

**An Open letter in response to the
Prime Minister's Brighton
Conference Speech**

by

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28th September 2004



Oxford Cross-Cultural Research Institute

A Muslim Think Tank in the West

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Brighton Conference Speech
from
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The Prime Minister

10 Downing Street,
London, SW1A 2AA

28 September 2004

Dear Sir,

I admire your candour in accepting that the Iraq intelligence was wrong and I believe it important that you take a closer look at the reasons for this global meltdown in the quality of intelligence leading up to the war in Iraq. If root causes, as you put it, should be addressed, then the focus should not be restricted to Madrasas, khutbas and Wahabism, sadly reflecting the rhetoric of the neoconservative warmongers across the Atlantic. I believe there is a need to look at the entire spectrum of arguments that were formulated in that fog of '*spintelligence*' that has led to the current state of world affairs.

Wahabism

You referred to uncompromising Wahabism. We are given the impression that "Wahabis" are a people full of hate, following a brand of Islam with which one cannot – under any circumstances – expect to have a negotiated dialogue or cooperation. Their only aim, we are told, is to destroy Western civilisation and the only solution is to invade their lands and brainwash their children with Western values. I suggest that this argument be subjected to historical scrutiny. Muhammad Abdul Wahab died in 1792. Over the past two hundred years, the British and other Western governments have maintained a constant dialogue and close relationship with followers of Abdul Wahab in the House of Saud. The cooperation exists not only at the governmental level but even among the masses. I am sure you are aware of the fact that two decades ago the West, via the secret services of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, recruited thousands of people to fight in their cold war with the Russians in Afghanistan. Sincere Muslims from all over the world who went to fight in Afghanistan saw it as a legitimate *jihad* but in the wider context they also recognised that they were fighting on the side of a Christian West against an atheist Russia. They accepted direct help and cooperation from the United States – one need only read about the effective use of American made Stinger Missiles in that conflict. It is very difficult to reconcile this history with the new perspective that is being painted: that of a people who are devoid of the capacity to negotiate.

Taliban

The same goes for the Taliban, who were drawn out of their seminaries by well-briefed intelligence agents and turned into warlords. The Deobandi madrasas have been in existence since 1867 and have always been far removed from anything to do with violence and military persuasions. It is not unreasonable to be suspicious of the coincidence that several Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan spontaneously became militant precisely at the time when the West was eager for a pipeline through Afghanistan. Everyone seems to have forgotten that several Taliban delegations were invited to the United States for discussions about the pipeline. We are now told that the Taliban were out to destroy the West and they were not open to any discussion. Yet no one can explain why Mullah Muhammad Ghaus headed a delegation to Houston in November 1997, where they were put up in five star hotels and taken on sight seeing trips, including to the NASA Space Center. They dined at Marty Miller's residence and had discussions with officials of the State Department (Caroline Lees, 'Oil barons court Taliban in Texas', *Sunday Telegraph* 14 December 1997).

I hope you can appreciate the feeling of insult being added to injury that Muslims experience when they are told that the reason for this upsurge in violence is due to their curricula, which teach hate and disunity. These curricula have not changed. They were the same when the West was recruiting from the Arab world to fight its Cold War in Afghanistan. The curricula were the same when the Taliban were visiting the USA to discuss oil pipeline projects. And the curricula were the same when the armies of Sharif Hussein were manipulated to march with T.E. Lawrence on Aqabah.

Role of Madrasas

In every culture, there are institutions and groups of people who serve as preservers of the core elements of that culture. In Judaism, the Orthodox traditions and religious schools serve that function in preserving text, norms, practices and jurisprudential rulings. Using the logic of this new perspective on Madrasas, it would be extremely easy for me to cherry pick from those Jewish traditions to paint a picture of hate mongering fanatics in the same way that Islamic scholarly traditions are being portrayed in recent times. However, if I do so I am sure I would be urged to remember that an expression of difference, however harsh it may seem, does not necessarily translate into hate. It is simply a way to affirm one's own identity.

Most of the people who inspire fear with their WMD ambitions today were not schooled in madrasas. If curricula are to be scrutinized then perhaps some attention should also be given to the curricula of intelligence agencies that teach their employees how to become provocateurs and how to manipulate the simple-minded into becoming pawns in their global political games. The world is now too small for big games.

If I live in a drought-stricken desert and the man living on the oasis is happy to sell me water; and allows me to run pipelines from his well so that I can grow crops and build my own oasis, I would not support bandits who are plundering the property of this man's children. This is just one perspective from the other side. A change of curricula in all the madrasas of the world would not have prevented the first suicide bomber in Palestine. He was a Christian who became desperate. We must not forget that there are people who are keen to create and sustain tension between the Islamic and Christian worlds. This I believe may

have played a part in the intelligence failures you have had to apologise for today. Please do not allow another argument based on a preponderance of spin to lead you and your colleagues into another course of action for which you may have to apologise in the future. Madrasas are preserving the core elements of our culture and the survival of our cherished heritage lies therein.

I come from a scholastic tradition (*Nadwatul 'Ulama*) that has been promoting the gradual development of madrasa curricula to provide an appreciation of the modern world for over a hundred years. I strongly believe that it would be very ill advised for the West to set out on a course of uprooting the entire system – and thereby detaching a people from their heritage – simply to conform to a flawed logic. Attacking the madrasas will only exacerbate the problems of our increasingly shrinking world.

Yours sincerely

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