Anti-Muslim Sentiment Is a Serious Threat to American Security

By Ken Gude   November 2015

Center for American Progress

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Contents

Introduction and summary

The incredible barbarism perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, too often dissuades those in the West from any meaningful assessment of the group's strategy and tactics. From beheading or burning alive captives to slaughtering entire minority populations and gunning down innocent civilians in previously quiet streets, the violence is incomprehensible and thus can appear devoid of reason or planning. That is far from the truth. ISIS has been very clear about its objectives. It uses violence to achieve its goals, including to spread fear and induce governments and publics to make choices they otherwise would not; to mobilize its supporters with demonstrations of its capabilities; and, most importantly, to provoke an anti-Muslim backlash to help it attract new followers and prepare for a clash of civilizations. The ignorance of most in Western society to ISIS's clear and openly described objectives is providing the necessary fuel for their continued growth and momentum.

The reaction in the United States to the attacks in Paris has been a mixture of solidarity with the victims and a growing anxiety about the threat ISIS poses to the American homeland. This fear is understandable even though the ability of the U.S. government to detect and prevent terrorist attacks has never been stronger. The United States should not be complacent, however, and the Center for American Progress has proposed a series of steps the United States should take to defeat ISIS.[1] We can never completely eliminate the risk of terrorist attacks. But in times such as these, it is incumbent upon political leaders to reassure the American people that they are taking all of the appropriate steps to keep them safe now and in the long term.

What is not acceptable is the kind of rhetoric that attempts to exploit Americans' reasonable fears for political gain and tries to push a jittery population toward increased hatred and prejudice: This is Islamophobia. Hateful rhetoric and discriminatory policies that target Muslims are morally wrong, factually inaccurate, and genuinely threaten the safety of Muslims in the United States. This report focuses on an additional aspect of Islamophobia that receives too little attention in

the current political discourse—that ISIS wants and needs the United States and other Western societies to alienate their Muslim populations through their words and deeds. This is a stated goal of ISIS leadership.

ISIS needs the West to alienate and marginalize its Muslim citizens in order to foster the appearance of a war against Islam. ISIS desperately needs new recruits in order to contend with its massive weakness compared with the forces aligned against the group and its incredible unpopularity among Muslims in Muslim-majority countries.

ISIS has developed a very sophisticated propaganda and recruiting campaign that uses modern communications and social media tools to dramatically eclipse previous terrorist recruiting efforts. Western anti-Muslim sentiment is the central narrative element in this propaganda and recruiting campaign.

The many knee-jerk policy proposals directed at all Muslims that are now emerging, particularly among conservatives and from several presidential candidates, serve only to advance ISIS's goals. This is dangerous and deadly serious. And it must stop.

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ISIS strategy:
Terrorize, mobilize, polarize

The horrific violence that was, for a time, limited to ISIS's main area of operations in Iraq and Syria has recently spread to countries near and far. The bombings in Ankara and Beirut, the downing of a Russian airliner over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, and the bombings and shootings in Paris mark a shift in ISIS's strategy to take its war to the next stage.[2] These attacks are not the actions of nihilists or random killings to slake a rampant bloodlust. Rather, according to Jason Burke, journalist and author of numerous books on Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, ISIS has three goals: to terrorize, mobilize, and polarize.[3]

The first objective of any terrorist organization, including ISIS, is to intimidate civilian populations and force governments to make rash decisions that they otherwise would not choose. William McCants, a scholar at The Brookings Institution, wrote in the wake of the Paris attacks that the leaders of ISIS "have thought long and hard about the utility of violence and the value of scaring ordinary people."[4]

The strategic mastermind behind the rise of ISIS, a former colonel in Saddam Hussein's Iraqi intelligence service who went by the pseudonym Haji Bakr, plotted ISIS's growth through the systematic application of incredible violence.[5] Haji Bakr's plan called for "the elimination of every person who might have been a potential leader or opponent."[6] It proved successful in gaining control of the Syrian city of Raqqa, and under Bakr's leadership, ISIS began using this strategy to expand to areas outside of its original base in Syria and into Iraq. This provided the basis for declaring a caliphate in June 2014.

ISIS's second objective is to motivate its supporters and enhance its legitimacy in the areas where it has seized control. A 2004 essay called "The Management of Savagery"—written by Abu Bakr Naji for the precursor to ISIS, Al Qaeda in Iraq—outlined many elements of the strategy that ISIS now pursues. It describes that "its specific target is to motivate crowds drawn from the masses to fly to the regions which we manage, particularly the youth."[7]

Scott Atran, the director of research at France's National Center for Scientific Research, wrote of ISIS that the complexity of the Paris attacks and the clear success at recruiting French and EU nationals "enhances its legitimacy in the eyes of its followers."[8] Multiple teams operating in different areas of the city, attacking simultaneously and with varied methods, recalls spectacular terrorist attacks such as Mumbai in 2008 or 9/11 and demonstrates disciplined military tactics. ISIS said of the recent attacks that it left "Paris and its residents 'shocked and awed,'" clearly a reference to the U.S. description of the bombing campaign in Iraq in 2003, as well as how ISIS hoped the attacks would be received among its supporters.[9]

The third objective, which Burke describes as "the most important," is to generate a response that will alienate Muslim populations from their governments, particularly in the West, and thus increase the appeal of the ISIS caliphate among them.[10] Harleen Gambhir of the Institute for the Study of War, identifies this as part of "ISIS's plan to eliminate neutral parties through either absorption or elimination, in preparation of eventual all-out battle with the West."[11]

Preparation for that all-out battle is central to understanding how ISIS sees the world. Its English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, is named after a Syrian city featured in a prophecy in which, according to McCants, the Prophet Muhammad "predicts the Day of Judgment will come after the Muslims defeat Rome at al-Amaq or Dabiq."[12] An essay in the February 2015 edition of *Dabiq* describes the world as comprised of "two camps before the world for mankind to choose between, a camp of Islam … and a camp of kufr—the crusader coalition."[13] In between those two camps is something that ISIS calls "the grayzone," composed of either "hypocrites" or "'independent' and 'neutral' Islamic parties that refuse to join the Khilafah [Caliphate, or ISIS]."[14]

It is the Muslims in this so-called grayzone that are the target of the ISIS effort at polarization. The essay in *Dabiq* cited above is titled "The Extinction of the Grayzone." ISIS uses the existence of its self-described caliphate in Iraq and Syria and its terrorist attacks outside of its area of operations to compel "the crusaders to actively destroy the grayzone themselves."[15] This will happen, ISIS argues, because "Muslims in the West will quickly find themselves between one of two choices, they either apostatize … or they perform hijrah [emigrate] to the Islamic State [ISIS] and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments."[16] ISIS wants a clash of civilizations between itself and the West, after all Muslims have either abandoned the faith or joined ISIS. Essentially, the subsuming of all existing Muslim nations into the caliphate is a precursor to the final war with the rest of humanity.

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ISIS cannot grow unless the West alienates Muslims

The ISIS strategy depends upon Western societies alienating their Muslim populations in reaction to terror attacks because ISIS is very weak relative to the many forces aligned against it and because it is extremely unpopular in Muslim countries where it operates. It would be a mistake to underestimate ISIS's capabilities given its unmitigated barbarism and the presence in its ranks of many former high-ranking Iraqi security officials, such as Haji Bakr. But ISIS has only been able to obtain the territory it now holds because of collapsing state authority in the parts of Syria and Iraq where it operates. And its power, though strong for a nonstate actor, simply does not compare with the combined forces of the more than 60 nation-states of the world aligned against it.[17]

ISIS must perpetuate the narrative of a global conflict between the West and Muslims because most Muslims have a negative view of the terrorist organization. Prior to this recent spate of ISIS attacks, the Pew Research Center conducted surveys in countries with significant Muslim populations that tracked support or opposition to ISIS. It found overwhelmingly unfavorable views of ISIS, including in Lebanon where "almost every person surveyed who gave an opinion had an unfavorable view of ISIS, including 99% with a *very* unfavorable opinion." In Jordan, 94 percent of the population held a negative view of ISIS, while just 3 percent gave their support. Negative views totaled 84 percent in the Palestinian territories and 73 percent in Turkey, with 19 percent answering that they "don't know."[18]

Muslims' opinions about ISIS are not confined to polls. In the week following the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris earlier this year, Ghambhir notes that protests against ISIS occurred "in Gaza, Algeria, Pakistan, Chechnya, Niger, Mali, Somalia, Syria, Lebanon, Senegal, Mauritania and Iran."[19] This should come as no surprise: Even though the U.S. media reports mainly on high-profile ISIS attacks targeting Westerners, as President Barack Obama said last year, "the vast majority of ISIL's [ISIS's] victims have been Muslim."[20] The chilling reality of ISIS's level of deprav-

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ity is that even Osama bin Laden grew increasingly concerned that ISIS's precursor organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq, had so badly damaged Al Qaeda's brand—due to its targeting of Muslim civilians—that he sought to disavow the group and contemplated changing Al Qaeda's name.[21]

All of this provides the rationale behind President Obama's carefully chosen words that described this conflict as one against "violent extremism."[22] It is not as if ISIS refrains from lumping Obama in with the other "crusader leaders" it rails against. Of course it does. But rather, the Obama administration has shown discipline—based on an understanding of ISIS's aims—to avoid furthering ISIS's own strategic objectives by providing the group with ready-made sound bites to plug into its powerful propaganda machine.

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ISIS uses Islamophobia in a sophisticated recruiting campaign

It may seem unfathomable why anyone, particularly in the West, would choose to become part of an apocalyptic cult located thousands of miles away and committed to ultraviolence. There is no sole motive, or driver toward radicalization, that leads people to join ISIS. But the reasons clearly include some toxic mix of the rebelliousness of youth, marginalization from mainstream society, and a real or perceived antipathy toward Islam on the part of the West. And while there is no justification for making such a decision, it is critical to comprehend what motivates people to travel to Iraq and Syria and how groups such as ISIS capitalize on these drivers in their sophisticated recruiting efforts.

The proliferation of social media has radically transformed the terrorist movement and the recruiting landscape from which it attracts new fighters. ISIS's early adoption of social media on various platforms is one of the reasons it has eclipsed Al Qaeda's recruitment, according to a 2014 U.N. Security Council report on the recruitment of foreign fighters into ISIS's ranks.[23] The report concludes that the "numbers since 2010 are now many times the size of the cumulative numbers of foreign terrorist fighters between 1990 and 2010—and are growing."[24]

ISIS's use of modern media tools and platforms is like nothing the terrorist world has ever seen. Scott Talan, a professor of social media and marketing at American University, described the ISIS recruiting videos he has seen as "sophisticated": "It is Madison Avenue meets documentary film making meets news channel with sensibilities and marketing value."[25] A former Taliban recruiter now working with the Canadian security services said this is because "Westerners are involved, especially in the recruitment and social media dissemination. … Look at the videos they're making. You think those people were trained in Syria and Iraq? Those people were trained in the West."[26]

ISIS does not merely rely on slick videos pushed out through social media. It operates a 24-hour social media help center, produces its own apps, and has even developed an online training manual.[27] And ISIS will devote thousands of hours in direct social media communication toward just one potential recruit.[28]

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Rys Farthing of the Department of Social Policy and Intervention at Oxford University interviewed young British Muslims across the United Kingdom in an attempt to understand the reason why ISIS had such appeal for Muslims in Europe. He found that Islamophobia, either experienced by Muslim communities in Britain or promoted by ISIS propaganda, played a major role. One young woman told him that "ISIS wouldn't be here if there wasn't Islamophobia." Another identified the representation of Muslims in the media as "the main problem. … This country does not accept Islam for what it is. They're stereotyping it."[29]

According to the Congressional Research Service, U.S. intelligence estimated that more than 20,000 foreign fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq from 2011 to early 2015.[30] Of those, at least 3,400 were Westerners.[31] The European Union's top diplomat, Federica Mogherini, has said that all of the Paris attackers are believed to be EU citizens and that at least some received training in Syria.[32] This and other attacks place Europe more squarely under threat from foreign fighters; the U.S. government believes that only about 150 of those 3,400 fighters are from the United States.[33]

This problem is more pressing in Europe, but it is not unique to it. In the most detailed public account of a long-term ISIS recruiting effort, *The New York Times* published an investigation into ISIS's courtship of a 23-year-old American woman in rural Washington state. Multiple online interlocutors from Syria and the United Kingdom spent more than six moths engaging her and enticing her to become a Muslim and ultimately leave the United States. According to *The New York Times* account, early in ISIS's efforts to recruit her, her primary online friend told her to keep her new Muslim identity secret, "arguing that Muslims are persecuted in the United States. She could be labeled a terrorist."[34]

Regardless of ISIS's level of sophistication in using social media, how much direct discrimination a Muslim community feels and how alienated it is from the rest of society, or how susceptible any one young person is to these recruiting techniques, only a tiny minority ever agree to join ISIS's cause. An even smaller fraction return to the West intent on doing harm to civilians. It is important to put this in the context of the multitude of threats, foreign and domestic, arrayed against the United States. But it is possible that even a small number could represent a genuine security threat. The United States has not experienced the same forces driving the dynamic in Europe, which has fostered a larger pool of potential recruits and greater numbers of people travelling to Syria to fight with

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ISIS. The reaction to the Paris attacks in the United States is a warning that ISIS's strategy could start to work here by increasing anti-Muslim sentiment and beginning to erode some of the advantages that come with America's well-integrated Muslim American population.

Muslim Americans should never feel the need to separate themselves from the rest of American society. Such a scenario would have negative social and economic impacts not only for Muslims in America but also for the nation as a whole. It also has broader security implications. Rising alienation that could possibly lead to a larger potential pool of recruits for groups such as ISIS, however, is not the only reason to be concerned. Because Muslim American communities can and want to be a part of the solution, they can offer a first line of defense to help detect and prevent terror plots. In fact, Muslim communities have worked with U.S. security officials to help prevent 40 percent of all Al Qaeda plots in the United States since 9/11.[35] However, an anti-Muslim backlash serves only to drive a wedge between Muslim Americans and security agencies, likely lessening the level of cooperation that has successfully prevented attacks in the past.

Islamophobic reactions to the Paris attacks are exactly what ISIS needs

The Center for American Progress has undertaken two detailed analyses of Islamophobia in the United States, uncovering a network of organizations, funders, and individuals that have promoted anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies in the United States over the past decade.[36] While this research showed that anti-Muslim rhetoric was a genuine problem in American social and political life, one of the most encouraging things it concluded was that these views were largely confined to the margins of conservative political discourse and did not have influence over national policymaking.

In part, this was because mainstream conservatives actively rejected the messages of the Islamophobia network. President George W. Bush said at a mosque in the days after the 9/11 attacks that "Islam is peace. … When we think of Islam we think of a faith that brings comfort to a billion people around the world. … And that's made brothers and sisters out of every race."[37] The organizers of the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, the largest annual gathering of conservative activists and a major marker for the conservative movement, banned prominent anti-Muslim activist Frank Gaffney from its conference in 2011. According to top CPAC officials, Gaffney, a former Reagan administration official, had become "tiresomely obsessed with his weird belief" that the Muslim Brotherhood was infiltrating the U.S. government and political organizations, including CPAC.[38] More examples of conservative pushback against Islamophobia are detailed in CAP's "Fear, Inc. 2.0" report.[39]

After the Paris attacks, it no longer appears that Islamophobia is confined to the fringes of the conservative movement. By the end of the first business day after the attacks, more than half of the nation's governors—all but one Republicans—had announced that they would attempt to keep any Syrian refugees from being resettled in their states, refugees who are fleeing from the carnage wrought in part by ISIS.[40] By the end of the week, the U.S. House of Representatives had passed a bill that would effectively end the Syrian refugee resettlement program; the bill had virtually unanimous Republican support with some Democrats joining the majority.[41]

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), unintentionally echoing the ISIS author of "The Extinction of the Grayzone," described the conflict with ISIS as "a clash of civilizations. … There is no middle ground on this. Either they win or we win."[42] Rubio went on to lambaste President Obama and other progressives for refusing to say that the United States is "at war with Islam. … That would be like saying we weren't at war with Nazis because we were afraid to offend some Germans who may have been members of the Nazi Party but weren't violent themselves."[43]

This type of response from elected officials is disappointing, reckless, and exactly the kind of poorly thought through reaction to terrorist attacks that helps ISIS. The conservative rhetoric and policy proposals in the wake of the Paris attacks serve only to validate the messages ISIS is distributing about Western attitudes toward Islam and Muslims.

Sen. Rubio personifies the ISIS objective to compel "the crusaders to actively destroy the grayzone themselves"—in other words, provoking Western leaders into helping to destroy mainstream Islam and the Muslim nations that ISIS views as apostates. Equating Muslims that are not part of ISIS with members of the Nazi Party suggests that all Muslims are somehow collaborators with the violent extremists committing atrocities. Sen. Rubio would gift ISIS the "grayzone" by putting all Muslims into the ISIS camp. Under this logic, Yazidis facing genocide and sexual enslavement at the hands of ISIS, Kurds fighting alongside U.S. special forces to retake territory from ISIS, and Syrian civilians fleeing ISIS, as well as President Bashar al-Assad's barrel bombs, are no longer the most desperate victims of terrorists. Rather, they are accused of being terrorists themselves.

The recently passed House bill, if fully implemented, would require the director of the FBI, the secretary of homeland security, and the director of national intelligence to each personally certify that the background checks and screenings are sufficient to ensure that each individual refugee is not a threat to the United States.[44] That sounds innocuous, but it is dangerously counterproductive. Given the 2016 refugee target numbers of 10,000 Syrians and 15,000 Iraqis, the proposal would require each of these three top national security officials to make 100 individualized certifications on average each working day.[45] Ensuring that the refugee resettlement program adequately protects the security of Americans is an appropriate role for the national security and intelligence agencies. But requiring these senior officials to spend so much of their time on this one issue when they have numerous other pressing national security priorities is a dangerous distraction. It would only serve to weaken U.S. security.

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Not satisfied with their attempt to bog down the heads of these critical national security and intelligence agencies, some conservatives seem ready to shut down the entire federal government over Syrian refugees. Rep. Brian Babin (R-TX) has obtained the support of 57 other members of Congress for his effort to bar any funds to the Syrian refugee resettlement program in the annual spending bills that must pass by December 11.[46] Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL) is leading a similar effort on the Senate side.[47] Few situations would play into the hands of ISIS more than shutting down the U.S. government in a misguided panic over Muslim refugees.

The United States has a long track record of resettling millions of refugees from war-torn countries—some of which had governments or elements that viewed the United States as an enemy—without any meaningful harm to security.[48] Concerns about the risk that ISIS could infiltrate the resettlement program are understandable, and it is for this reason that the screening and vetting system is so robust, as outlined in a recent Center for American Progress infographic.[49] It is also why CAP proposed some additional measures that could be taken to secure it.[50] But welcoming Syrian refugees would show America at its best at a time when anxiety and fear is driving some to be at their worst—and with potentially serious consequences.

Harsh rhetoric and knee-jerk policies are not the extent of Islamophobia in the United States in the wake of the Paris attacks. Over the past week, Christopher Mathias and Andy Campbell of The Huffington Post have chronicled a series of Islamophobic acts targeting Muslims in the United States. These include the burning of a mosque; three separate incidents in which passengers were removed from flights for either appearing Middle Eastern or speaking Arabic; two separate, credible violent threats against a mosque and an Islamic center; and several incidents of vandalism and harassment.[51]

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Conclusion

ISIS is not going to win this war. Its apocalyptic worldview and horrific violence will always prevent the group from obtaining broad support from any population. There is no amount of alienation or discrimination that could drive sufficient numbers to ISIS to affect the ultimate outcome of this conflict. What is in doubt is the duration of the battle and how bloody it will be.

Should the United States fail to snap out of this spasm of anti-Muslim sentiment that has followed in the wake of the Paris attacks, then the level of alienation that is currently more prevalent in Europe could become common here. This would provide ISIS with additional fuel to prolong this war and increase the loss of innocent lives. If, however, the United States and other Western societies view our fellow citizens—who happen to be Muslim—as our strongest asset and partners in defeating the objectives of ISIS, and if we make common cause with the overwhelming majority of Muslims who want to destroy ISIS, then this will be a shorter conflict with far fewer lives lost.

We cannot account for the utter barbarism of ISIS. But we are in complete control of how we react to it.

About the author

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And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

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