

Indoctrinating Children: The Making of Pakistan's Suicide Bombers

By Kalsoom Lakhani

IN NUMEROUS ARMED CONFLICTS, children continue to be used as weapons of war. According to Human Rights Watch, the military recruitment of children under 18 years of age and their use in hostilities occurs in at least 86 countries and territories, with Amnesty International estimating that there are approximately 250,000 children fighting in conflicts worldwide.¹ In Pakistan, a significant and disturbing number of suicide bombers were between 12 and 18 years of age, with one estimate placing that number at 90%.² Although young militants are generally teenagers when asked to carry out suicide attacks, the indoctrination of children often starts at a much younger age. In the PBS documentary *Children of the Taliban*, journalist Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy interviewed Taliban commander Qari Hussain, who boasted that he also recruits children as young as five, six and seven years old, emphasizing, "Children are tools to achieve God's will. And whatever comes your way, you sacrifice it."³

In the last year alone, child suicide bombers have perpetrated a number of attacks in Pakistan. In June 2009, news agencies reported that a teenage suicide bomber detonated explosives in the office of a prominent cleric and supporter of the Pakistani offensive against the Taliban.⁴ The cleric, Sarfraz Naeemi, was killed in the attack, as well as three others.⁵ In December 2009, a teenage suicide bomber, who a police chief described as "under 20 with

pimples on his face and short," attacked a press club in Peshawar, killing three people.⁶ Another teenager "wearing a vest with as many as 15 pounds of explosives" blew himself up near a protest rally in Peshawar in April 2010, killing a prominent police officer and as many as two dozen protesters.⁷ The attack was later claimed by Lashkar-i-Jhanghvi, a group from the Punjabi Taliban nexus.

To comprehend the gravity of the child militant phenomenon in Pakistan, it is first necessary to understand the process of indoctrination, which ultimately socializes young recruits into hardened fighters. By understanding this psychology, it is possible to find productive solutions.

The Role of Madrasas in Radicalization

Sources differ on the actual number of *madrasas* (religious schools) in Pakistan. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, "Experts say there is no credible information for the number of unregistered madrasas, but estimates of registered madrasas range from ten thousand to twenty thousand."⁸ When looking at the numbers of children who attend school in the country, however, only a small percentage (1.3%) receives a *madrasa* education, versus 65% who attend public schools and 34% who go to private schools.⁹ Nevertheless, according to South Asia expert Christine Fair, *madrasas* are still concerning as they may produce students who are more likely than students in mainstream schools to support militancy.¹⁰

While not all religious schools in Pakistan are radical in nature, some estimates claim that about 15% preach violence or militancy.¹¹ In areas with a high concentration of *madrasas*, low-income families may choose this school

system because their children are provided free education and room and board. In comparison, many government schools have limited teaching materials and "an inadequate number of properly trained teachers, or in many cases absent teachers."¹² As a result, some families choose to send their children away to religious schools.

According to Chinoy, the first stage in the indoctrination process involves the severing of young children from their families.¹³ Since they receive free board and education, a sense of loyalty and obligation between the students and the *madrasa* develops. From a psychological perspective, the separation of a child from parental control subsequently leads them to look toward a father surrogate as their new authority, noted Jerrold Post, a Professor of Psychiatry, Political Psychology and International Affairs at The George Washington University.¹⁴ In the case of the *madrasa* system, this surrogate often takes the form of the school cleric or teacher, whose sermons many young boys accept without question.

Children at a young age are deeply vulnerable, malleable and impressionable, traits often manipulated by group leaders in conflicts throughout the world to indoctrinate child soldiers. According to Post, "The psychology of morality and conscience is something that is absorbed during childhood, and if that childhood is spent carrying out or viewing acts of violence, it can be a very powerful and scary phenomenon."¹⁵

In the case of Pakistan, the dependency between the student and the school is further strengthened by the *madrasa* curriculum. According to Azhar Hussain, a consultant with various international organizations on *madrasa* enhancement in Pakistan, the curriculum in these schools is focused on religion, and rarely incorporates subjects such as math or sciences, disciplines that ultimately foster critical thinking and analysis.¹⁶ In many of these *madrasas*, students are also not allowed to watch

1 "Child Soldiers Global Report 2008," Human Rights Watch, May 20, 2008. The 250,000 figure is drawn from the "Child Soldiers" section of Amnesty International's website.

2 Zahid Hussain, an expert on the Taliban who has interviewed many children trained to become suicide bombers, provided this figure to CNN journalist Anderson Cooper, which was broadcast on "Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees," on January 5, 2010.

3 Dan Edge, *Children of the Taliban*, PBS Frontline, August 14, 2009.

4 Alex Rodriguez, "Taliban Critic Slain in Pakistan Suicide Bombing," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2009.

5 Ibid.

6 "Teen Suicide Bomber Kills 3 at Pakistan Press Club," *Kuwait Times*, December 23, 2009.

7 Sabrina Tavernise, "Bomber Strikes Near Pakistan Rally," *New York Times*, April 19, 2010.

8 Jayshree Bajoria, "Pakistan's Education System and Links to Extremism," Council on Foreign Relations, October 7, 2009.

9 Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, C. Christine Fair, and Asim Ijaz Khwaja, "The Madrasa Myth," *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2009.

10 Bajoria.

11 Douglas Johnston, "Madrasa Reform Key," *Washington Times*, August 7, 2009.

12 Bajoria.

13 Personal interview, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, May 10, 2010.

14 Personal interview, Jerrold Post, April 30, 2010.

15 Ibid.

16 Personal interview, Azhar Hussain, May 8, 2010.

television or read any materials not prescribed by their school and are “severely reprimanded and made an example if they do,” explained Chinoy. The use of intimidation is therefore an important tool in indoctrination. As a result, most *madrasa* students do not question or probe teachings centered on narrow and arbitrary interpretations of Islam.

The Common Narrative

Despite the numerous types of *madrasas*, as well as militant organizations, one simple and overarching narrative seems to tie these entities together. While there are variations on the enemy, more radical schools base their fundamental narrative around the notion that Islam is under attack. In his work on *madrasas*, Azhar Hussain found that numerous schools infuse teachings of religion with anti-U.S. sentiment, delivering firebrand sermons that depict the United States as the villain in the narrative, the force that threatens Islamic traditions and values.¹⁷ While perceived allies of the United States, including the Pakistani state and NATO forces, are also vilified in this scenario, the Pakistani military in particular is a rallying cry. According to Chinoy, clerics and militants frame the Pakistan Army’s operations against militancy in Pakistan as proof that they are “an enemy of Islam” since they are killing “fellow Muslims.”¹⁸ Chinoy noted, “Many don’t even consider the military to be a Muslim Army.”¹⁹

This simple but polarizing narrative is fundamental within the child militant context because it is digestible, noted Farhana Ali, a terrorism analyst who researches *madrasas*.²⁰ “The narrative doesn’t have to be true,” she emphasized. “If that’s what feeds young minds it’s irrelevant if it’s false.”²¹ Moreover, given the sense of dependency and obligation that form between the student and the *madrasa*, children absorb their teachers’ narrative as their own fairly quickly.

The Culture of Martyrdom

Not all *madrasas* are radical, and many that preach hatred and intolerance do not necessarily advocate violence. At the same time, there is a culture of martyrdom to which children become acclimated while attending these schools. According to Post, the evolution of suicide bombing in the Islamist context has involved “taking

“While adult suicide bombers may experience some ‘existential grappling,’ young children are unable to process the meaning of ending one’s life, especially if rewards are promised in the afterlife.”

something that is prohibited in the Holy Qur’an—suicide—and reframing it as martyrdom.”²² Although the “greater” jihad in Islam is the struggle within oneself, firebrand clerics and militants have shifted the emphasis to the “lesser” jihad, or jihad of the sword, “which was an obligation for Muslim men to protect Islam from invasion and its enemies.”²³ Ali and Post noted, “Over time, the terms jihad and martyrdom were misappropriated by terrorist leaders and their members to justify acts of violence in the name of Islam.”²⁴

In radical *madrasas*, the reframing of both jihad and martyrdom are instrumental in glorifying the acts of suicide bombers. These themes also further reinforce the fundamental narrative—that Islam is under threat, and suicide bombing is a tool “to teach the enemy a lesson,” a phrase often used by radical clerics and teachers and subsequently parroted by impressionable *madrasa* students. Chinoy, a journalist who spent a considerable amount of time visiting *madrasas* in Pakistan for her documentary *Children*

of the Taliban, noted that older students in the schools (teenagers 15-18-years-old) also influence the younger children (9-12-years-old), framing jihadist fighters and suicide bombers as heroes who bring value to society and should be emulated.²⁵ According to Hussain, students as young as nine years old say if there were an opportunity to harm Western interests, they would not hesitate in sacrificing themselves for “the greater good.”²⁶

Surrender to the collective or group identity is also a transformation that occurs in the indoctrination process. While adult suicide bombers may experience some “existential grappling,” young children are unable to process the meaning of ending one’s life, especially if rewards are promised in the afterlife.²⁷ Images and stories of virgins, rivers of milk and honey, and other heavenly delights in paradise, as well as propaganda videos celebrating the acts of jihadist fighters, further enforce the allure of suicide bombing.²⁸ Children are also told that by becoming suicide bombers they are securing a place in heaven for their families as well.²⁹

Children as Sacrifice

From the radical *madrasa* and militant perspective, children are seen as expendable human resources. A common term used by extremist clerics in reference to these indoctrinated students, noted Azhar Hussain, is *Qurbani ka bakra*, or sacrifice. A cleric from a Deobandi *madrasa* outside Lahore once told Hussain, “This is a gift from God that we have an unlimited number of youngsters willing to become *Qurbani ka bakra* to teach America a lesson.”³⁰ This callous framing by clerics and radical *madrasa* leaders signifies how the use of children as suicide bombers and militants is a political tactic to bolster power. In a system where religion often becomes blurred with culture, children

17 Ibid.

18 Personal interview, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, May 10, 2010.

19 Ibid.

20 Personal interview, Farhana Ali, May 10, 2010.

21 Ibid.

22 Personal interview, Jerrold Post, April 30, 2010.

23 Farhana Ali and Jerrold Post, “The History and Evolution of Martyrdom in the Service of Defensive Jihad: An Analysis of Suicide Bombers in Current Conflicts,” *Social Research* 75:2 (2008).

24 Ibid.

25 Personal interview, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, May 10, 2010.

26 Personal interview, Azhar Hussain, May 8, 2010.

27 Personal interview, Jerrold Post, April 30, 2010.

28 Arwa Damon, “Taliban Brainwashes Kids with Visions of Virgins,” CNN, January 6, 2010.

29 Personal interview, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, May 10, 2010.

30 Hussain noted similar statements by clerics from *madrasas* throughout the country, including in Karachi.

who view the world in black-and-white often have a hard time comprehending such nuanced distinctions.

By the time children go through years of indoctrination in the *madrasa* system, many are recruited or choose to join a militant organization. Again, while not all radical *madrasas* advocate the use of violence, these children have also heard the same messages repeated over and over again and have been socialized in an atmosphere of hatred and intolerance. According to Azhar Hussain, among more than 200 students he interviewed, many voiced an affiliation for at least one militant group, some noting they liked Lashkar-i-Tayyiba but not Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or they preferred Jaysh-i-Muhammad to Lashkar-i-Jhangvi.³¹ Although some militant groups, including the TTP, recruit children as young as six years old, children do not become suicide bombers until they are teenagers.³²

Solutions

In March 2010, the Pakistan Army established a boarding school to absorb and deradicalize 86 young militants in the Swat Valley, who had either been captured by the military or brought in by their families.³³ While the efforts of this center should be lauded, more resources must be allocated to absorb the overwhelming number of child fighters, particularly as Pakistan's military gains ground against insurgents in the country.

Although many of these young recruits have experienced years of indoctrination and radicalization, rehabilitation efforts must center on providing them with an alternate and legitimate surrogate authority, such as a more moderate cleric or a member of the military. According to Hussain, although many children with whom he spoke were willing to blow themselves up, "Most were timid and very much

open to listening to other adults."³⁴ Therefore, intervention efforts must be made to train and build capacity of potential guidance counselors to bolster the rehabilitation process.

More importantly, a comprehensive approach by the government of Pakistan must be developed to address this phenomenon as a whole. If the source of the issue is the more extreme *madrasas*, then long-term efforts must be made to strengthen parallel education systems to provide more attractive choices for families. In the short-term, efforts by local and provincial authorities to engage *madrasas* in curriculum reform, conflict resolution training, and peace-building workshops must also be supported. Moreover, the state should undertake continued efforts to discredit the narrative espoused by radical *madrasas* and militant organizations. In Pakistan, the issue of radicalization is a complex process, which can only be countered through a holistic, multifaceted and nuanced strategy.

Kalsoom Lakhani is director for Social Vision, the venture philanthropy arm of ML Resources, LLC, a Washington, D.C.-based company. Ms. Lakhani also runs the blog CHUP, or Changing Up Pakistan, which aims to raise awareness on the issues affecting Pakistan. Her articles have been published in the Washington Post, Foreign Policy's AfPak Channel, Dawn, and the Huffington Post. She received a master's degree in International Affairs/Conflict Resolution from The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, and a B.A. in Foreign Affairs and Middle East Studies from the University of Virginia.

The Third Way: A Paradigm for Influence in the Marketplace of Ideas

By Scott Helfstein

PRIOR ATTEMPTS AT crafting a sustainable long-term strategy for combating terrorism fail to appreciate the importance and power of the dichotomous choice fostered by the al-Qa`ida narrative.¹ Al-Qa`ida maintains that the Muslim way of life is under siege by the West, and that Muslims have two options: surrender or fight. Given this choice, some portion of the Islamic community will inevitably choose to fight. Long-term counterterrorism policy looks toward political and economic solutions, focusing far less on the attitudes and norms that al-Qa`ida manipulates to generate recruits and support. The key to draining this support, and improving the long-term strategic outlook, is by disrupting this choice and presenting a "third way."

Since the September 11 attacks, there are numerous examples of hard fought tactical and operational counterterrorism victories, but efforts to counter the spread of violent extremism have achieved limited success. Al-Qa`ida today is a global terrorist organization, carrying out attacks against civilians around the world, while simultaneously tied to regional and local insurgencies aimed at overthrowing specific governments. Kinetic activity, while important to security, will not provide a long-term solution. Fundamentally, this is a norm-based fight, and al-Qa`ida's leaders are adept at framing issues in a normative way to generate the dichotomous choice.

The vast majority of people will never aim to kill their neighbors or blow up a local café. Those prepared to do so go through a period of radicalization and mobilization where choices steadily disappear, and they are faced with a single path. These people develop strong attitudes and overcome the normative constraints on the use of violence. Breaking this cycle is crucial

31 Personal interview, Azhar Hussain, May 8, 2010.

32 If children are recruited at a young age, they go through a similar indoctrination process until they are teenagers. Prior to this time, they are also allowed to hold guns, or ferry items around for the militant group. Details are based on personal interview, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, May 10, 2010.

33 Kalsoom Lakhani, "We Neglect Child Soldiers at Our Peril," The AfPak Channel, March 29, 2010.

34 Personal interview, Azhar Hussain, May 8, 2010.

1 The author would like to thank Nassir Abdullah, Aleksander Matovski, Reid Sawyer, Bill Braniff, and Don Rassler for comments and assistance on prior drafts. All mistakes are those of the author.