

# *International Center for Religion & Diplomacy*

**Memorandum for the Record**

August 21, 2006

By: Douglas Johnston

Subj: Pakistan Trip Report (August 3-11, 2006)

On August 3rd, ICRD Board members Harold Jacobi, John Sandoz, and I traveled to Pakistan to meet with madrasa leaders of the Deobandi and Wahhabi sects and to make presentations to administrators and senior faculty at several key madrasas. These meetings were made possible through the laudable efforts of Azhar Hussain, our Pakistan Project Director, and Rashad Bukhari, our on-the-ground coordinator.

By way of explanation, there are five sects in Pakistan that sponsor these religious schools. Of these, the Deobandi and Wahhabi schools stand apart as the most conservative and hardest line. The Deobandis are greater in number and influence than all of the other four combined.

We first spoke to a number of Deobandi madrasa leaders from Balochistan (the “hot zone” of Pakistan near the Afghan and Iranian borders where the Taliban roam free) who were then in day 5 of one of our Center’s 10-day workshops. With multiple references to the Qur’an, our presentations challenged the participants to consider inter-faith collaboration as a promising avenue in moving toward peace. The message was well-received, with one madrasa leader reacting by smiling, putting his hand over his heart and proclaiming, “You have made me very, very happy. I thought that all Americans hated us.” (While Americans are everyone’s favorite target these days, Pakistanis care enormously about what Americans think).

Yet another madrasa leader indicated his new-found resolve (as a result of the workshop) to challenge the preliminary decision of village elders to kill a girl who had been caught talking to a young man on her cell phone at 2:00 am, along with her mother, her sister, and the boy’s mother (in addition to having the boy’s nose and ears cut off). This madrasa leader said that before the workshop, he would have gone along with the verdict, but now he was prepared to challenge it on religious grounds. Although he felt fortified to present this challenge, it was not without a degree of trepidation on his part. In a contest between religious and tribal imperatives, it is by no means a given that the religious will carry the day.

Next, we addressed Jamia Binnoria, a major Deobandi madrasa in Karachi (about 4,000 students, including 500 girls and 90 foreigners) that spawned the two most lethal anti-Shiite terrorist groups and which is thought by many to be the chief supplier of fighters for Kashmir and Chechnya. This was our Center’s first exposure to this madrasa;

and while there were a few testy moments during the discussion period following our presentations, on balance our message was well-received. Notably, three ISI agents (Pakistani intelligence) were present at this session to keep track of what we were doing. Eventually, their concerns and those of their parent organization were disarmed by our policy of total transparency; and we never saw them again.

The following day, we addressed Jamia Manzooral Islamia, the Wahhabi madrasa in Lahore that has been linked in the popular media to the London bombers. Compared to Jamia Binnoria above, it was much less austere—probably a result of the funding it receives from external (Saudi) sources. Again, our first exposure; but with an even warmer reception. This madrasa will become a linchpin in our newly developing training program for Wahhabis.

Our final presentation along these same lines took place in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), which, like Balochistan, is a highly volatile region. The audience was an inter-faith gathering initiated by a prominent Wahhabi leader, involving about 300 participants, most of whom were Muslim and Christian religious leaders from the surrounding area. As in previous presentations, the discussion period quickly focused on U.S. foreign policy, particularly in relation to the Middle East. After dealing with those issues, we were able to get back on message; and the post-event response was exceedingly positive.

In addition to the madrasa involvement, we visited the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement in Lahore that provides legal representation for minorities, women and children that suffer from persecution in one form or another (especially in relation to the country's blasphemy laws). Their efforts on behalf of Christians and other minorities are nothing short of heroic. We also visited the Christian Study Center in Islamabad where we made presentations to a group of Muslim and Christian interfaith leaders. Finally, we spent time at the Institute for Policy Studies (also in Islamabad) where we met with the Director General, Khalid Rahman, to review the progress to date of (and discuss future strategy for) our joint initiative to enhance the curriculums and pedagogy of all Pakistani madrasas.

At the end of our trip, we spent an hour conversing with Mohammedian Soomro, Chairman of the Pakistani Senate, an incredibly bright individual and one of the most powerful figures in the country (serving as acting President whenever Musharraf is away). He applauded our Center's work with the madrasas, but made note of another problem he considers every bit as pressing, i.e. the fact that the mujahadeen and others who the United States mobilized to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan were left without other options when the U.S. pulled out, following the Soviet withdrawal. Mr. Soomro said they are still highly energized, doing what they were trained to do (only now against others) and need to be re-assimilated into Pakistani society. He drew an analogy with our own Vietnam vets and pointedly remarked that America created this problem and Pakistan doesn't have the resources to deal with it. He suggested that a U.S. investment of a few hundred million dollars now could preclude the need to spend billions later.

When asked what his biggest challenge was, he replied “quality of life.” This certainly conformed with our own observations relating to the extreme poverty that permeates much of the country—major cities and rural areas alike (as poignantly illustrated in a local hospital that we visited). During our discussion, we were joined by the top government official responsible for earthquake relief. He too was bright—and very pleased to learn that ICRD had raised \$60,000 to aid in the recovery effort.

During our time in Pakistan, we ended up with extensive media coverage in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and the Northwest Frontier. This included a lengthy interview with the country’s largest newspaper (to which they are giving extensive coverage) and an hour-long television interview that was carried throughout the country (and via Direct TV to other parts of the world). Thus, the transition has been made from what began as a very low-profile initiative to something that is now far beyond that. Both our project personnel and the madrasa leaders with whom they are working felt strongly that this publicity would greatly empower their respective efforts (in addition to improving the image of the U.S. more generally). Working in the opposite direction, of course, is the added security challenge that will accompany the exposure. In their view, though, the potential gain will more than outweigh the added risk. We’ll have to see.

In responding to the multitudinous foreign policy challenges, I consistently made two points:

1. Although the United States has made some mistakes of late, it is important to recall that it intervened on behalf of Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Somalia (often overlooked with regard to Somalia is the fact that close to 300,000 lives were saved as a result of this humanitarian intervention), and
2. While the United States could rightfully be criticized for operating with a double standard in the Middle East (owing to its strategic relationship with Israel), so too could the Arab countries be accused of a double standard in their dealings with the Palestinians—complaining mightily about Israeli mistreatment, while turning a deaf ear to Palestinian pleas for humanitarian assistance.

Although personal security was a concern throughout, especially in Karachi and the Northwest Frontier Province, it was manageable and we never felt threatened. The final challenge in this regard was flying home through London at the peak of the recent terrorist scare. This too proved manageable. All in all, it was an incredibly rich and fruitful time.