

Muslim Americans and the Media after 9/11

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Introduction

For the first time in 10 years since the attack of September 11, several incidents happened in the United States that was indicative of rise in public anger towards Muslim Americans. Americans seemed intolerant towards Islam and their fellow Muslim Americans when the controversy over the Islamic Center in lower Manhattan erupted in the summer of 2010. Hundreds and thousands of people came out on the streets of New York and other major cities around country to protest the construction of a mosque that was located a few blocks away from Ground Zero. The media conglomerate took this story and ran with it like never before.

They started asking questions like “*Should Muslims be allowed to build a mosque at Ground Zero?*”ⁱ Or “*Are Muslims anti-American?*”ⁱⁱ While it is the right of every American to build a house of worship anywhere in this country, Muslim Americans were considered an exception. It came as a surprise to see how many people were out on the streets chanting against the very right of their fellow Muslim Americans.

In addition, on the ninth anniversary of the September 11, a nondenominational church in Florida decided to host an “International Burn a Quran Day.” The event was hosted to remember the 9/11 victims and to take a stand against Islam. Once again the US media gave so much attention to this event that it became a national news headline. CNN hosted the organizer of the event, Pastor Terry Jones on their show. The Facebook page that was created to promote the event had more than 1,600 fans who “*liked*” the page and supported this action.

Also, in March of 2011, Peter King - Republican Congressman from New York - hosted a hearing of Muslim Americans. This was an unprecedented act by a member of Congress. They had not targeted a specific group of Americans for a certain cause or a problem before, except Joseph McCarthy’s anti-Communist hearing in the 1940s.

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Peter King argued that Muslim Americans do not cooperate with law enforcement agencies in arresting potential terrorists, although the Obama administration denied his claims. This was also headline news around the country. While Peter King's hearing was covered extensively, Muslim Americans were not given a fair share of air time to counteract King's claim that all Muslim Americans is a threat to this country.

The question remains why the public anger towards Muslim Americans grew substantially after almost 10 years since the 9/11 incidents. Americans lived peacefully alongside their Muslim neighbor's right after 9/11. There were no protests, burning of the Quran or public hearing of Muslims in congress. Why has the American public grown more intolerant towards Islam and their fellow Muslims now? The answer to this question lies in representation of Muslim Americans in the media. This paper extensively studies Muslims illustration in the media and its effects on the general population.

Literature Review

Extensive scholarly work has been done on Muslims' representation in the media. The most central literature is by Edward Said when he writes about the Iranian Hostage Crisis in his book *covering Islam (1981)*. He points out that the American media and its experts have failed to understand and explain the Arab and Muslim world to the American public. More specifically, he argues that:

“Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, apprehended either as suppliers of oil or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world (Said, 26).”ⁱⁱⁱ

In another study, Nurrullah (2010) - a sociology professor at University of Alberta - uses Edward Said's understanding of Orientalism to analyze the Hollywood television serial “24”. The show portrays stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims which exacerbates the ‘Otheringprocess’ of Muslim Americans. The paper claims that cultural clash between the West and the Muslim world is not a new phenomenon. Islam and Muslims are historically looked down upon by the West. The negative portrayal of Muslims in the media began after the World War II with the development of sophisticated media technology.

Severin and Tankar (1997) argue that repeated coverage of Muslims as terrorists in the media leads to the belief that they are actually terrorists.^{iv} Thus, hatred and discrimination derives from that source against all Muslims. They call the phenomenon the Agenda-Setting theory where mass media agenda-setting causes an issue to be considered of high value and importance to the public. Van Dijk (1991) supports the argument and adds that the more people have exposure to news media, the more likely they are concerned about issues that are covered in news regularly.^v Therefore, media has a great influence in changing public perception.

This paper contributes to the current literature in two ways: First, it studies Muslim American's news coverage to see whether the news after 9/11 had similar limitations and weaknesses as Said argues. Second, it would examine how the representation of Islam/Muslims in the media has affected the American public sentiments towards their Muslim neighbors.

Methodological Considerations

In this world of internet the term media does not only refer to cable news channels, newspapers and magazines, but also websites, blogs, and online sources. Material used for this research project includes highly visited news sites, YouTube videos, news clips, and other online materials. Given the wide range of media sources, focusing on the internet media seems a far more appropriate way to approach this topic. However, the focus remains on four mainstream media sources. Data from two major cable news channels, CNN and FOX News, and two national print media, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, are used to analyze Muslims' representation in the media. In order to hear Muslim voices, the study also includes information from a focus group conducted by Columbia University in 2002.

Media Representation of Muslim Americans

The problem is not lack of Muslims' coverage in the news, but the way the news about them is framed that conveys stereotypes and affects public perception of Muslims. The nature of news is to report certain events and exclude others from airing. To be fair to mass media conglomerates, they cannot cover all aspects of Muslim Americans. As Lippmann said, one must distinguish between news, and truth. Not all reporting is necessarily poor or biased. However, sometimes media tends to report news with explanatory frames that give clues and

ideas to readers, listeners and viewers, and puts events, problems, and people into contextual frameworks of reference.^{vi} This framing does affect the news in many ways, for instance, in choice of language, topic and photographs. By framing the news along the lines of traditional prejudices of society's predominant groups, the news coverage conveys stereotypes that affect public perceptions of how they think about race, ethnicity and religion.

In order to study Muslim Americans' framing in the news media after 9/11, it is important to focus on two specific periods; the first six-month period after the attacks and the period after the first anniversary of September 11. The two periods are very important because the news framework completely changed during these two episodes. In the first immediate six months after 9/11, the media representation was very positive, comprehensive, frequent and contextual. However, after the first anniversary of 9/11, the media coverage changed. It became very negative, stereotypical and exclusive. To understand the difference in news coverage during these two periods, it is important to know the two most important media frameworks: *Episodic* and *Thematic* news frames.

Episodic and Thematic News Frames

Shanto Iyengar, professor of political science at Stanford University, coined the terms *Episodic* and *Thematic*. He believes that different ways of framing news stories have different effects on viewers. *Episodic* news frame focuses on individual case studies and discrete events. It reduces life to a series of disconnected episodes, or random events. The more episodically social issues are framed, the less likely it is that citizens will hold their government and other civic organizations accountable for solving the problem.

In contrast, *thematic* news frame focuses not only on isolated cases but on trends over time. It highlights the context and the environment in which the incident occurred. Also, it identifies shortcomings that have contributed to the problem. The more *thematic* the coverage of an issue, the more likely it is that citizens will hold their government and other organization accountable for the problem.

Media Coverage of Muslims in the first Six Months after 9/11

According to Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007), "following the terrorist attacks of September 11, the news about Muslim Americans and Arabs ... changed from overwhelmingly *episodic* to mostly *thematic*."^{vii} Muslim Americans were more frequently

covered in the news and more often interviewed or cited as sources than before the events of 9/11. They were given a chance to speak for themselves rather than the commentators talking on their behalf offering their views on certain issues relating to Muslim Americans. The *thematic* news coverage of the four mainstream conglomerates (CNN, FOX, *NY Times* and *Washington Post*) about Muslim Americans increased by 19 percent during the first six months after 9/11. In contrast, the percentage of *episodic* news stories declined by 21 percent during the same period.

In addition, the coverage of Muslims increased in both cable and print media. CNN aired 203 segments about Muslim Americans during the first six months after 9/11. Compare that to 23 segments during six months before 9/11. The coverage in Fox news increased by about 99 percent in the first 6 months after September 11 attacks (Figure 1). Similarly, in print media the *New York Times* increased reporting from 345 articles in pre-9/11 to 1,468 articles in 6 months after the attacks. In addition, many opinion leaders and President George W. Bush came out in the immediate aftermath of September 11 to ask the public not to blame the Muslim community in the United States collectively for the terrorist deeds of a few. On several occasions the President asked for a collective unity against the common problem.

Strikingly, most of the coverage was more positive than negative in the immediate six-month period after 9/11. The tone of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric had lowered compared to previous years. While 42 percent of the total segments/articles in CNN, Fox News, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were categorized as positive/supportive in the first six months after 9/11, only 25 percent of the news was supportive of Muslim Americans in the six months before 9/11. Meanwhile, the percentage of negative or critical segments/articles about Muslims in the four news sources declined from 31 percent to 22 percent in the six months post-9/11 (Table 1).

With such a drastic change in coverage habit, there was a shift from stereotypical portrayal to more comprehensive and inclusive news presentation of Muslim Americans. The *New York Times* published the following letter from a Muslim American on October 26, 2001 in their opinion section. This letter to the editor denies all terrorist acts committed by the Taliban and Al-Qaida and asks Muslim to stand up and resist the cruel act done in the name of Islam. In fact, the publication of this article indicates that not only moderate Muslims were given a chance to share their opinion in the aftermath of 9/11, but articles with positive

messages were printed and aired by news conglomerates. It shows a shift from *episodic* to more *thematic* news coverage during the first six months after September 11, 2001.

To American Muslims¹

Published: October 26, 2001

To the Editor:

Re "New York Cleric's Departure From Mosque Leaves Mystery" (news article, Oct. 23):

As a secular American Muslim, I feel compelled to advise fellow American Muslims that we must recognize that the World Trade Center attack was an act of mass murder, pure and simple.

Suicide is prohibited by the Koran, as is the killing of innocent civilians. Many Muslims seem to be in deep denial about the tragic events of Sept. 11, and some are even coming up with conspiracy theories about who was responsible.

We should stand up and resist the Taliban-like forces in the American mosques that mandate a draconian Muslim system that bars women from work, prohibits television, music and dancing and punishes men who trim their beards. We should discourage importing scholars from abroad who are unaware of the social context and dynamics of this society.w

SYED N. ASAD

Lattingtown, N.Y., Oct. 23, 2001

In fact, it is important to know how the American public received the positive and less negative media depiction of Muslim Americans. According to a content analysis conducted by Columbia University in 2002, American public in general viewed Muslim Americans more favorably after September 11 than before. Fewer people responded to the survey saying that they had never heard of Muslim Americans or could not judge their attitude towards their Muslim fellows. Everyone had something to say about Islam and the people who belonged to this religion in the first six months after 9/11. As a result, the public attitude towards Muslims shifted positively in the immediate period after 9/11. Pew Research Center survey shows that there was an increase of 5 percent in Americans favorable attitude and a decline of 3 percent in unfavorable attitude towards Muslims in November of 2011 (Table 2).

To sum up, these trends tell us that media coverage of certain group of people or issues has an impact on public's perception about these people and problems. The period right after September 11, 2001 was a period of understanding this unknown religion and people who perpetrated the attacks which forced the media to cover Muslims more frequently. The press started to paint a comprehensive picture of Muslims by giving them more access on air. The limited news about Muslims and the more *episodic* framing patterns before 9/11 that added to negative stereotypes suddenly changed to more *thematic* news framing patterns in

the six-month period post- 9/11. This *thematic* and regular coverage of Muslims improved American's perception of their Muslim neighbors. However, this positive sequence was not long lasting. The pattern quickly changed by the first anniversary of 9/11, which will be discussed in the following segment.

Media Coverage of Muslims after the First Anniversary of 9/11 and onwards

By the first anniversary of September 11, the portrayal of Muslim Americans in both print and cable news had completely shifted from the more frequent, positive, contextual, *thematic*, descriptive and comprehensive coverage to a more frequent, negative, stereotypical, *episodic* and exclusive coverage. The share of reporting on Muslim Americans declined, hate crimes skyrocketed and the positive public perception of Muslims that was created in the immediate period after 9/11 diminished. Eventually, this negative perception of Muslims manifested itself through anti-Islamic riots and hatred of Muslim Americans in upcoming years.

After the first anniversary of the terror attacks on the World Trade Center, *thematic* news was replaced by *episodic* coverage. "One of the old and valid journalistic tools used in *thematic* reporting is to provide answers to the five Ws – who, what, when, where and why."^{viii} *Thematic* news demands an answer to the five Ws and pays particular attention to explaining the "why" of whatever triggers the news. For example, a news report about a certain number of Muslim Americans that are held in detention facilities around the country based on tougher antiterrorism measures constitutes *episodic* reporting. *Thematic* coverage would report on every single case, ask why these people were detained and dig in for more background information about the detainees. While in the weeks and months after the first anniversary of 9/11 *episodic* news reporting increased by 27 percent, *thematic* coverage of the four national news conglomerates declined from 50 percent in the immediate six-month period after 9/11 to 20 percent in the first six months after the first anniversary of 9/11. In other words, Muslim Americans were not covered with depth and description as they were in the first six months after 9/11. Instead, reports were mainly opinionated by people and commentators who did not know enough about the religion or Muslim American way of life.

Moreover, the coverage of Muslim Americans declined by 67 percent in the six month period after the first anniversary of 9/11. Figure 2 illustrates that CNN news segments dropped from 203 to 67 news pieces after the first anniversary of 9/11. Similarly, articles

about Muslim Americans in the *Washington Post* declined from 568 to 187 during the same period.

Oddly enough, most of the coverage was negative after 2002. According to a content analysis conducted by Columbia University, positive news articles and news clips in CNN, FOX, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* declined from 42 percent in the 6 months after 9/11 to 21 percent after the first anniversary of 9/11 (Table 3). Meanwhile, negative coverage of Muslim Americans increased by 21 percent during this same period. In addition, unlike the first six months after the 9/11 incidents, many leaders and politicians did not come out to ask the public for unity with the Muslim communities. “This negative coverage was not simply the result of different choices on the part of the news media, but also a reflection of the behavior of political leaders and other influential figures in the United States.”^{ix}

Here is an example of negative coverage by the US media. The following excerpt is from an article titled *Homegrown Osamas* written by Nicholas D. Kristof, an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*. He wrote this article on March 9, 2005 in response to a terrorist plot in America by a Muslim American. It is important to point out that at the end of the article he writes, “So we don't have to go to Saudi Arabia to find violent religious extremists steeped in hatred for all America stands for. Wake up - they're here.” The article is problematic in a sense that while Kristof is making his point about homegrown terrorists, he is also adding to the conscious minds of the public about the danger of Muslim terrorists in their backyard.

Homegrown Osamas^x

By Nicholas D. Kristof

Published: March 9, 2005

Threats to federal judges and prosecutors have increased sharply since they began to be tabulated 25 years ago, but the attack on Judge Lefkow's family, if it was related to her work, would take such threats to a new level. Who would want to be a judge if that risked the lives of loved ones?

Whatever the circumstances of those murders, Mr. Hale provides a scary window into a niche of America that few of us know much about. Since 9/11, we've focused almost exclusively on the risk of terrorism from Muslim foreigners, but we have plenty of potential homegrown Osamas.

We were too complacent about Al Qaeda and foreign terrorists before 9/11. And now we're too complacent about homegrown threats.

So we don't have to go to Saudi Arabia to find violent religious extremists steeped in hatred for all America stands for. Wake up - they're here.

As a result of negative portrayal of Muslim Americans in the media, public perception of Americans about Muslims changed dramatically. According to a Pew Research Center survey, public's negative perception about Muslims continued to increase as shown in Figure 3.^{xi} They asked the survey participants this same question in 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2010 "Do you have a general favorable or unfavorable opinion of Islam and Muslim Americans?" Each year more and more people said they had unfavorable opinion about Muslims. In 2002, only 33 percent of the participants had negative perception. In 2003, the negative opinion increased to 34 percent and eventually in 2010 to 38 percent. Also, according to the survey, more and more Americans felt they knew less and less about Islam as each year passed since 9/11. It indicates that media's negative portrayal not only changed American public perception but also gave the public less and less information or misinformed them about the religion and the people. According to a Pew poll, in 2002 only 29 percent of Americans did not know enough about Islam to form their opinion about Islam and Muslim Americans. That number started to grow to 26 percent in 2003 and to 32 percent in 2010.

Therefore, hate crime and assault rates against Muslim Americans grew after the first six months of 9/11. The numbers of hate crime incidents were 481 in late 2001.^{xii} Religious intolerance was at its peak during this time. In the following years the number of anti-Islamic hate crime incidents dropped to 155 in 2002 and 149 incidents in 2003. However, public anger did not come out until 2009 and 2010 when Americans walked down the streets shouting anti-Islamic slogans and revolting against the basic rights of Muslims, such as building a Mosque. Their religious book was threatened to be burned, and they were subjected to a hearing in congress.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is right to say that based on the trends shown above, the US media has played a major role in shaping public perception about Muslim Americans. In the immediate six months after 9/11, the positive, contextual, and *thematic* portrayal of Muslims in the news helped improve public perception of Muslims. However, after the first anniversary of 9/11, the stereotypical representation of Muslims in the media, as Edward Said would say, expedited the "Other Process" of Muslim Americans. The four mass media corporations, CNN, FOX, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, clearly had an agenda to pursue. It would need another research project to find out about their agendas, but one thing is clear

that they created a platform for the Iraq War in 2003. Right after the first anniversary of 9/11 in 2002, cable news coverage and newspaper articles pursued a different framing style – a negative propaganda style that injected misleading information into public sphere about Muslims. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw’s *Agenda Setting Theory* clearly fits the characteristics of American mass media representation of Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era. American public was constantly fed with partial, incorrect, and biased news coverage to raise the importance of fear from Muslims in public minds. As *Cultivation Theory* suggests, exposing public to recurrent negative images about Muslims resulted in convincing Americans the threat from Muslims is real. Thus, this agenda driven anti-Islamic/Muslim rhetoric in the media added to public hatred and anger towards Muslim Americans, which eventually led to public uprising against Muslims in the recent years over the Ground Zero Mosque in Manhattan and other incidents mentioned above.

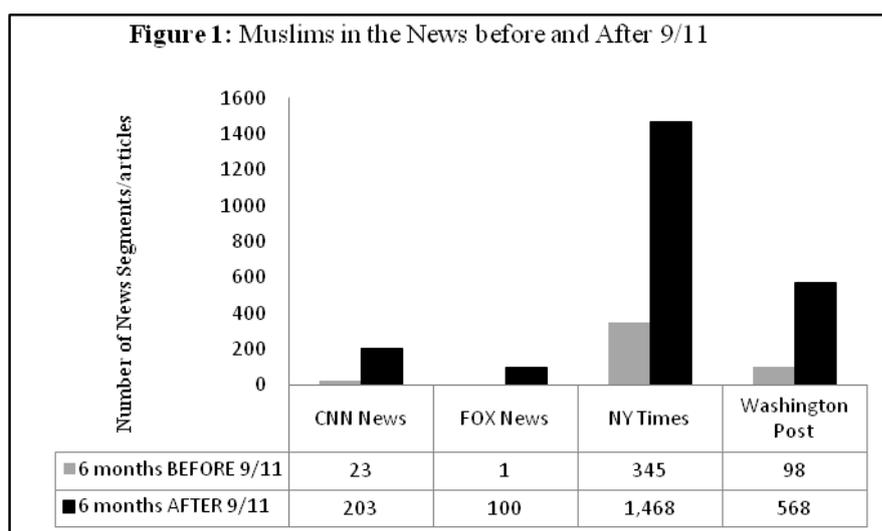
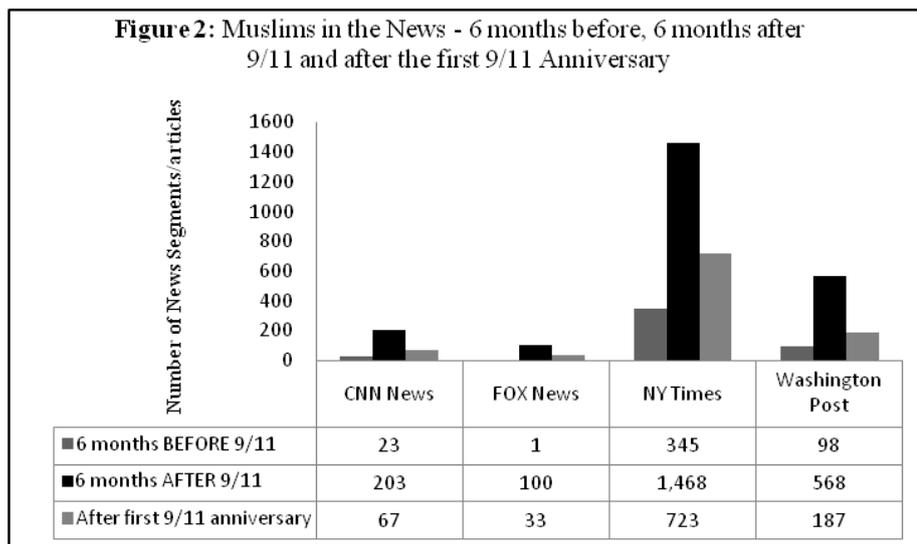


Table 1: Depiction of Muslim Americans in the News

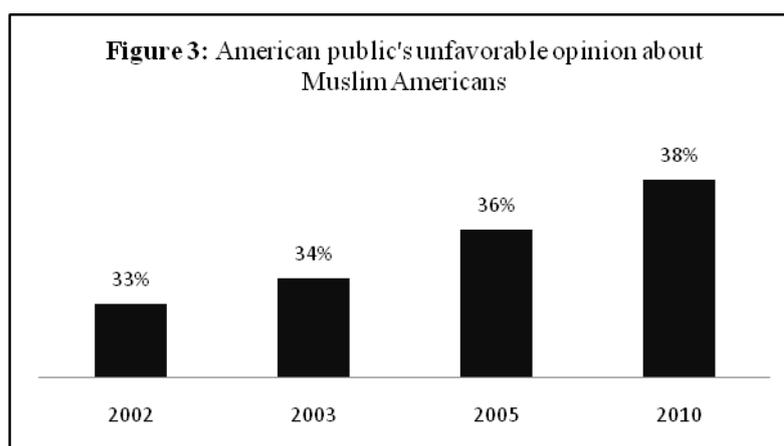
	6 Months BEFORE 9/11	6 Months AFTER 9/11
Positive/Supportive	25%	42%
Neutral/Ambiguous	44%	36%
Probably Negative/Critical	31%	22%

Table 2: Public's Attitudes Toward Muslim Americans

	Very Favorable	Mostly Favorable	Mostly Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable	Never Heard of	Cannot rate
Sept. 2000	11%	39%	13%	8%	2%	27%
Mar. 2001	7%	38%	16%	8%	4%	27%
Nov. 2001	15%	44%	12%	5%	1%	23%
Mar. 2002	8%	46%	14%	8%	2%	22%

**Table 3: Depiction of Muslim Americans in the News**

	6 Months After 9/11	After the First 9/11 Anniversary
Positive/Supportive	42%	21%
Neutral	36%	37%
Negative	22%	43%



Notes

- ⁱRatnesar, Romesh. (2010). “Ground Zero: Exaggerating the Jihadist Threat.” *Time Magazine*, retrieved from:
<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011400,00.html>
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- ⁱⁱ Al Marayati, Salam. (2010). “5 Questions Swirling Around the Ground Zero Mosque’ Debate.” *The Huffington Post*, Blog Post, Retrieved from:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/salam-al-marayati/five-swirling-questions-a_b_687532.html
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- ⁱⁱⁱSaid, Edward. (1997). *Covering Islam*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc
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- ^{iv}Severin, W. J., and Tankard, J. W. (1997). *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media*. New York: Longman, pp 250 & 251.
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- ^v Van Dijk, T. A. (1991). *Racism and the press*. London: Routledge.
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- ^{vi}Nacos, Brigitte, and Torres-Reyna Oscar. (2002). “Muslim Americans in the New before and after 9-11.” *Harvard Symposium Restless Searchlight*, pp. 2.
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- ^{vii}Nacos, B., and Torres-Reyna, O. (2007). *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, pp.15.
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- ^{viii}Nacos, B., and Torres-Reyna, O. (2007). *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 27.
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- ^{ix}Nacos, B., and Torres-Reyna, O. (2007). *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 28.
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- ^xKristof, Nicholas. (2005). “Homegrown Osamas.” *The New York Times, Op-ed section*, retrieved from:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/09/opinion/09kristof.html?scp=4&sq=homegrown+muslim+terrorists+in+the+US&st=nyt>
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- ^{xi}Pew Research Center/ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. (2010). *Retrieved from:* <http://www.pollingreport.com/religion.htm>
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- ^{xii} Number of Anti-Muslim hate crimes not what others want us to believe. (2010). *Retrieved from:* http://www.hyscience.com/archives/2010/08/number_of_anti-.php

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