

My Son's Teacher was an Irhabi (Terrorist)

By [Jacob Thomas](#)

2005/10/13

On Sunday, 2 October 2005, two days before the beginning of the Islamic month of Ramadan, the online Arabic daily, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, published an article with a very eye-catching title. In the original, the title consisted of three words. Translated into English, it required six words: "*My Son's Teacher was an Irhabi*," i.e. a terrorist.

The writer is a Saudi lady who was terribly shocked and disturbed by discovering that one of the men involved in a terrorist attack on a government building in the capital had actually been her son's teacher. She was outraged, and wrote a brief article. I would like to share it with the readers, and follow with some comments.

"Once, I wrote an article with the above title for the daily newspaper *"Al-Riyad."* Having gone through a horrible experience, these words should be regarded as my clarion call for all to hear. My blood almost froze on my face as I read the terrorist's name, and saw his photo."

"Let me explain. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Ministry of the Interior building, several newspapers published photos of those who had participated in the operation. My son, having glanced at the newspaper, pointed to the face of one of the terrorists and said in an agitated manner: **Mother, this man was my teacher!**"

"Two months prior to the attack, this same teacher stood just a short distance from my son's desk and talked to him. Actually, only one inch separated him from my son's mind and heart. Like all young students at the school, my son used to praise and love all his teachers. His little mind tended to receive and accept spontaneously his teachers' instruction. Unfortunately, not all teachers at the school were careful, or observed a proper attitude vis-à-vis their young and sensitive students. Some spouted out their ideological views. Their vision and outlook on life had been formed by the myths they imbibed, as they sat and watched for hours one television channel: *"Al-Jazeera."* After all, we all know that this television station broadcasts just one point of view, and quite often it is in the service of Irhab."

"I must add that I have become weary of going several times to the school principal to remind him of the duty of teachers to keep their personal opinions to themselves. They were not supposed to share them with their young students, most of them being only ten years old! Some teachers may admire Usama bin Laden for having forsaken the world and gone to live in caves. But they should voice such thoughts among their friends as they meet them at their favorite cafes. There should be no room for any such propaganda

at the school. Also, it is not the job of school teachers to issue *fatwas* that forbid their students from viewing certain television channels.”

“Yesterday, my son shared with me an incident that took place at his school. A teacher inquired from a student about his brother who had recently graduated from secondary school. The boy proudly informed him that his brother was very fortunate as he had received a government scholarship to study in America . The teacher responded angrily: “ America , may Allah guide him to any place but America !”

“I happen to know exactly where the teacher would have wanted this student to go for his university education; however, this is not the purpose for writing the column. My point is: *how are we to confront this Irhabi (terrorist) mentality, when we notice that all our efforts to spread a spirit of tolerance and an acceptance of the ‘Akhar’ (the Other) is being thwarted in the classrooms?*”

“Recently I learned that a book advocating a positive and tolerant attitude toward the ‘*Other*’ was pulled out of circulation. It was scheduled to be distributed among our teachers and educators! However, some voiced certain reservations about the contents of the book. So the project was dropped. I wonder what those reservations were! What was wrong with a book that advocated tolerance, and the need for a proper approach in our dialogue with the ‘*Akhar?*’ Or are we supposed rather to tolerate extremists and radicals? Why do we seem to be oblivious of the existence of ideological ticking bombs in our society? Should we not be shocked to learn that some of our teachers were on the wanted lists, and had actually participated in terrorist attacks? I am sure that most of us were aware that several of the men who planned their suicidal attacks, were not among the unemployed. Some were teachers in our schools; others have even served as imams in our mosques, or worked in our security agencies. In other words, these *Irhabis* were right there, all around us, in the very heart of our society, and busy influencing the minds of our youth.”

Thus far the words of this distraught mother. I have commented before that any translation from Arabic into a Western language loses some of the full meaning of the original text. Actually, the mother’s words were brimming with an intensity of feelings, and with powerful allusions to a very disturbing phenomenon, not only in Saudi Arabia , but all over the Islamic world. She was pointing to a shocking disconnect with reality that pervades the world of Islam today. Globalism is here to stay; our world has become more interdependent than ever. While many Muslims are aware of this fact, yet they persist to ignore it, and continue to hate and vilify the “*Akhar.*”

Only one week after reading this article, I woke up to the news of a massive earthquake that hit Pakistan and some of the surrounding areas. Reports indicate that Pakistan has endured its worst natural catastrophe since its birth in 1947. President Pervez Musharraf appealed for international aid. By noon , President Bush promised to help the stricken country. I mention this to underline the obvious fact that tolerance and the acceptance of the ‘*Other*’ as a fellow-human being is absolutely necessary in our world today. But radical Islamists never cease to hurl their insults at the Infidels; but how do they explain

the fact that when calamities strike Islamic lands, suddenly these same “Infidels” rush to help. The despised “*Others*” never reciprocate with insults or indifference. On the contrary, the common bonds of humanity transcend all inherited prejudices and insults; and so we watch people from all over the world, rush with help for the stricken Pakistanis.

Let me go back and make a few specific comments on the lady’s article.

The first thing that struck me about her words is the fact that in Saudi Arabia, as well as in most Arab countries where schools are government-run, the authorities seem to be incapable of enforcing the rule of law. When this mother went time and again to the principal with the plea that teachers should not be indoctrinating their young students, she got nowhere. Was the principal oblivious of the fact that a certain teacher at his school was spreading radical views with impunity? Why did he not take steps to warn him to cease and desist from his illicit activities?

Another revelation from the article was her charge that the notorious Al-Jazeera television station was being used as a vehicle for the spread of Islamic radicalism. I understand from some reports that this station is available via satellite, for Arab viewers in the United States

Furthermore, the incident of the teacher who became indignant upon hearing that a student was going to America for his studies was an alarming phenomenon. This radical teacher, who was blinded by his searing hatred of America, ignored the American role in the emergence of present-day Saudi Arabia. Was he really unaware that it was American petroleum engineers who discovered oil in the peninsula during the 1930s? Did he know what ARAMCO, stood for? This acronym, used both in Arabic and in English stands for the Arabian American Company. It was American ingenuity and resourcefulness that became a vehicle for the sudden riches that descended upon Saudi Arabia after WWII. This teacher must have never heard of the celebrations that took place in Lebanon, when the TAPLINE (Trans Arabian Pipeline) project was completed. This great engineering feat that brought crude oil from Eastern Arabia to the Lebanese coast on the Mediterranean just south of Sidon was planned by American engineers.

Another disturbing fact that was revealed in the lady’s article was the sudden withdrawal of a book that advocated tolerance in relations with non-Muslims? I have already written about the *National Dialogue Initiative Project* in Saudi Arabia that calls for a fresh outlook regarding non-Muslims. This “Initiative” was meant to involve various sections of Saudi society in helping them to re-define those regarded traditionally as Infidels. A new, down-to-earth word was being suggested: *Al-Akhar*, the *Other*. If that was the intention of some leaders in Saudi Arabia, what was then the reason to withdraw a book that championed this enlightened outlook?

The article referred to the existence of radical Imams occupying leadership in certain Saudi mosques. Are not all mosques under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs? It is true that the majorities of mosques are under the control of the government.

But some rich Saudis seeking to “earn” extra credit with Allah by doing good deeds build local masjids (mosques) and invite non-supervised Imams. Such independent mosques attract *Du’aat*, propagandists for radical Islam. These “houses of worship” become the breeding ground for recruiting *Irhabis*. We should never forget that the infamous Muhammad Atta, the leader of the 19 hijackers who attacked us on 9/11/2001 became a “born-again” Islamist while attending “*Al-Qods Mosque*” in Hamburg , Germany . It was there that he imbibed the ideology that gave birth to his dream of reaching Paradise instantly by killing untold numbers of Infidels.

Finally, the article of this brave mother was both helpful and at the same time, extremely disturbing. The fact that it was first published in *Al- Riyad* newspaper, and then was made available on the web site of *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, is heartening. Thousands of people in Saudia Arabia, and elsewhere read the article. It means that at least some Saudi women are not afraid to reveal their disgust with the behavior of the Islamists, and condemn them publicly.

On the other hand, the article revealed that things are out of control, and that *Irhabis* are able to attack, kill, and destroy in the very heart of the Islamic world. We rejoiced that a national initiative that aims at using a non-pejorative word to describe the non-Muslim is being suggested and discussed. But no sooner we read about this positive step being taken among Saudis, than we heard about a backward step. A book that was destined for use among teachers advocating a new vision of the non-Muslim had to be withdrawn. Someone in a position of power and authority caved in to the pressure from some ultras, and decided that the book should not be distributed.

The title of the article keeps ringing in my ears: “*Mudarris ibni Irahabi.*” *My son’s teacher is (or was) a Terrorist!* What a shocking, terrible, and horrific revelation!