How fringe attacks on American Muslims became mainstream
By Christopher Bail December 3, 2015

Donald Trump recently claimed that he saw Muslims celebrating in New Jersey after the September 11 attacks. He later reaffirmed this account despite a lack of evidence, adding that suspected terrorists should be tortured during counterterrorism investigations even if it “doesn’t work” because they “deserve it anyway.”

Though such brazen criticisms of minority groups are characteristic of Trump, his comments also illustrate the degree to which fringe ideas about Islam have become mainstream. Public figures of all political stripes have proposed that Muslims are secretly a fifth column quietly plotting to implement shariah law under the guise of political correctness. Over the past decade, 32 states proposed shariah law bans, controversies about the construction of mosques have increased by more than 800 percent, and the number of Americans with negative opinions of Islam has more than doubled, as my research shows.
The self-proclaimed Islamic State delights in these developments. The group’s propaganda cites anti-Muslim sentiments as evidence for its claim that the United States is at war with Islam. The Islamic State has repeatedly stated that its goal is to make the West so hostile to Muslims that they have no choice but to side with the Islamic State.

The battle against the Islamic State therefore requires careful analysis of how fringe ideas about Muslims become mainstream and what might be done to stem the tide. Recent advances in computational social science provide new tools to track the spread of different narratives about Islam. In my new book, I used plagiarism detection software to track how press releases produced by more than 100 religious groups, think tanks and
advocacy organizations influenced the ideas about Islam that appeared in more than 300,000 newspaper articles, television transcripts, government documents, and Facebook /Twitter posts between 2001 and 2010.

I found that the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States began long before the rise of the Islamic State. In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, journalists were heavily influenced by a small group of organizations, such as the Middle East Forum and the Center for Security Policy, who described Islam as an imminent threat to Western civilization. For example, these groups claimed terrorists or terrorist sympathizers had *infiltrated American universities*—and even *the White House*.

In contrast, media outlets—including both liberal and conservative outlets—almost completely ignored dozens of measured statements from mainstream Muslim organizations, such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council, that sought to distance Islam from groups such as Al Qaeda on theological grounds.

Yet when mainstream Muslim organizations expressed outrage about the groundswell of anti-Muslim sentiment within the American media, they inadvertently called further attention towards the anti-Muslim arguments they sought to discredit. They then confronted the common, though inaccurate, perception that Muslims were not condemning terrorism—a perception that lent credence to idea that mainstream Muslim organizations were waging a “stealth jihad.”

By 2008, I show that groups arguing for Islam’s threat had amassed more than $240 million and forged ties to elite conservative groups such as the Heritage Foundation.
They used these resources to launch a sophisticated media campaign that included a feature-length documentary about the imminent threat of Islam for Western civilization as well as a group of people who regularly commented on terrorism for cable news but actually had little expertise on this issue.

Today, mainstream Muslim organizations are uniquely qualified to challenge the narrative of the Islamic State. But my findings suggest that arguing theology is not enough. Citing Islamic jurisprudence will not overshadow images of a self-described Muslim committing gruesome violence in the name of their religion.
Above all, mainstream Muslim organizations cannot take the bait of someone like Trump. Though Muslim leaders are understandably angry about attacks on their religion, impassioned responses only feed hostility to Islam.

On the other hand, decades of social science research show that fear and anger can also create solidarity—and the actions of the Islamic State have made both Muslim leaders and the American public fearful and angry. The best way for Muslim-American leaders to combat anti-Muslim sentiments is to redirect their emotions away from figures such as Trump and towards the terrorist organizations that are the root cause of so many Americans’ antipathy to Islam.

Some may argue that forcefully condemning the Islamic State somehow legitimizes the idea that Islam is responsible for this violent movement. Yet the opportunity to avoid such guilt by association has long passed. Instead, mainstream Muslim organizations must recognize that shared fear and anger need not only be the outcome of terrorism—they may also be its antidote.

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