WESTERN VIEWS TOWARD MUSLIMS: EVIDENCE FROM A 2006 CROSS-NATIONAL SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about Islamic extremism and ongoing debates about the integration and assimilation of Muslims into Western societies continue to attract considerable attention from the media, policymakers, and scholars, but relatively little cross-national research has been done on Western attitudes toward Muslims. This article attempts to address this question by exploring 2006 Pew Global Attitudes data among non-Muslims in Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and the U.S. Using structural equation modeling, we examine the determinants of Western views toward Muslims, and find that threat perceptions are the primary factor influencing these views. Specifically, our analysis suggests that perceptions of security threats drive attitudes regarding Muslims, and that perceived cultural threats are only indirectly related to views towards Muslims.

In recent years, researchers, policymakers, and journalists have devoted increasing attention to relations between the Muslim world and the West, including conflicts in the greater Middle East, such as the war in Iraq, as well as heated controversies within Western nations, such as the 2006 debate over the publication of cartoons portraying the prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper. Public opinion researchers have also begun to explore these issues, comparing the values of Muslim and non-Muslim publics, and examining the extent to which these publics differ over key international issues.

Of course, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 were the catalyst for this renewed interest, and while public opinion surveys have consistently

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demonstrated that few Muslims support Islamic extremism (Pew Global Attitudes, 2006, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2007), the threat posed by Al Qaeda and affiliated groups continues to generate apprehension in the U.S. and Europe, raising concerns about extremist groups abroad and the potential for violence committed by “sleeper cells” at home.

However, despite these heightened concerns, and despite the much higher profile these issues now receive, relatively little work has been done on Western attitudes toward Muslims. In particular, there have been few cross-national efforts exploring the factors that influence these views. This study aims to add to our understanding of this topic by examining public opinion in five countries in which integration and assimilation of Muslim minorities, as well as broader tensions between Western and Muslim nations, have been major issues in recent years—Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and the U.S. We use structural equation modeling to analyze data from the 2006 Pew Global Attitudes survey in these five countries, and we develop a new measure of attitudes toward Muslims, based on character traits people associate with Muslims. In particular, we are interested in exploring five questions.

First, are attitudes toward Muslims driven by threat perceptions? And second, do perceptions of security-related threats and cultural threats have different effects, and which is the stronger predictor of negative views toward Muslims? Over the last few years, several major events, including the September 11 attacks and the Madrid and London bombings, have drawn attention to the threats posed by small groups of violent Islamic extremists in Western societies. Meanwhile, events such as the Danish cartoon controversy and debates in France and elsewhere over the wearing of veils by Muslim women have ignited fierce arguments over the role of Islam in Western societies, multiculturalism, and the assimilation of Muslim minorities. In the model we present below, we distinguish between security and cultural threats, and we compare the effects of each on Western views toward Muslims. A third question we investigate is whether negative views of Muslims are part of a broader set of xenophobic attitudes. Fourth, we examine the extent to which other variables drawn from the literature on views toward outgroups drive attitudes toward Muslims, including religiosity, perceptions of national conditions, socioeconomic status (SES), and other demographic factors. And fifth, we explore the ways in which the drivers of attitudes toward Muslims differ across the five Western nations included in this study. While, in general, the same patterns emerge across these five countries, there are nonetheless several interesting country specific effects. Before turning to an empirical examination of these questions, however, we review some of the relevant literature on tolerance and prejudice from political science, sociology, and social psychology.
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VIEWS TOWARD OUTGROUPS

While there has been relatively little scholarly research on cross-national views of Muslims, there are nonetheless extensive social science literatures that can help shed light on this topic. For over half a century, social scientists have investigated the determinants of political tolerance, as well as ethnic and racial prejudice, and these studies may have implications for the study of Western attitudes toward Muslims. Below we examine relevant work on threat perception, views of minority groups, perceptions of national conditions, and religiosity, as well as the impact of various demographic factors on tolerance and prejudice.

THREAT PERCEPTION

Threat perception has been called “the single most important predictor of intolerance” (Gibson, 2004a). Gibson defines the concept as “perceptions of threat posed by one’s political enemies” (p. 2), and indeed research over several decades has consistently shown that people tend to be less tolerant of groups they consider potentially threatening enemies. For example, Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982) found that, in general, the more people feel threatened by their political enemies, the less likely they are to tolerate and extend basic democratic rights to those enemies.

An emphasis on threat perception runs throughout the vast literature on racial attitudes in the U.S. Key’s 1949 classic, Southern Politics in State and Nation, highlights the centrality of race in the politics of the mid-twentieth century American South, and a recurring theme of Key’s work is that white hostility toward African Americans was especially intense in geographic areas where African Americans comprised a large percentage of the population. In the parts of the South where the African American population was highest, whites felt the greatest sense of threat to their political dominance, and these areas witnessed the most extreme measures of social control to maintain white dominance. Since Key’s study, numerous authors have found support for his claim, and what came to be known as the “power-threat” or the “racial threat” hypothesis has long been considered a central feature of racial politics, both in the American South and elsewhere (Keech, 1968; Lipset & Rabb, 1969; Black & Black, 1973; Giles & Evans, 1986; Giles & Buckner, 1993).

Findings regarding the importance of threat perception are not limited to the U.S. In her study of religious tolerance in Poland, Golebiowska (2004) finds that intolerance of religious minorities is linked to a perception of threats to Poland’s independence. Gibson and Gouws (2001) also show that threat perception is an important determinant of political tolerance in South Africa.
It is certainly possible that threat perception plays an important role in shaping attitudes toward Muslims in Europe and the U.S. Cesari (2004) describes a “Bin Laden Effect” in Western societies after September 11, which has led to discrimination and even violence against Muslims. The “Bin Laden Effect,” according to Cesari, “consists mainly of casting all Muslims within the U.S. and Europe in the role of The Enemy, transforming them into scapegoats for the entire society” (p. 35). In this view, perceived security threats associated with Muslims by many in the majority population are leading to negative reactions against this minority community.

Many scholars have attempted to advance our understanding of threat perception by identifying different types of threats and evaluating their relative impact on public opinion, as well as other dependent variables (Huddy et al., 2002; Davis & Silver, 2004; Gibson, 2004b). For example, in their study of arrest rates for African Americans in the U.S., Eitle and D’Alessio (2002) test three different threat perception hypotheses: the “political threat hypothesis,” the “economic threat hypothesis,” and the “black crime hypothesis,” and ultimately the authors conclude that only the black crime hypothesis can be supported, finding that arrest rates for African Americans are correlated with the amount of black-on-white crime in a given area, but not with the amount of black-on-black crime.

Meanwhile, Stephen et al. (2002) distinguish between symbolic and realistic threats. Symbolic threats “involve perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes” and “jeopardize the worldview of the ingroup,” while realistic threats “refer to threats to the very existence of the ingroup (e.g., through warfare), threats to the political and economic power of the ingroup, and threats to the physical or material well-being of the ingroup” (p. 1243).

Sniderman et al. (2004) find support for something akin to the symbolic threat hypothesis in their study of Dutch public opinion, discovering that perceived threats to Dutch culture lead to negative views of immigrant groups. Similarly, using data from the European Social Survey, Sides and Citrin (2007) find that “symbolic predispositions” such as opposition to cultural pluralism are strongly linked to negative views of immigration.

On the other hand, in their study of xenophobia and attitudes toward outgroups in contemporary Iraq, Inglehart et al. (2006) focus on realistic threats, emphasizing the importance of physical danger. Threats to what they term “existential security” have led to extraordinarily high levels of xenophobia among Iraqi Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. Comparing World Values Survey data from Iraq with results from other countries, these authors first demonstrate a link between economic development and negativity toward outgroups, a finding consistent with previous studies
(Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). However, they also find that “Iraqis are far more xenophobic than their economic level would predict” (p. 502). The extremely negative views of outgroups in Iraq can only be explained by the desperate security environment many Iraqis face and the resulting perceptions of threat to existential security.

Grim and Finke (2007, 2010), in a 143-nation study, also found a feedback effect between government regulation of religion, religion-related violence and negative social attitudes toward religious outgroups. While Grim and Finke did not distinguish between cultural and security threats, they found that government actions to limit religious freedom, often focused on religious outgroups viewed as threats, tend to legitimize government force being used to control those groups and consequently reinforce negative social attitudes toward those religious outgroups.

Intolerant views toward minorities have also been linked to perceived security threats from abroad. McIntosh et al. (1995) found that Romanians who were concerned about the military threat posed by neighboring Hungary were less tolerant of ethnic Hungarians in Romania. Similarly, in Bulgaria, they found that intolerant views toward minority Turks were associated with concerns about the military threat from Turkey. In this article, we distinguish between security threats, which resemble “realistic” or “existential” threats, and cultural threats, which are similar to “symbolic” threats; and we test hypotheses for both types of perceived threats.

Our main proposition and first hypothesis suggests that negative views toward Muslims are associated with perceptions about Islamic extremism. Given the high level of concern about terrorism in the five countries we analyze, and the fact that in recent years several have experienced attacks from extremist groups, we believe that security threats should be the dominant driver of negative views regarding Muslims.

\[ H_1: \] The perception that Islamic extremism poses a threat to security leads to negative views toward Muslims.

We will also pay particular attention to ways in which the impact of perceived security threats varies across countries. For example, the impact of security threats may be stronger in the three nations that experienced major terrorist attacks by extremist groups in the years prior to the survey (Britain, Spain, and the United States) than in the two that did not (France and Germany).

The second hypothesis emphasizes the role of cultural threats, which we hypothesize also increases negative attitudes, albeit less powerfully than security threats.

\[ H_2: \] The perception that Muslims pose a threat to a society’s dominant culture leads to negative views toward Muslims.
GENERAL ETHNOCENTRISM

While threat perception emphasizes the fears individuals have regarding the perceived threat posed by a specific group of people, attitudes toward Muslims may fit into a broader set of ethnocentric beliefs. In their recent study of American views toward Muslims, Kalkan et al. (2007) find that “the best predictor of how individuals feel about Muslims is how they feel about other minority groups” (p. 855), including ethnic, racial, and religious minorities such as Jews, blacks, Asian Americans, and Hispanics, as well as “cultural minorities” such as lesbians, illegal immigrants, feminists, and welfare recipients. As Kalkan et al. note, other researchers have also discovered links between various forms of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Stouffer, 1955), suggesting that “prejudice against one minority group is part of a tendency to denigrate outgroups more generally” (p. 848).

Looking at European public opinion, Kohut and Wike (2008) note that negative attitudes toward both Jews and Muslims have become more common in recent years. And the European countries with the highest level of negative views toward Jews tend to also assign the most negative ratings to Muslims. Moreover, negative attitudes toward both Jews and Muslims are especially common among the same groups in Europe: older people, the less educated, and those on the political right. These findings suggest that, while there may be specific factors driving attitudes towards Jews and Muslims, these attitudes may also fit under a broader set of ethnocentric perspectives.

Based on these arguments about common attitudes toward different minority groups, we advance the following hypothesis.

\[ H_3: \] Negative views toward Jews will be correlated with negative views toward Muslims.

OTHER HYPOTHESES RELATED TO TOLERANCE AND PREJUDICE

While the main propositions we test concern the impact of perceived security threats, perceived cultural threats, and general xenophobic attitudes, we also investigate several other factors that scholars have suggested to affect attitudes toward minority groups, including religiosity, perceptions of national conditions, and demographic variables.

RELIGIOSITY

Several studies have found a link between religiosity and intolerance, including one of the seminal works on political tolerance, Stouffer’s 1955 *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties*. Stouffer found that those with strong religious attachments were less likely to extend civil liberties to communists, socialists,
and atheists. In an update to Stouffer’s work, Nunn, Crockett, and Williams (1978) found that intolerance had declined in the two decades following the publication of *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties*, however the relationship between religiosity and intolerance remained.

Similarly, Beatty and Walter (1984) discovered that people who attend church regularly are less likely to be tolerant than are those who do not. Over time, other studies have also found support for the link between religiosity and a lack of tolerance in the U.S. (Wilcox & Jalen, 1990; Wald, 1997). Outside of the United States, Golebiowska (2004) finds that Poles with low religiosity are more likely to have contact with religious minorities and more likely to accept a member of their family marrying a religious minority.

\[ H_4: \] Higher levels of religiosity will lead to more negative views toward Muslims.

**NATIONAL CONDITIONS**

In debates over topics such as immigration in Western Europe and the U.S., it is often assumed that overall national conditions have an impact on public opinion toward minority groups, and public opinion studies have also noted such a relationship. For example, Citrin *et al.* (1997) found that negative assessments of the national economy were linked to support for more restrictive immigration policies in the United States. In their analysis of European politics in the 1970s and 1980s, Jackman and Volpert (1996) showed that higher national rates of unemployment created more favorable electoral environments for extreme right wing political parties. In this article, we examine whether there is a relationship between perceptions of a country’s general direction and attitudes toward Muslims.

\[ H_5: \] Dissatisfaction with national conditions will lead to more negative views toward Muslims.

**DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS**

Numerous studies have identified relationships between demographic variables and measures of tolerance. For instance, regarding age, Keeter and Kohut (2003) found that younger Americans tend to have more favorable views of Muslims, while Weil (1985) showed that they also tend to be less anti-Semitic. Similarly, studies of political tolerance have generally found older people to be more intolerant (Stouffer, 1955; Bobo & Licari, 1989), although as Wilson (1994) notes, this is not because people become more tolerant as they age; rather this pattern emerges because over the last several decades age cohorts have become progressively more accepting of other groups.

\[ H_6: \] Age will be positively correlated with more negative views toward Muslims.
Many scholars have linked higher socioeconomic status (SES) to greater tolerance and less prejudice. Inglehart and Welzel (2005), for example, have written that economically advanced postindustrial societies tend to be more accepting of minority groups, such as homosexuals. In the United States, positive opinions of Muslims (Keeter & Kohut, 2003) and Jews (Weil, 1985) have been found to be correlated with education. These findings are consistent with other research, which has continually demonstrated that individuals with more education tend to be more tolerant (Stouffer, 1955; Bobo & Licari, 1989; Gibson & Duch, 1992; Moore & Ovadia, 2006). Financial well-being has also been linked to tolerance. In their study of anti-Semitism in Russia, Gibson and Duch show that negative personal economic assessments are associated with anti-Semitic views. Meanwhile, Moore and Ovadia (2006) find that in the U.S., persons with higher incomes tend to be more tolerant.

**H7:** Lower socioeconomic status will lead to more negative views toward Muslims.

Finally, the impact of gender is less clear. For instance, Golebiowska’s work (1999, 2004) suggests that women are less tolerant of political outgroups, but that gender has no effect on religious tolerance.

**THEORETICAL MODEL**

Figure 1 summarizes the hypotheses to be tested using structural equation modeling. Our main proposition is that threats to security associated with Muslims constitute the most important predictor of negative attitudes toward Muslims. We also propose that perceptions of cultural conflicts and negative general attitudes toward minority groups are important predictors. The model also allows us to test the impact of religiosity, various demographic factors, and assessments of national conditions.

**DATA AND METHODS**

To explore perceptions of Muslims in Western nations, we use data from the 2006 Pew Global Attitudes survey, which included a battery of questions designed to measure how people from different cultural and religious backgrounds view one another, especially how people in predominantly Muslim and non-Muslim countries see each other. This poll asked non-Muslims in eight countries whether they associate a series of positive and negative characteristics with Muslims, and it asked Muslims in 11 countries the same set of questions about Westerners. The results reveal a disturbingly high level of distrust between Muslim and non-Muslim publics.

In our analysis, we focus solely on the attitudes of non-Muslims in the five Western nations included in the 2006 Pew Global Attitudes survey: Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and the U.S. Surveys were conducted with
nationally representative samples in each country from April to May 2006. In Spain, interviews were administered face-to-face, while telephone surveys were conducted in the other four countries. The response rates in Western Europe (RR1 according to AAPOR, 2009) were 5 percent in Britain, 18 percent in France, 33 percent in Germany, and 21 percent in Spain. In the United States the response rate was 25 percent, according to AAPOR RR3 (RR3 according to AAPOR, 2009).1

The integration of Muslim minorities and broader relations with the Muslim world have been major issues in all five of these nations in recent years, and thus they are especially appropriate for this study.

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1See the Discussion and Conclusion section for a discussion of response rates. For details on the 2006 Pew Global Attitudes survey, please see “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other,” June 22, 2006 at http://www.pewglobal.org. And please contact the authors for additional details.
DEPENDENT VARIABLE

We model the dependent variable as a latent factor built from the survey’s battery of questions regarding negative and positive characteristics. For each characteristic, non-Muslim respondents were asked whether they associate the characteristic with Muslims, including four negative terms (arrogant, greedy, immoral, and selfish) and two positive terms (generous and honest). For the negative terms, responses were coded a “1” if a respondent associated that term with Muslims and a “0” otherwise. For positive terms, responses were coded “1” if a respondent did not associate that term with Muslims and a “0” the respondent did describe Muslims in this way. Factor analysis reveals that these six characteristics all relate to a common factor, in this case, of negativity toward Muslims, as Figure 2 illustrates. We therefore call our dependent variable Negative views toward Muslims.

Figure 2 Characteristics associated with Muslims

Note: N = 3,055 (all paths shown are significant; statistically insignificant paths dropped). The five-country model fits the data well, as indicated by an RMSEA of 0.010. Usually, models at or below 0.050 are not rejected. An RMSEA of 0.010 can be interpreted to mean that this model is 99.1 percent away from the worst-fitting model. While this is not a “perfect” fit, it is well within the range of acceptability (Maruyama, 1997).

For a previous version of this measure, see Wike and Grim (2007a).
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Below we detail the independent variables in our analysis that operationalize our key concepts of security threats, cultural threats, and the cultural minority thesis, as well as other measures in our model, including religiosity, perceptions of national conditions, and demographics.

Security threats. Three questions measure perceived threats to security. These three measures are modeled as a single latent variable. The first asks about perceptions of extremism in a respondent’s country:

National extremism:

How concerned, if at all, are you about the rise of Islamic extremism in our country these days? Are you very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned or not at all concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism in our country these days?

The second deals with concerns about extremism in the world:

International extremism:

How concerned, if at all, are you about the rise of Islamic extremism around the WORLD these days? Are you very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned or not at all concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism around the world these days?

The third specifically addresses perceptions of support among Muslims for Al Qaeda and other extremists groups.

Support for Al Qaeda:

In your opinion, how many Muslims in our country support Islamic extremists like al Qaeda – would you say most, many, just some or very few?

Cultural threats. Two sets of questions measure perceptions of symbolic and cultural threats related to integration and assimilation. The first set, which includes four questions, measures perceptions of Muslim identity and the willingness of Muslims to adapt to the national culture. In our model, these four measures are combined into a single latent variable.

Cultural non-integration:

Muslims don’t adapt:

Do you think most Muslims coming to our country today want to adopt (survey country) customs and way of life or do you think that they want to be distinct from the larger (survey country) society?

3 All threat perception variables are recoded so that higher levels of threat perception receive higher values.
Strong Muslim ID:

In your opinion, how strong a sense of Islamic identity do Muslims in our country have—very strong, fairly strong, not too strong, or not strong at all?

In your opinion, these days do you think there is a growing sense of Islamic identity among Muslims in our country or don’t you think so?

Muslim ID is bad (asked only among those who believe Islamic identity is growing in their country):

Do you think this is a good thing or a bad thing for our country?

In our analysis, these last two questions are collapsed into a dichotomous variable, which takes the value of 1 for those who believe identity is growing and bad, and 0 for all other respondents.

Culture conflict:

The second set of questions includes two measures that are modeled as a single latent variable. These questions examine beliefs about Islam’s compatibility with modernity and democracy, with the assumption being that individuals who believe it is incompatible with these features of Western societies will hold more negative views toward Muslims.

With modernity:

Do you think there is a natural conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society, or don’t you think so?

With democracy:

Now on a different subject, some people feel that democracy is a Western way of doing things that would not work in most Muslim countries—others think that democracy is not just for the West and can work well in most Muslim countries. Which comes closer to your opinion?

Ethnocentrism. One independent variable, a favorability rating for Jews, operationalizes the idea that views toward Muslims may fit into a broader pattern of views about minority groups.4

Favorability to Jews:

Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of Jews.

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4This variable is recoded so that very unfavorable=1, somewhat unfavorable=2, somewhat favorable=3, and very favorable=4.
Religiosity. We include three measures of religiosity, which we combine into a single latent variable. The first asks about the overall importance of religion in a respondent’s life:

Importance of religion:

How important is religion in your life – very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important?\(^5\)

The next asks about religious affiliation:

Religious affiliation:

Do you consider yourself as belonging to a particular religion? IF YES, which one?\(^6\)

The third question explores the strength of religious identity by asking respondents whether they primarily identify with their religion or their nationality. Self-identified Christians were asked:

Strong religious ID:

Do you think of yourself first as [nationality] or first as a Christian?\(^7\)

Demographic and other variables. We also include four demographic variables: age, education, income, and gender. And finally, we include a measure of whether respondents are satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in their country.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

We use structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the determinants of views toward Muslims. This approach is especially appropriate for this study in that it allows for a theory-driven model to be developed and tested, and for various statistical goodness of fit tests and other ways of testing the model to increase the level of confidence in the findings. We are particularly interested in testing how each of the independent variables relate to not only negativity toward Muslims, but also to each other. For example, does SES directly affect the level of negativity, or might it also affect respondents’ views on whether Muslims integrate into society? In our model, we tested all possible inter-relationships between the independent variables in order to identify all significant relationships among the predictors of Negative views toward Muslims. This permits the final model not only to show which variables

\(^5\) This variable is recoded so that not at all important=1, not too important=2, somewhat important=3, and very important=4.

\(^6\) This variable is recoded so that self identified Christians=1, all others=0.

\(^7\) This variable is recoded so that who primarily identify as Christians=1, all others=0.
significantly predict the dependent variable, but also to show the significant direct and indirect relationships each independent variable has with other independent variables in the model.

Figure 3 presents results for the five country model. We also ran separate models for each of the five countries, and after presenting these overall findings, we will briefly note differences between the countries, which while interesting, are relatively minor (see Table 1). Given the consistency of patterns across the five countries, combining the data into a single model is clearly appropriate for this analysis.

The five-country model fits the data well, as indicated by a root mean square of the error (RMSEA) of .039. Usually, models at or below .050 are not rejected. An RMSEA of .039 can be interpreted to mean that this model is 96.1 percent away from the worst-fitting model. While this is not a “perfect” fit, it is well within the range of acceptability (Maruyama, 1997). All paths shown are significant at $p < .05$, two-tailed (or less); exogenous variables and error terms (not shown) are allowed to correlate if covariation is significant. The six items that make up the latent dependent variable (Negative views toward Muslims), when separately analyzed, function reliably as a scale in these five countries (Cronbach’s alpha = .740; $N = 3,055$)
fit, it is well within the range of acceptability (Maruyama, 1997). Moreover, the model explains a considerable amount of variance, as demonstrated by an $R^2$ of .60.

Figure 3 illustrates the key predictors of Negative views toward Muslims. The impact of Security Threats is both direct and strong (.76, where 1.00 indicates a one-to-one relationship). Higher religiosity also has a direct, although weaker, effect (.09). The other variables in the model do not have significant direct effects on views of Muslims. However, this does not mean these variables are completed unrelated. Indeed, several have significant indirect effects.

As the figure illustrates, several variables directly impact Security Threats, thereby indirectly affecting views towards Muslims. For instance, both latent variables measuring cultural threat perceptions have significant indirect effects on the dependent variable. Cultural Conflict is related to both Security Threats and Cultural Non-Integration. Those who believe Islam is incompatible with modernity and/or democracy are more likely to have concerns about Islamic extremism, and are more likely to voice concerns about Muslim identity and assimilation. Cultural Non-Integration, in turn, has a direct and strong affect on security concerns.

We also find modest support for the idea that attitudes toward Muslims are driven by more general negative views about minorities. Those who have positive opinions of Jews are less likely to feel threatened by Islamic extremism, and are therefore also less likely to have negative views of Muslims. Interestingly, religiosity has the same effect on attitudes toward Jews as on

### Table 1: Standardized total significant effects on negativity toward Muslims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Relationships to Negative Views toward Muslims</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Britain</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main hypotheses tested</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1: Security Threats</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Cultural Non-Integration</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Culture Conflict</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Low General Ethnocentrism (Favorable to Jews)</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other possible determinants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: Religiosity</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: Low Overall Satisfaction</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7: Socio-Economic Status</td>
<td>-.35</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (female)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All relationships statistically significant at $p < .05$, two-tailed. No coefficient indicates a non-significant relationship. Total effects reflect compounding indirect effects and may thus be greater than the direct effects shown on path models.
attitudes toward Muslims—in both cases, high levels of religiosity are associated with negative evaluations.

Consistent with previous studies, we find that higher SES is linked to more tolerant views. In our model, high SES is associated with fewer concerns about Islamic extremism and a lower likelihood of seeing a conflict between Islam and either modernity or democracy.

The effects of age, sex, and satisfaction with national conditions are limited, and for ease of presentation, they are omitted from Figure 3. Satisfaction with national conditions is modestly associated with security threats, cultural non-integration, and religiosity, while age and sex are significantly related to SES and religiosity (see Table 1 for the total impact of these variables).

Table 1 shows the total impact—combining both direct and indirect effects—of each independent variable. Again, the strong impact of security-related threat perceptions is clear. Worries about the threat posed by Islamic extremism are by far the strongest driver of negative attitudes across the five countries studied (.76). However, the total impact of perceived cultural threats is also substantial. The belief that Muslims have difficulty integrating into Western society (.38) and the belief that Islamic culture is at odds with modernity and democracy (.37) are both strongly—if indirectly—associated with more negative views toward Muslims. SES also has significant total effects.

Other variables have more modest total effects. As predicted, religiosity, dissatisfaction with the country’s direction, and age are all positively associated with negative views toward Muslims. Women are also slightly more likely to hold negative views. And overall, people who have a positive opinion of Jews are less likely to hold negative views of Muslims, although this variable is only significant in two countries, Germany and France.

Indeed, as Table 1 highlights, while the model performs well across countries, there are also interesting differences among countries. Security concerns, worries about integration, and SES are significant in each of the five countries. The Culture Conflict variable, however, is not significant in the U.S. or Britain—in these countries, beliefs about the compatibility of Islam with democracy or modernity are not related to opinions of Muslims. Religiosity is also only significant in three of the five countries.

Security threats is the strongest predictor in every country, and it has an especially large impact in Britain. The effect of this variable is slightly weaker in France, where it is just slightly stronger than Cultural Non-Integration.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

What factors influence Western attitudes toward Muslims? Our findings suggest a number of conclusions. First, our findings reinforce what much of the
long running literature on tolerance and prejudice suggests: threat perception is a major, and perhaps the single most important predictor of ingroup attitudes toward outgroups. People who feel threatened by Muslims are more likely to associate negative characteristics with them.

Second, we find that security threats and cultural threats have different effects on these views. Consistently, across all five countries, the perception of security-related threats is the strongest predictor of negative views regarding Muslims. Moreover, we find that perceived threats related to security are strongly and directly related to attitudes toward Muslims, while cultural threats concerning integration and the compatibility of Islam with life in the West are indirectly related. Concerns about cultural threats feed concerns about security, which in turn lead to negative attitudes. In this way, our analysis suggests that security concerns are the true drivers of negative views toward Muslims, or using terms other researchers have employed, “realistic” (Stephen et al., 2002) or “existential” (Inglehart et al., 2006) threats are the most significant determinant of Western public opinion regarding Muslims.

Third, our analysis also suggests modest support for the hypothesis that negative views about Muslims are part of a larger structure of negative attitudes towards outgroups generally. Our finding that attitudes towards Muslims and Jews are linked suggests that to fully understand how Westerners think about Muslims, researchers must consider both perceptions individuals have related specifically to Muslims and individuals’ general orientations toward other groups.

Fourth, our findings regarding SES and religiosity are generally consistent with many previous studies of tolerance and prejudice. Higher SES is associated with positive views of Muslims, although again this relationship is generally indirect. Individuals with more education and higher incomes are less likely to say Islamic extremism threatens their country or that a large number of Muslims support extremist groups; and in turn, they are less likely to hold negative opinions of Muslims. The negative association between SES and security concerns suggests that greater education and awareness in Western societies about the views of Muslims—who overwhelmingly do not support extremism—could potentially lead to fewer worries about internal security in Western societies, thereby leading to fewer negative views about Muslims.

Our findings regarding religiosity are also consistent with previous research suggesting a link between religiosity and negative views of outgroups, particularly, in this case, a religious outgroup. Controlling for other factors, non-Muslims who say religion is important in their life and who have a strong religious identity tend to have more negative views of Muslims. It should be noted, however, that the impact of religiosity is relatively minor, and in two of the five countries—Germany and Spain—it is not significant.
Finally, our structural equation modeling suggests that the factors driving views towards Muslims are generally similar across Western countries. For instance, as noted above, security threats are the strongest predictor in all five countries. At the same time, however, there are a few interesting differences among the countries, most notably in France, where the predictive power of the security threats variable is much weaker than in the other four countries. France is also the country with the least negative views toward Muslims, and perhaps importantly, it is also one of the two countries among the five that has not experienced a major terrorist attack in recent years. On the other hand, the effects of security-related perceptions are especially strong in Britain, which experienced terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists in 2005 and has subsequently uncovered major plots by terrorist organizations. It is also worth noting, however, that the impact of perceived security threats is also quite strong in Germany, the other nation among the five that has not experienced a recent attack on its soil. Thus, the evidence is mixed on whether the experience of having a terrorist attack in a country changes the relationship between perceived security threats and attitudes toward Muslims.

Our analysis presents no direct evidence about the influence of events on Western attitudes toward Muslims, but it seems reasonably clear that headlines from the last few years have influenced how non-Muslims in the West think about Islam and its followers. The September 11 attacks, the London and Madrid bombings, the Danish cartoon controversy, debates over the veil, disputes about the integration and assimilation of Muslim immigrants in major European cities, and many other familiar stories have surely affected threat perceptions, both security-related and cultural. So, in many ways, Western attitudes towards Muslims are a function of the current unique political and cultural environment, but at the same time, as our analysis shows, these perceptions have a lot in common with how other groups, in a various contexts, have perceived outsiders of one variety or another. As social scientists have repeatedly discovered, perceived dangers often lead to prejudice and bias.

In this case, fear of Islamic extremism is the primary driver of negative views regarding Muslims. It is worth noting that these views are not primarily driven by a clash of cultures. While many Westerners do have concerns about Islamic identity and assimilation, and significant numbers think Islam is incompatible with democracy and modernity, these are not the chief sources of negativity. It is not so much a perception that Islam is incompatible with Western society that leads to negativity, as it is the perception that extremism exists within the community of Muslims. Of course, extremist groups do exist, in predominantly Muslim countries as well as in the West, but as researchers—or for that matter, politicians and community leaders—continue to address the often difficult issues surrounding relations between Muslims
and non-Muslims, it is worth keeping in mind that, as we note above, research has continually shown that in most Muslim communities only small minorities actually hold extremist views.

Although our model is robust and the findings relatively consistent across the five nations analyzed, there are nonetheless limitations to our study that future research should consider and address. One limitation of this study is increasingly familiar to public opinion researchers: low response rates. As Groves and Peytcheva (2008, p. 167) suggest, “falling response rates in sample surveys throughout the richer countries of the world” are posing serious challenges for the survey profession. Fortunately, as Keeter and his colleagues (2000, 2006) have found, evidence suggests that the low response rates witnessed in recent years have not translated into nonresponse bias. Still, nonresponse will continue to be a concern for survey researchers, and future studies on this and other public opinion topics in Western societies should strive to achieve higher response rates and to examine the potential for nonresponse bias.

Also, future efforts should further explore the extent to which negative attitudes toward Muslims are reflective of broader xenophobic sentiments. In this study, we found that negative attitudes toward Jews were associated with negative attitudes toward Muslims, but additional studies should explore the question with more comprehensive measures of attitudes toward outgroups. And of course, future analyses should examine the extent to which our findings not only explain Western attitudes toward Muslims, but also the attitudes of publics around the world toward outgroups more generally. Given the extent to which our findings are consistent with many previous studies, we believe our general model may have broad applications.

REFERENCES


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

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