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Proliferating a Culture of Fear

Islam in a Post 9/11 America

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ABSTRACT

The threat of terrorism perceived by the American public has been shaped by a series of traumatic events over the past decade. In the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001, fear of terrorism has extended beyond the threat of terrorist groups. Much of the American public considers not only terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, but the entire religion of Islam to be a security threat. In much of this security discourse, ideas of hatred, violence, and terror have become associated with Islam. This study explores that association, and aims to identify what motivates existing stereotypes. Drawing on research from the Chapman University Survey of American Fears, we will analyze responses to suspicion and public approval of increased security, in order to evaluate the relationship that exists between fear and the religion of Islam. We will consider the perceived nature of Muslim people among the American public, and the stereotypes which have contributed to the construction of Islamophobia. Though Americans are divided in their feelings towards the religion of Islam, there does appear to be a strong connection between the fear of terrorism and trust in Muslim people.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11, 2001, notions of trust and security in America have been substantially altered. Years after this catastrophic event, the fear of terrorism continues to intensify, as reports of bombings, shootings, stabbings, and even beheadings appear in media headlines. As a result, the fear of terrorism has become a central organizing principle in the minds of Americans for over a decade. This paper will assess that fear, and its implications, through the analysis of data collected by the Chapman University Survey of American Fears. Three research questions will be explored. The first seeks to uncover why terrorism has become associated with Islam. The second considers the effects of this association on sociopolitical attitudes, including opinions on the restriction of civil liberties. The final inquiry concerns the forces driving the association, namely the role the media has played in the proliferation of fear and endorsement of certain stereotypes.

This paper is organized into 6 sections. Following the introduction, is a synthesis of the predominant literature on the fear of Islam in the United States. Included in this literature review is the discussion of Islamophobia as a consequence of incidental emotions, integrated threat theory, and social dominance orientation. This section will provide a detailed look into the roots of existing perceptions of Islam and its association with terrorism. Finally, three research questions will be introduced to test how various factors influence attitudes towards Islam, and measure the extent of that influence. The third section provides an explanation of the data collection process. Also offered in this section is a detailed account of survey methods and relevant variables. In Section Four, the three research questions will be tested through the comparison of means. Such analysis will demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between fear of terrorism and the belief that Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorist activity than non-Muslims. Results suggest that the more afraid an individual is, the more stereotypical his/her thinking. Data analysis will also evaluate the relationship between media exposure and levels of trust and fear. Finally, data will be used to demonstrate stereotypes that exist in society today, and the extent to which these stereotypes influence sociopolitical attitudes. Section Five offers additional discussion of the data, summarizing the results of the tests conducted in the previous section. A conclusion of the research is given in the sixth and final section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamophobia

One of the major challenges involved in quantifying any social phenomenon is defining the criteria and scope of that phenomenon. There exists no consensus as to how Islamophobia ought to be defined, and so long as that is the case, it remains difficult to compare and measure it scientifically. So long as there is no common understanding of what makes an individual “Islamophobic,” assessment of its relevance in this topic is also problematic. Runnymede Trust first defined the concept of Islamophobia as the “unfounded and close-minded fear and/or hatred of Islam, Muslims or Islamic/Muslim culture” (Larsson, 2015, p.14). This definition, which has received much attention in public discourse, is problematic for a number of reasons. The first issue is that Trust’s proposal is more of an Islamophobic ideology than it is a description of an individual’s reasons for acting. From this issue arises the question of whether an individual can be Islamophobic by virtue of their beliefs only, or by virtue of acting on those beliefs. Another issue which arises is whether the individual must have some sort of distinct and conscious Islamophobic ideology, in order to be classified as Islamophobic. If so, is it necessary that actions are consciously motivated by such ideology, or should situationally caused behaviors be considered as well?

In much of the literature on this topic, Islamophobia is described as a deeply rooted ethnocentric prejudice and an unwillingness to look beyond political experience (El-Aswad, 2013, p. 43). Others define it not as an example of prejudice but rather a paranoid fear born of projection (Dalal, 2008, p. 90). This section will explore the most widely discussed conceptions of Islamophobia, but will make no claims as to which definition is the most accurate. This paper does not attempt to assert the truth of any one conception over another, but rather seeks to uncover the variables which most profoundly contribute to this social phenomenon. For the purposes of this paper, the term will refer solely to beliefs towards Islam which are based in fear. It does not engage in the debate over the definition of Islamophobia, but instead examines the sources of common associations with the religion. Further, it does not make any judgement as to whether these fears are warranted or unwarranted, it simply seeks to examine the causes of them.

While there may not exist a consensus as to the principal causes of Islamophobia, there does appear to be a theme which is supported by most of the literature on the topic. The consensus in the literature involves the lack of trust in Muslim people among the American public.

Fear of Terrorism

On September 11, 2001 the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda carried out attacks against the United States that fundamentally altered the American public's perception of Islam. Al-Qaeda militants hijacked four airliners and waged suicide attacks on U.S. targets in the name of Islam. Over 3,000 people were killed during the attacks, making them the deadliest in United States history. The devastation of the attacks perpetrated by Muslim extremists on behalf of fundamentalist Islam has since transpired irrevocably into an association of Islam with terrorist activity. It is the goal of this paper to determine why that is the case, but this section will focus first on how fear of terrorism has contributed to such an association.

America is no stranger to tragedy. It had suffered unconscionable acts of terrorism long before September of 2001. Still, nothing this country has experienced before or since, could compare to the devastation caused by the 9/11 attacks. The sight of two aircrafts flying into the towers of the World Trade Center played on television screens around the world as millions watched helplessly. To measure the extent of fear and distress caused by such an event seems an inconceivable task. The first challenge researchers face studying public fear in a post 9/11 America, is the ambiguity of the fear itself. American citizens define the terrorist threat as an "abstract" threat, one that inspires not a personal fear, but rather a "collective sense of fear" (Kuzma, 2000, p. 92). Terrorism is an ambiguous danger in the sense that it can be executed at any time, at any place, and there is very little that can be done to prevent it. The Department of State Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Philip Wilcox, made a similar point when describing the effect of terrorism on the public. He argued that it is its random quality which makes terrorism particularly evil. Because it strikes without warning, and preys upon innocent victims, it inflicts an overwhelming psychological, political, and economic toll, thus increasing our collective sense of fear and vulnerability (Kuzma, 2000, p. 92).

This sense of fear was especially pervasive in the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks. In a study conducted three to five days after 9/11, 90% of participants reported that either they or their children experienced some stress symptoms as a result of the attacks (Choma, 2015). Americans suffered anxiety to varying degrees in the wake of September 11th. In the weeks following 9/11, more than half of the American public (53 percent) was "very worried" that they themselves, or someone they loved would become a victim of terrorism (Bloch-Elkon, 2011, p. 379). Though these personal concerns waned in the years that followed, there is still a significant percentage of the American public that remains very worried about terrorism. Even eight years after the 9/11 attacks, 30 to 40 percent of Americans still feared that they or a member of their family could be harmed by a terrorist attack (Bloch-Elkon, 2011, p. 379). The endurance of this fear was similarly demonstrated by responses to the 2016 Chapman University Survey of American Fears. Acts of terrorism which occurred on 9/11 and in the years following have 39% of Americans feeling either "afraid" or "very afraid" that they personally

will become a victim of terrorism. Attitudes concerning terrorist threat have remained relatively constant, even as the attacks become temporally distal, the fear of terrorism persists.

Perhaps even more relevant to this discussion than the persistence of fear, is the extent of it. It is important to consider how the lives of Americans who are indeed “very worried” about the threat of terrorism have been altered. Almost a quarter of the population is “very concerned” about terrorism in their daily lives, and agonize about it when they are in public places (CSAF, 2016). This portion of the population does not see the threat of terrorism as an abstract entity, but actually a concrete threat present in their daily lives. This small but significant group has internalized the collective sense of fear and adjusts their lives to accommodate their fear. Such accommodations include, for example, a reluctance to participate in public activities, or even travel abroad. Fear has made 24% of Americans less likely to attend concerts, sporting events, and other public events (CSAF, 2016). Similarly, the belief that Americans are targets of terror when traveling abroad, one held by 70% of the American public, has made over half of all Americans fear traveling abroad (CSAF, 2016). Even those Americans who do choose to travel abroad, still demonstrate suspicion of this threat. In fact almost 80% of Americans are willing to accept additional security screening and longer lines at the airport just to mitigate the danger of terrorism (CSAF, 2016).

This is likely because many Americans assume the inevitability of another large scale attack on the United States. The possibility of a future attack was for obvious reasons, a great source of anxiety immediately after 9/11, but even fifteen years later, this possibility continues to haunt many Americans. In the first, second, and sixth months following the September 11 attacks, 82%, 65%, and 38% of Americans respectively suffered anxiety over the possibility of future terrorism (Choma, 2015). Today, some 61% of Americans still believe in this possibility (CSAF, 2016). Over half of the American public lives in fear that the U.S. is likely to experience large scale attack in the near future.

These studies demonstrate how extensive the adverse mental health outcomes have been for a significant number of Americans. Collective tragedies such as 9/11 are strongly associated with adverse effects on mental health, physical health, and sociopolitical attitudes, including prejudice (Choma, 2015). The 9/11 attacks were unquestionably one of the most psychologically, politically, and economically devastating tragedies this country has ever experienced. Emotions, particularly emotional distress, play a fundamental role in the construction of prejudicial bias (Choma, 2015). Because the 9/11 attacks were perpetrated by an Islamic extremist group, it is very possible that the emotional distress caused by these events may in part explain the association of terrorism with the religion of Islam.

Origins of “Otherness”

In order to understand the present alienation of Muslims in our society, it is helpful to look as far back as the colonial era for the roots of this division. On a visit to Beirut during the civil war of 1975, a French journalist wrote regretfully of the gutted downtown area, that it had once seemed to belong to the Orient of Chateaubriand and Nerval (Said, 1978). This depiction of the East, according to author Edward Said, is completely indicative of its position in the rest of Western scholarship and history. Not only is the Middle East adjacent to Europe, it is also the place of Europe’s greatest, richest and oldest colonies. It is the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other (Said, 1978). For this reason the East, or the Orient, has been characterized in Western scholarship according to its special place in the European experience. European, and more broadly, Western culture, gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self (Said, 1978). The Middle East has helped define the West as its contrasting image.

Orientalism is an entire system of thought which, by demonstrating the comparatively greater strength of the Occident, has categorized Muslims as the alien and often threatening “other.” Although there are several million Muslims in the U.S, they remain othered, largely because of Orientalist thought. Orientalism regards the “Orient” or the “Muslim East” as a mirror image of what is the inferior and alien other to the West (El-Aswad, 2013, p.47). This binary discourse of East/West or Islam/West is rooted in a “they/we” division (El-Aswad, 2013, p.47). In the Western imagination, the Muslim is located outside of the U.S, and therefore is made a container of all that is opposite of the virtues that are attributed to the U.S. (Dalal, 2008, p. 90). In the unconscious denigrations of Islam, the Muslim has become the opposite of the American “us” (Dalal, 2008, p. 90).

What then takes place in the words of Sigmund Freud, is a “reaction formation.” Such a mechanism obscures a concept by emphasizing its opposite (Dalal, 2008, p. 90). Their mysterious otherness is a blank space waiting to be filled with projections imagined by the Western scholar. As Freud once put it, the unconscious knows no contradiction. The result is an image of the “other” modelled on a ‘minority of the worst of them,’ and an image of the “us” modelled on a ‘minority of the best of us’ (Dalal, 2008, p. 90). Thus parts come to stand for wholes, and it is through this “emotional generalization from the few to the whole” that the Jihadist comes to stand for all followers of Islam (Dalal, 2008, p. 90). In this sense Islam has become a postulate of fear, and Muslims have become the enemy, imagined or real.

Islamophobic attitudes are most commonly regarded as a consequence of uninformed notions of Islam. In much of the contemporary discourse, grave ignorance about Muslims and their stereotypical depiction in Western scholarship is deemed responsible for negative attitudes towards Islam. Persistent views of Islam and Muslim communities are believed to have resulted from a reliance on second-hand information and a lack

of direct contact with the religion itself (El-Aswad, 2013, p.44). The consequences of ignorance are even further exacerbated by a greater unwillingness to learn about the religion. It is because we are unable or unwilling to discriminate between varieties of Islamic belief—the fundamentalist vs. the rest—that we end up homogenizing them, and so damning them all (Dalal, 2008, p. 90).

Forming Implicit Bias

In order to identify the sources which contribute to Islamophobic attitudes, it can be helpful to understand how attitudes are developed in general. Distinctions between explicit attitudes and implicit attitudes can help us recognize what might be informing them. Explicit attitudes are evaluations that can be reported and for which expression can be consciously controlled (McConnell, 2008, p. 793). By contrast, implicit attitudes are evaluations for which activation cannot be controlled (McConnell, 2008, p. 793). In fact, often times, people are not initially conscious of their implicit attitudes. It is important to note the difference between the two, because they have different levels of influence over a person's behaviors. For example, knowledge of a social group can influence implicit attitudes even when a person devotes significant attention to understanding that social group (McConnell, 2008, p. 793). If knowledge of a social group leads to negative evaluations, the group can become stigmatized. Stigmatized groups are often avoided or devalued, and therefore provide a negative association cue. Association based cues, such as race, play a critical role in determining implicit attitudes (McConnell, 2008, p. 794). Implicit attitudes are then more likely than explicit attitudes, to guide spontaneous behaviors in low effort situations (McConnell, 2008, p. 794). To the extent that stigmas impact implicit attitudes more strongly than they do explicit attitudes, it may often be the case that people will remain unaware of their stigma-related biases (McConnell, 2008, p. 794).

This lack of awareness presents a roadblock in reducing prejudice and discrimination. People are far less attentive to information which individuates a person from a stigmatized group (McConnell, 2008, p. 805). Therefore, stigmas may frequently discourage people from acknowledging information that could present a stigmatized person in a much more positive light. Even in the event that positive behaviors are encountered, the extent to which they will be effortfully recognized may be limited (McConnell, 2008, p. 805). The formation of implicit attitudes towards social groups may demonstrate the prioritization of negative association cues over actual individuating information available to the perceiver (McConnell, 2008, p. 805). Unconscious associations make it less likely that bias will be corrected.

Integrated Threat Theory

Perceived threat is one of many factors which drive prejudice. Since 9/11, negative views of Islam and of Muslims have been justified by an imminent yet unpredictable threat posed by terrorist attacks to the physical safety of Americans. Today, over half of the American public fears that the U.S. is likely to experience a large scale attack in the near future (CSAF, 2016). The Integrated Threat Theory is a social theory which suggests that the more individuals perceive certain social groups as threatening, the more likely they are to have prejudice against these groups. It identifies four types of threat that are associated with prejudice. Included in this list are realistic threats, symbolic threats, negative stereotypes, and intergroup anxiety. Each of these constructs have been empirically tested and have been found to predict prejudice (Uenal, 2016 pg. 69).

The first type of threat, realistic threats, relate to political and economic power as well as to the physical well-being and safety of the in-group (Uenal, 2016 pg. 69). This can include concerns regarding material goods or physical well-being. Threats concerning physical safety are empirically distinct from threats concerning jobs, accommodations, and other material things (Uenal, 2016 pg. 70). Even in the absence of other threats, feelings of insecurity over physical safety can incite prejudice towards an outgroup. Safety threats demonstrate a strong predictive power regarding specific intergroup outcomes (Uenal, 2016 pg. 69). Such outcomes include social and political intolerance towards Muslims.

Symbolic threats are also an instigator of prejudice. Symbolic threats are threats to the values, norms, morals, or identity of the in-group (Uenal, 2016 pg. 69). Islam is frequently pictured in the media as archaic, barbarian, and sexist religion (Uenal, 2016 pg. 69). This characterization of Muslims presents a threat to the values and norms of the liberal-democratic American society. As with realistic threats, previous studies have confirmed a positive relationship between symbolic threats and prejudice (Uenal, 2016 pg. 69).

Studies demonstrate a strong connection between perceived terroristic threats and anti-Muslim intergroup bias. Threats concerning terrorism are significantly related to subtle and blatant prejudice, and discriminatory behavior against Muslims (Uenal, 2016 pg. 69). Different types of threat can elicit different emotional reactions. While safety threats are a distinct predictor of fear, symbolic and realistic threats are more strongly associated with anger and disgust (Uenal, 2016 pg. 70).

Social Dominance Orientation

Also relevant in understanding how prejudice towards Muslims is formed, is a theory which deals with social dominance. Social Dominance Theory suggests that high status groups tend to support social-hierarchical structures which favor the dominance of the in-group, and demand the subordination of the outgroup (Uenal, 2016 pg. 72). This partially explains why a significant portion of the American population endorses the

restriction of civil liberties and policies which target Muslims specifically. Almost 40% of Americans support an increased police presence in Muslim neighborhoods (CSAF, 2016). Over 33% believe America should cease all Muslim immigration (CSAF, 2016).

Social Dominance Orientation is a relatively new concept which can be helpful in explaining why individuals support non-egalitarian policies and attitudes. SDO assesses the extent to which individuals endorse social hierarchies between different groups, and the rejection of social equality (Uenal, 2016 pg. 72). As indicated by the Social Dominance Theory, individuals who exhibit high SDO tend to perpetuate or improve their social standing by adopting “dominance legitimizing myths” (Uenal, 2016 pg. 72). Through the acceptance of these myths, social hierarchies are explained and justified.

Additionally individuals with high SDO seem to be more vulnerable to high threat perceptions, and may therefore perceive the rising visibility of Islam in American society as threatening to the status of the non-Muslim in-group (Uenal, 2016 pg. 72). As a result of such threat perceptions, individuals showing a higher SDO could exhibit more prejudice toward the perceived Muslim outgroup. It is likely that this vulnerability to high threat perceptions is what incites anxiety about the presence of Muslims in our society. Nearly half of the American public is not comfortable with the possibility of a Mosque being built in their neighborhood (CSAF, 2016). The Chapman University Survey of American Fears demonstrated similar worries about Muslims handing out copies of the Quran, or simply congregating outside a shopping center.

Media Influence and Incidental Emotions

The extent of media influence on formation of bias is widely debated in the context of Islamophobia. Its portrayal or even fabrication of reality plays a crucial role in the formation of public opinion. Since 9/11 the volume of terrorism related news has surpassed all past records of terrorism coverage (Bloch-Elkon, 2011, p. 367). Not only did reports outpace coverage from the 80’s and 90’s, it also prioritized the proliferation of fear. In the months following 9/11, bin Laden received more attention in television news than President Bush (Bloch-Elkon, 2011, p. 379). With the prioritization of terrorism on the news agenda then and now, it is inevitable that the public will similarly prioritize the threat of terrorism.

Mainstream media portrays Muslims in terms of global terrorism and Islamic Jihadism, by repeatedly stressing the reality of suicide bombings, flag burning, and the misconduct of Muslims (El-Aswad, 2013, p. 41). The result is a state of moral panic. This phenomenon, as defined by Sociologist Stanley Cohen, refers to the distinction of a group as a threat to societal values and interests, after that group has been presented by the mass media in a stereotypical fashion (Laycock, 2015, p. 41). The concept of moral panic is consistent with literature in the discipline of Psychology which defines the role of incidental emotions in the formation of stereotypes. Incidental emotions principally relevant to

an outgroup increase intergroup bias toward that outgroup in particular (Choma, 2015). One study examined these incidental emotions, specifically symptoms of distress, by testing the effects viewing 9/11 footage ten years after the attacks. Because distress was among the most commonly reported mental health outcomes after 9/11, and negative attitudes towards Muslims intensified following the attacks, this study sought to uncover whether distress might in part explain the relationship between 9/11 and Islamophobia. Studies revealed that viewing 9/11 footage fostered greater fear of future terrorism and Islamophobia (Choma, 2015). Less positive attitudes towards Muslims were reported by those in the 9/11 condition compared to the neutral condition, indicating the negative effects of viewing 9/11 footage on intergroup attitudes, even ten years later (Choma, 2015). Results are consistent with literature suggesting that emotions can impact prejudicial and sociopolitical attitudes. Western media is therefore, one of many sources which informs sociopolitical attitudes towards Islam.

DATA COLLECTION AND CODING

The data set used to test the hypothesis was Wave 3 of the Chapman University Survey of American Fears. This national survey studies the degree to which respondents fear crime, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, personal crises and other phenomena. The study was conducted using a probability based web survey designed to be representative of the United States. The target population consisted of English language survey takers ages 18 and over.

Statistical analysis was primarily conducted through the comparison of means. By comparing means, we can examine the relationship between two variables. In this procedure one variable is interval or ratio level and the other is nominal level. The first of the variables tested asked respondents “How afraid are you of the following events? [Terrorist Attack]”. Respondents could indicate either (1) Very afraid, (2) Afraid, (3) Slightly afraid, or (4) Not afraid, depending on the degree of their fear. The second variable asked participants “How much do you trust the following people? [Muslims]”. Participants could indicate their degree of trust or distrust using the following responses: (1) Trust completely, (2) Trust somewhat, (3) Do not trust very much, and (4) Do not trust at all. The final variable which was tested in relation to those previously mentioned, asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following: “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims.” Participants could indicate their degree of assent with the response (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, or (4) Strongly disagree. Responses to this question are representative of Islamophobic attitudes within American society today.

The second section of data analysis demonstrates frequencies using a bar graph. Five relevant variables are represented. Each asks a question which demonstrates a general feeling of distrust towards Muslims. For each of these five questions, responses are ordered from (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, to (4) Strongly disagree. The first asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: “I think it is ok for Muslims to receive extra screening at the airport”. The second variable represented in the bar graph, which was also tested in the previous section, asks respondents whether they believe “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims”. The third variable asks participants whether they agree that “There should be an increased police presence in Muslim neighborhoods”. The fourth variable asks respondents whether they endorse the claim that “America should cease all immigration from Muslim countries”. The final variable depicted on the bar graph asks respondents if they agree with the statement “I would be comfortable with having a Mosque built in my neighborhood”.

The final section of data analysis, like the first, uses the comparison of means to test two relationships. The first is the relationship between media usage and level of trust in Muslims. The second is the relationship between media usage and fear of terrorism. The

same two variables which were tested in the first section: “How much do you trust the following people? [Muslims]” and “How afraid are you of the following events? [Terrorist Attack]” are also tested here. Only now, they are being compared with responses to the question “How often do you watch cable news (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News)?”. Several other media sources, including local and national news, were represented in the data set, but only cable news is represented in the data analysis section.

DATA ANALYSIS

The following section will provide a number of statistical measurements which demonstrate how the various factors discussed contribute to stereotypical beliefs about Islam. Analysis will include the comparison of means across variables to determine which beliefs coincide with one another. Once the existence of each particular relationship has been either confirmed or denied, additional analysis will then explore the extent of these relationships.

Research Question I: Why has terrorism become associated with Islam?

The tables in this section each provide a comparison of means between two variables. In the first comparison, fear of terrorism is being tested in relation to endorsement of a Muslim stereotype. The first variable asks “How afraid are you of terrorist attacks?” Responses are ordered by degree of fear, with 1 indicating the greatest level fear, and 4 indicating the least fear. The second variable measures the respondent’s level of agreement with the statement “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims.” Responses are ranked from 1 to 4, with 1 representing strongly agree, and 4 representing strongly disagree.

Table I

Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorist activity than non-Muslims

How afraid are you of terrorist attacks?	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Very Afraid	2.13	268	0.988
Afraid	2.45	337	0.872
Slightly Afraid	2.6	526	0.824
Not Afraid	2.8	349	1.04
Total	2.47	1151	1.068

In the comparison above, the smaller the mean, the closer it is to the number 1, which indicates the response “strongly agree.” Therefore, the smallest mean indicates the strongest agreement with the statement “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims.” Correspondingly, the largest mean indicates the strongest disagreement with the previous statement. The comparison of means reveals that those who most strongly agree with this statement, are also those who are most afraid, or “very

afraid” of terrorist attacks. Those who most strongly disagree with this statement, are also those who are least afraid, or “not afraid” of terrorist attacks.

Table II offers a slightly different comparison. Agreement with the statement “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorist activity than non-Muslims” is now being compared with responses to the question “How much do you trust Muslims?”. Responses to this question are ranked from 1 to 4 with 1 being the greatest level of trust, or “trust completely,” and 4 being the lowest level of trust, or “do not trust at all”. Again, the smaller the mean, the closer it is to the number 1, which indicates the response “strongly agree.” Therefore, the smallest mean indicates the strongest agreement with the statement “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims.” The largest mean indicates the strongest disagreement with the previous statement.

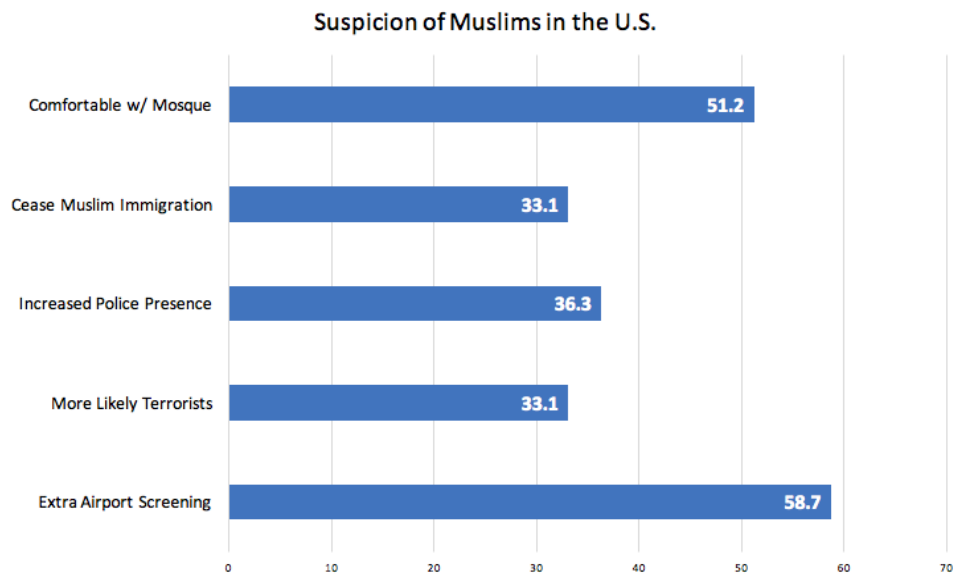
Table I

Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorist activity than non-Muslims

How much do you trust Muslims?	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Trust completely	3.29	38	0.867
Trust somewhat	3.86	772	0.828
Do not trust very much	2.28	444	0.92
Do not trust at all	1.78	218	0.923
Total	2.47	1151	1.068

By comparing the means in this table, we find that the smallest mean appears by those who “do not trust at all” and the largest mean appears by those who “trust completely”. Therefore those who most strongly agree with the statement “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorist activity than non-Muslims” are also those who trust Muslims least. Those who most strongly disagree with this statement, are those who are most trusting of Muslims.

Research Question II: What is the effect of this association on sociopolitical attitudes?



The bar graph represents five questions that directly measure opinions regarding Muslims. Variables include whether Muslims should be subjected to increased screening at airports, whether they are more likely to be terrorists, whether police presence should be increased in Muslim neighborhoods, whether America should cease all immigration from Muslim countries, and whether respondents would be comfortable with having a mosque built in their neighborhood.

Research Question III: What is fueling this association?

In this section, media exposure is being analyzed in relation to levels of trust in Muslims, and levels of fear of terrorism. In Table III, responses to the question “How much do you trust Muslims?” are compared with responses to the question “How often do you watch cable news (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News)?”. Responses to the question “How much do you trust Muslims?” are ranked from 1 to 4, with 1 representing “trust completely,” and 4 representing “do not trust at all”.

Table III

How much do you trust Muslims?

How often do you watch cable news?	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Everyday	2.7	199	1.004
Once or twice a week	2.55	212	0.78
Once or twice a month	2.44	225	0.865
Less than once a month but at least once a year	2.4	228	0.867
Never	2.55	429	0.878

In this comparison, the larger the mean, the closer it is to the number 4, which indicates the response “do not trust at all”. Therefore, the highest mean indicates the lowest degree of trust in Muslims. Correspondingly, the smallest mean indicates the greatest trust level of trust in Muslims. In Table III, we find the highest mean appears next to those who watch cable news everyday. The lowest mean appears by those who watch cable news less than once a month but at least once a year.

Table IV

How afraid are you of terrorist attacks?

How often do you watch cable news?	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Everyday	2.38	199	1.065
Once or twice a week	2.49	212	1.055
Once or twice a month	2.5	225	1.009
Less than once a month but at least once a year	2.67	228	1.054
Never	2.86	429	1.084

In Table IV, levels of fear are tested in relation to media exposure. The new variable being compared here asks “How afraid are you of terrorist attacks?”. Responses to this question are ranked from 1 to 4 with 1 indicating the greatest level of fear, and 4 indicating the lowest level of fear. Therefore the smaller the mean, the closer it is to 1, or the response “very afraid”. The larger the mean, the closer it is to 4, or “not afraid”. In this comparison, there is a clear decline of fear as you move from frequent media exposure towards zero exposure. The smallest mean appears by those who watch cable news everyday and the largest appears by those who never watch it. According to this comparison, those who watch the news more frequently are more afraid of terrorism than those who do not.

RESULTS

Q 1:

The comparison of means reveals that those who most strongly agree with the statement “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims,” are also those who are most afraid, or “very afraid” of terrorist attacks. Those who most strongly disagree with this statement, are those who are least afraid, or “not afraid” of terrorist attacks. The more afraid an individual is, the more stereotypical his thinking. Similarly, the less afraid an individual is, the less likely he is to engage in stereotypical thinking.

Additionally, those who trust Muslims least, are the greatest supporters of the statement “Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims”. Those who trust Muslims most are less supportive of that statement. The data suggests that distrust for the Muslim outgroup may foster the development of stereotypical beliefs about them.

Q 2:

Results show that a significant portion of the American population distrusts Muslims and believes extra security measures should be employed against them. This climate of suspicion has led many Americans to endorse greater scrutiny of Muslims by law enforcement, including extra security screening at airports. Nearly one-third of Americans believe that Muslims are more likely to engage in terrorism than non-Muslims. Roughly the same percentage agree or strongly agree that the U.S. should halt all immigration from Muslim nations, and an even greater number believe that Muslim neighborhoods should have an increased police presence. The majority of the American population would not be comfortable with a Mosque being built in their neighborhood. Those who support institutionalized discrimination are more likely to be rural, male, white, older, and lacking a college education.

Q 3:

Data analysis demonstrates a statistically significant relationship between media usage and fear, as well as media usage and distrust. Those who have greater exposure to media are more likely to distrust Muslims. Another consequence of high media usage is greater fear of terrorist attacks. Survey results illustrate the ability of media to influence public opinion, especially towards a certain outgroup.

CONCLUSION

Fear of terrorism contributes significantly to the association of terrorism with Islam. This collective sense of fear is shared by almost half of the American public today. Nearly 41% of Americans are either “afraid” or “very afraid” of terrorist attacks. As demonstrated by the literature and data, fear is indeed a motivator of stereotypical thinking. Incidental emotional like distress and fear are relevant for understanding stereotypes towards Muslims, especially in the context of the 9/11 attacks. Monolithic views of Islam and Muslims are also the result of a reliance on second hand information, and lack of direct contact with the religion. To reduce these negative consequences we must minimize social category distinctions and establish meaningful connections with outgroup members.

Media coverage which characterizes Muslims as the threatening “other,” perpetuates negative outgroup attitudes and culture-based narratives of intergroup conflict. Media ought to, instead, refrain from social categorization, offer more balanced information, and reduce heightened threat perceptions to avoid further aggravating intergroup tensions. In order to reduce intergroup tension, public discourse should promote alternative narratives which account for the complexities of intergroup relations.

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