



Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2017

CHARLES KURZMAN

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

JANUARY 18, 2018

Thirty-three Muslim-Americans were associated with violent extremism in 2017, a 25 percent drop from 2016 but higher than the annual average since 9/11 (28 per year, for a total of 456 over more than 16 years). Just over half of the individuals identified in 2017 traveled (four individuals) or attempted to travel (13 individuals) to join militant groups overseas. Fourteen individuals were associated with plots against targets in the United States, and two cases involved unknown targets (see Figure 1).

As in recent years, the plots against U.S. targets in 2017 were unsophisticated attempts at mass murder. Three individuals shot people with firearms; one ran people over with a rented truck; and one tried to use a homemade explosive, in the first attempted suicide bombing in the United States by a Muslim-American. In total, the attacks killed 17 people and injured 20. All of the suspects were arrested.

These incidents brought the total number of fatalities caused by Muslim-American extremists in the United States to 140 since 9/11. Over this same period, there have been approximately 260,000 murders in the United

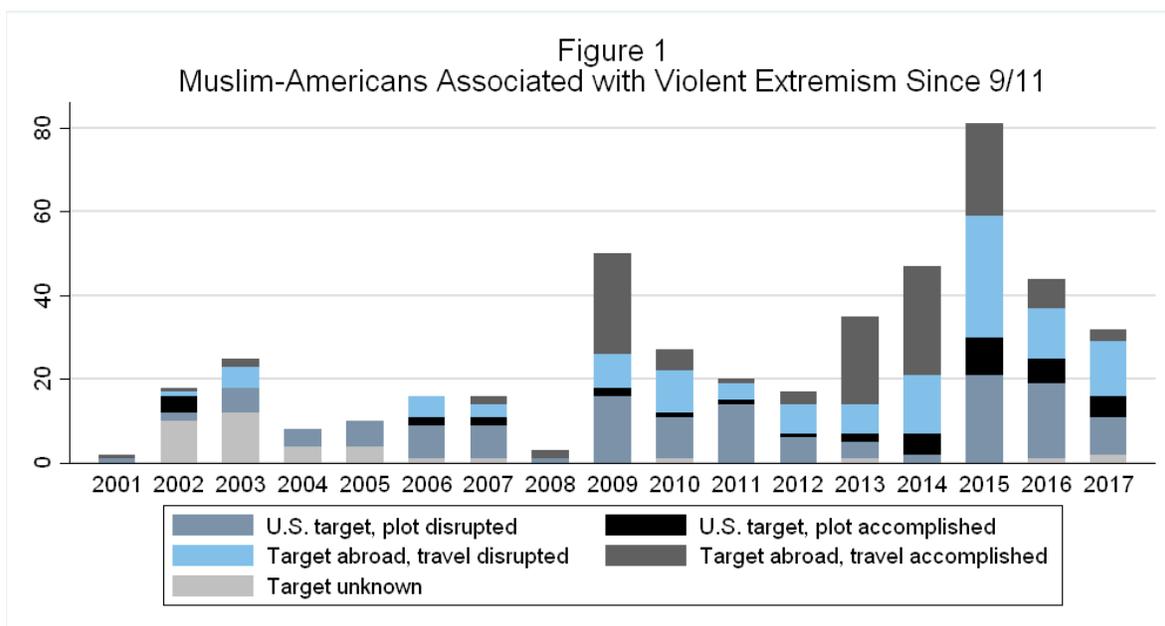
This is the ninth annual report on Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators published by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security (<https://sites.duke.edu/tcths>). These reports, and the data on which they are based, are available at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism/annual-report>.

States.¹ In 2017 alone, 267 Americans were killed in mass shootings.² This figure does not include victims of Muslim-American extremists. In other words, almost twice as many people were killed in the United States by mass shootings in 2017 as have been killed by Muslim-American extremists in the past 16 years.

No Trump Effect

The number of Muslim-Americans associated with violent extremism peaked in the first half of 2015, with the rise of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State,” and has been dropping since then. The 2017 figures continued this trend.

This trend defied expectations that President Donald Trump’s presidency would generate a distinctive pattern of violent extremism. During



the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump declared that past approaches had failed to solve the problem of terrorism, and that, “I will solve – and fast!”³ Trump’s major campaign speech on terrorism promised that under his administration, as opposed to previous ones that were hobbled by “political correctness,” “The support networks for Radical Islam in this country will be stripped out and removed one by one.” The same speech promised that “one of my first acts as President will be to establish a Commission on Radical Islam ... to identify and explain to the American public the core convictions and beliefs of Radical Islam, to identify the warning signs of radicalization, and to expose the networks in our society that support radicalization.”⁴ These promises have not been kept. Trump did not establish the commission, the problem of terrorism was not “solved,” and we have seen no burst of government activity to expose alleged support networks for Radical Islam.

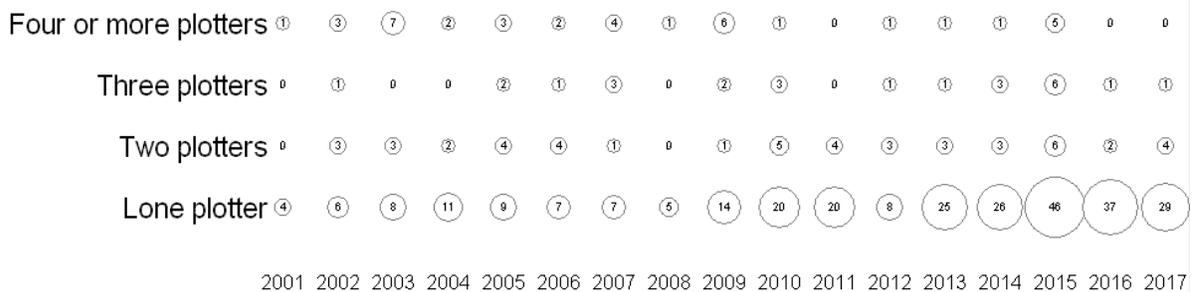
Trump’s reference to supposed “support networks” for terrorism echoed concerns since 9/11 that large-scale networks of Muslim violent extremists may be present in the United States.⁵ These concerns have not been borne out by years of intensive federal investigations. Few extremist plots by Muslim-Americans involved more than a handful of conspirators, and participants in the largest plots were arrested before engaging in an attack in the United States. The average number of Muslim-Americans publicly

identified in each plot has dropped from 3.7 in 2009 to less than 1.7 in each year since 2010.⁶ In 2017, as in the previous year, the average was less than 1.2, and no plots of violent extremism involved more than three Muslim-Americans (Figure 2). Most involved lone individuals. A number of these individuals conspired with militants overseas, but the Trump administration revealed no support networks in the United States.

Some of Trump’s opponents worried, and some Muslim extremists predicted, that Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies might trigger a backlash of increased violent extremism.⁷ That did not occur either. The number of Muslim-Americans involved with violent extremism continued to decline in 2017.

The ratio of public indictments to federal investigations also dropped slightly in 2017, as compared with the previous year. James B. Comey, then-director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), told Congress in September 2016, “We still have about a thousand open investigations” on violent extremism related to the “Islamic State.”⁸ Christopher Wray, Comey’s successor, repeated this estimate in testimony to Congress in September 2017.⁹ Less than 3 percent of these investigations led to indictments in 2017. The previous year, the rate of indictments was between 4 and 5 percent.¹⁰

Figure 2
Size of Violent Extremist Plots Involving Muslim-Americans Since 9/11



No Fatalities from Travel-Ban Countries

The Trump administration's major counterterrorism initiative was a suspension of visas to nationals of eight Muslim-majority countries. (The first executive order in January 2017 included Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen; the second order in March 2017 dropped Iraq; the third order in September 2017 dropped Sudan and added Chad.)

There were no attacks in 2017 by Muslim-American extremists with family backgrounds in travel-ban countries. Since 9/11, violent extremists with family backgrounds in these countries have caused zero fatalities and 32 injuries.¹¹ These individuals accounted for 21 percent of Muslim-Americans involved with violent extremism since 9/11; of the 21 percent, more than half were Somali. Among plots directed at targets in the U.S., only 7 percent had family backgrounds in travel-ban countries.

A total of 518,386 individuals from travel ban countries entered the United States on nonimmigrant visas over the decade from 2006 through 2015, the latest data available.¹²

The proportion of these individuals who have been involved with violent extremism is less than 0.02 percent.

An examination of violent extremism suspects with family backgrounds in travel ban countries suggests that additional vetting, as the Trump administration has proposed, would not have prevented many extremist immigrants. One quarter of these suspects and perpetrators were born in the United States, and half arrived in the United States as children. The number of violent extremists who migrated to the United States as adults and might have been subject to vetting is 25 or fewer since 9/11.¹³ The median time from immigration to arrest or attack was 12 years, in the cases for which the age at migration was available.¹⁴ This long period suggests that radicalization occurred primarily in the United States, not prior to entry, and would not have been prevented by stronger vetting.

The Trump administration's ban on refugees from the Syrian civil war is another purported counterterrorism policy that lacks a factual basis. The United States has admitted 21,060 Syrian refugees admitted to the United States since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011.¹⁵

Figure 3. Muslim-American Terrorism Suspects and Perpetrators, Plots Directed at U.S. Targets, 2017

Name	Location	Plot or alleged plot	Disrupted	Status of case
Esteban Santiago	Ft. Lauderdale, FL	Shot and killed 5, injured 6 at airport	No	Trial pending
Joshua Cummings	Denver, CO	Shot and killed 1 near train station	No	Trial pending
Robert Lorenzo Hester Jr.	Columbia, MO	Plan to bomb buses and trains	Early	Trial pending
Gregory Lepsky	Point Pleasant, NJ	Possible plan to make explosive	Early	Trial pending
Garrett Asger Grimsley	Cary, NC	Threat on social media	Late	Trial pending
Adam Nauveed Hayat	Denver, CO	Possible plan to use explosives	Late	Trial pending
Kori Ali Muhammad	Fresno, CA	Shot and killed 3	No	Trial pending
Clark Calloway	Washington, DC	Plan to shoot police officers	Early	Trial pending
Ali Kourani	New York, NY	Possible plan to use firearms	Early	Trial pending
Aziz Sayyed	Huntsville, AL	Plan to bomb police and military	Early	Trial pending
Casey Charles Spain	Richmond, VA	Plan to use firearm	Early	Pled guilty
Vicente Solano	Miami, FL	Plan to bomb shopping center	Early	Trial pending
Saifullo Saipov	New York, NY	Killed 8, wounded 11 with vehicle	No	Trial pending
Akayed Ullah	New York, NY	Bomb in subway, wounded 3	No	Trial pending

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

None of these 21,060 Syrian refugees has been identified as being involved with violent extremism.

These figures suggest that the federal government's vetting procedures for visa applicants and refugees, which Trump characterized as a "sieve"¹⁶ and "uncontrolled entry,"¹⁷ have been extremely effective at preventing the entry of violent extremists into the United States.

Few Plots with Domestic Targets in 2017

Fourteen Muslim-Americans were arrested for involvement with extremist plots aimed at targets within the United States in 2017 (Figure 3), down from 30 in 2015 and 24 in 2016. Of the five individuals who engaged in violence, two had histories of mental illness: Esteban Santiago, who approached an FBI office two months before his rampage in an airport and told them he was hearing voices that told him to join the "Islamic State"; and Kori Ali Muhammad, who had been hospitalized for auditory hallucinations. (Muhammad's social media posts and self-produced music albums appear to draw on themes from the Moorish Science Temple, a small religious organization founded in the United States in the 1920s, rather than on Sunni Islamic themes.)¹⁸ In another case, Adam Nauveed Hayat, a military veteran, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. He put home-made explosives in a hotel room safe and wrote a note in lipstick on the mirror indicating where the explosives were located, then left the city. The explosives were not set to explode, and Hayat's intentions were not immediately clear.

The rate of mental illness among suspects was slightly higher in 2017 than in previous years. Since 9/11, 7 percent of Muslim-Americans involved in violent extremism were diagnosed with mental illnesses or disabilities

prior to their arrest or death, according to court documents and news reports. Another 2 percent may have suffered mental illness, but did not appear to have been formally diagnosed prior to arrest or death.¹⁹

Dwindling Number of Muslim-American Militants Overseas

The number of Muslim-Americans identified as joining or attempting to join militant groups associated with the "Islamic State" or the Nusra Front, al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria (now called Tahrir al-Sham, or Liberation of Syria), dropped for the second year in a row.

Arrests for attempted travel were the same in 2017 as in 2016 (12 each year), down from 30 in 2015, while Muslim-Americans identified as having joined militants overseas fell from 19 in 2015 to seven in 2016 to four in 2017.²⁰ In fact, there may have been no successful cases of travel at all in the past two years, because the individuals identified in 2016 and 2017 may have joined the militants some time earlier. One of the 2017 cases, known only by the pseudonym "Abunailah Al-Amriki," died in early January 2017 with a Philippine revolutionary group affiliated with the "Islamic State."²¹ Abdella Elfadil Ahmed, was identified by his U.S. passport, which was found on a battlefield in Syria in late 2016 or early 2017.²² Another purported Muslim-American, known by the pseudonym "Abu Salih al-Amriki," appeared in an "Islamic State" video in May 2017.²³ A fourth person, an unnamed dual Saudi-U.S. citizen, was detained by Kurdish forces in Syria in September 2017 and turned over to the United States military in Iraq, where he has been the subject of legal petitions by the American Civil Liberties Union.²⁴ This individual may or may not be Bashir al-Morshid al-Anzi, an "Islamic State" commander who was reportedly born in San Francisco in 1980 while his father was a student in the United States.²⁵

These cases brought the number of Muslim-Americans identified as having joined the “Islamic State,” the Nusra Front, and their affiliates to a total of 78. Of these, 38 are thought to have died, five were detained overseas, and three were prosecuted after returning to the United States. Thirty-two individuals are unaccounted for, including five women. A comprehensive report on Muslim-Americans in the “Islamic State” is due out next month from the Program on Extremism at George Washington University.²⁶

Disconnect Between Threat Assessment and Evidence of Threats

The Trump administration’s National Security Strategy, issued in December 2017, identifies “jihadi terrorists” as “the primary transnational threats Americans face.”²⁷ This assessment was consistent with all of the National Security Strategy documents since 2002. Although the 2017 document labels itself an “America First National Security Strategy,” its approach to counterterrorism is the same as previous administrations’: attack Muslim militants overseas, block Muslim militants from entering the United States, and prevent radicalization among Muslim-Americans.

Trump’s National Security Strategy acknowledges that militants have lost territory in Syria and Iraq, but proposes that the threat has not diminished, because militants may have left the battlefield for their home countries and continue to “use virtual and physical networks around the world to radicalize isolated individuals, exploit vulnerable populations, and inspire and direct plots.” Terrorists “exploit porous borders and threaten U.S. security and public safety. These actors adapt quickly to outpace our defenses.”²⁸ This is the same argument that the Bush administration made when al-Qaida’s central command was driven underground in the years after 9/11, and the

same argument that the Obama administration made after the insurgency in Iraq was driven underground almost a decade ago: despite the reduction of terrorist organizational capabilities, each administration maintained the same security posture as before.²⁹ Both the Bush and Obama administrations emphasized the “evolving” nature of the threat from Muslim extremism, which required ever-greater vigilance and resources.³⁰

In sum, Trump’s counterterrorism strategy is a continuation of Bush’s and Obama’s strategy, not a break with the past, despite Trump’s ridicule of his predecessors.

At the most basic level, the Trump administration’s counterterrorism policy repeats the disconnect between the high priority placed on Muslim extremism as a national security threat to the United States, and the relatively small scale of Muslim extremists actually identified in the United States. For more than 16 years, security officials have warned of waves of plots on the scale of 9/11, or swarms of lone wolves radicalized online. Neither threat materialized on the scale that we were told to expect.

Instead of feeling safe, however, many Americans feel at risk. A Gallup poll in June 2017 found 13 percent of respondents “very worried” that they or someone in their family will become a victim of terrorism.³¹ In the Chapman University Survey of American Fears, 17 percent reported that they were “very afraid” of being the victim of terrorism.³²

This fear is out of proportion to the actual rate of victimization. For each of the last four years, Americans have been more likely to be killed by an extremist for being Muslim (a rate of 1 in 3 million in 2017) than to be killed by a Muslim extremist (a rate of 1 in 19 million in 2017).³³ (Non-Muslim extremists have

generated similar numbers of incidents and fatalities in the United States in recent years as Muslims, according to several studies.)³⁴

Rather than bring anxieties into alignment with the evidence, Trump has encouraged disproportionate concerns. During his presidential campaign, Trump told Fox News that terrorists are “coming into our country, they’re coming in by the thousands. And just watch what happens. I’m a pretty good prognosticator. Just watch what happens over the years, it won’t be pretty.”³⁵ In his first month in the White House, Trump warned that “many very bad and dangerous people may be pouring into our country.”³⁶ These and similar claims have not proven accurate.

Trump’s predecessors never used hyperbole of this sort. But threat assessment with regard to Muslim-American extremism has long been immune to evidence. The national security doctrines of Presidents Bush and Obama helped to justify the fears that characterize the Trump era.

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. A new edition, updated for the age of the “Islamic State,” is scheduled for publication in Fall 2018. He can be contacted through his website, <http://kurzman.unc.edu>.

Acknowledgments:

I thank Matthew Shear for his research assistance, as well as the researchers and reporters who responded to my inquiries and shared their findings about Muslim-American involvement in violent extremism, including Trevor Aaronson, *The Intercept*; Anat Agron, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI); Amarnath Amarasingam, Institute for Strategic Dialogue; Peter Bergen and David Sterman, *New America*; Karen Greenberg, Center on National Security, Fordham University School of Law; Seamus Hughes, George Washington University Program on Extremism; and Verryan Khan, Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC).

Notes:

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, 2016, Table 1, "Crime in the United States by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1997-2016." The estimate for 2017 is extrapolated from preceding years.

² Mass Shooting Tracker, "U.S. Mass Shootings, 2017," <https://massshootingtracker.org>, January 2017. The figure of 267 fatalities includes only attacks causing four or more deaths, and does not include deaths caused by Muslim-American extremists. Mass Shooting Tracker counted 428 attacks with four or more deaths or injuries in 2016; Gun Violence Archive (<http://gunviolencearchive.org>) counted 345 such attacks.

³ Donald J. Trump, Twitter, March 24, 2016, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/713014127061544961>.

⁴ Donald J. Trump, "Understanding The Threat: Radical Islam And The Age Of Terror," August 15, 2016, p. 19, http://assets.donaldjtrump.com/Radical_Islam_Speech.pdf.

⁵ In 2003, Robert S. Mueller III, then-director of the FBI, testified to Congress that several hundred al-Qaida members were thought to be at large in the United States. No more than a dozen were ever identified. Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 13.

⁶ These figures include individuals who provided nonviolent support such as false statements to authorities. A separate list of these individuals is included in the spreadsheet of Muslim-American involvement with violent extremism at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism/annual-report>.

⁷ Joby Warrick, "Jihadist Groups Hail Trump's Travel Ban as a Victory," *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2017.

⁸ James B. Comey, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, September 27, 2016, C-SPAN.org.

⁹ Christopher Wray, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, September 27, 2017, C-SPAN.org.

¹⁰ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2016," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 26, 2017, p. 3.

¹¹ Charles Kurzman, "These Numbers Show Why Trump's Muslim Entry Limit Is Absurd," *Huffington Post*, January 26, 2017; Alex Nowrasteh, "Guide to Trump's Executive Order to Limit Migration for 'National Security' Reasons," Cato Institute, January 26, 2017.

¹² Department of Homeland Security, "Nonimmigrant Admissions 2015 Data Tables," December 2016, <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/nonimmigrant>.

¹³ The number may be as low as nine individuals who immigrated as adults from travel ban countries; precise years of immigration are not known for another 16 individuals.

¹⁴ This figure is consistent with the median length of time in the United States of foreign-born violent extremists reported by the Department of Homeland Security, "Most Foreign-Born, US-Based Violent Extremists Radicalized After Entering Homeland; Opportunities for Tailored CVE Programs Exist," March 1, 2017, p. 5.

¹⁵ Refugee Processing Center (U.S Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration), "Refugee Admissions Report," November 30, 2017, <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals>.

¹⁶ Fox News, February 6, 2017.

¹⁷ Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump in Joint Address to Congress," February 28, 2017, <http://whitehouse.gov>.

¹⁸ Katie Zavadski and M.L. Nestel, "Accused Fresno Mass Shooter Railed Against 'White Devils,'" *Daily Beast*, April 18, 2017.

¹⁹ A government study found 10 of 39 homegrown violent extremists have suffered "mental illness and/or suicidal" ideation. Office of Intelligence and Analysis, Department of Homeland Security, "Overview of Recently Successful or Arrested HVEs' Radicalization to Violence," March 9, 2017, p. 2.

²⁰ Unlike previous years' reports, cases of travel to join militants abroad are assigned to the year in which travel occurred, if known, not the year in which it became public knowledge. For example, Zulfi Hoxha ("Abu Hamza al-Amriki"), a Muslim-American who was identified in early 2018 as having joined the "Islamic State," is listed in 2015, the year he traveled to Syria. Seamus Hughes, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, and Bennett Clifford, "A New American Leader Rises in ISIS," *The Atlantic*, January 13, 2018, <http://theatlantic.com>.

²¹ Anat Agron, "On Facebook, Filipino Fighter Eulogizes Fellow American Fighter in Philippines," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), January 11, 2017.

²² Seamus Hughes, Program on Extremism, George Washington University, January 4, 2017.

²³ “U.S. National ISIS Fighter Vows To Raise ISIS Flag 'Over the White House,' Urges 'Brothers' To Carry Out Operations Using Knives, Guns,” Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), December 27, 2017, <http://www.memri.org>. “Abu Salih al-Amriki” speaks with a Caribbean accent, but may have lived in the United States.

²⁴ ACLU Foundation v. Mattis, updated December 23, 2017, <https://www.aclu.org/cases/aclu-foundation-v-mattis>.

²⁵ Ali al-Ahmed and Mohamed Dhamen, “From American College Campuses to ISIS Camps,” Institute for Gulf Affairs, June 2017, p. 8. It is unclear whether this person counts as “Muslim-American” by this report’s main criterion: Muslims who lived in the United States for more than a year before becoming involved in violent extremism, in keeping with the definition in David Schanzer, Charles Kurzman, and Ebrahim Moosa, “Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans,” Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 6, 2010, p. 53.

²⁶ Program on Extremism, George Washington University, “The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq,” forthcoming in February 2018.

²⁷ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 10.

²⁸ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, pp. 9-11.

²⁹ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, pp. 8-9; *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, pp. 19-22.

³⁰ Charles Kurzman, Ahsan Kamal, and Hajar Yazdiha, “Ideology and Threat Assessment: Law Enforcement Evaluation of Muslim and Right-Wing Extremism,” *Socius* (American Sociological Association), vol. 3, p. 3.

³¹ Gallup, “Trend: Concern About Being Victim of Terrorism,” June 2017, <http://gallup.com>.

³² Chapman University Survey of American Fears, Wave 4, May 2017, <http://www.chapman.edu/fearsurvey>. I thank L. Edward Day and colleagues for sharing their data.

³³ Number and rate of fatalities by extremists:

	Americans killed by an extremist for being Muslim:	Americans killed by a Muslim extremist:
2014	1 (rate of 1 in 3 million) Hassan Alawsi, Sacramento, CA	7 (rate of 1 in 45 million)
2015	5 (rate of 1 in 600,000) Deah Barakat, Chapel Hill, NC Yusor Abu-Salha, Chapel Hill, NC Razan Abu-Salha, Chapel Hill, NC Ahmed Al-Jumaili, Dallas, TX Ziad Abu Naim, Houston, TX	19 (rate of 1 in 16 million)
2016	4 (rate of 1 in 750,000) Khalid Jabara, Tulsa, OK Maulama Akonjee, New York, NY Thara Uddin, New York, NY Nazma Khanam, New York, NY	54 (rate of 1 in 6 million)
2017	1 (rate of 1 in 3 million) Abdul Yafae, New York, NY	17 (rate of 1 in 19 million)

Also in 2017, Srinivas Kuchibhotla of Olathe, Kansas, was killed by an extremist who thought he was Muslim; and Ricky John Best of Happy Valley, Oregon, and Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche of Portland, Oregon, were killed by an extremist while defending a Muslim from assault.

³⁴ United States Government Accountability Office, “Countering Violent Extremism: Actions Needed to Define Strategy and Assess Progress of Federal Efforts,” GAO-17-300, April 2017, p. 6; David Neiwert, Darren Ankrom, Esther Kaplan, and Scott Pham, “Homegrown Terror,” *Reveal* (The Center for Investigative Reporting), June 22, 2017, <https://apps.revealnews.org/homegrown-terror>; Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), Syracuse University, “Domestic Terrorism Prosecutions Outnumber International,” TRAC Reports, September 21, 2017, <http://trac.syr.edu>;

³⁵ Fox News, “Fox and Friends,” Fox News, March 22, 2016.

³⁶ Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 4, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/827996357252243456>.