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Mariam F. Alkazemi

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Abstract

Understandably, the perception of Muslims in America was negative after September 11, 2001. Immediately after the terrorist attacks, scholars sought to understand the impact of the media coverage on perceptions of Muslim Americans. Nisbet and Shanahan (2004) found that less than a third of Americans felt that Islamic values were similar to Christian values. This study analyzes 271 articles from American newspapers and news wires covering the television show All-American Muslim, which was canceled after one season on The Learning Channel (TLC) (Goldberg, 2012).

Social Construction of Reality Television: An Analysis of Print Journalism Coverage of *All-American Muslim*

By Mariam F. Alkazemi | alkazemi@ufl.edu

Understandably, the perception of Muslims in America was negative after September 11, 2001. Immediately after the terrorist attacks, scholars sought to understand the impact of the media coverage on perceptions of Muslim Americans. Nisbet and Shanahan (2004) found that less than a third of Americans felt that Islamic values were similar to Christian values. Almost half of Americans believed that Islam encourages more violence than other religions, and 44 percent agreed that some restriction of the civil liberties of Muslim Americans was necessary. Those who supported restricted civil liberties for Muslim Americans reported fear of another terrorist attack in the United States, were more likely to self-identify as being religious, and paid greater attention to television news. These trends, published in 2004, may have been a natural reaction of the American public to attacks carried out by terrorists who claimed to be followers of Islam.

However, such negative perceptions of Muslim Americans still prevailed by 2011. A decade after 9/11 the Pew Center for Research (2011) found that while 21 percent of Muslim Americans believe there is substantial support for extremism in the Muslim American community, 40 percent of the general American public believe that Muslim Americans support extremism.

In a survey of 1,033 Muslim Americans, 28 percent say they have been approached with suspicion, 22 percent report being called offensive names, 21 percent say they have been targeted by airport security, and 13 percent say they are targeted by law enforcement officials. More than half of the Muslim Americans surveyed report being targeted in government efforts to prevent terrorism. Therefore, negative perceptions of Muslim Americans result in their feeling targeted by the broad American public and American law enforcement agencies—although they too are Americans.

More than half of the surveyed Muslim Americans expressed a desire to assimilate into American society and adopt an American lifestyle, but 49 percent self-identify first as Muslims while 26 percent self-identify first as Americans. Actually, Muslim Americans seem to have accepted many aspects of American life. The majority of those surveyed believe there is no difference between men and women political leaders, and 90 percent say that women should be able to work outside the home. However, the problem most frequently reported by Muslim Americans is the general public's stereotypes of Muslims.

This study analyzes 271 articles from American newspapers and news wires covering the television show All-American Muslim, which was canceled after one season on The Learning Channel (TLC) (Goldberg, 2012). Some companies pulled their advertising from the show after the conservative Florida Family Association (FFA) complained that the show represents Muslims in a deceptively positive light. The social construct of reality theoretical framework is used to examine how coverage of the controversy impacted portrayals of Muslim Americans. Such an examination contributes to the current understanding of media portrayals of Muslims, and the general American public's opinion of Muslim Americans.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Social Construction and the Reality of Muslims

Rodgers, Kenix and Thorson (2007) explained the social construction of reality as a process in which social and political issues carry meaning through media images. They argue that visual images can be instrumental in creation of meaning because of the subtlety of how the information is presented. They considered the emotions captured in photographs to find associations between gender, age, and ethnicity and stereotypes of emotions propagated by the media. Overall, they argue that some portrayals of the emotions of minorities reinforce inaccurate stereotypes.

Interestingly, media images generated by the Indian cinema set forth positive images of the Hindu nationalist movement (Murty, 2009). Themes of "nationalism, masculinity and religion intersected during this particular historical conjuncture in the Indian subcontinent to form hegemonic patterns that represented and reinforced Hindu nationalism" (p. 267). In the six films that he analyzed, Murty argues that "the narratives of the films demand the suppression of religious identities in favor of a national identity" (p. 279). Islam "is no longer a faith, a way of life, a simple belief in a god; it is a dogmatic monolith, and demands power" (p. 279). Negative portrayals of Muslims as "violent, aggressive, and a threat to the nation, to simplify complex political and social situations and present an easy resolution" (p. 280) contrast with Hindu nationalism which shows the direction to be followed.

Negative media portrayals of Muslims do not affect only non-Muslim populations; negative media portrayals also impact Muslims. Focus groups with Muslim Australians conducted by Green and Aly (2011) reveal that Muslim Australians were afraid because of "constructions of the media discourse on terrorism in which they perceived themselves to be the objects of fear" (p. 67). At the same time, such media portrayals of Muslims made the general Australian public fear the religious conviction of Muslims and afraid that international terrorism might impact life in Australia. Meanwhile, Muslim Australians experienced fear of physical harm, worried about losing civil liberties, and in general felt insecure. Thus, negative media portrayals of Muslims impact the whole society.

Globally, efforts have been made by Muslims to create positive media images. Al-Jazeera was launched as a global news network by the emir of Qatar in 1995 (Cherribi, 2006). According Cherribi, "before Al-Jazeera was on the scene, BBC world radio in Arabic was the most trusted source of information in an Arab world dominated by official state media" (p. 123). When France passed a law outlawing the hijab, the full face covering worn by some Muslim women, in public schools, Al-Jazeera framed the newly passed law as "a problem for Muslim women and men around the world" (p. 124). Cherribi argues that Al-Jazeera advocated Islamic values because their "viewers are exposed to many opportunities to see ads encouraging women to buy and wear the veil"(125). He counted 282 programs focusing on the veil—including one that was "as if CNN had an extremely popular Christian minister each week in a one-hour program live during prime time" (p. 132).

Another way that Muslims have attempted to construct social reality is through Arab reality television shows. Kraidy (2008) argues that because "reality TV's protagonists are not media professionals," there is a sense of unpredictability that "claims to represent reality" (p. 52). By depicting individuals from "separate nations, ethnic groups and classes, but also the socio-cultural hybrids in which the traditional and modern are mixed," reality television manifests

modernity in the Arab world where Islam is the dominant religion. Such media portrayals have been criticized by Islamists in Saudi Arabia, who claim reality shows are "fostering interaction between unmarried men and women" and thus refer to the show *Star Academy* as Satan Academy. Though some shows emerged that were similar to *Cops* in the United States and *UK Idol* in the United Kingdom, Kraidy (2008) points to other shows that "reaffirm cultural norms but with a twist," such as *Millions Poet*, which is broadcast on Abu Dhabi TV. Clearly, reality television plays an important part in the construction of social and political realities.

In the United States, *The Real World* brings "charged confrontation between people of different races to the forefront of the audience's attention (Park, 2009, p. 154). Park explains that the program gives the cast "an unusual opportunity to speak for themselves and voice their critical opinions about race" (p. 155). Racial minorities are given an opportunity to share their experiences, thus contributing to the construction of social realities that may be difficult to find in more homogeneous regions of the U.S. The strategic function of reality television contributed to the creation of the television series All-American Muslim, in which Muslim-Americans were able to share their narrative with the general American public a decade after the 9/11 (Rose, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW: Portrayal of Muslims in the Media

While negative opinions of Muslims might have been expected to increase after 9/11, Trevino, Kanso, and Nelson (2010) found that American editorial writers were more careful in their descriptions of Muslims after the terrorist attack. They analyzed the portrayals of Muslims in editorials published in The Washington Post, The New York Times, and Los Angeles Times between September 2000 and September 2002. Their findings suggest that most news coverage of Muslims was negative before and after September 11, 2001.

In fact, the authors found that most references described Muslims with words formed from the nouns terror, extremism, fundamentalism, kidnapping, assassination, murder, "killers, beheading, militant, jihad and guerilla" (p.13). Interestingly, the researchers found that neutral references to Muslims increased after 9/11, and negative references to Muslims decreased. They argue that although columnists and writers of editorials are expected to have a point of view, their research suggests "evidence of an effort since the 9/11 attacks to be more fair-minded and measured in the gathering and presentation of news and opinion" (p. 14).

Ibrahim (2008) has argued that Muslims are presented as either friendly or hostile, depending on their nationality. Her qualitative research examined the frames used on television news from September 11 - 25, 2001 in the portrayals of various countries with a majority of Muslims. Three were American allies: Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Ibrahim compared their portrayals to four countries with which the U.S. has a more hostile relationship: Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya. Her findings suggest that network anchors made an effort to identify American allies as "friends of the United States, not as countries who were implicated in the attacks despite the fact that the hijackers included Saudis and Egyptians" (p. 293). While "the networks chose to marginalize Arab opinion and decontextualize the anger in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt," representatives of countries that criticize American foreign policy were "marginalized and framed as irrational by network reporters" (p. 294). Therefore, Ibrahim's research suggests that the dichotomy presented to the general American public is that there are friendly Muslims and hostile Muslims.

The idea that some Muslims are portrayed positively while others are portrayed negatively is interesting. All-American Muslim is a reality television show that lets Muslim Americans from Michigan present their lives to the general American public. Media coverage of the television show could have supported American Muslims or not. Because of the controversy around the show contributed to increasing the viewership (Goldberg, 2012), the tone of the print coverage is worth investigating.

RQ1: How does the article portray All-American Muslims?

The tone in which print news coverage depicts the reality television show is important to understand the media messages with regard to the show. Ibrahim (2008) found that many Arabs from predominantly Muslim countries are articulate enough in English to communicate to western audiences. According to Ibrahim, television news coverage in the two weeks after the 9/11 attacks marked "a major shift from earlier years, when reporters would find it difficult to find an Arab who was highly articulate and appealed to a western audience" (p. 294). Noteworthy is Ibrahim's conclusion that "there are more Arab experts quoted on TV than there were twenty years before the September 11 attacks" (p. 294), and her description of such experts as "articulate and know[ing] how to make their messages and viewpoints relate to Americans" (p. 294).

The language barrier is a problem, but has been decreasing since 9/11. More English-speaking experts translates into more potential sources for American journalists. Moreover, advocacy for Muslim Americans today is more prominent since two U.S. Congressmen are Muslim (Newton-Small, 2010).

RQ2: How does print newspaper coverage of All-American Muslim portray advocacy for and against the television show or Muslim Americans?

Since the program was broadcast on TLC to increase the awareness of issues facing Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 world, it is useful to examine the proportion of articles advocating for or against Muslim Americans. This is particularly interesting because the show clearly illustrates that there are many Muslim Americans who can articulate the cohesion of their American and Islamic values.

The emergence of eloquent Muslim representatives in the English-language news makes sense, considering that most Muslims immigrated to the United States in the 1990s while the emergence of a Muslim identity in Great Britain occurred in the late 1980s. (Pew, 2011; Meer, Dwyer, & Modood, 2010). Meer, Dwyer, and Modood examined 497 news items published in the British press after a British politician wrote in a column in the Lancashire Telegraph that he requires Muslim women to unveil their faces when meeting with him. The analyzed data included letters to the editors, and the authors concluded that Muslims in Britain are only recently portrayed in the media as not marginalized, though they have not yet reached mainstream status.

Letters to the editor can be used by Muslims to influence the way media portray them. Atkin and Richardson (2007) say that though arguing is a necessary part of conflict resolution, some letters to the editor in British media use "unreasonable argumentation" (p.13). Their findings show that "unreasonable argumentation about Islam and Muslims can, at best, hamper our

judgment and impede understanding; or, at worst, actualize and reinforce racial or ethnicist inequalities" (p. 22). Letters to the editors may help perpetuate positive media portrayals of Muslims, but they may also perpetuate negative media portrayals of Muslims. It depends on the content.

An example of negative media portrayals of Muslims is the association of Muslims with terrorism. All-American Muslim depicted the reaction of Muslim Americans to 9/11 and its aftermath.

RQ3: How is terrorism portrayed in print coverage of the reality show, All-American Muslim?

An analysis of the appearance of terrorism in print media coverage of the television show reveals its success at challenging the association of Muslims with terrorism domestically. Such prejudices are not limited to religious minorities. In the U.S. some regional differences have been found in attitudes towards gender (Armstrong and Gao, 2010). Since the show is based in Dearborn, Michigan, home to a very large Muslim community, one may assume that the local press would be more vocal about issues facing Muslims. Many Americans in other regions only ever interact with a Muslim through the media.

RQ4: Are there regional differences in the way All-American Muslims is portrayed in reports about the show?

Since the complaints against the show were coming from the FFA which is based in Florida, it is logical to assume that regional differences would exist. Regional differences in media coverage could impact media portrayals of the show All-American Muslim.

METHOD

Sample: The current study employs qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Academic databases Lexis Nexis and NewsBank were searched for English-language news stories in which the words"All-American Muslim" appeared. From Lexis Nexis, more than a thousand articles were found; however, not all of them related to the show. Articles that did not relate to the television show were eliminated, along with those not from a U.S. source. NewsBank was searched for articles from the states of North Carolina and Florida which include newspapers not accessible via Lexis Nexis. Duplicates were eliminated, along with television listings. The result was 188 news stories published in newspapers and 83 articles from news wires. Thus, 271 news stories from print journalism sources were content-analyzed for this study.

Coding Categories: There were nine coding categories, including: type of story (news, review, opinion-editorial, or letter to the editor); type of sources (no source attributed, journalist, editorial writer, politician, organizational spokesperson, multiple sources, educator, activist or other); and tone (negative, neutral positive). Since mass communication researchers have used proportions as a method of testing attitudes towards gender (Armstrong and Gao, 2010), four coding categories were used to create proportions. For example, coders counted the number of paragraphs that mention the reality show as well as the length of the reference in paragraphs. Additionally, the coders counted the number of sources advocating for and against Muslim Americans and/or All-American Muslim.

Proportions were calculated to depict how many sources were advocating for or against the show to the total sources that advocating either for or against the show. Because some mass communications scholars have emphasized the influence of letters to the editor from a newspaper's Muslim readership to challenge negative portrayals (Meer, Dwyer & Modood, 2010), coders included mention of terrorism (absent or present), and self-identity as a Muslim (absent or negative).

Coders: Intercoder reliabilities were calculated using ReCal, a web application that calculates Krippendorff's alpha (Freelon, 2010). Graduate students coded 54 news stories or 20 percent of the data. The results of the intercoder reliability are summarized in Table 1. The second time the intercoder reliability was calculated, the Krippendorff's alpha value exceeded .70 in the categories.

Table 1. Intercoder Reliability of Coding Categories

Category	α Value
Type of story	1.0
Number of graphs regarding show	0.97
Number of total graphs	1.0
Type of sources	0.86
Number of sources advocating for	0 .95
Number of sources advocating against	0.80
Appearance of mention of terrorism	1 .0
Author self-identifies as Muslim	N/ A*
Tone	0.76**

*Because there are not many instances in which the two coders agreed data that fit into this category was present, Krippendorff's alpha was unavailable although percent agreement is high (Freelon, 2009).
**The category was collapsed from a 5-point scale to a 3-point scale the second time intercoder reliability was calculated.

The average intercoder reliability for eight of the categories was .92. Table 2 shows the frequencies of the variables

Table 2. Frequency of Coding Categories

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Type of story		
News	190	70.1
Reviews	17	6.3
Opinion editorials	44	16.2
Letters by the audience	20	7.4
Type of source		
No attribution	86	31.7
Journalist	2	.7
Editorial writer	1	.4
Politicians	21	7.7
Organizational spokesperson	28	10.3
Multiple sources	124	45.8
Educator	1	.4
Activist	7	.7
Other	1	.4
Tone		
Negative	17	6.3
Neutral	74	27.3
Positive	180	66.4
Terrorism Mention		
Present	210	77.5
Absent	61	22.5
Region of newspaper		
Northeast	70	37.2
Southwest	38	20.2
Midwest	21	11.2
Mountain	18	9.6
West	41	21.8

The intercoder reliability for the story type was 1.0, and it was .86 the type of source. The intercoder reliability for the collapsed tone was .76. The average of intercoder reliability for these categories is .87. The region category was constructed by the author based on adjustments made to online maps (American, n.d.).

DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The strategy employed to address the research questions includes statistical and non-statistical methods. The first research question was answered using descriptive statistics. The second research question was answered using a paired sample t-test as well as a qualitative analysis. The third research question was answered using descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis. Finally, the fourth research question was answered using a one-way ANOVA test. Results

This study analyzes content in 188 news stories from American newspapers and 83 news stories from American wire services in which the television show, All-American Muslim, was covered. The 271 news stories were analyzed for type, type of sources, tone, presence of a mention of terrorism, presence of an author who self-identifies as Muslim, the length of the coverage of the show, and the number of sources advocating for or against the show.

A second coder coded 54 news stories, approximately 20 percent of the data, to determine inter-coder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha was used, and the average inter-coder reliability was 0.92.

The first research question asked, **In what tone does the article portray All-American Muslims?** The tone was coded on a three-point scale as negative (1), neutral (2), or positive (3). Of 271 articles, 17 had a negative tone (6.3 percent), 74 had a neutral tone (27.3 percent), and 180 had a positive tone (66.4 percent). The average tone was 2.60 with a standard deviation of 0.61. This shows that the majority of the portrayals of the show were neutral or positive.

The second research question asked, **How does print newspaper coverage of All-American Muslim portray advocacy against and for the reality show or Muslim Americans?** The coders coded the number of sources arguing both for and against the TLC show or Muslim Americans. A proportion was created to show the ratio of sources negative about the show or Muslim Americans out of the total number of sources for or against the show or the minority group.

Another proportion was created to show the ratio of sources advocating for the show or Muslim Americans out of the total number of sources for or against the show or the minority group. A paired sample t-test was run to compare the means of the two proportions. The results indicate that the inclusion of sources advocating for the show or Muslim Americans was much more likely in print news stories (difference of mean=.25 SD=.74, t (184)=4.66, p<.001). Therefore, a significant relationship was found between the likelihood of a story having more sources advocating for All-American Muslim or for Muslim Americans and the likelihood of a story that advocates against them.

Qualitative analysis further illuminates the answer to this research question. An example of a source advocating for the show is Sueheila Amen, one of the characters. In an Associate Press news story (2011) by David Bauder, she describes her reaction to 9/11. "'It was the first time I realized that people looked at me as less American,' said Suehaila Amen. 'As a person who was born and raised in this country, it was very difficult'" (p. 1). Another example of a source cited by journalists is the Muslim U.S. Congressman, Keith Ellison.

Another AP writer stated that Ellison "released a statement Monday condemning Lowe's for choosing 'to uphold the beliefs of a fringe hate group and not the creed of the First Amendment'" (Anderson, 2011, p. 1).

An example of sources advocating against the reality television show or Muslim Americans was commonly cited and attributed to the website of the FFA, which complained that Lowe's was supporting the show; that led to Lowe's suspending its advertising. State News Agency, a news wire that focuses on political news published the following:

> The Florida Family Association (FFA) complained that the show features "ordinary folk while excluding many Islamic believers whose agenda poses a clear and present danger to the liberties and traditional values that the majority of Americans cherish" (Mattu, 2012, p.1).

This quote was often used by reporters in a neutral setting, and by columnists who insisted that Muslims are ordinary Americans. A qualitative examination of the sources with clear opinions about Muslim Americans and the reality show adds a dimension to understanding portrayals of Muslim Americans in the American media.

The third research question asked, **How is terrorism portrayed in print coverage about the reality show, *All-American Muslim?*** The coders looked for references to terrorism, such as Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, and September 11. The word fundamentalist was not included because it may or may not describe terrorism. The results are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Number of Articles that Mention Terrorism, Categorized by Tone.

	Mention Present	Mention Absent
Negative	3	14
Neutral	9	65
Positive	49	131
Total	61	210

The results show 80 percent of the articles in which terrorism was mentioned are positive, which may sound counterintuitive.

Qualitative analysis may explain the results. An example of how terrorism could be mentioned in print coverage of All-American Muslim is in an AP story:

> Mike Jaafar, a deputy sheriff who participated in a Sept. 11 memorial service at Tiger Stadium in Detroit, helped law enforcement prepare for any problems related to the anniversary. He choked up when recalling how police officers in New York City were killed as they tried to rescue people at the World Trade Center (Bauder, 2011, p.1).

Even though the terrorists were associated with Islam, the quote demonstrates a distance being drawn between terrorism and the Muslim police officer from Detroit, Mike Jaafar. In other words, 80 percent of the articles that mentioned terrorism challenged the association of Muslim Americans with terrorism.

The fourth research question asked, **Are there regional differences in the way All-American Muslims is portrayed in reports about the show?** One coder listed the name of all the newspapers in which 188 news stories appeared. The author then constructed a region category based on adjustments made to an online map on the website of a professional organization (American, n.d.). The regions were northeast, southeast, midwest, mountain, and west.

The statistical test used to test the relationship between region and tone was a one-way ANOVA, with a post-hoc test. The northeast region included 70 news stories with average tone 2.48. The southeast region included 38 news stories with average tone 2.57. The midwest region included 21 news stories with average tone 2.71. The mountain region included 18 stories with average tone 2.50. The west region included 41 stories with average tone 2.63. The results were not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question examines the tone of the news items. The results show that the tone of the media portrayals of the show and Muslim Americans was mostly neutral or positive. The social construction of reality would suggest that the goals of TLC were met, "the decision – strategy, even – of the Discovery-owned cable channel to once again deep dive into an unfamiliar and potentially controversial subculture" in order to portray Muslim Americans as normal Americans (Rose, 2011, p. 1). From the perspective of the social construction of reality, the positive tone of the media portrayals of Muslim Americans is evidence of a process of re-creating the meaning of Islam in American culture.

The second research question examines the sources advocating for or against the reality show and religious minority group. Results illustrate that the sources were more likely to advocate for the show or the minority religious group than against them. By constructing a mediated social reality of Muslim Americans in which advocates speak favorably about them, the spiral of silence theory may be reconfigured. The spiral of silence theory suggests that most minorities often do not express their opinion, unless they feel the majority's opinion is subject to change (Donsbach & Stevenson, 1984).

 Individuals use the media to calculate the degree to which others would agree with their opinions before expressing them, except for an outspoken minority capable of changing the majority opinion when they feel very strongly about the subject (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). A change in the attitude of the general American public towards Islam and Muslims requires more advocates willing to speak on behalf of Muslim Americans.

The third research question analyzes the presence or absence of any reference to terrorism. The results demonstrate that most references to terrorism appeared in articles with a positive tone. Qualitative analysis suggests that the positive tone may overcompensate for references to terrorism in articles featuring Muslim Americans—a norm established in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. This suggests a shift in the attitudes towards Muslim Americans. The former stereotypes of terrorism may be replaced with perceptions of Muslim Americans as positively contributing members of American society.

The fourth research question examines differences of tone based on region of the U.S. The results show tone did not differ by region. Kaufer and Al-Maliki (2009) argue that some media like the Michigan-based Arab-American News provide alternative frames that are more consistent with the views of Arab-Americans. One possible explanation for the lack of regional differences is that while Michigan is home to a large Arab-American population, not all the immigrants are Muslim. Another possible explanation is the importance of freedom of religion in the U.S.

Finally, at least one of the authors of 12 analyzed news items identified as a Muslim. In an editorial the writer said the show "represents a slice of my diverse Muslim world," while noting that its portrayal of Muslims is limited (Shadia, 2011, p.1). Such a reaction suggests that Muslim Americans feel an increased sense of agency, which could be the result of an increasingly fluent and assimilated generation of Muslim Americans—a new phenomenon since most Muslims began immigrating to the United States in the early 1990s (Pew, 2011). As Muslim Americans decide to break the silence and share their experiences of being both American and Muslim, a new narrative is likely to alter the social construction of reality for Muslim Americans.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to the research presented in this study. One such limitation is the fact that only one medium was analyzed: print media. Another limitation may lie in the sample size of 271 articles. Finally, portrayals of Muslim Americans were limited to print coverage of the reality television show, All-American Muslim. Therefore the generalizability of this study may be limited.

Nonetheless, this study offers an examination of how reality television gives voice to members of religious minorities. Future research can expand the current knowledge of portrayals of Muslim Americans in broadcast media. Moreover, a content analysis of blogs written by those who self-identify as Muslims may be useful in examining what does not reach traditional media. Finally, a content analysis of Muslims that are not American may be useful in determining attitudes towards Muslims around the world.

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