

## **Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum**

“Madrasas and the “Global War on Terror””

September 12, 2006

Many of the traditional madrasas or religious schools in Pakistan and in other areas of the world have come under scrutiny for fear that they incite Islamic extremism and promote terrorism. For the past three years, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) has led an effort to expand the curriculums and enhance the pedagogy of the Pakistani madrasas. The September Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum examined the various tools and methods used by the ICRD to reshape and enhance the capability of the madrasas to provide a better future for the children of Pakistan. The panel speakers included ICRD President Douglas Johnston, Project Director Azhar Hussain and Ahmad Younis, National Director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. The forum was moderated by the Director of Search for Common Ground’s Partners in Humanities project, Leena El-Ali.

Dr. Douglas Johnston gave a brief introduction on the history and role of the madrasas in Pakistan, noting that there are probably between 12,000 and 14,000 such schools (not even the government of Pakistan knows for certain how many there are), serving between one to one and a half million pupils. Johnston noted that while there is some debate over how many madrasas actually incorporate a jihadist agenda (most use the International Crisis Group’s estimate of 15%), there is widespread agreement that, at the very least, they provide an environment that is conducive to Islamic extremism. Unlike the madrasas of the Middle Ages, which represented the absolute peaks of learning excellence at the time and inspired the creation of the Western university system, the curriculums of most of today’s madrasas have deteriorated to the point where they focus almost exclusively on Islamic principles and rote memorization of the Qur’an. Much of this deterioration took place in opposition to colonialism.

Dr. Johnston explained that although many students memorize the Qur’an from cover-to-cover, they are clueless as to what it means because their first language is Urdu and they are forced to learn it in Arabic (of which they know very little). This, in turn, makes them easy prey for the militants who misappropriate Qur’anic scripture to win these students to their cause. Dr. Johnston pointed out that while the majority of students at madrasas are poor and are there, at least in part, to capitalize on the free room and board, a significant percentage is not. A number of students enroll in madrasas not for lack of better options, but because Islamic religious tradition is a fundamental part of their heritage; and most Muslim families want at least one of their children to be schooled in Islamic principles. The majority of these madrasas are funded locally by the communities in which they are located, with the remainder getting their support from Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states.

ICRD has been working in partnership with an Islamic think tank to enhance the madrasas by expanding their curriculums to include the scientific and social disciplines (with a special emphasis on religious tolerance and human rights), and by transforming the pedagogy to facilitate the development of critical thinking skills among the students. Dr Johnston indicated

that their progress to date has been a function of two factors: (1) conducting the project in such a way that the madrasa leaders feel it is their reform effort and not something imposed from the outside (by giving these leaders considerable ownership in the process) and (2) inspiring them with their own heritage, noting that many of the pioneering breakthroughs in the arts and sciences, including religious tolerance, took place under Islam a thousand years ago. Dr. Johnston closed by noting that this reform effort will not only provide a brighter future for the children of Pakistan, but it also gets to the heart of the global war on terrorism in a positive and meaningful way.

Mr. Azhar Hussain began by outlining his assessment of some of the major, deep-rooted problems that exist within the madrasas. Indifference and deep distrust toward the outside world (largely resulting from British colonial rule) is a major problem. Because of such feelings, many Muslims chose to distance themselves from their occupiers in every way possible, including education. Although this turning away from Westerners helped preserve a strong sense of identity and culture, it also led to doctrinaire and ideologically rigid madrasas as they rejected the “western educational style.”

Another formidable challenge in reforming madrasas, Mr. Hussain pointed out, is that many people are furious with what they see as a double standard: the United States once flooded the madrasas with money and introduced a jihadist agenda in order to fight the Soviets. At the time, America referred to these Pakistanis as “freedom fighters;” now, it calls them “terrorists.” Many do not want the younger generation to make the same mistake of trusting the West. This fury is compounded by a reluctance on the part of the madrasas to buy into any change process that might result in the secularization of their curriculums. ICRD’s approach to overcoming these obstacles includes a strong emphasis on confidence-building—persuading the madrasas that they have the power to reform themselves from within. Mr. Hussain explained that this process takes considerable effort and is not without its risks. Softening the hardened impressions of outsiders is often the first step in this process.

Mr. Hussain closed by highlighting some of the specific aspects of the ICRD training, which brings together madrasa administrators and senior faculty from all five of the religious sects that sponsor these schools to engage in a combination of seminars, workshops, and fieldtrips. Mr. Hussain noted that the project focuses on helping the madrasas to help themselves and described in general terms the various topics covered in ICRD’s ten-day workshops. Thus far, a total of 13 workshops (of varying lengths) and five policy seminars, involving over two hundred madrasas, have been conducted to date, with plans to reach 500-1000 more over the next 18 months.

Ahmed Younis, having recently returned from a trip to Malaysia, which included visits to many Malaysian madrasas, spoke passionately about the crucial need to reform the madrasa system from inside the Islamic world. He stressed the need of madrasas to move away from an extremist Islamic view, and to realize and utilize the accepting nature of the religion as taught in the Qur’an. In many of the post-Soviet societies, madrasas serve, or at least may be able to serve, as the indispensable “front line” in the “war on terror”; essentially combating Islamic extremism from the inside out. Mr. Younis commented that within madrasas there is little emphasis placed on critical thinking. He said that, in fact, there is a *lack* of education, or at least unbiased information, on the Islamic tradition and especially the interpretations of the Qur’an.

Mr. Younis, in chorus with the other two speakers, believes that the way to reform the madrasas and the militant brand of Islam that is permeating the Muslim world is to “fight bad theology with good theology”. The role of a positive, strong Muslim identity that is informed, critical and devoted is paramount in the fight on terror. In his travels, Mr. Younis met many young Muslims that feel they do not have public representatives speaking with or for them, expressing their hopes and dreams, their concerns and their fears. It is because of this lack of representation that figures like Osama Bin Laden become the focus of attention and in many cases, a hero for some Muslim youth. The fundamental problem is that when Muslims do not see themselves represented, when the caricatures of the “Arab terrorist” created by the West are the only images that receive international attention, it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Mr. Younis believes that one positive advantage to the cleavage between left and right wing Muslims is that it theoretically provides an arena to debate these issues and to find common ground. The best tactic, according to Mr. Younis, would be to involve younger Muslims in debates on Islam, introducing different perspectives and challenges to their deeply ingrained doctrine. Only then will some of the youth begin to actually challenge their acceptance of violent tactics, and instead begin to formulate their own interpretations and feelings towards Islam. He also stressed that this is not a “war on terrorism”, rather it is a struggle against extremism. Therefore, in an attempt to reform and change the Muslim status quo, it is of dire importance to include the Muslim world, both Muslims abroad and Muslim-Americans, as major players in this reform process. It is Muslims who suffer the greatest from terrorism and extremism and therefore it is important to include those who suffer the most in the solution.