

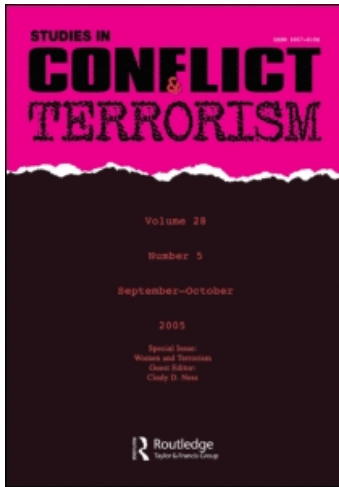
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What's Special about U.S. Muslims? The War on Terrorism as Seen by Muslims in the United States, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia

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What's Special about U.S. Muslims? The War on Terrorism as Seen by Muslims in the United States, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia

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Since 11 September 2001, Europe has suffered multiple jihadi attacks but the United States has not. This "American exceptionalism" has been attributed to the special qualities of U.S. Muslims, who are seen as politically better integrated and less sympathetic toward radical politics than other Muslims. This article tests the exceptionalism hypothesis by comparing results from a 2007 Pew poll of U.S. Muslims with results from 2006–2007 START polls of Muslims in Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia. On questions about religious identity, attitude toward Al Qaeda, U.S. intentions in the War on Terrorism, and suicide terrorism, U.S. Muslims differed only slightly from comparison Muslims.

There have been no significant terrorist attacks in the United States since 9/11, but terrorist bombs in other countries—notably in Madrid and London—have increased concerns about the possibility of terrorist attacks in the United States. Unsuccessful and thwarted attacks show the same kind of disparity: although several terrorist groups have been arrested in the United States, none got as far as the attempt to blow up U.S.-bound airliners from Heathrow in 2006 or the failed car bombs in London in 2007. *Jihadi* terrorist attacks have been even more common outside of Europe, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan but in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Indonesia.¹ Why have terrorist attacks and near-attacks been fewer in the United States than elsewhere?

One possibility is that U.S. Muslims are different from other Muslims. In this view, emigration to the United States is difficult and expensive, with the result that U.S. Muslims are a select group with higher education and higher economic status than other Muslims. Immigrants with more resources may be more easily assimilated and less attracted to radical Islam.

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A related possibility has to do with the reception of immigrants. Seeing itself as an immigrant country, the United States is more welcoming to immigrants and more successful in assimilating them. Thus Muslim immigrants in the United States may be less alienated and less attracted to radical Islam.

These two possibilities claim a kind of “American exceptionalism,” a view of America that can be traced as far back as 1630 when John Winthrop exhorted his fellow Puritans that their New World settlement should be a “city upon a hill”—a break from and an inspiration to the Old World they were leaving behind. In the mid-nineteenth century, de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* famously described the egalitarian nature of social relations that made the United States so different from European countries. Academic interest in American exceptionalism was stimulated in the 1950s as U.S. scholars began to ask, in the context of the Cold War, why socialism did not appeal to Americans as much as to others.² In a particularly strong statement of the concept, Seymour Lipset argued that “‘exceptional’ in this context is to be interpreted as . . . qualitatively different from all other countries.”³ Whether and how America is exceptional is still debated, but there is little doubt that many Americans see their country as exceptional and even providential.⁴

It is then consistent with conceptions of American exceptionalism to suggest that the United States is protected against terrorism, relative to other countries, because U.S. Muslims are different from other Muslims. Whether by selection in reaching the United States or by better acceptance living and working in the United States—or both—Muslims in the United States may be less susceptible to the radical opinions that provide the base of sympathy and support from which terrorists arise.⁵

U.S. Muslims versus European Muslims

The exceptionalism hypothesis has been challenged by the results of a comprehensive Pew poll of a thousand U.S. Muslims conducted between 24 January and 30 April 2007.⁶ Results indicated that 48 percent of U.S. Muslims believe that the United States made the wrong decision in using military force in Afghanistan, 75 percent believe that the United States made the wrong decision in using military force in Iraq, 28 percent do not believe that Arabs carried out the 9/11 attacks, 55 percent do not think that the War on Terrorism is a sincere effort to reduce international terrorism, and 8 percent feel that suicide attacks on civilian targets are often or sometimes justified in order to defend Islam. In short, results of the Pew poll suggest that U.S. Muslims are not immune to opinions that could provide support for terrorism.

Some of the questions in the Pew survey of U.S. Muslims had appeared earlier in Pew surveys of European Muslims, permitting comparison of U.S. Muslims with European Muslims. These comparisons suggest that U.S. Muslims may not be very different from European Muslims. An April 2006 Pew survey, for instance, asked Muslims in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain whether they felt that suicide attacks on civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam.⁷ Across the four countries, percentages feeling that suicide terrorism is often or sometimes justified ranged from 7 to 16 percent. The 8 percent of U.S. Muslims justifying terrorism are thus in the range of results for European Muslims.

U.S. Muslims versus Muslims in Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia

If U.S. Muslims are not very different from European Muslims on issues relating to the War on Terrorism, it may yet be true that U.S. Muslims are very different from Muslims in Muslim countries. Pew reporting of its 2007 poll of U.S. Muslims included, for some items,

comparisons with Pew polls of Muslim countries conducted in March 2004 and April 2006. The mismatch in timing of the surveys (2004 and 2006 compared with 2007) is not ideal; political events associated with the passage of time can affect survey results.

This article provides comparisons of U.S. and Muslim-country polls of Muslims that were more closely matched in time. It compares results of the Pew poll of U.S. Muslims conducted between January and April of 2007 with results from START polls conducted between December 2006 and February 2007 in Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia.⁸ The similarity in timing of the surveys provides general assurance that differences across surveys are not likely to be an artifact of responding to different current events related to the War on Terrorism. Again, the issues of interest are those related to the War on Terrorism: identification with country versus religion, views of the War on Terrorism, and support for terrorism.

The article does not present statistical significance tests for comparisons across countries. With large sample sizes, approximately a thousand respondents per country, differences of five percentage points or less can be statistically significant. Instead of statistical significance the article employs a judgment of substantive significance in which differences of less than ten percentage points are treated as negligible.

Religious Identification

Table 1 indicates that Pakistani Muslims demonstrated the highest level of religious identification (80 percent), followed by Egypt (53 percent), then Morocco and Indonesia (27 percent, 22 percent). U.S. Muslims were in the middle of this range with 47 percent agreeing that they thought of themselves primarily as Muslims. It is interesting to note that a Pew Global Attitudes poll in May 2006 found that 48 percent of U.S. Christians saw themselves first as Christians, 48 percent saw themselves first as Americans, and 7 percent saw themselves as “both.”⁹

Table 1
Religious identification

START: Which of the following statements do you agree with most?

- I think of myself primarily as a citizen of [Country].
- I think of myself primarily as a member of my religion.
- I think of myself primarily as a member of my tribe or ethnic group
- I think of myself not so much in these ways, but primarily as an individual.

Pew: Do you think of yourself first as an American or first as a Muslim?

START	Morocco	Egypt	Pakistan	Indonesia	Pew	U.S. Muslims
Citizen	60	34	13	65	Citizen	28
Religion	27	53	80	22	Religion	47
Tribe/ethnic group	3	3	3	6	Both	18
Individual	9	8	2	5	Other	7
Don't know/Refuse	1	2	2	2		

Note. Tabled values are country percentages; because of rounding, these values do not always sum to 100 percent. For Egypt, an original urban sample of 1,000 was augmented with a rural sample of 500; thus percentages reported for Egypt in this and succeeding tables are from data weighted to represent the actual urban-rural proportion in Egypt.

Table 2
Al Qaeda

START: How do you feel about Al Qaeda?

- I support Al Qaeda's attacks on Americans and share its attitudes toward the U.S.
- I oppose Al Qaeda's attacks on Americans but share many of its attitudes toward the U.S.
- I oppose Al Qaeda's attacks on Americans and do not share its attitudes toward the U.S.

Pew: Overall, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Al Qaeda?

START	Morocco	Egypt	Pakistan	Indonesia	Pew	U.S. Muslims
Support ^a	9	23	10	17	Favorable	5
Oppose ^a	56	56	22	50	Somewhat/Very unfavorable	68
DK/R	35	20	68	33	DK/R	27

^a“Support” is the percentage of those choosing the first response above; “Oppose” is the sum of the percentages for the second and third responses.

Although the START survey offered “tribe/ethnic group” as a response option, this response was rarely selected (3 percent to 6 percent). Similarly, few START respondents saw themselves as primarily individuals (2 percent to 9 percent). Across all five countries, few participants saw themselves in a category other than citizens or religious believers (7 percent in the United States, 12 percent in Morocco, 11 percent in Egypt, 5 percent in Pakistan, and 11 percent in Indonesia).

Views of Al Qaeda

Table 2 shows that U.S. Muslims were least favorably disposed toward Al Qaeda, with only 5 percent saying that they had a favorable view of the group. Nevertheless, the difference between U.S. Muslims and Moroccan Muslims was small (5 percent vs. 9 percent). In Pakistan 10 percent were favorable toward Al Qaeda, but this result is difficult to interpret because the majority of respondents in Pakistan (68 percent) did not respond (*Don't Know* or *No Response*) to the question about feelings toward Al Qaeda. In the other three Muslim countries, non-response rates ranged from 20 percent to 35 percent, with the U.S. rate similar at 27 percent.

Views of the War on Terrorism

Table 3 indicates that U.S. Muslims' opinions of the War on Terrorism closely resembled those of Muslims in other countries. In all five countries, more than half of respondents (55 percent to 82 percent) believed that the primary goal of the U.S. War on Terrorism is not actually to combat terrorism. Egypt and Pakistan had the lowest opinion of U.S. intentions: only 10 percent and 11 percent believed that the War on Terrorism is actually intended to combat terrorism. In Morocco, Indonesia, and the United States, 19 percent, 22 percent, and 26 percent believed that the War on Terrorism represents primarily a sincere effort to fight terrorism.

Table 3
The War on Terror

START: Do you think the primary goal of what the U.S. calls “the War on Terrorism” is to:

- Weaken and divide the Islamic religion and its people?
- Achieve political and military domination to control Middle East resources?
- Protect itself from terrorist attacks?

Pew: Do you think that the U.S.-led War on Terrorism is a sincere effort to reduce international terrorism or don't you believe that?

START	Morocco	Egypt	Pakistan	Indonesia	Pew	U.S. Muslims
Yes ^a	19	10	11	22	Yes	26
No ^a	72	82	62	56	No	55
					Both ^b	2
DK/R	9	8	26	22	DK/R	17

^aPercentages for the first two responses above (“Weaken . . .” and “Achieve . . .”) were summed to create the “No” response; “Yes” is the third response (“Protect itself . . .”).

^b“Both” was a volunteered response.

Non-response rates varied, with about a quarter of respondents in Pakistan and Indonesia not answering the question. In the United States 17 percent did not answer; in Egypt and Morocco only 8 percent to 9 percent did not answer.

Suicide Attacks and Islam

Although the START and Pew questions on this topic are not identical, they do have the common theme of justification for Muslim suicide attacks. The Pew question further specifies attacks on civilian targets and the idea of defending Islam, but it seems unlikely that Muslims considering Muslim suicide attacks would not have these common attributes of suicide terrorism in mind.

Table 4 shows that U.S. Muslims were least likely to support suicide attacks, with only 8 percent seeing such attacks as justified. Not very different, however, were the results for Pakistan and Indonesia, where 14 percent and 16 percent said that such attacks are often or sometimes justified. In Morocco 35 percent supported suicide attacks, and in Egypt such attacks were supported by a strong majority of 61 percent.

This item produced relatively low rates of non-response, ranging from 4 percent (Egypt) to 16 percent (Pakistan) in the four Muslim countries and 9 percent in the United States. The low rates of non-response are worth noting because a question asking about the use of suicide attacks would appear to be a particularly sensitive item. A respondent worried about avoiding the attention of police or security forces might want to avoid answering this item in particular.

Discussion

There can be little doubt that Muslims in the United States differ from Muslims in other countries in many ways, but this article focuses on public opinion issues related to the War on Terrorism. As noted in the introduction, there have been suggestions that U.S. Muslims are less radicalized than European Muslims, but recent survey data have indicated

Table 4
Muslim suicide attacks

START: When you hear or read about an attack in which a Muslim blows himself up while attacking an enemy, do you think that this action is:

- Often justified
- Sometimes justified
- Rarely justified
- Never justified

Pew: Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?

START	Morocco	Egypt	Pakistan	Indonesia	Pew U.S. Muslims
Often/sometimes	35	61	14	16	8
Rarely/never	53	34	71	79	83
DK/R	12	4	16	5	9

instead the similarity of U.S. and European Muslims on issues such as justifying suicide terrorism to defend Islam. At least with regard to these issues, U.S. Muslims show no signs of American exceptionalism. In this article, therefore, the authors compared U.S. Muslims with Muslims in Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

In general, U.S. Muslims are less likely than those in the four Muslim countries surveyed to hold opinions that might support opposition to the War on Terrorism. But the differences are often small. For all four items, U.S. results are within ten percentage points of results from at least one Muslim country. For religious versus national identity, U.S. Muslims are similar to Egyptian Muslims. For attitude toward Al Qaeda, U.S. Muslims are similar to Moroccan Muslims. For doubts about the War on Terrorism, U.S. Muslims are similar to Muslims in Morocco and Indonesia. And for justification of suicide attacks, U.S. Muslims are similar to Muslims in Pakistan and Indonesia.

The study's conclusion is that the margin of difference is too small to support the view that the United States is substantially safer from domestic terrorism than Muslim countries because U.S. Muslims are less susceptible to radical opinions. Socialism may appeal less to Americans than to citizens of other countries, but this kind of American exceptionalism is not evident in regard to Muslim opinions about the War on Terrorism, not even in comparison with Muslims in Muslim countries.

If U.S. Muslims' opinions relating to the War on Terrorism are only marginally different from opinions of Muslims in Muslim countries, then the United States is only marginally safer from domestic terrorism. In this regard it is worth noting that the 5 percent of U.S. Muslims favorable to Al Qaeda and the 8 percent justifying suicide attacks can be projected to represent about $(.05 \times 1.4 \text{ million})$ 70,000 adult U.S. Muslims with radicalized opinions in relation to the War on Terrorism.

If the United States is indeed substantially safer from homegrown terrorism than Muslim countries, the margin of safety must arise from factors other than the political opinions of U.S. Muslims. Possibilities include the greater reach and sophistication of

U.S. security forces and police, greater willingness to cooperate with these forces by U.S. Muslims disapproving of *jihadi* violence, or perhaps the slower development of networks among the few U.S. Muslims who sympathize with *jihadi* violence.

The last possibility is worth emphasizing. The United States has approximately 2.4 million Muslims in a population of approximately 300 million (0.8 percent).¹⁰ The United Kingdom has about 1.6 million Muslims in a population of 59 million (2.8 percent). In Spain, Muslims are 1 million of 43 million (2.3 percent), in the Netherlands nearly 1 million of 16 million (5.8 percent), in France 5 to 6 million of 62 million (about 9 percent).¹¹ It is possible that the small percentage of Muslims in the United States represents a barrier to the development of networks and organizations among the few who sympathize with Al Qaeda. That is, the potential for radical action may depend not just on the numbers or percent of Muslims with radical sympathies, but on the degree to which Muslims are salient as a proportion of the population.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism," 2006, available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/> (accessed 24 October 2007).

2. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955).

3. Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 18.

4. Larry G. Gerber, "Shifting Perspectives on American Exceptionalism: Recent Literature on American Labor Relations and Labor Politics," *Journal of American Studies* 31(2) (1997), pp. 253–274.

5. Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The homegrown threat*. New York Police Department, 2007, available at http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/files/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf (accessed 24 October 2007).

6. Pew Research Center, *Muslim Americans: Middle class and mostly mainstream*, 2007, available at <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf> (accessed 24 October 2007). This was the most comprehensive and sophisticated sampling of U.S. Muslims yet accomplished, at a cost of about one million dollars, between 24 January and 30 April 2007. Nearly 60,000 respondents were interviewed to find a representative sample of 1,050 Muslims. Telephone interviews were conducted in Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi as well as in English. Full details of the methodology are presented in chapter 8 of the Pew report, pp. 57–74. About 35 percent of respondents were born in the United States, and of these 56 percent were Black. Thus about 20 percent of respondents (.35 × .56) were U.S.-born Black Muslims. Although for some purposes it might be useful to analyze Black Muslims separately, as a distinctive culture group, Pew has not published separate analyses. In any case, it is not clear that Black Muslims would differ from other U.S. Muslims in opinions related to terrorism.

7. Pew Global Attitudes Project, *The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other*, 2006, available at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253>, (accessed 24 October 2007). Results for the survey are based on telephone and face-to-face interviews conducted in 2006 under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International, which managed the fieldwork conducted by local research organizations in each country. All surveys were based on national samples except in China, India, and Pakistan, where the sample was disproportionately or exclusively urban. Details of methodology for each country are available in the Methodological Appendix to the report.

8. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Responses to Terrorism (START) developed a questionnaire in English, which was translated in each country by the research agency conducting the survey. These translations were then back-translated by native speakers of Arabic, Urdu, and Indonesian working with the research team. Differences were reconciled with

the agencies in each country. Interviewing was conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes using probability-based samples developed according to the experience of each research agency. Gender matching of interviewer and respondent was implemented as needed based on the judgments of the research agencies. The questionnaires were administered as follows: Egypt (sample size 1,000 from urban areas 17 January–9 February 2007; sample size 500 from rural areas 25 May–28 June 2007); Indonesia (sample size 1,141), 12 December 2006–8 January 2007; Morocco (sample size 1,000), 9–19 December 2006; Pakistan (sample size 1,243), 15 January–15 February 2007. The numbers of non-Muslim participants in these polls were too small for separate analysis and only Muslim participants appear in our results. Details of the survey methods and results are available at http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START_Apr07_rpt.pdf (accessed 30 January 2008).

9. Pew Global Attitudes Project, *The Great Divide*, p. 87.

10. Pew Research Center, *Muslim Americans*, p. 10.

11. Population estimates for European countries from BBC News website, last updated 23 December 2005, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4385768.stm#netherlands> (accessed 30 January 2008).