Study links extremism to local expressions of anti-Muslim prejudice

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by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [August 15, 2018](#) issue

A new study takes a novel approach to studying the rise of violent extremism. The findings suggest that it may be connected to ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination.

The study, [published in *Science Advances*](#), finds an association between local forms of anti-Muslim hate and susceptibility of Muslims to joining extremist groups.

Sociologists at Duke University and a statistician from the University of California, Berkeley, examined Internet search data provided by Google in 3,099 counties across the U.S. Specifically, the researchers looked at average monthly search data to see if people in the same geographical areas searched for phrases such as "Muslims are violent" and "how to join ISIS."

The findings, collected between August 2014 and July 2016, suggest that sympathy for the self-described Islamic State is most prevalent in communities that also show high levels of anti-Muslim sentiment.

"One interpretation of this finding is that violent extremism results from the failure of ethnic integration," said Chris Bail, a sociologist at Duke and the study's lead researcher. "People of immigrant background experience a disconnect between their family heritage and their receiving society's culture and thus become vulnerable to extremist narratives."

The researchers also found that anti-Muslim prejudice is particularly high in communities where most people are white.

The authors note that studies about radicalization are notoriously difficult to undertake since few would-be extremists are likely to identify themselves as such in surveys. People who hate Muslims also may not betray their true feelings. But the anonymity of the Internet can provide researchers with a more objective measurement.

After gathering the data, which Google made available to potential advertisers, the researchers superimposed U.S. Census data and other surveys to determine the amount of ethnic diversity in each area. The census doesn't ask about religion, but researchers were able to identify ethnic backgrounds. They also measured the overall volume of searches for the term *halal*—used for food that meets Muslim dietary restrictions—within each county.

The authors suggest their findings may also explain cases of domestic terrorism in which extremists do not identify with Islam, such as the killing of nine black worshipers at a church in Charleston, South Carolina. The terrorist in that case, Dylann Roof, worried that white men were becoming an imperiled minority.

The authors acknowledge that not all people who search for "how to join ISIS" are would-be extremists. They may be law enforcement officers, journalists, or other people interested in figuring out the group's recruitment process. Further, many ISIS recruits have been known to join through social media, which the researchers didn't examine.

Google no longer allows search range estimates for phrases such as "how to join ISIS," potentially limiting further study of Internet searches. Still, the study may be the first to show an association between religious discrimination and violent extremism at the county level.

"I've never seen a cross-national study showing any correlation between racial discrimination and radicalization," said Aziz Z. Huq, a law professor at the University of Chicago who has studied counterterrorism policies that target Muslims. This study comes closest, he said.

The results, he added, fit other evidence that suggests it's not economic worries that lead people to support anti-immigrant policies and politicians but rather cultural anxiety about religious or ethnic minorities.

"We know Europeans massively overestimate the proportion of people in their country who are Muslim," Huq said. "It's not the objective fact of 'demographic threat.' What it is, is that the presence of the first few outsiders will often trigger a large response."

The researchers acknowledge additional factors in violent extremism that other studies have suggested, such as feelings of powerlessness or financial struggles.

"We are not saying ethnic integration is the only predictor of violent extremism," Bail said. "It's almost surely the case that violent extremism has multiple causes. Our contribution is another brick to a building that many different scholars are building." —Religion News Service