Islamic studies as early childhood education in countries affected by conflict: The role of mosque schools in remote Afghan villages

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords:
Development
Literacy
Educational policy
Islamic education
Early childhood education
Education and armed conflict

A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the relationship between an early Islamic education and academic achievement in Afghanistan. Fears of political indoctrination have dominated discussions of Islamic schooling among many Westerners, making some policy-makers hesitant to support the kind of education to which most children in Afghanistan have access. In addition, misunderstandings of Islamic education as well as assumptions about the lack of educational benefits from pre-primary or primary Islamic schools have helped sideline them in policy discussions. But mosque schools may play an important role in preparing children for academic success. Children who attend mosque schools score better on tests of literacy than those who do not. This is particularly significant in countries like Afghanistan where many children do not have access to formal education. These findings suggest that mosque schools merit more careful attention.

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1. Introduction

Conventional Western views of Islamic education in Afghanistan assume that radical madrassas play a prominent role in educating Afghan children. In fact, the importance and prevalence of madrassas in Afghan society is dwarfed by another type of religious school commonly known among Afghans as mosque-based early education, or “mosque schools” for short. Because mosque schools are often confused with madrassas, it is important to highlight the differences between them. Mosque schools offer religious classes held in a mosque, taught by the local mullah, or religious leader. In Afghanistan, young children—up to age eleven or twelve—usually attend mosque schools to study the Qur’an and related religious texts and attend in the early morning for a couple of hours per day, often six days per week. Madrassas typically cater to older students, offer longer and more varied classes, and are sometimes boarding schools. Although no statistics are available on the total numbers of madrassas in Afghanistan, most qualitative and anecdotal reports indicate that while there may be several of them in cities, provinces often have only one per district, as was true in our study of community-based education in Ghor Province discussed below.1 Indeed, madrassas in Afghanistan appear to play a negligible role in rural children’s religious education. In contrast, mosque schools play a prominent role in every day Afghan life and in educating young children. Of the 819 6–11 year-old children in our study described below, for example, only four (0.5%) attended a madrassa during the 2007–2008 study period while 688 (83.8%) attended a mosque school.2,3

1 A number of these are “official” madrassas, managed by the Ministry of Education and sponsored by the state. Community-based schools, also registered with the government, are housed in existing local infrastructure—in the case of this study, usually in the mosque, but while mosque schools only provide religious education, community-based schools offer a full range of math, science, and language lessons from government textbooks.
2 It is likely that madrassa attendance in the region is overestimated in the popular press. In neighboring Pakistan, for example, according to some reports, madrassa enrollment may account for less than one percent of total enrollment in schools. In spite of such low enrollment, much has been made of the dangerous role these schools play in the country (Andrabi et al., 2006).
3 Although the children included in this study range in age from 6-11 and therefore are older than most who participate in early childhood education programs, we believe that because this is their first schooling experience, our findings are relevant to this type of education.
Yet many foreign policymakers in Afghanistan have, to date, virtually ignored the existence of mosque schools. Many are not aware of these schools (personal interviews, September 2012; March 2013). Others who may have information about mosque schools, such as some US policymakers, rarely incorporate them into education policy toward Afghanistan. There are several reasons why this is so. First, US law prohibits the use of government funds to support foreign religious organizations. Second, given the divisive role religious education is thought to play in magnifying social divisions between Afghans and Westerners, and between Afghans and human rights norms, foreign policymakers working in Afghanistan have typically been reluctant to address Islamic education in their plans. Thus, the media image of virulently madrassas has crowded out the everyday forms of Islamic schooling that are much more relevant to Afghan society and to Afghan and foreign policymakers alike. Third and crucially important, many consider the pedagogical practice typical of mosque schools to hold little educational value.

In Afghanistan, where the education system struggles to serve the rural population, approximately 75 percent of which lives in villages, mosque schools are too important to overlook. In this paper, we examine mosque schools for their academic merit. We argue that mosque schools extend the potential for universal access to education, providing basic literacy skills that enhance school readiness for young children. In our study of community-based schools in Ghor Province, Afghanistan, we show that children with better attendance at mosque schools performed significantly better on literacy tests than their counterparts who did not attend.

This paper proceeds in the following way. First, we briefly discuss the state of access to primary education in Afghanistan and the importance early childhood education holds for children living in countries affected by conflict. Second, we provide a review of mosque schools, including what is known to date of their effect on student learning in Afghan and Muslim societies. We illustrate the tensions between Western versus Islamic views of learning and knowledge, showing how this has allowed observers to dismiss the role of early Islamic education in academic achievement. Third, we return to the tensions between religious versus “modern” education in Afghan society to acknowledge the hurdles that face the incorporation of these schools into a broader system. Fourth, we present our data from structured surveys with parents and their children, complemented by qualitative interviews with parents, village leaders and mullahs. We show how mosque school attendance is associated with academic achievement. The conclusion discusses the implications of our results for policymakers intent on expanding universal access to education as well as implications for current debates regarding the educational role of religious education in post-conflict intervention.

2. Background

2.1. Access to education in Afghanistan

Other studies have chronicled the numerous obstacles that prevent many Afghans from gaining access to education (Buerde and Linden, 2013; Burde, 2014). Some of the most significant factors include the distance many children must travel to reach school, ongoing conflict that makes both this distance and physical attendance particularly dangerous, and economic hardships requiring children to contribute to labor at home. These challenges are especially detrimental to young children and girls’ enrollment. While the Afghan government has made huge progress in increasing educational enrollment since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, approximately 5 million of the estimated 12 million school-age children still lack access to education (Ayobi, 2010). No female students are enrolled in grades 10–12 in close to half of the 412 existing urban and rural districts across the country (Ayobi, 2010).

Yet access to early childhood education may be especially important for children in countries experiencing conflict. Children who are likely to face frequent interruptions to their schooling due to violence and the poverty that often accompanies it especially need the boost to academic achievement that early education can offer. Early childhood programs can also offer a stable and safe environment for children. They can help to normalize daily life in unstable environments. These programs can provide a caring and safe environment for children during a key time in their psychological and emotional development. Schools also offer a consistent way to reach children in order to provide them with health services such as immunizations. In conflict zones, early childhood education programs are also a means to disseminate important information to children and their parents related to safety in a particular conflict. Thus these programs can increase the number of children who have access to such services (CGECCD/ INEE, 2009; Kamel, 2006). On a national level, these boosts to children’s academic success, health and wellbeing can help fulfill broader development goals.

Despite the positive potential these programs hold, in 2008 the Afghan Ministry of Education (MoE) reported that no state system for early childhood education existed outside of approximately 200 day-care centers operating primarily for the children of government employees (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan MoE, 2008). In 2011, the MoE voiced its commitment to early childhood education in response to the Education for All Global Monitoring Report, stating that a section on preschool curriculum development was added to the MoE and that preschools for the children of “working mothers” were established in urban areas. Otherwise, though, the MoE points to mosque schools and NGOs as primary sources of early childhood education provision (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan MoE, 2011). Although some formal provision for early childhood education may be emerging in parts of Afghanistan, it is increasing slowly and maintains limited reach. Without more

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4 The separation of church and state, mandated by the US Constitution, prohibits USAID from financing activities that are inherently religious, such as “worship, religious instruction, or proselytization” (USAID, 2009, p. 71). Note that although the US government does support faith-based US NGOs as well as vouchers for children in the US to attend religious schools, the government is prohibited from funding foreign religious schools or organizations.

5 Although there are likely mosque schools that would be deemed extremist by Western standards, according to historical and anecdotal accounts, and according to our own data shown here, these mosque schools make up a minority of the whole. It is also important to note, however, that we do not assess children’s attitudes or beliefs in this study.

6 Afghans refer to mainstream government schools that incorporate science and other subjects as “modern” or “worldly” education.

7 Although the official name of the government of Afghanistan is the “Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,” in keeping with newspapers and current convention we refer to it as simply the “Afghan government.”

8 Enrollment figures are subject to significant debate. Current data puts the total figure at approximately 8 million (PHI, 2011).

9 Although we do not discuss them here, early childhood programs are cited for their secondary effects on parents. During the conflict in Bosnia, for example, parents reported a greater peace of mind from knowing that their children were being cared for despite the conflict.

10 Recently, the Global Partnership for Education has promoted a mosque-based primary school component as a new government-led initiative. It is not without precedent. King Amanullah Khan’s 1920s education decree launched community education across the country, including in mosques where classes were taught by a mullah. This decree was later abandoned in the 1930s (see Burde, 2014 for a more detailed discussion of this history).
systematic incorporation of mosque schools into the government education system, full education enrollment for Afghan children is likely to be unattainable for some time into the future.

2.2. Education in mosque schools in Afghanistan and beyond

The lack of wide access to good educational options within the limited government system underscores the need for policymakers to pay attention to the potential educational benefits of mosque schools and to reevaluate policies that exclude or deny aid to this system. Mosque schools are by far the most common form of religious education in Afghanistan yet they have been the subject of less than a handful of qualitative studies (e.g., Karlsson and Mansory, 2007; Borchgrevink, 2010) and no prior quantitative studies that we know of. As noted above, most of the focus on Islamic education in recent years has been on the extent to which it may or may not inculcate anti-Western, violent religious beliefs. Although these schools certainly exist, this discussion has not easily accommodated the more numerous religious schools that do not teach hatred and violence (Boyle, 2006; Burde, 2014). In addition, the media focus on the schools that likely contribute to violent jihad (see, for example, Goldberg, 2000; Singer, 2001) has had the effect of heightening the apprehension among many Westerners toward religious education in the region. This apprehension on one side, combined with the suspicion of many Afghans toward government and outsiders meddling in religious affairs on the other side, has made gathering data on this type of education difficult. At the same time, religious education holds enormous importance in a country like Afghanistan and any discussion about education reform that does not include some reference to this form of learning omits an essential element of the education system and risks appearing insensitive to parents’ priorities. Below, we first describe the structure of mosque schools, followed by a discussion of their relationship to academic achievement.

2.2.1. Content and Structure of mosque schools

The primary aim of the first several years of mosque school education historically and today is the cultivation of Islamic knowledge (Mehrafi, 1978). Toward this goal children learn to read Arabic, and some learn Arabic grammar. Sometimes children also learn to read and write in their spoken language, which in Ghor province (where the study was located) is Dari. In addition, mullahs teach children to recite Persian or Pashto poetry, to memorize and recite the Qur’an, and to perform religious rituals. Some are taught to understand the Qur’an as well, although the emphasis is on memorizing the contents in Arabic, a foreign language to Afghans, without focusing on understanding individual words (Personal Interviews, June 2008). In Afghanistan children often study the texts of the Panj Kitab (five books), which teach Islamic values (personal interviews, June 2008; Ward, 1978). Larger mosque schools may include instruction in calligraphy, basic math, and more sophisticated lessons in Islamic rights, laws, and guidance (personal interview, April 2014).

The teacher is either a “mullah” who has completed a certain level of Islamic learning but supplements his living in another way such as by farming, or an “imam” who is employed by the villagers to teach and officiate at the mosque, usually through the zikat system where families provide in-kind donations such as firewood and food (Karlsson and Mansory, 2007). Small, poor villages typically employ one person—a mullah—to serve both teaching and officiating roles.11

11 Practices relating to mosque schools, mullahs, and imams are subject to some variation depending on the region, ethnic group, and level of proximity to an urban center.

The structure of mosque schools differs from Western secular education as well as from that of government schools in Afghanistan. Although mullahs (and parents) test children’s progress orally, there are no grades, written exams, or attendance sheets. Children attend irregularly and progress as they are able. Girls often attend until around age eleven or twelve at the oldest, while boys may continue on for years. Most children attend regularly in the winter when they have fewer chores at home. While most government schools are located in urban and semi-urban centers, mosque schools are found in villages across the Afghan countryside.

Two options exist for Afghan government oversight of mosque schools: the MoE and/or the Ministry of the Haj and Religious Affairs (MHRA). Although there have been attempts to incorporate mosque schools into the MoE, they currently remain distinct from both the formal and non-formal systems of classification. The formal system includes general education (grades 1–12), Islamic education (grades 1–14) and community-based education (grades 1–6), all of which concern primary and secondary levels, as well as teacher education (grades 10–14) and technical and vocational education (grades 10–14), which are upper secondary, career-oriented tracks. The MoE defines non-formal education as literacy programs for adults and children who are not in school. Although mosque schools are ubiquitous in Afghanistan, they fall outside this official MoE classification.

The MHRA is also charged with overseeing some forms of Islamic education. According to an official at the MoE, the MHRA maintains a registry of mosque schools and provides some amount of funding for some of these schools (personal communication, April 2014). It is unclear, however, how widespread this support is. None of the schools in our study appeared to be registered or to receive support from the MHRA. As a result, they remain outside of existing monitoring and management systems, and lack access to government funding. In this article, we suggest that domestic and foreign policymakers pay more attention to mosque schools, for example, by increasing their training and contact with government systems.

2.2.2. Misunderstandings between western and Islamic education

Education plays a central role in Islam, and the Qur’an contains many quotes regarding the importance of seeking knowledge throughout one’s lifetime (Halstead, 2004; Boyle, 2006; Thobani, 2007). However, differences between the concept of education and knowledge in Islam and in Western liberal thought may lead Westerners to undervalue the academic merits of Islamic education. There are many variations, of course, in both Islamic and Western education, but we highlight some common differences here to illustrate our argument. Rather than aiming to cultivate autonomous critical thinking as in liberal Western approaches to education, Islamic education aims to cultivate all aspects of the self in a way thought to bring the child closer to God (Halstead, 2004; Boyle, 2006; Alavi, 2007). This goal is related to several common characteristics of Islamic education. For example, within Islam revealed knowledge is distinguished from knowledge that can be gained through human reasoning. Both are valuable in Islam, and reason is important in understanding what has been revealed, but revealed knowledge may be considered of a higher value because it is understood to come directly from God (Halstead, 2004; Boyle, 2006). While Western, liberal education may focus on socially and empirically derived truths, Islamic education asserts that these contingent truths must be learned within the context of revealed knowledge. The personal dimension of knowledge is recognized as well, but in the value of personal insight (Hussain, 2007; Halstead, 2004). In addition, where Western thought may posit a tension between the needs of society and individual freedom, within Islamic thought the
cultivation of individual potential is expected to enable the individual to live in harmony with others (when that cultivation is grounded in the Qur’an) (Hussain, 2007).

As noted above, Islamic educational techniques used to cultivate revealed knowledge are often misunderstood among non-Muslims, and the emphasis on memorization particularly so. Helen Boyle (2006) observes that failure to understand the nuances of why the Qur’an is memorized leads many in the West to assume that Islamic schools rely on memorization in order to “indoctrinate” students rather than educate them. However, her ethnographic study of Islamic schools in Morocco, Yemen, and Nigeria, indicates that the purposes of Qur’anic memorization are more subtle than they appear to most Western observers. In addition to transmitting sacred texts across generations, memorization is intended to lay a foundation of knowledge that the child will come to understand as he or she matures. Rather than replacing comprehension, the emphasis on memorization reflects a view that meaning unfolds gradually throughout a person’s life. Finally, it is important to note that we do not assess Islamic education for its effects in comparison to Western education, and therefore, do not endorse one type of pedagogy over another. Instead, we observe that strong beliefs about one form of pedagogy may obscure understanding of another.

2.2.3. Mosque Schools and Academic Achievement:

Despite the fact that Islamic pedagogy may run counter to Western standards, a small number of studies point to the positive consequences of an early Islamic education. Participation in a Qur’anic school is associated with higher achievement in primary school in Guinea Bissau (Ahlenhed et al., 1991, cited in Daun and Sane, 2008). A longitudinal study in Senegal indicates that adults who had an Islamic education earn an income that is, on average, equal to or higher than those with secondary education (Daun and Sane, 2008). The same study found that greater participation in Qur’anic schools is correlated with higher math scores, though only for girls (Daun and Sane, 2008). In East Africa, children who attend community-run or government-run preschools do not do as well on cognitive measures as those who attend a preschool that is part of the Madrassa Resource Center, an education project that uses learner-centered pedagogy to teach Islamic and secular knowledge (Mwaura et al., 2008).

One of the few qualitative studies of mosque schools in Afghanistan suggests several reasons why children may gain an advantage from access to Islamic education in early childhood (Karlsson and Mansory, 2007). Through ethnographic research of two mosque schools, this study finds that children work at their own pace and often in small groups, help each other, and receive individual attention from the mullah/imam. Children often learn to read and write and sometimes to do math, as well as socialize into student life. These particular schools use books specifically geared toward helping young children read.

In addition, there may be benefits to memorization beyond the possibility of internalization for future use, discussed above. Some researchers suggest that memorization of the Qur’an can also promote academic development (Karlsson and Mansory, 2007; see also Boyle, 2006). Indeed, in Islamic communities memorization is often viewed as helping children to cultivate mental discipline and with it, the capacity for intentional, rational action (Boyle, 2006).

At the same time, some studies question the learning outcomes of an exclusively Islamic education. In Bangladesh, students who attended an Islamic school do not score as well on math tests as those that attended a secular school (Asadullah et al., 2007). Furthermore, mosque schools have mixed implications for girls’ education. Parents send girls to mosque school when they are young to obtain a basic Islamic education, so mosque schools provide an important start to girls’ academic paths. These schools tend to be trusted by parents and are usually located within every village so girls do not need to travel far. However, girls typically do not attend past age eleven or twelve. The extent to which mosque schools may educate all children, and girls in particular, remains an open question. We address this question below and argue that mosque school attendance has positive implications for children’s education.

2.3. Importance of religious education in Afghan society: differentiating among the options

Before sharing our findings, it is important to discuss perceived risks associated with state-supported religious education. In countries where religion is a fundamental part of the national identity, religious education is considered an integral part of developing that identity. Concerns with perpetuating intolerance through certain kinds of religious education are not unfounded, however. Elsewhere, although government initiatives to increase access to primary school by subsidizing mosques have met with some success for both boys and girls, they may also have broader social implications. Pakistan provides an example of the potential damaging effects of such policies. Under General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq the government of Pakistan subsidized mosques in villages without primary schools to teach a standard primary school curriculum as well as Islamic education. While this initiative succeeded in increasing enrollment, especially among girls (Warwick and Reimers, 1995), Zia ul-Haq’s education policies were part of a deep and sustained effort to Islamicize Pakistan. Many regard his influence on young generations as a turning point in the country’s history, in part cultivating the religious intolerance that exists in Pakistan today (personal interview, May 2014; Burde, 2014).

Afghan education has also been subjected to these distortions, most notably during the 1980s and early 1990s when the mujahideen struggled against the Soviets. The mujahideen textbooks interwove violence and religion such that violence against the Soviet occupiers and other “infidels” was described as a religious duty (Burde, 2014). The blurring of the lines between religious obligations and violence has persisted under the Taliban and in Taliban-controlled areas today. It is important to understand, however, that Afghan religious education has not historically taught violent messages and anecdotal evidence indicates that most traditional mosque schools do not provide this focus.

Furthermore, Afghan parents do not typically perceive a tension between religious and secular subjects and want their children to learn both. When Afghan parents are asked why they consider education important, many make it clear that they value two types of education—“education for the soul” (i.e. religious education), and “education for the world” (i.e. education that incorporates math, science, and a wide range of subjects deemed useful for success in the modern world) (Burde, 2008; Burde, 2014). In addition, as described above, Islamic education may provide the first step toward literacy for many. Moreover, our interviews with mullahs and parents suggest that most families do not choose between an exclusively religious and exclusively secular education (Personal Interviews, June 2008). Parents tend to take advantage of all the options available to them, sending their children to both mosque and formal schools when possible and to mosque schools alone when other options are not available.

3. Data and methods

The data presented here come from a randomized experiment, described previously in Burde (2012) and Burde and Linden (2013). The original aim of the study was to examine the effects of community-based schools (CBS) on math and reading scores. In

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12 Please see Burde 2014 for a detailed discussion of these mujahideen textbooks.
this paper, we reuse these data for an observational analysis examining the relationship between mosque schooling and educational outcomes. For the reasons laid out above, there is evidence to believe that mosque schools are more effective at improving educational outcomes than has been acknowledged to date, and our data provide further evidence to support this conclusion. We describe the details of the data collection in this section. Interested readers can find more detail, along with the results of the randomized experiment, in Burde (2012) and Burde and Linden (2013).

The researchers for this study worked with a large international US-based NGO, Catholic Relief Services (CRS)13, to measure the effects of community-based schooling on children, households, and villages in remote Afghan villages. CRS was part of a consortium of NGOs tasked with providing hundreds of community-based schools for children between the ages of 6 and 11 in 19 provinces across Afghanistan. In contrast to mosque schools, community-based schools use government textbooks, and the teachers receive government and NGO-supported pre-service and in-service training. The CRS portion of the program was carried out in Ghor Province, which is among the most remote and inaccessible regions in Afghanistan, covering a mountainous plateau subject to harsh winters. Roughly 90 percent of the approximately 675,000 inhabitants of the province live in rural villages organized by tribe or clan. Few of these villages have government schools.

Although these villages lacked government schools, all of the villages in this study had a mosque with a mullah who was selected, paid, and managed by the community, and all of the mullahs offered religious classes to young children in these villages.14 Thus, every village had a mosque school before it had the community-based school that was assessed in the original study. Many of the children in our study attended these mosque schools before attending the community-based schools.

We randomly assigned community-based schools to 13 of 31 villages, and collected enrollment, attendance, and achievement data from all of the girls and boys between the ages of 6 and 11 living in all of the 31 villages—both those that received the community-based schools, and those that had not yet received them (N = 1544).15 All villages received schools in the second year of the program. To carry out this intensive data collection, we hired and trained a team of approximately 18 Afghan researchers managed by an Afghan research supervisor. The team surveyed every household in every village in the study, interviewing every head of household, and administering achievement tests for each child between the ages of 6 and 11. The surveyors returned repeatedly to locate and interview any children who were missing from the village. They recorded attendance data regarding mosque and community-based schools, and visited government schools to determine whether children enrolled in the study attended government area schools.

Because students were surveyed at the beginning (wave 1, spring of 2007), in the middle (wave 2, fall of 2007), and the end of the study period (wave 3, spring of 2008) we can analyze whether the year of mosque schooling made a difference in academic achievement. Because the academic achievement tests at the beginning of the year identify any differences between students that existed prior to the 2007 year of mosque schooling, this allows us to control for the fact that the students who enrolled in mosque schools in 2007 may have started out with a higher level of ability on average. The use of such “panel” data (data collected over multiple time periods for the same individuals), provide an improved basis for identifying causal effects (Wooldridge, 2002).

To take advantage of the panel design, we restrict the sample to students for which we have academic achievement tests at both the beginning and the end of the year. These two panel waves were a year apart and so this choice allowed us to measure the effect of a full academic year. This limited our cases for two reasons. First, as is common in panel surveys, some subjects could not be surveyed in each wave of data collection. Second, 8 villages could not be reached during wave 1 data collection due to an armed conflict in the region. Thus, the number of cases for which there are both beginning of the year achievement tests (wave 1, spring of 2007) and end of the year achievement tests (wave 3, spring of 2008) surveys is 819, representing 23 villages.16

3.1. Key variables of interest and outcomes

We used surveys to collect three types of information relevant to this analysis.17 First, we collected the basic demographic information listed in Tables 2 and 3 such as age and economic background. Second, we determined the enrollment status of each child between the ages of 6 and 11 living in the household. Finally, for each child that was available, the surveyor administered a short test covering math and language skills. The questions were adapted from the first grade government textbooks to ensure that the test covered material from the official Afghan curriculum.

3.1.1. Outcomes

We tested students on their math and language test scores in spring 2007 (wave 1) and again in spring 2008 (wave 3). Our outcomes of interest are the standardized18 math and language test scores at the end of the year (wave 3). The math test included questions on number identification, counting, greater than or less than, addition, and subtraction. The language test covered Dari, the children’s primary language and the medium of instruction in all government schools in the region, and included questions on letter identification, reading words of varying difficulty, basic grammar (subject-verb agreement), and simple reading comprehension.

3.1.2. Mosque school attendance

In order to assess the impact of mosque school attendance on children’s learning outcomes, we examine the relationship between test outcomes and self-reported mosque school attendance between the two waves of data collection during the 2007–2008 academic year.19 Our key variable of interest is an indicator

13 CRS is a nonproselytizing organization that works with people of all backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, etc.
14 Parents are encouraged to participate in community-based schools, for example, monitoring attendance and asking children questions about their work. Some report similar behavior in relation to mosque schools (personal communications, April 2014), but these interactions typically take place at a local level, that is, within the village. As with community-based school attendance, parents appear to support girls’ attendance provided that the distance between home and school is not great and provided the girl is under 12 years of age.
15 Note that randomization was not used to test for mosque school effects; randomization is only mentioned here to show the robustness of the study in relation to community-based school effects.
16 Among the 819 analysis cases, 36.9 percent were children from families that identify as Aimaq, 30.1 percent from families that identify as Tajik, 20.8 percent from families that identify as Farsi speaking and another 5.3 percent from families that identify as Afghan. Sixty-eight percent of the sample lived in households where the head was a farmer. The average child in our sample lived in a household with 8.7 individuals, owning an average of 2.4 jeribs of land and 1.4 sheep. The average education of household heads was 2.9 years and the average distance to the nearest government school is 3.1 km.
17 Table A1 lists the variables included in our analysis along with summary statistics.
18 Standardization puts outcome measures on a common scale with mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. This convention allows for comparing results across studies.
19 Although the academic year in “cold” areas such as those in Ghor Province runs from the third week of March until December, mosque school attendance continues during the winter. Similarly in this study, attendance in community-based schools also was meant to continue through January and February.
showing whether the student reportedly attended the mosque school during the 2007–2008 academic year.

3.1.3. Education control variables

In order to ensure that we are comparing children of similar ability, we include a number of variables in our model to control for differences in educational experience as well as for children’s ability at the beginning of the year. In other words, by including these variables we account for differences among children that could predispose some toward higher achievement, irrespective of school attendance. Education-related control variables include whether a child attended an NGO school in 2007, whether a child attended a government school in 2007, number of years of mosque schooling prior to the 2007 school year, and number of years of government schooling prior to 2007. These four education variables are included in all analyses because current mosque school attendance will be related to prior education. Adjusting for these variables allows us to counter competing explanations for differences between children’s achievement scores.

We also take into account how students performed prior to the 2007 year of mosque school attendance. This enables us to examine whether students actually gain in educational attainment during the course of the year. Without measuring ability at the beginning of the year as we do, our findings could reflect a selection bias in which students who are more capable to begin with are chosen by their families to attend mosque school.

In an ideal study to test the effects of mosque schooling, at the outset students who attend mosque schools would be indistinguishable from those who do not attend. In particular, they should have equal academic achievement scores at the beginning of the year. An association between higher test scores at the start of the year and subsequent mosque school attendance would be evidence of selection bias, whereby higher achieving students are more likely to attend mosque school. Below we discuss how we attempt to rule out selection bias by testing for differences in test scores at the beginning of the year, after adjusting for education control variables. We call this a placebo test, because any association there would necessarily be a spurious result of selection bias and would not be due to the effect of mosque schooling. Finding an association in this analysis would provide evidence of selection bias in our sample and weaken our results.

3.1.4. Demographic variables

Finally, we include a number of additional demographic variables in our analyses. Within villages, families tend to be homogenous—ethnically, linguistically, and religiously—and have similar lifestyles and sources of income. Indeed, in each village, most inhabitants are related and trace themselves to the same ancestor. These demographic variables, including child and household characteristics, are listed in Table A1. We also include village indicators in some analyses to control for differences among villages.

3.2. How to assess the effects of mosque schools

In this section we discuss our hypotheses and analysis. Our goal is to evaluate whether mosque schools complement other educational institutions. We use regression analysis to test our hypotheses.21 We discuss below each of our three specific hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Since mosque schools focus on reading rather than math, there should be a relationship between language test scores and mosque school attendance in the 2007 academic year but not between math scores and mosque school attendance.

3.2.1. Test 1

To evaluate Hypothesis 1, we first look at the relationship between test scores and mosque school attendance while accounting for other types of schooling. In other models we also control for the demographic background variables listed above. If we find statistically significant results in this analysis, it would suggest that mosque schools increase language skills.22

However, as noted above, evidence that wave 3 language scores are associated with mosque school attendance could be due to selection bias, rather than a causal effect of mosque schooling. Selection bias would arise if students with greater literacy were more likely to choose (or be chosen by their families) to attend mosque schools. As noted above, evidence of selection bias would be apparent if there were an association between 2007 mosque school attendance and scores from the wave 1 tests, administered before the 2007 academic year since this association would indicate that higher performing children were more likely to enroll in mosque schools.

Hypothesis 2. If there is no selection bias, there should not be a relationship between wave 1 language scores, collected before the 2007 academic year, and mosque school attendance in 2007.

3.2.2. Test 2

To evaluate Hypothesis 2, we look at the relationship between test scores and mosque school attendance in 2007. We run the same analyses as in Test 1 where possible. On the one hand, statistically significant results for the placebo tests would be evidence of a selection bias. On the other hand, failure to find statistically significant results would bolster the interpretation that results in Test 1 are due to a causal impact of mosque school attendance on language skills.

In the next analysis we separately examine the ability of students to identify letters used in Dari only and letters that are common to both Arabic and Dari. Because the primary purpose of mosque schools is to teach the Qur’an to young children, and because the Qur’an is taught in Arabic, if mosque schools have an effect on letter recognition, we should expect this to manifest as an increase in Arabic letter recognition but not Dari letter recognition.

Hypothesis 3. Since mosque schools focus on reading in Arabic, there should be a relationship between mosque school attendance and Arabic letter recognition but not Dari letter recognition.

3.2.3. Test 3

To test Hypothesis 3, we examined the relationship between Dari and Arabic letter recognition scores and mosque school attendance while controlling for a variety of different background variables. A statistically significant result for Arabic, but not Dari, would reinforce the interpretation that mosque schools are having a causal impact on language test scores.

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20 The school year in cold areas in Afghanistan (i.e., regions that experience harsh winters) runs from the third week of March to early December.

21 “Regression analysis” refers to a statistical method for understanding the ways different variables affect each other. For readers interested in the more technical aspects of this study, please note that we use OLS regression models with robust standard errors that are adjusted for village-level clustering (Wooldridge, 2002; Williams, 2000).

22 For readers interested in more technical details, please note that to check the robustness of results, we also ran an analysis that stratified the sample by the original treatment and control groups to rule out the possibility that results are driven by an interaction between the experimental treatment and mosque school attendance. Results are not substantively different.
Table 1
Regression of math, language scores on 2007–2008 mosque school attendance and variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Letter identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosque school ‘07–’08</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>0.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline years mosque schooling</td>
<td>0.251***</td>
<td>0.154***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government school</td>
<td>0.260</td>
<td>0.290*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘07–’08</td>
<td>0.192</td>
<td>0.141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline years</td>
<td>0.288***</td>
<td>0.198***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO schooling</td>
<td>0.902***</td>
<td>0.830***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘07–’08</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline math score</td>
<td>0.352***</td>
<td>0.300***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline letter identification</td>
<td>0.208***</td>
<td>0.194***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic covariates</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village dummies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.383</td>
<td>0.476</td>
<td>0.528</td>
<td>0.546</td>
<td>0.577</td>
<td>0.623</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Because mosque schools focus primarily on reading, we hypothesize that mosque schools have educational benefits for literacy (e.g., letter recognition). Table 1 presents statistically significant associations between mosque school education and letter identification (models 7–12). The failure to find statistically significant results for math scores is consistent with the interpretation that mosque school attendance is a causal factor contributing to increased letter recognition. Were association between mosque school attendance and literacy spurious, with more advanced students attending to attend mosque schools, we might also expect to see a relationship between math and attendance (models 1–6).

4. Results

In this section we present the results of the four tests, each in turn. Overall, we find that higher language scores, but not math scores, are associated with mosque school attendance, consistent with Hypothesis 1. We find no evidence that this is due to selection bias, consistent with Hypothesis 2. We also find that there is a relationship between Arabic letter recognition and mosque school attendance, but not Dari letter recognition and mosque school attendance, consistent with Hypothesis 3.

4.1. Test 1 results

Results of Test 1 are presented in Table 1. Models 1–6 present the results examining the relationship between math scores at the end of the 2007 school year and mosque school attendance in 2007 while controlling for different combinations of variables. We see no statistically significant relationship between mosque school attendance and math scores collected at the end of the study. This is unsurprising given that mosque schools do not teach math skills.23

Models 7–12 examine the relationship between language scores at the end of the 2007 school year and mosque school attendance in 2007. Here we do see statistically significant estimates for mosque school attendance in each of the six models. We now turn to Test 2 where we try to rule out the possibility that Test 1 results are due to selection bias.

4.1.2. Test 2 results

As described above, Test 2 models examine the relationship between test scores at the beginning of the year and subsequent mosque school attendance. Significant results would provide evidence of selection bias, as it would indicate that higher achieving children are more likely to attend mosque school, rather than suggest that mosque schools help children achieve.

Results of Test 2 are presented in Table 2.24 Consistent with our second hypothesis, we find no statistically significant results in any of the models examining the relationship between test scores and mosque school attendance in Table 2. Importantly, there are no statistically significant results for mosque schooling in models 7–9 where the outcome variable is language scores. Therefore we fail to find evidence of selection bias, bolstering the interpretation that statistically significant results in Table 1 are due to a causal effect of mosque schooling on language skills.

4.1.3. Test 3 results

In Table 3 we examine the relationship between Arabic and Dari letter recognition and mosque school attendance. Models 1–6 examine Dari letter recognition. We see a statistically significant association between mosque school attendance and Dari scores for only two of six models (Model 3 and Model 6). Models 7–12 present results examining the association between Arabic letter recognition and mosque school attendance. Here we see statistically significant estimates for mosque school attendance across each of the six models. Results from Test 3 are broadly consistent with Hypothesis 3, which says that the statistically significant associations should be present for Arabic letters but not Dari letters.

5. Discussion

Our results above provide support for the theory that mosque schools are improving the educational attainment of students who attend, specifically with respect to literacy. We identified three hypotheses that followed from this theory and found support for

---

23 While some mosque schools do, in fact, teach math, those in this study did not and anecdotal reports suggest that math instruction is uncommon.

24 Note that only models 1–3 and 7–9 in Table 1 could be replicated in the placebo test in Table 2. This is because models 4–6 and 10–12 include prior wave test scores as controls, and since we are substituting wave 3 test scores with wave 1 scores as the dependent variable there are no prior test scores to use as a control variables.
all three. In this section we review our findings and discuss implications.

To begin, we hypothesized that if mosque schools are improving literacy there would be a relationship between literacy scores but not math scores because mosque schools focus primarily on reading the Qur'an (Hypothesis 1). Test 1 supports this hypothesis. We further hypothesized that we would not find evidence of selection bias when we analyzed the relationship between test scores at the beginning of the year and mosque school attendance (Hypothesis 2). We found no evidence of selection bias in Test 2: We found that there was no significant difference in the academic attainment of children who do and do not attend mosque schools prior to the year of attendance (after controlling for prior schooling), and that the difference manifests itself only after the year of attendance. This bolsters a causal interpretation of the statistically significant results in the first test.

Finally, we hypothesized that since mosque schools teach reading in Arabic, that higher scores on Arabic letter recognition should be associated with mosque school attendance but not Dari letter recognition (Hypothesis 3). Results of Test 3 support this hypothesis.

Overall the pattern of results is consistent with the theory that mosque schools are contributing to literacy among Afghan school children. The gold-standard study design for adjudicating between

### Table 2
Placebo test: regressing baseline math, language scores on mosque school attendance and variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Letter identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosque school '07–08</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
<td>(0.073)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline years mosque schooling</td>
<td>0.205***</td>
<td>0.090***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government school '07–08</td>
<td>0.336*</td>
<td>0.301***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.173)</td>
<td>(0.097)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline years government schooling</td>
<td>0.370***</td>
<td>0.275***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO school schooling '07–08</td>
<td>0.132</td>
<td>0.135*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.062)</td>
<td>(0.078)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline math score</td>
<td>0.389</td>
<td>0.508</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Table 3 replicates regressions from Table 2 but replaces the dependent variables, Fall 08 Math and Letter Identification scores, with baseline Math and Letter Identification scores. Since attending Mosque schools in 2007–2008 cannot possibly affect math and language scores at baseline, we expect no statistically significant results. However, if results in Table 2 are spurious, resulting from unobserved heterogeneity (selection bias), the same statistically significant finding should manifest here. Failure to find statistically significant results here is consistent with the interpretation that Mosque school attendance is causally related to Letter Identification. Models comparable to 4–6 and 10–12 in Table 2 do not appear in Table 3 because there is no logged Math and Letter Identification Scores observed prior to the baseline survey wave.

### Table 3
Regressing dari letter identification and arabic letter identification on mosque school attendance and variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dari letter identification</th>
<th>Arabic letter identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosque school 2007–2008</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(0.078)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline Years Mosque</td>
<td>0.203***</td>
<td>0.129**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government School</td>
<td>0.260</td>
<td>0.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>(0.211)</td>
<td>(0.161)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline Years</td>
<td>0.210***</td>
<td>0.168**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Schooling</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>(0.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Schooling</td>
<td>'07–08</td>
<td>0.883***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.094)</td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline math score</td>
<td>0.151*</td>
<td>0.146**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(0.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline letter</td>
<td>identification</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village dummies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.264</td>
<td>0.325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Table 3 presents regressions of Dari letter identification and Arabic letter identification on mosque school attendance and variables. If mosque schools have a causal impact on literacy, one might expect this effect to be limited to literacy for Arabic letters. However, if letter recognition is only spuriously correlated with mosque school attendance, with more advanced students selecting to attend, then we might expect to see statistically significant results for both Dari and Arabic letters in Table 3. Seeing statistically significant associations only between Arabic letter identification and attendance, above, is consistent with the interpretation that mosque school attendance is causally related to Letter Identification.
explanations (causal effects versus selection of students with
greater potential) would be an experiment that randomly assigned
some students to attend mosque schools. However, such a
research opportunity is unlikely. In the absence of a suitable
randomized experiment, we argue that our study goes a good
distance toward supporting the theory that mosque schools
provide vital early education in our study villages and toward
ruling out some selection biases as a possible source of observed
associations.

In addition, there are other effects associated with school
readiness that we do not test for here, but to which mosque school
attendance likely contributes. These include, for example, peer
socialization—improved ability to work cooperatively when
surrounded by children of approximately the same age, as well
as exposure to classroom practices—interaction with a teacher,
improved listening skills, memorization, and concentration.
Additional research should contribute to expanding our under-
standing of the role of mosque schools in increasing children's
school readiness beyond cognitive achievement.

6. Conclusion

The study we present here provides initial evidence to support
our argument that mosque schools contribute to children's
academic achievement and to their school readiness, likely
preparing them to perform better once they reach a formal
government school. According to both our quantitative and
qualitative data, mosque schools do not suffer from some of the
afflictions of formal government schools since the teachers are
known to the communities in which they work, and children do not
have to travel more than a short distance to attend them. As a
result, similar to community-based schools, children are more
likely to be able to attend mosque schools regularly than
government schools, because mosque schools are easily accessible.
The government might take advantage of the potential effects of an
early mosque school education by encouraging the academic
preparation of children in these schools along with the study of
Islamic subjects. This might be accomplished by training mullahs
in academic subjects and providing them with academic texts and
other pedagogical tools.

Despite these positive outcomes presented here, we recognize
that capitalizing on the services that mosque schools provide
poses challenges to foreign aid interventions in Afghanistan as
well as to the Afghan state. Indeed, there is an on-going tension
between the co-opting of religious messages by conservative
groups and the education of young children across Afghanistan.
We would encourage policy makers to keep in mind, however,
that mosque schools are not madrassas. Moreover, according to
most reports, only a small minority of religious education in
Afghanistan—mosque schools or madrassas—includes violent or
vitiolic messages. It is important to realize that modern
(government supported) education in Afghanistan also includes
many hours for Islamic study. Indeed “secular education” as it
is conceived of in the West, does not exist in Afghanistan. Rather,
efforts to modernize education have focused on teaching science
and math alongside traditional religious subjects.25

Finally, we do not intend to suggest that the pedagogy used
in these schools cannot be improved upon. On the contrary, it
certainly can. Although we do not evaluate the pedagogical
methods in these schools directly, anecdotal reports indicate that
they are weak by any standard—Western or Islamic. Thus, the
boost in academic achievement described here is all the more
remarkable.

We hope that the data we have presented here will spur
the interest in further research on these schools and contribute to
a thoughtful discussion of the role of mosque schools in
providing support to education for girls and boys across
Afghanistan.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge support to this project by grants
from the National Science Foundation (NSF SES-0722472), the
Spencer Foundation (Spencer 200700190 and Spencer for Pilot
200600090), and the Weikart Family Foundation. The pilot study
that made this larger project possible was supported by the
California University Institute for Social and Economic Policy,
the Spencer Foundation, the US Institute of Peace USIP-SG-206-05S,
and the Weikart Family Foundation. We are grateful for the
valuable comments provided by Abdul Wassay Arian, Jim Fraser,
Jennifer Hill, Salem Ibrahim, Jehanzaib Khan, Leigh Linden, and
Saeed Mahmoodi. Thanks also to the Editor-in-Chief at the
International Journal of Educational Development, Stephen P.
Heyneman as well as Wing-Wah Law and two anonymous
reviewers. The ideas expressed here do not represent those of
the funders, the journal, or our colleagues, and any errors are our
own.

Appendix A

See Table A1.

Table A1

Descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes of interest</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2 math test</td>
<td>Standardized score</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2 language test</td>
<td>Standardized score</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable of Interest</td>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosqueschoulng</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Variables</td>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government schooling</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO schooling 2007–2008</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline mosque</td>
<td>In years</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schooling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline government</td>
<td>In years</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schooling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1 math test</td>
<td>Standardized score</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1 language test</td>
<td>Standardized score</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child works in-house</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child works outside house</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child of household head</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child is female</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>In years</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household head is farmer</td>
<td>Binary indicator</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance to government school</td>
<td>In kilometers</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance to mosque school</td>
<td>In kilometers</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household head duration in village</td>
<td>In years</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household head age</td>
<td>In years</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household head education</td>
<td>In years</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household size</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household school age children</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household land holdings</td>
<td>In jeribs</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household number of sheep</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25 The US concept of the separation of church and state is not practiced in
government institutions in Afghanistan, nor has it ever existed in daily life.