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## Does Private Islamic Schooling Promote Terrorism? An Analysis of the Educational Background of Successful American Homegrown Terrorists

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College of Education & Health Professions  
*Education Reform*

## **WORKING PAPER SERIES**

# **Does Private Islamic Schooling Promote Terrorism? An Analysis of the Educational Background of Successful American Homegrown Terrorists**

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## **Does Private Islamic Schooling Promote Terrorism? An Analysis of the Educational Background of Successful American Homegrown Terrorists**

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### **Abstract:**

Some commentators argue that private religious schools are less likely to inculcate the attributes of good citizenship than traditional public schools (Gutmann, 1999), specifically proposing that private Islamic schools are relatively more likely to produce individuals sympathetic to terrorism (Stotsky, 2011). This study offers a preliminary examination of the question by studying the educational backgrounds of Western educated terrorists. While data are limited, in accord with prior work (Bergen & Pandey, 2005) findings indicate the vast majority of both Islamic and reactionary terrorists attended traditional public schools and had no religious education; hence findings suggest that early religious training and identification may actually encourage prosocial behavior.

**Keywords:** terrorism, public schools, private schools, school choice, Islam, madrasa, Muslim, jihadist, right wing, homegrown terrorists.

*With regards to three dimensions (reflection, skills, and attitudes) pupils at Islamic schools score considerably higher than pupils at comparable schools, and still higher than pupils at the average school. Only with regard to knowledge competence do pupils at Islamic schools score nearly the same as pupils at comparable schools, but significantly lower than pupils at the average school. These findings directly challenge the assumption that pupils at Islamic schools are less likely to cultivate the relevant civic virtues for Dutch society at large.* Jaap Dronkers, 2016, pp. 14-15.

The late, eminent sociologist Jaap Dronkers possessed an impressive set of academic skills and virtues (Wolf, 2016). He delved, courageously, into controversial topics with an open mind and an incisive set of analytic tools. The fruits of his scholarship included his pioneering study of the civic skills and attitudes of students in private Islamic schools in The Netherlands, published just before his untimely death. Contrary to popular belief, Dronkers concluded, Dutch Islamic schools appeared to be doing a good job of preparing students to be law-abiding, democratic citizens (Dronkers, 2016). In this article, we examine whether Dronkers' findings regarding Dutch private schools and civic values appear to apply to the U.S. context and the most un-civic of behaviors: terrorism.

Despite the considerable media and law enforcement attention it draws, terrorism in the West is rare, and typically conducted by individuals or small groups, limiting empirical analyses (Biglan, 2015; Berman et al., 2015).<sup>1</sup> The extant empirical work on terrorism questions conventional wisdom about the phenomena. Pape's profiles of modern suicide bombers as of 2003 indicate that religion was a primary motivation in only 5% of cases. Rather "suicide

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Charles Leslie Glenn, Jr., of Boston University and Robert Maranto and Dirk C. van Raemdonck of the University of Arkansas for comments on earlier drafts. All remaining flaws are ours. Corresponding author is M. Danish Shakeel, [mdshakee@uark.edu](mailto:mdshakee@uark.edu).

terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than the product of Islamic fundamentalism” (Pape, 2005, p. 237). Terrorism has since evolved, with an incremental rise of Western born and raised individuals joining foreign battlefields or attempting to commit acts of terror in their homelands. Case studies employ political environment and socioeconomic variables to explain these individual decisions to participate in acts of terror. Possible causes of contemporary terrorism include religious indoctrination (Hindery, 2003; Schbley, 2003) and social and psychological alienation (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015; Stern, 2016). While studies try to examine potential causal variables that may explain radicalization, the individual, social and political variables involved are endogenous to other key variables such as religion and culture.

Lyons-Padilla et al. (2015) finds that cultural homelessness and attendant alienation among American Muslim immigrants is associated with increased support for fundamentalist groups and extremist causes. Bhatt and Silber (2007) proposes four phases of radicalization for the Western jihadist terrorist: 1) pre-radicalization, 2) self-identification, 3) indoctrination and 4) jihadization. Religious education may play a role in these phases of radicalization. Often, private Islamic schools are accused of producing individuals who commit acts of terror (Stern, 2000), but Bergen & Pandey (2005) point out that Western jihadists largely do not attend Islamic schools. They note, “while madrassas may breed fundamentalists who have learned to recite the Koran in Arabic by rote, such schools do not teach the technical or linguistic skills necessary to be an effective terrorist.” (Bergen & Pandey, 2005, p. A23) Out of the 75 profiles of terrorists who attacked Western targets, only nine had attended *madrassas*. Their study did not parse out the data between homegrown vs. foreign terrorists and by schooling type, probably due to small sample size.

Few Western terrorists majored in religion during their religious studies (Gambetta, & Hertog, 2016). Classic work by Hoffer (1951) shows how radicals differ from the rest of society. Since many commentators see religious schooling as a form of indoctrination (Dawkins, 2006; Harris, 2011; Americans United, 2011), it is important to examine possible relationships between religious schooling and terrorism.

The purpose of this study is to offer a preliminary exploration of whether religious schooling in general and Islamic schooling in particular is associated with participation in terrorism. American government and international aid agencies have funded programs to strengthen the educational effectiveness of public schools, but not religious schools, in majority-Muslim nations since September 11, 2001. Efforts to reduce terrorism by replacing religious schools with public schools may be counter-productive. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies in the United States and Europe indicate that private school choice interventions tend to produce positive outcomes for civic values (Wolf, 2007; Forster, 2016), or at least do no harm in that area (Dronkers, 2004; Carlson, Chingos & Campbell, 2017). Thus, carefully designed school choice interventions may decrease terrorism by reducing the numbers of young recruits who attempt to commit violent acts.

To explore the possibility that religious schooling might not be causing, and in fact might be hindering, terrorism, this article analyzes the schooling of native born Americans who succeeded in committing an act of terror inside the United States. We first outline the role of quality instruction grounded in an authentic understanding of Islamic tradition, culture, and values in discouraging terrorism, as well as the role of independent religious schools in delivering such instruction. The paper argues that decentralized and market based schooling better facilitates tolerance in comparison to centralized and government controlled schooling

(Berner, 2017; Coulson, 1999; Friedman, 2002; Glenn, De Groof, & Candal, 2012). We suggest that religious extremism and recently Islamic extremism is a byproduct of the lack of access to quality religious education, government hindrance of school choice and the lack of pluralism in public schooling and not necessarily caused by religious schooling. We use the coding of historical cases and summary statistics to support our claims. This preliminary analysis suggests that school choice interventions may, over the long term, reduce the incidence of terrorism in Western societies.

### **Contextual history and theory of Islamic schooling and organization**

Five framing considerations are vital to our exploratory study. First, Islam has a long and storied educational tradition that mainly has been privately operated and decentralized. Second, the major branches of Islam, Sunni and Shia, are distinct in ways that inform our consideration of private school choice and terrorism. Third, traditionalism and fundamentalism is a second distinction within Islam that is largely independent of the Sunni-Shia divide. Fourth, a lack of exposure to high-quality religious instruction appears to be contributing to the modern terrorist activity of some Muslims. Fifth, high-quality Islamic religious instruction in the West is likely to be fostered by a system of private Islamic schools financially supported and partially overseen by government.

#### *Islamic schooling tradition*

Up to the eleventh century, Islamic schooling was primarily self-funded and philanthropic. Schooling in mosques and in the *madrasas* took place free of government intervention. Egger (2004, p. 220) notes “[t]he madrasa never displaced the mosque as an educational institution. In fact, Muslims were never precise in distinguishing between the two, because education and worship took place in both.” This period is often remembered as the

golden age of Islam due to its high scholarly accomplishment and education attainment. Increased state intervention in schooling starting in the eleventh century occurred contemporaneously with a decline in Islamic scholarship and reduced tolerance of minorities, perhaps reflecting regime goals superseding religious goals. Decentralization and a market orientation were the key attributes of Islamic schooling up to that time (Coulson, 1999; Durrant, 1950, p. 94, 304).

### *The Sunni-Shia distinction*

Religious tradition is often complicated. Much of Sunni Islam is decentralized whereas Shia Islam is essentially centralized. This distinction has important implications. The violent extremists of Sunni Islam become self-empowered and interpret Islam in ways that justify their values and actions (Gambetta, & Hertog, 2016). Sunni extremists practice violence horizontally while Shia extremists do so vertically, meaning that the former harm fellow religious comrades and declare them as apostates while the latter target ‘perceived opponents.’ By every count Al-Qaeda, Taliban, ISIS and other Sunni terrorist organizations have killed far more Sunni Muslims than other groups have done. On the other hand, Shia Militias seldom attack their co-religionists, largely because Shia central authorities (*Ayatollahs*) must authorize such violent acts.

### *Islamic traditionalism versus fundamentalism*

The divide between Islamic traditionalism and fundamentalism is central to the schooling and terrorism story. Traditionalism involves following the four jurisprudential schools of thought in Sunni Islam of *Hanafi*, *Shafi’i*, *Hanbali* and *Maliki*. Fundamentalism rejects these established theological practices and often goes against the theological consensus of the traditionalist interpretations, called the *ijma*. Traditionalists are less likely than fundamentalists to get involved



in terrorism as traditionalists are influenced by historic institutions, scholarly consensus and a variation in interpretation of religious texts, all of which possess market attributes.

Traditionalists view family and civic values as highly salient, while these commitments tend to be weaker for fundamentalists. Literal interpretation of the text of *The Quran* is central to the fundamentalist doctrines of *Salafism* and *Wahhabism* (Hill, Knitter, & Madges, 1997). Fundamentalism lacks mass appeal, but in societies where socio-economic and political vacuums exist, fundamentalism has gained legitimacy. Almost all major Sunni terrorist organizations identify their ideology as fundamentalist (*Salafism* or *Wahhabism*). In the theological sense, Sunni fundamentalism confronts the theological consensus of traditionalist Muslim scholars and jurists. The majority of Islamic fundamentalists do not practice violence yet the correlation between fundamentalism and violence is strong. We now focus on the possibility that quality Islamic instruction could moderate the trail to terror for Sunni fundamentalists that form the majority.

*Quality instruction grounded in an authentic understanding of Islamic tradition, culture, and values*

Growing numbers of new converts to Islam have suddenly joined jihad. Ten to 25 percent of terrorists are Western converts to Islam, including approximately 30 percent of American jihadists, a remarkably high percentage given their very small numbers (Roy, 2008; *New America*, 2017). While most life-long Muslims have received a substantial amount of religious instruction in their mosques and schools, converts to Islam lack depth to their Islamic training due to a general lack of exposure to quality Islamic instruction.

This article defines quality Islamic instruction as grounded in an authentic understanding of Islamic tradition, culture, and values. High quality instruction, regardless of topic, promotes cognitive outcomes like educational achievement and attainment and also non-cognitive

outcomes like grit and perseverance. For example, Dutch Islamic schools outperform comparison schools in improving student non-cognitive skills on three dimensions: reflections, skills, and civic attitudes and have a positive effect on student cognitive outcomes after controlling for student socio-economic background (Dronkers, 2016).

A lack of quality religious instruction grounded in an authentic understanding of Islamic tradition, culture, and values appears to contribute to terrorist activity. Most Western terror recruiters and the individuals who commit terror are less likely to know classical Arabic or be trained in traditional Islamic sciences<sup>2</sup> and thus lack the authority to issue a *fatwa*<sup>3</sup> (Kareem, 2014; Oakford, 2014). In lieu of quality Islamic instruction, the typical Islamic consumer may not be able to distinguish between the opportunity cost of choosing the religious signal from a traditionalist who opposes terrorism over that of a fundamentalist who condones or encourages it.

Many Muslim youth in the West lack a religious identity, as they neither attend mosque nor vigorously nurture a strong religious identity (Haddad & Lummis, 1987; Smith, 2000). Qualitative work in Islamic schools shows that children draw upon Islamic education for their identity and to give their life meaning (Driessen, & Valkenberg, 2000; Hussain, & Read, 2015; Mohme, 2017; Smith, 2000; Zine, 2006). Lack of access to quality & overtly religious schooling is thus not a boon but a bane for promoting civic values (Berner, 2017). The traditional public schools are often large, bureaucratic, and lack religious and other values. Hence, they leave

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional Islamic sciences include Islamic jurisprudence and its methodology primarily based on the Quran and the traditions of the prophet of Islam. Islamic sciences differ from western sciences as the former are laid around revealed Islamic texts and spirituality. Worship forms the core of the former while for the latter acquiring material knowledge is the main motivation.

<sup>3</sup> Literal meaning is Islamic opinion (it takes the form of a verdict when issued by a jurist). In Western democracies, a *fatwa* is often a non-binding Islamic verdict issued by an influential religious authority.

young people hungry for meaning (Berner, 2017; Chubb, & Moe, 1990; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985).

Western Islam seeks to be in accord with modernity. Almost all Western mosques welcome Muslims of both genders. The challenge for Islam, however, is that new converts to the faith and the current generation of Muslims coming of age in the West often lack access to quality instruction to communicate the theological depth, diversity, traditions, and values of Islam. The social and purposive needs of Muslims, especially if they are young or converts to the religion, may be better addressed through private schools of choice, as market oriented organizations are better at dispensing incentives to individuals to prompt them to contribute activity to collective enterprises (Clark and Wilson, 1961). Under school choice systems, consumers are able to maximize their religious, spiritual and cultural utility by their choice of a school for their child. Such programs operate under the purview of the legal and democratic process (Wolf & Macedo, 2004; Glenn, De Groof, & Candal, 2012; Mohme, 2017).

#### *Role of independent religious schools*

Limited local access to quality religious instruction creates a bad market for the potential Islamic consumer. The problem concerning religious extremism and Islam, we contend, can be thought of as an example of market failure. The market for Islamic religious instruction in most parts of the world arguably is suffering from a lack of four key market components: (1) quality options, (2) variation in theological instruction, (3) operational autonomy from the state, and (4) competition among religious institutions based on observable outcomes. Increases in the delivery of education specifically through government schooling reduces the variance in Islamic theological instruction by reducing the size of the market for religious schools. State intervention in religious institutions also gives rise to special interest groups, which, if fundamentalist,

become a source for the government to stay in power. Consequently, fundamentalism gains influence in the absence of local quality options, as we have seen recently in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Religious education is handled, broadly, in three different ways across countries (Wolf & Macedo, 2004; Glenn, De Groof & Candal, 2012). In most nation-states, religious schools operate entirely in the private sector, with no subsidies and little involvement from government. Some countries, from the Middle East to Great Britain, provide faith based religious instruction in government-run public schools. For political reasons such as regime maintenance, these governments influence the instruction in religious schools. Finally, many Western countries permit private religious schools to receive government subsidies to support the education of students that choose to attend such schools (Dronkers & Robert, 2008). Even though the government regulation of religious schools under private school choice systems ranges from minimal to only moderate at most (Glenn, De Groof, & Candal, 2012), a substantial amount of research shows that private school choice contributes to civic values and tolerance, and no evidence indicates that civic attitudes and social cohesion degrades due to school choice (Greene, 1998; Dronkers, 2004; Wolf, 2008; Shafiq & Myers, 2014; Carlson, Chingos, & Campbell, 2017).

Religious schools might be more apt to promote civic values as they cater to the spiritual development of the soul and encourage stronger family ties. Wolf (2008, p. 487) says “[t]his seems to be the case particularly among ethnic minorities (such as Latinos) in places with great ethnic diversity (such as New York City and Texas), and when Catholic schools are the schools of choice.” The overlap of education and religion is not new to the Western democracies and the local churches played a role in the original American public schools. Ironically, while America

denies the role of religion in its public schools, many European democracies have embraced school choice that includes state-funded religious schools (Berner, 2017; Maranto & van Raemdonck, 2015).

As private schools, we contend that religious schools are best accountable to consumers in the form of parents and not to the government. Chubb and Moe (1990) develop the likely superiority of consumer rather than state driven schooling. They argue that institutional reform is the key to better schools and an indirect control of the schools through markets and parental choice is the best hope for educational effectiveness.

Numerous studies done on private schools have established that religious schooling contributes to civic values and practices much more strongly than public schooling (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016; Bettinger & Slonim, 2006; Mills & Wolf, 2016). Dronkers (2016) shows that Dutch Islamic schools not only have a positive value added for student achievement after controlling for socio-economic background, but also the schools do well on non-cognitive measures. Merry and Driessen (2016) report that in 2002, the Dutch Education Inspectorate concluded that 90% of the Islamic schools were aiding the process of integration of Muslims in Dutch society. Abernathy (2005) notes that increased competition due to school choice affected the voting behavior for the state of New Jersey. Basford and Traeger (2014) have shown Somali students adapted to civic values and expressed a greater acceptance of American society in the ethnocentric charter schools in Minneapolis, consistent with similar findings for Somalis in the private school choice environment of Sweden (Mohme, 2017). Catholic schooling in the U.S. has contributed to successful integration in society (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Catholic schools enroll growing number of non-Catholic and minority students (McDonald, 2000) and produce equal or better civic outcomes than traditional public schools (Wolf, 2007; Berner, 2017). The

relatively new Islamic schools in the U.S. are likely to contribute towards the common good in a similar fashion to the relatively older Catholic schools. Thus, a deep grounding in one's faith and religious community through Islamic schooling can in fact facilitate successful assimilation within a largely secular society. We argue this holds for Islamic schools in the cultural West.

In contrast, state control or state influence in religious schools has a history of promoting intolerance when compared to decentralized and privately administered religious schools. There are far fewer fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields from India, which is home to the third-largest population of Muslims,<sup>4</sup> than from other Muslim and Western countries. Concerning the ongoing wars in Iraq and Syria, calculations<sup>5</sup> for number of foreign fighters per million people by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence do not list India. This is not to say that few Indian Muslims have not gone overseas to join the terrorist organizations, but their representation is least after taking the Indian Muslim population's size and India's history of religious conflicts in account. India's religious schools are largely free of government control and the Islamic religious institutions (*madrasas*<sup>6</sup>) in India have strongly protested any government attempt to bring the religious institutions under its control.

Conditions differ where the state regulates religious schools to promote particular religious schooling for regime support. There could be objections to this hypothesis that the geopolitics of the countries are different, however, none other than Al-Qaeda expressed frustration with this by releasing a video entitled 'Why is there no storm in your river?' (Ahmad, 2013). Al-Qaeda's frustration with Indian Muslims has continued to grow till today.<sup>7</sup> The Syrian and Iraqi

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<sup>4</sup> Hackett (2015) says that by 2050, Indian will have world's largest population of Muslims.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/a/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-is-isis-isil-infographic/26584940.html>

<sup>6</sup> Islamic schools, mostly prevalent in parts of Asia and Africa.

<sup>7</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/zakir-musa-slams-indian-muslims-for-not-joining-jihad-calls-them-worlds-most-shameless/articleshow/59010014.cms>

battlefield has more fighters from Western nations both in numbers and in proportion to their Muslim population than from many Muslim majority nations. Weaver (2015) says “More British Muslims have joined Islamist militant groups than serve in the country’s armed forces.”

Sociology should address why Indian Muslims, who arguably have genuine grievances, join foreign battlefields in far lower proportions than Pakistani, Saudi, and Western raised individuals. A potential explanation is the existence of state-independent *madrasas* in India, which provide the Muslims with stakes in the system and thus reduce radicalization and terrorism.

In summary, observers may be incorrect in ascribing the trail to terror to Islamic religious schools. The assumption that public schools promote tolerance and private religious schools promote intolerance should be empirically tested. An important arena in which to test this claim is regarding the most intolerant of acts: terrorism in the cultural West. Islamic schools operating independently in choice-based educational markets need to please parents, who, after all, do not want their children to become terrorists. State support for authentic Islamic religious schools in the West could provide the instruction for young Muslims truer to the Muslim faith and less critical of the West because it would be transparent and subject to public scrutiny. O’Neill (2010, p. 68) notes that a majority of Islamic schools in the U.S. are governed independently of local mosques. Independent religious schools, supported by the state, could be a highly effective anti-terrorism vehicle in the cultural West. We think that the evidence from terrorist activities to date provide empirical support for our claim.

## **Data**

This section describes the data sources for testing if religious and specifically Islamic schooling is associated with successful cases of homegrown terror or not. Before beginning the

project, we contacted major experts in the area to get their views on the question of private schooling and western terrorists. The views by Robert Pape at the University of Chicago, Thomas Hegghammer at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, Diego Gambetta at European University Institute, Joshua Freilich at The City University of New York and Brent Smith at the University of Arkansas were constructive. The New America Foundation provided the complete list of fatal jihadist and right wing attacks since 9/11. Databases like *The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism* (START) at the University of Maryland were also searched to see if they collected information on the educational background of terrorists. Freilich et al. (2014) provided useful data which was crosschecked with the other sources. Mueller (2013) included individual case studies which helped us trace the history of western terrorists. Internet searches were used to fill some data gaps. We combined all of this information into a single database of the educational and backgrounds of all western terrorists since 9/11. To the best of our knowledge, our database is the first to codify information on all levels and types of schooling of western terrorists. We then used the database to test the claim that private religious schooling promotes terrorist activity.

### **Research Design**

The study is based on collecting the high school profile of individuals raised in the West who successfully committed acts of terror on the western soil. The article does not delve into questions of foreign and domestic politics or religion and ideology since they have been studied elsewhere, as described in the framing sections above. This study focuses on the single vital question of the association between private education and extreme intolerance in the form of terrorism.



Although our analysis is confined to acts of terror in the U.S., we discuss some European terror events to explore the external validity of our findings. We focus our research on the U.S. because:

- 1) It does not share a border with countries that directly suffer terror or insurgency, so terrorist infiltration is of little concern (Laqueur, 2016).
- 2) It does not have a territorial dispute that is tied to acts of terror.
- 3) It is not known to have inflicted state sponsored violence on citizens in the post-Soviet era.<sup>8</sup>
- 4) It is economically prosperous and defends many individual liberties, so individuals born and raised in the U.S. have few obvious motivations to commit acts of terrorism.

Indeed, Francis Fukuyama (1992), in *The End of History and the Last Man*, claimed there existed a consensus that the West had discovered the formula for societal success. All countries, according to Fukuyama, would soon evolve toward the model of capitalist democracy common in North American, Europe, the much of Asia. Until quite recently, with the notable exception of the IRA and Basque separatists in Spain, domestic terrorism was almost non-existent in the west.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior research has examined systematically the educational background of Western born terrorists. As a preliminary analysis, we focus only on the high school level of education, recording attendance at public or private schools. Data for schooling of all the terrorists at all levels from K-12 is not available. A lack of control variables measuring non-schooling factors that could influence terrorist activity means that our analysis is merely exploratory and not causal. Although even a single act of terror is a regrettable horror,

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<sup>8</sup> We have thus excluded South Asia, China, Russia, Middle East, South East Asia and Northern Africa and other regions.

from a statistical sense, the sample of people who have committed terrorist acts in the U.S. since 9/11 is small. Future associations between private schooling and terrorist activity might be different should additional acts take place that diverge from the pattern we describe here.

The terrorists analyzed in this paper are limited to those born and raised in the U.S., with right-wing affiliations, who actually managed to commit an act of terror. We limit our study to right-wing terrorists because Jihadist ideology is a politically conservative form of extremism (Lee, 2011). For example, Ismaaiyl Brinsley<sup>9</sup> may have been inspired by Black Lives Matter but we exclude his case because BLM does not advocate violence and is not politically conservative. Similarly John Allen Muhammad, the “Beltway sniper”, was a U.S.-born Muslim who spread terror but his purpose was to kill his ex-wife in order to gain custody of their children. The terrorism he engaged in was instrumental to making his wife’s murder look like a terrorist act, so we exclude him. Naveed Afzal Haq clearly committed an act of terror but his prior actions include arrest for public exposure and other behaviors that suggest mental illness, and not right-wing ideology, motivated him to commit terror. Finally, we exclude cases such as Alton Nolen in Oklahoma where the possible terrorist was accused but never legally charged with a terror-linked crime.<sup>10</sup> One takeaway from the data below is that there really are not very many actual successful U.S. born and raised ideologically motivated Muslim terrorists, certainly not compared to Europe. But are private Islamic schools associated with the few terrorists who have emerged from the American Muslim community over the past 16 years? That is our question here.

Consistent with the principles of Bayesian inference (Edwards, Lindman & Savage, 1963), we first determine the percentage of Muslims in the U.S. who attend private high schools

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<sup>9</sup> Information available at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtid=201412200060>

<sup>10</sup> Information available at <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/extremists/terror-plot.html?id=1793>

to find an empirical basis for an increased likelihood of a U.S. Muslim committing terrorism due to attending private Islamic schools. Then we compare that likelihood of having attended a private high school, given that a person is an American Muslim, with the likelihood of them having been privately educated, given that they committed a terrorist act.

## **Results**

We conduct separate analyses of explicitly jihadist terrorists (table 1 A) and non-jihadist right-wing terrorists (table 1 B). Out of the twelve profiles of jihadist terrorists, we could collect educational data on only seven. For the thirty-three profiles of right-wing non-jihadist terrorists, we could collect educational data for only fifteen. All seven jihadist individuals are males who attended public schools. Of the fifteen right-wing non-jihadist terrorists for which we were able to obtain data, eleven attended public schools, three attended private schools, and one was homeschooled.

[table 1 A about here]

[table 1 B about here]

To determine if these limited associations between private schooling and terrorism suggest a connection between the two, we consult data on private school attendance in general and private Islamic school attendance in particular. In 2013-2014, 208 private Islamic schools in the U.S. enrolled 35,295 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a). A total of 4,097 students were enrolled in Islamic high schools that year, representing just .03 percent of the 15.3 million secondary school students that year, as most Islamic schools in the U.S. end at grade 8 (Keyworth, 2006). O'Neill (2010, p. 5) reports that only three percent of American Muslims attend private Islamic schools. Since approximately ten percent of high school students in the U.S. attend private schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017b), the

likelihood of a Muslim attending a private Islamic school is lower than the general likelihood of private school attendance. Given that a U.S. born adult is a Muslim, there is a 3 percent chance that he attended a private school. Given that a U.S. born adult is a Muslim terrorist, there is a 0 percent chance that he attended a private high school. Thus, although the actual educational histories of seven Muslim terrorists do not support the claim that private Islamic schools encourage people to commit terrorist acts, they also do not necessarily support the claim that private Islamic schools discourage people from becoming terrorists. It is possible that the main reason why no U.S. Muslim terrorists have been privately educated is because so few U.S. Muslims attend private Islamic schools.

The evidence regarding non-jihadist right-wing terrorists is similarly inconclusive. Given that a person is a U.S. born adult, there is a 10 percent chance that he attended a private high school. Given that a U.S. born adult is a right-wing terrorist, there is a 20 percent chance that he attended a private high school. Although private school attendance is associated with a higher likelihood of having committed a right-wing terrorist act, with only 15 cases to draw from, this preliminary analysis is only suggestive of such a link.

### **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

With limited data, this analysis indicates that there is lack of empirical basis to claim that religious and specifically Islamic schooling in the United States is associated with homegrown terrorism. Among the U.S.-raised Muslims charged with committing or attempting to commit acts of terrorism in the west, all for whom we have data attended traditional public schools. There is an interesting historical analogy, in that in the 19th and early 20th Century American Catholic schools were seen as divisive to the polity. In fact, as the past 30 years of research has shown, Catholic schools seem to increase rather than decrease patriotism, civic activity,

tolerance as well as effectiveness (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; Manno & Graham, 2001; Campbell, 2008). The same could be true of Muslim schools in the U.S.; however, their current small scale provides little evidence at this point to confirm that possibility.

Greater access to religious schooling may benefit the society and religious schooling may moderate the frequency of acts of terror in the West. A key recommendation for policy makers is to encourage decentralized and private school choice and evaluation of Islamic schools based on measurable outcomes. This recommendation is especially acute as Muslim nations suffer from bad governance, unpopular regimes, restless and uneducated youth (Hackett et al., 2016; *Ummid news*, 2015). Decentralized and private religious schooling could moderate the causal link between hate and violence in the form of terrorism. Local quality Islamic education and the higher education of Imams of mosques in U.S. universities may also promote tolerance among Muslims. A lack of quality local schooling options in the Middle East have increased the role of Saudi *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* Islam funded by petrodollars. A market oriented approach to Islamic schooling can increase adherence to the traditional approach to Islam and weaken fundamentalism. Government can aide this process through greater access to private religious schools. An alternate approach is to also provide religious instruction in existing public schools; this may increase the plurality of public education that may add to creating democratic citizens (Bernier, 2017). In many cases it could be possible that the marginal terrorist can be brought back to sanity if his or her spiritual and social needs can be met through religious schooling.

School choice has the potential to serve disadvantaged minorities better than public schools (Tooley, 2009; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2015; Howell & Peterson, 2006). In religious private schools, students from other religions and cultures self-select for a better quality of education, generating social and religious diversity within such private schools (Trivitt &

Wolf, 2011). It is surprising to know that this doesn't only happen in affluent Catholic schools in some countries outside the U.S. but also in some of the not so affluent Islamic schools in India which Hindu students self-select into for educational needs (*Al Jazeera English*, 2013). This shows that the market produces more options for diversity and acceptance by choice. The schools created for the disadvantaged minorities in a free-market would be open to everyone. The decision to create a school for minorities would again be based on consumer demand and not regime goals that might be antithetical to political tolerance.

We acknowledge that some findings of terrorists having attended religious private schools goes against our hypothesis that market and plural education is better than a statist approach to education. However, as mere attendance at a public school does not make one a democratic citizen, mere attendance at a religious school does not make one a fundamentalist or terrorist. Further research is need for the few cases where terrorists attended religious schools to see if religious values were in fact translated to these individuals at the schools. Additionally, researchers need to examine if terrorists built a socio-religious identity due to their religious schooling that then led them strike at their fellow citizens with terrorism. We hypothesize they did not.

This study aims to encourage further research into the education profiles of people who commit violence and, secondly, calls for evaluation and proper design of Islamic curriculum in schools which can cater to the social and spiritual needs of Muslims. Independent researchers, child psychologists, trained religious instructors and sociologists should build upon the pioneering work of Jaap Dronkers in this field. To support such research, government agencies should produce more detailed and comprehensive databases regarding the backgrounds of people who commit terrorist acts. We drew from multiple data sources for this study and still only

obtained the evidence that we needed from about half of the cases that could have been included in the study.

We think there is good reason to believe that providing increased access to modern Islamic schooling in the U.S. would address the spiritual and religious needs of Muslim students. Providing people with a stake in society through a system of school choice can be a way to moderate any inclination towards terrorism. We look forward to more research on this vital topic.

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*Table 1 A: Successful jihadist terror attacks committed in U.S. by U.S. born and raised individuals since 9/11.*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>School Type Attended</b>	<b>School Name</b>
Jihadist	John Allen Muhammad	Killed by suspects prior to the spree in Washington DC	2002	Public	Scotlandville Magnet High School
Jihadist	Joel Henry Hinrichs III	University of Oklahoma Bombing	2005	Public	Roy J. Wasson High School
Jihadist	Naveed Afzal Haq	Seattle Jewish Federation Shooting	2006	Public	Richland High School (Washington)
Jihadist	Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad	Little Rock Shooting	2009	Public	Memphis' Craigmont High School
Jihadist	Major Nidal Hasan	Fort Hood Shooting	2009	Public	William Fleming High School
Jihadist	Yusuf Ibrahim	Ibrahim shot and killed 25-year-old Hanny Tawadros and 27-year-old Amgad Konds after he abducted them in February 2013 and buried them in a shallow grave in Atlantic County.	2013		
Jihadist	Ali Muhammad Brown	Washington and New Jersey Killing Spree	2014		
Jihadist	Ismaaiyl Brinsley	shot two NYPD cops in Brooklyn's Bed Stuy neighborhood	2014		
Jihadist	Zale Thompson	Queens hatchet attack	2014		
Jihadist	Syed Rizwan Farook	San Bernardino shooting in California	2015	Public	La Sierra High School
Jihadist	Omar Mir Seddique Mateen	Orlando nightclub shooting	2016	Public	Martin County High School
Jihadist	Joshua Cummings	Colorado Security Guard Shooting	2017		



Note: Results are derived from basic internet searches. Cells for which data was not available through internet searches have been left blank.

*Table 1 B: Successful right wing terror attacks committed in U.S. by U.S. born and raised individuals since 9/11.*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>School Type Attended</b>	<b>School Name</b>
Right Wing	Wade Lay	Tulsa OK, Bank Robbery	2004		
Right Wing	Christopher Lay	Tulsa OK, Bank Robbery	2004		
Right Wing	Jim David Adkisson	Knoxville, TN Church Shooting	2008		
Right Wing	Keith Luke	Brockton, MA Murders	2009	Public	Brockton High School
Right Wing	Scott Roeder	George Tiller Assassination	2009	Public	Topeka High School
Right Wing	James Von Brunn	Holocaust Museum Shooting	2009	Public	JvB was educated in public schools
Right Wing	Robert Andrew Poplawski	Pittsburgh Police Shootings	2009	Private	North Catholic High School
Right Wing	Albert Robert Gaxiola	Flores Murders, Pima County, AZ	2009		
Right Wing	Jason Eugene Bush	Flores Murders, Pima County, AZ	2009		
Right Wing	Shawna Forde	Flores Murders, Pima County, AZ	2009		
Right Wing	Andrew Joseph Stack	Austin, TX Plane Attack	2010	Private	Milton Hershey School
Right Wing	Raymond Franklin Peake	Carlisle, PA Murder	2010		
Right Wing	Isaac Aguigui	Fear militia	2011	Home Schooled	
Right Wing	Heather Salmon	Fear militia	2011		

Right Wing	Anthony Peden	Fear militia	2011		
Right Wing	Christopher Salmon	Fear militia	2011		
Right Wing	Michael Burnett	Fear militia	2011		
Right Wing	Wade Michael Page	Sikh Temple Shooting	2012	Public	Littleton High School, Arapahoe High School
Right Wing	Kyle David Joekel	St. John's Parish Police Ambush	2012	Public	Freeman High School
Right Wing	Holly Ann Grigsby	Tri-State Killing Spree	2012	Public	Parkrose High School
Right Wing	David Joey Pederson	Tri-State Killing Spree	2012	Public	North Salem High School
Right Wing	Eric Frein	Blooming Grove Police Shooting	2012	Public	Pocono Mountain High School
Right Wing	Derrick Smith	St. John's Parish Police Ambush	2012		
Right Wing	Terry Smith	St. John's Parish Police Ambush	2012		
Right Wing	Chanel Skains	St. John's Parish Police Ambush	2012		
Right Wing	Britney Keith	St. John's Parish Police Ambush	2012		
Right Wing	Brian Lyn Smith	St. John's Parish Police Ambush	2012		
Right Wing	Jerad Miller	Las Vegas Police Ambush	2014	Public	Kennewick High School
Right Wing	Amanda Miller	Las Vegas Police Ambush	2014	Public	Jefferson High School
Right Wing	Frazier Glenn Cross	Kansas Jewish Center Shooting	2014		
Right Wing	Dylann Roof	Charleston Church Shooting	2015	Public	White Knoll High School
Right Wing	Robert Dear	Colorado Planned Parenthood Shooting	2015		

Right Wing	James Harris Jackson	New York Stabbing	2017	Private	Friends School of Baltimore
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Note: Results are derived from basic internet searches. Cells for which data was not available through internet searches have been left blank.