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WISEUP

Addressing Gaps in Lawmakers' Understanding of Islam and Muslims in America:
A Proactive Plan to Unite Communities Against Hate, Extremism, and Violence

About

Mission: The Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality & Equality (WISE) promotes Muslim women leaders who are at the forefront of addressing pressing challenges facing their community. We create long lasting social change by amplifying women's voices at all levels of political, economic, religious, and social discourse.

Scope Note

Today, we see many optimistic and constructive calls to collective action to combat all forms of extremism and hate, which pose a threat to us all. All agree that such initiatives must also be based on collaborative relationships with mainstream institutions where trust has already been built and, if not, now urgently needs to be, particularly, though not exclusively, between elected officials and their constituencies.

The 375-page *WISE Up* report, published in collaboration with 72 authors, will serve as a practical blueprint for combating disinformation about Muslims/Islam and provide practical ways to prevent the growth of extremism on American shores. It has been designed as a coherent, overarching framework to spread authoritative yet easily accessible knowledge about American Muslims and their Islamic beliefs. It is broken into three discrete sections, each usable as a stand-alone guide: Part One: Voices of American Muslims; Part Two: Islamic Theology vs. Extremist Ideology; and Part Three: Preventing Extremist Recruitment.

The aim of *WISE Up* is to:

- 1) Present best practices on how to foster unity and mutual respect amongst diverse communities,
- 2) Emphasize the need for lawmakers to shift the narrative surrounding their Muslim constituents from one focused on security, to a frame that recognizes American Muslims as pioneering contributors and an essential part of the fabric of American society, who deserve to be treated equally and in accordance with our nation's laws and values, and to
- 3) Educate, inform, and enhance interactions between American Muslims and their representatives, law enforcement officials, civic leaders, mayors, and school boards.

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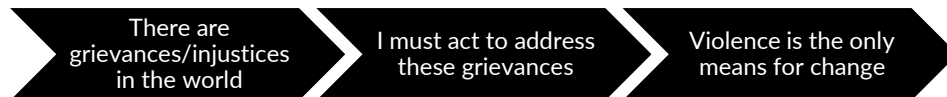
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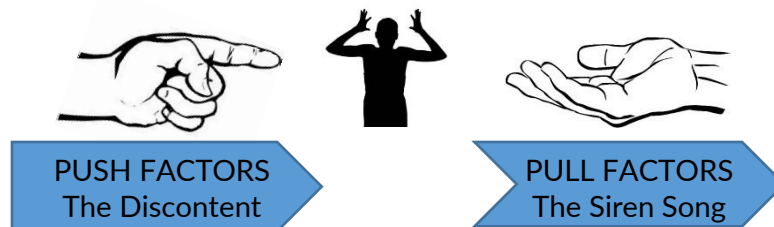
Executive Summary

The United States faces the dual threat of foreign and domestic terrorism and incidents of mass violence, with a profoundly permissive information sharing environment that allows ideas to be transported globally and nationally in real time like never before. Extremist groups have taken advantage of an exceedingly polarized American political landscape – and the prevalence of social media as a primary news source for many – in order to spread their message and recruit individuals to their cause.

Extremism is a phenomenon that has commonalities across religions, races, and cultures. Using 21st century methods, and confronted with a bureaucracy stuck in the 20th century, all extremist groups prey on natural human grievances by promoting an “us versus them” mindset that blames society, the government, or other defined groups for their problems. Extremists then cite examples of inflammatory public discourse to reinforce the notion that society, the government, or other groups are really to blame for the sense of dissatisfaction or malaise that the individual feels, and encourage hostility and violence against these groups and entities.



While the vast majority of American Muslims have had no involvement with any sort of violent extremist activity, in the years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the community as a whole, e.g. anyone who identifies as a Muslim, has been placed firmly in the crosshairs of what has become the Global War on Terror. Because terrorists blatantly manipulate the religion of Islam for political gain, and because terrorism is a violation of Islam, Muslim scholars and leaders have repeatedly and publicly denounced terrorism committed in the name of Islam. However, the lack of coverage of these condemnations among mainstream media perpetuates the false notion that terrorists' violent actions are somehow justified in Islam.¹ When public officials, who are supposed to be religiously-neutral, then **publicly link terrorist attacks with the religion of Islam**, they disparage the religion, implicate its adherents, and reinforce extremists' propaganda



As a result of this false linkage, the **American Muslim community is perceived largely through a national security lens**, subjecting them to heavy-handed government policies which infringe upon their civil liberties and result in an increase in hate crimes perpetrated against them. This is unfortunate because American Muslims have always placed enormous value on their American identity, with 89% of American Muslims saying they are proud to be American *and* Muslim.²

Unfortunately, the negative perception of American Muslims has no resonance with who they really are – patriotic, law-abiding citizens, neighbors, and contributing members of their communities.³ Yet, the consequences of these negative perceptions are dire: greater public acceptance of discriminatory treatment against Muslims and a betrayal of our nation's values of fairness and equality for all.

WISE Up is a practical blueprint for combating disinformation about Muslims/Islam, and it provides practical ways to prevent the growth of all forms of extremism and hate on American shores.

Recommendations:

- 1) In order to prevent the spread of extremism in all communities, there is a need to conduct a community-led, comprehensive study to understand the overarching framework and commonalities shared by extremist groups, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or culture.
- 2) Delink “Extremism” and “Terrorism” from race, religion, culture, and ethnicity – Recognize that the language used by government officials sets the tone for the country.
- 3) Address American Muslims Beyond the Security lens – engage Muslims more broadly as neighbors and essential contributors to our communities and society.

¹ To read more Muslim Condemnation of Terrorism, see *WISE Up*, page 33.

² Pew Forum, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>

³ To read more Common Misconceptions About American Muslims, see *WISE Up*, pages 26-27.

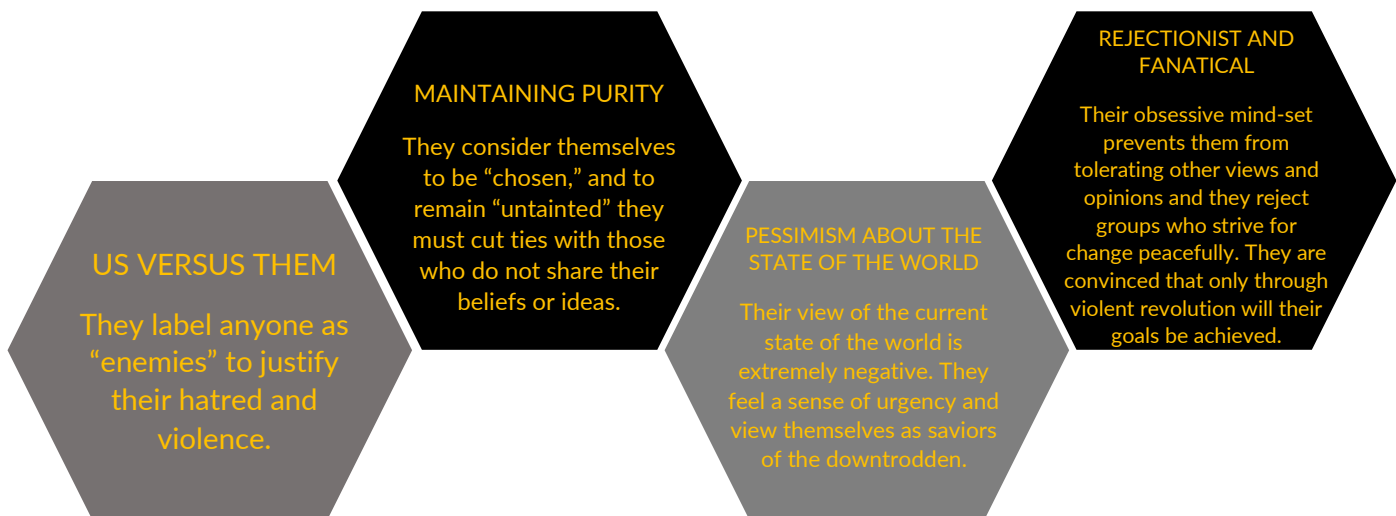
Part 1: Extremism is a phenomenon that has commonalities across religions, races, cultures.

Treating the Symptoms Rather Than Preventing the Disease

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011, much of U.S. government attention has focused on what is often called “Islamist” extremism, though there is ample evidence that most violent extremist attacks are actually committed by non-Muslims.⁴ Many efforts have been made to defeat international terrorist groups, often designated as Foreign Terrorist Groups (like ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram), and vast resources have been used on intelligence and to analyze these groups’ military operations, funding sources, and social media recruitment. Though these efforts have resulted in the loss of territory for Daesh/ISIS, nevertheless, there has been little attention paid, and few resources allotted to studying the psychological, social, political, and ideological drivers which motivate individuals to commit acts of mass violence in the first place.

As such, WISE set out to use a fresh, community-based, holistic approach to study the interconnected factors that have led to the rise of violent extremism committed by groups like Daesh/ISIS. While on the surface, different forms of extremism may not seem like they have much in common, in reality, the foundations of their ideology and the framework by which they operate are similar across groups.

Ideological Foundations Shared by Extremist Groups



What Motivates Individuals to Join Extremist Groups?

There is no one single factor that motivates individuals to join extremist groups. Their motivations, called “push and pull factors,” are multifaceted and context-driven, and can be socioeconomic, psychological, spiritual, political, social or any particular combination of these, depending on his/her personal circumstances, background, and vulnerabilities. Each “pull” factor is specifically designed to provide a direct and seemingly simple solution to each particular discontent experienced by an individual.⁵

⁴ See <https://apps.revealnews.org/homegrown-terror/>.

⁵ To see more “Push and Pull” factors for men and women, see *WISE Up*, pages 162-163 and 170-171.



OUR RESPONSE?



PUSH FACTORS
The Discontent

PULL FACTORS
The Siren Song

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BLEAK FUTURE OUTLOOK

Faced with bleak economic opportunities and the prospect of not being able to provide for themselves or their families, some individuals feel a sense of uncertainty when it comes to being able to lead a dignified life.

CHANCE FOR PROSPERITY

Portrays group membership with promise and economic opportunity. Every person's role is deemed important and indispensable to the state-building operation, and in turn, each person can lead a life of prosperity.

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SUFFERING AND INJUSTICES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Many young Muslims are motivated to redress injustices faced by Muslims everywhere who are suffering because of longstanding and enduring conflicts, such as those in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Chechnya.

BRINGS JUSTICE AND HONOR BACK TO ISLAM

Channels frustration by providing a solution to avenge the plight of Muslims and by offering each member a chance to fight on behalf of disenfranchised Muslim populations.

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DISAFFECTED BY POLITICAL STATUS QUO

Fed up with authoritarian or oppressive regimes' active suppression of dissent that leaves the masses with no political voice and without representation in the power structure.

A CHANCE TO CREATE A JUST POLITICAL SYSTEM

Offers an opportunity to change their political circumstances and reclaim their individual power by being part of an ideal model for "good Islamic" governance.

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MARGINALIZATION AND ALIENATION

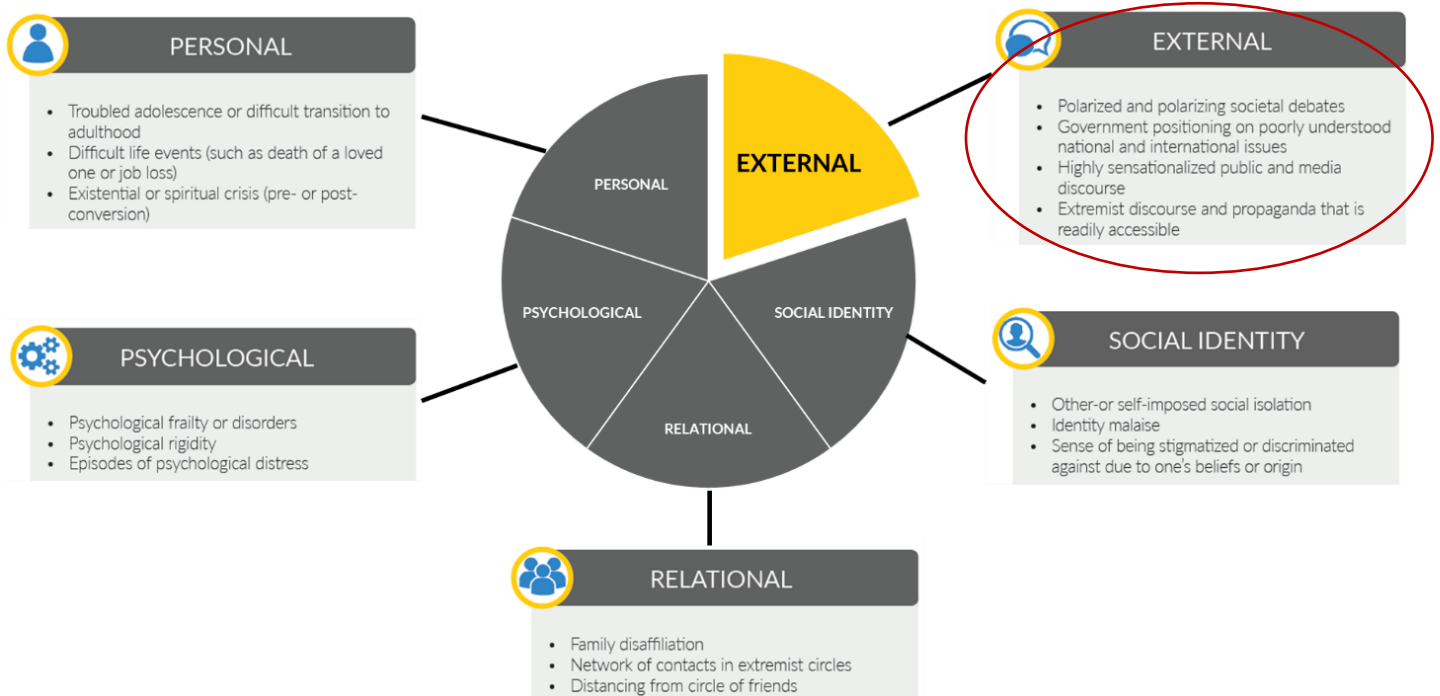
Perceive a lack of social integration and acceptance of Muslims in the West due to widespread religious liberties violations and ethnic or religious discrimination. Feeling of being cut off from community and society.

PROMISES COMPANIONSHIP, COMMUNITY

Promises a social network of like-minded people who will offer companionship, inclusion and respect, and the social benefits of belonging to an elite group.

Individual Vulnerability Factors

Often, it is only after external and personal circumstances intersect, that individuals question their place in society, or begin to experience identity malaise, perceived injustice, or marginalization. External circumstances, including **political situations** such as war, conflict, social and foreign policy, and **public and media discourse**, such as highly polarized debates on social issues or controversies, may indirectly contribute to the development of feelings of stigmatization, discrimination, frustration, or humiliation. At the same time, personal factors, such as social vulnerability, economic marginalization, or fragile family ties, may reinforce feelings of failure and/or helplessness in those who experience them.⁶



Bottom Line: To create an alternative to law enforcement-only approaches, community leaders must look at and deal with the problem of violent extremism at the micro level and not at the macro level. It is prudent for all of us to provide resources, training, and a safe space for any person who is confused about his/her beliefs, identity, or place in our society. Resources can include a directory of mental health experts, religious counselors, and social service workers. **It is so much better to rehabilitate than to incarcerate.** While anyone involved in criminal activity falls under the jurisdiction of law enforcement, **we must remember that the preferred healing and educational approach to prevention is under the purview of the community.**

Recommendation 1: In order to prevent the spread of extremism in all communities, there is a need to conduct a community-led, comprehensive study to understand the overarching framework which highlights the commonalities shared by extremist groups, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or culture.

Task 1.1: Convene a privately-funded community taskforce which receives input from stakeholders that have been dealing with extremism. (The findings of *WISE Up* present an opportunity to engage other minority groups, e.g. Latinos, African Americans, Jews, etc.)

- **OUTCOME:** Taskforce will present its recommendations to media, Congressional Representatives, and select Congressional committees.

Task 1.2: Develop targeted trainings for various communities' group leaders, educators, law enforcement agencies, etc. on practical ways that communities can prevent extremism from taking root.

- **OUTCOME:** The study's findings will be shared with either age appropriate classes and/or PTSA's so that multiple generations are trained to recognize individual vulnerability factors that lead individuals to join extremist groups, and to enhance protective factors to strengthen individual resiliency.





Task 1.3: Create national public service announcements focused on increasing awareness of tactics that all extremist groups use, especially on social media, in targeting young people.

⁶ To see "Vulnerability and Protective Factors," see *WISE Up*, pages 270-271.

Part 2: Delink “Extremism” or “Terrorism” from race, religion, gender, or ethnicity - The power of the language from government officials sets the tone for the country

By weaponizing and instrumentalizing religion, extremists are able to tap in to familiar religious touchpoints with which people may identify, and thus impart cosmic significance to any actions these individuals may undertake on behalf of the group. This politicized ideology serves as a powerful motivating factor that binds people of different backgrounds to a common cause, and provides the group: 1) a language of mass mobilization, 2) justification for acts of violence, 3) sustained culture of violence for future generations, and 4) a rationale for financial and logistical support of the movement.

Below are direct quotes from Daesh/ISIS propaganda, in which recruiters have incorporated a distortion of religious terms in to their communications, so as to impart cosmic significance to what they are asking of these individuals:

Language of Mass Mobilization		“You should learn about some political situations, these are your brothers and sisters! It will help if you see what this persecution really looks like (1) . Here are some videos to watch, and some websites to learn more about what is really happening.”
Justification for Acts of Violence		“Armed jihad (2) is the only solution to Muslim oppression and injustice. The only way to truly free your Muslim brothers and sisters from persecution is by participating in Allah's holy war (3) . They are depending on us.”
Sustains Culture of Violence for Future Generations		“Our role is even more important as women in Islam... if [we are unwilling] to sacrifice [our] desires and give up [our] families and lives in the west in order to make Hijrah (4) and please Allah, then who will raise the next generation of Lions?... Sister's [sic] don't forsake this beautiful blessing being able to raise the future Mujahideen of Shaam.”
Rationale for Financial and Logistical Support of the Movement/Group		“This Khilafah (5) is more in need than ever before for experts, professionals, and specialists, who can help contribute in strengthening its structure and tending to the needs of their Muslim brothers.”

(1) “Fighting for Islam” as it is commonly understood, almost always means fighting for political power, vengeance, or glory, none of which qualifies as *jihad*. Even if the motive is correct, if the means are abominable, that fighting is not *jihad*. The object of just struggle is the restoration to wholeness; in a just struggle, the highest pinnacle of success is to turn enemies into friends.

(2) Here, the recruiter says that “armed *jihad*” is “the only way” to do something about oppression and injustice. In fact, *Jihad* literally means “to strive for excellence.” There are many levels of *jihad* that connote renewal and growth in the way of God.

(3) Though terrorists have wrongly equated “*jihad*” with “waging holy war on ‘infidels,’” *jihad* has never meant “holy war” in Islam. On the contrary, the Arabic word for warfare is *harb*, not *jihad*. Significantly, *harb* is never attached to or combined with the phrase “in the way of God,” as *jihad* is. The Arabic word for armed combat is *qital*.

(4) Today, making *hijrah* is only necessary when a Muslim is persecuted in his homeland, or fears for his religious freedom, personal rights, dignity, and wealth. Muslims who emigrate from Muslims lands, live side by side with people of other religions, and practice their religious freely have no obligation to migrate to other lands.

(5) The term *khilafah*, commonly translated in English as “Caliphate,” literally means “those who came after,” and most scholars agree that it directly refers to the succession of the four “Rightly Guided Caliphs” who were declared successors of the Prophet Muhammad following his death. Neither the Qur’an nor the Prophet Muhammad ever established a particular form of political governance, or mandated the creation of a “caliphate” or “Islamic state.” The term *khilafah* never appears in the Qur’an.

While we see above how extremist recruiters corrupt specific religious terms to meet their political goals, ultimately, we must become educated about how to spot these distortions; otherwise, we risk perpetuating them and unknowingly propagating extremist rhetoric. Indeed, broadly speaking, ignorance of Islam and Muslim belief can impair our ability to achieve peace and stability; domestically, it negatively impacts our national unity.

For example, we see Islamic terms being invoked by anti-Muslim bigots to “otherize” Islam as a so-called un-American religion; these distortions conjure up fear of Muslims by painting them as a menace to “civilized society.” The exploitation of a term like *Shari’ah*, for example, creates confusion and fear in the general American public about what *Shari’ah* is, incorrectly likening “*Shari’ah* law” to the U.S. legal system, and falsely claim that Muslims seek to subvert U.S. constitutional protections with *Shari’ah*-sanctioned restrictions on women’s freedoms and the imposition of brutal punishments for adultery, blasphemy, or apostasy.⁷ Out of ignorance, some politicians and legislators have responded to these fears by passing “anti-*Shari’ah*” legislation in scattered jurisdictions throughout the country. However, rather than “protecting” Americans (as such legislators claim), such measures actually serve more nefarious goals: 1) to remove constitutionally guaranteed religious liberty protections for American Muslims, the vast majority of whom reference *Shari’ah* to determine how they perform religious rituals; and 2) to hide discriminatory measures that limit the rights and infringe upon the liberties of other groups of Americans, namely women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community.

Bottom Line:

Violent extremist attacks or terrorist attacks committed by Muslims are not “Islamic.” Remove all references to “Islam” when referring to these violent movements. By publicly calling these attacks “Islamic,” we provide very public marketing for extremists, who target those who do not know what Islam really is. It is not accurate to refer to the actions of these people as “radical Islam.” This contributes to a narrative that Islam is under threat, which aids recruiters in signing on individuals to their violent cause. Instead, refer to these individuals by their organizational affiliation, e.g. “He is an Al-Qaeda terrorist.”

Recommendation 2: Delink “Extremism” and “Terrorism” from race, religion, culture, and ethnicity – Recognize that the language used by government officials sets the tone for the country. Identifying a religious group by a few violent extremists gives terrorists the legitimacy they crave, isolates American Muslims, supports extremist propaganda, and violates the core American values of fairness and equal treatment.

Task 2.1: Use your voice as a member of Congress to speak out when you see examples of anti-Muslim bias or ignorant terminology employed in local media or the public sphere.

Task 2.2: Do not give radicals or terrorists legitimacy by allow them to carry the banner of Islam. In speeches and legislation, use the names of terrorist groups like “Al Qaeda Terrorists” or “Daesh/ISIS Terrorists.”

Task 2.3: In legislation, be sensitive to terms and phrases that describe all Muslims or the entire faith as terrorists and take proactive measures to remove or amend offensive/counterproductive terminology.

Task 2.4: Condemn unequivocally any acts of terror or hate regardless of who the assailant or targets are. If a Muslim has been targeted by a hate crime, be clear that innocent civilians should never be targeted—doing so is a criminal act.

Task 2.5: Support and/or introduce hate crime legislation in state legislatures to counter the proliferation of ignorant and fear-mongering “anti-*Shari’ah* legislation” in state legislatures across the U.S.⁸ H.R. 1730,⁹ the “Protecting Religiously Affiliated Institutions Act of 2017,” is one such example.

⁷ To read more about anti-*Shari’ah* legislation, see *WISE Up*, pages 46-48.

⁸ “Anti-Muslim Activities in the United States.” *New America*, New America, www.newamerica.org/in-depth/anti-muslim-activity/.

⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr1730/BILLS-115hr1730rh.pdf>

Part 3: Address American Muslims Beyond the Security lens – engage Muslims more broadly as neighbors and essential contributors to our communities and society

Negative Perceptions of Islam

Statistics show that public perception of Muslims is overwhelmingly negative, likely the result of extremist acts by fringe actors, and the accompanied media framing and coverage of these acts, as well as policies that cast the Muslim community as primarily or solely a security issue. Muslims are one of the few, if not only, groups in the country to be perceived primarily through the actions of their fellow Muslims overseas, thus reinforcing the misperception that Muslims are “other,” or somehow a foreign entity. As a result of such framing, they are also held accountable in the court of American public opinion for what occurs elsewhere in the world, being compelled to explain, disavow, and condemn such actions upon demand, despite having no connection apart from belonging to a common faith tradition. Such framing of the American Muslim community also facilitates securitization and surveillance policies targeting the community and growing public support for such measures. The recent travel ban is one such example.

Muslims as a “Foreign” Entity

American Muslims are a diverse, multiethnic, multicultural community, whose history predates American independence. In fact, Muslims have been in America since colonial times; many African slaves who were brought here were Muslim and many retained their faith. Nevertheless, policy makers often treat Muslims as a monolithic entity and reduce their complex lives, livelihoods, experiences, and histories to a single lens of securitization and surveillance, thereby subjecting them to policies that adversely affect the entire community. Furthermore, there are those who tend to overlay the actions of violent extremists claiming to act in the name of Islam – fringe though these extremists are – and thrust this negative view upon 3.3 million Muslims in the U.S. and 1.8 billion globally.

Unfortunately, because a small fraction of extremists have twisted Islamic terms to instigate violent action, they are often linked to Islam in media portrayals, which then renders American Muslims as somehow guilty by association. Precisely because of this, Muslims in America are on the receiving end of unlawful surveillance, hate crimes, and entrapment. Moreover, public officials’ perpetuation of imprecise terminology related to religion distorts an already warped lens through which the American Muslim community is perceived, and leads to the justification and public acceptance of discriminatory policies.

This politicization and securitization of Islam and Muslims in America has had a devastating impact on this community. While the effects of biased media narratives and deteriorating government-community relationships may seem abstract, the recent surge in hate crimes targeting American Muslims makes concrete the real-life impact of hate crimes that individuals and communities have felt across the country.

Exacerbating Feelings of Unequal Treatment

Openly anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies that have been enacted in recent years have given license to hatred and bigotry, resulting in a significant spike in hate crimes against Muslims. FBI hate crimes data (which are incomplete due to underreporting from police departments and victims) reveal that anti-Muslim bias crimes spiked by 67 percent in 2015. And many lives have been lost amid this crime wave.

The wave of crimes committed against Muslims has also led to allegations of double standards and unequal treatment in media coverage and in legal prosecutions brought against perpetrators of hate crimes and terrorist attacks. For example, attacks by right-wing extremists, like Dylann Roof’s massacre in South Carolina, are less likely to be labeled terrorism in the media, even though they often meet standard definitions of terrorism. Convictions for terrorism and hate crimes require additional elements of proof regarding the perpetrator’s motivations, so prosecutors may be less likely to charge for those additional crimes if they determine that their ability to prove those motivations is likely to be unsuccessful.

Bottom Line:

When the “terrorism” label is applied, seemingly exclusively to Muslim perpetrators or those who claim to commit their crimes “in the name of Islam,” the entire Muslim community is put under scrutiny, and responses from the government target the entire community. It is of utmost importance to treat American Muslims with respect and appreciation for the commonalities that we share. Building strong and trusting relations with the American Muslim community will greatly enable law enforcement to learn of potential early-warning indicators. Our law enforcement agencies must lead the way in showing that the American Muslim community is their best ally in this united fight against extremism.

Recommendation 3: Address American Muslims beyond the security lens – engage Muslims more broadly as neighbors and essential contributors to our communities and society.

Task 3.1: Engage directly with members of the Muslim community in order to develop long lasting relationships of trust. Representatives have a responsibility to engage with all their constituents and must “get to know their Muslim Neighbor.”

Task 3.2: Include Muslim experts and representatives from all fields in meetings on the full range of policy issues that you discuss with constituents.

Task 3.3: Assign one of the community liaisons/outreach staffers in your district offices to be the liaison to the American Muslim community in your district.

Task 3.4: Visit civic gatherings at local mosques, attend iftars as well as religious holidays and celebrations.

Task 3.5: If you have an interfaith and/or clergy advisory council, include local Imams and Muslim leaders.

Task 3.6: Seek out opportunities to showcase and highlight positive contributions of Muslims to the community/U.S. society

Task 3.7: Recognize exemplary local individuals, events, and programs through statements in the congressional record. Individuals and organizations can reference the “Notable American Muslims” section in *WISE Up* (pages 80-84) for such examples.

Task 3.8: Encourage schools in your district to seek opportunities to highlight American Muslims contributions in the same way they would African-American, women, or any other community’s contributions. African-American History Month is a positive example of such efforts in schools and American civic life.