terrorist organization known as the Islamic Group, who signed on to Al Qaeda's declaration of war against the United States in 1998.

Our findings suggest that policymakers' concerns regarding madrassas are overwrought. More than half of the terrorists that we studied took university-level courses, and nearly half of this group attended Western schools. The majority of the college-educated group had technical degrees, which sometimes provided skills for their later careers as terrorists. Yousef's degree in electrical engineering, for example, served him well when he built the bomb that was detonated underneath the World Trade Center in 1993. It was the rare terrorist who studied exclusively at a madrassa, and only one terrorist managed to transition from madrassa to university, suggesting that madrassas simply should not be part of the profile of a terrorist capable of launching a significant anti-Western attack. Only in Southeast Asia, as seen in the Bali attack in 2002, did madrassas play a role in the terrorists' education. Yet, even in this example, the madrassa graduates paired up with better-educated counterparts to execute the attacks. Masterminding a large-scale attack thus requires technical skills beyond those provided by a madrassa education.

Because madrassas generally cannot produce the skilled terrorists capable of committing or organizing attacks in Western countries, they should not be a national security concern. Conceiving of them as such will lead to ineffective policies, and cracking down on madrassas may even harm the allies that Washington attempts to help. In countries such as Pakistan, where madrassas play a significant role in education, particularly in rural areas, the wholesale closure of madrassas may only damage the educational system and further increase regional tensions. One of Gen. President Pervez Musharraf's plans to reduce extremism, expelling foreign students and dual citizens, may be effective in reducing the number of militant Arabs studying in Pakistan

**Immigrants and their children in Europe may be more dangerous than madrassa grads.**

but may also harm neighboring countries such as Afghanistan, which rely on Pakistani madrassas, by leaving thousands of poor Afghans without any education.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to suggest that Western countries should ignore madrassas entirely. To the extent that they remain a domestic problem because they

**Cracking down on madrassas may even harm the allies that Washington attempts to help.**

undermine educational development and spawn sectarian violence, particularly in Pakistan, Western policymakers should remain vigilant about working with local governments to improve madrassas, as well as state schools. Efforts at observation and regulation might be more usefully directed toward European Islamic centers such as the Hamara Youth Access Point, where the London bombers gathered. Armed with a more realistic understanding of religious schools, particularly

the differences in the curricula they provide across countries and regions, policymakers can hone their strategy with respect to madrassas. Only by eliminating the assumption that madrassas produce terrorists capable of carrying out major attacks can Western countries shape more effective policies to ensure national security.

## Notes

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2. *The 9/11 Commission Report: The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 367.
3. Donald Rumsfeld, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, August 20, 2005.
4. Alex Alexiev, "If We Are to Win the War on Terror, We Must Do Far More," *National Review*, November 7, 2005; Nicholas D. Kristof, "Schoolyard Bully Diplomacy," *New York Times*, October 16, 2005, sec. 4, p. 13.
5. See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
6. For a detailed study of the relationship between madrassas and violence in Pakistan, see Saleem H. Ali, "Islamic Education and Conflict: Understanding the Madrassahs of Pakistan" (draft report, United States Institute of Peace, July 1, 2005).
7. Febe Armanios, "Islamic Religious Schools, *Madrassas*: Background," *CRS Report for Congress*, RS21654 (October 29, 2003), p. 1, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/26014.pdf>.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.



9. Ibid., p. 2.
10. See generally Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Robert S. Leiken, "Europe's Angry Muslims," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 4 (July/August 2005): 120–135.
11. *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 160–169.
12. Walid Phares, *Future Jihad: Terrorist Strategies Against America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 63.
13. Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), chap. 1.
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18. Ian Herbert, "Portrait of Bomber as a Dupe Fails to Convince Bereaved," *Independent*, September 24, 2005, p. 16.
19. Naveed Ahmad, "Pakistani Madrassas Under Attack," *Security Watch*, October 8, 2005, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=12418>.

