

# Fighting Terrorism With Education

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**Problem:** In many undeveloped Muslim countries education is not widely available to all citizens. Many of the boys and young men in these countries get their education in small religious schools called madrasas that teach a strict fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law to their students. Militant Islamic extremists use these schools as a vehicle for recruiting potential terrorists.

**Solution:** The citizens in these countries have shown that they are open to new schools being built with funding and assistance provided by western nations. These schools encourage women to participate and teach a well rounded curriculum free of fundamentalist teachings. The resulting improvement in literacy and understanding of the outside world creates a more moderate point of view, and reduces poverty and overpopulation.

Every year hundreds of wealthy Westerners flock to the Himalayan Mountains in Asia hoping to conquer some of the World's most challenging peaks. Most will hire local villagers to guide them to the summit and to carry their gear along the way. These villagers do the lion's share of the work for what usually amounts to pennies.

In 1993 American climber Greg Mortenson decided to attempt to summit the notorious K2 in Pakistan, one of the World's highest and most dangerous peaks. While Mortenson did not make it to the summit he did learn a great deal about living conditions in this wild and remote region. Mortenson had become separated from his group on the descent and ended up stumbling down the mountain exhausted and disoriented, and without shelter, food or water. Fortunately, he managed to wander into a tiny mountain village where he was taken care of by the locals until he could regain his strength. As he recovered from his climb he was shocked to see the rampant poverty and high infant mortality rates (over 30%) common to villages in this area.

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When he realized that literacy had only been achieved by less than 3% of the inhabitants Mortenson saw how he could most effectively give back to the people who had been so kind to him in his hour of need. Mortenson felt that education was the key to lowering poverty, reducing infant mortality, and slowing birth rates. He began raising money to help build schools. One of his requirements for building a new school was that it had to allow women to attend. Mortenson realized that educating the women was the key to making progress on poverty, infant mortality, and high birth rates.

Mortenson was on to something. Studies have shown that in countries where women have received increased education there are consistent results that improve the quality of life in that

country. Poverty rates and infant mortality drop substantially as education increases. Economies grow and birthrates drop as more women enter the workforce. Mortonsen understood that poverty and ignorance are the motivating social factors that fuel religious extremism. If he could reduce ignorance and poverty through education; especially education for women, then he could reduce the incentive for the religious extremism that is used to recruit terrorists.

When Mortonsen first began raising money he did not get much of a response from the famous and wealthy people he attempted to contact. His best response came from American school children. A group of elementary kids in Wisconsin raised over \$600 in pennies to help support his cause. This got the attention of adults who began taking Greg's mission more seriously, and was the beginning of a program called Pennies for Peace. Today, Pennies for Peace educates American school children about life in other countries and shows them how the pennies they raise can help to make the world a better place for children in other countries. The money these children raise is sent directly to Pakistan and Afghanistan for the building of schools and athletic facilities.

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Today Greg Morton presides over the Central Asia Institute. The mission of the Central Asia Institute is: To promote and provide community-based education and literacy programs, especially for girls, in remote mountain regions of Central Asia. This year schools built by Greg Mortonsen and the CAI educated over 20,000 children in the 55 schools that have been built in the last 12 years. Nearly 50% of these students are girls. CAI makes sure that women are afforded access to this education by requiring that the enrollment of girls be increased by 10% each year. The curriculum at CAI schools is focused on math, science and languages. Students from CAI schools averaged 72% on exams to qualify for middle school last year. In comparison the national average in Pakistan is less than 45%. In addition to building schools CAI has also developed over 15 water projects and built four women's vocational centers.

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All too frequently in these regions the only source of aid and support for these villagers comes from Taliban militants or extremist groups funded by money from Saudi Arabia. These groups take full advantage of this dependency to suppress rights for women and herd young men and boys into the madrassas when they can be indoctrinated with extreme fundamentalist ideology, and later by recruited for terrorism. The education provided by the CAI schools offers an alternative to this path, and the opportunity to improve life in these villages without becoming beholden to warlords and religious extremists.

When Mortonsen first began his mission to provide education and assistance to the folks in remote Pakistan and Afghanistan he did not enjoy much support back at home. Even more daunting was the

threat posed by the local tribal chieftains and clergy. Several times Mortonsen nearly gave his life for his mission when fatwas were issued for his death by angry mullahs suspicious that he was a spy for the US government. Mortonsen once survived an armed kidnapping by escaping and hiding under a pile of animal carcasses as they were being transported out of town. Even in the face of danger Mortonsen persisted and continued building schools and relationships until his detractors were convinced of the value of his contributions.

Apparently, results speak loudly in these impoverished regions. Saeed Abbas Risvi, the senior Shiite spiritual leader in Pakistan, was so impressed by Mortonsen's work that he approached the Supreme Council of Ayatollahs in Iran and managed to obtain a very rare letter of recommendation for Mortonsen to help protect him from the local mullahs and clergy. As news of his success traveled home Mortonsen earned the respect of some prominent members of Congress who are now in support of the work of the Central Asia Institute.

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There are many lessons to be learned from the success of the Central Asia Institute and the respect Greg Mortonsen has earned from Muslim leaders. One of these is a lesson in economics. Mortonsen has shown that making an investment in reducing poverty and ignorance may be the most cost effective solution to terrorism. He contends that, "If we could have the \$1 million for the purchase of one Tomahawk cruise missile dropped on the Taliban converted to education assistance, we could strike a serious blow on terrorism." Another lesson is that educating women may be the most effective way to combat poverty and ignorance. To quote Mortonsen; "Girls education is a mighty sword in the war on terrorism." It makes you wonder if much of the money spent on the war on terror might have been better spent on educating women and reducing poverty and ignorance in the places where terrorists are recruited.

To learn more about the work of Greg Mortonsen and the Central Asia Institute visit their website at: [www.threecupsoftea.com](http://www.threecupsoftea.com)