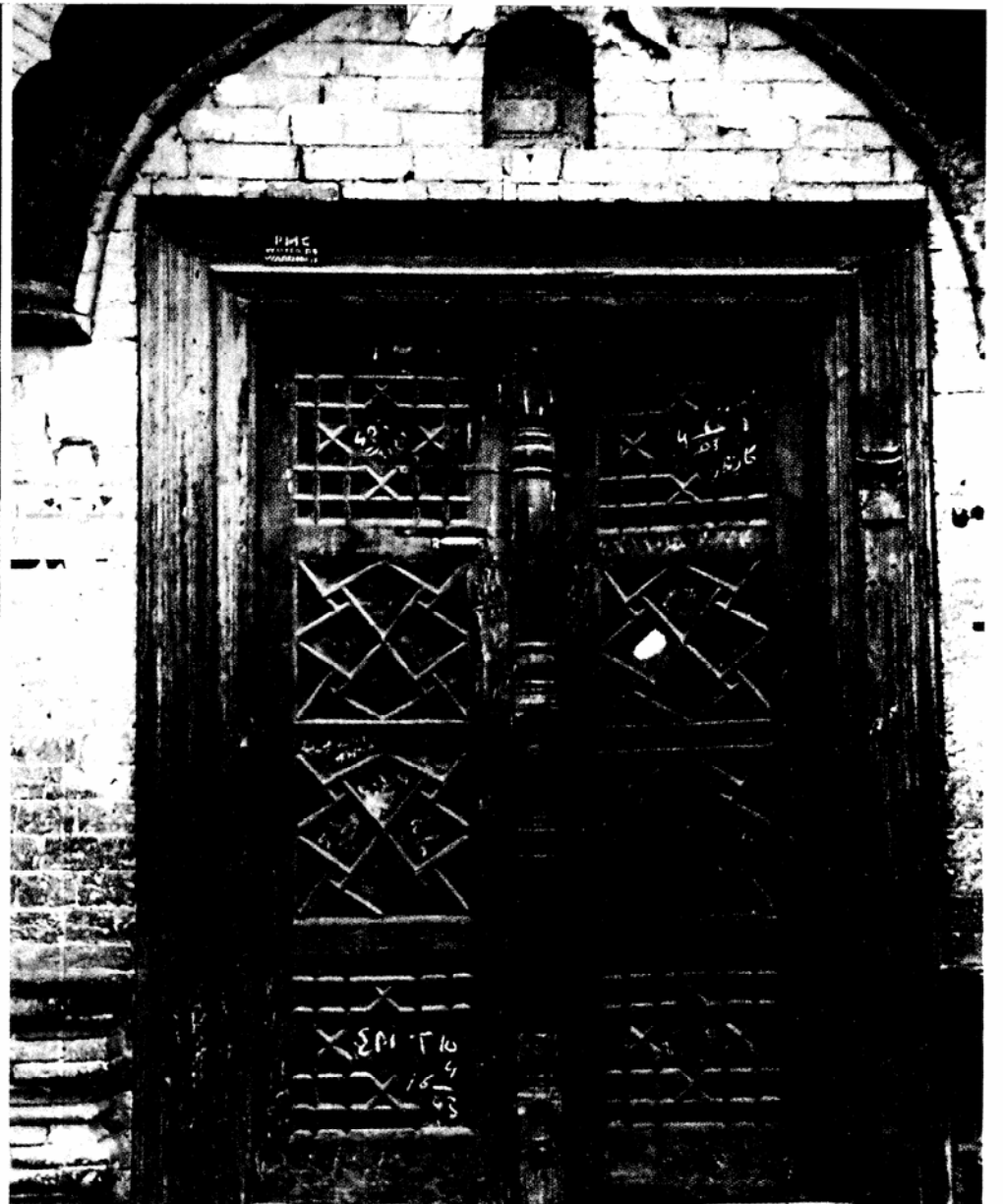




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PICTURES BY FARISH A NOOR



From left: The Tomb of Anarkali, the Moghul courtesan who was the lover of Emperor Jahangir; solace and peace can be found in the Wazir Khan mosque in Lahore; a door to learning, the entrance to one of Pakistan's many madrasahs

FEATURE

SLEEPING with the ENEMY

Five weeks touring the *madrasahs* of Pakistan teaches Farish A Noor about sordid realpolitik and *sepak takraw*

Jihad factories." The *madrasahs* or religious seminaries of the Muslim world have become the bête noire of Westernised liberals, Eurocentric secularists and Washington hawks alike, a forbidding metaphor of Islamic religiosity caught in a fateful confrontation with the West and all things western. The media-circulated "war against terror" has not helped to calm public fears; nor has it improved our understanding of the *madrasahs* themselves.

It was against this backdrop of intrigue and paranoia that I found myself in Pakistan in February and March this year. My research on the circulation of ideas and knowledge across the Indian Ocean meant that I needed to spend some time in the archives of Lahore (situated in the majestic confines of the Tomb of Anarkali the Moghul courtesan, no less) and several *madrasahs*, or *deeni madaris*, as they are referred to, in Punjab.

But entering the *madrasahs* of Pakistan — not to mention living in them — is not exactly the easiest thing to do these days. For a start, one has to transcend the suspicion and fear that block the threshold itself. Since Sept 11, 2001, the *madrasahs* of Pakistan have been labelled by many a self-professed "security expert" as laboratories for an Islamist experiment gone badly wrong, with deadly results.

Prior to making my trip, I had heard and read lurid tales of how students as young as seven were made to watch videos of the killing of the Western journalist, Daniel Pearl, who was not only shot but whose body was subsequently hacked into a dozen pieces. Such videos, I was told, were shown to the children in order to prepare them for the great *jihad* against the infidels. My academic colleagues were none too keen on me going to these places, much less living in them for whatever reason.

But those who have heard and read these stories should realise that there are a multiplicity of Pakistans, as would be the case in any other country. It is true that Pakistan has had a history of bloody, unrestrained violence, and the notorious "AK-47 culture" that thrived and prospered during the period of martial law under General Zia 'ul Haq and the Afghan war has yet to breathe its last.

It is also true that Pakistan was the breeding ground of the Taliban, who were trained, armed, financed and protected by a succession of Pakistani politicians, Pakistan intelligence agencies as well as the country's erstwhile ally, the US. Pakistan is definitely no picnic — a trip to the Afghan refugee camps in the tribal areas of the north quickly removes such illusions — but more of that later.

As a political scientist and historian, I needed to prove that there is another side to the *madrasah* culture of Pakistan, and that this other side had a story of its own that deserves to be told. What emerged was a story more complicated than

originally anticipated — a sordid tale of Machiavellian intrigue laced with the deception and exploitation of naïve youths manipulated by mercenary interests, and of young lives being sacrificed at the altar of realpolitik. But what set me on the right track — or so I hoped — was my visit to one of the more prominent *madrasahs* of Lahore, the Syed Maudoodi International Islamic Educational Institute (SMII).

Come on, we want to show you our football trophy," the boys say to me on my second day in the *madrasah*. SMII has definitely won its fair share of cups. Last year, the team won second place in the all-Punjab football tournament for boys, and there was the cup to prove it — shining as if polished an hour ago. The trophy cupboard at the *madrasah* is impressive indeed, filled with trophies for everything from cricket and football to debating. I wonder how people would react if I told them that sports is compulsory in this *madrasah*.

I am the guest of the Jamaat-e Islami party, Pakistan's equivalent of our PAS, but with a more complex history and a wider transnational network of supporters and members to boot. The *madrasah* was named after the founder of the Jamaat-e Islami, Syed Abul Alaa Maudoodi, who founded the party in India, opposed the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, but who later migrated to Pakistan when the division proved inevitable.

I find myself staying at their guesthouse located in the middle of the Jamaat-e Islami's political headquarters, the Mansoor complex, just off Multan road, in a run-down and dilapidated part of Lahore.

Mansoor is a self-contained though not self-supporting community set within an enclave. Established in 1974, it stands as a bold statement of how the Jamaat-e Islami would like to see the rest of Pakistan governed. Around 500 people (all party members) live in 150 houses covering 400 *kanals* of land — individuals own 200 *kanals*, while the other 200 are owned and let by the Majlis-i-Ahya-ul-Islam.

The complex is linked to the SMII as well as the Islamic Research Academy, the Markaz Ulum-al-Islamia, the Mansoor Model Schools and College, and the Jamiat-ul-Muhsinat. Medical facilities are provided for residents and non-residents alike at the 80-bed Mansoor Hospital. Security is maintained by a private Jamaat-e Islami-run armed security force.

The mosque, whose minaret towers above all else, dominates the landscape. Sitting on the grassy lawn, one gets the impression that life in this micro-universe is idyllic compared with the rest of Pakistan where the water can give you dysentery and power failures make it impossible to work. But the impression is soon dispelled when you're told that the lawn is named after a martyr of the Jamaat-e Islami,

Hafeez Muhammad Yusuf, killed just outside the gates during a protest against the government of Nawaz Sharif in 1998.

Living in the *madrasah* as an outsider means that I am bombarded with questions all the time. The principal of the *madrasah*, the retired brigadier Professor Omar Farooq Dogar, was worried about the fate of his students whose numbers had diminished drastically since my last visit a few years ago. "Why are they targeting us? We have done nothing wrong. All the boys are good students, they work hard and study hard; they haven't done anything illegal. Their papers are in order and they came to Pakistan with the knowledge of their own governments," he assured me time and again.

At one point, Omar took out a copy of the official certificate of recognition issued by the Pakistani government to show that his *madrasah* has been recognised as an institution on par with Punjab University, no less.

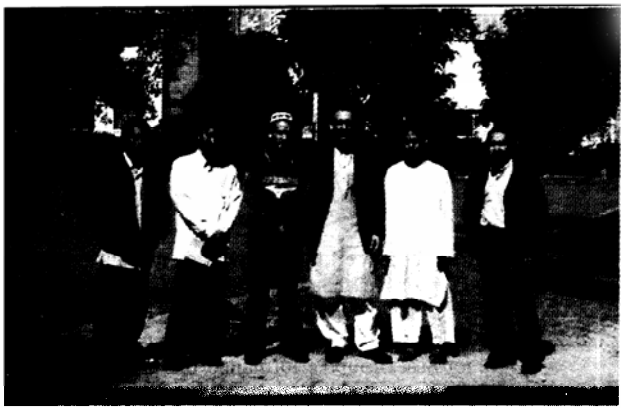
But Omar has good reason to be concerned. In September 2003, nearly two dozen students from Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar were arrested and taken from their *madrasahs* in Karachi on the grounds that they were engaged in militant training and terrorist-related activities. After the initial fiasco of denials and counter-accusations, notably between the Pakistani and Indonesian governments (the latter insisted that it did not order the arrest of the Indonesian students), the hapless students were sent back to their own countries to an unknown fate. Many have since been detained without trial under anti-terror laws and the public is none the wiser as a result.

Instead, the public has been fed all manner of reports about how these *madrasahs* have been used for political indoctrination (something most of them admit to) and how they serve as recruitment centres for future militants and *jihadis* sent to an early death in places like Kashmir, Chechnya and Mindanao.

While it is impossible to deny that some of the *madrasahs* have been used by militant groups as recruitment centres, it would be wrong to conclude that making bombs and shooting automatic rifles are part of the standard curriculum for all of them.

If anything, the curriculum at the SMII puts to shame most government-run colleges in Pakistan, or any other country for that matter. For a start, since the revision of its syllabus, the *madrasah* now teaches subjects like political science, sociology, psychology, history and geography — in English. It also offers the standard fare of religious subjects ranging from *Quran* and *Hadith*, Quranic exegesis, religious law or *fiqh*, ethics and morality in Arabic. Language training is central at the *madrasah*, which has its own language and computer lab.

Sports and extracurricular activities are also compulsory, and the Southeast Asian students seem particularly good at



Top: The writer (third from right) with SMII's Malaysian students
Bottom: Southeast Asian students at SMII enjoy a game of sepak takraw



theology schools in the West produce Christian priests," he notes.

But the Southeast Asian students arrested in Karachi were caught in *madrasahs* linked to the Jama'at-ul Dawa, the civilian front of a militant group called the Lashkar-e Taiba, which was responsible for the deaths of hundreds in Kashmir. After the presidential ban on six militant *jihadi* groups in January 2002, the Lashkar-e Taiba was forced to disband itself in Pakistan and transfer its activities to Indian Kashmir. Its leaders then re-emerged in the Jama'at-ul Dawa, though their combustible rhetoric has not cooled down significantly. I witnessed a demonstration by the group in central Lahore where the leader of the Jama'at-ul Dawa, Faez Saeed, openly called for an all-out *jihad* against India.

This brazen display of martial defiance raised the most obvious question of all: If the Malaysian and Indonesian students were arrested on the grounds that they were involved in clandestine militant activities organised under the auspices of the Jama'at-ul Dawa, why is it that the movement's leaders are still allowed to roam freely around the country, recruiting followers and potential *jihadis* , and calling for war against India?

"These *jihadi* groups have been working with and protected by elements within the Pakistani government and intelligence agencies all along," argues Rashid. "During the 1980s, when the Cold War was at its height and the *jihad* against the Soviets was in full swing, the Americans, Pakistanis and their allies were actively campaigning to create an international Islamic brigade that was being trained in camps and *madrasahs* along the Afghan-Pakistan border and then sent over to kill the Russians in Afghanistan. But after the Afghan conflict, the Americans abandoned Pakistan [yet again] and allowed the local regional players to sort things out among themselves. Many of these militant groups then lent their support to the Taliban, while others turned their attention to Indian Kashmir." In the case of the latter, the *jihadi* groups were protected by elements within the Pakistani army and intelligence that regarded these militants as part of an "unconventional force" to weaken Indian power in Kashmir.

Numerous examples of propaganda material are distributed by the *jihadi* groups themselves, often in full public view. Apart from their donation boxes that dot the urban landscape of Lahore, Karachi, Quetta and Peshawar, these groups are still recruiting followers in the open. Rashid confirms my observations: "The militant groups are good at recruitment and advertising their services. They make it a point to recruit extensively and intensively, and produce

a lot of propaganda [about] their services to Islam and Muslims. The sophistication of the radicals lies in the way that they disguise their real agenda. They never tell you what they really expect of you, what they want to do with you and what they expect you to do for them in turn. The boys who get caught in their grip often get indoctrinated and trained to be hardline *jihadis* , but don't even realise that their training is far more radical and dangerous than what is offered by the mainstream *madrasahs* ."

The fate of the Southeast Asian students in Pakistan's *madrasahs* depends on the vicissitudes of Pakistani politics, which is unpredictable at the best of times. The crackdown on Karachi's *madrasahs* were widely seen as a cosmetic gesture on the part of President Musharraf's government, to show that something was being done to control the hardcore militants who are the offspring of Washington's and Islamabad's experiment with state-sponsored militancy during the Cold War. Now that the tide has turned and the liberal conscience of the West is troubled by the menacing spectre of Osama bin Laden — another American ally turned enemy — the militant movements that were partly funded and protected by the Pakistani government and its Western allies have become an embarrassment to all.

The solution to the problem has been a case of pragmatism at its most vicious and hypocritical, as Rashid argues: "The arrests of the foreign students [in Karachi] were really a token offering, a way of satisfying Washington and other foreign governments and showing that something was being done. It is a way of making it look as if these militant groups are being put under control, when we know that is not really the case."

"But the foreign students like the ones from Malaysia and Indonesia are really the weakest and most vulnerable ones of all. They are foreigners; they don't understand what has happened and what they have got themselves into; they don't realise what they have been used for and whose interests they were serving; and they are the least important and least protected. In all my years of research, I have hardly come across boys who knew what they were doing prior to going to these schools. Most Pakistani boys go to these *madrasahs* because they offer cheap basic Islamic education, and that is probably the only education they may ever get."

Of all my discoveries during my research in Pakistan, this is the most troubling of all. Having visited and lived in the *madrasahs* , and even taught there, I cannot help but feel like a trespasser who can deliver only bad tidings. As I leave the compound of the Maudoodi *madrasah* I catch a glimpse of Malaysian, Thai and Indonesian students playing *sepak takraw* — Asean's contribution to the sporting culture of Pakistan within the walls of this micro universe. What will happen to these boys when they leave, and what will be their fate in the uncertain months and years to come? Pakistan is a country with many faces and stories to tell, and this is one of them. I board my rickshaw with the burden of responsibility heavy on my shoulders. ■



From left: The door of Emperor Jahangir's tomb can be dark and eerie; while the Badshahi mosque in central old Lahore is still as beautiful as ever

badminton. Have they tried their hand at cricket? "The ball comes at you too fast, we don't know how to catch it properly." But that's the point of the game! Most of all, the boys are bored out of their wits and fed up with having to eat chapatti every day. "We take turns cooking for the whole group," they inform me, and I hope that their cooking is better than their cricket.

But inevitably, our discussions return to the topic of what will happen to them when they get back. One of them, a Kelantanese boy named Mohammad Amin, was lucid enough to have some inkling of goings-on outside the walls of his *madrasah* : "These days, the whole world thinks that we *madrasah* students are terrorists. Every time there is a report on the *madrasahs* on TV, all you see are images of the Taliban; and now everyone thinks we are all the same. It's just not true, but our parents are scared, and so are we. We don't know what the future will bring."

My stay at Mansoorah has convinced me that not all of the *madrasahs* in Pakistan are involved in what has been described as militant training or terrorist activities. Though it is impossible to conduct a proper survey of all the *madrasahs* in Pakistan (numbering more than 20,000 in the country, with thousands more that don't even look like schools), local analysts contend that an overwhelming majority are engaged in nothing more than basic religious education. If they are to be faulted at all, it would be for their relatively poor standard of services and facilities, as is the case for most government schools.

Why, then, were those Malaysian and Indonesian students arrested in Karachi, and under whose orders? Here, my research takes a decidedly murky turn. I have to speak to those in the know. The best person to talk to is Ahmed Rashid, author of the book on the Taliban movement and the only researcher who has lived with and studied the Taliban from their birth in the 1990s.

It is Rashid who insists that many of the older *madrasahs* that have links with the older, established Islamist organisations are actually well-run schools that offer a combination of subjects. Some provide a balanced and rounded education while others even teach comparative politics, literature, comparative religion, and so on — and even allow their students to read Western philosophers like Karl Marx. The *madrasahs* run by more established parties like the Jamaat-e Islami provide much better education than the government system. Their curricula may be conservative, but that is far from *jihad* -oriented. "They produce real religious scholars and priests, just like

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