

Center for American Progress



Anti-Muslim Sentiment Is a Serious Threat to American Security

By Ken Gude November 2015

Introduction and summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

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

Our Approach

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

