

Dear New York Post,

20 July 2008

We have read the recent article by Ann Marlow regarding funding for madrasas with deep concern. The article entitled MADRASSAS BUILT WITH YOUR TAXES published 14th July, makes a number of assertions about Afghan religious life and civil society which are unhelpful and misleading.

Marlowe takes issue with funding for religious schools, madrasas, by US forces stating 'there is no reason we have to subsidize the lowest common denominator elements of Afghan culture.' Earlier in the article Marlowe also asserts that 'Afghans don't cooperate in units larger than the family or tribe.' Both of these statements show a considerable lack of understanding for Afghan's religious lives and civil society. The article also discusses government registered madrasas where 40% of the curriculum is reserved for non-religious teaching but derides madrasas for teaching only the Koran. This demonstrates a lack of understanding about how complex the madrasa education sector actually is.

The notion that a tribal organisation is inherently somehow weaker than or worse than Western notions of civil society, as is implicated in the article, is both wrong, and out of step with most analysts and policy makers. In a recent speech to the Brookings institute the British Secretary of Defence Des Browne said that in supporting the Afghan state the international community needed to understand that a Western model would be inappropriate and unsustainable. And so it is for Afghan civil society, religious or not, where support should be given to enhance local capacities and local models of civil society. It is also incorrect to assert that Afghans don't work together in units larger than the family or tribe.

Afghan civil society is highly heterogeneous, especially with regard to religious actors - and whilst there are issues that need to be addressed within civil society, they are a legitimate part of Afghan society and Afghan culture. There are well established religious orders, particularly but not exclusively Sufi who have large followings in the country, further there are a number of saints (Pirs) and respected religious leaders and teachers with their own followings.

Amongst non-religious civil society there are a number of organisations, networks and forums that do cooperate and work together on a range of issues from support for the disabled, human rights and the environment amongst others. Further there are a number of political parties and movements which have large followings and have played significant roles in recent Afghan history. It shows a remarkable lack of understanding of the complexity of Afghanistan and the civil society groups that are there to dismiss Afghans because they 'don't cooperate in units larger than the family or tribe.' Afghan society has also been significantly changed by the conflicts of the last 30 years meaning that the relative strengths of tribal structures and religious orders have changed in different ways in various parts of the country. Assuming that tribal or religious structures are somehow immune to change or the impact of external events is misleading.

The article further misrepresents how religious education actually functions and makes assertions that do not hold upon closer inspection of reality.

Funding for religious actors, mosques, madrasas and other religious activities is very diverse and there are many more unregistered madrasas than registered ones (of which there are just over 500). There is known to be funding from several Gulf States, Iran, and Pakistan as well as the predominantly Western international military forces including the United States. A large number of these madrasas have their curricula tied to the religious ideology of the funder - which could be a state or an individual. It is of note

that this is less true for those supported by the international military which generally hand them over to the Afghan government as soon as possible.

There are both Sunni and Shia adherents in Afghanistan, along with Sufi groups that draw from both branches. Within Shia and Sunni practices in Afghanistan there are also several schools. Most Afghans are either adherent to the Hanafi School if they are Sunni, or the Jafari School if they are Shia, both of which are mainstream Islamic schools practiced in many parts of the Islamic world. To a limited degree there are other adherents to schools such as the Hanbali, Wahabis, Salafis and Ismailia etc.

A madrasa may not be the only education establishment that a child attends. In some areas, where there are secular schools, they can attend the madrasa in the afternoon. In some communities families send their children to madrasas because many of them offer board and lodging for the children to attend - a facility that is not available in state schools - and in the context of increasing food prices and insecurity sending a child to a religious school can also be a part of the coping mechanisms of families struggling to survive.

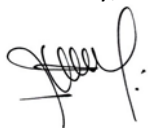
Then there is a question of the teaching in religious schools, madrasa in the West is often associated with memorising the Koran, but this is mistaken. A madrasa is a literally a 'place of study' where students learn about Islam in general. It is only in Dar-ul Hifaz (literally 'house of memorising') that students actually memorise the Koran - a course which normally takes 2-3 years. It is not entirely uncommon for a child to attend a secular primary school, move to a Dar-ul Hifaz for 2-3 years and move back in to the secular system afterwards.

The majority of Afghans in rural areas, and indeed many in urban areas, are deeply religious. Their day starts with a prayer in the mosque and ends with a prayer in the mosque. Meetings to decide important village issues; receiving visitors, and other events in a village often take place in the mosques. The centrality of the mosque and religious leaders to many Afghans' lives however should not be taken to imply that religious civil society is homogenous. It comprises of pro-government groups, reformists, radicals and fundamentalists as well as traditionalist elements. Further complicating the picture are the impacts of different outside influences which includes the funding of numerous madrasas across the country.

The roles and functions of religious leaders and institutions can and have been utilized for different agendas; they may support the government, or oppose it; they may promote peace and cooperation, or they may advocate hostility and conflict. It is partly this ambiguity that makes religious civil society critical in peace and reconciliation in the larger processes ongoing today - and many religious leaders feel threatened by all sides in the current climate in Afghanistan.

Whether or not the US military should be involved in supporting mosques and madrasas is their prerogative, but the decision should not be coloured by analysis that does not bear relation to the reality of Afghans' religious experience or civil society.

Sincerely,



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