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Pakistan's 'University of Jihad' is getting millions of dollars from the government

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After terrorists killed more than 100 Pakistani school children 18 months ago, the country's leaders vowed to crack down on religious seminaries that are recruiting grounds for domestic and international Islamist militant groups. U.S. officials have also continued to pressure Pakistan in their decade-long effort to get the government to deny safe-havens to insurgent groups destabilizing Afghanistan, especially the Taliban and its brutal offshoot, the Haqqani network.

Despite all of that, Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government is giving \$3 million to the Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary, also known as the "University of Jihad." At a provincial assembly meeting last week, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's leaders announced the grant and said it was needed to keep one of the world's most controversial Islamic seminaries operational. Government leaders noted the seminary currently enrolls and houses about 4,000 students, and their parents expect they will be taken care of.

"A large number of students study, live and eat in this seminary, and it's doing great service for the poor people," Mushtaq Ghani, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's information minister, said in an interview with The Washington Post.

By subsidizing one of the world's most controversial Islamist institutions, Ghani said the government will be helping to "mainstream it" as part of a broader reform of what 3 million Pakistani children learn in more than 100,000 madrassas.

But critics are blasting the move, saying it threatens to renew doubts about whether Pakistan can ever be trusted as a reliable partner in the global fight against terrorism.

If there is any institution that could elicit such a response, critics say, it's Darul Uloom Haqqania.

"The Taliban are killing our children, and our government is giving money to their sympathizers," said Shahi Syed, a Pakistani senator.

Although it was founded in 1947, the university gained prominence in the 1980s when both Pakistan and U.S. intelligence officials used it to recruit and nurture rebels who resisted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

During that time, both Mohammad Omar, the founder of the Taliban, and Jalaluddin Haqqani, leader of the Haqqani network, are believed to have studied there, according to past statements made by seminary officials. Asim Umar, leader of al-Qaeda's South Asia wing, is also believed to have been a former student.

After the former Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, the seminary maintained its ties to Taliban leaders who took control of Kabul in the mid-1990s. Later, after the United States helped oust the Taliban government from power in 2001, the seminary produced scores of insurgents who are still fighting Afghanistan's U.S.-backed government.

Tariq Afaq, a militancy expert from Peshawar, Pakistan, estimates that 80 percent of Haqqania seminary students joined or sympathize with the Taliban. Former Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike last month, is also reportedly a former student.

The leader of the seminary, Samiul Haq, isn't known to be as radical as some other Pakistani religious leaders. Haq served two terms in Pakistan's senate and has become an advocate for vaccinating Pakistani children against the polio virus.

But in interview with [Reuters two years ago](#), Haq embraced the title "father of the Taliban" and said his "students" should fight U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

“They are my students. In our tradition, a teacher is like a father, like a spiritual leader,” Haq said. “Afghans should be allowed to fight for their freedom.”

Last year, [Pakistan’s Dawn newspaper reported](#) that two suspects in the 2007 killing of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto had also attended the seminary. But school officials denied ever having any affiliation with the men.

The seminary, one of the world’s largest Islamic learning centers, focuses on teaching the hard-line Deobandi strain of Islam that advocates for Sharia law.

Over the years, many Deobandi institutions received financial support from Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Persian Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are both past donors to Darul Uloom Haqqania, [according to Pakistan’s Express Tribune newspaper](#).

It’s unclear why the seminary suddenly appears to be having financial troubles. But Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's government said it will allocate the \$3 million over two years to help the seminary meet its budget, and most of the money will be used to build dormitories.

National Pakistani leaders, including aides to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, stress the funding is a local decision. But some lawmakers say the grant upends Sharif’s recent pledge that “any enemy of Afghanistan is an enemy of Pakistan.”

“The provincial government needs to tell the people why such a big amount is to be given to one seminary,” said Sitara Ayaz, a Pakistani senator, who noted other, more moderate religions institutions are not receiving similar funding.

The grant comes at an especially strenuous time in Pakistan’s relationship with U.S. lawmakers and military leaders.

Despite an ongoing Pakistani military operation in the country’s northwestern tribal belt, U.S. officials have been criticizing Pakistan for not doing enough to eradicate Taliban safe havens within its borders.

Given the Pakistani army’s dominant role in the country’s affairs, many analysts think the army's general, Raheel Sharif, who is not related to the prime minister, could stop the grant if he chose to.

But analysts say that Pakistan’s military is increasingly frustrated with both the United States and Afghanistan, which may be causing it to become even more reluctant to crack down on the Taliban.

Earlier this year, Congress blocked U.S. subsidies for a \$699 million deal to sell Pakistan eight F-16 fighter jets.

Pakistani military leaders reportedly were not consulted before President Obama authorized the drone strike that killed Mansour.

There is also growing frustration in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad over Obama's support for India's domestic nuclear program. And last week, Pakistan and Afghan security forces clashed at a key border crossing.

"If Pakistan is now not interested in cooperating with the U.S., that is something that shouldn't be surprising," said Hasan Askari Rizvi, a Lahore-based military analyst.

But Muhammad Amir Rana, an Islamabad-based security expert, said he was befuddled by the grant.

"This act will alarm the international community, and their reaction won't be good," said Rana, noting that it seems the money will be dispersed without any conditions. "If they are trying to mainstream the seminary, then money alone won't serve the purpose."

The allocation of the money, however, shows the influence that religious conservatives still yield in Pakistani politics.

In nationwide elections, conservative Islamist parties often struggle to get 10 percent of the vote. But in local elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2014, former cricket star Imran Khan's Movement for Justice party failed to win an outright majority of provincial assembly seats. It now relies on support from Islamist parties to maintain a coalition government.

"This money has much more do with provincial politics, and power, than anything else," said Zahid Hussain, an Islamabad-based political analyst.

But Ghani, the information minister, insists the grant was approved strictly on "humanitarian grounds."

"If there are more such requests from seminaries, and they could be brought into the mainstream, we would take such steps," Ghani said.