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## SHOULD YOU BE SCARED OF THESE KIDS?

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### Inside Portland's private Muslim academy

The kickball score is 13 to five, and the girls are losing. Standing at the plate, her headscarf fluttering in the breeze, 12-year-old Fatima delivers a majestic, soaring punt over the heads of the boys in the infield and sprints for first base--a sewer grille in the parking lot--while teammate Sarah rounds the flattened tin can that marks second, and makes a valiant dash for third. Too late. Grinning like a hyena, Ahmed grabs the ball and tags her for the last out. Now the boys are up to bat.

"Guys, that's not fair!" Sarah wails. "Give us a chance. We should get *four* outs!"

Watching a dozen sixth and seventh graders play schoolyard kickball on an overcast December afternoon, it's hard to imagine a more innocent scene. But in the past three months, many Americans have begun to ask if there is something sinister going on at institutions such as the Islamic School of the Muslim Educational Trust, one of only two Muslim academies in Oregon.

Sheltered by a stately, 200-year-old oak tree off a bustling stretch of Southwest Scholls Ferry Road, ISMET's low-slung buildings look like a suburban dentist's office. Inside, the hallways smell of socks and glue and Play-Doh, with a faint whiff of ammonia. The walls are lined with verses from the Koran and the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet): *God has no mercy on one who has no mercy for others; God does not judge you by your bodies and appearances, but he looks into your hearts and observes your deeds.*

"Our goal is to create well-adapted American Muslims," says the Muslim Educational Trust's executive director, Wajdi Said, a 35-year-old religious scholar who emigrated from Yemen 15 years ago and functions as the school's unofficial principal.

Most of the 49 students, from kindergarten to seventh grade, were born in the U.S.A. Their parents include doctors, lawyers, engineers and limousine operators.

On Friday, Nov. 23, however--just as news was breaking about Portland's now infamous refusal to help FBI agents interview male students and tourists from Islamic countries--callers to KXL-AM accused ISMET of being a hush-hush "training center."

"They're going to be bringing refugees in," a caller named Rebecca told KXL host Mike Siegel, who was sitting in for Lars Larson. "There's a lot of people questioning what the real intent is. Could they be bringing people in other than refugees, if you know what I mean?"

By the end of the broadcast, Mayor Vera Katz's office had logged dozens of calls from outraged citizens demanding to know why the mayor, who made a public trip to ISMET on the night of Sept. 11, was coddling terrorists.

"There were just outrageous things being said," recalls her communications director, Sarah Bott.

Of course, many outrageous things have been said since Sept. 11. In the first few hours after the attacks, U.S. Rep. John Cooksey, a Republican from Louisiana, urged authorities to investigate anyone "wearing a diaper on his head, and a fan belt around that diaper." (He later apologized.)

In October, evangelist Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, denounced Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion."

But even if you skip over this sort of bigotry and tune out the hemorrhoidal babble on the talk-radio dial, Islam is coming under fire from far more respectable sources.

"We patronize Islam, and mislead ourselves, by repeating the mantra that Islam is a faith with no serious problems accepting the secular West, modernity and pluralism, and the only problem is a few bin Ladens," wrote Pulitzer Prize-winner Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times*. "Although there is a deep moral impulse in Islam for justice, charity and compassion, Islam has not developed a dominant religious philosophy that allows equal recognition of alternative faith communities."

Among the liberal establishment, the proposition that Islam is a peaceful, tolerant religion is almost literally an article of faith. But in many cases, the liberals' rush to defend Islam--just like the conservatives' rush to attack it--is based more on reflex than on knowledge. Awkward as it may be, in light of the Bush administration's decision to freeze the assets of the nation's biggest Islamic charity, and in light of official suspicion that terrorist "sleeper cells" are still active in America, is it possible that there *is* something inherently intolerant about Islam? More to the point, is there any reason to believe that Islam--as practiced and taught in the United States--is incubating a new generation of extremists?

To answer this question, *WW* decided to peek behind the curtains at ISMET. We interviewed students, teachers and parents. We reviewed textbooks and sat in on classes and prayers.

What we discovered was neither the conservatives' paranoid nightmare of fanatics sharpening scimitars nor the liberals' wishful daydream of Unitarians in headscarves. Instead, we

developed a far more nuanced image. We found a deeply conservative faith determined that its children not lose their way in a me-first society--and a group of believers scrambling for sanctuary in a newly suspicious nation.

The first thing that strikes a visitor to ISMET is that the classes are pretty conventional. Second-graders fidget through a lesson on the difference between straight and wavy lines in art class. Seventh-graders wrestle with personal pronouns, quadratic equations and the physics of the rainbow. In English class, teacher Jawad Khan challenges his students to define and spell words like "gnarled" and "wharf," peppering his lessons with quotations from Socrates and William Faulkner.

Pencil in hand, scratching his head over the definition of "turquoise," 12-year-old Ahmed Abdelgader is in many ways a typical pre-teen. Born at St. Vincent hospital, he likes basketball, collects Hot Wheels, plays video games and enjoys Jackie Chan movies. His father is a mechanical engineer from Libya, his mother a doctor from Morocco. He wants to be a heart surgeon. "I want to help people," he explains, gently brushing away an insect that strayed onto a reporter's head. "And also for the sake of the money."

But Ahmed and his classmates are also quite different from the average adolescent. Like every other student and teacher at ISMET, Ahmed prays five times a day, every day, at *fajr* (dawn), *zuhr* (afternoon), *asr* (before sunset), *maghrib* (dusk) and *isha* (night).

During the holy month of Ramadan (which ends Dec. 15), Ahmed fasts from dawn to dusk. He has memorized 72 of the Koran's 114 *surahs*, or chapters. He doesn't have a video-game console. He doesn't watch much TV. And--unthinkable blasphemy!--he doesn't have a favorite rock group.

"I like ISMET because you're around a Muslim environment," he says. "You don't get led astray like you would in public school. If there's a conflict, it's my religion that I have to follow. The devil's always trying to make us turn away from the straight path."

One is at first tempted to chalk up Ahmed's pious statements to a desire to impress. But watch him at *zuhr*, the noon prayer, and there's no mistaking his sincerity. With his eyes clamped shut and his fingers stuck in his ears, Ahmed stands in the school's main hall and wails a haunting ululation, skipping up and down the scale in hypnotic quarter-tones. This is the *adhaan*, the call to prayer.

Clad in uniforms--black pants and white shirts for boys, black jumper, white shirt and headscarf for girls--the students rush to the rest rooms to perform their *wudu*, the ritual cleansing required before each of the five daily prayers. They scrub their hands three times, rinse their mouths with water, clear their nostrils and clean the tip of their noses, whispering supplications at each phase of the ablution.

During Ramadan, the rules on fasting are so strict that Muslims may not swallow the water they use to rinse their mouths--even though they have not had a drop to drink since dawn.

Then the students troop into the prayer hall, kneeling shoulder to shoulder in neat rows on the wooden floor, boys first, girls behind them, all looking toward Mecca (the prayer mats include special compasses designed to point them in the right direction.)

The squirming and the high-pitched chatter dies down, and suddenly, the room is so quiet you can hear the ticking of the clock and the muffled roar of traffic from Scholls Ferry Road. In unison, the students stand, bow at the waist, then prostrate themselves, their foreheads touching the floor for a full 10 seconds. "Allahu Akbar!" they chant. "God is Great!"

Like most holy books, the Koran places great emphasis on compassion--a message constantly reinforced at ISMET. "It is very important that we have to be merciful and compassionate to each other," Said implores during Friday prayers. "To the animals, to the trees, to our neighbors, to our brothers and sisters, to the grocery man in the grocery store, to our community leaders, to our mothers and fathers."

But if Islam is about peace and justice, it is also about self-discipline. Pork, pornography, homosexuality and abortion are all taboo, as is gossip, physical contact between unrelated men and women, and bathing in front of others. Halloween is frowned on as a wasteful superstition.

Combined with the emphasis on daily prayer, these rules make ISMET sound almost puritanical. In fact, although the students are remarkably well-behaved, they are anything but dour. Most seem enthusiastic, even excited, about the rules and rituals. Ask a group of fourth-graders who's fasting for Ramadan (fasting is not required until children reach puberty) and the hands shoot up in the air. "I am! I am! Full day!" proclaims Luay, just 7 years old.

"My mother won't let me fast," one of his classmates confesses, looking wistfully down at the floor. "She says I have to wait 'til next year."

The girls, despite their demure *hijab* (headscarves worn to preserve modesty), are a spirited bunch, eager to challenge the boys at kickball and express their opinions. Asked about gender equality in Islam--in Afghanistan, after all, girls were banned from school, and the Middle East is hardly a feminist stronghold--they say those restrictions have nothing to do with the Koran, and jump to point out that Islamic law granted women the right to vote, own property and choose their husbands many centuries before their Western sisters.

What about the fact that the girls always sit behind the boys at prayers?

"I love this question," laughs art teacher Gail Ramjan, a former Lutheran who converted to Islam after marrying a Zimbabwean Muslim. Because prayer involves prostration--sticking

your butt in the air, to put it crudely--women are seated behind men so that their posteriors are not on display. "Ask any of the women if they'd rather be in back or in front," she says.

What does she tell her female students about the role of women in Islam? "I don't have to tell them anything," she replies. "They realize Islam gave women so many rights long before they had rights in the West. We had the right to own property 1,400 years ago. We choose our husbands--the Prophet's wife asked him to marry her! Now, does every Muslim follow the rules on how to treat women? Of course not! But if you go by what Islam says, any woman would be happy. People look at our dress and say, 'Look, they're subjugated.' Well, this is my choice. Nobody's making me wear it. Lots of Muslim women don't wear *hijab*. In fact, I was a Muslim for six years before I ever wore *hijab*. I didn't have the courage, to be honest."

In addition to teaching students the tenets of Islam, ISMET must tackle the much thornier subject of its history and politics, and the significance of Sept. 11. Viewed in the wake of the attacks, some of its textbooks clearly include awkward phrases.

For example, a sixth-grade textbook, *Islam & Muslim Civilization*, includes the following suggestions to teachers:

*Discuss persecution in today's world, the forms it takes, its purposes, and specific incidents.... Discuss the Arabic word jihad, its significance as inner struggle to achieve personal goals and as regrettably necessary action to counter persecution.*

In our post-Sept. 11 hypersensitivity, it is tempting to seize on the last sentence as at least tacitly condoning violence. Presented with that proposition, Wajdi Said pauses for a moment while he swallows his frustration.

"The last few months have been tough, to be honest with you," he says. "It has been tough because Islam has been put on trial.... No one's putting Christianity on trial in Northern Ireland--and we don't want to put Christianity on trial. Israeli soldiers are killing people in Palestine, but you don't hear the media saying Judaism is on trial--and we don't want to see it on trial. This is sad. American Muslims ask why the media has put *us* on trial."

In fact, Said cites numerous historical episodes where Islamic leaders demonstrated far more tolerance than their Christian counterparts. For example, the Sephardic Jews enjoyed tremendous prosperity under the Islamic Moors, who ruled Spain for seven centuries. When the Catholics took over, the Sephardim were tortured, massacred and eventually expelled.

"Which religion shows the tolerance?" Said asks. "The problem with Thomas Friedman and the so-called experts is that they take things out of context. I can quote you from the Bible, from the Torah, all sorts of things. Samson was the first suicide bomber! But does it mean Judaism is intolerant? No. It has nothing to do with Judaism."

Reaching for a speech he gave last month to a Rotary club, he turns to an eloquent passage denouncing terrorism.

"Islam condemns terrorism against human beings regardless of their faith, race, gender or nationality. Terrorism is antithesis to Islam. The September attacks are horrific and sinful. We pray to the Lord of the Universe to prevent anything like the Sept. 11 tragedy from happening again. We pray that the perpetrators be identified and brought swiftly to justice."

At the same time, Said is torn. It is currently seen as unfashionable, even unpatriotic, to suggest that the United States bears any responsibility for the terror of Sept. 11. American Muslims who voice this opinion can expect to be labeled disloyal or worse.

And yet, Said and others at ISMET strongly believe that U.S. foreign policy has, directly or indirectly, resulted in misery for millions of Muslims in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and now Afghanistan. They understand the rationale for those policies. But they still cannot divorce themselves from the suffering of their Muslim brothers and sisters.

"What happened on Sept. 11 was a huge tragedy," Said says. "But the public needs to understand there are hundreds and hundreds of September Elevens every day in the rest of the world."

In truth, the disagreement goes far deeper than foreign policy. While Muslims naturally cherish the American creed of freedom and prosperity, their faith is fundamentally at odds with its consequences, the freewheeling carnival of indulgence that dominates popular culture. "The West and Islam have different values, and they're divergent," says Khan, the English teacher. "Anyone who disagrees is fooling themselves."

A striking example is the question of music.

The Koran itself says nothing against music. But verses of the Hadith have been interpreted as condemning "the drum and the lute"--for pretty much the same reasons that Elvis' swaying hips were amputated by the television censors--and many Muslims today shun all music except for *nasheed*, a traditional format involving voice and drums glorifying Allah.

This wariness of music is by no means universal among Muslims. Said reckons that half the students at ISMET take private lessons on the piano or other instruments, but the school itself intentionally provides no musical instruction beyond *nasheed*. "There's nothing wrong with Beethoven or Bach," says Said. "We leave it up to the parents."

But when it comes to pop music--a defining element in the identity of the typical American adolescent--ISMET takes a completely different attitude. Said emphasizes that the lyrics should be "ethically based" and have a "meaningful objective"--a restriction which, if followed, would pretty much put MTV out of business.

The students at ISMET seem generally resigned to these restrictions. Fatima, the kickball punter, sometimes listens to the radio but prefers weaving. Lina Tarhuni likes rap and R&B, but emphasizes that she's "not into pop music." Ahmed says he listens to no music at all, except for the occasional Muslim hip-hop artist.

The siren call of rock 'n' roll has sent a chill down the spine of many a religious leader--pastor, rabbi or imam--but judging from the students at ISMET, the muezzin's call to prayer is still more powerful than the navel bombardment of Britney Spears. While the liberated Afghans of Kandahar dust off their VCRs, in Portland the children of Islam are sticking to their prayer mats. That certainly sets them apart from most American kids--but hardly makes them a menace to society. On the contrary, the real question is not what we have to fear from America's Muslims, but what we can learn from them.

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ISMET is open to students from all backgrounds, regardless of religion. Find out more about the Muslim Educational Trust at [www.metpdx.org](http://www.metpdx.org) .

ISMET tuition runs \$275 a month; more than 100 students are on the waiting list.

Many groups offer resources for learning about Islam, including:

American Muslim Council ([www.amconline.org](http://www.amconline.org) )

American Muslim Foundation ([www.amfnet.org](http://www.amfnet.org) )

Council on American- Islamic Relations ([www.cair-net.org](http://www.cair-net.org) )

Muslim Women's League ([www.mwlusa.org](http://www.mwlusa.org) )

Through Nov. 29, the Council on American- Islamic Relations logged more than 1,450 post-Sept. 11 incidents against Muslims (including 19 deaths and 265 cases of assault or property damage). See [www.cair-net.org](http://www.cair-net.org) for details.

In the past three months, leaders of the Muslim Educational Trust have participated in 200 speaking engagements and more than 40 media interviews.

Since Sept. 11, 1,147 people, mostly Middle Eastern immigrants, have been detained in connection with the attacks.

Islam means "submission" in Arabic.

The United Nations estimates the world Muslim population at 1.2 to 1.4 billion-- roughly one person in five.

There are an estimated 6 to 7 million Muslims living in the U.S. Roughly 33 percent of Muslims at a typical mosque are South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi and Afghani), 30 percent are African- American, 25 percent are Arab.

Local Islamic leaders reckon the Portland area has roughly 15,000 to 20,000 Muslims-- the majority living in Washington County.

The Muslim calendar begins with the prophet Mohammed's journey from Mecca to Medina in



CE 622. It is based on the lunar cycle, which means there are 354 days in an Islamic year. We are currently in year 1422.