



# Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2016

**CHARLES KURZMAN**

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

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Forty-six Muslim-Americans were associated with violent extremism in 2016, a 40 percent drop from 2015 but higher than the annual average since 9/11 (27 per year, for a total of 414 over more than 15 years). Almost half of the individuals identified in 2016 traveled (8 individuals) or attempted to travel (14 individuals) to join militant groups overseas. Twenty-three individuals were associated with plots against targets in the United States, and one case involved an unknown target (see Figure 1).

Few of these individuals (9 of 46, or 20 percent) had family backgrounds from the seven countries reportedly designated by the Trump administration for temporary immigration bans. Since 9/11, only 23 percent of Muslim-Americans involved with violent extremist plots had family backgrounds in these seven countries (Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somali, Sudan, Syria, Yemen). Among plots directed at targets in the U.S., only 6 percent had family backgrounds in these seven countries. There have been no fatalities in the United States caused by extremists with family backgrounds in these countries.

The plots in 2016 were overshadowed by a

This is the eighth annual report on Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators published by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. These reports, and the data on which they are based, are available at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism/annual-report>.

single attack, the mass shooting at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016, in which 49 people were killed, plus the shooter, and 53 were injured. This was the deadliest terrorist attack in the United States since September 11, 2001, when approximately three thousand were killed. Five other attacks in 2016 accounted for five additional deaths, plus two of the attackers, and 53 injuries. The 54 fatalities caused by Muslim-American extremists in 2016 brought the total since 9/11 to 123. More than 240,000 Americans were murdered over the same period.<sup>1</sup> In 2016 alone, 188 Americans were killed in mass shootings.<sup>2</sup> This figure does not include the victims of Muslim-American extremists.

### Rate of Cases Peaked in Early 2015

The number of Muslim-Americans associated with violent extremism peaked in the first half

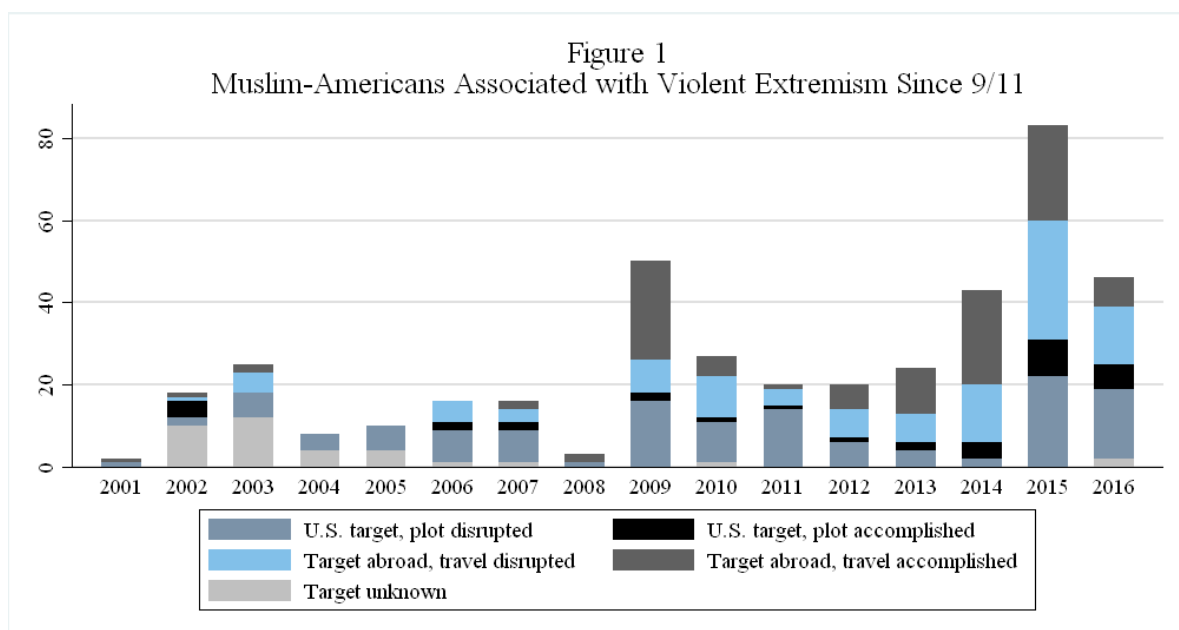
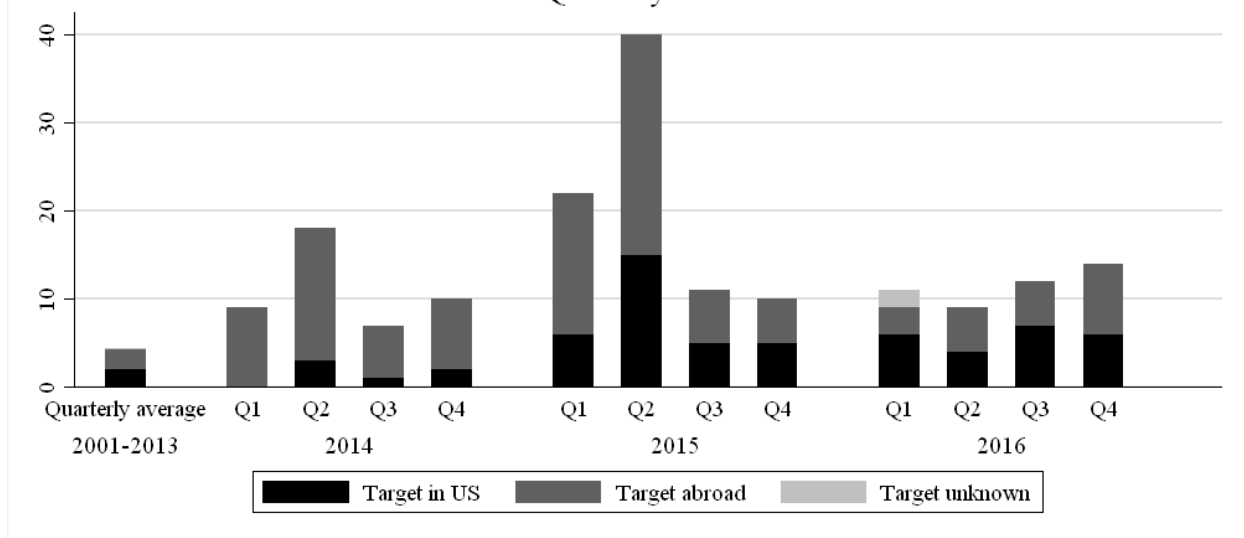


Figure 2  
Muslim-Americans Associated with Violent Extremism Since 9/11  
Quarterly Totals



of 2015 (Figure 2). Over the year and a half since then, the rate of incidents and arrests has dropped to 14 or fewer per quarter.

This is more than double the average quarterly rate in the years preceding the rise of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” in Syria in early 2014. At the same time, the rate is considerably lower than the scale of violent extremism described in statements by James B. Comey, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In October 2015, Comey stated that the FBI had “Islamic State”-related “investigations in all 50 states, over 900 of them.”<sup>3</sup> In September 2016, Comey told Congress, “We still have about a thousand open investigations on that [“Islamic State”-related extremism]. If there’s any good news, and I don’t want to squeeze it too hard for good news, it’s that the rate of increase has slowed a little in recent months. Now my hope is that it’s going to follow the same trajectory as the traveler numbers, and head downward, but it hasn’t headed downward yet. We’re still opening and closing [cases], and it’s ticking up slightly.”<sup>4</sup>

Over the past year, the number of indictments and acts of violent extremism was less than 5 percent of the number of investigations reported by FBI Director Comey.

During the 2016 election campaign, however, targets of investigation -- 95 percent of whom were not indicted -- were sometimes treated as proven terrorists. At the Republican National Convention, for example, Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa said, “According to the FBI, ISIS is present in all 50 states. Think about it for a moment. Terrorists from ISIS are in every one of our 50 states.”<sup>5</sup> Venturing even farther from the evidence, presidential candidate Donald Trump said after the mass shooting in Orlando, “You have thousands of shooters like this, with the same mentality, out there in this country, and we’re bringing thousands and thousands of them back in to this country every year.”<sup>6</sup>

Sixty-five Americans (listed in Figure 4) have been identified, by name or alias, as having traveled to join the Nusra Front or the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” in Syria, Iraq, or Libya, since the civil wars began in those countries in 2011. Of these, 27 have died

**Figure 3. Muslim-American Terrorism Suspects and Perpetrators, Plots Directed at U.S. Targets, 2016**

Name	Location	Plot or alleged plot	Disrupted	Status of case
Edward Archer	Philadelphia, PA	Shot and wounded police officer	No	Trial pending
Samy Mohamed Hamzeh	Milwaukee, WI	Plan to attack Masonic temple	Early	Trial pending
Khalil Abu-Rayyan	Dearborn Heights, MI	Plan to shoot police and church	Early	Trial pending
Daniel Seth Franey	Montesano, WA	Plan to attack military base	Early	Trial pending
Safya Roe Yassin	Buffalo, MO	Threats on social media	Early	Trial pending
Abdul Raheem Ali-Skelton	Brooklyn Park, MN	Communication with “Islamic State”	Early	Pled guilty
James Gonzalo Medina	Miami, FL	Plan to bomb synagogue	Early	Trial pending
Alex Hernandez	State prison, MA	Threat to kill president	Early	Trial pending
Omar Mateen	Orlando, FL	Killed 49 people at nightclub	No	Killed in attack
Mohamed Bailor Jalloh	Sterling, VA	Plan to shoot people	Early	Trial pending
Mahin Khan	Tucson, AZ	Plan to bomb government office	Early	Pled guilty
Sebastian Gregerson	Detroit, MI	Gathered weapons	Late	Trial pending
Erick Jamal Hendricks	Charlotte, NC	Plot to create terrorist cell	Early	Trial pending
Marie Antoinette Castelli	Maysville, KY	Threats on social media	Early	Trial pending
Dahir Adan	St. Cloud, MN	Stabbed people at mall	No	Killed in attack
Ahmad Khan Rahami	Seaside Park, NJ; New York, NY; Elizabeth, NJ	Injured 31 people with explosives	No	Trial pending
Arkan Cetin	Oak Harbor, WA	Killed 5 people at mall	No	Trial pending
Nelash Mohamed Das	Prince George, MD	Plan to kill member of military	Early	Trial pending
Thomas Bastian	State prison, AZ	Plan to bomb prison	Early	Trial pending
Marlonn Hicks	Crown Point, IN	Plan with explosives	Early	Pled guilty
Abdul Razak Ali Artan	Columbus, OH	Drove into and stabbed people	No	Killed in attack
Derrick Thompson	Phoenix, AZ	Plan to purchase firearm	Early	Trial pending
Lionel Williams	Suffolk, VA	Plan with firearms	Late	Trial pending

Early disruption is defined here as coming to the attention of authorities prior to the gathering of weapons or explosives.

overseas; seven are in U.S. custody, including two who defected from the “Islamic State”; and 31 may still be living in “Islamic State” territory.<sup>7</sup>

### Attempts to Identify Extremist Motivations

The 23 individuals who engaged in or planned violence in the United States are listed in Figure 3. Six of the individuals engaged in violence, and 17 confided in undercover law enforcement officers or informants and were arrested before engaging in violence.

Thirteen of the arrests took place before any weapons or explosives had been gathered for an attack; the cases of Safya Roe Yassin and Marie Antoinette Castelli involved threats and

distribution of addresses over social media. In the case of Sebastian Gregerson, weapons were gathered but no target had been selected. In one case, Lionel Williams had gathered weapons and suggested via social media that he may have been ready to engage in violence.

All of the disrupted plots appear to have been inspired at least in part by the ideology of the “Islamic State,” according to comments made by the suspects that were quoted by law enforcement officers in legal documents. The motivations of the six individuals who engaged in violence are not equally clear. The most straightforward instance of ideological extremism may have been Ahmad Khan Rahami, who injured 31 people with

<b>Figure 4. Muslim-Americans Allegedly Joining Nusra Front or “Islamic State,” By Year of Travel</b>			
<b>2012 or earlier</b>			
Ahmad Abousamra	Died in Syria in 2015	Third roommate of “Abdul Aliy”*	Possibly living in Syria*
“Abdul Aliy” (@maitreuvee)*	Possibly living in Syria*	“Abu Qaqaa”	Possibly living in Syria
First roommate of “Abdul Aliy”*	Died in Syria by 2015*	Russell (Abdullah) Dennison	Possibly living in Syria
Second roommate of “Abdul Aliy”*		*May not be American, according to a reporter in contact with “Abdul Aliy” in 2016	
<b>2013</b>			
Bilal Abood	Arrested in U.S. in 2015	John Georgelas (Yahya Abu Hassan)	Possibly living in Syria
“Abu Dujana al-Amriki”	Died in Syria in 2013	Eric Harroun	Arrested in U.S. in 2013
“Abu Khalid al-Amriki”	Died in Syria in 2015	Amiir Farouk Ibrahim	Died in Syria in 2013
“Abu Muhammad al-Amriki”	Died in Syria in 2015	Omar Kattan	Died in Syria in 2014
Aws Mohammed Younis Al-Jayab	Arrested in U.S. in 2016	Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati	Arrested in U.S. in 2015
Adnan Fazeli	Died in Lebanon in 2015	Nicole Mansfield	Died in Syria in 2013
<b>2014</b>			
Ahmad Abdul Aziz (Abu Bakr Alsinawi)	Possibly living in Syria	Douglas McAuthur McCain	Died in Syria in 2014
“Abu Abdullah al-Amriki”	Died in Iraq in 2015	Hanad Abdullahi Mohallim	Died in Syria in 2014
“Abu Muhammad al-Amriki”	Died in Syria in 2015	Abdirahman S. Mohamud	Arrested in U.S. in 2015
Moner Abusalha	Died in Syria in 2014	Abdirahmaan Muhumed	Died in Syria in 2014
Ridwan al-Haymar	Possibly living in Syria	Hoda Muthana (Umm Jihad)	Possibly living in Syria
Sari Abdullah al-Kambodi (Abu Latifa al-Kambodi)	Possibly living in Syria	Zakia Nasrin	Possibly living in Syria
Erius Alliu	Possibly living in Syria	Reza Niknejad	Possibly living in Syria
Mohimanul Bhuiya (Saleh Muhammad)	Defected in 2014	Abdi Mohamud Nur	Possibly living in Syria
Ariel Bradley	Possibly living in Syria	Abdullah Ramo Pazara	Died in Syria in 2014
Yusra Ismail	Possibly living in Syria	Talmeezur Rahman (Abu Salman al-Hindi)	Possibly living in Syria
Yusuf Jama	Died in Syria in 2014	Rasel Raihan (Abu Abdullah al-Amriki)	Died in Syria in 2015
Jaffrey Khan	Possibly living in Syria	Alberto Renteria (Abu Hudhayfa al-Mexiki)	Possibly living in Syria
Rahmo Kodaimati	Possibly living in Syria	Mohamed Roble	Possibly living in Syria
Father of Kodaimaiti brothers	Possibly living in Syria	“Umar” (@onthatpath3)	Possibly living in Syria
<b>2015</b>			
“Abu Bara al-Mexiki”	Died in Syria in 2015	Muhammad Jamal Khweis	Defected in 2016
Samy El-Goarany	Died in Syria in 2015	Mohammad Maleeh Masha	Possibly living in Syria
Sixto Ramiro Garcia	Died in Syria in 2015		
<b>2015 or earlier</b>			
“Abu Dawoud al-Amriki”	Died in Iraq in 2015	“Chloe”	Possibly living in Syria
“Abu Huraira al-Amriki”	Possibly living in Syria	Khaled ad-Dusarii	Died in Syria in 2015
“Abu Usama al-Amriki”	Died in Iraq in 2015	Executioner of Christians	Possibly living in Libya
“Abu Zeyd”	Possibly living in Syria		
<b>2016 or earlier</b>			
“Abu Asma’ al-Amriki” (@al_amriki7964)	Possibly living in Syria	“Abu Zubair as-Somali”	Died in Syria in 2016
“Abu Isma’il al-Amriki”	Possibly living in Iraq	Yusuf Rodriguez (Abu Maria al-Mexiki)	Possibly living in Syria
“Abu Talha al-Amriki”	Possibly living in Libya	David Yambasu (Dawud Qatal al-Amriki)	Died in Libya in 2016

Note: Two individuals who traveled prior to 2016 came to public attention in the past year and are included in the total of 46 Muslim-Americans associated with violent extremism in 2016.

explosives in New York and New Jersey in September 2016. Rahami allegedly wrote in a notebook, which he had with him when he was arrested, "I looked for guidance and Alhumdulillah [thank God] guidance came. Sheikh Anwar [al-Awlaqi of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and] Brother [Abu Muhammad] Adnani [of the] Dawla ["Islamic State"] said it clearly[:] attack the kuffar [unbelievers] in their backyard."<sup>8</sup> Al-Qaeda and the "Islamic State" are military rivals in Syria, but both have called for Muslims to engage in violence in the United States.

Omar Mateen, who died after killing 49 people in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016, called a local television station during his attack to say, "I did it for ISIS. I did it for the Islamic State."<sup>9</sup> Months later, however, FBI Director Comey said that "further investigation is needed to determine if this attack was inspired by a foreign terrorist organization. We are spending a tremendous amount of time trying to understand every moment of the killer's path, to understand his motives, and to understand the details of his life."<sup>10</sup>

Edward Archer, who shot and wounded a police officer in Philadelphia in January 2016, also claimed ideological inspiration for his attack. Archer told police after his arrest, "I pledge my allegiance to the Islamic State, and that's why I did what I did." No contact with known terrorist suspects was found in his Internet activity.<sup>11</sup>

Dahir Adan, who stabbed 10 people at a mall in St. Cloud, Minnesota, in September 2016, made no statements about his motivations, but asked at least one victim whether he was Muslim. An "Islamic State" news agency claimed Adan as a "soldier of the Islamic State" in a Twitter post 12 hours after the attack.<sup>12</sup>

The "Islamic State" also took credit for the

actions of Abdul Razak Ali Artan, who drove a car into pedestrians and stabbed several people in Columbus, Ohio, in November 2016. Just before his attack, Artan posted a vague threat on Facebook: "By Allah, we will not let you sleep unless you give peace to the Muslims. You will not celebrate or enjoy any holiday."<sup>13</sup>

Arkan Cetin, who allegedly shot and killed five people at a mall in Burlington, Washington, in September 2016, fits the definition of violent extremism least well. In 2015, a blog featuring his photograph called Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the "Islamic State," "my main dude." Two weeks later, though, the blog called Ali Khamene'i, leader of Iran and an enemy of the "Islamic State," "my other dood."<sup>14</sup> In 2016, another blog featuring Cetin's photograph quoted an anti-"Islamic State" commentary: "Calling to ban all Muslims because of Daesh ["Islamic State"] is the same thing as calling to ban all Catholics because of the IRA [Irish Republican Army]. ... no one should judge and prescribe all of a religion's followers by the actions of an extremist minority. And lest you forget, most of the fighting against Daesh is being done by other Muslims...."<sup>15</sup> Cetin had been institutionalized after a suicide attempt in late 2015.<sup>16</sup> His inclusion in this report, like the inclusion of other marginal cases over the years, should not be taken as a judgment that his motivations reflect an extremist ideology.

This report does not include Suleiman Bengharsa of Clarksburg, Maryland, among the cases of violent extremism. His extremist comments on social media and linkages with other suspects brought him under federal investigation in 2016, but he has not been charged with any crime.<sup>17</sup> The report also excludes Yusuf Wehelie of Fairfax County, Virginia, who was arrested in 2016 for possession of firearms that he was paid by an undercover agent to transport in a cigarette-

trafficking sting operation. According to the agent, Wehelie allegedly spoke about a desire to attack a military recruitment office in the U.S., but was not accused of making any preparations for an attack.<sup>18</sup>

The list of Muslim-American violent extremists also excludes four individuals who were charged with material support for terrorism but were not themselves involved with violence: Azizjon Rakhmatov of Brooklyn, New York, who contributed part of \$2,400 for a friend to attempt to travel to join militants overseas; Nicholas Young of Fairfax, Virginia, who donated \$245 to an undercover agent he thought was in Syria; Robert Blake Jackson of Pensacola, Florida, who lied to federal agents about statements he made on social media in support of "Islamic State"; and Haris Qamar of Burke, Virginia, who also made statements on social media in support of "Islamic State."

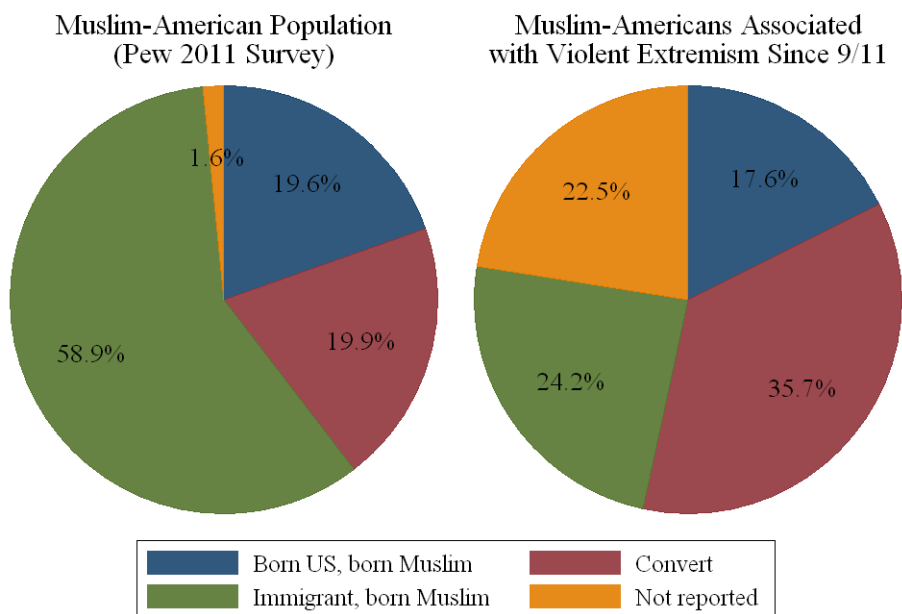
These individuals are included on a separate list of non-violent support for terrorism, which has dwindled over the past five years to an annual average of 9 individuals, as compared with an average of 44 per year in the decade after 9/11.

### Failure of Demographic Profiling

Over the past year, observers have noted that the Orlando shooter, the New Jersey/New York bomber, and several other Muslim extremists were young adults – either born in the United States or brought to the country as children -- who were raised in the United States by immigrant parents. The children of immigrants form part of "a rich recruiting pool for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State," *The New York Times* reported, because "the uncomfortable in-between status can be especially acute for those with recent immigrant roots." "You have a message at home that's very conservative, and a completely different message from the society around you when you're growing up," according to one expert.<sup>19</sup>

However, the children of immigrants do not appear to be overrepresented among Muslim-Americans involved with violent extremism, as compared with their prevalence in the Muslim-American population as a whole.

Figure 5. Comparing Demographic Profiles



According to survey data from the Pew Research Center, 20 percent of Muslim-Americans are converts who did not grow up in Muslim households.<sup>20</sup> Among Muslim-Americans involved with violent extremism since 9/11, converts constitute a higher proportion, 36 percent.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that generational conflict within Muslim immigrant families is not generating a disproportionate level of violent extremism.

In sum, it is not accurate to suggest that Muslim-American violent extremists have a distinct demographic profile. This confirms the conclusion of previous studies<sup>22</sup> and of law enforcement agencies. Violent extremists, FBI director Comey testified to Congress in 2014, “do not share a typical profile; their experiences and motives are often distinct.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition, it is worth noting that several dozen cases per year does not represent a “rich recruiting pool.” The annual average (27 cases) is fewer than one in 100,000 of the estimated 3 million Muslims in the United States,<sup>24</sup> and fewer than one in 10,000 young adult male Muslims.<sup>25</sup>

#### **About the author:**

Charles Kurzman is a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a specialist on Islamic movements. His book, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2011. He can be contacted through his website, <http://kurzman.unc.edu>.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, 2015, Table 1, "Crime in the United States by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1996-2015." The estimate for 2016 is extrapolated from trends in preceding years.

<sup>2</sup> Mass Shooting Tracker, "U.S. Mass Shootings, 2016," <https://massshootingtracker.org>, January 2017. The figure of 188 fatalities counts only attacks causing four or more deaths, and does not include the 54 deaths caused by Muslim-American extremists. Mass Shooting Tracker counts 476 attacks with four or more deaths or injuries in 2016; Gun Violence Archive (<http://gunviolencearchive.org>) counts 385 such attacks; and Vice News's "Mass Shootings in the United States in 2016" ([https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/mass-shootings-in-the-united-states-and-europe-in-2016](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mass-shootings-in-the-united-states-and-europe-in-2016)) counts 392 such attacks.

<sup>3</sup> James B. Comey, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, speech to counterterrorism experts, Chicago, Illinois, October 23, 2015, audio minute 8:50.

<sup>4</sup> James B. Comey, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, September 27, 2016, C-SPAN.org.

<sup>5</sup> Joni Ernst, speech at the Republican National Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, July 18, 2016, transcribed at <http://www.whatthefolly.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Donald J. Trump, speaking on "Fox and Friends," Fox News, June 13, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> These figures include 15 Americans identified in several thousand "Islamic State" intake forms from 2013-2014 that were leaked to journalists in early 2016. Richard Engel, Ben Plesser, Tracy Connor and Jon Schuppe, "The Americans: 15 Who Left the United States to Join ISIS," NBC News, May 16, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> A photograph of one page of the notebook was published by numerous media outlets on September 21, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Omar Mateen quoted by Matthew Gentili, a television producer who answered Mateen's phone call during the nightclub attack, in Scott Fais, "Mateen to News 13 Producer: 'I'm the Shooter. It's Me,'" News 13 (Orlando, Florida), June 15, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> James B. Comey, "Statement Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs," September 27, 2016, FBI.gov.

<sup>11</sup> Aubrey Whelan, Mari A. Schaefer, Jeremy Roebuck, and Stephanie Farr, "Police: Gunman Who Shot Cop Pledged Allegiance to the Islamic State," *The Inquirer* (Philadelphia), January 8, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> "Daher Adan: What We Know," *StarTribune* (Minneapolis), September 22, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Tracy Connor, Pete Williams and Stephanie Gosk, "Ohio State Attack: Friend says Abdul Razak Ali Artan 'Loved America,'" NBC News, November 29, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Posts of June 30 and July 13, 2015, <http://meowfraulein.tumblr.com>.

<sup>15</sup> Posted between March 22 and September 23, 2016, <http://arcanmotherrussiavodkaandak47.tumblr>.

<sup>16</sup> Jessie Stensland, "Records Document Mall Shooting Suspect's Tormented Past," *Whidbey* (Washington) *News-Times*, October 4, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Snell, "FBI Probes Md. Terror Link in Detroit Case," *Detroit News*, September 21, 2016; Scott Shane and Adam Goldman, "Extremist Imam Tests F.B.I. and the Limits of the Law," *New York Times*, September 30, 2016; Robert Snell, "Detroit Terror Suspect Part of Broader Group, Feds Say," *Detroit News*, December 22, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Rachel Weiner, "Detained Six Years Ago in Egypt and Arrested Now on a Weapons Charge," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Scott Shane, Richard Pérez-Peña And Aurelien Breeden, "'In-Betweeners' Are Part of a Rich Recruiting Pool for Jihadists," *New York Times*, September 22, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Calculated from the Pew Research Center's "2011 Muslim American Survey" dataset (downloaded from <http://www.people-press.org/category/datasets/?download=20050837>).

<sup>21</sup> The dataset of Muslim-Americans associated with violent extremism does not have information on parents' birthplace. According to Pew's "2011 Muslim American Survey" dataset, 7 percent of the Muslim population was born in the United States to non-immigrant Muslim parents. The Pew survey does not include detailed information on the respondents' age at migration to the United States, so no comparison can be made about immigrants who arrived as children.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Terrorism: Declining Further," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 1, 2013; Karen J. Greenberg, "Case by Case: ISIS Prosecutions in the United States, March 1, 2014-June 30, 2016," Center on National Security, Fordham Law School, July 2016, page 24.

<sup>23</sup> James B. Comey, "Statement Before the House Judiciary Committee," June 11, 2014, FBI.gov. Comey's predecessor as director of the FBI, Robert S. Mueller III, offered the same conclusion, using almost the same wording, in Congressional hearings on October 6, 2010; April 7, 2011; May 9, 2012; September 19, 2012; March 19, 2013; and May 16, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Besheer Mohamed, "A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population," Pew Research Center, January 6, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> This rate is based on the proportion of Muslims age 18-29, which is estimated at 36 percent of adult Muslims, according to two separate surveys: Gallup, "Muslim Americans: A National Portrait," 2009, page 22; Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism," August 2011, page 14. I have estimated the percent of adults in the Muslim population at 40 percent, based on the number of children reported in the Pew Research Center's "2011 Muslim American Survey" dataset.