

Student name

Instructor name

English 100

Date

Just Education isn't the Answer: How Malala Misses the Forest for the Trees

In Malala Yousafzai's book, *I am Malala*, she tells the story of her father's and her own fight for women's education against the Taliban. She introduces the reader to the political history of Pakistan and the cultural history of Pashtuns, explaining how the Taliban manipulated this cultural and political moment to seize power and impose their oppressive societal ideals onto the people of Swat. School was a source of empowerment for Malala and she believes that education is an effective way to fight the terrorism of the Taliban. Her story is powerful and her cause is admirable, but her idea that education combats terrorism is simplistic and glosses over the importance of the geopolitical situation Pakistan finds itself in. Education in this environment is no guarantee of de-radicalization and may even work to galvanize the Taliban's cause. In a political context of postcolonial exploitation where foreign governments actively try to destabilize the country and fund extremist groups, education will just make more effective terrorists.

A common idea is that education combats terrorism by making the population more skeptical and less easy to control. This idea is both patronizing and insulting because it seems to blame the less educated population for their own oppression, leaving little culpability for the actions (and inaction) of the government and Western powers. On the contrary, the support of militant Islamist groups was entirely rational in the beginning because the government left the people of Swat no other choice. When Islamic extremists first came into the valley, the people

were already frustrated with an ineffective, unresponsive government and there was a popular sentiment among Pashtuns that they would prefer their old tribal justice to state bureaucracy which was slow and required bribes. The militants confirmed the peoples' mistrust of their government when groups like Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law (or TNSM, whose leaders eventually became the leaders of the Taliban) and Lashkar-e-Taiba, were the most effective help in rural, tribal areas after the 2005 earthquake (Yousafzai 87). Shortly after, Mullah Fazlullah from TNSM started broadcasting a radio station in which he would charismatically call for Sharia law and call out the government's corruption as well as rail against the feudal system of khans. So the Taliban came in with a populist message, speaking against corruption and injustice, and then proved that they were more effective than the government when it really mattered, during a disaster. Lack of education was not what gave rise to the Taliban; they took advantage of the geopolitical situation and made it unwarranted to oppose them. Given the same circumstances, it is difficult to see how a more educated populace could have acted differently.

Malala shares her father's idea that poor education was "at the root of all Pakistan's problems" and that it was ignorance which led to the population being fooled by politicians (32). However, the election of Donald Trump in the US just this year demonstrates that a nation that is considered quite educated is just as easily duped if the political moment is right. Donald Trump had a similar message as the Taliban minus the religious trappings. He took advantage of popular frustration with government and called the establishment corrupt, saying he would "drain the swamp" in Washington. Just like the Taliban, he stokes up fear and hatred of foreigners, his most iconic campaign promises being to build a wall along the border with

Mexico to keep “illegals” out and banning Muslims from entering the country, garnering him a large white nationalist base. Though not as extreme as the Taliban, he has also indicated that he wants to restrict women’s rights by making abortion illegal and has repeatedly made sexist, degrading remarks about women. He is unqualified to run the country and none of his policy proposals would actually do anything to help the working class but that hasn’t hampered his support in a country with high rates of education and literacy. While better education may help a few people recognize that the billionaire is not here to help the working class, this phenomenon of the population supporting dangerous people is about frustration at an unresponsive government and has little to do with being too ignorant to make good decisions.

Another misguided notion about terrorism is that terrorists are uneducated and poor, with few prospects for their career and future. This idea is easily disproved as there is no linear relationship between poor countries and the prevalence of terrorism; in actuality, political dysfunction and human rights abuses are better predictors (Piazza). People do not become radicalized and use violence because they are underprivileged but being educated can lead to beliefs that terrorism is the best way to achieve political goals. In a survey of 79 jihadis, it was found that 54% had attended university, which is slightly better than the percentage of Americans that had attended university (Hoffman). If educated, most terrorists come from a background of engineering or medicine. Unfortunately, this education gives them the skills to plan and execute highly successful and destructive attacks. Also, education does not make one impervious to dangerous ideologies. Malala even explains how her father Ziauddin, the paragon of education, was at one time seduced by extremist ideology (27). It was not until he met his future wife’s family that he started to question these ideas. If one of the most educated,

progressive and anti-Taliban men in Swat could be convinced of the righteousness of being a martyr, then clearly there are other issues beyond lack of education that are producing these terrorists.

Understanding the historical and current relationship between the Pakistani people, the Pakistani government, and Western powers will elucidate the real conditions under which terrorism thrives. Throughout the 19th and 20th century, Pakistan suffered under the influence and manipulations of Western powers. It started with being colonized by the British, and continued into the 1980s when the US gave money to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to fund Islamic militant groups to fight the Russians in Afghanistan. Malala discusses the changes to Pakistan at this time when the head of state was Zia ul Haq, a military dictator. She describes how Zia “launched a campaign of Islamization” and, with the generous financial support of the US, spread the idea that fighting the Russians was a religious jihad. Malala says, “It was as if under Zia jihad became the sixth pillar of our religion” (25). This is a crucial period in the rise of terrorism because there is a dictatorial government and foreign powers are funding religious militants, which pushes the cultural narrative that violent jihad is a legitimate and effective strategy to achieve political and spiritual goals. Currently, the US gives billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan while simultaneously drone striking suspected Islamic militants without the permission or knowledge of the Pakistani government because they are suspected of harboring terrorists. This political chaos where the government is at odds with itself and the US is trying to bomb away the Islamic extremist Frankenstein it helped create continues to make the terrorist cause stronger

Terrorism is a devastating and overwhelming issue to respond to with no clear answers but there are some factors which create an environment where terrorism thrives that can be eliminated. The first thing that can be done is for the US to stop the drone strikes in Pakistan. The government of Pakistan views the strikes as a violation of their sovereignty, and the strikes often kill civilians which in turn recruits more people willing to become terrorists to fight the “evil west” who are murdering their people. There is no reason to continue a policy which is illegal under international law and which garners sympathy for terrorists (Hughes). The US should stop putting our significant financial support behind military operations and instead put the money into human operations: hospitals, food aid, and other desperately needed humanitarian support. Schools should also be a part of this nation building, because, although they alone will not solve terrorism, they do promote free thought and open up opportunities for individuals to become more effective and empowered citizens. One of the most important things that can be done is to encourage Pakistani civil society at the grassroots level, teaching communities how to take a stand against violence and to have faith based organizations change the current harmful cultural narratives about Islam (Mirahmadi). Inspiring leaders like Malala can help to forge change, but a one-pronged solution will fail in the face of a much more complex situation.

Works Cited

- Hoffman, Bruce, Lyle J. Goldstein, Joseph W. Prueher, J. Stapleton Roy, Paul Heer, David M. Lampton, Michael D. Swaine, Ezra Vogel, and Paul J. Saunders. "Today's Highly Educated Terrorists." *The National Interest*. Center for the National Interest, 15 Sept. 2010. Web. 4 Dec. 2016.
- Hughes, Dana. "US Drone Strikes in Pakistan Are Illegal, Says UN Terrorism Official." Online Posting. *Abs News*. World News, 15 Mar. 2013. Web. 4 Dec. 2016.
- Mirahmadi, Hedieh, Waleed Ziad, Mehreen Farooq, and Robert D. Lamb. *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers 2014*. Brookings. Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, Jan. 2015. Web. 4 Dec. 2016.
- Piazza, James A. "Rooted in Poverty?: Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages 1." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18.1 (2006): 159-77. Web. 4 Dec. 2016.
- Yousafzai, Malala, and Christina Lamb. *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, 2013. Print.