

## [Creating Frankenstein: The Impact of Saudi Export of Ultra-Conservatism in South Asia](#)

By James M. Dorsey

### **Introduction**

Continued doubts about the longevity of the Saudi ruling family are fuelled by its Faustian bargain with Wahhabism – a conservative, intolerant, discriminatory and anti-pluralistic interpretation of Islam.<sup>1</sup>

It is a bargain that has produced one of the largest dedicated public diplomacy campaigns in history. Estimates of Saudi Arabia's spending on support of ultra-conservative strands of Islam, including Wahhabism, Salafism and Deobandism, across the globe range from \$70 to \$100 billion. Saudi largesse funded mosques, Islamic schools and cultural institutions, and social services as well as the forging of close ties to non-Wahhabi Muslim leaders and intelligence agencies in various Muslim nations. In doing so, Saudi Arabia succeeded in turning a largely local Wahhabi and like-minded ultra-conservative Muslim worldviews into an influential force in Muslim nations and communities across the globe.<sup>2</sup>

The campaign is not simply a product of the marriage between the Al Sauds and the Wahhabis. It is central to Saudi Arabia's soft power policy and the Al Sauds' survival strategy. One reason, albeit not the only one, that the longevity of the Al Sauds is a matter of debate, is the fact that the propagation of Wahhabism is having a backlash in countries across the globe, as well as on Saudi Arabia itself. More than ever before, Wahhabism, and its theological parent, Salafism, are being put under the spotlight due to their theological or ideological similarities with jihadism in general, and the ideology of the Islamic State (IS) group in particular.

Speaking at a conference in Singapore, sociologist Farid Alatas noted that madrassas – often funded by Saudi Arabia or other Salafi and Wahhabi groups – fails to produce graduates trained to think critically. "They have not been exposed to [Muslim] intellectuals like Ibn Khaldun," Alatas said "That is the opportunity for Salafis and Wahhabis" in the absence of Muslim scholars who would be capable of debunking their myths he added. Alatas was referring to Abd al-Rahman ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Abi Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn Khaldun, the 14<sup>th</sup> century historian, who is widely seen as one of the fathers of modern sociology, historiography, demography and economics.

Taking Wahhabism's influence in Malaysia as an example, Alatas pointed to the uncontested distribution of a sermon by the religious department of the Malaysian state of Selangor, that asserted that women who fail to wear a hijab invite rape and resemble a fish that attracts flies.<sup>3</sup>

Such attitudes fostered by Saudi funding, as well as Saudi Arabia's willingness to look the other way when its youth leave the kingdom to join militant groups, undermine Saudi Arabia's international image and its efforts to create soft power. "It is often alleged that the Saudis export terrorism. They don't, but what they have done is encourage their own radicals – a natural by-product of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's conservative brand of Islam – to commit their terrorist acts elsewhere. As the radicals leave, so does Saudi money, which funds their violent activities," said former U.S.

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Christopher R. Hill.<sup>4</sup> The estimated 2,500 Saudis who have joined IS constitute the group's second largest national contingent.<sup>5</sup>

The problem for the Al Sauds is not just that their image is under attack and that their legitimacy is wholly dependent on their identification with Wahhabism; it is also that the Al Sauds since the launch of their Islamist campaign, have often been only nominally in control of it. As a result, the Al Sauds have let a genie out of the bottle that now leads an independent life and cannot be put back into the bottle. Wahhabi and Salafi-influenced education systems played into the hands of Arab autocrats, who for decades dreaded an education system that would teach critical thinking and the asking of difficult questions.

Saudi funding of conservative Islamic learning neatly aligned itself in Pakistan, which has an education system shaped by the partition of British India into predominantly Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. This emphasis on religious nationalism, where minorities are perceived as being inferior, involved a parochial definition of what it meant to be Muslim in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported that Pakistani public school textbooks – circulated to at least 41 million children – contained derogatory references to religious minorities. The perception of minorities as threats was reinforced with the enhanced Islamisation of textbooks in the decade from 1978 to 1988, in which General Zia ul Haq-ruled Pakistan.<sup>7</sup>

“In public school classrooms, Hindu children are forced to read lessons about ‘Hindus’ conspiracies toward Muslims’, and Christian children are taught that ‘Christians learned tolerance and kind-heartedness from Muslims.’ This represents a public shaming of religious minority children that begins at a very young age, focusing on their religious and cultural identity and their communities’ past history. A review of the curriculum demonstrates that public school students are being taught that religious minorities, especially Christians and Hindus, are nefarious, violent, and tyrannical by nature. There is a tragic irony in these accusations, because Christians and Hindus in Pakistan face daily persecution, are common victims of crime, and are frequent targets of deadly communal violence, vigilantism, and collective punishment,” USCIRF report concluded.<sup>8</sup>

“By imposing the harsh, literal interpretation of religion exported and promoted by Saudi Arabia, we have turned Pakistan into a drab, monochromatic landscape where colour, laughter, dancing and music are frowned upon, if not entirely banned. And yet Islam in South Asia was once characterised by a life-enhancing Sufi tradition that is now under threat. More and more, we are following the example set by the Taliban,” added Pakistani writer Irfan Husain.<sup>9</sup> A Pew Research survey moreover concluded in late 2015 that 78 percent of Pakistanis favoured strict implementation of Islamic law.<sup>10</sup>

Syed Imran Ali Shah whose father was murdered when he was a child, was 16 when in 1999 he was admitted to Mercy Pak School in Peshawar, an educational institution funded by Saudi-backed Mercy International Pakistan. Zahid al-Sheikh, the brother of 9/11 mastermind Khalid al-Sheikh, was one of the charity's executives in the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s, a time when Saudi Arabia joined the United States in financing the Pakistan-based resistance against the Soviets in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> Syed Imran says his radicalization was spurred by one of his teachers all of whom were in his words Wahhabis. The teacher argued the importance of jihad in his sermons.<sup>12</sup> Jihad never figured in the school's curriculum but students learned to believe that the beliefs and practices of other sects were heresy. “We teach students the aqeedah (creed) of every sect and tell them as to how and where that aqeedah is wrong so that we can guide them to the right aqeedah,” said Umer bin Abdul Aziz of the Jaimatul Asar madrassa in Peshawar.<sup>13</sup> Based on textual analysis of madrassa texts, scholar Niaz Muhammad warned that “no one should claim that their statements

about the madrassa curriculum have nothing to do with sectarianism or other forms of religious militancy.”<sup>14</sup>

In a seminar moderated by Jordanian scholar Nadia Oweidat at the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C., on 3 May 2016, Ahmed Abdellahy, a reformed, former Egyptian jihadist, described being educated in a school system that divided the world into ‘us and them’. ‘Us’ were the Muslims who had been victimised by ‘them’. Abdellahy said he was taught that: ‘they’, the Christians, Westerners and “all the world is against us [Muslims] because we are better than them.” Abdellahy said. He said this was an attitude engraved in generations of children who were expected to accept it at face value. “When I was going to school, the role of the school was to stop you from questioning,” Oweidat added.<sup>15</sup> The inability of Abdellahy’s school teachers to answer students’ probing questions and a lack of available literature drove him to the Internet, where militant Islamists provided answers.<sup>16</sup>

The current backlash of Saudi support for autocracy and funding of the export of Wahhabism and Salafism, coupled with the need to radically reform the kingdom’s economy, means that the Al Sauds and the Wahhabis are nearing a crunch point, one that will not necessarily offer solutions, but in fact could make things worse. It risks sparking ever more militant splits, that will make themselves felt across the Muslim world and in minority Muslim communities elsewhere, in multiple ways.

One already visible fallout of the Saudi campaign is greater intolerance towards minorities and increased sectarianism in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia. In Pakistan, for example, a U.S. Foreign Service officer, noted that in Saudi-funded “madrassas, children are denied contact with the outside world and taught sectarian extremism, hatred for non-Muslims, and anti-Western/anti-Pakistan government philosophy.”<sup>17</sup>

The recent shooting in the southern Philippines of Sheikh Aaidh al-Qarni, a prominent Saudi Wahhabi cleric whose popularity is evident in his following of 12 million on Twitter, further suggests that the backlash for the kingdom is not just the Saudi government emerging as a target but also the ulema<sup>18</sup> – including ulema who are not totally subservient to the Saudi government. Sheikh Aaidh al-Qarni is a product of the fusion between Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood that produced the Sahwa, a Saudi Salafist political reform movement. While Philippine investigators are operating on the assumption that the Islamic State (IS) group was responsible for the shooting, Saudi media were quick to report that Saudi authorities had warned the Philippines days earlier that Iran’s Revolutionary Guards were planning an attack.<sup>19</sup>

A key to understanding the Saudi funding campaign is the fact that while it all may be financed out of one pot of money, it serves different purposes for different parties. For the Wahhabi ulema, it is about proselytization, about the spreading of Islam; for the Saudi government, it is about gaining soft power. At times the interests of the government and the ulema coincide, and at times they diverge. By the same token, the Saudi campaign on some levels has been an unparalleled success, on others, success is questionable and one could argue that it risks becoming a liability for the government.

### **Problematic Soft Power**

It may be hard to conceive of Wahhabism as soft power, but the fact of the matter is that Salafism was a movement that had only sprouted miniscule communities in the centuries preceding the rise of Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab, and only started to make real inroads into Muslim communities beyond the Arabian Peninsula 175 years after the death of the 18<sup>th</sup> century preacher. By the 1980s, the Saudi campaign had established Wahhabi Salafism as an integral part of the global community of

Muslims, and sparked greater conservative religiosity in various Arab countries as well as the emergence of Islamist movements and organisations.<sup>20</sup> The soft power aspect of it, certainly in relation to the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has paid off, particularly in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Maldives, where sectarian attitudes and attitudes towards minorities, particularly Shiites, and Iran are hardening.

In Indonesia, for example, where recently retired deputy head of Indonesian intelligence and former deputy head of Nahdlatul Ulema (NU), one of the world's largest Islamic movements that prides itself on its anti-Wahhabism, professes in the same breath his dislike of the Wahhabis and warns that Shiites are one of the foremost domestic threats to Indonesian national security. Shiites constitute 1.2 percent of the Indonesian population, including the estimated 2 million Sunni converts over the last 40 years. A fluent Arabic speaker who spent years in Saudi Arabia as the representative of Indonesian intelligence, this intelligence and religious official is not instinctively anti-Shiite, but sees Shiites as an Iranian fifth wheel. In other words, the impact of Saudi funding and Salafism is such that even NU is forced to adopt Wahhabi language and concepts when it comes to perceptions of the threat posed by Iran and Shiites.<sup>21</sup>

Wahhabi influence has meant that "the nature of South Asian Islam has significantly changed in the last three decades," said international relations scholar and columnist Akhilesh Pillalamarri.<sup>22</sup> Pillalamarri argued that "the result has been an increase in Islamist violence in Pakistan, Indian Kashmir, and Bangladesh. While governments in South Asia have not initially made the connection between Saudi Arabian money and the radicalization of Islam in their own countries, it is now clear that Wahhabism's spread is increasing conservatism in South Asia.... As a result, many South Asians are now Wahhabis or members of related sects that practice a form of austere Islam similar to the type found in Saudi Arabia. One of these sects is a conservative movement known as the Deobandi movement, long one of the largest recipients of Saudi funding,<sup>23</sup> which, while indigenous to South Asia, is influenced by Wahhabism," Pillalamarri said.<sup>24</sup> He was referring to the Deobandi school of Islam, the most influential sponsor of Islamic education in Pakistan and Afghanistan's Pashtun belt founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup>

Many of the madrassas were initially Pakistani state sponsored, particularly during Zia's rule. The funding was part of Zia's Saudi-backed aim to Islamise the country as a whole. "The global Islamic reassertion spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and Arab petro-dollars was making itself felt in Pakistan. There were unmistakable signs of the Saudi impact on Zia's locally honed ideological agenda," says South Asia scholar Ayesha Jalal.<sup>26</sup> Zia would handout as gifts and awards the writings of Sayyid Abul-A'la Maududi, a Saudi-backed scholar whose Jamaati-i-Islami party advocated the creation of an Islamic state. Maududi, who was arrested in 1977, was released from prison by Zia's predecessor, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, at Saudi Arabia's request. Maududi used his regained freedom to back the coup that would topple Bhutto and bring Zia to power. Maududi was reported to have met with Zia for 90 minutes before Bhutto was executed.<sup>27</sup>

Zia's funding of the madrassas dried up when he suddenly died in 1988 in a mysterious plane crash. "We then had to turn to charitable donors at home and abroad for funds to meet our expenditure. How else do you expect us to finance our expenditure?" says Pir Saifullah Khalid, the founder of the Jamia Manzoorul Islamia seminary, a sprawling semi-circular complex of multi-storey classrooms and hostel blocks with a courtyard in the middle, in Lahore Cantonment's Saddar area.<sup>28</sup>

The mushrooming of militant Deobandi, Wahhabi and Salafi mosques, often Saudi-funded, has led Pakistani authorities to link scores of madrassas to political violence.<sup>29</sup> Hundreds have been closed in the past years. The Crime Monitoring Cell of the police inspector general in Sindh has reported that

in 2015, 167 madrassas were closed, of the province's 6,503 with a collective student population of 290,000. It was also reported that there were another 3,087 unregistered madrassas that cater to approximately 234,000 students.<sup>30</sup>

Deobandis, like Wahhabis and Salafis, advocate theological conservatism and oppose liberal ideals and values, and like its theological cousins, run the gamut from those who are apolitical and focus exclusively on religion, to militant Islamists who empathise with jihadists and see seizure of power as the way to implement the Sharia and change social behaviour. These various ultra-conservative sects, irrespective of their attitude towards politics and violence, benefit from the fact that with the government's failing to invest in quality public education, madrassas have turned into institutions of rote learning for the poor. These madrassas evade conveying understanding of the Quran, and are a far cry from the institutions of religious and scientific learning in the first centuries of Islam that produced intellectuals, scholars and scientists.

The luminaries of modern-day, ultra-conservative madrassas, include the likes of Sami ul Haq, the scion of a Deobandi cleric, and former senator who founded the Darul Uloom Haqqania madrassah in the town of Akora Khattak in Pakistan. Ul Haq is widely seen as the father of the Taliban. Ul Haq argued in a book published in 2015 that the Afghan Taliban provided good government, Osama bin Laden was an "ideal man" and that Al Qaeda never existed.<sup>31</sup> Ul Haq had vowed not to stop his students from interrupting their studies to join the Taliban and awarded Mullah Omar, the late Taliban leader, an honorary degree. The 2007 plot that led to the killing of prominent Pakistani politician and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was believed to have been hatched in meetings in Akora Khattak.<sup>32</sup> A senior Pakistani interior ministry official said that, all in all, "most of the terrorist attacks during the last three years could be traced back to madrassas."<sup>33</sup> The militancy among Pakistani Deobandis persuaded more than 100,000 of the movement's scholars to issue a fatwa (religious ruling) denouncing violence and terrorism as un-Islamic in 2008.<sup>34</sup>

Columnist Pillalamarri dates the expansion of Saudi and Wahhabi influence in Pakistan to the US-Saudi sponsored jihadist resistance against Soviet occupation in the 1980s that created the basis for the funding of thousands of madrassas, that at the time often offered education, shelter and food to the most impoverished who otherwise may not have had an opportunity to go to school. "Initially, the mushrooming of Wahhabi and Deobandi groups worked to produce mujahedeen [freedom fighters] to fight in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Later, elements of the Pakistani government, notably the Pakistani intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), saw the spread of Wahhabism as useful in creating jihadist proxies to influence Afghanistan and Indian Kashmir. As a result, despite the end of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1989, the influence of Wahhabism continued to grow in Pakistan," Pillalamarri said.

Proselytization of Wahhabism was facilitated by an agreement in the 1970s between the Pakistani and Saudi governments to promote the Arabic language and Islamic literature in Pakistan.<sup>35</sup> The influx of sectarian, anti-Shiite Wahhabi materials grew exponentially with the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The International Crisis Group (ICG) concluded that "Saudi patronage has played a particularly important role in promoting jihadi madrasas and jihadi culture in Pakistan."<sup>36</sup>

Saudi-sponsored non-governmental organisations like the Muslim World League, which fell under the auspices of the kingdom's grand mufti but was populated by Muslim Brotherhood operatives and aimed to spread Wahhabism beyond the kingdom's borders, opened offices across the globe, including South Asia. Wahhabi texts, including translations of the Quran, and the writings of Maududi and Sayed Qutb, were distributed in Muslim communities in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, the United States and Europe. Wahhabi imams (religious leaders) were dispatched to build

madrassas with Saudi curricula offering free education to the poor. Wahhabi beliefs were at the same time exported when migrant workers returned home from the kingdom grateful for the opportunity to earn money to support their families.

Once back from the kingdom, many of the workers prayed in Saudi-funded mosques and adopted Wahhabi and/or Salafi practices. "People go to the Middle East and come back thinking a certain way. There's Wahhabi money flowing in," states International Relations scholar Amena Mohsin, whose maid in Bangladesh returned from a visit to her village fully covered. "It gives her an increased status. In that area, near Chittagong, by and large everyone supports the Hefazat-e-Islam, a conservative group opposed to Bangladesh's secular education and women's rights policy," she adds.<sup>37</sup> Hefazat was founded in 2010 by attendees of Wahhabi mosques in Bangladesh.<sup>38</sup>

### **Evident Risks**

The risk embedded in the ultra-conservatism of Wahhabism and Salafism is further evident in Bangladesh, a secular Muslim state, with militant Islamists waging a brutal and murderous campaign against liberal and secular intellectuals, bloggers, and publishers, and carries out attacks on Christians, Hindus and Shiites. The attacks were largely the work of Islamic State and Al Qaeda operatives, but were built on the nurturing of a radical, intolerant environment by Saudi-funded institutions and Bangladeshi workers who had returned from the kingdom with a far more conservative and black-and-white worldview.

Saudi influence was also discernible in Bangladesh's gradual move away from secularism, which was a pillar of the country's first constitution after it broke away from Pakistan and became independent in 1971. The kingdom only recognised Bangladesh after the assassination of the country's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. President Ziaur Rahman two years later removed secularism from the constitution, paving the way for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. Military leader General Hussain Muhammad Ershad completed the process in 1988 by making Islam the state religion.<sup>39</sup> The kingdom reportedly funded Jamaat-e-Islami, a leading Islamist party, whose leaders were charged with war crimes during the country's war of independence. Several Jamaat leaders were sentenced to death. Saudi Arabia lobbied unsuccessfully in 2013 to stay the execution of Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Molla, but refrained from doing so in 2015 in the case of Muhammad Kamaruzzaman and the party's general secretary, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid. Analysts said the kingdom was willing to sacrifice its Bangladeshi political allies in a bid to ensure the country's support in its regional power struggle with Iran.<sup>40</sup>

The cooperation with ISI and other Pakistani government agencies and officials turned Saudi Arabia from a funder into a player in domestic Pakistani affairs. Adel al Jubeir who at the time was an official of the Saudi embassy in Washington, told U.S. diplomats at a lunch in Riyadh during a 2007 visit to the kingdom by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf: "We in Saudi Arabia are not observers in Pakistan, we are participants."<sup>41</sup> US Charge D'Affaires in Riyadh, Michael G. Foeller, reporting in a cable to the State Department on the Musharraf visit, noted that "the Saudis have an economic hold on Nawaz Sharif.... Sharif was reportedly the first non-Saudi to receive a special economic development loan from the SAG [Saudi Arabian Government], with which to develop a business".<sup>42</sup> He was at the time in the kingdom in exile. Sharif has since become Pakistan's Prime Minister.

The degree to which Saudi paranoia about Shiites dictated the kingdom's efforts to influence Pakistani politics through check book diplomacy was evident in State Department reporting on Saudi-Pakistani relations in the waning years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One cable, detailing discussions in 2009 between U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman and

United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, quoted the UAE official as saying, "Saudi Arabia suspects that [then Pakistani President Asif Ali] Zardari is Shia, thus creating Saudi concern of a Shia triangle in the region between Iran, the Maliki government in Iraq, and Pakistan under Zardari." Feltman noted that, in response, there was a pattern of Saudi Arabia withholding pledges in international frameworks for financial support of Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

A State Department cable a year earlier in 2008 quoted the Pakistani Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington, D.C., Sarfraz Khazada, saying that Saudi-Pakistani relations were "under strain" because the Saudis had no confidence in Zardari. Khazada said Saudi financial assistance to Pakistan had dropped sharply. The Saudis had not provided "a single drop" of oil on promised concessionary terms. Instead, they had given Pakistan a single \$300 million check, considerably less than in previous years. "Beggars can't be choosers," Khazada had said, adding that the Saudis were "waiting for the Zardari government to fall."<sup>44</sup> Pakistan's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Umar Khan Alisherzai, told U.S. diplomats in 2009 that "we have been punished by Saudi Arabia because our president talks to the Iranians."<sup>45</sup>

Then Saudi Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef went a step further, advising U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke that the Saudis view "the Pakistan Army as the strongest element for stability in the country." Bin Nayef described the Pakistani military as the Saudis' "winning horse" and Pakistan's "best bet." The Saudi official said that instability in Pakistan or tension between Pakistan and India posed a threat to Saudi Arabia's stability, because of the 800,000 Pakistani and one million Indians employed in the kingdom.<sup>46</sup>

Author and former Pakistani ambassador to the United States Hussain Haqqani estimated that Saudi Arabia donated more than \$2 billion to the Islamist resistance against the Soviets.<sup>47</sup> The investment, alongside that of the United States and others, fundamentally changed Pakistani society and the country's power structure. ISI, supported by Saudi Arabia and the United States, exploited its role as the recruiter, trainer and operations manager of the Afghan mujahedeen to expand and legitimise ISI's role as a key arbitrator of Pakistani politics by manipulating the government's allies and intimidating its opponents.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, direct Saudi funding as well as support by the Muslim World League of Jamaat-e-Islami – the Pakistani wing of a movement founded in 1941 by theologian and philosopher Abul Ala Maududi – became a launching pad for Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism into then still communist Central Asia.<sup>49</sup>

The movement's Afghan wing was headed by figures who would play key roles in the ultimate defeat of the Soviets and the rise of Wahhabi-influenced conservatism and Islamism in the country. Burhannudin Rabbani, the theology professor, twice became President of Afghanistan. Rabbani's students included Ahmad Shah Massoud, a legendary Tajik military commander in the fight against the Soviets and Afghanistan's subsequent civil war, who was killed by Al Qaeda on the eve of 9/11; and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a two-time Prime Minister, whose Hezb-e-Islami party received the lion's share of Saudi funding for the mujahedeen.<sup>50</sup>

Hekmatyar, the instigator of Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s, that in Kabul alone killed more than 50,000 people, was best known for his targeting of those Muslims denounced as idolaters – just like the Wahhabis at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hekmatyar spent "more time fighting other mujahedeen than killing Soviets," quipped journalist and author Peter Bergen.<sup>51</sup> Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, a Saudi-funded Wahhabi Islamic Law scholar, politician and warlord, who split with Rabbani and Hekmatyar to form his own group of mujahedeen, is believed to have facilitated Osama Bin

Laden's return to Afghanistan in 1986<sup>52</sup> after the Saudi was expelled from Sudan and assisted Masood's assassins.<sup>53</sup>

Then Pakistani leader Zia-ul-Haq encouraged Saudi charities to build mosques and madrassas for the large number of Afghans fleeing the war to Pakistan as well as for Pakistanis themselves. With little prospect of employment, refugee camps became recruitment centres for Saudi-funded mujahedeen. Volunteers from across the globe were welcomed to train alongside the mujahedeen's refugee recruits funded by the Muslim World League.<sup>54</sup>

To help Pakistan alleviate the cost of hosting large numbers of Afghan refugees, Saudi Arabia hired hundreds of thousands of Pakistani migrant workers whose remittances boosted Pakistan's economic growth. Many of the workers eventually returned home imbued with Wahhabism's conservative values. The same was true for Pakistani troops enlisted to assist in fortifying the kingdom's security in a deal mediated by the United States. "Pakistani workers in the Gulf and their families became either sympathetic or indifferent to Islamization. The expatriate workers were also influenced by Islamist missionaries backed by Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi establishment during the course of their stay in the Gulf states," Haqqani, the former Pakistani ambassador, noted.<sup>55</sup>

### **A Case in Point**

The history of Tashfeen Malik is a case in point. Her experience and that of her family is indicative of the kind of tensions adherence to Wahhabism's narrow mindset can foster. Malik moved with her parents to Saudi Arabia when she was a toddler. The two decades in Saudi Arabia persuaded the family to abandon their Sufi practices that included visiting shrines, honouring saints and enjoying Sufi trance music – practices rejected by the kingdom's Wahhabism. The change sparked tensions with relatives in Pakistan, whom the Maliks accused in Wahhabi fashion of rejecting the oneness of God by revering saints. Syed Nisar Hussain Shah, an academic at Bahauddin Zakariya University in Malik's native Pakistani town of Multan, whose madrassas are known as jihadist nurseries, where she studied Pharmacology, recalls Malik seeking assistance because her conservative norms clashed with more the comparatively more liberal values of her dormitory mates. "She told me, 'my parents live in Saudi Arabia, and I am not getting along with my roommates and cannot adjust with them, so can you help me?'" Shah recalls.<sup>56</sup>

While in Pakistan, Malik studied Islam for 18 months at the Al-Huda Institute, a religious school with branches in Britain, the United States, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka that propagates non-violent Wahhabism.<sup>57</sup> Students at Islamabad's Islamic International University, whose mosque was donated by Saudi Arabia and whose foreign liaisons are primarily Saudi universities, are encouraged to attend religious classes at Al Huda.<sup>58</sup> Cultural anthropologist Sadaf Ahmad describes Al Huda as a "school-turned-social movement."<sup>59</sup> Former students of Al Huda describe a curriculum that educates them in puritan Islam, encourages them to isolate themselves from the outside world and view it as hostile, and in some cases, brings vulnerable youth to the edge of radicalism. Al Huda's Toronto branch closed its doors in December 2015 following news reports that four of its students had attempted to join IS.<sup>60</sup> After enrolling in Al Huda, Malik donned a hijab, refrained from communication with the opposite sex, and spent most of her time studying the Quran.<sup>61</sup>

"Women would often weep, overcome by religiosity. We were constantly taught that this path was our choice, but also that not choosing it was the way of sin. Gradually, perhaps because I was far from my family, young and troubled, and my education in Britain had provided me with little secular knowledge, I was completely sucked in... Only in retrospect do I realise that essentially I'd been brainwashed into something resembling a cult... I feel that al-Huda's literalist, conservative



interpretation of Islam, which discouraged criticism or dissent, built a fire. It laid down the kindling, the twigs, the wood, ready for a match. And the flames swept in from two directions. First, from geopolitical events: the discourse of Muslim oppression that has gained force across the world, which Islamic State, among others, uses so powerfully. Yet it also requires an internal fire, something within an individual that will ignite fundamentalist theology into violent action. Most women who leave al-Huda institute are zealous for a while, but the sheer intensity requires so much emotional energy that it invariably fizzles out... This happened to me... Yet there was a time when I was lonely, isolated, a troubled girl with nothing but my all-encompassing faith, when I know that a spark could have been ignited within me. I walked on. Tashfeen Malik lit the fire," said Aliyah Saleem.<sup>62</sup>

"All her students, who you would think after coming closer to God, would become more tolerant and at peace, have always showed the opposite result. They became intolerant, judgmental and arrogant instead... There is no real proof to back the theory that Al-Huda brainwashed Tashfeen and others into terrorism, but one thing that is for sure is that Madame Hashmi's [Al-Huda co-founder Farhat Hashmi] institute promotes unhealthy fanaticism and an orthodox manner of thinking. And that could very well turn one into a cold blooded murderer given just the right push; all in hopes to getting in heaven," added former student Shamila Ghiyas, who had attended several classes given by Al-Huda co-founder Farhat Hashmi.<sup>63</sup>

Mosharraf Zaidi, an Islamabad-based columnist who specialises in education issues, argues that if Malik was radicalised while studying in Pakistan, "it was because she was exposed to ways of thinking that these schools have helped to promote. They require people to isolate themselves from modernity [outright] – television is wrong, eating McDonald's is wrong, mixing with the opposite gender is wrong. And once you establish that isolation, then dehumanising people is easy...and if you leave someone there, you have left them on a cliff."<sup>64</sup>

For people like Malik raised in a Wahhabi environment, as well as those who were not, jihadism's appeal is in part the absolutism that ultra-conservative strands of Islam project. Both apolitical or non-violent ultra-conservatism and jihadism see the acknowledgement of God's oneness and His sovereignty as the prime drivers of a believer's life. All other aspects of life, including family relationships, are secondary to that, which explains why adherents of the Islamic State and other jihadist groups often break from their families, as well as their past. Wahhabis dedicate their lives to prayer, study of religious texts and mosque attendance; jihadis add the dimension of holy war. Their dedication is rooted in Ibn Abd al Wahhab's assertion that "worship of Allah cannot be performed until taghut (polytheism) is denounced and rejected."<sup>65</sup>

### **Educational Vacuum**

Al Huda and Malik's example highlights the educational vacuum in Pakistan, that militant strands of Islam, including Wahhabism, Salafism and jihadism are able to exploit in a country with a poor educational infrastructure and one of the world's lowest education budgets.<sup>66</sup> Pakistan's some 26,000 madrassas graduate an estimated 200,000 students a year.<sup>67</sup> To be sure, the madrassas run the gamut in terms of theological orientation and quality. They also run from mud-walled structures with rote memorisation of the Quran at their core, to sophisticated institutions like Al Huda, to outright jihadi conveyor belts. A Harvard Kennedy School study put enrolment in madrassas at only 7.5 percent of all children enrolled in Pakistani schools. It argued that enrolment had remained constant much of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>68</sup> By contrast, the International Crisis Group estimated that 1.5 million students were enrolled in Pakistani madrassas in 2002.<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, a 2008 cable from the U.S. consulate in Lahore reported that “financial support estimated at nearly US \$100 million annually was making its way to (conservative) Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in the region from ‘missionary’ and ‘Islamic charitable’ organisations in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, ostensibly with the direct support of those governments...”<sup>70</sup> U.S. diplomat Bryan Hunt estimated in the cable that up to 200 madrassas in southern Punjab, in towns like Multan as well in Dera Ghazi Khan – a juncture of all four of Pakistan’s provinces – and in the central city of Bahawalpur, served as recruitment grounds for militant Islamist groups.

The consulate’s principle officer, Hunt, reported in his cable to authorities in Washington that the funding had spawned a “network (that) reportedly exploited worsening poverty in these areas...to recruit children into the divisions' growing Deobandi and Ahl-el Hadith madrassa network from which they were indoctrinated into jihadi philosophy, deployed to regional training/indoctrination centres, and ultimately sent to terrorist training camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).” He said families with a large number of children who face financial difficulty as a result of inflation, poor crop yields, and growing unemployment are targeted for recruitment.<sup>71</sup>

Hunt said Gulf funding of charitable activities of charities that fronted for groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Mohammed that had been proscribed by the U.S. Treasury, had increased the local population’s dependence on extremist groups and undermined the influence of moderate Sufi religious leaders. Hunt said that the charities targeted boys up to the age of 15. The funds, the diplomat said, had officially been transferred to Pakistan to assist victims of a 2008 earthquake in Kashmir and the North West Frontier Province. “Locals believe that a portion of these funds was siphoned to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in southern and western Punjab in order to expand these sects' presence in a traditionally hostile, but potentially fruitful, recruiting ground. The initial success of establishing madrassas and mosques in these areas led to subsequent annual ‘donations’ to these same clerics, originating in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Hunt said”<sup>72</sup>

The U.S. diplomat suggested that the influence of officials in key positions in the Pakistan bureaucracy, who were sympathetic to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith, had thwarted efforts by Sufi and other religious scholars to persuade the government to crackdown on extremist funding. “The brother of the Federal Minister for Religious Affairs, and a noted Brailvi/Sufi scholar in his own right, Allama Qasmi, blamed government intransigence on a culture that rewarded political deals with religious extremists. He stressed that even if political will could be found, the bureaucracy in Religious Affairs, Education, and Defence Ministries remained dominated by (former president) Zia ul Haq appointees, who favoured the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith religious ideologies. This bureaucracy, Qasmi claimed, had repeatedly blocked his brother's efforts to push policy in a different direction,” Hunt reported.<sup>73</sup>

Describing in detail how Saudi funds were put to work, Hunt reported that “the local Deobandi or Ahl-e-Hadith maulana (religious scholar) will generally be introduced to the family through these (charitable) organisations. He will work to convince the parents that their poverty is a direct result of their family's deviation from ‘the true path of Islam’ through ‘idolatrous’ worship at local Sufi shrines and/or with local Sufi Peers. The maulana suggests that the quickest way to return to ‘favour’ would be to devote the lives of one or two of their sons to Islam. The maulana will offer to educate these children at his madrassa and to find them employment in the service of Islam. The concept of ‘martyrdom’ is often discussed and the family is promised that if their sons are ‘martyred’ both the sons and the family will attain ‘salvation’ and the family will obtain God's favour in this life, as well. An immediate cash payment is finally made to the parents to compensate the family for its

'sacrifice' to Islam. Local sources claim that the current average rate is approximately Rs. 500,000 (approximately US\$ 6,500) per son," Hunt wrote.<sup>74</sup>

Hunt said the children were sent to one of up to 200 madrassas located in isolated areas where they are prevented to have contact with the outside world and inculcated with "sectarian extremism, hatred for non-Muslims, and anti-Western/anti-Pakistan government philosophy. Graduates from the school are either employed as clerics and teacher or move on to jihadist training camps.<sup>75</sup>

The infusion of Saudi money and Wahhabism into Deobandi schools, some of which have produced many of the Taliban's leaders, including Mullah Mohammed Omar, the group's supreme commander and spiritual guide who reportedly died in 2013; and Jalaluddin Haqqani, a powerful commander, has changed the very nature of the movement. 'As Pakistan's economy and politics have moved towards West Asia, and away from an Indian history and past, its various Islams have also been influenced by these trends. Pakistan's version of Deobandi Islam is affected by Saudi Wahhabism, and hence it becomes difficult to argue that these madrassas are still in any sense Deobandi... Islam, even Pakistani and Afghani Islam, is now globalised, Wahhabised, as well as affected by geopolitical influences, which have a far-reaching impact on local and domestic Islam," said scholar of International Relations, S. Akbar Zaidi.<sup>76</sup>

U.S. Democratic senator Chris Murphy took the example of a possible parent in a small town in northwest Pakistan, to depict her/his vulnerability. "You're illiterate, you're poor, you're getting poorer by the day, unemployment in your village is sky high, inflation is making everything unaffordable, your crop yields have been terrible. And one day, you get a visit that changes your perspective. A cleric from a nearby conservative mosque offers you a different path. He tells you that your poverty is not your fault, but simply a punishment handed down to you because of your unintentional deviation from the true path of Islam. And luckily, there's a way to get right with God, to devote your son's life to Islam. And it gets even better, because the cleric's going to educate your son in his own school, we call them madrassas, and not only will you not have to pay for the education, he'll actually pay you... And when your son finishes school he'll get employment in the service of Islam," Murphy said.<sup>77</sup>

"And so for thousands of families in destitute places like northwest Pakistan, it's a pretty easy choice," Murphy said. "But as you go on, you lose contact with your son. Gradually, the school cuts off your access to him. When you do see him, now and again, he's changing. And then one day it's over. He's not the little boy you once knew. He's a teenager, announcing to you that the only way to show true faith to Islam is to fight for it against the kafir, the infidels who are trying to pollute the Muslim faith, and against the Westerners who are trying to destroy it. He tells you that he's going off to Afghanistan, or Syria, or Iraq with some fellow students, and that you shouldn't worry about him because God is on his side," Murphy added.<sup>78</sup>

The parents try to find out what happened at the school for their son to become a jihadist. "You discover the textbooks that he read, that taught a brand of Islam greatly influenced by something called Wahhabism... I tell you this story because, as you know, some version of it plays out hundreds of times every day in far-flung places, from Pakistan to Kosovo, from Nigeria to Indonesia – the teaching of an intolerant version of Islam to hundreds of millions of young people. In 1956, there were 244 madrassas in Pakistan. Today there are 24,000. So these schools are multiplying all over the globe. And don't get me wrong, these schools, by and large, they don't teach violence. They aren't the minor leagues for extremist groups. But they do teach a version of Islam that leads very nicely into an anti-Shia, anti-Western militancy," Murphy said.<sup>79</sup>

The pervasiveness in Pakistan of Saudi-backed ultra-conservative-inspired militant Islamist ideology was on full display in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad when authorities opted to shut down all cell phone coverage during Friday prayers to prevent dissemination of a sermon by Maulana Abdul Aziz, rather than detain the jihadist imam. Abdul Aziz, dubbed Mullah Burqa after he tried to escape in 2007 from Islamabad's Red Mosque at a time that it was besieged by Pakistani military troops, has since been banned from giving sermons. Eight years after the siege in which 75 people died, Abdul Aziz has re-emerged as a seemingly untouchable figure, even if militant groups like Teheek-e-Taliban better known as the Pakistani Taliban that he supports have been significantly weakened in a military crackdown. Abdul Aziz illustrated the degree to which Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism inspired ideology had gained currency in Pakistani society.<sup>80</sup>

So did two events in early in 2016: mass demonstrations in February and March protesting the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, a jihadist who was an elite Force commando who was convicted to death for killing former Punjab governor Salman Taseer because of his opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy laws,<sup>81</sup> and for carrying out a suicide-bombing of a park in Lahore on Easter Sunday.<sup>82</sup> As emergency units rushed to the park where 70 people had been killed and some 300, mostly women and children, wounded police in Islamabad sought to control a 10,000-strong demonstration against Qadri's execution. Jammāt-ul-Ahrar, an offshoot of the Pakistani Taliban said the bombing was aimed at Christians even if the vast majority of the victims were Muslims.

Taken together, the two events suggested that Pakistan's problem went beyond political violence, to encompass a deep-seated, ultra-conservative and intolerant interpretation of Islam that has taken root in significant segments of society, and has created an environment in which oppression, discrimination and violence against the other is legitimised. The Economist noted that, "the religious hatred it (Jammāt-ul-Ahrar) represents has been assiduously cultivated in Pakistan for many years. Saudi money for the building of madrassas (religious seminaries) began to flood into Pakistan during the 1980s with the encouragement of the president at that time, General Zia ul Haq, a Deobandi follower, who saw the country's Islamisation as his main mission. There are now some 24,000 madrassas in Pakistan, attended by at least 2 million boys. Nearly all adhere to the highly conservative Deobandi sect, whose beliefs are similar to Saudi Wahhabism." Some analysts put the number of madrassas closer to 30,000. They note that while a majority fall in the realm of the Deobandi, a substantial number subscribe to other interpretations of the faith.<sup>83</sup>

The magazine quoted Tahir Ashrafi, head of the Pakistan Ulema Council, as saying that 60% of the pupils at madrassas were "not involved in any training or terrorist activities." In other words, 40 percent may be. "It's a very complex feeder system. All the remaining 40% are not involved in terrorism or terrorist training, but they could be sympathisers, they could funnel part of their funds to terror outfits, they could aid and abet in various ways," said Mahmoud, a Pakistani lawyer, businessman and author of a forthcoming book on Islam.<sup>84</sup>

In the book, Mahmoud recalls that "a bright young woman who worked with my aunt succeeded in penetrating a religious centre in the outskirts of Islamabad. The centre served as an orphanage and school for girls. It taught them a way of jihad. On occasion, young women, teenage girls, really, from the centre would be introduced to teenage boys from other centres. If a boy was to be sent on a suicide mission, he would be married to a girl, and the couple would be allowed to consummate their marriage. The experience was intended to provide the boy a foretaste of the pleasures that awaited him in heaven, the girl an assurance of a place in heaven as the wife of a martyr. If the boy did indeed complete his mission, the girl would be free to remarry. If the boy did not achieve martyrdom, the couple would be kept apart, in purgatory on this earth. Both boy and girl were

provided strong incentives to push towards the event of suicide. The centre has been closed, but its cloistered, manipulative spirit endures.”<sup>85</sup>

The fallout of Deobandi philosophy – a “back to basics movement” in the words of British Deobandi Mufti Mohammed Amin Pando – goes far beyond the realm of South Asia, embedding itself deeply in Muslim minority communities in Europe. A 2016 BBC investigative documentary traced jihadist thinking to a month-long visit to Britain in 1993 by Masood Azhar, a graduate of a Deobandi madrassa called Darul Uloom Islamia Binori Town in Karachi, who headed the Pakistani militant group Harakat ul Mujahedeen. Azhar, a portly bespectacled preacher, son of a Bahawalpur religious studies teacher and author of a four-volume treatise on jihad as well as books with titles like *Forty Diseases of the Jews*,<sup>86</sup> gave 40 lectures during his fundraising and recruitment tour in Britain, and was feted by Islamic scholars from Britain’s largest mosque network. More and more scholars joined his entourage as he toured the country before moving on to Saudi Arabia. His tour included Darul Uloom Bury (Bury House of Knowledge), a boarding school and seminary that was home to Sheikh Yusuf Motala, Britain’s foremost Islamic scholar.<sup>87</sup> A passionate and emotive speaker, women reportedly took off their jewellery and handed it to Azhar after listening to his speeches.<sup>88</sup>

Deobandis, the Muslim sect with the greatest reach in the U.K., control an estimated 40 percent of all British mosques that service an estimated 600,000 people. A substantial number of UK-trained Muslim scholars are graduates of Deobandi institutions. Deobandis trace their roots to a seminary established in 1866, in the Indian town of Deoband in the state of Uttar Pradesh, that was founded in the struggle against British colonialism. The seminary is widely viewed as one of the foremost institutions of Islamic learning, although it consists of a host of departments that focus on the rejection of Christianity, Judaism, Shia Islam, Barelvism and a postgraduate course that teaches loathing of Ahmadis<sup>89</sup> a sect is widely viewed by conservative Muslims as heretic, because it recognizes Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as the messiah prophesied by Mohammed. .<sup>90</sup> “The theology of the Deoband school...fosters social change and nurtures the ideals of political activism,” noted Islam scholar Ebrahim Moosa. Its adherents run the gamut from political quietists to moderate-minded social activists to militant Islamists like the Taliban.<sup>91</sup>

With Pakistan becoming a battleground in the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution, Deobandis, funded by Saudi Arabia, launched an anti-Shia campaign. The fiery Deobandi cleric Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, a madrassa graduate who became head of the Jamiat-i-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), a Deobandi party, is reported to have maintained close ties to Pakistani intelligence<sup>92</sup> until he was killed in 1990 by Shiite militants. Jhangvi, who earned his spores with his agitation against the Ahmadis,<sup>93</sup> founded Anjuman Sipah-e-Sahaba (Soldiers of the Prophet’s Companions) with the sole purpose of combating Shiites. With Pakistani Shiites feeling empowered and emboldened by the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia was more than willing to generously fund the anti-Shiite campaign.<sup>94</sup> As mentioned earlier, Saudi funds were largely routed through the Pakistani military and the ISI.<sup>95</sup> The Muslim World League also funded the prominent Indian Deobandi scholar, Muhammad Manzoor Naumani, who compiled a book of anti-Shiite fatwas that included opinions of Pakistani scholars and was distributed in Pakistan.<sup>96</sup>

Marouf Dualibi, an Islamic scholar with close ties to Saudi King Fahd was dispatched by the kingdom to help General Zia introduce hudood, the Islamic legal concept of punishment as well as mandatory zakat, a charitable tax, and ushr, an agricultural levy that dates back to early Islam, as well as persuade the Pakistani leader to adopt anti-Shia laws.<sup>97</sup> A 1981 report by the Council of Islamic Ideology – an advisory body of clerics and scholars established to assist the Pakistani government in bringing laws in line with the Quran and the example of the Prophet Mohammed – reported that

hudood laws were discussed by the Council and the Law Ministry “under the guidance of Dr. Maruf Dualibi, who was specially detailed by the government of Saudi Arabia for this purpose.”<sup>98</sup>

Pakistani security consultant Muhammad Amir Rana reported that Saudi Arabia in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had donated US \$2.7 million to the education department of the municipality of Jhang in Punjab, Jhangvi’s hometown, for the funding of madrassas.<sup>99</sup> The Saudi campaign aimed at pressuring the Pakistani government to designate the Shiites as non-Muslims and make Sunni Islam the basis for an Islamic state. This also served to boost the fortunes of the Deobandis, who until then had been a minor presence, at the expense of other Muslim groups, particularly the Sufis.<sup>100</sup> “The Saudis injected conservative attitudes into Muslim societies. They infiltrated Muslim societies. It created many divisions and a sectarian culture. It has impacted Pakistan’s social fabric,” Rana said in an interview.<sup>101</sup>

Sipah-e-Sahab’s membership swelled to a million, including some 5,000 well-trained militants who waged a campaign of terror against Shiites. The group was backed by a fatwa issued by the Deobandi scholar Naumani, that declared Shiites to be non-believers and was endorsed by hundreds of scholars in India and Pakistan. Maulana Wali Hassan, the Deobandi grand mufti of Pakistan, banned Sunni Muslims from marrying Shiites, participating in Shiite funeral rites, burying Shiites in Muslim graveyards and eating meat from animals slaughtered by Shiites even in accordance with Islamic law.<sup>102</sup>

Saudi Arabia at the same time backed Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, the internationally designated terrorist who founded Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of the largest and most violent militant Islamist groups in South Asia, because of his longstanding ties to the kingdom and his strong links to the Ahl-e-Hadith<sup>103</sup> group that had maintained close bonds with ultra-conservatives like the Wahhabis and Salafis since its founding in the 1920s.<sup>104</sup> Saeed, a graduate of an Ahl-e-Hadith madrasa and the King Saud University in Riyadh, backed by Saudi money, founded Islamic schools in which potential jihadis not only studied Islam, but also acquired the computer and communication skills they would need in their militant Islamist career.<sup>105</sup>

Much of the British Deobandi community has in the wake of 9/11 sought to distance itself from the minority of primarily Pakistani scholars and madrassas that opt for an endorsement of violent jihad. Motala, in an Urdu-language note to the BBC said that “during the last several decades, I have neither uttered Masood Azhar’s name in my speeches, even by mistake, nor mentioned his group, nor talked about any nihilistic terrorist action.”<sup>106</sup> The UK’s Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), however, concluded on the basis of an unannounced visit to DarulUloom Bury in January 2016, that its students had a deep understanding of “fundamental British values, such as democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths.”<sup>107</sup>

Yet, the Muslim Council of Britain, widely viewed as the UK’s foremost Muslim umbrella group, in line with Deobandi, Wahhabi and Salafi thinking, declared in April 2016 a position against Ahmadis who are also on the defensive in various countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Britain.<sup>108</sup> In a statement that paid only lip service to “to pluralism and peaceful coexistence and...the rights of all to believe as they choose without coercion, fear and intimidation,” the Council, in response to requests by unidentified parties for it to take a stand on the persecuted group, stated that “Muslims should not be forced to class Ahmadis as Muslims if they do not wish to do so, at the same time, we call on Muslims to be sensitive, and above all, respect all people irrespective of belief or background.”<sup>109</sup> The BBC documentary further linked Scotland’s largest mosque, the Glasgow

Central Mosque, 23 years later to Sipah-e-Sahaba that has been banned in Britain because of its deadly attacks against Shiites and other minorities in Pakistan.<sup>110</sup>

Responding to the MCB statement in *The Independent*, Waqar Ahmedi, a British Ahmadi, warned that “when Muslims start playing God in this way, religious prejudice, bigotry and hate will inevitably rise – including here in Britain.... They appear content to regard extremists like the murderer of Asad Shah and hate preachers as among their co-religionists, but not those who live by the motto ‘love for all, hatred for none.’ Whatever the theological differences, no individual or institution has any authority to dictate what anyone else can and cannot call themselves. My faith is a matter between me and my Maker. Freedom of belief and the right to self-determination are among the cornerstones of any progressive society. The Prophet Muhammad certainly stood up for those rights – one hopes bodies like the Muslim Council of Britain does too,” Ahmedi wrote. Asad Shah was a popular news vendor in Glasgow who was murdered a month before the MCB statement because of his faith.<sup>111</sup>

The MCB statement seemed to belie the longstanding rejection of the notion by Britain’s Islamic scholars that Muslim radicalism emanated from the country’s South Asian mosques. The MCB scholars identify Arab Islamists like Mustafa Kamel Mustafa, better known as Abu Hamza al-Masri, a fiery Egyptian cleric, (who preached at London’s Finsbury Park Mosque in London before being extradited to the United States where he was sentenced to life in prison on terrorism charges, and Omar Bakri Muhammad, a Syrian-born Salafist, as the guilty parties. “These Wahhabi preachers, who operated on the fringes of Muslim communities, certainly played an important role in radicalising elements of Britain’s Muslim youth. But it was Azhar, a Pakistani [Deobandi] cleric, who was the first to spread the seeds of modern jihadist militancy in Britain – and it was through South Asian mosques belonging to the Deobandi movement that he did it,” Bowen said.<sup>112</sup>

In his lectures during his visit to Britain, Azhar argued that much of the Quran was dedicated to “killing for the sake of Allah”, while a substantial number of the Prophet Mohammed’s sayings dealt with jihad. At the inauguration of a mosque in Plaistow, Azhar dwelled on “the divine promise of victory to those engaged in jihad.” In another public presentation, Azhar argued that “the youth should prepare for jihad without any delay. They should get jihadist training from wherever they can.” His slogan was “from jihad to Jannat (paradise).”<sup>113</sup>

Birmingham-born Mohammed Bilal, a student in the West Midlands, who left Britain in 1994 to join Azhar’s newly founded Jaish-e-Mohammed (Army of Mohammed), was one of the first Azhar recruited on his UK tour. He died in 2000 as a suicide bomber when he attacked an Indian Army barracks in Srinagar, killing nine people.<sup>114</sup> Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, a student from London, was another. Sheikh gained notoriety as one of the hijackers of an Indian Airlines flight, who demanded Azhar’s release from prison as well of one of the 2002 kidnappers who snatched Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl and beheaded him.<sup>115</sup> Rashid Raul, an in-law of Azhar’s, who like Bilal hailed from Birmingham, is widely believed to have been one of the masterminds of the 7/7 attacks in 2005 on London’s public transport system, as well as a failed attempt to again assault the system two weeks later on July 21 and efforts to smuggle liquid bomb-making substances aboard trans-Atlantic flights.<sup>116</sup> Waheed Ali, a young Bangladeshi friend of the 7/7 bomber Shehzad Tanweer, reported that he listened to tapes of Azhar’s speeches.<sup>117</sup>

Jaish-e-Mohammed maintains a semi-legal, public presence in Pakistan itself, despite government assertions that it is cracking down on jihadist groups. A Wall Street Journal reporter on a recent visit to Lahore, a city of 600,000 that is home to the headquarters of the Pakistan Army’s XXXI Corps, visited the group’s four-storey, downtown compound that also houses an affiliated seminary.

Although the group has had several of its seminaries closed down, it is building an even bigger facility on four hectares of land on the edge of Lahore with a new madrassa, crowned with white domes, looming over the surrounding farmland. “We don’t hide who we are. We are a jihadist group,” a cleric affiliated with Jaish-e-Mohammed told the visiting reporter.<sup>118</sup> A sign outside another Jaish complex in the Usman-o-Ali madrassa in the central Pakistani city of Bahawalpur says its seminary is “under the guidance” of Azhar.<sup>119</sup>

Jaish-e-Mohammed’s overt operations despite being proscribed reflect the degree to which the Pakistani military, intelligence and interior ministry has embraced Saudi-backed sectarianism and ultra-conservatism. “There is a sense of weary resignation hung around the shoulders of reports that the government is struggling, and largely failing, to keep on top of the problem of banned organisations that continue to resurface, remake and relaunch themselves under a new set of acronyms. Many of these groups are decades-old, at least in their original iteration, and almost equally many are either openly sectarian in nature or simply dedicated to the downfall of the democratic state. It is the interior ministry that is ultimately responsible for this sorry state of affairs, and the buck ought to stop at the desk of the interior minister himself — an outcome as likely as rivers ever flowing uphill.... Let us not deceive ourselves — there is no shortage of people in the populace that do support such groups, be it with money or logistical support, and allow them a broad footprint nationwide... Millions are inclined to give succour to these snakes that we keep at the bottom of the garden and which all too often turn and bite us,” commented The Express Tribune.<sup>120</sup>

Pakistani indulgence of Saudi-backed militant groups impacts Muslim communities far beyond the South Asian nation’s border. In the UK, prominent UK-based Deobandi scholar Khalid Mehmood has frequently been associated with Aalmi Majlis Tahaffuz Khatm-e-Nubuwwat (AMTKN), a militant Pakistan-based group that is also legally registered with the UK Charity Commission. AMTKN, with a history of Saudi backing in its various guises since it first was established in 1953, campaigns against Ahmadis, an Islamic sect widely viewed by conservative Muslims as heretics that is on the defensive in various countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Britain alongside Pakistan. As far back as the then, Saudi Arabia intervened to prevent the execution of AMTKN scholars, including Abul Ala Maududi, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for most Muslim thinkers, who were sentenced to death for sparking anti-Ahmadi riots in Lahore that led to the imposition of martial law in the city. The clerics were released a year later on a legal technicality

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The AMTKN group, whose name translates as the Global Congress for the Preservation of the Finality of Prophethood, traces its root to Saudi Arabia’s decision in the late 1970s to deny Ahmadis visas for the pilgrimage to Mecca and call for their excommunication. The kingdom, leveraging its financial support for Pakistan, including funding of its clandestine nuclear weapons program, got Bhutto to



introduce constitutional provisions that obliged the country's presidents and prime ministers to swear an oath that they believed in the finality of Mohammed's prophecy and denied the possibility of any prophet after him – provisions designed to move Ahmadis beyond the pale.

Saudi King Faisal advised Bhutto on the sideline of the 1974 Islamic Summit Conference in Islamabad that Saudi aid would be contingent on Pakistan declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims.<sup>123</sup> The Muslim World League called two months later on all Muslim governments to excommunicate Ahmadis and bar them from holding sensitive government positions. The Saudis effectively forced Bhutto to reverse his awarding of senior posts to Ahmadis after they supported him in a narrowly won election in 1970. Bhutto's Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs was an Ahmadi, as were the official overseeing Pakistan's nuclear program and the commanders of the navy and the air force. Ahmadis were also among the Army's corps commanders. The Saudi campaign was crowned when Pakistan's national assembly amended the constitution in 1974 to designate Ahmadis as a minority. Saudi rejection over the years has been supported by the Deobandis.<sup>124</sup> .<sup>125</sup> Ahmadis have since been banned from calling their houses of worship mosques and greeting one another with the customary words, As-salamu alaikum, Peace be upon you. Pakistani passport applications require Muslims to distance to forswear the founder of the Ahmadi community.

The immediate impact in Pakistan of the campaign was the killing of Ahmadis, burning of their properties and the desecration of their mosques and cemeteries. Little has since changed. In 2011, a AMTKN leaflet in Urdu calling for the murder of Ahmadis that circulated in Pakistan identified a south London mosque, the Stockwell Mosque, as its overseas contact point.<sup>126</sup> The mosque at the time denied any association with either the leaflet or AMTKN, even though it is listed as an AMTKN office with the Charity Commission. Four of the mosque's managers serve as AMTKN trustees. Piles of leaflets in English demanding death for Ahmadis were found by a BBC researcher in the mosque in April 2016.<sup>127</sup>

Three months later, the group again listed the London mosque as its international address alongside the contact details of its offices in Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Quetta, and Multan in newspaper advertisements across Pakistan calling during Ramadan for donations to restrict Ahmadi activity; "save Muslims from them;" file lawsuits against them; establish mosques and seminaries in Chenab Nagar, home to the Ahmadi's main organization, Jamaat-e-Ahmadia; and print anti-Ahmadi literature.<sup>128</sup> The ad appeared three weeks after unidentified gunman killed an Ahmadi outside his home in Karachi.<sup>129</sup>

The ad appeared on the back of years of deadly attacks on the Ahmadis and repeated manifestations of tacit government approval. Two gunmen sprayed an Ahmadi mosque in Lahore in 2010 with bullets. At the same time, two others lobbed grenades and exploded suicide vests in another mosques 15 kilometres away. 95 people were killed and 120 others injured. Days later, gunmen attacked the hospital where the wounded were being treated. "This is a final warning to the (Ahmadi community) to leave Pakistan or prepare for death at the hands of the Prophet Muhammad's devotees," the group said in a statement.<sup>130</sup>

At the time, Punjab's law minister, Rana Sanaullah, a member of Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League, campaigned openly alongside leaders of Sipah-e-Sahaba in an election during a special election in Jhang. Members of Sipah, flouting restrictions placed on the outlawed group, paraded through the town wielding weapons and chanting bloodcurdling anti-Ahmadi and anti-Shi'ite slogans. Rather than halting the march, police escorted it.<sup>131</sup>

Four years later, on the eve Eid-al-Fitr, which marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan, a frenzied mob in the city of Gujranwala set Ahmadi homes and businesses ablaze in retaliation for an allegedly blasphemous Facebook post by a young Ahmadi man. While the mob danced and police stood idly by, a fifty-five year-old Ahmadi woman and her two young granddaughters suffocated to death as a result of the smoke. The girls' pregnant aunt miscarried during the ensuing chaos.<sup>132</sup>

Taxi driver Tanveer Ahmed took AMTKN's advice literally when he killed Asad Shah, an Ahmadi shopkeeper in Glasgow, in March 2016. An AMTKN-linked Facebook page congratulated all Muslims on Shah's death.<sup>133</sup> Ultra-conservative and Deobandi prejudice against Ahmadis is weaving itself into the fibre of British society, with Sunnis in Muslim neighbourhoods refusing to greet the minority with the traditional welcome, salaam aleikum 'peace be upon you, share a meal with them or do business with them.<sup>134</sup> Ahmadi butchers who sell halal meat in Britain have seen their business substantially reduced after imams called on their flock to boycott Ahmadi shops.<sup>135</sup> Death threats have persuaded the Beitul Futuh Mosque in London and Ahmadi mosques elsewhere in Britain, frequented by the country's 30,000 followers of the sect, to introduce airport-style security checks at mosques.<sup>136</sup>

Security measures at Ahmadi mosques and mainstream Muslim rejection of the Ahmadis, along with the anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe, contrast starkly with the role the Ahmadis played on the continent a century ago in forging bridges between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe. Founded in 1923 as part of the first wave of Muslim emigration to Europe, the Ahmadi mosque was centre of intellectual discussion on issues as divergent as balancing modern daily life with the requirements of Islamic doctrine and the future of Germany and Europe in the wake of World War One. German non-Muslims, disappointed by Christian civilization, sought answers in those discussions and many ultimately converted to Islam.<sup>137</sup> One of the mosque's directors, Hugo Marcus, was a gay Jewish philosopher who converted to Islam.<sup>138</sup> Built by a Jewish scholar, Gottlieb Leitner, the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking, a town 45 kilometres south of London, played a similar role at the time.<sup>139</sup>

### **A Poor Return on Investment**

Violence in Pakistan in which an estimated 60,000 people have been killed in the last decades, as well as the thousands of deaths in numerous other parts of the world, is likely not what Saudi Arabia hoped to achieve through its campaign to further ultra-conservatism.

A more conservative, intolerant society in which Saudi Arabia held the foremost status as the leader of the Muslim world was. Pakistan is paying the price in terms of lives, Saudi Arabia in terms of reputational damage. The events of March 2016 are the latest to raise questions about the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's more than US \$100 billion, four-decade long campaign in building the kingdom's soft power. So do Saudi efforts to harness the kingdom's diplomatic and military relationships in support of its more assertive foreign and military policies Saudi Arabia came up short in its effort to rally support in early 2016 for its conflict in Iran, following Saudi Arabia's execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al Nimr, the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the breaking off of Saudi diplomatic relations with Iran. Only a handful of countries – Bahrain, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, and the Maldives – followed Riyadh's example and ruptured their ties with Iran, as a result of Saudi check book diplomacy. Major players like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia despite close diplomatic, intelligence and non-governmental ties to the kingdom, rejected the Saudi request, choosing instead to walk a tightrope between Riyadh and Tehran.

The stakes for Pakistan were higher than other Muslim nations not only because of its shared border with Iran, but because of the changing geopolitical dynamics that have come with lifting of Iran's

sanctions. It revived the construction of an Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline as well as Iranian, Afghan and Indian interest in development of the Iranian port of Chabahar. Besides competing with the Chinese-funded Pakistani port of Gwadar, Chabahar would allow Afghanistan to break Pakistan's regional maritime monopoly and offer India access to energy-rich Central Asia.

Saudi Arabia's seemingly poor soft power return on investment is not simply that Muslim states largely want to keep their lines open to two of the Middle East's foremost powers. It also is the result of domestic repercussions that governments across the Muslim world fear. Saudi Arabia was taken aback when Pakistan despite massive Saudi financial support for its economy, madrassas, and nuclear program and the kingdom's assistance in getting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif out of prison following General Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup and hosting him for his seven years in exile; rejected a Saudi request that it support military intervention in Yemen.

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Saudi Arabia had assumed that it had sufficient Pakistani assets to cash in. The kingdom is home to over two million Pakistani expatriates,<sup>141</sup> and is Pakistan's single largest source of remittances.<sup>142</sup> Saudi Arabia has come to Pakistan's aid in times of difficulty, for example, by providing oil on deferred payment when Islamabad was hit by U.S. sanctions after conducting nuclear tests in 1998. In addition, some 1,200 Pakistani troops are stationed in the kingdom.<sup>143</sup> Pakistani military foundations recruited retired military personnel to serve as mercenaries in Bahrain during the Saudi-backed crushing of a popular revolt in Bahrain in 2011.<sup>144</sup>

Yet, with Shiites constituting up to 20 percent of the population in Pakistan and escalating sectarian tensions in recent years, as well as plans for closer economic and energy cooperation with Iran, Pakistan has little choice but to walk a tightrope. Just how tight the tightrope is, was evident in guidelines for coverage of the Saudi-Iranian dispute issued by Pakistan's electronic media regulatory authority. "Media houses should ideally refrain from airing programs that can result in irreparable damage," the guidelines said.<sup>145</sup>

### **Lack of Oversight**

Wahhabism's proselytising character served the Al Saud's purpose as they first sought to stymie Arab nationalism's appeal in the 1950s and 1960s, and later that of Iran's Islamic revolution. These were tectonic developments that promised to redraw the political map of the Middle East and North Africa in ways that potentially threatened Saudi Arabia's rulers. Both developments were revolutionary and involved the toppling of Western-backed monarchs. Arab nationalism was secular and socialist in nature. The Islamic revolution in Iran was the first toppling of a US icon in the region and moreover involved a monarch. The Islamic republic represented a form of revolutionary Islam that recognised a degree of popular sovereignty. Each in their own way, posed a threat to the Al Sauds who cloaked their legitimacy in a religious puritanism that demanded on theological grounds absolute obedience to the ruler.

Ultimately, the Saudi campaign benefited from Arab socialism's failure to deliver jobs, public goods and services, as well as the death knell to notions of Arab unity delivered by Israel's overwhelming victory in the Middle East in the 1967 in which the Jewish state conquered East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's early rupture with the non-Salafist Muslim Brotherhood, led many Brothers to join the stream of migrant workers that headed for the Gulf. They brought their activism with them and took up positions in education that few Saudis were able to fill. They also helped create and staff organisations like the Muslim World League, initially founded to counter Nasser's Pan-Arab appeal.<sup>146</sup> The campaign further exploited opportunities created by Nasser's successor, Anwar al-Sadat, who defined himself as "the believing president."<sup>147</sup> Sadat in contrast to Nasser allowed Muslim groups like the Brotherhood and Salafis to re-emerge and create social organisations, build mosques and found universities.<sup>148</sup>

The rise of the Brotherhood in the kingdom sparked a fusion of the group's political thinking with segments of the Wahhabi and Salafi community, but also accentuated stark differences between the two. Saudi establishment clergy as well as militants took the Brotherhood to task for its willingness to accept the state and operate within the framework of its constrictions. They also accused it of creating fitna or division among Muslims by endorsing the formation of political groups and parties and demanding loyalty to the group rather than to God, Muslims and Islam.<sup>149</sup>

The Saudi campaign was bolstered by the creation of various institutions including not only the Muslim World League and its multiple subsidiaries, but also Al Haramain, another charity, and the likes of the Islamic University of Medina. In virtually all of these instances, the Saudis were the funders. The executors were others often with agendas of their own such as the Brotherhood or in the case of Al Haramain, more militant Islamists, if not jihadists. Saudi oversight was non-existent and the laissez-faire attitude started at the top.

The lack of oversight was evident in the National Commercial Bank (NCB) when it was Saudi Arabia's largest financial institution. NCB had a department of numbered accounts. These were all accounts belonging to members of the ruling family. Only three people had access to those accounts, one of them was the majority owner of the bank, Khaled Bin Mahfouz.<sup>150</sup> Bin Mahfouz would get a phone call from a senior member of the family who would instruct him to transfer money to a specific country, leaving it up to Bin Mahfouz where precisely that money would go.

In one instance, Bin Mahfouz was instructed by Prince Sultan, the then Defence Minister, to wire US \$5 million to Bosnia Herzegovina. Sultan did not indicate the beneficiary. Bin Mahfouz sent the money to a charity in Bosnia, that in the wake of 9/11 was raided by US law enforcement and Bosnian security agents.<sup>151</sup> The hard disks of the foundation revealed the degree to which the institution was controlled by jihadists.<sup>152</sup> In one instance, the Saudis suspected one of the foundation's operatives of being a member of Egypt's Islamic Jihad. They sent someone to Sarajevo to investigate. The investigator confronted the man saying: "We hear that you have these connections and if that is true we need to part ways." The man put his hand on his heart and denied the allegation. As far as the Saudis were concerned the issue was settled until the man later in court testimony described how easy it was to fool the Saudis.

### **An ambiguous attitude**

One place where refusal to acknowledge Saudi Arabia as the gold standard of an Islamic State is counter balanced by the belief of the quietist trend in Saudi-backed Islamic ultra-conservatism is a two storey, walled building built around a courtyard in an upscale neighbourhood of Islamabad. The

building houses the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), Pakistan's top Islamic advisory body designed to guide parliament on whether proposed bills comply with the Sharia'a. The Council's offices hark back a quarter of century to a time when computers with small monitors were far and few between; fax machines dominated; and desks were piled with papers, folders and press clippings and dotted with a battery of telephones.

Two of the council's members, in a rare public brawl in a government agency over religion, got into a fist fight in 2015 as the council debated further discrimination against Ahmadis. The council was considering categorizing Ahmadis as apostates, a crime punishable by death under strict Islamic law.

"I am stronger than him... He wants to make the law on Ahmadis controversial, and push the country towards violence," Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, a controversial, pot-bellied, alcohol-consuming scholar and head of the Pakistan Ulema Council charged after 78-year-old Maulana Mohammad Khan Sherani, the CII chairman and a member of parliament for the Deobandi-affiliated Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazal) party who adheres to Saudi-backed quietist Salafi principle of unquestioned obedience to a ruler, grabbed his collar and ripped out the buttons.<sup>153</sup>

Sporting a square white beard and clad in a black turban and vest and white salwar kameez, Sherani cuts a stern figure with his Central Asian features and narrow eyes. He embodies Saudi Arabia's dilemma: those that it has nurtured and that are closest to the kingdom's ideology increasingly view it as a country that has betrayed its founding beliefs. "Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are Islamic states that do not follow what Islam teaches... Allah did not ordain monarchies," Sherani asserted in an interview.<sup>154</sup>

In remarks that deliberately included Saudi Arabia by implication, Sherani described Pakistan as "a security state" in which "those that are in power do what is in their interests... Religious leaders participate in elections to bring rulers closer to the truth. It's their prerogative not to follow. Those in power play games and have many puppets. The ulema's responsibility is to keep informing the public and government," Sherani said.

In a twist of irony, Sherani spoke sitting in his spacious office under a picture of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the lawyer and politician who founded Pakistan as a secular republic. The irony and difficulty quietist ultra-conservatives have in justifying their support for governments they essentially view as illegitimate was evident in Sherani's effort to explain his support of the Pakistani government and endorsement of the Al Sauds' rule. "You obey the rules and do not risk fitna in the community," he said.

Sherani tied himself into knots as he sought to justify his position. Comparing the government to a blind man standing at the edge of a well, Sherani argued that it was his responsibility to warn the man but not stop him. "It is his responsibility if he does not listen," Sherani said. When asked if his refusal to stop the man would not make him an accomplice if he fell into the well and hurt or killed himself, Sherani quickly changed tack. In the only time that he smiled during a three-hour interview, he said a better example was a man on a street who asked for directions but then opted not to follow them. That is not my responsibility," he said.

In a magazine interview after his brawl with Sherani, Ashrafi, referring to the CII's Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism asserted that "there is a dictatorship within the body. The environment is such that no scope for dissent is left."<sup>155</sup> Shortly after the brawl, the council suggested in apparent support of the fact that wife beating in Pakistan is the norm rather than the exception<sup>156</sup> that a draft bill in parliament legalize the right of husbands to 'lightly' beat wives who refuse to obey their orders or have sex with them. The council had earlier urged parliament to declare nine year-old girls eligible

for marriage and replace the Pakistani rupee with gold and silver. The council further denounced a women's protection bill passed by the Punjab provincial assembly as a violation of the tenants of the Sharia.<sup>157</sup>

Members of parliament blamed the CII days after its ruling on wife beating for the brutal killing of 18-year old Zeenat Rafiq. Rafiq, one of an increasing number of women killed for asserting their independence, was burnt alive by her mother after she married a man of her own choice. "I have killed my daughter. I have saved my honour. She will never shame me again," neighbours heard Rafiq's mother, who had complained for months that her two elder daughters had married men of their choice, shout from the roof her house when she was done.<sup>158</sup>

Rafiq was but one of an average of 1,000 of mostly female victims of honour killings in Pakistan. A Jirga or council of local elders in the city of Abbottabad where Osama Bin Laden was killed by US forces ordered the killing of a teenage girl that had helped a friend elope. The Jirga dictated the manner of her death. The girl was tortured, injected with poison and then strapped to the seat of a vehicle that was parked at a bus stop as a message to others, doused with gasoline and set on fire.

In parliament, deputies charged that the council had legitimized violence against women and questioned whether it should be allowed to continue to exist. Opposition deputies Aitzaz Ahsan and Farhatullah Babar asserted that "the anti-women bias of the CII as expressed in its recommendations and pronouncements" had "contributed to crimes against women with impunity."<sup>159</sup> So does the breeding of ultra-conservatism among women in the exponential growth of all-female madrassahs. Columnist I. A. Rehman picked up on that when he suggested that a section of society, including women, has been influenced by ultra-conservative opposition to women's rights to the extent of justifying violence against all those who rebel against unjust constraints."<sup>160</sup>

The council has also condemned co-education, demanded that state-owned Pakistan International Airlines hostesses be fully covered, and called for the dismissal of civil servants who failed to say their daily prayers. It declared in 2014 that a man did not need his wife's consent to marry a second, third or fourth wife and that DNA of a rape victim did not constitute conclusive evidence.

To be fair, parliament has in recent years not acted on any of the council's positions. Nonetheless, the council forced Marvi Memon, a law maker for the ruling Muslim League, in early 2016 to withdraw a proposal to ban child marriages, declaring the draft bill un-Islamic and blasphemous.<sup>161</sup>

The history of the council, ironically housed on Islamabad's leafy Ataturk Avenue, named after the visionary who created modern Turkey as a secular state, charts the increasing influence of Saudi conservatism in Pakistan. Founded in 1962, the council was originally headed by Fazlur Rahman Malik, a liberal scholar, who in the words of Pakistani journalist Farahnaz Ispahani put forward "bold and ingenious interpretation of Islamic themes, including suggesting that drinking of alcohol was permissible, provided it did not result in intoxication."<sup>162</sup>

Rahman, who returned to Pakistan from Canada at the invitation of President Ayub Khan to head the council's predecessor, the Central Institute of Islamic Research, resigned in 1968 frustrated with the success of conservative opposition to his ideas. The council's conservative instinct was boosted in the late 1970s and the 1980s by Zia ul Haq who needed it to legitimize his effort to Islamicize Pakistani society. It was under Ul Haq that Pakistan enacted hudood, Islamic law's concept of punishment that involves amputations, whipping and death sentences for crimes such as theft, pre-marital sex, and rape, and that ultra-conservatives interpret as a license to put rape victims at risk of prosecution if he or she cannot produce four upright male eye-witnesses.

In an unprecedented parliamentary debate in 2015 about the council's role, opposition deputy Pakistan People's Party's Farhatullah Babar called for its dissolution because it was "dangerously conservative" and irrelevant. "I am pained that some of the council's pronouncements have prompted the critics to describe it as something of medieval nonsense at public expense," said Babar. He cited a long list of "long and frustrating" council proposals that included inscribing the words Allah-o-Akbar (God is Great) on Pakistan's national flag and charged that the council inspired martyrdom and jihad. Islamist deputies denounced Babar and demanded that he recite verses of the Quran to prove his religiosity.<sup>163</sup>

The positions adopted by the council were with the exception of the transgenders in line with Saudi policy. Saudi influence was also evident in Pakistan's feeble attempts to gain some measure of control of the madrassahs that mostly involve boarding schools. Registration with the Pakistan Madrassa Education Board (PMEB), the government's overall board, established in 2003 to oversee boards that represent the country's five Muslim schools of thought, and encourage madrassahs to use government syllabi and offer vocational training is voluntary rather than mandatory. Oversight of the five sectarian boards by the education and religious affairs ministries, bulwarks of ultra-conservatism, has proven to be spotty at best.

As a result, the PMEB's efforts have been largely rejected by the more conservative and militant institutions, many of which have had Saudi financial backing. PMEB chairman Amir Tauseen, estimated 13 years after the board's establishment that up to 10,000 religious seminaries were not registered. A renewed effort in 2015 to get madrassas to register, involving newspaper advertisements, failed to convey sincerity by aiming to get a mere 500 institutions to register.<sup>164</sup>

### **Traditional culture on the defensive**

Gunmen on a motorbike shot dead one of Pakistan's best known Sufi musicians and scion of a musical dynasty, Amjad Sabri, in June 2016 as he drove his car in the port city of Karachi. Fakhre Alam, the Chairman of the Sindh Board of Film Censors, claimed on Twitter that security authorities had earlier rejected a request by Sabri for protection. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) in 2014 demanded an explanation in a blasphemy case from Sabri and two TV channels who were accused of playing and broadcasting a qawwali, a form of Sufi devotional music, that was deemed offensive because it referred to the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>165</sup>

The killing claimed by the Pakistani Taliban was the latest in a campaign waged by jihadists as well as non-violent Saudi-backed ultra-conservative interpreters of Islam that has in recent decades stifled popular culture; silenced music; led to the bombing of theatres and video and music shops; and provoked the death of scores of musicians and other artists. Sabri was a target both as a musician and a Sufi, whose shrines have repeatedly been attacked in recent years. His assassination served as a warning to those determined to celebrate and preserve indigenous cultural traditions. Human rights activist Ali Dayan Hasan warned that each killing brought Pakistan closer to being what he termed a Wahhabi-Salafist wasteland.

It is a wasteland that Saadat Hasan Manto, a Muslim journalist, Indian film screenwriter and South Asia's foremost short story writer envisioned as early as 1954 in an essay, 'By the Grace of Allah.' Manto described a Pakistan in which everything – music and art, literature and poetry – was censored. "There were clubs where people gambled and drank. There were dance houses, cinema houses, art galleries and God knows what other places full of sin ... But now by the grace of God, gentlemen, one neither sees a poet or a musician... Thank God we are now rid of these satanic people. The people had been led astray. They were demanding their undue rights. Under the aegis

of an atheist flag they wanted to topple the government. By the grace of God, not a single one of those people is amongst us today. Thank goodness a million times that we are ruled by mullahs and we present sweets to them every Thursday.... By the grace of God, our world is now cleansed of this chaos. People eat, pray and sleep,” Manto wrote.<sup>166</sup>

Maulana Amir Siddiqui, the leading imam at Islamabad’s notorious Red Mosque, one of the Pakistani capital’s oldest mosques named after its red walls and interior, is just the sort of mullah Manto had in mind. “Music is a great weapon of Satan used to spread obscenity in society. As music spreads, people will get only further away from the Qur’an,” Siddiqui argued in a sermon in 2015. In an interview, he added that “if there is something that draws a person closer to sin like music does, it is forbidden. All music these days is based on temptation, emotions, and illicit relations between men and women, which can lead to sex and sin.”<sup>167</sup>

Seven years prior to Siddique’s sermon, students at the mosque’s madrassah launched an anti-vice campaign and marched through Islamabad. They attacked and beat those they accused of running brothels and torched video and music shops. More than a 100 people were killed in fighting between the students and security forces. Authorities found stockpiles of weapons in the Red Mosque’s compound.

Karachi’s Metropol Hotel, once Pakistan’s prime music venue that hosted the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington and Quincey Jones, stands today and shuttered and in decay. “The biggest names in the industry, people we grew up listening to, have just completely given up. It’s very disheartening, people walking away, people you think are so successful, gods, the stars and the icons. It’s like Freddy Mercury just decided to open up a restaurant instead of being on stage.” said Sara Haider, a 24-year old rising star who records in her own studio because Pakistani music labels refuse to sign new artists.<sup>168</sup>

Sabeen Mahmud, a prominent Pakistani social and human rights activist who operated The Second Floor, one of Karachi’s few remaining retreats for artists, gave Sara her first break. The 40-year old was gunned down in April 2015.

Gulzur Alam, one of Pakistan’s most popular folk singers with a fan base that stretches into Afghanistan and across the Pashtu Diaspora, hasn’t performed for years.

“Pashtun Youth, raise the red flags of revolution high in your hands, come!

Pashtun Youth, raise the red flags of revolution,

The land cries for revolution,

The revolution that can ensure freedom for all,” reads one of his most popular songs composed in 1987.

Sitting on the floor of a dilapidated music hall in Peshawar in front of empty chairs that have not been occupied for years, Alam recalls how men would sit on one side and women on the other as he enamoured them with his music. People would shower flowers as he came on stage. His voice brought audiences to tears. Yet, under the influence of ultra-conservatives, authorities harassed him and his family and ultimately shut down the concert hall, saying they could no longer ensure public security in the face of violent opposition to expressions of traditional and non-religious culture.

“Now the hall is filled with silence. One feels scared... If you remove culture from a nation, that nation dies. We have a centuries old tradition of music. The traditions have been attacked, murdered. It’s left us all deeply depressed,” Alam says.



Threatening phone calls persuaded him to no longer perform in the Northwest Frontier Province. He tried to find gigs in the port city of Karachi, but there, he faced a different problem: ethnic violence against Pashtuns. The situation was no different in Baluchistan. In total, he moved and his family moved 18 times to evade the threats.

In Karachi, he landed in the firing lines of ethnic violence against Pashtuns and returned with his family and without income to Peshawar where his older brother refused to take him because it would put his family in danger. Alam, his wife and five children, now cram into three dank, dark rooms with no running water. "It's like falling from the sky to earth," says Rukhsana Muqaddas, Alam's wife. "Before this we had a very modern, wonderful life. We used to send our kids to good schools. Now, we can't afford to educate them at all."<sup>169</sup>

Alam recalls performing at a wedding with a group of musicians in the Swat Valley in 2008. They were ambushed by armed men emerging from the bushes on a mountain road as they were returning home from their performance. "All of sudden men jumped out. They opened fire. Many people were hit, including my friend, Anwar Gul," a renowned composer and harmonium player. "He died later in the hospital," Alam said, his voice trailing. Months later he was hit by a car and walks with the aid of a stick ever since. "We humans are social beings, we need friends but so many of them have died and I am now alone. I take sleeping pills to calm my nerves but I believe my death will soon come as well," he adds.<sup>170</sup>

In one of the few music shops still open in Peshawar, Alam points to CDs by a host of well-known musicians. "Shah Wali, he's in Canada; Nagma, she's in America; and Sardar Ali Takkar, he's also in America; he's also in America," Alam says, pointing a finger at yet another CD. "I've had chances to leave and have been offered asylum but I never thought it would get this bad. Now it's too late, other countries won't accept us. I gave 35 years to music and I'm 55 years old, I no longer know what to do. I can't support my family," Alam says, explaining why he didn't follow his friends and colleagues into exile.

Alam's native Peshawar and Swat Valley nestled in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, illustrates the corroding impact of Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism as well as government policies that were supported the kingdom and served its foreign and soft power policies. The region once boasted a vibrant cultural life punctured by concerts, theatre performances, art exhibitions, festivals and poetry recitals. All of that has been replaced by countless madrassahs and ultra-conservative religious and jihadist literature and education curricula. A cultural hub was transformed into a hotbed of inward-looking, intolerant worldviews initially populated by the mujahedeen confronting the Soviets in nearby Afghanistan and their successors, the Taliban.

A study conducted by the Pakhtunkhwa Cultural Foundation, a Peshawar-based group that aims to confront the erosion of culture, concluded that "the Wahabi school of thought gained influence in the society due to political developments and state patronage, and particularly in the wake of the war in Afghanistan. Ideologues of the Wahabi school consider artistic expression against Islam. Groups such as Tablighi preachers sprang up during the period and rendered great damage declaring songs, films and anything artistic to be obscene... The sharp decline in socio-cultural life has created a vacuum that is being filled by religious missionaries... The lack of action of the Pakistani government to support the development of cultural industries, together with the lack of a strategy on the part of the incumbent provincial government to redress the situation, has washed away any other hope for the revival of music and cultural life in Swat," the study said.<sup>171</sup>

It documented the end of public concerts, the demise of scores of families of artists, the closure of almost 200 CD shops and dozens of cinemas and the professional death of actors and performers. Clerics set fire in cinemas and exhibition centres. They smashed billboards that displayed females' images.<sup>172</sup> Police harassed cultural institutions across the Swat valley. Missionaries targeted dancing and music at weddings and other events. They argued convincingly in mosques and in street encounters that performances were sinful and that those involved would not only be condemned to hell in life after death. People's suffering, they reasoned, was God's punishment for their immoral practices.

Their campaigns were part of Pakistani President General Zia ul-Haq's Saudi-backed effort to Islamicize Pakistani society and erode secular or more liberal religious expressions of culture. "The school curriculum was designed on the basis of Islamic values and morality. Free expression and creative thinking were discouraged. Music was considered immoral. 'The State TV channel removed music videos. Instead, Islamic shows held sway. Artistic expressions in all forms were discouraged by various means such as new taxation, 'forcefully imposed on the film industry'... This new phase introduced the culture of the madrassa and Jihadi literature in Swat, with an education curriculum that glorified Jihad and promoted extremism," the study said. Swat Valley counted by 2005 225 madrassahs with thousands of students educated with no marketable skills but those qualifying them to become imams or religious teachers. "Madrassa graduates' mind-sets have little to appreciate or even tolerate art and secular values in society," the study added.<sup>173</sup>

Notions of government inertia if not complicity in branches in which Saudi-backed worldviews have made significant inroads are fuelled by the fact that security forces seldom capture the killers of artists and cultural workers or bombers of shops and cinemas. On the contrary, those branches of government frequently adopt policies that contribute to an environment of increased intolerance. Victims and their families are left to their own devices and often reduced to abject poverty. Islamic scholars who cross ultra-conservative red lines are disciplined by the religious affairs ministry.

Religious affairs minister Sardar Yousuf suspended Deobandi Mufti Abdul Qavi, a representative of the ulema in former cricket player Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, in June 2016 after a picture of him and Qandeel Baloch, a Pakistani Kim Kardashian who achieved stardom as a drama queen with videos of her daily life that often tackled controversial issues, went viral on social media. The picture, in which Baloch donned the mufti's cap, was taken during an iftar, the breaking of the Ramadan fast, in a hotel room during which the two discussed Islam. Yousuf suspended Qavi's membership in the committee that sights the new moon to announce the beginning of Muslim holy days as well as a committee populated by representatives of madrassahs as the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party that issues fatwas.<sup>174</sup>

Qavi was no stranger to controversy. The scholar claims to be a major spiritual influence in the life of controversial Pakistani actress, TV host and model Veena Malik whom he first met when the two clashed on live television. Malik caused a stir when she appeared nude on the cover of FHM magazine's India edition with the initials ISI of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency written on her forearm. Malik and her businessman husband Asad Bashir Khan fled in 2014 to Dubai after they were sentenced together with a TV host to 26 years in prison by an anti-terrorism court on charges of blasphemy for re-enacting their wedding in a scene that against the backdrop of religious music seemed to be loosely based on the marriage of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter.<sup>175</sup> Returning to Pakistan two years later, Malik and her husband announced during a visit to Karachi's Jamia Binoria al Aalmia, a major Deobandi mosque and seminary that propagates Saudi-backed ultra-conservative that she intended to enrol in the institution to get an Islamic education.<sup>176</sup>

## Conclusion

It took the Al Qaeda bombings of residential complexes in Saudi Arabia in 2003 and 2004 as well as a year-long running battle between security forces and the jihadists rather than the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. to persuade the Saudis to really take control of funding of soft power assets worldwide by banning charity donations in mosques, putting the various charities under a central organisation, controlling the transfer of funds abroad, and working with the United States and others to clean out some of the charities – or like in the case of Al Haramain – close them down.<sup>177</sup>

The problem was that by that time it was too late; the genie was already out of the bottle. At the same time, the soft power /proselytization campaign still served and serves the purpose of countering Iran as Saudi Arabia battles the Islamic republic for regional hegemony.

The question is how long Saudi Arabia can afford the cost of its support of ultra-conservatism. The domestic, foreign policy and reputational cost of the Al Saud's marriage to Wahhabism is changing the cost benefit analysis. Tumbling commodity and energy prices are forcing the Saudi government to reform, diversify, streamline and rationalise the kingdom's economy. Reform that enables the kingdom to become a competitive, 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy is however difficult, if not impossible, as long as it is held back by the strictures of a religious doctrine that looks backwards rather than forwards, and whose ideal is the emulation of life as it was at the time of the Prophet and His Companions.

Moreover, the rise of IS has sparked unprecedented international scrutiny of Saudi-backed ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam such as Wahhabism and Salafism, that is causing Saudi Arabia significant reputational damage. Increasingly Saudi Arabia's roots are being seen as similar to those of IS, and the kingdom is viewed as what IS will look like if it survives US-led and Russian military efforts to destroy it.

In sum, the complex relationship between the Al Sauds and Wahhabism creates policy dilemmas for the Saudi government on multiple levels, complicates its relationship with the United States, as well as its approach towards the multiple crises in the Middle East and North Africa. The Al Sauds' problems are multiplied by the fact that Saudi Arabia's clergy is tying itself into knots as a result of its sell-out to the regime and its close ideological affinity to more militant strands of Islam.

Ultimately, Wahhabism is not what's going to win Saudi Arabia lasting regional hegemony in the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, the Al Sauds may not have a secure way of restructuring their relationship to Wahhabism. As a result, the Al Saud's future is clouded in uncertainty, no more so than if they lose Wahhabism as the basis for the legitimacy of their absolute rule.

The at times devastating fallout of Saudi Arabia's soft power efforts is visible in Muslim communities across the globe, nowhere more so than in Pakistan. Similarly, the fallout of the inevitable restructuring of relations between the Al Sauds and the kingdom's ultra-conservative ulema is likely to reverberate beyond the Middle East and North Africa in the Muslim world at large, including in South and Southeast Asia.

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