

DIALOGUE HUB FOR COMMON GROUND

Cross-Border Education and Extremism

A Field Study on Afghan Children Sent to Pakistani Extremest Madras's

(Idialogic-schools)

2016

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Organization: Dialgoue hub for common ground

Provinces: Takhar, Badakhshan, Kandahar, Zabul and Helmand

Introduction

The issue of sending children aged 7 to 18 from Afghan provinces such as Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand, Badakhshan, and Takhar to schools in Pakistan represents a complex social and security challenge with far-reaching consequences for children, families, and society. In 2016, the organization **Dialogue Hub for Common Ground** decided to conduct a field-based, scientific investigation into this phenomenon due to its critical importance and direct impact on children's futures and social stability.

One of the primary factors driving families to send their children to Pakistani schools was severe economic hardship. Many families, lacking sufficient income and limited access to quality education within Afghanistan, viewed these schools as opportunities for a better future. Simultaneously, insufficient awareness of the long-term risks and consequences of this decision exposed families and children to serious vulnerabilities.

A particularly significant factor was the presence of Taliban-affiliated individuals in some Afghan schools and their influence among local communities. Coupled with intelligence-driven propaganda campaigns, these activities motivated families to send their children to Pakistani schools. Many children, upon attending these schools or after graduation, were exposed to extremist ideologies and, in some cases, joined the ranks of the Taliban. This illustrates the profound social and security consequences of this phenomenon, extending far beyond education alone and affecting both children and society at large.

It is also important to note that some children were not even formally registered in these schools, highlighting the lack of transparency and oversight in educational processes and the direct exposure of children to informal and ideological instruction. Such circumstances left children vulnerable to harmful and extremist influences without the protection of formal educational frameworks.

Given these conditions, this study, conducted by **Dialogue Hub for Common Ground**, aimed to provide a comprehensive field analysis of the reasons behind sending children to Pakistani schools, examining economic, social, propaganda, and security factors. The findings of this research can assist policymakers and civil society actors in raising awareness among families, preventing children from being sent to high-risk environments, and contributing to the social and security development of vulnerable regions.

Literature Review

Research and reports prior to 2016 indicate that educating children in conflict-affected environments, particularly in religious schools, can expose them to serious risks. One of the most prominent sources is the **Human Rights Watch (HRW) report dated 17 February 2016**, which documented that the **Taliban were recruiting children not only for religious education but also for military training and participation in armed operations**. The report was based on interviews with families, civil society activists, political analysts, and United Nations officials. (hrw.org)

According to HRW, the Taliban were using religious schools (*madrasas*) in provinces such as **Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan** as training centers for children aged 13–17, with some children as young as 10–13 being involved in combat operations. Some were trained in handling and constructing **improvised explosive devices (IEDs)**.

The report highlights that the Taliban exploited poverty and family vulnerability to recruit children, often providing **material incentives such as food, clothing, or money** to families to encourage sending their children to these schools. Families facing economic hardship were particularly susceptible to this recruitment. (dw.com)

HRW's analysis underscores that these practices represent a **violation of international humanitarian law and children's rights**, as the use or recruitment of children under 15 in armed conflicts constitutes a **war crime**. Furthermore, these actions have long-term consequences on the education, social development, and security of children and their communities. (hrw.org)

The report also emphasizes the link between **religious education and pathways to radicalization and armed recruitment**, as children exposed to years of ideological influence may later participate in militant activities, either directly or indirectly. (eurasiareview.com)

Based on this evidence prior to 2016, it is clear that **the role of religious schools in facilitating the recruitment and radicalization of children was already recognized by human rights organizations and researchers**. This background provides a strong foundation for the 2016 field study conducted by **Dialogue Hub for Common Ground**, emphasizing the importance of analyzing economic, social, and propaganda-related factors in sending children to foreign schools.

Methodology

This study aimed to investigate the reasons for sending children aged 7 to 18 to Pakistani schools across five provinces of Afghanistan: Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand, Badakhshan, and Takhar. The research employed a **mixed-methods field study**, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the economic, social, and propaganda-related factors involved.

Research Type

The study was designed as a **field-based research** to collect real and reliable data from families and educational environments. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the underlying motivations and consequences of sending children abroad for schooling.

Data Collection Tools

Multiple tools were used to collect data:

- **Questionnaires** for gathering quantitative information on family economic status, educational background, and motivations.
- **In-person interviews** with families and relevant stakeholders.
- **Online video and audio interviews** to reach participants who could not be interviewed in person and to supplement field data.

Sample

A total of **30 families were interviewed in each province**, resulting in a **total sample size of 150 families**. Participants were selected purposively to ensure diversity in social and economic backgrounds, allowing for a comprehensive and representative understanding of the factors influencing the decision to send children to Pakistani schools.

Data Analysis

- **Qualitative data** from interviews were analyzed using **content analysis** to identify patterns, behaviors, motivations, and key factors affecting family decisions.
- **Quantitative data** from questionnaires were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** to examine trends and distributions among the sample.
- In-person, online audio, and written interviews were integrated into a unified analysis to provide a holistic perspective on the issue.

This methodology allowed for a **multi-dimensional understanding** of the motivations behind sending children to Pakistani schools and the associated consequences, providing a solid basis for practical recommendations and policy development in education and social protection.

Results

This section presents the findings from the field study conducted across **five provinces of Afghanistan**: Ghazni, Zabul, Kandahar, Takhar, and Badakhshan. The results combine **quantitative data** (number of children, registration status, affiliation with armed groups) and **qualitative data** (interview analysis and parental perspectives).

4.1 Helmand

- **Sample:** 30 families
- **Number of children:** Approximately 2–3 sons per family → ~70 male children
- **Age range:** 13–18 years
- **Family occupations:** Farmers, rickshaw drivers, shopkeepers, unemployed
- **Key qualitative findings:**
 - 4 families reported that their children were never officially registered in schools and did not return for years.
 - 8 children returned home after studying in Pakistani schools as highly radicalized individuals.
 - 2 children joined the Taliban.
- **Schools attended:**
 - Darul Uloom Haqqania (Akora Khattak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)
 - Jamiat-ul-Uloom al-Salmiya (Deobandi, Karachi)

4.2 Zabul

- **Sample:** 30 families
- **Number of children:** ~65–70 male children
- **Age range:** 13–18 years
- **Family occupations:** Farmers, rickshaw drivers, shopkeepers, unemployed
- **Key findings:**
 - 3 families reported children were never officially registered.
 - 10 children returned home as highly radicalized.

- 5 children joined the Taliban.
- **Schools attended:**
 - Darul Uloom Haqqania
 - Jamia Ashrafia (Lahore)

4.3 Kandahar

- **Sample:** 30 families
- **Number of children:** 70 male children
- **Key findings:**
 - 2 families had three children who carried out suicide attacks.
 - 4 families reported children never officially registered.
 - 8 children returned as highly radicalized.
 - 6–7 children joined the Taliban.
- **Schools attended:**
 - Darul Uloom Haqqania
 - Jamiat-ul-Uloom al-Salmiya

4.4 Takhar

- **Sample:** 30 families
- **Number of children:** ~65–70 male children
- **Key findings:**
 - 2 families reported children were never officially registered.
 - 6–7 children joined the Taliban.
 - 10–12 children returned home as highly radicalized.
- **Schools attended:**
 - Darul Uloom Haqqania
 - Jamia Ashrafia, Lahore

4.5 Badakhshan

- **Sample:** 30 families
- **Number of children:** ~65–70 male children
- **Key findings:**
 - 2–3 families reported children were never officially registered.
 - 3–4 children joined the Taliban.
 - Most other children returned home as highly radicalized.
- **Schools attended:**
 - Darul Uloom Haqqania
 - Jamiat-ul-Uloom al-Salmiya
 - Jamia Ashrafia, Lahore

Overall Analysis

- **Total children studied:** 350–355 male children from 150 families.
- **Affiliation with Taliban:** At least 20 families reported their children joined the Taliban.
- **Suicide attacks:** 2 families had three children who carried out suicide attacks.
- **School registration:** At least 6 families reported children were not officially registered and were missing for years.
- **Return to home:** Most children returned highly radicalized.
- **Schools attended in Pakistan:**
 - Darul Uloom Haqqania (Akora Khattak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)
 - Jamiat-ul-Uloom al-Salmiya (Deobandi, Karachi)
 - Jamia Ashrafia (Lahore)

Conclusion: The findings indicate that **poverty, Taliban influence, propaganda, and lack of official school registration** collectively facilitated the radicalization of children and, in some cases, their recruitment into armed groups.

Table 1: Summary of Field Study Results by Province

Province	Families (n)	Children (approx.)	Age Range	Registered in School	Joined Taliban	Suicide Attacks	Returned Radicalized
Ghazni	30	70	13–18	4 families not registered	2	0	8
Zabul	30	65–70	13–18	3 families not registered	5	0	10
Kandahar	30	70	13–18	4 families not registered	6–7	2 families (3 children)	8
Takhar	30	65–70	13–18	2 families not registered	6–7	0	10–12
Badakhs han	30	65–70	13–18	2–3 families not registered	3–4	0	Most children

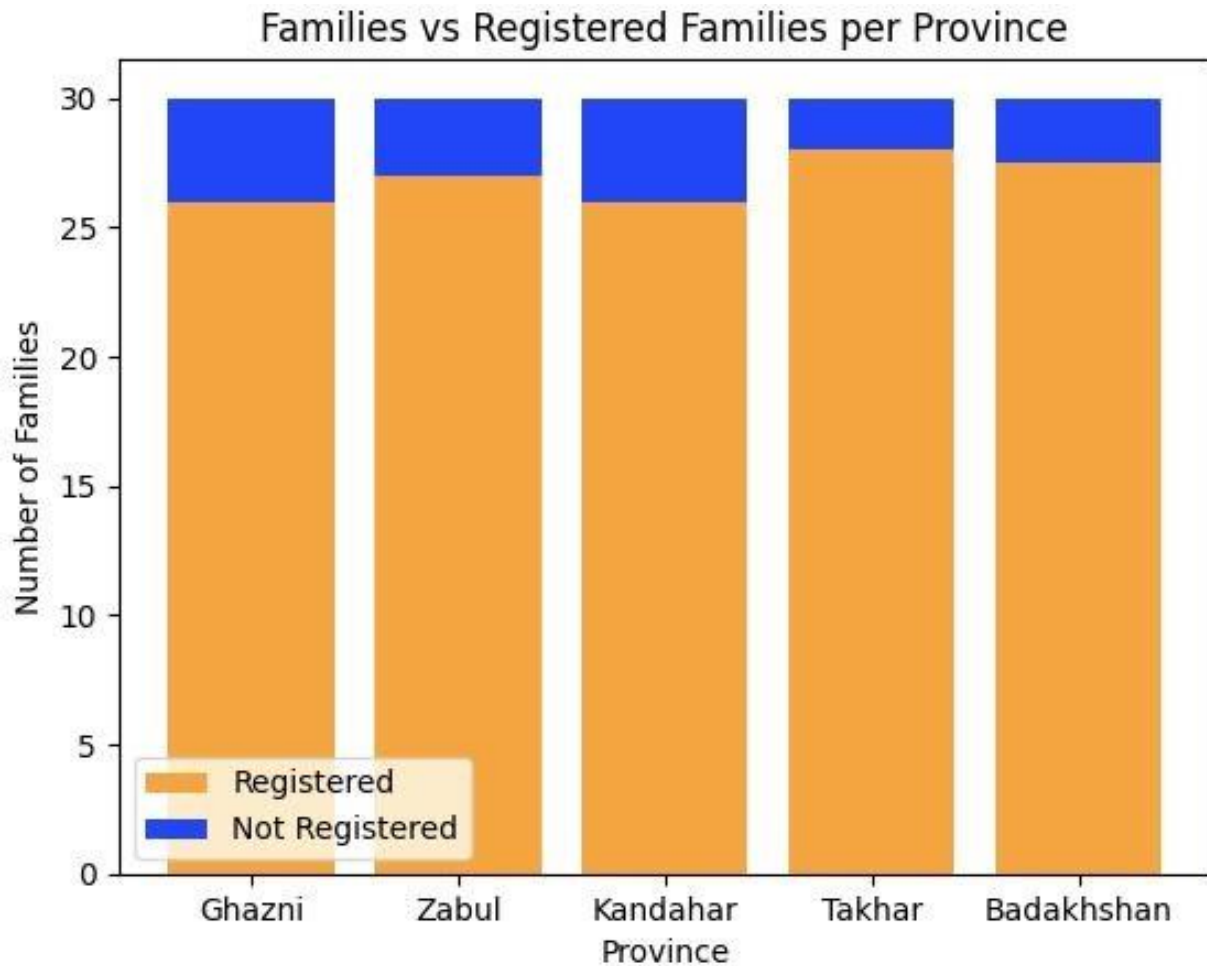


Figure 1: bar chart representing the proportion of families registered in school, per province

Notes:

- Children per family are estimated at 2–3 sons.
- Age range of children is mostly 13–18 years.
- Schools attended include **Darul Uloom Haqqania** (Akora Khattak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), **Jamiat-ul-Uloom al-Salmiya** (Deobandi, Karachi), and **Jamia Ashrafia** (Lahore, Pakistan).

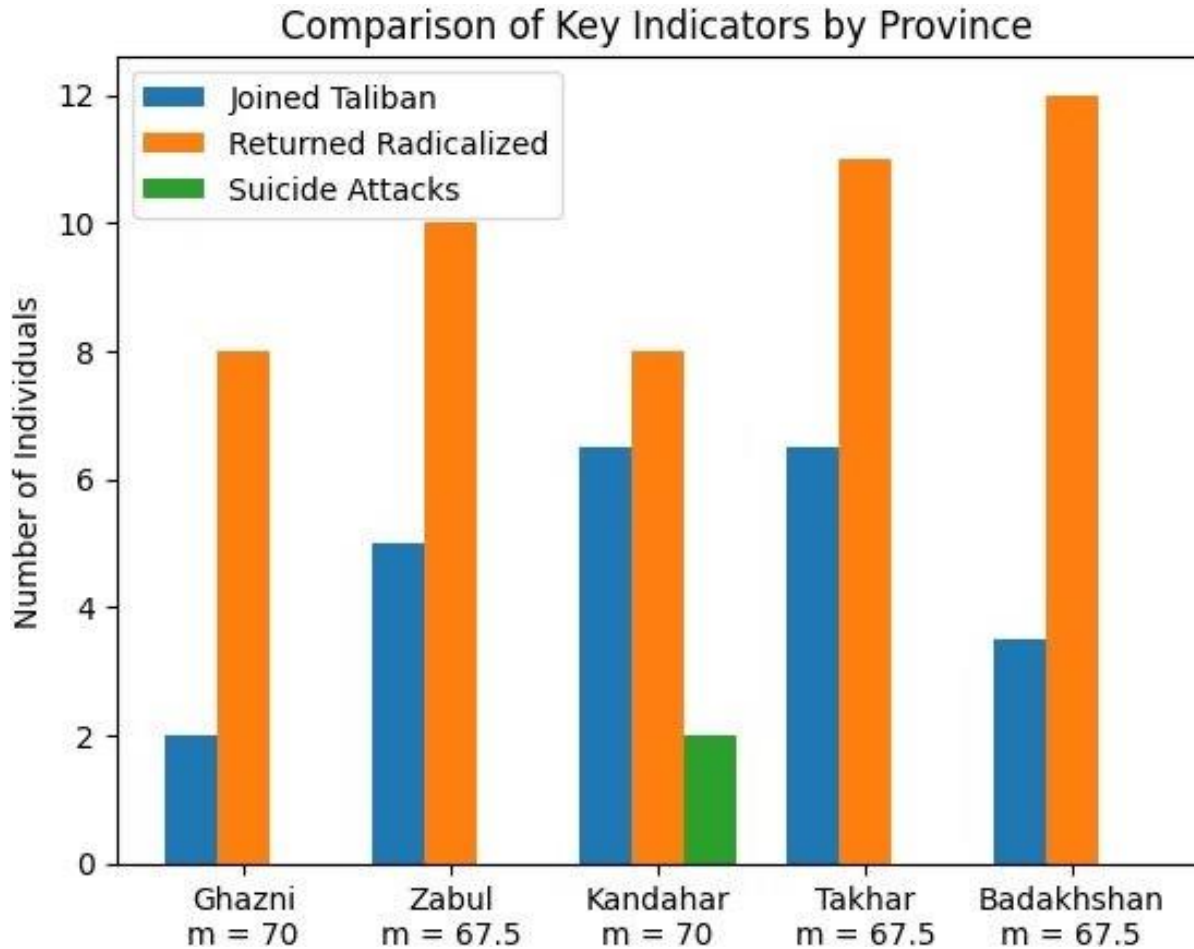


Figure 2: grouped bar chart representing how many children joined the Taliban, committed suicide attacks, and returned radicalized, in every province.

Notes:

- ‘m’ represents the average number of children sampled in each province
- “Returned Radicalized” refers to children who returned home highly radicalized after studying in Pakistani schools.

Discussion

- The findings of this study reveal multiple interrelated factors influencing Afghan families to send their children to Pakistani schools, with significant social and security consequences.
- **Economic Poverty as a Root Cause**
- One of the main factors driving parental decisions was **economic hardship**. Most

families were farmers, rickshaw drivers, shopkeepers, or unemployed, with limited financial capacity to support their children's education. Sending children to Pakistani religious schools was often seen as a way to **reduce household expenses**, particularly because schools often provided for the children's **basic needs such as food**. This economic vulnerability increased the likelihood of children being recruited into armed groups.

- **Role of Taliban Campaigns**

- The Taliban's **propaganda and recruitment campaigns** played a decisive role. Families reported being influenced by promises of financial support, **monthly stipends**, and provision of basic needs for children. These strategies facilitated conditions in which children would **join the Taliban or become radicalized** after studying in Pakistani schools. At least 20 families reported children joining armed groups, and in some cases, children were involved in **suicide attacks**.

- **Lack of Religious and Educational Awareness**

- Many parents lacked awareness of the **risks associated with foreign religious schools**, including the absence of official registration and exposure to extremist curricula. Several families discovered after years that their children had **never been formally enrolled** in these schools, highlighting gaps in **parental oversight and information**.

- **North vs. South Comparison**

- Differences were observed between **northern provinces** (Takhar, Badakhshan) and **southern provinces** (Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand). In the south, **more children joined the Taliban or became highly radicalized**, correlating with **poorer economic conditions and stronger Taliban influence**. In northern provinces, the number of children joining armed groups was lower. Although direct parental supervision was limited because children traveled to Pakistan for schooling, most children from the north **maintained at least some contact with their families**, which may have mitigated the extent of radicalization.

- **Consequences: Radicalized Children and Gender Rights**

- A major consequence is the **radicalization of children**, posing potential threats to family and community security. Additionally, families sending boys to foreign religious schools often **restricted girls' educational opportunities**, perpetuating **gender inequality in education**.

- **Conclusion:** The combination of **economic hardship, Taliban propaganda, lack of awareness, and weak parental oversight due to cross-border schooling** has facilitated the radicalization of children and their recruitment into armed groups. Addressing these challenges requires **economic support for vulnerable families, awareness programs, and stricter monitoring of foreign religious schools** to mitigate social and security risks.

Conclusion

- The findings of this 2016 field study indicate that Afghan families sent their children aged 7–18 to Pakistani religious schools primarily due to **economic hardship, lack of local educational opportunities, and Taliban propaganda**. Most children were boys aged 13–18, and families with limited income viewed these schools as a way to reduce household expenses, particularly for **food and basic needs**.
- The study shows that the majority of children returned from these schools **radicalized**, with at least 20 families reporting that their children had joined the Taliban, and in some cases, children participated in **suicide attacks**. Lack of **official school registration, parental oversight, and educational awareness** were significant factors contributing to these outcomes.
- Comparisons between northern and southern provinces revealed that while southern provinces had a higher number of children joining armed groups, children from the north maintained at least some contact with their families, which may have moderated the extent of radicalization.
- The long-term consequences of these dynamics include the **radicalization of youth, threats to family and community security, and perpetuation of gender inequality in education**. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions addressing economic, educational, and social vulnerabilities.

Recommendations (2016 Perspective)

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to mitigate the risks associated with sending children to Pakistani religious schools:

- **Economic Support for Vulnerable Families**
 - Provide financial assistance or livelihood programs to families in high-risk provinces to reduce the economic incentives for sending children abroad.
 - Subsidize local educational opportunities, including school meals and materials, to decrease reliance on foreign schools.
- **Awareness and Education Campaigns**
 - Educate parents about the potential risks of cross-border religious schooling, including radicalization and lack of official registration.

- Promote awareness about children’s rights, including access to safe and quality education within Afghanistan.
- **Strengthening Local Educational Institutions**
 - Improve the quality and accessibility of local schools in rural and conflict-affected provinces.
 - Ensure that curricula address civic education, critical thinking, and tolerance to counter extremist narratives.
- **Monitoring of Cross-Border Schools**
 - Collaborate with local and international partners to monitor the activities of Pakistani religious schools attended by Afghan children.
 - Advocate for formal registration and reporting of Afghan students in foreign schools to enhance accountability.
- **Community-Based Interventions**
 - Establish community centers and youth programs to provide safe spaces, mentorship, and alternative learning opportunities.
 - Engage religious and community leaders to promote non-violent interpretations of religious education.
- **Gender-Sensitive Measures**
 - Encourage families to ensure equal educational opportunities for girls to prevent gender-based disparities.
 - Support programs that integrate girls into local schools with safe access and proper resources.

Summary: Implementing these measures in 2016 could have addressed the **root causes of child radicalization**, enhanced educational oversight, and reduced the social and security risks associated with sending children to foreign religious schools.

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