

Islamic Schools and American Civic Culture

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Having grown up in northeastern Wisconsin, I am a product of K–12 and undergraduate public education in the heartland of America. In my youth, I mostly learned the rules of my Muslim faith from my family, and from weekend school at the mosque. But I gained the foundations of my appreciation for the sanctity of our Constitution and the Bill of Rights through the Wisconsin public education system. For example, I recall participating in the American Legion Constitution contest—an annual competition of Wisconsin high school students testing their ability to memorize the U.S. Constitution. Permeating my educational experience was appreciation for America’s rule of law, based in individual liberty and superior to all collectivist and authoritarian systems, from communism to fascism to theocracy. I was taught the value of criticizing authority and defending my ideas in the public arena.

Islamic schools operating on U.S. soil will have Koran memorization contests—an admirable practice—but do they also have contests on the U.S. Constitution? Do Islamic schools teach their students to question thoughtfully the authority of their imams or teachers? How do Islamic schools teach the ideals of the Enlightenment, as compared to those of Islamist theocratic governance? More important, do their civics classes teach primary allegiance to our Constitution over the Koran as the guiding document of our government?

These are questions that must be asked, now, because in the nearly ten years since the attacks by Muslim terrorists on 9/11, we have seen an

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exponential growth in homegrown radical Islam, or Islamism. Insufficiently recognized and acknowledged, this metastasis has produced its natural, deadly effects: jihad against American citizens on our own soil—most recently the attempt by Mohamed Osman Mohamud, a nineteen-year-old Somali-born U.S. citizen, to detonate what he believed was a van full of explosives, with the intention of blowing up thousands of people celebrating a Christmas tree lighting in Portland, Oregon.¹

Some analysts cite “the narrative” as the driving cause behind rampant radicalization, at home and abroad. The narrative exploits the virulently anti-American propaganda being spread across the world in Muslim communities, from Miami to Mumbai, from Detroit to Dubai.² That narrative drives a rapidly escalating fervor of discontent against the West in general and America in particular, which serves to radicalize Muslims who view us as their mortal enemies and the cause of all the maladies that afflict Muslims worldwide. With images of Abu Ghraib and other exaggerated embarrassments that twist the reality of our mission in Iraq and Afghanistan, Islamists garner recruits and begin the radicalization process—on foreign soil, and our own.³

Far deeper than the “narrative,” however, is the Islamists’ desire to indoctrinate Muslim youth with the belief that Western-style secular democracy is incompatible with Islam. The Islamists closely tie the notion of an “Islamic upbringing” with the aspiration to establish Islamic states, and implement *shariah*, or Islamic law, wherever Muslims live. Such ideas can be inculcated through Islamic schooling, and Islamic schooling is spreading in the United States.

Islamic Schools in America: Incubators of Freedom or Radicalism?

Most Westerners have never heard of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the Egypt-based radical Islamist network that has inspired and spawned almost

¹Jim Redden, “Police, FBI Say Bomb Plot Over,” *Portland Tribune*, November 27, 2010, http://portlandtribune.com/news/story.php?story_id=129089314174585500.

²See books and publications by the Quilliam Foundation, www.quilliamfoundation.org, and “Ex Extremist Fights Jihadist Ideology, 60 Minutes: Maajid Nawaz Explains How Home-Grown Jihadists Are Recruited,” CBS News, April 25, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/04/23/60minutes/main6425491.shtml>.

³See, for example, “Iraqi Recounts Abu Ghraib Abuse,” Al-Jazeera, July 23, 2009, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/07/20097239535145934.html>.

every militant Muslim group from Hamas to Al Qaeda.⁴ In fact, for the past half-century, the MB has been one of the primary organizers and financiers of Islamist groups (and front groups) in America. Unfortunately, Western Muslims have done little to stand up to the MB, in part due to their fear of violent personal, social, or public reprisals.⁵

The ultimate goal of the MB is two-fold. Its first objective is to ensure that all Muslim-majority nations are ruled by *shariah* law (theo-political Islamic jurisprudence), as practiced in such stringently authoritarian regimes as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iran, and in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Second, it seeks to spread Islam throughout the rest of the world, in large part by subverting other nations and undermining their ability to understand what is happening to them, let alone defend themselves—until it is too late.

The success of the MB and its ideology of political Islam is greatly dependent on its ability to indoctrinate Muslim children, in mosques and Islamic schools, with the view that Islam and *shariah* must reign supreme, and that all other systems of governance—especially the kind of liberal democracy arising from the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights—are to be disdained.

Lovers of liberty frequently lament our system of public education system in that so many students graduate without even a rudimentary understanding of the concept of political freedom, the principles of our founders, or of American history and civics in general. Islamic schools, however, present a different, more fundamental and pernicious set of problems. Obviously, we cannot know exactly what is going on in every classroom, but there are alarming indications that things are not as they should be in many Islamic-based schools in the United States.

One glaring example is provided by the growing number of charter schools created under the influence of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher and educator accused by officials in his native land of “working to overthrow

⁴See Ikhwanweb, The Muslim Brotherhood’s Official English Web Site, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/>.

⁵See Zeyno Baran, “O Brotherhood, What Art Thou?” *The Weekly Standard*, April 23, 2007, at http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&id=4864. See also, Zeyno Baran, ed., *The Other Muslims: Moderate and Secular* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and “The Muslim Brotherhood’s US Network,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 6, Hudson Institute, February 27, 2008, <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-muslim-brotherhoods-us-network>. Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2010). Khalil Al-Anani, “The Young Brotherhood in Search of a New Path,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 9, Hudson Institute, October 5, 2009, <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-young-brotherhood-in-search-of-a-new-path>. Gilles Kepel, “The Brotherhood in the Salafist Universe,” Hudson Institute, April 2, 2008, http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&id=5522.

secular government,” according to a security and defense think tank based in the United Kingdom.⁶ Although perhaps not directly inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, Gülen’s vision is similarly directed toward promoting Islamic government. He now lives in self-imposed exile in eastern Pennsylvania and is described as “the leader of a shadowy Islamist sect” by Rachel Sharon-Krespin in her exposé in the *Middle East Quarterly*.⁷

As reported in the *Deseret News*, Gülen declared in a 1999 sermon aired on Turkish television that in order to effect reform, “every method and path is acceptable (including) lying to people.” He said: “You must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers....You must wait for the time when you are complete and conditions are ripe, until we can shoulder the entire world and carry it.”⁸

The Gülen Movement, as Gülen and his followers are known, is the most powerful Islamic force in the world, according to Hakan Yavuz, author of *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* (Syracuse University Press, 2003). Gülen is reported to operate a worldwide network of schools, foundations, and businesses with a budget of around 25 billion dollars.⁹ The Gülen movement was recently reported by Stephen Schwartz, executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism in Washington, D.C. (and author of “The Terrorist War against Islam: Clarifying Academic Confusions” in this issue of *Academic Questions*), to be operating more than eighty-five primary and secondary charter schools in the United States, which are, as such, funded with public money.¹⁰ These schools are run by innocuously named companies such as “The Daisy Education Corporation.” According to an investigative report for the *Tucson Weekly*, a parent at the Sonoran Science Academy, a charter school in Tucson, expressed the concern of many other parents in stating that:

[The] Sonoran Academy seems constantly to be bringing Turkish educators into the United States, and subjecting students to substitute

⁶Elizabeth Stuart, “Islamic Links to Utah’s Beehive Academy Probed,” *Deseret News*, June 1, 2010, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700036619/Islamic-links-to-Utahs-Beehive-Academy-probed.html>.

⁷Rachel Sharon-Krespin, “Fethullah Gülen’s Grand Ambition: Turkey’s Islamist Danger,” *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2009): 55–66, at <http://www.meforum.org/2045/fethullah-Gülen-s-grand-ambition>.

⁸Stuart, “Islamic Links.”

⁹Guy Rodgers, “Fethullah Gülen: Infiltrating the U.S. Through Our Charter Schools,” Act! For America, <http://www.actforamerica.org/index.php/learn/email-archives/1069-fethulla-Gülen-infiltrating-us-through-our-charter-schools/>.

¹⁰Stephen Schwartz, “Islamist Gülen Schools Runs U.S. Charter Schools,” *American Thinker*, March 29, 2010, http://www.americanthinker.com/2010/03/islamist_guelen_movement_runs.html.

teachers while the teachers await work visas....She says several Sonoran Academy parents believe the school has a hidden agenda to promote Gülen's brand of [Islamist] Turkish nationalism, advance sympathy for that country's political goals such as winning acceptance into the European Union, and discourage official acknowledgment of Turkey's genocide against the Armenians during World War I.¹¹

Another school suspected of Gülen involvement, the Beehive Science and Technology Academy in Salt Lake City, Utah, also recruited Turkish men as teachers, many without the requisite qualifications. In addition, "Female teachers reported being told to cover their hair and reminded that 'a woman's place is home raising her children.'"¹² Complaints against the school asserted that while "Beehive advertises itself as a public charter school offering college-bound seventh through 12th graders a foundation in math and science...the school has another mission: to advance and promote certain Islamic beliefs."¹³ (Beehive's charter has been revoked due to financial problems, but the decision is being repealed.)

Another glaring example of Islamists using the charter school system to push through the separatist Islamist culture and mindset is the Tarek Ibn Zayed Academy (TIZA) in Minneapolis. Katherine Kersten, a columnist for the *Star Tribune (Minneapolis)*, has done extensive reporting on how far TIZA crossed the line between church and state.¹⁴ Kevin Featherly of *Minnesota Monthly* noted the carpeted prayer space in the middle of the building and "the vaguely religious-sounding language used in the school. At one point, a conversation with [Principal Amad] Zaman is interrupted by the intercom: 'Sister Zamia, please call the office. Sister Zamia, 2-2-1.' '[Muslims] refer to everyone as a 'brother' or a 'sister,' he explains. 'We are all children of Adam.'"¹⁵

¹¹Tim Vanderpool, "Hidden Agenda? Parents Raise Concerns That a Tucson Charter School Has Ties to a Turkish Nationalist Movement," *Tucson Weekly*, December 31, 2009, <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/hidden-agenda/content?oid=1694764>.

¹²Stuart, "Islamic Links."

¹³Schwartz, "Islamist Gülen Schools."

¹⁴Katherine Kersten, "March 9: Are Taxpayers Footing Bill for Islamic School in Minnesota?" *Star Tribune (Minneapolis)*, March 9, 2008, <http://www.startribune.com/featuredColumns/16404541.html>. Also see "Blurring the Line between Mosque and State: Public Education in the Twin Cities," Kersten's article in this issue of *Academic Questions*.

¹⁵Kevin Featherly, "Brothers' Keeper," *Minnesota Monthly* (March 2007), <http://www.minnesotamonthly.com/media/Minnesota-Monthly/March-2007/Brothers-Keeper/>.

Digging Deeper

As disturbing as are these reports about charter schools, the potential for Islamist indoctrination on American soil is exaggerated manifold when the schools are private. Certainly, the First Amendment protects the rights of citizens to establish private schools. But it is our responsibility to expose when the youth attending those schools are being indoctrinated in an ideology that is not only incompatible, but at war with American principles of liberty and equality.

In 2008, I personally reviewed texts of Islamic law that an imam uses to teach Muslim children at an Islamic private school in Arizona. In their course on Islamic family law, for example, the adolescents were taught that “marriages for convenience” (*misyar*) are permitted for men who travel frequently, and are away from their “primary” spouses for prolonged periods of time. He also taught them that while marriage of Muslim men to Jewish or Christian women is permitted in the Koran, marriage to Jewish women is currently forbidden because “all Muslims are in a state of war with Jews” due to the situation in Israel.¹⁶

These ideas clearly arise from the radical Wahhabi stream of Islamic thought and demonstrate a deep detachment from Western principles. These private schools also do not teach any healthy critique of Islamic history, but rather portray that history, from 610 C.E. to the fourteenth century onward, in utopian terms, and depict development in the West as inferior.

There are many further disturbing examples of what young people can be exposed to in Islamic schools. In 2003 the *New York Daily News* pointed out that books used in the city’s Muslim schools “are rife with inaccuracies, sweeping condemnations of Jews and Christians, and triumphalist declarations of Islam’s supremacy.”¹⁷ The Muslim Community School in Potomac, Maryland, instills open alienation against America. Miriam, a seventh grader at the school, told a *Washington Post* reporter in 2001, “Being American is

¹⁶Quoted Arabic *shariah* texts are authored by Imam Omar Shahin *Jurisprudence of Muslim Family in Western Society*, trans. American Islamic Forum for Democracy (South Bend, IN: Cloverdale Books, 2007). Shahin is the head of the North American Imams’ Federation (NAIF) and has also been head of the Phoenix Imams’ Council.

¹⁷Larry Cohler-Esses, “Sowing the Seeds of Hatred: Islamic Textbooks Scapegoat Jews, Christians,” *New York Daily News*, March 30, 2003, http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/2003/03/30/2003-03-30_sowing_the_seeds_of_hatred.html.

just being born in this country.” Ibrahim, an eighth-grader, said, “Being an American means nothing to me.”¹⁸

In a press release dated October 19, 2007, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) cited a number of concerns about the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA) in Northern Virginia. The ISA, which is funded by the Saudi embassy, has been exposed as particularly extreme. The USCIRF specifically brought attention to the hatred of, and urgings toward violence against other faiths expressed in some of the textbooks used at the ISA. Many other American Islamic schools come out of the same Islamist ideological fold, with admittedly varying levels of Islamist commitment, but employing sources for curricula with similar origins. (Of particular note: Ahmed Omar Abu Ali, the ISA valedictorian for 2004, was indicted for plotting to assassinate President Bush.) The USCIRF press release stated, “Several studies, including by Saudi experts themselves, have pointed to serious concerns that these texts encourage violence toward others, and misguide the pupils into believing that in order to safeguard their own religion, they must violently repress and even physically eliminate the ‘other.’”¹⁹ These Muslim students are thus deliberately separated from core American constitutional values, and Western culture in general, and are encouraged instead in a spirit of Islamic separatism.

There are somewhere between three and four million Muslims in the United States (a little over 1 percent of the population), and approximately two hundred Muslim private schools and five hundred Islamic Sunday schools. With almost two thousand mosques in the United States, however, one may also assume that the vast majority run some kind of program for youth. Some reports show that not more than 3 percent of Muslim children obtain any formal Islamic schooling outside of their home.²⁰ But this only increases the determination of Muslim educators to influence the public school system as much as possible. In addition, while the total numbers seem small, studies show a significant increase in the number of Muslim schools—from fifty in 1987 to 240 in 2009—according to the Islamic Schools League

¹⁸Marc Fisher, “Muslim Students Weigh Questions of Allegiance,” *Washington Post*, October 16, 2001, B01, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A63884-2001Oct15?language=printer>.

¹⁹United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, release, October 19, 2007, http://www.uscirf.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=88&Itemid=47.

²⁰“Mapping Muslim Assimilation: Islam’s Growing Social Infrastructure,” Religionlink, posted March 26, 2009, http://www.religionlink.com/tip_090326.php. Hussam S. Timani, “Islamic Schools in America: Islam’s Vehicle to the Future?” *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Roundtable*, September 22, 2006, <http://www.forumonpublicpolicy.com/archive06/timani.pdf>.

of America, as reported in “Mapping Muslim Assimilation” on Religion-link.²¹ These numbers are amplified by the fact that there is relatively no counter-Islamist movement within Muslim communities, so Islamist education proceeds unopposed.

A very small portion of Islamists are committed to violent militancy. The deeper problem is that those inculcated with Islamic separatism and supremacy, who are driven by a belief that the “Islamic state” is superior to any other form of governance on earth, will always remain apologists for the cause of the militants, whether they believe in the means or not.

All Americans who wish to should certainly be free to establish private religious schools, but none of these schools should be shielded from legitimate inquiry, or insulated from scrutiny in the public square. And the fact is that an alarming number of those behind private Muslim schools come out of the global movement of political Islam—and more specifically, the Muslim Brotherhood. As Hussam S. Timani notes,

Islamic organizations and Muslim educators have capitalized on the ills of public schools to put pressure on Muslims to build Islamic schools where re-Islamizing Muslim children would be the goal. But in the process, many of these children may end up alienated and isolated from the rest of the society, and in some cases exposed to anti-American, anti-secular and anti-Western propaganda.²²

This is not about limiting the rights of Islamic private schools or violating the freedom of religion. It is about the impact upon our national security interests of Islamist schools within our borders that radicalize young Muslims into becoming full-bore Islamists, whether political or militant. Practicing Muslims must be able to separate mosque and state, and lift up the preeminence of our Constitutional freedoms over Islamic governance. It is only through Islamic schools being exposed to the radiant sunlight of accountability that we will begin to get a true grasp of the extent to which Islamist radicalization is occurring in America—something I fear is far more widespread than most of us can imagine.

²¹“Mapping Muslim Assimilation.”

²²Timani, “Islamic Schools in America.”