



Are Muslims Intolerant? Is that Even the Right Question?

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Author Biography

Youssef Chouhoud is a doctoral candidate and Provost's Fellow in the Political Science and International Relations program at the University of Southern California, studying political attitudes and behavior, survey methodology, and comparative democratization. His research elaborates the determinants of core democratic norms by examining understudied groups in both established and emerging democracies. Youssef earned his BA in History from Lehigh University where he also completed an MA in Political Science as a President's Scholar.

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Key Findings

- American Muslim intolerance is not broadly and invariably applied, but is rather targeted at White supremacists.
- This intolerance is largely driven by fear for personal safety, contrary to the more socially rooted threat that drives intolerance in the general public.
- It is, in large part, the neglect of this added psychological strain on American Muslims that facilitates the view that their intolerance is “deep-rooted” rather than (as with any other group) a product of social context.

One cornerstone of anti-Muslim rhetoric is the claim that Islam fosters an abiding intolerance among its followers. This assertion is not exclusive to the likes of Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller, and other archetypical Islamophobes writing in dark corners of the Internet. Indeed, prominent (if controversial) commentators and academics also advance the idea that Muslims are inherently intolerant.¹ At times, even well-regarded authors who generally steer clear of such provocative declarations nonetheless see fit to contend that “[t]he modalities of Muslim intolerance inhabit theological, cultural, and ideological discourses whose roots penetrate deeply into the pre-modern Islamic past.”²

This impression of Muslims’ “deep-rooted” nature is similarly reflected in cross-national public opinion polling. For instance, fewer than half of those surveyed in America and several Western European countries associate Muslims with being tolerant.³ Such sentiments are not benign. In The Netherlands, France, and neighboring states, these views led to deep debate over the detriments of multiculturalism, likely setting the stage for the subsequent implementation of discriminatory policies.⁴ Similarly, in the US, the meteoric rise of anti-*Shariah*

¹ See, e.g., Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

² Vincent J. Cornell, “Theologies of Difference and Ideologies of Intolerance in Islam,” in *Religious Tolerance in World Religions*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (West Conshohocken, Pa: Templeton Press, 2008), 278.

³ Pew Research Center, “Europe’s Muslims More Moderate: The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other” (Washington, D.C: Pew Global, June 2006), 15.

⁴ See, e.g., Bruce Bawer, “Tolerant Dutch Wrestle With Tolerating Intolerance,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2004, sec. Week In Review, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/weekinreview/tolerant-dutch-wrestle-with->

legislation across the country underscores how unchecked othering can have tangible policy implications.⁵ Given how much this presumed link between Islam and intolerance impacts social and political affairs in the West, it is well worth systematically scrutinizing (rather than simply assuming) it.

Before examining intolerance among American Muslims, however, it is worth first asking: What exactly do we mean by “tolerance”? In its common usage, tolerance generally connotes an acceptance of different ideas and groups. This conception—what we might call social tolerance—is at the heart of claims that the United States is a more tolerant nation than it was, say, fifty years ago. Yet, although a society is bound to function better when there is less strife among its populace, a democracy need not require its constituents to “get along with” one another. What such a government does need, at a minimum, is a citizenry willing to “put up with” one another. This political tolerance drives the ethos of minority rights and freedom of speech that buttresses any liberal democratic order. Implicitly, too, it is this variant of tolerance that is implicated when Muslims’ place in the West is questioned. That is, what publics and politicians are effectively skeptical of is Muslims’ ability to accept the rights of individuals that challenge their beliefs.

The recently fielded Muslim American Attitudes Survey, which recorded the opinions of over 625 Muslim respondents from across the US on a range of social, political, and religious issues, allows us to examine the dynamics of political tolerance in this community.⁶ Commissioned by the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, this first-of-its-kind survey features, among other rare components,⁷ a dedicated tolerance battery. To measure respondents’ level of tolerance, we first

[tolerating-intolerance.html](#); Frida Ghitis, “The Dutch, Too Tolerant for Their Own Good?,” October 30, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/28/AR2005102802437.html>; Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2014).

⁵ Hatewatch, “Anti-Sharia Law Bills in the United States,” Southern Poverty Law Center, August 8, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/08/anti-sharia-law-bills-united-states>.

⁶ For the full sampling methodology, see Youssef Chouhoud, “What Causes Muslims to Doubt? A Quantitative Analysis” (Dallas, TX: Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2018).

⁷ The centerpiece of the survey is a multi-item scale of doubt in the American Muslim community and a set of related corollary measures.

asked them to identify a group in society that they disliked the most, and subsequently prompted them to choose their next least-liked group from the remaining options. The (randomly ordered) choices were:

- White supremacists (e.g., KKK)
- Muslims w/ extreme religious views
- Those opposed to all religions
- Militant anti-fascists (e.g., Antifa)
- Black Lives Matter activists
- Homosexual rights activists
- Christian fundamentalists
- The Tea Party

Once respondents made their selections, they were presented with a series of questions asking the extent to which they would be willing to limit the civil liberties of one of their chosen groups and the degree to which they felt this group threatened their personal safety.⁸

Figure 1 displays American Muslim political tolerance conditioned on which group they chose and whether they were asked to consider their first or second least-liked group. As expected, tolerance is significantly lower among those who were asked about their least-liked group compared to those asked about another group they strongly dislike. Splitting the sample by the subject of respondents' intolerance reveals another substantial divide: White supremacists are significantly less likely to elicit a tolerant response compared to all other groups. Even though the menu of options contained highly salient and, by the respondents' own admission, strongly disliked groups, there was something qualitatively different about White supremacists. *Figure 2* points to a likely rationale for this divergence. Comparing levels of threat perception across groups and choice assignments, a similar pattern emerges with respondents fearing for their safety far more when White supremacists are invoked.

⁸ Each of the questions presented respondents with a 7-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The tolerance battery asked whether respondents would support: 1) banning their chosen group from running for office; 2) putting their chosen group under government surveillance; 3) allowing their chosen group to hold a rally in their city (reverse coded); and 4) banning a member from their chosen group to speak at a local college. The responses to these questions were then aggregated to form a scale ranging from 0-1 where "0" represents the lowest level of tolerance and "1" the highest. To gauge threat, the prompt read: "[CHOSEN GROUP] pose a threat to my own and/or my family's personal safety."

Figure 1: American Muslim Political Tolerance
(by Choice Assignment and Group)

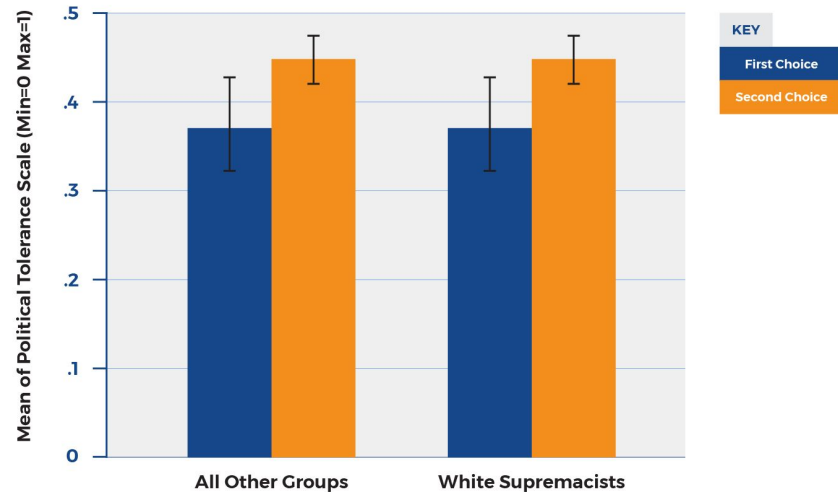
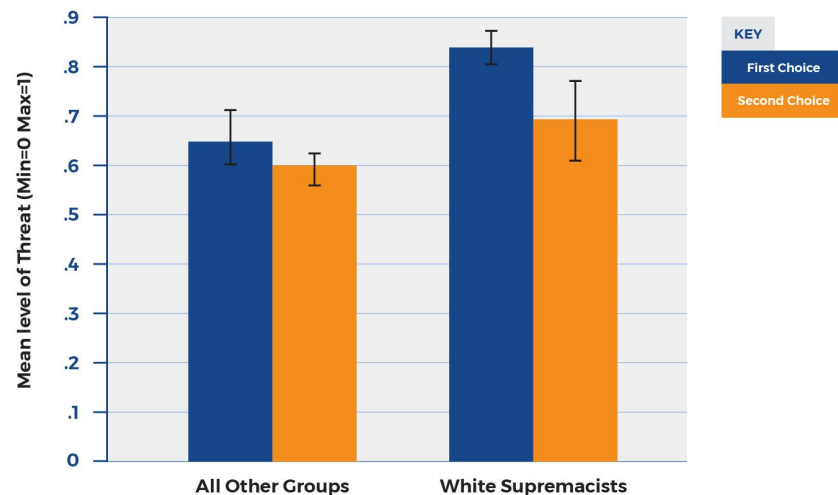


Figure 2: American Muslim Personal Threat Perception
(by Choice Assignment and Group)



What then, are we to make of American Muslim intolerance? Though preliminary, these data nonetheless seem to undermine the “Are Muslims intolerant?” line of questioning altogether. Based on the above analysis, it appears far more appropriate to ask, “When are Muslims intolerant?” That is, intolerance among Muslims does not manifest as an innate trait, invariably operative when a disliked

group is invoked. Instead, this disposition is more akin to a latent attitude that can get activated under the right conditions—which is to say that Muslims function psychologically in the same way as everyone else. Where they (and, arguably, other targeted minority groups) do differ is in the particular considerations that determine their tolerance judgments.

Broadly speaking, Muslims are particularly driven to intolerance when faced with the prospect of interacting with groups that pose a distinct threat to their personal safety. Such a dynamic is fairly intuitive, given the stubbornly high rate of hate crimes against Muslims over the past decade,⁹ which has dramatically increased since the start of the most recent presidential campaign,¹⁰ yet it is also fairly atypical. That is, studies of tolerance among the general public often find that threats to one's "way of life" often drive up intolerance, but consideration of personal safety plays little, if any, role. Why, after all, would a member of the majority White, majority-Christian public fear for their personal safety from a member of the Ku Klux Klan or a Neo-Nazi (two perennial "least-liked" groups in academic studies of tolerance)?

In part, then, the belief that Muslims are particularly intolerant relies on a faulty expectation that this targeted minority group assesses the costs associated with being tolerant in the same way as any other member of the broader society. Thus, when a notable share of American Muslims inevitably fall short of this unreasonable standard—one that is divorced from their lived experience—skeptical observers often explain this "intolerance" with reference to some embedded disposition in the community. This tendency to discount external circumstances in lieu of a presumably more fundamental attribute speaks to how uncharitable assessments of minority behavior can be, especially when compared to the usually more generous appraisals that socially privileged groups often receive. Ultimately, the findings presented here further underscore the need to jettison such blanket, unsubstantiated claims about Muslims' (and numerous other minority

⁹ Jeff Spross, "Hate Crimes Against Muslims Remain Near Decade High," December 10, 2012, <http://thinkprogress.org/security/2012/12/10/1312341/hate-crimes-against-muslims-remain-near-decade-high/>.

¹⁰ Janice Williams, "Hate Crimes against Muslims Are on the Rise in the U.S.," Newsweek, July 17, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/hate-crime-america-muslims-trump-638000>.

communities’) “nature” and instead focus on the social contexts that shape their attitudes and actions.