

Racialized Threat: Muslim Americans and Nationalistic Exclusion

In 1958, sociologist Herbert Blumer developed a theory of race-based threat as being rooted in a sense of group position, and is credited with bringing a more sociological, rather than psychological, understanding to prejudice and discrimination (Bobo 1999). Since then, much work has been done in developing the racial threat hypothesis to understand how whites, as the dominant racial group, feel and respond to threat as a non-white group increases in number. African Americans are usually the group that is investigated as producing racial threat, through an increasing number of studies are focusing on threat experienced due to a growing Hispanic population. Racial threat is most typically construed in economic or political terms, meaning that whites believe that some minority group is threatening their economic position (including job prospects and security) or political power, most often through a sheer increase in numbers (Blalock 1973; Olzak 1994).

This analysis expands on the racial threat literature in two ways. First, I analyze whites' perceived threat from Muslims—a group that is not well represented in the existing literature. This analysis is among the first to systematically apply the racial threat framework to a racialized group whose identity centers around religion, rather than a group that has a long history in the United States of being perceived as a biology-based racial group. Understanding how threat is induced by Muslims, a group that is *racialized*, is important for assessing how contemporary constructs of race are connected to discourse about nationalism and for analyzing how both local and national frameworks are important for understanding whites' experience of racial threat.

Second, the qualitative approach of this analysis yields insight into the experience and content of racial threat, which large-scale, quantitative assessments of policy change or voting patterns cannot do. This allows us to understand why some groups are more likely to be perceived as threatening than others, to understand how both local and national contexts matter for perceptions of threat, and to better understand some of the interpersonal consequences of racial threat. A qualitative framework also returns somewhat to the spirit of Blumer's (1958) original framework of racial threat. That is, although Blumer's original components detail a sense of group position on the part of racially dominant whites, most analyses investigate aggregate and institution-based effects of these perceptions. The present analysis allows us to understand how threatened whites frame their discomfort, which is particularly compelling when overt references to race are usually not socially appropriate, and when race and racial fears may be disguised under other terminology (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Mendelberg 2001).

Interviews and ethnography with members of the Michigan militia are my data source for two interrelated reasons. First, they yield strong insight into perceived threat from Muslims because Muslims are a salient outgroup in Michigan, and members have more opportunities to publicly voice their concern about this group than would be the case in many other states. Second, militia members are predominately lower-middle class, white men who simultaneously subscribe to a Libertarian brand of equality while being hyper-aware of perceived threats to an ideal nation that is grounded in white masculinity. These men have similar life experiences and concerns as members of similar groups like the Tea Party or National Rifle Association members. The examination of

such men, who strongly identify with the nation and who most feel as though they are on the losing end of a so-called "post-racial" Obama-era society (Kimmel 2013) is critical if we are to understand the changing logics of contemporary racial threat and racism that shape the contemporary U.S. My goal here is not to make claims about all instances of anti-Muslim bias, or about all anti-Muslim actors, but rather to reveal how one apparently common form of racialization occurs. In this context, militia members are one example of how the racialization of Muslims occurs among a demographic group (white men) that has previously been demonstrated to be most likely to evidence anti-Muslim bias (Zainiddinov 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Racial Threat

Blumer's original framework of racial threat is defined as a threat to group position that occurs when dominant group experiences four things:

1. A feeling of superiority
2. A feeling that the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien
3. A feeling of proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage
4. A fear and suspicion that the subordinate race harbors designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race (1958:4).

All four of Blumer's original components implicate feelings and perceptions about group position (how whites "rank" relative to other groups) on the part of racially dominant whites. The first two components focus largely on affective distinctions that whites make between themselves and non-white groups, while the third and fourth components are

more about a sense of encroachment on social realms dominated by white privilege (Bobo 1999).

Most scholars following Blumer's work, however, have not focused on whites' feelings of group position or on the nature of the threat they experience. Instead, racial threat is most typically investigated in terms of social outcomes. The racial threat hypothesis and its variants have been used to help explain everything ranging from historical patterns of lynchings and across-state differences in modern-day death penalty applications (Jacobs, Carmichael, and Kent 2005) to voting preferences among white communities (Bafumi and Herron 2009). Racial threat has experienced particularly broad application in analyses seeking to understand punitive policies in both the criminal justice (D'Alessio, Stolzenberg, and Eitle 2002; Drakulich and Crutchfield 2013; Eitle, D'Alessio, and Stolzenberg 2002; Eitle and Monahan 2009; Novak and Chamlin 2012; Stolzenberg, D'alessio, and Eitle 2004) and educational systems (Goyette, Farrie, and Freely 2012; Olzak, Shanahan, and West 1994). Criminologists Kelly Welch and Allison Payne (2010), for example, find that school discipline becomes more punitive and more likely to include zero tolerance policies as the percentage of black students in the school rises.

African Americans most often constitute the focus of racial threat analyses, though an increasing number of studies are using a racial threat framework to understand varying acceptance of Hispanic immigrants. Political scientist Benjamin Newman and his colleagues (2012), for example, show that whites who have increased contact with immigrants who speak little to no English feel a heightened degree of threat relative to

whites who have fewer of these encounters, which then translates to anti-immigrant sentiment and support for anti-immigrant policies. In this case, barriers to verbal communication appear to serve as reminders to whites of cultural difference that is seen both as incompatible with, and as threatening to, white dominance.

A similar study by Rene Rocha and Rodolfo Espino (2009) underscores the importance of considering not just population sizes, but also population distribution when assessing the presence of racial threat. This study finds that Latino immigrants evoke racial threat, including resistance to Spanish language acceptance, under conditions of neighborhood segregation, but not integration. These results suggest that segregation maintains both physical and symbolic boundaries between racial groups, while integration creates opportunities for contact and individualization that work to undermine stereotypes and feelings of otherness. Rocha and Espino thus suggest that neighborhood integration allows for a shift away from the racial threat hypothesis and toward the contact hypothesis, whereby feelings of racial animosity can be undermined by interpersonal contact between racial groups, at least in some contexts (Forbes 1997).

Other scholars (Baybeck 2006) have shown that spatial boundaries beyond a neighborhood context must be considered to accurately assess threat. People have multiple reference points for racial stereotypes and interactions and may, for example, be heavily influenced by media representations as much as their personal interactions (Gallagher 2003). Daniel Hopkins (2010) analyzes how whites consider both national and local contexts in their assessment of immigrant groups. I suggest that this framework is relevant to understanding not just immigrant groups per se, but any group that is

perceived as fundamentally "othered" from mainstream, white America in national discourse. In other words, local racial dynamics do not happen in a political or cultural vacuum. Whites may be differentially attuned to national discourse about ongoing affirmative action, welfare, or other debates that might influence their overall perceptions of African Americans, for example, and these perceptions may impact their interactions African Americans in a local context.

Hopkins developed the concept of "politicized places" to reflect communities that, "are undergoing sudden demographic changes at the same time that salient national rhetoric politicizes immigration, [where] immigrants can quickly become the targets of local political hostility" (2010:40). Although most analyses of racial threat have quantitatively assessed change in non-white populations over time, other scholars have noted that numerical changes are not always necessary to produce threat (Goyette et al. 2012; Pettigrew et al. 2010); rather, perceptions of change or the anticipation of change can be enough to provoke a threat response, based on stereotyped expectations of a non-white group.

The effect of perceived or anticipated change is very important because it is highly questionable that whites always have an accurate sense of change in non-white population numbers. Whites tend to dramatically overestimate the numbers of non-white groups in the population (Gallagher 2003), and it is unclear whether relatively small increases in a non-white population over a period of several years are something that most Whites would accurately notice and experience as threatening. As criminologist Ted Chiricos and his coauthors observed, "the racial composition of place can only be

consequential [...] if actors situated in those social circumstances are aware of the racial composition, concerned about it, and respond..." (2001:323). A model of racial threat that is based on group position, rather than objective group sizes, is analytically advantageous because it explains why perceptions of threat can rise even in the absence of realistic group conflict (Taylor 1998).

I suggest that, at the experiential level, racial threat is less about quantifiable population change than it is about group salience and perceived, threatened cultural change. Qualitatively assessing racial threat through the framework of group position allows for exploration of the experience and content of threat, which previous studies have been ill-equipped to assess (Bobo and Kluegel 1993). A qualitative focus also addresses literature gaps regarding how non-white groups induce status, physical, or cultural threats, rather than economic or political threats alone (Taylor 1998).

From Racial Threat to Racialized Threat

Racialization is an essentializing process whereby a group that previously had no racial meaning is assigned such meaning (Omi and Winant 1994). As John Hartigan says, it "reduces individuality to the point that only racialness matters" (1999:13).

Racialization means that phenotypical differences are reified across groups that are perceived to be distinct, and skin color or the shape of the nose, for example, are considered to be reliable markers of a person's racial classification. Racialization may also incorporate cultural factors in addition to traditional, physical markers of race and ethnicity. Importantly, these perceived cultural differences are still understood to be

embodied such that brown skin and traditional religious dress are understood to mark cultural traits as well as assumed race or ethnicity.

Scholars have discussed how non-Muslim Americans assume that all Muslims are Arabs and all Arabs are Muslim (Joseph, D'Harlingue, and Wong 2008; Joshi 2006; Shaheen 2000). This overgeneralization occurs despite the fact that some studies estimate as many as one-third of American Muslims to be African American, and as many as two-thirds of Arab Americans to be Christians (Task Force 2007). Other scholars have discussed the State's involvement in the racialization of Muslims, which occurs, in part, to promote the war on terror and to uphold clear ingroup/outgroup boundaries during the time of national crisis following the 2001 terror attacks¹ (Rana 2011). Sociologist Sherene Razack (2008) goes a step further and theorizes that once Muslims are racialized, terrorism also becomes racialized, such that Arabs are not only perceived as Muslims, but they are also uniformly perceived as likely terrorists due to stereotypes about violence in Islam. The reverse is also true: for many non-Muslim Americans, the term "terrorist" harkens a mental image of a traditionally dressed Muslim (Alsultany 2007; Razack 2008).

After the terror attacks of 9/11, anti-Muslim sentiment and violence surged and, as Figure 1 shows, has remained at elevated levels since that time. Many non-Muslim Americans still harbor resentment and suspicion toward their Muslim neighbors. Ongoing public debates about the U.S.'s continued involvement in the Middle East, and about American citizens' safety from future terrorism, particularly in the wake of the 2013 Boston bombings, keep the specter of the dangerous Muslim terrorist who is

incompatible with American values alive in the public mind (Alsultany 2007; Joseph et al. 2008; Naber 2000; Saeed 2007; Shaheen 2009). These findings suggest that "racialized threat" might be a more accurate term for describing resistance to Muslim acceptance in the U.S.

In just the last few years and corresponding with a recent uptick in anti-Muslim violence (see Figure 1), at least 26 states have tried to implement versions of anti-Sharia² legislation (Raftery 2012), purportedly to prevent judges from considering religious or other non-U.S. law when deciding court cases. Thirteen states have thus far been successful in these efforts, despite the American Civil Liberties Union and various Muslim advocacy organizations arguing that the laws are legally unnecessary and only serve to bolster stereotypes and exclusionary behavior toward Muslim Americans (Gay 2011).

[Figure 1 About Here]

Muslims living in Michigan have been especially high-profile targets of anti-Muslim vandalism and protests in the last few years. In 2012, for example, 33% of religiously-motivated hate crimes in Michigan were anti-Islamic in nature, and this proportion is 2.75 times the national level (Michigan Incident Crime Reporting 2013). These events are, on some level, unsurprising given the large number of Michigan residents with Arab heritage. The city of Dearborn in particular is touted as having the largest concentration of Arabs outside the Middle East at about 30% of its residents (de la Cruz and Brittingham 2003), and California is the only state with more residents of Arab ancestry than Michigan (Arab American Institute N.d.). Michigan is therefore an ideal

site for investigating whites' experience of racialized threat of Muslims because of the increased salience of “Muslim-looking” people there relative to some other places.

DATA AND METHODS

From 2008 to 2011, I spent more than 300 hours across 63 events doing fieldwork with militia units across the state of Michigan. I attended public and private meetings, trainings, and camping events. I also conducted 40 in-depth, open-ended interviews with members around the state, and analyzed contemporary and historical archival militia materials, including materials from three private online militia forums and personal papers from militia founder Norman Olson.

Militia members are predominately, though not exclusively, white and male, and most members are married, have children and jobs, pay their taxes, and care very much about preserving their access to firearms. About one-third of militia members and two-thirds of militia leaders have military experience. Most militia members do not live in rural areas, but instead live in larger Michigan cities and their suburbs, especially Detroit and Grand Rapids, and most must travel at least 30 miles to participate in regular militia training activities.

Although distinct entities, militia members have important ideological overlaps with men in a variety of other groups ranging from avid hunters and recreational shooters, to Tea Party, Oath Keeper and National Rifle Association members, to mainstream Republicans who believe President Obama is not a "real" American. Militia men also share common life stressors with many other under-employed, lower-middle

class white men who may not be involved in this particular range of social or political activities. These are men who are often fearful or angry about losing historically-granted privileges in a changing society (Kimmel 2013), and who may be the most likely to resist social acceptance of other groups (Zainiddinov 2012).

Militia men also understand themselves to have a special relationship with the nation. Militia members see themselves as super citizens³ whose mission it is to uphold the essence of Americanism as they understand it. Their vision of the nation rests on individual liberty and self-determination, and on citizenship as a set of day-to-day practices that attest to one's commitment to the nation (Billig 1995; Isin 2009). Members pride themselves on being lawful citizens who carefully follow even laws with which they disagree, such as laws banning certain grips or other accessories from being attached to certain firearms. Members report voting at every opportunity, and understand their militia participation as a way to be prepared to serve their communities in the event of emergencies ranging from snowstorms to terror attacks. Militia members see themselves as more dedicated to the country and its principles than other Americans because of their militia involvement, but their version of super-citizen nationalism resonates with groups on the political right (e.g., Tea Partiers, Oath Keepers, etc.) who hold a similar "originalist" vision of a country that adheres to a literal interpretation of the Constitution as it was supposedly intended by the Founding Fathers. Militia members' deep investment in an idealized nation thus positions them to have both strong and visible attitudes about racial groups that they believe may challenge or threaten their ideal nation.

FINDINGS

Militia Members' Religious and Racial Schemas

Militias are often stereotyped in fictional or news portrayals, or in popular discourse as being highly religious (Christian) and racist organizations with overt ties to white supremacist groups. My observations of Michigan militias did not match this stereotype, and, here, I briefly include information about participants' general religious and racial frameworks to demonstrate that their threat response to Muslims cannot be categorized merely as a standard outgroup response whereby they uniformly experience threat from non-Christians or non-whites; doing so glosses over meaningful ways in which whiteness is reproduced in post-Obama America.

Most Michigan militias are not religious; that is, although individual members may have a religious affiliation, militias in Michigan do not usually have religious goals or identities at the group level.⁴ Religion was never the focus of any militia function I attended, and was rarely discussed as a casual personal interest during members' conversations at militia events. When I asked my 40 interviewees an open-ended question about their religious affiliation, 67% identified as Christian. Another 31% responded that they were Atheist or Agnostic. One interviewee—a respected leader of a unit in the southern part of the state—informed me he had converted to Islam after a stint in the military. I draw on his experiences later in the paper to further clarify militia members' experiences of racialized threat from Muslim Americans.

Most Michigan militias do not have overtly racial aims. The front page of www.michiganmilitia.com states:

A well-armed citizenry is the best form of Homeland Security and can better deter crime, invasion, terrorism, and tyranny. Everyone is welcome, regardless of race, creed, color, religion or political affiliation, provided you do not wish to bring harm to our country or people. If you are a United States citizen (or have declared your intent to become such), who is capable of bearing arms, or supports the right to do so, then YOU ARE the MILITIA!

In accordance with this message, I witnessed different militia leaders tell first-time meeting attendees that they had no patience for racism or any “Nazi crap” on at least half a dozen occasions, including times where they did not know I was observing. I also witnessed many members welcome and even attempt to recruit (usually unsuccessfully) African Americans who were in earshot of public militia events and seemed to be listening to the proceedings.

In one very unique yet instructive encounter, militia members from at least four different units across the state were confronted by six members of the Michigan NAACP as the militia gathered for a joint post-election meeting in November 2010. The NAACP members had been informed that the militia was gathering with a racial agenda, and they planned to protest the meeting. Militia leaders invited them inside to better hear the meeting information. The NAACP members then sat in on the meeting and asked several questions. After the meeting was over, the NAACP members shook hands with militia leaders, a few exchanged phone numbers, and I overheard one NAACP member say, ‘This is the kind of stuff we should be implementing in *our* neighborhoods!’⁵ in reference to community-oriented disaster planning the militia leaders had advocated that night.

More commonly, individual militia members profess that they are in agreement with the egalitarian stance the militia promotes. Several interviewees, to my surprise,

responded similarly to 30 year old Mark when I asked why they thought more people of color were not involved in the militia:

“I don't think it's an awareness thing. I think if anything they're *more* aware than most white people. Because they've been *through* it. I mean they've already been manipulated and exploited more so than most white people have.”

Members like Mark demonstrate at least some knowledge of a history of race-based mistreatment in U.S. society, and an understanding that other racial groups might not feel so closely attached to the nation as he does as a result.

Other members talk fondly of their own racially-mixed heritage, or are in interracial marriages; one group leader in particular says he is "proud to have contributed to the 'browning' of America," as he expresses frustration that his granddaughter is made fun of at school because of her beautiful, dark skin. One militia unit in southern Michigan made a point of including African American models on their "Militia Babes" calendars with the explicit goal of communicating a version of racial acceptance to their website visitors.

These factors do not, of course, mean militia members have full empathetic understanding or knowledge of institutional racism and other continuing discrimination. These and other interactions nonetheless reflect a more insightful and accepting perspective on race than is often expected from this group, and demonstrate members' attempts to support a super-citizen vision of an egalitarian America. In his investigation of color-blind racism, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva found that many of his white respondents said or implied that they, "don't like to think about" (2001:145) race as a way to avoid confronting ongoing racial problems. Militia men, in contrast, do think about

race and how their group is perceived in the context of members' whiteness. The question then becomes how to integrate members' explicit embrace of racial egalitarianism with their exclusion of Muslims.

The Militia's Response to Muslims

While the conversations about African Americans in the militia emphasized inclusivity rather than racialized fears, narratives surrounding Muslims were exclusionary and alarmist. Early in my fieldwork, 35 year old George told me that several members left his group, the Southeast Michigan Volunteer Militia (SMVM), when he wanted to bring a Muslim friend to trainings and SMVM leadership supported his decision. One of the objectors, 45 year old Kyle, told me:

“Last April, the SMVM was contacted by some Muslims, and they wanted to train. And they [SMVM] said, ‘well we can’t discriminate [based on] their religion and their race.’ And we basically said, ‘the hell we can’t.’ [...] Ok, you let these guys in, they come out and train with us, they come to all our meetings, they do everything. They’re there for a year or two, next thing you know, they disappear. [...] But, one of their carcasses just turns up in the Sears Tower that just got bombed, with an SMVM membership card. [...] What do you think is gonna happen? They are gonna round up every member, anybody that ever inquired in conversation or email [about the militia], they’re gonna come through these [units] and hunt everybody up, [saying] ‘You trained a terrorist.’”

Kyle believes that Muslims would only want to train with the militia to learn skills to harm American citizens, and believes that it is perfectly appropriate to exclude Muslims from the group as a result. Kyle does not see this exclusion as contradicting the militia’s super-citizen vision because he believes that Muslims do not comply with the

militia mission statement of allowing the participation of people who do not want to “bring harm to our country or people.”

Kyle's belief that neighboring Muslims would want to learn how to commit terror attacks on highly recognizable landmarks in bigger cities demonstrates how he interprets local Muslims within a non-local context; concerns of national security and public dialogue about likely future terror targets shape his perceptions of local Muslim's desires and likely behaviors. Kyle also affirms a racialized view of terrorism as he implies that any given Muslim is likely to participate in an act of terror. In the same way that stereotypes about black criminality play a role in the activation of perceived racial threat from African Americans (D'Alessio et al. 2002), stereotypes about Muslim terrorism are amplified as militia members consider Muslims and experience threat from them.

Trevor, age 49, even more directly expressed a racialized belief that Islam cannot coexist with the American way of life as he talked with another member at a meeting:

“And [the Constitution] is for all people. All people of all races, all creeds and all religions. But one thing you gots to understand: the Muslim religion and our Constitution and our way of life cannot coexist. They can't do it.”

Trevor's quote shows how the U.S. is ostensibly founded on principles of racial and religious inclusion, but Muslim Americans are nonetheless excluded from full acceptance and participation in U.S. society.

People like Trevor understand Muslims themselves to have highly exclusionary attitudes toward people with other belief systems, such that their worldview is incompatible with American ideals. Vincent, a proud Atheist, elaborated on this idea as said that Islam is inherently terroristic and antithetical to the American way of life such

that Muslims are incapable of even understanding American values. Vincent indicated that these values included full equality for both men and women, and tolerance for opposing ideas without the risk of violent backlash. Although he did not use this term, Vincent was suggesting that "Muslim American" is an oxymoron; that, in his view, it is fundamentally un-American to be a Muslim. Vincent's and Trevor's perceptions of the incompatibility of Muslim values with American ones are rooted in racialized stereotypes of Muslims (and Arab cultures) as being oppressive toward women and prone to violence and terrorism. In this framework, the exclusion and fear of Muslims is not a contradiction to expressions of full racial inclusion, but rather an outgrowth of them—an attempt to protect different "legitimate" belief and cultures within the U.S. from an exclusionary, violent, and illegitimate Muslim culture.

Some militia members said that Islam is detrimental to American culture when discussing claims about President Obama's rumored Muslim status. Remarks about Obama are important because of how the President is perceived to represent the nation and its goals. Grady, in his late 30s, announced just prior to the 2008 election that he believed Obama had connections to terrorists like those involved in the 9/11 attacks. He said he believed that 'being a Muslim should be enough to disqualify someone for running for the highest office' because he, too, understands Muslims to be uniformly involved in terror and disconnected from American values. Another member added that he would be able to get a higher security clearance at his government job than Obama would as President because of Obama's Middle Eastern ties. When I asked 23 year old Stewart about his opinion on Obama's administration during my interview with him, he

haltingly responded, “Clearly he had some kind of Muslim or Arabic background. So that was a concern. For our nation’s security.”

It is important to note that militia members like these men feel that Muslims as a racialized group threaten the physical safety of the nation and its citizens as well as its culture and values. Scholars sometimes overlook that white, gun owning men are sometimes expressing real fear with these statements (Barker 1981; Oliviero 2011), rather than merely using rhetoric to spur recruitment or mobilization or perhaps merely to disguise racism or other underlying motives. Militia men are primarily having these Islamophobic conversations with each other, rather than with potential recruits or a broader public, or even with me as a researcher. Their comments are not intended to spur action, but rather to share a mutual concern and perceived threat.

Part of the reason that militia men feel such a strong need to prepare for a range of unknown disasters—to be involved in the militia at all—is because some are afraid they may be unable to protect themselves and their families from possible dangers. For some members, owning guns and other equipment is as much a way to manage this fear as it is a real preparation for danger. My interviewees, for instance, had an average of 4.6 firearms *per person in their household*—a much higher number than realistically needed to defend, for example, against a home invasion. Members evince a similar fear about possible harm to the physical nation and an inability to adequately guard against it.

Militia members' fear of Muslims might be best understood as a form of collective or "altruistic fear" (Warr and Ellison 2000), whereby they experience threat not only of their own safety and that of their family, but also for that of their nation. That is, militia

members believe in the negative stereotypes about Muslim uniformity and violence, which continue to be perpetuated in the news media and national dialogue, and believe that they and other "real" Americans have reason to fear violence and cultural change from Muslim Americans. This feeling of threat is then amplified in the local context, particularly in communities near Dearborn where Muslims and Muslim-looking people are visible and salient.

Members' fear of Muslims is, of course, largely rooted in the terror attacks of 9/11. George, the member with Muslim friends, called the attacks "the biggest disaster this country has ever seen," while 47 year old Adam said:

"I, as a citizen, do not feel our nation is safe, and weaknesses are being opened up for our enemies to exploit. If there are any failures here, I feel they will cost us many American lives."

Daryl, now in his early 50s, told me he tried to sign up with military recruiters shortly after the terror attacks, and was frustrated that his efforts to do something concrete to defend his nation were thwarted when he was told that he was "too old." Other members, like Bert, try to be vigilant against future attacks as they remember being traumatized from 9/11 and think about the possible consequences of this national event in their local context:

"I recall where I was and who I was with, pretty much most details around those hours leading up to and after the planes crashed. We were all in shock - this couldn't be real - it must be an accident - is this a bad dream! [...] It was only months ago, another terrorist came close to blowing up a plane as it approached Detroit. [...] I would recommend we map out where the nuclear power plants are located and try to have maps ready on hand so it would be quicker to plan a route to get family away from the radiation and/or violence that could occur. Had those planes on 9/11 crashed into nuclear reactor towers, it would have been WAY worse for us

to recover! Terrorism is only one of many areas that militia training could help with.”

The terror attacks of 2001 presented both a real and symbolic threat to Americans’ senses of safety and identity, and to their sense of group position relative to other nations. No other act had ever impacted white Americans' sense of security in quite this way: not only was the physical safety of the nation threatened with the attacks, but so was the sense of national superiority and invincibility that very important to some Americans, and perhaps to white men in particular (Kimmel 2013; Zainiddinov 2012).

Events like this certainly have personal meaning to militia members, but they also cause local communities to become "politicized places" that are informed by national discourse and debates (Baybeck 2006; Hopkins 2010). In other words, national events like the terror attacks of 9/11 and continuing dialogue about President Obama's purported Muslim faith strongly impact how militia members see potential threat from Michigan's Muslim population. It is not a coincidence that Dearborn is known locally by various slurs like "Dearbornistan," while a major high school near the heart of the city is colloquially referred to as "Hezbollah High" because of the city's large Arab population. These terms symbolically mark the city as both a racialized and fundamentally different space from "real" American communities. Both terms are meant to mark the city's foreignness and perceived connections to militant Islamic groups who want to infiltrate and hurt America. The fact that Muslim Americans are effectively seen as segregated within Dearborn contributes to this perception, to the relative salience of Muslims within that city, and to the perception of threat from Muslims for whites in surrounding communities (Rocha and Espino 2009).

Militia members also fear change that could happen to the country's government and legal system as a result of terrorism. Militia members despise increasing restrictions on private citizens through legislation like the Patriot Act because these changes undermine the freedom and individual agency that American culture represents to these self-described super citizens. Members like 27 year old Hugo describe this act as allowing the police to have entirely too much power:

“Now with the Patriot Act, with the other rules and regulations they have, [there's] no warrant, no knocking, the door gets busted down and they seize everything.”

This Act thus exemplifies the increase in governmental power over individual lives that militia members despise and also find threatening to their identities as Americans.

Involvement in Anti-Muslim Events

Militia members verbalized perceptions of physical and cultural threat from Muslims and their supposedly inevitable and negative effect on American society early in my fieldwork. Their verbalizations only shifted to action in spring 2011 when they became involved in two anti-Muslim events near Dearborn. Understanding the militia's participation in these events is useful for delving further into how members understand Muslims to be threatening the nation and its values.

Terry Jones Protest. The first anti-Muslim event that members became involved in occurred in April 2011, when Koran burning Florida pastor Terry Jones made a trip to Dearborn to rant about Sharia Law and Islam's supposedly negative effect on the

Constitution and freedom of speech. The city briefly denied Jones' right to protest by ordering a hearing to determine the likelihood his presence might incite violence, jailing him over his refusal to pay a "peace bond" to cover the cost of protest security, and charging him a symbolic \$1

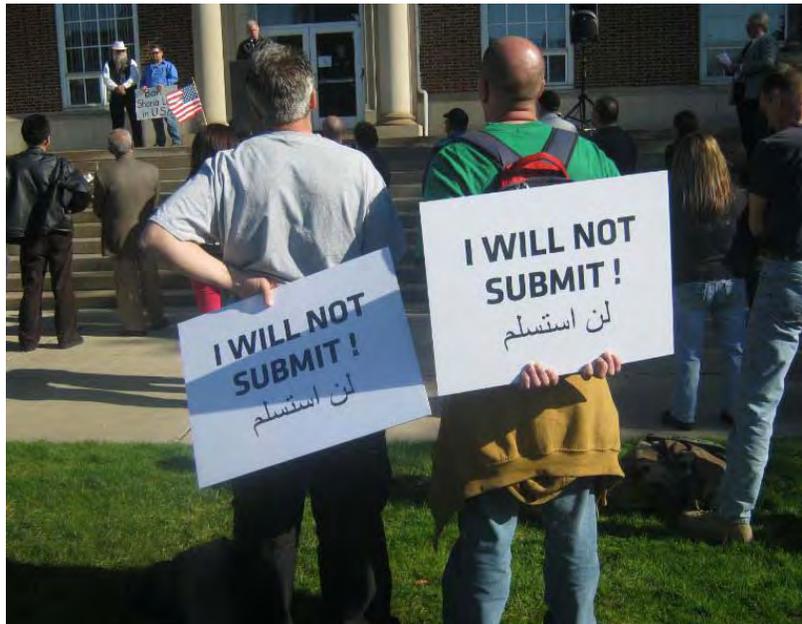


Figure 1: Militia members took a picture of other protestors holding signs that read, "I will not submit!" in both English and Arabic as they listen to Jones. Photo from <http://s657.photobucket.com/profile/SMVM>

bond to be freed from jail (Langton 2011).

Militia members have often stated that they believe First Amendment rights to be the most important rights that Americans have. Because if any other rights are infringed, they say, 'We can complain about it, but if they take away the right to complain, to fight, we're in real trouble.' Dearborn's treatment of Jones certainly played into members' decision to be involved in this particular protest, as Elias' note on a forum indicates:

"A 1st Amendment precedent is being set here, that is the side we should all be on. Ignoring such things over the years, no matter how small, is why our Constitution keeps slipping away. If a local government decides my "Freedom of Speech" is beneath them, they order me to post a "PEACE BOND" of let's say \$200,000 before I can speak, sorry but that is censorship by fine."

The city's refusal to grant Jones permission to speak in accordance with the law also helped perpetuate member's belief that Muslims could not be trusted to uphold American

laws and values when they conflicted with Muslim interests. This event thus increased the sense of racialized threat that some members experienced from Muslims

Militia members were divided on their opinion of Jones himself. One person called him an “ass,” while another noted, “in militia terms, pastor Jones is a few rounds short of a full mag,” but both still wanted to support his freedom of speech. A few members expressed concern about sending the wrong message by supporting Jones, and some said they were uncomfortable attending what might prove to be a violent event. To this, Doug, who is in his early 30s, responded:

"[Jones] is not the first man or woman to step into the powder keg to make his point! I think about what it would had been like to be a black man in the 1960's when Dr. Martin Luther King was holding meetings and pleading his rights, for the things he believed in."

Likening Jones to the Civil Rights leader indicates that Doug believes Islam is oppressive. He believes the fight against the perceived spread of Islam and its values is just as noble and necessary for the pursuit of American values as was the fight for equal rights. This appeal also allows Doug to disguise a racialized fear as a concern about the greater good (Kinder and Sears 1981; Mendelberg 2001).

Members who attended this event all lived relatively close to Dearborn, with no one from Grand Rapids on the other side of the state participating, for example. This differential participation certainly reflects practical concerns about resources needed for traveling long distances, but also reflects that the us-versus-them distinction between Dearborn and its surrounding communities was more stark for people living in and near that racialized city boundary, in accordance with expectations about outgroup segregation and salience increasing perceptions of threat (Rocha and Espino 2009).

Members who attended the event did not wear their usual camouflage, deciding to avoid being overtly identified as members of the militia. Based on their self-reports as well as pictures and videos they took of the event, militia members stood as a group on Terry Jones' side of the street along with roughly two dozen Jones supporters. They were separated from a loud-counter protest crowd that numbered in the hundreds by two sets of temporary barriers on either side of a four-lane road, police officers, and, when the counter-protestors tried to rush the barriers, a line of SWAT officers.

Some militia members who participated may have been genuinely concerned about the First Amendment encroachment Jones had experienced and wanted to become involved in the protest for that reason. However, at this point, Jones' freedom of speech was no longer threatened—he was speaking with a microphone from behind a podium on the steps of City Hall. A more problematic motivation for protest was evident for at least three members who participated in the event. The most telling response came at the next militia meeting when 52 year old

Edmond told me about his experience being interviewed by a local media crew regarding his presence at the protest. He told me the crew could not air his response when they asked what he thought of Jones' message because he had answered that he thought Jones would just stir up trouble “because we



Figure 2: Police and SWAT team members line Jones' side of the rally. Photo from <http://s657.photobucket.com/profile/SMVM>

already know [Muslims] are animals.” Edmond, who frequently wears clothing with the word "Infidel" written in both English and Arabic, meant that he believes Muslim Americans would respond violently in response to Jones’ speech because they are “animals” who have inferior cultural standards regarding tolerance for violence and free expression. This explicit dehumanization of Muslims follows a long history of symbolically demoting threatening racial groups to non-human status as an attempt to manage the threat.

Militia members did not attend Jones’ rallies when he made two later trips to Michigan. There was some debate over participation on the forums, as a few members, including Edmond, wanted to go and support Jones’ message. Leadership indicated that, while people were free to attend on their own, the militia as a group would not be involved because there were no threats to anyone’s freedom of speech during Jones’ return visits. At the same time, however, members continued to make disparaging remarks about Muslim Americans that show how they view Islamic culture as uniform, problematic, and threatening. Atheist Vincent, for example, indicated during the exchange that he believes Muslims tolerate unequal and violent treatment of women and non-believers as he said:

“Any social structure that tolerates rape and fails to punish rapists is not acceptable to me. Period. Any structure which denies the basic dignity and self-ownership of human beings is wrong. Period. Any idea, concept, teaching, or thought that requires violence or threats thereof to spread is not just wrong, it is weak. Weak, weak, weak. That's why it needs force, because it cannot stand on its own.”

At the same time as Vincent expresses threat from perceived cultural differences, he also indicates that such a system could not win out against superior American



Figure 3: A reporter interviews a small crowd of counter protestors supporting Lowe's Hardware near Dearborn. The counter protestors hold an American flag and have signs and apparel that reads "infidel" in both English and Arabic. Photo from <http://s657.photobucket.com/profile/SMVM>

values and systems, which again references a racialized hierarchy and a sense of relative group position.

All American Muslim Protest. The next protest event that some militia members became involved in happened in December 2011, when home improvement store Lowe's pulled advertising from the short-lived television show *All American Muslim*. The show followed several Muslim families in Dearborn as it highlighted the Muslim community and challenges some family members faced in their jobs or other venues as a result of their religion. Lowe's Allen Park, Michigan location (the store nearest where the show was filmed) found itself hosting around 100 protestors—many of them dressed in traditional Muslim garb—and around 25 counter-protestors. Only a couple militia

members, including Edmond, attended this event as counter-protestors, but several more once again expressed regret that they could not.

These members' stated reason for involvement in the protest was again rooted in defense of a supposedly threatened First Amendment. Edmond claimed that people did not understand that Lowe's had the right to spend money as they chose, and he wanted to show support for Lowe's free-market decision. Edmond and other counter-protestors, however, can be heard in video taken at the event repeatedly saying "God Bless America," "Kill the infidel right where you find him,' [it's] right out of the Koran," and obnoxiously singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" toward the traditionally-dressed protestors and their supporters. These comments do not reflect a concern about protecting a corporation's rights to speech or spending. Instead, the counter-protestors' comments demonstrate a belief that Islam is fundamentally opposed to, primarily, American and, secondarily, Christian⁶ values. Counter-protestors were supporting and enacting Lowe's *lack* of support for the local Muslim American population and effectively endorsing a financial move that limited the visibility (and therefore, a source of threat) of Muslims in the media.

It is important to note here that the Arab population in Dearborn had not experienced a recent change in size that would provoke racial threat in accordance with quantitative analyses of the construct. Instead, the salience and perceived threat of Muslims were artificially inflated by their presence on national television program and subsequent media reports about the show. This again shows how national-level discourse matters for shaping the interpretation of a local, racialized context.

Faux Muslim Terrorist Training. Following involvement in these anti-Muslim protests, Islamophobic activities entered militia trainings. SMVM conducted a training in April 2012 where the motivating hypothetical scenario involved evading an imaginary terrorist group named Farouk-Al-Salit. A careful reader will notice that this is a play on the name of a Willy Wonka movie character that can serve as a tongue-in-cheek denial that the name has any Muslim connotation. During my observations, no unit previously used a named entity as a fictive enemy in their training sessions. On the contrary, units were very careful to completely avoid referencing real people in their training scenarios, with the exception of using Osama Bin Laden shooting targets prior to his assassination; he was a person they assume everyone would recognize as an undisputable enemy and legitimate threat to American safety. Notably, Bin Laden was also recognizably Muslim



Figure 17: A used shooting target depicting a man in traditional Islamic clothing. Photo courtesy of www.michiganmilitia.com.

in these pictures, with a long beard and turban, and some of the pictures included improvised fake blood made from jelly packets and taped to the back of the pictures, to provide an accurate shooter with an added cathartic effect of "killing" a threat to the nation. The introduction of the new training scenario indicates that Muslims are increasingly acceptable as outgroup targets to militia members. Combined with their participation in and support of anti-Muslim demonstrations,

this means that militia members are increasingly marking Muslims as problematic, threatening others.

A MUSLIM MILITIA MEMBER

There is a final complexity in the militia's overall perception of threat from Muslim Americans that must be analyzed to evaluate their understanding of the group. Militia member Chad is white, grew up in a Christian military family, and lived in nearly a dozen states before he moved to Michigan a decade ago with several extended family members. Chad converted to Islam after joining the Navy and encountering people who believed in the Muslim faith, although, curiously, Chad was stationed not in the Middle East, but in Mississippi. Regarding his decision to convert to Islam, Chad notes:

"I didn't like how the Lutheran religion—the churches anyway that we went to—they didn't all practice what they preached. You know, everything's fine on Sunday but come Monday morning, they're a whole new person."

Chad believed there was less hypocrisy among the Muslims he knew than among the Christians he grew up with. It was important to him to be in a community of faith that enacted the principles and behavioral standards they advocated behind the pulpit. All the same, Chad explains that he is not strongly religious:

"I don't follow it [Islam] religiously per se. Most Christians don't either, you know, they don't go to church all the time. They don't follow all of the rules that you're supposed to, you know, and stuff like this. I don't. [With] Islam, you're supposed to pray five times a day. I don't. Do I have a prayer rug? Yes. Have I used it? Not in the last six years [laughs]. You know? I don't do that. I haven't been to a mosque since I have converted and when I lived in North Carolina. I have not been to a single one since I've lived here. So I mean in 10-11 years now I haven't been to a single mosque."

At the time of our interview, Chad had been involved with the militia for three years after starting his own militia unit along with his Christian brother. The brothers started their own unit after feeling the government was "overstepping their bounds" and realizing that there was not already a local unit with whom they could train. Chad and his brother followed SMVM 's model for training guidelines and required gear, which they found on www.michiganmilitia.com, soon made contact with SMVM and other units in the state, and began attending other groups' trainings as well as continuing to structure their own trainings and other events.

Militia members who did not already know that Chad is a converted Muslim became aware of Chad's religion in spring 2010, when he discussed both his faith and his militia activity on several news reports. Journalists spoke with Chad after learning he called the FBI rather than harboring members of the nearby Hutaree militia who were trying to avoid arrest following law enforcement raids of that group. Other militia units continue to welcome Chad and other members of his unit (who are all Christian or nonreligious) to shared training events and other functions, and Chad is included on messages that pertain to leadership concerns or disaster planning.

Chad attended the Jones protest, and must have done so at least in part to demonstrate that his loyalty rested more with nationalistic values including freedom of speech than with his religion. His participation did not stop another leader from only partially joking about whether other members in attendance at that event 'asked to see the contents of his backpack,' to make sure it contained no suicide bomb—a stereotypical Islamic terrorist's tool—to injure Jones and his supporters. Chad recognizes that his

acceptance by at least some militia members is tenuous as he talks about members who left SMVM because they allowed Muslims (including Chad, in his view) at their trainings:

“Okay, I am a Muslim, I have an AK-47, but I’m white so that helps a little bit, you know? If I was Arabic, they would have just totally stereotyped the hell—the crap out of it.”

Chad notes that militia members racialize Muslims and says he believes that his whiteness gives them a reason to view him as an exception to how most Muslims supposedly are.

Importantly, Chad remarks that his skin tone only helps him "a little bit," meaning that he is aware that his whiteness does not fully absolve some members' suspicions of his loyalties. Elias, for instance, called Chad a ‘fashionable Muslim’ and told me that he would not accept Chad if he took things ‘too seriously.’ He meant that Chad would be “too serious” if he talked extensively about his beliefs, wore turbans or other religious clothing, or interrupted trainings to participate in daily prayers. Another man emailed me to ask my “professional” opinion on Chad’s dedication to the nation after he first learned of Chad’s Muslim faith. Thus, skin tone alone does not nullify concerns about Chad's commitment to the nation for members who do not know him well. Assumptions that other members hold about violence and exclusion being fundamental attributes of Islamic faith outweigh the possibility of accepting Chad based on his skin color and militia participation alone.

Members who do know Chad personally believe that Chad demonstrates his commitment to their shared national values in several ways: his militia participation,

which is reinforced by his Christian family members' militia involvement, his prior military experience, and a large “We the People” tattoo on his back. Further, Chad’s militia unit has participated in multiple community events, including search and rescue efforts, that have garnered positive media attention for the militia, and Chad worked with the FBI to ensure that members of a different local group did not engage in unlawful behavior. These factors allow members who know Chad to view him as a fellow super citizen who is firmly committed to their shared values of security and individual liberty. These factors that “prove” Chad's loyalty to militia members' shared national identity also mean that members can see Chad as an exception to how most Muslims supposedly are, rather than as a reflection of Muslim diversity. Rather than serving as a normalizing point of contact that might increase acceptance of all Muslims, Chad's involvement in the militia does nothing to reduce members' sense of racialized threat from Muslims generally.



Figure 18: Chad's tattoo, which references the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, as well as the notion that the American people are collectively more powerful and more important than the government. Photo courtesy of Claire Schneider.

CONCLUSION

Militia members experience racialized threat from local Muslims when either local or national discourse activates stereotypes members have about Muslims being uniformly terroristic and opposed to American values. In this case, the experiential content of racialized threat consists of several interrelated factors that might be subsumed under the heading of cultural change. Militia members are fearful that Muslims want to change social structures including the legal system to be more oppressive of non-Muslims, that Muslims want to perpetuate more terrorism in the U.S. to the detriment of the nation's physical safety and symbolic identity, and that the President himself may be engaged in undermining national interests that are opposed to global Muslim interests, whatever that may mean. These fears are exacerbated by the highly salient segregation of Michigan Muslims within Dearborn (Rocha and Espino 2009), and are activated and facilitated by continuing government and media dialogue about Muslim terror threats. Their communities thereby become politicized places (Hopkins 2010) that are informed by policies and events that are not overtly connected to their local context.

Importantly, militia members experience racialized threat from Muslims not only as something that might impact them and immediate family, but also their entire nation. That is, members experience both a personal fear and an altruistic fear on behalf of all "real" Americans. Despite their intentions of racial egalitarianism and inclusion, militia members' experience of threat reproduces whiteness and white privilege.

Militia members' feelings of racialized threat are manifested in accordance with Blumer's (1958) original taxonomy related to a sense of group position:

1. Members feel that they, not just as whites but also as Americans, are superior to Muslims, whom they perceive as having a backward or regressive culture.
2. Members feel that Muslims are intrinsically different from Americans in that they believe Muslims are incapable of embracing religious acceptance or upholding treasured values like free speech.
3. Members feel a proprietary claim to dictate the identity of the nation, including what acceptable forms of tradition and religious expression, including clothing and language, should look like in American communities.
4. Members fear that Muslims want to fundamentally change American culture, including its legal structure in a way that would supposedly benefit them, but harm "real" Americans.

Members' feelings of group position are informed not only by their whiteness, but also by their Americanness. These are men who feel like they may be losing social status not only from a traditional racial standpoint, but also in a global context, where their once-invincible nation has been successfully wounded by a supposedly-inferior culture.

This analysis shows that objective changes in outgroup size are not necessary to invoke a feeling of racial threat. Rather, subjective perceptions of the outgroup are sufficient to produce threat (Goyette et al. 2012; Pettigrew et al. 2010), and Muslim racialization exemplifies how threats to group position can be invoked specifically by threatened cultural change due to a racialized outgroup. The cultural changes that militia members most fear all implicate and idealized national identity and values, which militia members see as central principles of the nation, the very values upon which the country was founded, and the values that they, as self-described super citizens have vowed to uphold.

Members believe that individual liberty and national identity were negatively impacted as a result of increased the security and monitoring of citizens that was implement in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and some still feel uncertain about their own physical safety from future terror attacks. Militia members and other Americans' ongoing resistance to accepting their Muslim neighbors may, in other words, reflect a continuing insecurity, even a decade after the attacks. President George Bush and others spoke at the time about how the attacks would not undermine American culture and identity, but they did apparently undermine the historicized sense of invincibility possessed by some American whites, including militia members (also see Kimmel 2013).

Analyzing racialized threat from Muslims in the context of Blumer's framework helps explain why militia members did not shift from racialized, anti-Muslim rhetoric to anti-Muslim protest involvement and training activities until 2011. Several events reignited anti-Muslim discourse in the media at the national level and served to politicize militia members' local context as they raised the salience of Muslims in Michigan and thereby heightened a sense of threat to group position. Late 2010 brought much media attention to the controversy surrounding an Islamic center being built near Ground Zero (Jia, Karpen, and Hirt 2011). Osama Bin Laden's assassination in spring 2011 returned media dialogue to the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, which began in August 2010 and continued steadily through December 2011, was another contentious issue that maintained a focus on Muslims as a problematic and othered group. Further, media attention to anti-Sharia legislation in various states, including Michigan, was common during this time (Raftery 2012). These events

collectively helped inflame militia members' relatively dormant anti-Muslim passions and inflame perceived racialized threat, with the Jones and Lowe's protests in 2011 providing timely outlets for these anxieties.

The case of the militia additionally suggests that, in a contemporary context, nationalism may need to be placed more firmly at the center of discussions of racism and racial threat. Discrimination is generally considered un-American. However, discrimination against people who supposedly want to harm the nation is not only legitimate and acceptable in this frame, it is also seen as *necessary* to uphold the identity and security of the nation and its “true” citizens.

Other scholars have had findings that support an increased focus on nationalism for understanding ongoing issues of racism and discrimination. Psychologist Debra Oswald (2005), for example, found that the greater association her respondents had with national identity, the greater their anti-Arab sentiment. Lile Jia et al. (2011) argue that nationalism played a strong role in opposition to building a mosque at Ground Zero, while political scientists John Sides and Kimberly Gross (2013) found that people who viewed Muslims as violent and untrustworthy were more likely to support the War on Terror. These authors' findings all confirm that a feeling of threat against national identity can play a strong role in anti-Muslim sentiment and violence in a variety of contexts that can have real consequences for Muslims' ability to fully participate as equal citizens. Qualitatively examining the militia's perceived threat from their Muslim neighbors helps elucidate that threats to security and individual liberty specifically activate anti-Muslim

sentiment for at least some lower-middle class, white men, and how this sentiment may then be converted to protest action or worse.

A protectionist framing of anti-Muslim sentiment has the possibility to resonate with other politically conservative groups, like the Tea Party or some mainstream Republicans, who also profess a certain nationalistic vision. These groups include people who may be discriminating against Muslim Americans solely on the basis of race or religion, rather than perceived national threats, or those who exclude based on a combination of racist and nationalistic factors (Miles 1993). Nationalistic framing of anti-Muslim sentiment may have the potential to mobilize a variety of groups with differing underlying motives for discrimination and exclusion. Further investigations into the content and experience of racial threat will be crucial for having an accurate understanding of evolving racial constructions and of which groups are likely to face continued exclusion and discrimination in U.S. society.

ENDNOTES

1. Naber (2007) discusses the history of Arab immigrants in the U.S. and argues that the racialization of Muslims happened long before the 9/11 attacks, but that the attacks changed the tenor and acceptability of expressed anti-Muslim sentiment.

2. Sharia law is a version of traditional Islamic Law that includes harsh sanctions for adultery and other behavior that has largely been decriminalized in the U.S,
3. My usage of "super citizens" differs from that of Kate Nash's (2009) description of people who are granted extended or transnational human rights because of their economic or political power. Militias are super citizens in that they understand themselves to most ideally embody the principles that Americans are supposed to uphold.
4. The one notable exception to this general rule during my fieldwork was the Hutaree militia, the so-called Christian militia who were arrested in 2009 for allegedly plotting to kill police officers before ultimately having most charges dismissed three years later. Other militias in the state had rejected the Hutaree as a legitimate militia well before its members were arrested.
5. I use double quotation marks to indicate passages that were recorded and reproduced word for word. I use single quotes to indicate where I reconstructed the speaker's words from memory when writing fieldnotes soon after the interaction, doing my best to recreate both word choice and meaning. All names used are pseudonyms.
6. Unsurprisingly, the few militia members who attended this protest identify as Christian. It may also be that many people understand the nation to be founded on Christian principles, even if they are not Christians themselves, and understand Islamic traditions as foreign to this heritage.

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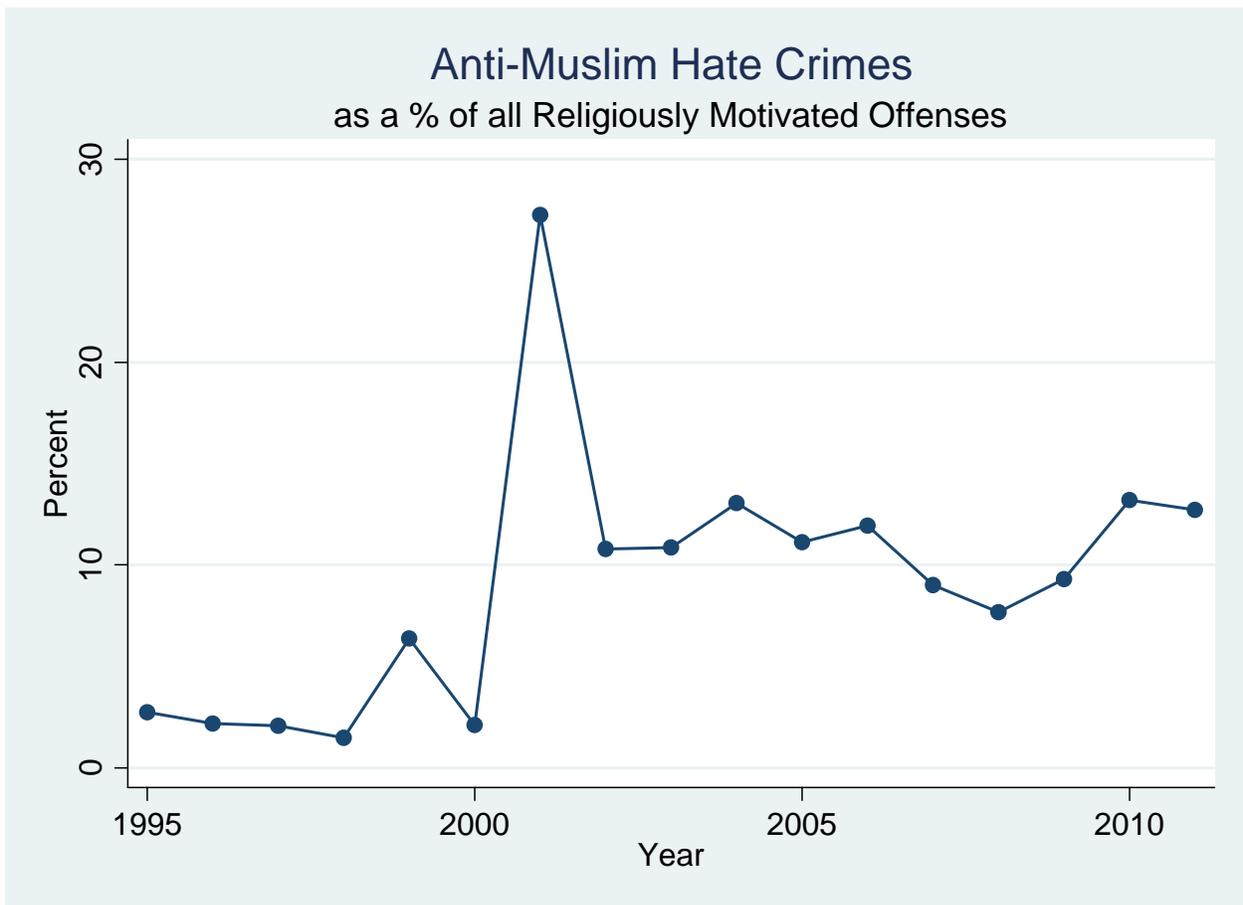
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Figure 1. Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes from 1995-2011



Compiled from FBI Uniform Crime Reports; available at <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr>