

June 14, 2005

## The Madrassa Myth

By **PETER BERGEN** and **SWATI PANDEY**

The New York Times

Washington

It is one of the widespread assumptions of the war on terrorism that the Muslim religious schools known as madrassas, catering to families that are often poor, are graduating students who become terrorists. Last year, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell denounced madrassas in Pakistan and several other countries as breeding grounds for "fundamentalists and terrorists." A year earlier, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld had queried in a leaked memorandum, "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?"

While madrassas may breed fundamentalists who have learned to recite the Koran in Arabic by rote, such schools do not teach the technical or linguistic skills necessary to be an effective terrorist. Indeed, there is little or no evidence that madrassas produce terrorists capable of attacking the West. And as a matter of national security, the United States doesn't need to worry about Muslim fundamentalists with whom we may disagree, but about terrorists who want to attack us.

We examined the educational backgrounds of 75 terrorists behind some of the most significant recent terrorist attacks against Westerners. We found that a majority of them are college-educated, often in technical subjects like engineering. In the four attacks for which the most complete information about the perpetrators' educational levels is available - the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the attacks on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the 9/11 attacks, and the Bali bombings in 2002 - 53 percent of the terrorists had either attended college or had received a college degree. As a point of reference, only 52 percent of Americans have been to college. The terrorists in our study thus appear, on average, to be as well educated as many Americans.

The 1993 World Trade Center attack involved 12 men, all of whom had a college education. The 9/11 pilots, as well as the secondary planners identified by the 9/11 commission, all attended Western universities, a prestigious and elite endeavor for anyone from the Middle East. Indeed, the lead 9/11 pilot, Mohamed Atta, had a degree from a German university in, of all things, urban preservation, while the operational planner of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, studied engineering in North Carolina. We also found that two-thirds of the 25 hijackers and planners involved in 9/11 had attended college.

Of the 75 terrorists we investigated, only nine had attended madrassas, and all of those played a role in one attack - the Bali bombing. Even in this instance, however, five college-educated "masterminds" - including two university lecturers - helped to shape the Bali plot.

Like the view that poverty drives terrorism - a notion that countless studies have debunked - the idea that madrassas are incubating the next generation of terrorists offers the soothing illusion that desperate, ignorant automatons are attacking us rather than college graduates, as is often the case. In fact, two of the terrorists in our study had doctorates from Western universities, and two others were working toward their Ph.D.

A World Bank-financed study that was published in April raises further doubts about the influence of madrassas in Pakistan, the country where the schools were thought to be the most influential and the most virulently anti-American. Contrary to the numbers cited in the report of the 9/11 commission, and to a blizzard of newspaper reports that 10 percent of Pakistani students study in madrassas, the study's authors found that fewer than 1 percent do so. If correct, this estimate would suggest that there are far more American children being home-schooled than Pakistani boys attending madrassas.

While madrassas are an important issue in education and development in the Muslim world, they are not and should not be considered a threat to the United States. The tens of millions of dollars spent every year by the United States through the State Department, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, and the Agency for International Development to improve education and literacy in the Middle East and South Asia should be applauded as the development aid it is and not as the counterterrorism effort it cannot be.

Peter Bergen, the author of "Holy War Inc.," is a fellow at the New America Foundation. Swati Pandey is a research associate there.

Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company