INSIDE JIHAD U.

The Education of a Holy Warrior

In a Pakistani religious school called the Haqqania madrasa, Osama bin Laden is a hero, the Taliban's leaders are famous alums and the next generation of mujahedeen is being militantly groomed.

By JEFFREY GOLDBERG - New York Times, June 25, 2000

A bout two hours east of the Khyber Pass, in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, alongside the Grand Trunk Road, sits a school called the Haqqania madrasa. A madrasa is a Muslim religious seminary, and Haqqania is one of the bigger madrasas in Pakistan: its mosques and classrooms and dormitories are spread over eight weed-covered acres, and the school currently enrolls more than 2,800 students. Tuition, room and board are free; the students are, in the main, drawn from the dire poor, and the madrasa raises its funds from wealthy Pakistanis, as well as from devout, and politically minded, Muslims in the countries of the Persian Gulf.

The students range in age from 8 and 9 to 30, sometimes to 35. The youngest boys spend much of their days seated cross-legged on the floors of airless classrooms, memorizing the Koran. This is a process that takes between six months and three years, and it is made even more difficult than it sounds by the fact that the Koran they study is in the original Arabic. These boys tend to know only Pashto, the language of the Pathan ethnic group that dominates this region of Pakistan, as well as much of nearby Afghanistan. In a typical class, the teachers sit on the floor with the boys, reading to them in Arabic, and the boys repeat what the teachers say. This can go on between four and eight hours each day.

What Westerners would think of as high-school-age and college-age students are enrolled in an eight-year course of study that focuses on interpretation of the Koran and of the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. These students also study Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic history. The oldest of those attending Haqqania -- the postgraduates, if you will -- are enrolled in the "mufti course." A mufti, in Islam, is a cleric who is allowed to issue fatwas, or religious rulings, on matters ranging from family law to the rules governing the waging of jihad, or "holy war." (One room in the school's administration building houses upward of 100,000 fatwas issued by the madrasa over the years.) There are about 600 students in the mufti course.

Very few of the students at the Haqqania madrasa study anything but Islamic subjects. There are no world history courses, or math courses, or computer rooms or science labs at the madrasa.

The Haqqania madrasa is, in fact, a jihad factory.

This does not make it unique in Pakistan. There are one million students studying in the country's 10,000 or so madrasas, and militant Islam is at the core of most of these schools. Many madrasas are village affairs, with student bodies of 25 or 50. Some of the madrasas are sponsored by Pakistan's religious parties, and some are affiliated with the mujahedeen groups waging jihad against India in the disputed province of Kashmir.

Haqqania is notable not only because of its size, but also because it has graduated more leaders of the Taliban, Afghanistan's ruling faction, than any other school in the world, including any school in Afghanistan. The Taliban is today known the world over for its harsh interpretation of Islamic law, its cruelty to women and its kindness to terrorists -- the most notable one being Osama bin Laden, the 42-year-old Saudi exile who the American government believes was behind the bombings two years ago of the United States Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Taliban also seems to harbor a deep belief in

the notion of a never-ending jihad, which makes the Haqqania madrasa a focus of intense interest in such capitals as Washington and Moscow and New Delhi and Jerusalem, where the experts are trying to understand just what it is the Taliban and its sympathizers want.

At any given time, there are several hundred Afghan students at the madrasa, along with dozens from such former Soviet republics as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and a handful from Chechnya too. To those who see wars like the one in Chechnya as expressions not only of nationalist aspirations but of pan-Islamic ones as well -- to those who see a new Islamic revolution on the horizon, a Sunni revolution a generation after the Shia revolution that shook the world -- the foreign presence at Haqqania is not comforting.

The majority of Haqqania students come from Pakistan itself, a fact that also worries officials in Washington and Moscow and New Delhi and Jerusalem. Pakistan's Islamists are becoming more and more radicalized -- Talibanized," some call it -- thanks in part to madrasas like Haqqania, and Pakistan is showing early signs of coming apart at the seams. Pakistan also happens to be in possession of nuclear weapons. Many Muslim radicals say they believe these weapons should become part of the arsenal of jihad. It turns out that many of the Haqqania students, under careful tutelage, now believe it, too.

It is for all these reasons that on a hazy morning in March, I presented myself at the office of the chancellor of the madrasa, a mullah named Samiul Haq, in order to enroll myself in his school. My goal was simple: I wanted to see from the inside just what this jihad factory was producing.

Maulana Haq -- maulana means "our master" -- is a well-known Islamist with pronounced anti-American views. He is a Deobandist, a follower of an Islamic movement born in India in the days of the British Raj; it was a movement devoted to anticolonialism, and its outlook is not dissimilar to that of Wahhabism, the austere, antimodernist Saudi variant of Islamic fundamentalism embraced by Osama bin Laden. The chancellor is a friend and supporter of bin Laden, and he has granted an honorary degree -- the first and only in his school's history -- to Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader. Samiul Haq is also a politician, a former senator who today leads a faction of the Jamiat-Ulema-Islami, the J.U.I., a radical Islamic party seeking to impose Shariah, or Islamic law, in Pakistan. The maulana, it is said, would like to see Pakistan become more like the Afghanistan of his Taliban disciples.

Because of his views -- and because he is said to have endorsed a 1998 fatwa issued by bin Laden that called on Muslims to kill Americans wherever they may be found -- I was not sure how well we would get along.

I was made to wait outside his office for 20 minutes. Students would pass by, shooting me looks ranging from the quizzical to the hostile. Eventually, I was invited in by two of the maulana's sons, Hamed, who is 31, and Rashid, who is 27 and in charge of designing the madrasa's Web page. We were joined by several of the madrasa's teachers and students, and we made small talk while we waited. One student, surprisingly, mentioned that my last name is the same as that of a star of World Championship Wrestling.

The maulana came into the room in a rush, and sat down right beside me. He is a man of 65. He was barefoot, and his toenails looked as if they were covered with rust. He had a long beard dyed a kind of fluorescent brown, and a loosely wrapped turban sat on his head. He has two wives and eight children, he told me, and he seemed, right from the start, a very happy man. He dispensed with small talk almost immediately, in order to let me know that I should feel at home.

"The problem," he told me, through an interpreter, "is not between us Muslims and Christians."

I knew where this was going, but stayed silent.

"The only enemy Islam and Christianity have is the Jews," he said. "It was the Jews who crucified Christ, you know. The Jews are using America to fight Islam. Clinton is a good man, but he's surrounded by Jews. Madeleine Albright's father was the founder of Zionism."

"I'm Jewish," I told him.

There was a moment's pause.

"Well, you are most welcome here," he said.

And so I was.

The maulana made me an offer: I could spend as much time as I wanted at the madrasa, go wherever I wanted, talk to anybody I chose, even study the Koran with him. He had a point he wanted to make, of course: his madrasa might be Taliban U., but it was not a training camp for terrorists.

Strictly speaking, Haq was right: I never saw a weapon at the Haqqania madrasa. The closest guns could be found across the Grand Trunk Road, at the Khyber Pass Armaments Company, a gun store that sells shotguns for $40 and AK-47's for $70. And I never heard a lecture about bomb making or marksmanship.

On the other hand, when the Taliban was faring badly not long ago in battle against the northern alliance -- the holdout foe of the Taliban in Afghanistan's seemingly endless civil war -- Haq closed down his school and sent the students to the front. (He would not tell me how many never came back from the front.) Classrooms were full when I visited Haqqania this spring. For a cramped campus housing so many students, it was, most of the time, unusually quiet. The hustle and energy of town life never seemed to intrude, and what noise there was mostly came from the Grand Trunk Road, just outside the gates of the school, where the horn and not the brake is the driver's primary defense against accident, and buses and trucks compete for space with donkey carts and the occasional camel train.

There were no TV's, no radios that I could see. The students woke up before dawn, to pray in the madrasa's mosque. The dormitories were threadbare and filthy, and there was no cafeteria, per se: students lined up at the kitchen with their plates and spoons and were fed rice and curries and nan, the flat Afghan bread. Suffice it to say, the students at the madrasa almost never see women. There were no female teachers, no female cafeteria workers, no female presence whatsoever at the madrasa. There is no such thing as parents' day, or family day, when mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers come to visit. To be sure, I did see, on occasion, a facsimile of what we in the West call student life: like all Pakistanis, the young students are cricket fanatics, and in the late afternoon, they would play on a dirt field across the road from the school. There was a dusty patch and a net for volleyball too. But most of the day was devoted to Islam.

The youngest students interested me particularly. They had not yet been armored in the hard-casing of jihadist ideology, and yet they seemed to incorporate the politics of the madrasa into their play. Two 11-year-old boys, both Afghan refugees who came to the school from Peshawar, would follow me around wherever I went. They wore pots on their heads, and their version of hide-and-seek was to jump out from behind a tree or some other hiding place, scream "Osama!" and pretend to shoot me.

They were also fascinated by my shoes. Shoes weren't worn in class; they were left outside the rooms. So for reasons of poverty as well as convenience, most students owned a single pair of slippers. My Timberlands, then, were a source of conversation, and I once caught my two 11-year-old pursuers trying on my shoes. I tried to learn what I could about these boys, but they were reticent. And my minders -- there was usually someone from Samiul Haq's office with me, listening in on my conversations -- didn't want me probing too deeply into how boys came to be students at the madrasa.

The youngest boys were kept under lock and key, in a three-story dormitory guarded by older students, and I wasn't allowed to see how they lived. The two 11-year-olds were refugees, I eventually learned. One of them lost his father in Afghanistan. Their mothers spend their days gathering firewood. They are as poor as poor can be. Compared to a refugee camp, the madrasa is a palace, and they are blessed to be here, where they eat food every single day. No one else -- certainly not the government of Pakistan -- would provide them with an education, room and board.

During the school day, I would make a special point of auditing classes in which the Hadith was studied, because so much of Islamic thought is found in the Hadith, and also because the Hadith has traditionally been understood to be a text open to interpretation, argument and rigorous intellectual inquiry. But such is not the case at the Haqqania madrasa. In the classes I attended, even the high-level classes of the mufti course, the pattern was generally the same: a teacher, generally an ancient, white-bearded mullah, would read straight from a text, and the students would listen. There was no back and forth. It seemed as if rote learning was the madrasa's only style of learning. During one particularly dreary class, I abandoned my interpreter and left the room. In the hallway outside, a poster was stapled to the wall. On it was a picture of a split-open watermelon whose flesh was veined in an unusual way. The caption read: "A miracle of Allah: this watermelon contains the name of Almighty Allah."

After a time, I began to be asked questions during classes, questions about America and about my views. One day, in a class devoted to passages in the Hadith concerning zakat, or charity, I was asked my views about Osama bin Laden. Why did America have it in for him? It is unsettling, to say the least, to be seated in a class being held in a mosque, led by a mullah, and attended by some 200 barefoot and turbaned students, and be asked such a question.

I began by saying that bin Laden's program violates a basic tenet of Islam, which holds that even in a jihad the lives of innocent people must be spared. A jihad is a war against combatants, not women and children. I read to them an appropriate saying of the Prophet Muhammad (I came armed with the Hadith): "It is narrated by Ibn Umar that a woman was found killed in one of these battles, so the Messenger of Allah, may peace be upon him, forbade the killing of women and children."

They did not like the idea of me quoting the Prophet to them, and they began chanting, "Osama, Osama, Osama."

When they calmed down, they took turns defending bin Laden.

"Osama bin Laden is a great Muslim," a student named Wali said. "The West is afraid of strong Muslims, so they made him their enemy."

I was curious to know how Wali came to admire Osama bin Laden so ardently. After all, there was no course at the madrasa -- at least so far as I could tell -- titled "The Sayings of the Great Muslim Osama bin Laden."

"Osama wants to keep Islam pure from the pollution of the infidels," he said. "He believes Islam is the way for all the world. He wants to bring Islam to all the world."

I answered that the Koran states that "there is no compulsion in religion." This is the Koranic saying frequently quoted by those who believe that, at its core, Islam is moderate and tolerant of others.

Wali: "There is no compulsion. But the West compels Muslims to live under the control of infidels, like in Chechnya."

Since the students had turned this day's class into a political seminar of sorts, I decided to ask a question of my own. I brought up the subject of Pakistan's nuclear bomb. The Islamists in Pakistan have been the

most vociferous proponents of Pakistan's nuclear program. The leading religious party, the Jamiat Islami, has in fact led the campaign to persuade the government not to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. I asked the students if they thought it would be permissible, by the law of Islam, to use a nuclear bomb during the prosecution of a jihad.

"All things come from Allah," one student said. "The atomic bomb comes from Allah, so it should be used."

I then asked: Who wants to see Osama bin Laden armed with nuclear weapons? Every hand in the room shot up. The students laughed, and some applauded.

But, I said, innocent people would inevitably die if the bomb was used. Even if the West, or Russia, is subjugating Muslims, does that give bin Laden and his supporters the right to kill innocent people?

"Osama has never killed anybody innocent," one student, whose name was Ghazi, answered.

"What if you were shown proof that he did?"

"The Americans say they have proof, but they don't give it to the Taliban."

I then presented a hypothetical scenario. "What if," I asked, "you were shown a video in which Osama bin Laden was actually seen murdering a woman. What then?"

There was a pause. A student named Fazlur Razaq stood up: "The Americans have all the tricks of the media. They can put Osama's head on the body of someone else, and make it seem like he's killing when he's not doing it."

I then took from my notebook my secret weapon: the 1998 fatwa issued by bin Laden's organization -- the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders -- concerning the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia. I read them a passage, the English translation of which reads as follows: "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military -- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the Al Aksa Mosque and the holy mosque from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim."

Here it is, I said, in black and white: bin Laden calling for the death of all Americans, civilian and military.

"Osama didn't write that," one student yelled, and the others cheered. "That's a forgery of the Americans."

I asked one final question, more out of self-interest than anything else: What would you do if you learned that the C.I.A. had captured bin Laden and was taking him to America to stand trial?

A student who gave his name as Muhammad stood up: "We would sacrifice our lives for Osama. We would kill Americans."

What kind of Americans?

"All Americans."

As I left the mosque, Muhammad and a group of his friends approached me. "We'd like you to embrace Islam," he said. "We love you. We want you to have Islam."

Later that day, I met with a small group of students I had grown to like, hoping that, away from their teachers, they would talk a different talk. Meeting students out of class had already made for a number of interesting moments: I had, for example, been asked for sex, as had Laurent Van Der Stockt, the photographer with me. Sometimes the propositions were intimated; sometimes they were unusually blunt, especially given the Taliban's official position on homosexuals, which is that they should be killed. Those few students who knew a bit of English seemed most interested in talking about sex. Many of them were convinced that all Americans are bisexual, and that Westerners engage in sex with anything, anywhere, all the time. I was asked to describe the dominant masturbation style of Americans, and whether American men were allowed by law to keep boyfriends and girlfriends at the same time.

Among the young men I spoke with after the Osama colloquy there was no talk of sex. One, a bright and personable student from a village near Kabul, had told me his name was Sayid. His brother, a Taliban judge, had also attended the madrasa. When I had asked Sayid for his last name, he'd said he would be known as Sayid Haqqani upon graduation. Many of the students take Haqqani as their last name when they leave the madrasa.

I asked him on this afternoon how his parents felt to have him at the madrasa, knowing that there is a chance he would choose to be a mujahed -- against the northern alliance, or perhaps against India, in Kashmir.

"They support the jihad," he said.

"How would they feel if you were killed?"

"They would be very happy," he said. "They would be so proud. Any father would want his son to die as shaheed," or martyr.

If you fought against the northern alliance, you would be killing Muslims, I said.

"They're Muslims, but they're crazy," Sayid replied.

A couple of days later, I saw the maulana, and I told him I thought some of his students believed that terrorism, under certain circumstances, was Koranically acceptable. "Then you don't understand what we are teaching," he said, frowning just for a moment. "There is a great difference between jihad and terrorism." He invited me to eat with him, to discuss my inability to comprehend the distinction, but I begged off. I was due in Islamabad, the capital, for a birthday party, and I had promised I would go.

It was quite a party. a big cake, lots of speeches, lots of dignitaries, including Gen. Pervez Musharraf, the "chief executive" of Pakistan, which is the title he took when the Pakistani Army overthrew the elected govemment in October and installed him as maximum leader.

The cake was actually quite good. It was a vanilla sheet cake, and written in lemon frosting across the length of it were the words, "Second Anniversary Celebrations of Youm-e-Takbeer." Youm-e-Takbeer can be translated as "the day of God's greatness," and in Pakistan it refers to May 28, 1998, the day Pakistan first exploded a nuclear bomb. The birthday party, under the auspices of Pakistan's military leader, was a birthday party for the bomb.

"We bow our heads to Allah almighty for restoring greatness to Pakistan on May 28, 1998," proclaimed the science minister of Pakistan, Atta-ur-Rahman, at the outset of the official program.

Pakistan has fetishized the bomb. In the traffic circles of every sizable city in the country, a full-scale model of the country's home-grown long-range missile stands proud. In Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, a model of a missile is aimed at India. In three cities in Pakistan I visited there stand

30-foot-high models of the Chagai Hills, the site where Pakistan exploded its test bombs, and in Islamabad, the monument lights up from the inside at night -- all fiery orange -- to simulate the effect of a nuclear explosion. Parents dress up their children and photograph them standing before it.

A couple of days after the party, I went to Rawalpindi, next door to Islamabad, because I'd been given the chance to talk with General Musharraf. We met one morning at Army House, the residence of the Pakistani Army's chief of staff. (General Musharraf has chosen not to take up residence in the prime minister's house, even though he has functioned as prime minister since October.) During our conversation, I asked General Musharraf if the West should worry that fundamentalist Muslims, in or out of the army, might get hold of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. (In Pentagon exercises, American war-gamers have mapped out a scenario in which Taliban-like extremists gain control of Pakistan's atomic arsenal during a violent break-up of the country.)

"Absolutely implausible," General Musharaff said. "There is no question of that happening. There is no question of nuclear material falling into the hands of irresponsible people at all."

I made mention of the religious overtones of the Youm-e-Takbeer celebration, particularly the science minister's remarks, saying that Westerners are discomforted by the belief that God is the founder of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.

"Yes, we do use the term 'Allah's will,' "he said. "We do consider God to be the supreme sovereign, and we do consider ourselves to be his representatives on earth. We being his representatives on earth, whatever has to be done is according to the teaching of Allah. But when we say 'the will of God,' that doesn't mean we aren't using our brains, that we are trigger-happy fundamentalists."

General Musharraf is not thought of as an Islamic fundamentalist. He is known to have progressive views on the rights of women, for example. And yet he can sound very much like an Islamic fundamentalist at times, like when he began parsing the words "jihad" and "terrorism" for me.

"There is no question that terrorism and jihad are absolutely different," he told me. "You in the West are allergic to the term 'jihad,' but jihad is a tolerant concept."

I asked the general if he believed bin Laden to be a terrorist.

"If at all he's involved in planning or conducting bombings or hijackings, he's a terrorist."

I then asked him if he doubted American claims that bin Laden is a terrorist.

"The Taliban has a stand on this subject. They say they need proof, which has not been given to them. We have asked for proof from the U.S. and we are in the process of getting this. From the legal point of view, I haven't seen the proof."

General Musharraf says he needs the pro-Taliban Pathans on his side. The religious parties, though never terribly successful at the polls, have street power, and when it comes to Kashmir, broad sympathy. Kashmir used to be spoken of in secular terms, as a national liberation struggle against a neocolonial oppressor. But today, that same fight is spoken of matter-of-factly as a jihad. It is almost as if the end of the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan forced the professional jihadists in the region to find a new cause to adopt.

General Musharraf himself calls the struggle against India a jihad, and the English-language newspapers in Pakistan use the language of jihad when talking about the fight: one otherwise dry-as-bones news story I read stated that seven "mujahedeen" had "embraced shahadat" in a fight against the Indian Army. Shahadat is martyrdom, and "embraced shahadat" means that they were killed.

The jihad in Kashmir is of great political help to General Musharraf. In a fractious country like Pakistan, the jihad in Kashmir unifies people the way no other issue does. And so the military junta has given wide berth to the jihad groups training on Pakistani soil. Two weeks after we met in Rawalpindi, General Musharraf's government announced that it would curb the power of militant groups within Pakistan, and bring the madrasa network into conformity with national educational standards, two steps the Americans have been asking him to take nearly from the moment the army seized power. But in our pleasant, early-morning conversation at Army House, the general did not seem overly concerned about the power of the madrasas. "Very few of these schools are engaged in any kind of militancy," he said. "Most of them are very humanitarian. They give food and lodging to these poor boys."

He also defended the activities of groups the State Department has labeled terrorist, particularly the Harkat ul-mujahedeen of Fazlur Rahman Khalil, which is waging a violent jihad against India; it is believed to be behind the hijacking last December of an Indian airliner. The State Department has labeled the HUM, as it is known, a terrorist organization. The group keeps training bases in Afghanistan, but Khalil, its leader, has an office in Rawalpindi, not far from General Musharraf's house, and he moves freely through Pakistan. "These people are not terrorists," General Musharraf said. "They are fighting a jihad."

Two days after my interview with the general, I talked to Khalil in Rawalpindi. We met late at night, in a dingy office near a bus station, and sat shoeless on the floor under a poster depicting the word "Allah" spelled out in bullets. Khalil, bearded and preternaturally calm, told me he is sorry his group is thought as of terrorists. "We feel very bad about this," he said. He denied his group was behind the hijacking of the Indian airliner -- a "breakaway faction" was to blame, he said -- and he denied that his group has ever killed civilians in its war in Kashmir.

"No one should worry about us," he said. "Only the oppressors of Islam."

I asked Khalil: Would you use nuclear weapons against your enemies if you could?

"We don't have nuclear weapons," he said, smiling. "We wish we had nuclear weapons. If we had them, we would use them as necessary. But they're very expensive."

Khalil, I was told, would be going to Afghanistan the following day, to Jalalabad, for a meeting with leaders of the other Islamic extremist groups given shelter by the Taliban. Pakistani news reports the day before our meeting stated that Osama bin Laden was replacing his bodyguards with men from Khalil's group; they were true believers, the report said, who would keep bin Laden safe.

One day, I drove across the border of Pakistan to the Afghan city of Kandahar, in the Taliban heartland, where many of the students at the Haqqania madrasa will end up.

The Taliban burst out of Kandahar in 1994 on their quick march to Kabul. Along the way, they closed down girls' schools and fired female doctors and murdered homosexuals and staged public amputations and generally gave a bad name to the Prophet in whose name they claimed to act.

It was a long drive, through the Baluchistan desert, over the Khojak Pass and through miles and miles of Afghanistan wasteland. On the approach to Kandahar, near the airport, is one of bin Laden's houses, but the Taliban wouldn't let me anywhere near it. We drove a bit farther, past the market square where wrestling matches are staged each Sunday. If you time it right, you might be able to catch a glimpse of Mullah Omar, the supreme leader of the Taliban, who will sometimes stop by in his black Pajero S.U.V. with the tinted windows to catch a couple of matches. If he's in a good mood, he'll even send his bodyguards to challenge the local wrestlers.

We continued on, past the Chechen Embassy, and soon enough approached the compound of the Shrine of the Respectable Cloak of Muhammad, from which the Taliban derive so much of their legitimacy among Afghan believers. The cloak of Muhammad is kept locked in a marble vault that is housed inside

an elegant, one-story shrine in the center of town. The people of Kandahar believe that the Prophet Muhammad wore the cloak, and so they believe that proximity to the cloak will cure the sick and heal the lame. They also believe it lends its current custodians the mantle of Islamic legitimacy. At the Haqqania madrasa, they talked a lot about the cloak.

The cloak has only been removed from its vault three times in the 250 or so years since it was brought to Kandahar by followers of the Afghan king Ahmed Shah Durrani. The last time it came out of its vault was in 1994, when Mullah Omar wore it to a rally of his followers. His decision to wear the cloak could have easily been seen as blasphemous, but things broke his way, and it was on that day that he solidified his reputation as the commander of the faithful.

It is not easy to get inside the compound that houses the shrine. For one thing, the Taliban minder assigned to me, a mullah named Haji Muhammad, resisted my pleas for help. Mullah Muhammad -- actually, he admitted, he was not yet a mullah, having not yet passed his final examinations -- was a short, taciturn fellow who couldn't for the life of him understand why I wanted to see the Respectable Cloak Shrine. The other problem: the men of the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice, who wear black turbans and black eyeliner (to make themselves appear fierce), were patrolling the entrance to the shrine, and they are terrible xenophobes.

The first time I tried to see the shrine, I was accompanied by a photographer, Nina Berman. In accordance with local custom, Nina was dressed like Mrs. Khomeini at a wake, but to the men of the Taliban, she might as well have been Jennifer Lopez. We were rudely denied entrance. We did, however, get to touch the toothache tree.

When the people of Kandahar feel the beginnings of a toothache, they come to this dead tree outside the shrine and hammer in a nail. Thousands of nailheads cover every inch of tree trunk. The interpreter who accompanied us explained that the tree actually worked as advertised. He once had a toothache and so banged a nail into the tree. One-two-three, his teeth felt fine. I looked inside his mouth. He didn't have any teeth in the Western sense of the word "teeth," just yellow stumps of bone that in poor, superstitious backwaters like Kandahar pass for teeth. After six years in power, the Taliban is good at waging jihad, but not good at all at providing medical care to the people of Afghanistan.

Later that same day, I returned with the interpreter in the hope of getting a better look at the shrine. But he wouldn't go with me. "It's better if we sit in the car," he said, and then I realized how frightened he was. He was frightened of the Taliban, and he was frightened by Mullah Muhammad, who only grudgingly accompanied me back to the compound.

We made it all the way to the front entrance of the shrine, but standing there were 15 or so young guards, thick wooden sticks in their hands. I turned around to ask Muhammad to intercede on my behalf, but he had made himself disappear. The young guards were angry, and they called me a "kaffir," an infidel. Then they ran me out of the compound.

I made it to the car, and we sped off. "It's better to wait in the car," my interpreter said wearily.

I asked Mullah Muhammad if we could see Osama bin Laden's house; he said no. What about Mullah Omar's house? No. But I knew he would turn down these requests. I was surprised, however, when he wouldn't allow me near the Jihadi madrasa. The Jihadi madrasa is Muhammad's alma mater, and it is one of the biggest in Kandahar. "Non-Muslims aren't allowed into a madrasa," he said. "It's against the Koran."

Which is nonsense, of course. Nothing in the Koran or in the Hadith bars infidels from school buildings, and I said so. He asked me how I knew this.

"Because I read the Koran," I answered.

"In Arabic?"

"No, in English."

"The Koran comes in English?" he asked, utterly sincerely.

The next day, frustrated to the point of paralysis, I complained to the Taliban foreign minister about Mullah Muhammad and his strange ideas.

"This is the fault of the Clinton administration," Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, the foreign minister, said. The foreign minister is a man completely lacking in charm, and he has a beard that has crawled up to within an inch of his eyes. He is touted as one of the sophisticates of the Taliban, a new face of moderation. He is not an easy small-talker, and so to thaw him out, I asked him how many children he has. "I have four boys and one girl," he said, and then offered, with no prompting: "The girl is my most beloved of all." Even the Taliban engages in spin.

Muttawakil understood my frustration with Muhammad. "The attitude is regrettable," he continued, "but many of our young people feel very badly about America because of the missile attacks and because of these unfair accusations about Osama bin Laden, and so they aren't open to Americans."

In other words, Taliban paranoia is an American creation?

"Yes. We have done nothing to you, but you insist on treating us as an enemy."

Muttawakil is no fan of America. "In America, parents do not show love to their children," he informed me -- but he said the average Afghan doesn't necessarily share his feelings. They may feel warmly about America, because of the help it gave to the mujahedeen during the struggle against the Soviets.

Mullah Muhammad feels no such warmth, however. A couple of days after seeing the foreign minister, I asked Muhammad what he thought of America.

"America is the place that wants to kill Osama," he said. "Osama is a great hero of the Muslims."

Does anything good come out of America?

He thought about that one for a while.

"Candy," he answered finally. "Candy comes from America. I like candy."

Did I mention that Mullah Muhammad is 17 years old?

Because he seemed to have a lot in common with madrasa students in Pakistan -- and having no expectation that I would be allowed to plumb the mysteries of Taliban spirituality -- I began to ask Muhammad about his life. He was born in Kandahar, he said, but lived for a while near Quetta, one of the Pakistani cities that absorbed millions of refugees during the Afghan wars. He has attended madrasas all his life. He has never studied math or science or English or computers or history. He had learned the Koran, by heart, by the time he was 9. But he learned it in Arabic, and he speaks Pashto. All he learned were the sounds.

I asked him if he has read any books beside the Koran.

"Yes," he answered. "A book of Hadith."

"Are you interested in reading other books? "

"No. Why?"

I asked him if he knew any women.

His sisters, he responded.

Any women not his relatives?

No.

I learned that he hasn't hugged his mother since he reached puberty. He listens to no music; he has never seen a movie.

I asked him what the future held for him. He said he has already fought once with the mujahedeen against the northern alliance, and might do so again.

And if you're not martyred in that fight?

"I will return to my job."

Why do you want to work at the Information Ministry?

"This is not my regular job," he said, meaning baby-sitting for me.

Where do you work, then?

"I'm a teacher."

Mullah Muhammad teaches the Koran to 9-year-old boys.

This is what Maulana Samiul Haq imparts to his 9-year-old boys, and everyone else enrolled at his madrasa: America, he told me in one of our many conversations, was controlled by the Jews, who were in turn controlled by Satan. His is a worldview shaped by his understanding of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, but it is a worldview moderate Muslims might say is shaped by something else.

For Samiul Haq, the world is divided into two separate and mutually hostile domains: the dar-al-harb and the dar-al-Islam. The dar-al-harb is the "abode of war." The dar-al-Islam is the "abode of peace." The dar-al-Islam is the Ummah, the worldwide community of Muslims. The dar-al-harb is everything else. In the 1980's, the Soviet Union epitomized, for fundamentalist-minded Muslims, the abode of war. Today, it is the U.S. that symbolizes the dar-al-harb.

How this came to pass, how America, which supported -- created, some would say -- the jihad movement against the Soviets, came to become the No. 1 enemy of hard-core Islamists is one of the more vexing questions facing American policy makers and the leaders of a dozen Muslim countries today.

One school of thought, Samiul Haq's school, says it's the Americans' fault: American imperialism and the export of American social and sexual mores are to blame. The other school of thought holds that Islam, by its very nature, is in permanent competition with other civilizations. This is the theory expounded by the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, who coined the term "Islam's bloody borders" -- a reference

to the fact that wherever Islam rubs up against other civilizations -- Jewish, Christian, Hindu -- wars seem to break out.

Men like Samiul Haq deride this view, and yet, in their black-and-white world, Islam stands alone against the world's infidels: Christians (or "Crusaders," in the fundamentalist parlance) to be sure, but Jews and Hindus especially. Haq, like many Pakistanis, even some Pakistanis of secular bent, say they believe that America's policy toward Muslims is directed by a Jewish-Hindu conspiracy. (A former chief of Pakistan's intelligence service sympathetic to the Islamists, Gen. Hamid Ghul, told me that Aipac, the pro-Israel lobby, sets America's policy toward Pakistan. "The Jews and the Brahmins have a lot in common," he said, referring to high-caste Hindus. "Like what?" I asked. "Usury," he responded, rubbing his hands together in the Shylockian manner.)

In Samiul Haq's view, the West is implacably hostile to the message of Islam, and so the need to prepare for jihad is never-ending.

"Jihad" is a concept widely misunderstood in the West. It does not mean only "holy war." It essentially means "struggle," and according to the traditional understanding of Islam, there are two types of jihad: greater and lesser. "Greater Jihad," is the struggle within the soul of a person to be better, more righteous -- the fight against the devil within. "Lesser Jihad" is the fight against the devil without: the military struggle against those who subjugate Muslims.

Whenever I meet a Muslim fundamentalist, I ask them the same stupid-sounding question: Which is more important to Islam, greater jihad or lesser jihad? The answer, usually accompanied by an indulgent look, is usually something like, "They don't call it 'greater jihad' for nothing." The struggle against the external oppressor waxes and wanes, but the fight to suppress the evil inclinations within is perpetual.

But in my conversations with Haq, and with mullahs across Pakistan and Afghanistan, I kept getting a different answer. "They are of equal importance," Haq said. "Jihad against the oppressor of Muslims is an absolute duty. Islam is a religion that defends itself." Jihad against the devil without has assumed a place of permanent, even overriding importance in the way these mullahs look at the world. This was surprising to me, because not even the leaders of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, or sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, ever answered the question this way.

(The thinking of Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, is in line with Haq's. Mullah Omar has refused to meet face to face with non-Muslims, a policy ungrounded in the Koran or in the Hadith, but when I submitted a written question to him about the nature of jihad, he wrote in response: "Both the jihads have their own importance. In one, one struggles to amend his inner self, and in another he defends his religion.")

When I asked Samiul Haq to explain why he placed so much emphasis on lesser jihad, he said: "Islam is a religion of limits. There are four pillars of Islam. Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, you must make once, only if you have the means. There is a limit to how much charity you must give. In prayer, we only pray five times a day. And fasting, we fast for only one month, Ramadan. But for jihad, there are no limits. Jihad must be fought without limits. There is no compromise in jihad."

So where is the jihad being fought today? Against India?

"Yes. The liberation of Kashmir is a holy struggle."

He then said that jihad today should be waged against Serbia and Russia and Israel, and against the northern alliance, the Taliban's foe in Afghanistan.

I asked him question after question about the Taliban -- why do they do the things they do? Finally he had enough: "Listen, if you Americans don't stop pestering us about the Taliban, we'll give them the nuclear bomb. How would you like that?"

He also said it was necessary to wage jihad against America, for "occupying" Saudi Arabia.

This jihad is the particular obsession of the Saudi exile Osama bin Laden: the struggle to evict American troops from Saudi Arabia, who are there at the invitation of the Saudi king. Samiul Haq says he believes that these troops are polluting holy soil. A jihad, then, is compulsory. And in a jihad, he said, these American troops are targets.

I asked him if this is what he is teaching his thousands of students.

"My students are taught Islam. This isn't a military school."

Haq's secret was not that the Haqqania madrasa is a training camp for terrorists. And the secret of the Taliban -- the secret of Talibanism -- is not found inside the Shrine of the Cloak of Muhammad. The secret is embodied in the two 11-year-olds cocking their fingers at me, and in the taunts of the students in the mosque who raised their hands for Osama bin Laden, and in the person of Mullah Haji Muhammad, my 17-year-old minder in Kandahar who has no interest in any book but the Koran, and in the hundreds of thousands of young men like him at madrasas across Pakistan and Afghanistan. These are poor and impressionable boys kept entirely ignorant of the world and, for that matter, largely ignorant of all but one interpretation of Islam.

They are the perfect jihad machines.