Western Islamic Schools as Institutions for Preventing Behavioral Radicalization: The Case of Quebec

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Abstract

Understanding radicalization in the West is more important than ever. Since the onset of the Syrian civil war, there has been increasing media and academic attention on the radicalization process of individuals and foreign Muslim fighters, leaving the comfort of their homes to join ISIS. Numerous initiatives, governmental as well as community-based, were created to combat and prevent this phenomenon. This inquiry sets out the core components to developing a critically reflective approach to Islamic schooling in the West for the purposes of preventing behavioral radicalization of Muslim youth.

Extensive research on Islamic education in North America is lacking; in fact, it is scarcer in Quebec. This paper examines the role of Montreal's Islamic schools in countering or encouraging radicalization. I seek to address two main questions: (1) Do Islamic schools advance radicalization by providing cognitive radical platforms to students? And (2) how and why do certain parents consider these schools a safe haven from the radicalization of their children? I conclude that modern Islamic schooling, at least in part or in some cases, can be regarded as itself a preventive measure to Islamic behavioral radicalization. Indeed, such schooling can help in creating balanced western Islamic identities that are functional from both western and Islamic worldviews.

Keywords: *Islamic school*; *Islamic radicalization; Muslim youth; ISIS; Quebec; Canada*

INTRODUCTION

"If my children are in a public school, they will either let go their religion or become very attached to Islam and very religious. Most Muslims there pick this extreme or the other. They either become agnostics like everyone else, or become radicalized. I see modesty here at this Islamic school."

In this quote, Kamal, a 50-year-old research participant, explains the main reasons behind choosing an Islamic school for his four children. He insists that Islamic schools are effective in creating balanced identities and in avoiding extremes. This inquiry reflects the views of Montreal Muslim parents about radicalization and Islamic schooling. Research participants were recruited through my personal contacts and snowballing in Islamic community centers and mosques. All of my participants are born into Muslim families; they acquired their 'islam' and their Islamic identities from their parents. Throughout our discussions, many of them expressed deep concerns about their children being either radicalized or getting diverged from their religion. My participants were recruited through community institutions; most of them are very involved and active in their communities, though they embrace different levels of religiosity.

The Muslim population in Canada is diverse and increasingly growing. For example, Muslims comprise of Africans, North Africans, Asians, Middle Easterners, European born Muslims as well as converts (Spalek & Lambert, 2008, p. 264; Yousif, 1993). Their involvement as active citizens is being increasingly framed by positive civic engagement, collaboration with authorities, and counter-radicalization measures. Likewise, communities are gradually seen as important allies for addressing social problems such as violence, youth disengagement, and radicalization, either through establishing community institutions that host and embrace their youth, or through collaborating with the government in similar initiatives.

Although counter-radicalization measures are thoroughly criticized both within and outside academia, reflections upon the significance of faith identities of Muslim youth and radicalization are drawing more attention; little academic work has addressed Islamic institutions' role in tackling radicalization (Spalek & Lambert, 2008, p. 260). The purpose of this article is to shed light on the Islamic schooling phenomena and its role in preventing

radicalization by creating balanced western identities. Even though some scholars agree that religious ideology may lead to a form of cognitive radicalization (Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Bartlett & Miller, 2012; King & Taylor, 2011), I examine whether this ideology can be employed to prevent and counter behavioral radicalization. In the first part, I present a short historical context of Muslims in North America and of North American Islamic schools. In the second part, I articulate on radicalization and religious education. The third part discusses the methodology adopted and data analysis. In the last part I investigate the role of modern Islamic schools in preventing behavioral religious radicalization.[2]

PART I: Historical context

1.1 Western Muslims

Although by the nineteenth century, numerous delegations of young men were sent from Muslim countries to study in the West, living in a non-Islamic society was thought to be dangerous, uncertain, and even non permissible (*haram*) from a religious perspective. Such beliefs were supported by traditional Islamic views that divided the world into *dar al- Harb w-al-Kufr* (abode of war and unbelief) on one hand, and *dar al-silm* (Abode of peace) on the other. In essence, most Muslim immigrants had no guidelines for behaving as permanent residents in the West (Kelly, 2000, p. 30; Yousif, 1993), and therefore no intention for establishing permanent institutions to preserve their culture and transfer their heritage to their offspring in the long run.

Douglass (2009, p.79) distinguishes between Muslim immigrants who came to North America before the 1960s and those who immigrated at later dates. Muslims who immigrated earlier were more flexible in assimilating into the host society culture; they kept their faith and tradition private in their homes. Those who settled after the 1960s, continues Douglass, carried values, attitudes, and an intellectual package different from their predecessors.[3] Most of these immigrants were graduate students and academics with self-confidence, self-

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[2] By behavioural religious radicalization, I mean violent radicalization that is based on religion and motivated solely by interpretations of scriptures.

[3] See also Memon, N. A. (2011). *From protest to praxis: A history of Islamic schools in North America.* Ottawa: Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada.

awareness, and a strong sense of identity. They were the founders of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and of earliest Islamic institutions.

1.2 What is an Islamic school?

Various Islamic institutions have emerged in North America over the past few decades. These institutions are a natural outcome of the increasing Muslim presence on the continent. As these Muslims have in one way or another contributed to the communities and the cities in which they have settled, one of the more significant contributions that benefit members of their community is in the field of education through the establishment of Islamic schools. An Islamic School is a school where the Qur'an is usually taught in Arabic and where Islamic core values are instilled along with the formal curriculum required by the state in which the school is situated (Sirin & Fine, 2008; Clauss, Ahmed & Salvaterra, 2013, p. 4; Zine, 2008). In other words, Islamic schools are implementing two curricula, the first responds to the tradition and heritage behind the school's community, and the second strives to meet the academic requirements of the state. This paper does not examine *madrasas* (traditional Islamic schools) that are not following the state's curriculum and that do not have accreditation from the ministry of education.

Because of the tensions surrounding Islam and Muslim immigrants, especially in a post-9/11 and post-ISIS era, Islamic schools in the West have attracted much attention. First, because of the status quo of western Muslims as a suspect community, and second because of concerns of what is being taught in these schools, and whether they are fertile nests for radicalization and extremism. As these institutions are being categorized by some as virtual plants for radicalization, there are concerns regarding the teachings of radical interpretations and violent verses of the Qur'an that might incite radical thought and behavior.[4]

These schools are not a western invention; they have existed for centuries in the Arab world and in the Indian Subcontinent (Haddad, Senzai, & Smith, 2009, p. 7). Nevertheless, their presence in North America depends on the Muslim existence, the Muslim commitment, and on the evolution of Muslim consciousness as a separate, growing, and independent

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[4] Serious concerns were raised recently after four Canadian females, who attended Al-Huda Islamic Institute in Ontario, left Canada to join ISIS last December. For more on the subject see:
http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/al-huda-islamic-institute-students-isis-syria-mississauga-1.3354945

community. These schools are not homogeneous; their theological and historical distinctions affect how each school embodies its role in society, how it plans its strategies for educating its youth, and how it engages in societal and civic participation.

1.3 '*Black*'[5] and immigrant Islamic schools

According to Memon (2011), the earliest Islamic schools in North America were a part of the Nation of Islam's (NOI) revival project. Establishing these schools was an act of protest against the absence of legitimate educational opportunities in American society and in American educational system for *black* Americans. Memon (2011, p. 177) differentiates between the indigenous[6] experience of Islamic schools, which relates to the University of Islam schools (UOIS), and the immigrant experience related to the relatively recent waves of Muslim immigrants in North America. The first model of schools is Qur'an-Based Model of Islamic schooling; the founders of this model sought refuge exclusively in the Quran for instruction and inspiration. The second model is based on integration and Islamization[7] of knowledge.[8] In the Canadian Diaspora, there are no NOI schools as the Nation did not establish any schools outside the United States.[9] This desire and need for Islamic institutions that preserve the 'black' Islamic tradition emerged from the need to "resist cultural assimilation and to promote the salience of religious identity" (Memon, 2012; Zine, 2008, p. 14). The founders of 'black' Islamic schools believed that their mission was a 'going back' to the tradition of their African Muslim ancestors. Put differently, the NOI schools protested the dehumanization to which African Americans were subjected.

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[5] I employ the term black to refer to Islamic schools established by the Nation of Islam; the epistemology of these Islamic schools was centered on the purity of the black race and on the evilness of the White 'American' man.

[6] Because of the confusion that the term 'indigenous' may bring to the reader, I chose to employ the term 'black' for reasons mentioned above.

[7] The term 'islamization' was first used in its modern sense by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attasin his 1978 book '*Islamic and Secularism*'. For more see: Khalīl, I. -D. (1991). Islamization of knowledge: Outline of a methodology. International Institute of Islamic Thought.

[8] Memon, N. A. (2011). *From protest to praxis: A history of Islamic schools in North America*. Ottawa: Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada.

[9] There is a branch of the NOI that was established in Montreal in 1997 by Min. Linwood X. It is the first independent branch of the N.O.I. outside the U.S. in history. The Nation of Islam of Canada is not affiliated with any branches of the N.O.I. in the U.S. and adheres to Islam as it was taught by the Hon. Elijah Muhammad. For more, see: http://www.noic.ca/history.php.

At the other side of the spectrum, immigrant Islamic schools adopted a different strategy. Unlike 'black' schools, they have not completely refuted the form and structure of secular schooling. Instead, they placed an emphasis on the lack of moral values being properly taught in public schools,[10] and on the divergence between Islamic and western values. These schools were not meant to be permanent when they were first established and therefore did not intend to create future western Muslim citizens or to construct an Islamic western identity. The assumption was that these Muslim students would supposedly return and live with their parents' in their countries of origin.

That being said, early Muslim immigrants who founded and supported Islamic schools had two intentions: The first was to preserve the cultural and religious package they brought with them until they returned home; and the second was to protect their heritage from what they considered habits and customs that endangered their children's religion and identity.[11] Nevertheless, the pedagogical practices of their schools were, unconsciously, shaped by their own experiences of colonization, decolonization, and immigration from their countries of origin (Memon, 2011, p. 253).

According to Kelly (1997), there were 24 Islamic schools in Canada in 1997, 14 of them in Ontario. By the end of 1999, the number of Ontarian Islamic schools had grown to 19 (Azmi, 2001). Zine (2008, p.6) indicates that there are 35 full-time Islamic schools in Ontario alone by 2008. Today, that number might have reached 60 schools (Ahmed, 2012) in Ontario, and over 120 in Canada. All Canadian Islamic schools must be accredited from their province's ministry of education and must teach the state's curriculum.

PART II: Radicalization and Religious Education

2.1 Religious schools as "radicalizing" institutions

Fierce opponents of religious education have repeatedly drawn our attention to the risks of faith education; they even call for the elimination of denominational schooling altogether

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[10] Memon, N. A. *Between Immigrating and Integrating: The Challenge of Defining an Islamic Pedagogy in Canadian Islamic Schools*. In McDonough, G. P., Memon, N. A., &Mintz, A. I. (2012). *Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent: Catholic, Jewish, and Islamic Education in Canada*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
[11] Ibid.

(Thiessen, 2001, p. 17). Opposition to these schools is often expressed in terms of an implicit or explicit appeal to state rights in education (Thiessen, 2001, p. 73) on the one hand, and the threat of divisiveness, intolerance, and radicalization on the other. Concurrently, Maxwell, Waddington, McDonough, Cormier, & Schwimmer (2012, p. 14) assert that children who attend conservative religious schools are most likely to be at risk of not receiving the basic civic education that guarantees democratic citizenship. Gutmann (1996) for instance, argues that all religious or culturally based schools are part of a "separatist multicultural perspective" and are "designed primarily to sustain the self-esteem of students on the basis of their membership in a separatist culture". This membership may lead to rejection of societal norms, values, and attitudes, which is a form of cognitive radicalization. The threat of these schools, according to Jackson (2004, p. 55) and Sweet (1997, p. 179), lies in their potential to erode social harmony by creating barriers between communities.

Critics have expressed concerns that religious schools, by nature, abdicate the role educational institutions play in mediating the rights of the child against those of the family.[12] In her book "God in the classroom", Sweet (1997, p. 180) points out that, in these schools, the children are not the only ones whose rights are being violated; teachers also lack the legal protection that their colleagues in other schools enjoy. Furthermore, Maxwell *et al.* (2012, p. 12) insist that the promotion of exceptionalism in religious schools lead to the minimization of intercultural contacts and to the inadequacy of civic education. The argument here is that through the adoption of exceptionalism, religious schools teach students that they are the only holders of the genuine and valid truth, which closes the possibility of 'dialoguing' with and accepting others.

In sum, scholars who support dismissing or eliminating faith schools or who oppose the teaching of religion in public schools believe that the subject matter not only ceased to be relevant to issues of ethics, morality, and citizenship (Jackson, 2004, p.136; Zine, 2009; Cairns, 2009), but it may also lead to radicalizing students by exposing them to radical and extremist ideologies.

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12 Kelly, P. L. (2000). Integrating Islam: A Muslim school in Montreal. Ottawa: National Library of Canada = Bibliothèquenationale du Canada

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2.2 Understanding Radicalization

Radicalization is the rejection of the status quo, but not necessarily in a problematic way (Bartlett & Miller, 2012, p. 2). There are major disagreements amongst academics and stakeholders on the meaning, nature, and the threat of radicalization. Many have devoted time and energy to proving that this phenomenon is a myth (Neumann, 2013) and that it does not represent a major threat *per se*. The origin of the debate comes from the historic complexity of the term and the vagueness of definitions applied to it. For instance, in the United States and, by extension, Canada, not only is being radical no crime but, more importantly, the very idea of 'radicalism' has positive connotations in nations whose founding principles were seen as radical (Neumann, 2013). History books are full of examples of heroes (i.e. founding fathers, freedom fighters, etc.) such as Gandhi, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King who were considered dangerous 'radicals' by their contemporaries (ibid, p. 877). The term "radicalization" can be problematic in its relationship to 'radicalism' as an expression of legitimate political thought (Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation (ECEGVR), 2008, p. 5), which results in debates about the unlawfulness of the process.

There is no shortage of theories and analyses relevant to the study of radicalization. While discussing this phenomenon, researchers often seek to investigate a state of mind that precedes terrorism (Mastors & Siers, 2014, p. 379). However, radicalization, extremism, terrorism, fundamentalism, etc. often mean different things to different people. Ambiguities are often based on the political interests, cultural background, and religious affiliations of the beholder. In other words, radicalization, like terrorism, is in the eye of the beholder: "one man's radical is another man's freedom fighter" (Neumann, 2013, p. 878). This ambiguity comes from notions of radicalization that emphasize extremist thought "cognitive radicalization" and those that focus on extremist action "behavioral radicalization" (ibid, p. 873). The latter involves engaging in radical activities, whether legal or clandestine, which could lead to terrorism (Hafez & Mullins, 2015, p. 7). Understanding the mechanisms behind radicalization forms is key to understanding "why and how individuals move from cognitive to behavioral radicalization" (Koehler, 2014, p. 125). It does not necessarily entail action; it can simply mean support for extensive and vast changes to a system or society, without using violent means to this end (Hirsch-Hoefler, Canetti & Eiran, 2016, p. 2).

In radicalization theories and models, which are wide-ranging, most studies center on

major factors that help establish a terrorism-friendly environment (Bartlett & Miller, 2012). Radicalization can be portrayed as emerging from specific factors, or as a linear progressive process with recognizable phases (King & Taylor, 2011). The main five known models of radicalization are Borum's pathway, Wiktorowicz's theory of joining extremist groups, Moghaddam's stair case to terrorism, the New York Police Department (NYPD) model, and Sageman's four pongs. The table bellow clarifies the stages and processes of each model:

Models of radicalization:

Author	Type of model	Stages or factors
Borum 2003	Linear, progressive	1. Social and economic deprivation 2. Inequality and resentment 3. Blame and attribution 4. Stereotyping and demonizing the enemy
Wiktorowicz 2004	Linear and emergent	1. Cognitive opening 2. Religious seeking 3. Frame alignment 4. Socialization
Moghaddam 2005–2006[9]	Linear, progressive	1. Psychological interpretation of material conditions 2. Perceived options to fight unfair treatment 3. Displacement of aggression 4. Moral engagement 5. Solidification of categorical thinking 6. The terrorist act
NYPD (Silber & Bhatt) 2007	Linear	1. Pre-radicalization 2. Self-identification 3. Indoctrination 4. Jihadization
Sageman 2008	Non-linear, emergent	1. Sense of moral outrage 2. Frame used to interpret the world 3. Resonance with personal experience 4. Mobilization through networks

Adopted from King & Taylor (2011)

    Each of the models above offers a precious understanding of radicalization; they see it as a transformation based on social-psychological processes. There is a consensus regarding

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the main key radicalizing factors. According to King & Taylor (2011), these five models describe emotions, cognitions, and social influences that can lead individuals to engage in terrorism (p. 609). Among the many commonalities, the two main factors that reappear are 'relative deprivation' and 'identity-related issues' (ibid).

At the other side of the spectrum, Koehler (2014) suggests that there are four major theoretical schools of radicalization: (1) sociological, (2) social movement, (3) empirical and (3) psychological theories. The "sociological" school, continues Koehler, links radicalization to the individual's identity crisis; the "social movement" sees its (radicalization) occurring due to networks, group dynamics, peer pressure and a constructed reality; the empirical theory looks at the motivations, socio-economic factors, backgrounds, and affiliations of individuals; and the psychological school "states that emotional vulnerability, dissatisfaction with current political activity, identification with victims, belief that the use of violence is not immoral, a sense of reward and social ties into the radical group, among others, are very important" (p. 124).

Bartlett & Miller (2012) understand radicalization as conveying dissent from dominant norms. Being radical means diverging from "the attitudinal orthodoxy on one or more key questions of religious, social, political, or cultural organization . . . they are a radical" (p. 3). Radicalization could be a normal phenomenon in society.

2.3 Religious radicalization

Amid discussions of religious identity and radical violent action, the role of Islamic ideology in terrorism occupies counter-terrorism research. Opinions are often divided between those who believe that Islam itself is part of the problem and those who believe that it is only a vehicle through which radicalization occurs (Bartlett & Miller, 2012, p. 9).

Radicalization is not explicit to a religion, a nation, an ideology or an ethnicity; its present context is usually employed to describe a pre-terrorism stage (King & Taylor, 2011). Hafez & Mullins (2015, p. 20) assert that there are four factors that lead to political and religious radicalization: (1) personal and collective grievances; (2) networks and interpersonal ties; (3) political and religious ideologies; (4) and support structures. Ideology can be very effective in convincing individuals that "the status quo" is problematic and that the guilt lies

with others that ought to be considered enemies (i.e. broader society, the West, the Jews, etc.). Radicalization becomes problematic when there

> "[i]s the fusion with a certain type of ideology that inherently denies individual freedom to persons not part of the radical person's in-group and thusly the degree of ideological incompatibility with a political culture based on human rights and pluralism"(Koehler, 2014, p. 125).

Scholars and concerned stakeholders are still trying to understand what ultimately motivated and incited Western Muslim youth to reach a state of cognitive radicalization, and then to move from there to a rhetoric of behavioral violent radicalization. Some mention Islamophobia, discrimination, and racism; but, I would argue, radicalization could also be incited by something else altogether: instead of feeling marginalized, youth may claim being called as the chosen ones to change the world. For instance, to these youth, the declaration of the Caliphate had created an obsession with purity, utopia, and with the forgotten prophecies of the Islamic religion (Creswell & Haykel, 2015) that fits the idealized world they are dreaming of.

PART III: Methodology and Data Analysis

3.1 Methodology

Through this empirical inquiry, I seek to examine the experiences of four Muslim parents in Montreal with Islamic schools. This was accomplished by having them narrate their experiences and the outcomes they and their children receive from these institutions. While I draw from only four interviews for the purposes of this study, these data are part of a larger study examining the experiences of 35 Muslim participants (students, parents, teachers, principals, and leaders) with Montreal's Islamic schools. I employ Jackson's (2011, p. 190) interpretive approach in analyzing discourses about religion in schools. This approach neither privileges the person nor the faith, but it focuses on the hermeneutical relationship between the two, without neglecting the influence of external factors. The interpretive approach is concerned with how religions are perceived by stakeholders, the media, and by 'consumers' of religious education.

I conducted at least one semi-structured interview with each of the four parents; each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, over a time span from January to September 2015. Interviews took place in community centers and coffee shops. My questions, while wide-ranging, focused on two key areas: (1) the parents' perception of indoctrination and Islamic schooling; and (2) their impressions about the outcome of such education on the well-being and integration of their children.

3.2 Muslims and Montreal's Islamic schools

Kamal, Ahmed, Catherine, and Khaled are Muslim parents in Quebec (all names are pseudonyms) who chose an Islamic school for their children. Kamal is a university professor in one of Montreal's universities. He has been living in Montreal for the last 20 years and sent all his four children to Islamic schools. Ahmed is a leader and one of the founders of two Islamic schools in Montreal. He has been in Montreal for 30 years. He sent his kids to Islamic schools. Catherine is born and raised in Montreal; she spent her elementary and secondary years in Islamic schools, and she chose to enrol her son there as well. Khaled is an activist who works in an Islamic community center. He immigrated to Montreal 16 years ago. He sent his son and daughter to Islamic schools as well. Kamal and Khaled are North Africans; Ahmed and Catherine are Lebanese. My sample does not reflect the views of other Muslim communities in Montreal and, therefore, is not representative as Muslims in Canada are very heterogeneous and have different cultural backgrounds. The study is limited to Montreal terrain and to Muslims who opt for Modern Islamic schooling.

3.3 Discussion

Kamal,

When asked about the performance of Montreal's Islamic schools, Kamal, a university professor said:

> "I think the Islamic school is doing its job; their mission is to have Canadian and Quebecer students who have an Islamic identity, who participate in the community, and students are taught this dimension." (Kamal)

Kamal argues that public schools are not value-free institutions because other epistemologies that differ from the majority are not being equally reflected. While he deeply

reflects on how he sees Muslims' experiences in public schools, it seems like he mainly pictures two alternatives:

> "The best thing is that my kids lived in a community; they had a social life; okay, if I compare my kids to others [Muslims] who went to public schools, from my experience I see it in two types, either the parents are very conservative and they don't let their kids mingle with non-Muslims [. . .] because they have non-Muslim values, and so forth. These kids will grow alone with no friends, and no people to talk to, and they will turn to the computer at the end of the day, okay? Or [they will] have an identity problem, have a lack of self-confidence, a lack of being part of a community, because when the kids are teenagers, they want to go out, they want to go to the cinema, to restaurants, to coffees, go skiing, or just go for a walk on Saint-Catherine, right? (Laugh) we all went through this. You cannot keep them all the time at home, and tell them don't go with these people because they are non-Muslims, they will have an identity and a psychological crisis, they won't have a balance in their life. People live in communities. The other group let their kids go with the flow. The kids often go astray; they start taking drugs, alcohol, girlfriends, and boyfriends, whatever. Then when something happen it is the end of it, you cannot be severe them, they will call the police and all the troubles we know. Some people manage to have a balance but it is very difficult." (Kamal)

Kamal claims that Islamic schools can meet the demands of liberal democracy by cultivating an identity that is at once grounded in their own traditions while at the same time oriented toward the requirements of democratic agreement (Beiles, 2012, p. 103; Khan, 1999; Thiessen, 2001). He believes that by promoting a common good such as the cultivation of a shared value and identity, these schools can meet the demands of modern societies. Kamal insists that these schools are effective in strengthening actions such as social, civic and cultural competences and in enhancing critical thinking. Cristillo (2009, p. 77), Daher (2005), and Thiessen, (2001), for instance, point out that there is strong evidence that Islamic schools are fostering the development of social capital for students, staff, and parents in their Muslim communities. They believe that the Islamic school is an active societal actor.

When asked about whether he was worried about ISIS and its influence on Muslim youth, including his children, Kamal said:

> "From the beginning when this thing started I was communicating with my kids about it. When there is something in the news I share it with them. I am banning them, and myself, from having Facebook. I believe the flow of information is less in other networks such Twitter and Skype. The best protection is to talk to kids and to make them aware of the situation. Then they can make a judgment." (Kamal)

He affirms that his Islamic school helps in balancing youth identities:

> "If my children are in a public school, they will either let go their religion or become very attached to Islam and very religious. Most Muslims there pick this extreme or the other. They either become agnostics like everyone else, or become radicalized. I see modesty here at this Islamic school . . . The good thing [about the Islamic school] is that they [students] won't find a culture that completely contradicts the home's culture." (Kamal)

Ahmed,

I brought up the issue of Western and Islamic values, and how certain immigrants' values may be perceived as alien to Canadians and to Canadian society. Is the fact of rejecting western values a conveyor belt to radicalization? Ahmed's response was interesting:

> "I don't believe there are exclusively Canadian values. Canadian values are the values of the communities that live in Canada. When the media differentiates between Canadian values and our values, they divide us. We are Canadians and our values are part of Canadian values. In terms of habits, it is very normal to have differences. We see this even within the same culture. Habits are different from one place to another and so on." (Ahmed)

Ahmed believes that the school's environment gives youth a sense of belonging, hope, and meaning. When asked about why he believes the Islamic school is a positive alternative to the public sector, he said:

> "It guides youth. The public system doesn't do that. When we create a balance between the mind, the heart, and the body, students focus more on their studies. Most graduates

of community schools are well balanced and do well at university. They have less mental tensions, fewer temptations, and fewer distractions. Our students are very successful." (Ahmed).

Ahmed believes that state curriculum is failing to recognize the experiences and contributions of certain groups within society, and that it might increase their sense of marginalization and isolation within their society (Maxwell *et al.*, 2012, p.9). Furthermore, he claims that the Islamic school is contributing to the well-being of society by creating stable youth with stable identities:

> "I strongly believe that it is helping Quebec society by helping these students be stable and have stable identities. Psychologically speaking, this formation of a stable human being is helping the whole society. We don't only protect the culture. We teach them to be nice, useful, helpful, and to be true citizens, which means they'll be more productive. Look at our students and you'll see how integrated they are, in a positive way." (Ahmed)

Throughout the discussion, Ahmed gave the impression that students from non-Christian backgrounds experience few of their perspectives and few, if any, people who resemble them, who hold their beliefs, or who adopt their cultural expressions at their public school. The school calendar is organized to meet the needs of many of the Christian faith communities (Blumenfeld, 2006a, p. 6; Bouchard & Taylor, 2008). This gives the impression that beliefs and values of the dominant group are transmitted (through hegemonic discourses) rendering subordinated groups virtually invisible while concurrently constructing labels about these groups, which may lead to a state of perceived discrimination.

Catherine,

Catherine, a 32-year Montreal-born who studied at Islamic schools, chose to enrol her son in an Islamic school as well. When questioned about this choice, she said

> "For my son, it was either an Islamic school or a private secular school; the public school is out of the question. I don't feel they have good mentoring, especially in ghetto neighbourhoods." (Catherine)

Catherine is not a practicing Muslim. She neither wears the hijab nor prays but she fasts during Ramadan: the holy month for Muslims. I requested an explanation of why she chose a religious school, even though she is not religious herself. She asserted that religious literacy is a key to the prevention of radicalization:

> "You know, before putting him in this Islamic school, I was discussing with my sister and you know my worst fear? I was afraid of radicalization. She said it is people that don't know about religion who have more chances of getting radicalized. Then I thought yeah that is a good point, and that's what encouraged me to go there [Islamic school]." (Catherine)

She added that: "better knowledge of religion with good basis could prevent radicalization."

Catherine insists that it was in her Islamic studies courses when she learned the obligation of serving society and "to be a good citizen":

> "I went to Islamic schools right? So the way they talked to us was not on religious bases. I learned more about Islam in *halaqat* [study circles] than at my school . . . For example, as a school, or in *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence] classes, [they taught us that] you'll be a good Muslim if you get involved with the broader society, whether you volunteer to help people, whether the Palestinian cause, or whatever." (Catherine)

She affirms that: "this notion of serving back the community was present. If I didn't engage with Islam this way, I wouldn't be an engaged citizen"

Catherine believes that learning about Islam and its diversity will make youth immune from fanaticism and radical interpretations of their faith:

> "And I believe it is the narrow understanding of Islam that leads to it [radicalization]. If you don't understand Islam, anyone can come and bring you [radical] ideas.

Khaled

While discussing his experience with Islamic schools, I asked Khaled about what we hear in the media concerning these schools being sites of oppression and indoctrination, he said:

> "No, that is not true. Students there can be open-minded and liberated while keeping their Muslim identities at the same time. They can be fully integrated in their Quebecois or Canadian society while keeping to their Muslim-ness. My son can be a practicing

Muslim and engage with everyone in society. So here I am talking about positive integration."

I also mentioned that Islamic schools are widely seen as purposely contributing to students' cognitive radicalization by denying them exposure to other alternatives (Maxwell *et al.*, 2012, p.9). Khaled does not think that his children are being isolated from the rest of society, or that their contact is limited to only those who share the same set of values, he says:

> "Even though they are in Islamic schools, they have Quebecois friends that visit them at home. These are non-Muslim friends from the neighbourhood; once they finish school, they have other activities, Taekwondo, soccer, etc." (Khaled).

> He insists that we "should not put a label on these Muslim youth" because "they are normal kids."

Khaled asserts that maintaining a balanced Islamic identity is the main reason for sending his children to Islamic schools (Clauss *et al.*, 2013). He believes that children's identity might be at risk if they attend the public educational system. He states that public schools do not promote or encourage religious and moral values and therefore Muslim students will feel confused and lost in an ocean of relativism. He says:

> "So I believe that staff at the Islamic school should help students with the development of their religious identities, but they should do it in a responsible way." (Khaled)

PART VI: Preventing Behavioral Religious Radicalization

4.1 Preventing religious radicalization

Certain Muslims believe that religious education, despite containing aspects of radical talk and thought, is effective in avoiding the rhetoric of radical actions. By promoting religious pride along with national pride, reaching out to other communities, and building a shared identity, these schools can promote social coexistence. We would be mistaken if we view Islamic radicalization as purely "Islamic" (Hafez & Mullins, 2015, p. 2; Picart, 2015), other cultural, social, and political factors have important effects as well. The principal conceptual fault-line is between notions of radicalization that emphasize radical beliefs and those that focus on radical actions (Neumann, 2013, p. 873; Picart, 2015).

Even though radicalization is considered a complex socio-criminal challenge that is difficult to define or to prevent (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2015), it is inaccurate to see the problem of youth radicalization exclusively in the broader context of youth issues, such as drawing similarities between the roots of youth radicalization, youth violence, and gang membership. Unlike general youth violence and gang membership, radicalized individuals are not usually dysfunctional and violent youth. In fact, most of them are concerned, smart, politically literate, and intelligent youth. Some of them are seeking a utopian world, and membership in a radical milieu usually appeals to lost souls seeking a new path to personal redemption and dreaming of transforming this unjust world (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). This ideology of religious radicalization frames and explains personal sacrifice (*shahadah*) in this life "as a stepping stone to eternal salvation and redemption" in the hereafter (Hafez & Mullins, 2015, p. 21).

Furthermore, prevention through policing cognitive radicalization is seen as controversial, especially in advanced countries where freedom of conscience is protected by Charters of freedoms and liberties. The main challenge for monitoring radicalization of thought is that it broadens the at-risk population, which may result in profiling and in convicting innocent people (Harris-Hogan *et al.*, 2015, p. 13). In addition, because the literature on radicalization is fragmented, most theoretical measures cannot be applied on the field (Mastors & Siers, 2014), which makes this inquiry very important in tackling religious radicalization as it presents practical measures in existing Islamic institutions.

4.2 (Dis)engagement

The Foreign policy of Western countries may negatively impact upon the engagement of their Muslim communities. Indeed, it is one of the most significant sources of anger within Muslim communities (Spalek & Lambert, 2008, p. 267). Muslims usually take a broad collective Islamic identity that links them to the Ummah: the international community of Muslims, which infuses in them the obligation of sympathizing and defending their brothers and sisters in Islam. This, according to Mastors & Siers (2014, p. 379), leads to "depluralization", which means the replacements of previous identities with new virtual and universal identities. It is the same idealized version of Islam developed by some Muslim youth in the west, "a universalized, transnational Ummah that is not shaped by a specific national heritage" (Hafez

& Mullins, 2015, p. 12). According to Koehler (2014):

> "Radicalization can be understood as a process of individual depluralization of political concepts and values [...] The more individuals have internalized the notion that no other alternative interpretations of their political concepts exist, the more we can speak a degree of radicalization" (p. 125).

Further, there are also physical and psychological disengagement factors related to local, national, and international events (i.e. perceived or real discrimination, Islamophobia, wars in the Muslim world, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, etc.). Psychological disengagement usually precedes physical engagement (Mastors & Siers, 2014, p. 37). Similarly, grievances in the Muslim world that are perceived as a result of Western interventions may lead a minority of Muslims to denounce their Western identities (Hafez & Mullins, 2015, p. 13); these youths are struggling with their multiple identities and battling for deriving meaning from the conflicting realities they face (Feddes, Mann, & Doosje, 2015, p. 400). This tiny minority does not want to be associated with the atrocities committed against their brothers and sisters in Islam; they denounce Western atrocities by denouncing their Western identities.

4.3 The role of the Islamic school

My informants believe that their religious and cultural commitment require them to seek quality education that nurtures the heart, the intellect as well as the soul. They believe that "public schools can represent moral permissiveness and lower academic achievement" (Clauss, *et al.*, 2012, p.4; Zine, 2004, 2008, 2009). Similarly, they view the public educational system as "an unhealthy microcosm afflicted by violence, drug abuse, and sexual promiscuity" (Cristillo 2009, p. 69; McAndrew, 2006; Khan, 1999).

Most of my participants think that it is unfair to suggest that Islamic schools are more harmful to students than secular schools within the same context (Kelly 2000, p. 121). They insist that the social and cultural impact of the Islamic school environment must not be underestimated, especially in constructing healthy and balanced Western Muslim identities. It provides a controlled environment in which religious ideology is filtered and adapted to youth reality and context.

Students' emotional and spiritual well-being is an important component of learning and growth (Zine, 2008, p. 286; Zine 2004). For instance, the term 'jihad' is probably the most often-heard concept in the West to explain or describe an act of violence perpetuated by a radicalized Muslim. In this essence, modern Islamic schools modernize and Westernize Islamic terminology, in particular controversial terms such as *jihad*, *kuffar* (infidels, disbelievers), *dar al-harb* (abode of war), and *dar al-silm* (abode of peace). According to Zine (2008, p.135), the Islamic school is viewed by some parents as a temporary stage and path towards a safe haven; these parents often speak about the challenges they face raising their children and helping them resist deviation, crime, violence, and dogmatism.

4.4 Maintaining an Islamic identity

It seems that anti-radicalization initiatives tend to be underpinned by broader debates around what sorts of Muslim identities should be fostered in Canada, and what should be actively discouraged or even repressed (Spalek & Lambert, 2008, p. 26). Many young Muslims and their families struggle to maintain their religious identity by avoiding un-Islamic social practices such as drinking, engaging in premarital sexual relations (Zine, 2008, p. 137; Yousif, 1993; McAndrew, 2006) or in any other inadequate social activities. These Muslims are conflicted with how to develop an Islamic identity that is immune from Western temptation. They believe in harmony between the practices (cultural, religious, etc.) at home and those at school (Zine, 2009). The home culture of all students must be, at least partly, observed at school. To fail to address radicalism and extreme views in a way that will lead to dialogue, disagreement, investigation, and analysis is to fail those youths and to fail to promote their moral and spiritual development (Miller, 2013; Cairns, 2009).

4.5 Opting for the Islamic school

Most of my informants state that, in certain cases, Muslim students experience uneasiness and discrimination when they are called onto speaking for their "religion" and their "people." Other students are rarely, if ever, expected to speak for their religion (Blumenfeld, 2006a). Khaled, for instance, believes that most teachers at public schools are not sensitized to Muslim children, and hence do not provide them with an equitable balanced mentoring (Clauss et al., 2012, p.4) that their peers receive. The norm is looked at as the neutral that all

students should abide by; any challenges to this dominance are sometimes perceived as rebellious (Blumenfeld, 2006b; Khan, 1999), which may result in an unbalanced identity:

> "If my children are in a public school, they will either let go their religion or become very attached to Islam and very religious. Most Muslims there pick this extreme or the other. They either become agnostics like everyone else, or become radicalized. I see modesty here at this Islamic school." (Kamal)
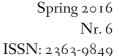
CONCLUSION

Many radicalization experts emphasize that there are as many factors of radicalization (social, cultural, political, religious, personal, etc.) as there are radicalized individuals. This paper sought to add clarity to the area of countering Islamic racialization through modern Islamic schooling. I have described some of the experiences of four Muslim parents with Islamic schools in Montreal.

Exploring common grounds between Islamic values and western virtues should be a central goal of educational programs at Western Islamic schools (Ahmed, 2012, p. 158). Radicals use ideology to increase despair by convincing individuals that the cause of their problems always comes from external factors. Similarly, religious and spiritual identities can represent sites of radicalization as well as sites of resistance to this radicalization through providing a space for critical contestation and political engagement. For instance, while religion is used as an alibi to push radical ideas, we can also refer to religion to seek liberation and prevent radicalization. In other words, while some Islamic beliefs can provide justification for some individuals to commit violent acts, institutionalizing the process of learning Islamic principles may lead to contextualizing them to fit their modern climate. Muslim educators should also be aware of, and resist, the penetration of Islamic extremism into the curriculum of Islamic schools. Religious literacy and social strength either delay or prevent radicalization. That said, the distinction between radicalization of thought and radicalization of action should be made clear; theoretical rhetoric of radicalization does not automatically convert into a rhetoric of radical action unless all surrounding circumstances allow it (Picart, 2015). There is little evidence of a direct connection between radical ideas and radical behavior so this should not in and of itself be considered an alarming indicator. Cognitive radicalization is to behavioral radicalization as anger to physical aggression.

It can also be suggested that empowerment may actually boost radicalization by increasing narcissism (Feddes *et al.*, 2015, p. 401). Nevertheless, rational empowerment will help in creating rational youth that are balanced and aware while making conscious decisions in their lives. Islamic pedagogy must widen its discursive boundaries to include alternative epistemological understandings that provide students with the opportunity to investigate multiple truth claims on ideological, rational, and empirical grounds (Zine, 2008, p. 316), which will eventually draw students away from exceptionalism, extremism, fundamentalism and, therefore, from radicalization. That said, most Islamic institutions manage to establish an atmosphere void of these radical interpretations.
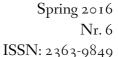
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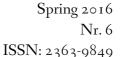Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2012). The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization. Terrorism and Political Violence, 24(1), 1-21. doi:10.1080/09546553.2011.594923

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