

## Media Portrayal Shaping Attitudes Towards Muslims in the U.S.

Ibtissam BENTALEB\*

University of Hassiba Ben Bouali, Algeria, i.bentaleb@univ-chlef.dz

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**Abstract:** Muslim groups in the U.S. experience significant discrimination and hate crime rates. They were accused of several terrorist attacks occurring worldwide, particularly the September 11<sup>th</sup> Attacks occurring in the U.S. That led to widespread negative perception and intolerance towards the Muslim minority. The situation was exacerbated by negative media coverage, portraying Muslims as outsiders posing a real threat to American safety. The article reveals the important role the media plays in shaping American public opinion toward Muslims. Data were collected from previously conducted research studies. Conclusions were drawn from the most read newspapers and watched news networks, including USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. The study concludes that media coverage focusing on problematic themes, including terrorism, intercultural clash, and stereotypes serve as an essential influencer that undermine the Muslim integration and assimilation levels within American society.

**Keywords:** American Public Opinion, Assimilation, Media, Muslims, Stereotypes.

### 1.Introduction

Despite its common notion as a melting pot society, Muslims tend to be subjected to different acts of discrimination in the American society. Terrorism, crime, and xenophobia have long been coined with Islam and Muslims. Aside from their diverging ideologies, the Western and Muslim worlds fell under extreme conflicts, as Muslims were accused of several terrorist attacks targeting the Westerners. Tensions grew with repeated negative media portrayals, emphasizing problematic issues while representing the Muslim minority. As one of the major sources of information, media is of high importance in providing the public with the needed knowledge. Hence, people rely heavily on mass media to get news and updates, particularly with the immense technological development that facilitates the process. With the absence of intergroup contact, media has become the initial, if not the only connector between the Muslim minority and the other American ethnic minorities. Media effects have occupied a significant share of research literature. The latter argues that media contributed largely to shaping public opinion towards Muslims due to the widespread use of stereotypes. In this regard, the article seeks to answer two main questions. First, why media is perceived as an important, if not the only influencer on public opinion? Second, how were Muslims impacted by negative media coverage? The article reveals that the overrepresentation of Muslims as terrorists, intruders, and extremists resulted in widespread public antagonism towards the Muslim minority. As an unavoidable consequence, Muslims have become among the most discriminated ethnic group within the American society.

## 2. Muslim Groups in the U.S.

Contrary to the common perception claiming that Islam is a new phenomenon in the U.S., the history of Islam in America goes back to its earliest foundation days. According to scholar Richard Brent Turner, the first Muslim arrivals to America paralleled the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, with about 40,000 to 3 million enslaved Muslims brought to the New World. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, subsequent Muslim immigrant groups joined (Williams, 2017).

With the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which canceled the national quota system, the U.S. started receiving an important share of Muslim immigrants escaping political conflicts in the Middle East, including Palestine, Syria, and Iraq (Wekhian, 2016), as well as professionals and entrepreneurs looking for economic prosperity from the south and southeast Asia (Tindogan, 2011).

Indifferent about their religious affiliations, the U.S. allowed the entry of several immigrant groups. Consequently, millions of people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds immigrated to the U.S. Between 1966 and 1997, it was estimated that about 1.1 million immigrants were Muslims (Curtis, 2009).

Muslim Americans are considered the most ethnically diverse Muslim population in the world, originating from more than 80 countries. In contrast to the widespread belief, claiming that most Muslim Americans are Arabs, only one-third are from Arab majority countries. The remaining share includes one-third of South Asians and one-fifth of blacks, in addition to an increasing number of U.S.-born converts of Anglo and Hispanic ancestry (Read, 2008).

Though most Americans reported not having strong ties or prior knowledge of Muslims and Islam in general, the majority hold unpleasant sentiments towards them. Despite their early arrival, Muslims in the U.S., especially those of Arab origins, were perceived differently. While some could integrate, the majority experienced different acts of discrimination, whether in education, the labor market, or other socio-economic sectors. The situation worsened as Muslims became the central focus of negative rhetoric.

## 3. The Othering of Muslims in the U.S.

Muslims tend to be among the most despised, targeted, and criticized ethnic groups. Given their distinct culture, traditions, values, language, and religion, Muslims of different origins faced several acts of discrimination and segregation in the U.S. Initially, they were accused of not being able to assimilate within the American society (Tindongan, 2011), and became the scapegoats for almost every terrorist incident. This led to the resurgence of the phenomenon of Islamophobia; simply explained as the 'fear of Islam'. Islam has become a near-constant feature of terror.

Though many combined the 9/11 attacks with hostility and discrimination against Muslims, namely the Arab ones, tension towards the Muslim minority existed earlier (Mamdani, 2002). Antagonism between the Western world and Muslims existed hundreds of years ago. The Western world portrayed Islam and Muslims as the "Other" and "the anti-thesis" of the western features (Acim, 2019). Islamophobia predated the 9/11 incident, as the common image towards Islam had long been a barbaric, inhumane, and evil religion that did not accept and refused to cohabitate with cultural diversity (Said, 1978).

Apart from their different religious belief and traditions, the othering of Muslims in the U.S. society was due to other factors, including imperialist and colonial interests (Suleiman, 1989), and political conflicts (Tindongan, 2011). The first major conflict between the U.S. and the Arab world occurred in the 1950s when the U.S. expressed its support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine (Suleiman, 1989). The menace of the Muslim Other among the American society escalated as a result of other events, including the Arab oil

embargo of 1973<sup>1</sup>, the American hostages in Iran in the 1980s<sup>2</sup>, U.S. military intervention in Libya in the 1980s, and the 1990s Gulf war (Tindongan, 2011).

Following those incidents, hostility towards Muslims in the U.S. intensified (Teague, 2018). Stereotypes conflating Islam/Muslims and terrorism escalated, leading to increased anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments across the United States mainstream (Suleiman, 1989). Those negative sentiments resulted in several acts of racism and discrimination against Muslim subjects. In his article *Islamophobia Culture and Race in the Age of Empire*, Mehdi Semati argued that Islamophobia was an ideological response to conflicting politics, histories, societies, and cultures between Muslim countries and the Western world (2010).

With the occurrence of one of the most brutal terrorist attacks the U.S. had ever experienced, known as the September attacks, Muslim status became of much concern, as they were vehemently accused of being responsible for the incident. The attack of September 11, 2001, led to the rise of national solidarity in the face of terror and insecurity. Islamic tradition and Muslims became under extreme scrutiny, which worsened the Arab-Muslims' status, making them the most rejected group in the U.S. (Tindongan, 2011). In a post-9/11 era of Islamophobia, Arab-Muslims were subjected to misjudgment and mistreatment from the Western world and the American public.

As a response to those stereotypes, several calls escalated asking for the ban of immigration, elimination of student visas and Diversity Lottery Visa Program, and closing the U.S. borders. Perceived as outsiders, even Muslim Americans were asked to leave the country.

Trapped in the middle, Muslims found themselves lost between bettering their image and preserving their religious affiliation. Unfortunately, the mission tended to be much more difficult, as they were attacked from different angles, most importantly through extensive negative media portrayal. Playing a pivotal role in shaping and guiding public opinion, media served as a moving vehicle directing public opinion to whatever path it seeks to reach. In the case of Muslims, deepening American resentments has been a targeted and reached point.

#### **4. Media's Role in Reinforcing Misjudgement Towards Muslims**

As one of the major sources of information, Media plays a leading role in providing public with the necessary and needed updates they seek to know. Hence, people rely heavily on mass media to get news and information, particularly with the immense technological development facilitating the process.

Besides, with the absence of direct intergroup contact between multi-ethnic American groups and their peers from Muslim origins, which tend to be reinforced by widespread negative prejudice, media has become of much importance in shaping and guiding the public's attitude toward the Muslim minority.

Political scientist Diana C. Mutz considered both political elites and the media the two vital players in influencing mass public opinion over a particular subject of concern (Mutz, 2018). One could say that media portrayal determines the place of a group in the larger society. Some xenophobic people were more likely to negatively perceive an entire group based on just one malevolent member (Small & Loewenstein, 2005).

More critically, between good and bad news, people tended to absorb the bad ones more (Mutz, 2018). The media's stereotypical portrayal of Muslims, notably the Arabs, led to increased resentment toward them. Consequently, many were subject to hostile treatment by certain U.S. citizens. Some political and social scientists combined the increasing share of hostility towards the Muslim community to the widespread use of demonizing rhetoric, portraying Muslims as terrorists threatening Americans' lives.

Defining terrorism has encountered several misleading concepts. The term received different definitions. The main challenge was to determine the exact actions to be considered terroristic. In the wake of the twenty-first century, terrorism as a term raised considerable concerns among historians and scholars who ought to present the most adequate definition to this phenomenon.

The difficulty of drawing a consistent definition of terrorism lies in the common aspects it shares with other forms of violence; including a state-based armed conflict, non-state conflict, one-sided violence, hate crime, and homicide. In an attempt to distinguish terrorism from different violent acts, Hannah Ritchie, Joe Hasell, Cameron Appel, and Max Roser presented a set of criteria precising what made an act a terrorist one.

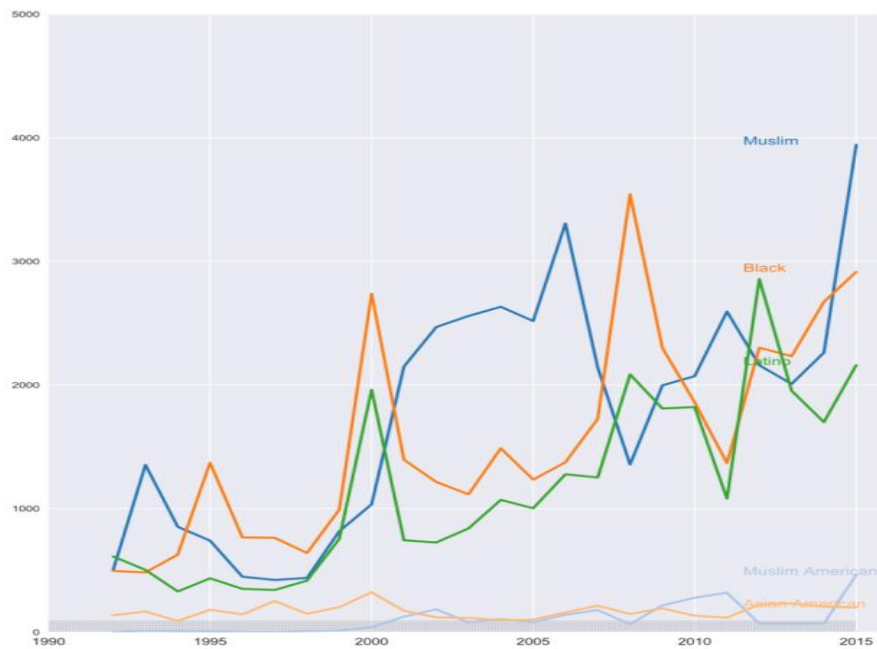
They argued that terrorism included acts which were conducted by a subnational group or a non-state entity formed of individuals who were influenced by terrorist movements. The main aim of those organizations was to install fear among randomly selected victims by conducting violent acts aimed at reaching political, economic, religious, or social objectives (Ritchie, Hasell, Appel, & Roser, 2019).

Despite their common features; based mainly on installing fear and the use of violence, there were remarkable disparities in media coverage between acts committed by Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators. In a study conducted by the Communication Studies Department at Luther College, focusing on six media newspapers and networks, including the *NEW YORK TIMES*, *WASHINGTON POST*, *USA TODAY*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and *FOX NEWS*, results showed that both the tone and the content used to describe the incidents differed sharply. While acts committed by perpetrators with no Muslim ties were labeled as isolated acts of a troubled individual or hate crimes, the ones conducted by those with Muslim ties were defined as terrorism (Powell, 2018).

Following the 9/11 attacks, Muslims and Islam became the crux of common media threat narratives. Compared to other marginalized groups, the media focus increased both in terms of volume and negative portrayal targeting the Muslim community.

While examining media coverage for the three main marginalized groups in the U.S., including Muslim Americans, Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans, political scientist Nazita Lajevardi found that there was a remarkable decrease in the volume of coverage of Muslims. The studied period included pre and post 9/11 attacks. In 2000, a year before the September attacks, Muslims ranked the last among the three most marginalized groups, with 1.79%, 3.27%, and 4.61%, of all available news media broadcasts targeting Muslims, Latinos, and Blacks, respectively. In 2015, the Muslim share witnessed a significant increase, surpassing the other groups, with a turn-up of 26.5 percent in comparison to 18.83% and 13.91% for mentions of Blacks and Latinos (Fig 1.).

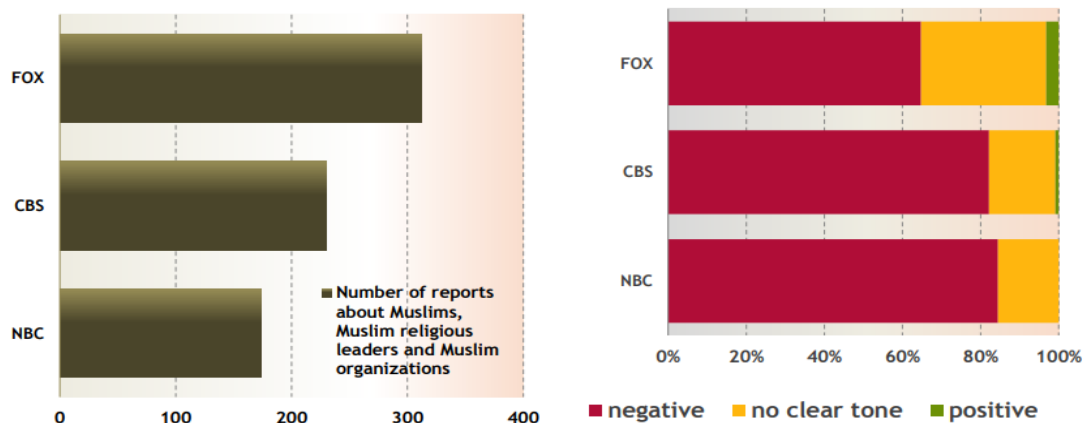
**Figure 1: Changes in Volume of Group Mentions in the News Media Over Time**



**Source:** Lajevardi, N. (2019). The News Media and Portrayals of Muslims Foreign and Domestic. Retrieved from Maydan: <https://themaydan.com/2019/05/the-news-media-and-portrayals-of-muslims-foreign-and-domestic/>

Moreover, the perceived identity of an alleged perpetrator shaped the media content in terms of the tone used. Some of the most common terms while describing Muslims included terrorists, extremists, and jihadists. They were perceived as an alienated group, **bringing** nothing but hatred and death to the world. The high number of reports devoted to **covering** the Muslim minority employed a negative tone. Despite their disproportionate rates, all networks, including Fox, CNN, and MSNBC, used negative words when portraying Muslims (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2: Tones Used in Muslim Representations by American Media Outlets**



**Source:** Mediatenor. US TV Primetime News prefer stereotypes: Muslims framed mostly as criminals, 2013.



Importantly, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Muslims were subjected to negative representation than any other racialized American group (Lajevardi, 2019). The media's stereotypical portrayal of Muslims, notably Arabs, led to increased resentment toward them. Some political and social scientists combined the increasing share of hostility towards immigrants to the widespread use of demonizing rhetoric, portraying immigrants as intruders attempting to invade the United States. Often-repeated threat narrative combining Muslims with pernicious social, cultural, and national impacts led to increased American public hostility against the Muslim minority. The threat narrative of Muslims was displayed across media outlets, political narratives, and scholarly works. Negative media representation covering the Muslim minority group, including both immigrants and nationals, focused on combining Islam with terrorism.

A number of Americans responded with anger and fear towards those growing often-repeated stereotypes. Some of those sentiments turned into violent actions. Several Muslims were subject to different acts of hostility and harassment. The heated debate about Islam and Muslims increased the rate of hate crimes.

In the first few months following the September 11 terrorist attacks, hate crimes against Muslims increased dramatically, reaching 296 anti-Muslim intimidation crimes and 93 simple and aggravated assaults. The number declined in the subsequent years to 26 aggravated assaults in 2004. However, in the aftermath of the San Bernardino attacks in 2015, the debate about the interrelation between terrorism and Muslims resurfaced again, increasing the number of hate crimes to 120 crimes of intimidation against Muslims and 91 aggravating attacks (Kishi, 2016).

Apart from their different religious traditions and practices, negative media coverage placed Muslims as the most marginalized group in the U.S. With the widespread use of social media and heavy reliance on news outlets, the American public drew a deep-rooted image of the Muslim minority based on prejudice, stereotypes, and misinterpretations of Islam. The question left to be answered though is why Muslims are becoming more and more the focal concern of Americans, one can even assume the whole Western media? Is it because Muslims hold anger and antipathy towards the Western world or the opposite?

From 2009 to 2019, of the 136 terrorist attacks on US soil, only 12.5 percent were committed by perpetrators of Muslim origin. However, they received the highest share of concern, with 357 percent more media coverage than that of other groups (GSU\_News, 2019). Other than the incident's terror scale, the perpetrator's religion serves as an essential factor defining the media focus. The main aim tends to be related to asserting the bad image about Islam, rather than revealing reality.

## **5. Conclusion:**

Undeniably, negative representation of Islam and Muslims in some of the major American news media platforms deteriorated the Muslim image and resulted in widespread hatred towards all that is related to Islam. Albeit the fact that media coverage plays an indispensable feature in shaping American public opinion, the deep-rooted hatred toward the Muslim community serves also as a de facto feature that cannot be overlooked. The problem is that the idea of Islam and terrorism are deeply installed within the subconscious of the western world. Even with positive media representation, negative perceptions would always persist. People tend to believe and respond more with negative portrayal and prejudice than when a positive picture is shown about Muslims. Some tend to mock videos that try to picture the Muslim community as a good one, or at least as ordinary, having both bonafide and malevolent members. Non-credibility of media coverage raises an important question, which is whether the war on terror is directed towards perpetrators or, in fact, is a war on Islam?

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\* Corresponding Author

<sup>1</sup>In October 1973, Middle Eastern OPEC nations stopped oil exports to the U.S. as part of the Arab coalition against enemy countries accused of supporting Israel against the Arabs.

<sup>2</sup>A group of Iranian student demonstrators invaded the American embassy in Tehran, Iran and took Americans as hostages for 444 days.