Western Political Rhetoric and Radicalization

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Does anti-Muslim rhetoric by Western politicians breed radical attitudes among European Muslims? We explore this question by conducting an experimental study in Bosnia — a European democracy, where, unlike the rest of Europe, Muslims are neither immigrants nor socio-economically disadvantaged. This helps us clearly identify the radicalization potential of Western rhetoric alone, absent contextual factors such as social inferiority. Experimental evidence with Bosnian Muslims from five surveys (with a total $N = 2,608$) suggests that rhetorical attacks on Islam by Western politicians do not strengthen individuals' Muslim identity, cause higher levels of animosity toward the West, or lead to condoning the use of violence. We also find that *pro*-Muslim rhetoric, while increasing positive views of the West, does not affect individuals' strength of Muslim identity or their radical sympathies. These results provide important implications for our understanding of sources of radicalization and for efforts to curb radical tendencies.

Despite the fact that a very small fraction of Muslims worldwide express support for terrorism and political violence,[1] worries about Muslim radicalization are widespread in Western societies.[2] The problem of foreign fighters from Europe joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria combined with deadly attacks on European soil since 9/11[3] undoubtedly contribute to these concerns.[4] It is therefore critical to understand the factors that contribute to radicalization and support for violence among Muslims in Europe.

Prior work has focused on radicalization of Muslims outside of Western societies and has explored the effect of various factors,[5] including socioeconomic status,[6] religion,[7] exposure to

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[1] Telhami 2013.

[2] Poushter, Jacob. 2017. "Majorities in Europe, North America Worried about Islamic Extremism." Pew Research Center, http://pewrsr.ch/2qcHWsy.

[3] The Madrid train bombings in March 2004, the London bombings in July 2005, the Glasgow international airport attack in June 2007, and the December 2010 Stockholm bombings are examples.

[4] Benmelech and Klor 2018.

[5] But see, e.g., Doosje et al. 2013; van Bergen et al. 2015.

[6] Blair et al. 2013; Fair et al. 2018; Krueger and Malečková 2003.

[7] Fair et al. 2018; Ginges et al. 2009.

violence,[8] attitudes towards democracy,[9] and opinions on American culture and foreign policy.[10] Other work has combined several explanations to develop multifaceted theoretical frameworks that integrate many factors leading to radicalization.[11]

We focus on radicalization in Europe and, rather than attempting an overarching explanation of radicalization, we isolate a previously overlooked factor: anti-Muslim rhetoric by Western politicians. Western leaders frequently use 'us versus them' terminology to discuss Muslims, depicting them as the 'negative other' and linking Islam to terrorism, hatred, and violence.[12] This same rhetoric is exploited by extremist organizations worldwide as a radicalization tool.[13] Terrorist propaganda uses quotes, images, and references from Western leaders as examples of Muslim identity under threat and for recruitment.[14] The fact that both politicians and terrorist groups are focused on rhetoric and its impact, and words alone are thought to have substantial importance, provides a strong motivation for a careful analysis that isolates the power of Western political rhetoric to produce radical tendencies among Muslims.

Prior work has explored the effect of Islamophobia or general anti-Islam public sentiment on the emergence of (violent) radicalization in young European Muslims.[15] However, we do not know whether the kind of specific anti-Islam rhetoric by Western politicians that terrorist organizations use is able to fuel radical tendencies and to do so independently of other factors conducive to radicalization. Our goal is to systematically study exactly that. We ask whether such rhetoric alone triggers radical attitudes and, on the flip-side, whether pro-Islam rhetoric by Western politicians fosters de-radicalization.

Because our goal is to isolate the effect of Western politicians' rhetoric on radical attitudes among Muslims, we adopt a research design with high internal validity and conduct a series of experimental studies over a five-month period in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) — a European democracy where Muslims are natives and do not suffer from systematic socio-

[8] Canetti 2017.
[9] Piazza 2019; Zhirkov et al. 2014.
[10] Ciftci et al. 2017.
[11] e.g., Abbas 2012; Alimi et al. 2015; Eleftheriadou 2018; Esposito 2018.
[12] Bartolucci 2012.
[13] Lyons-Padilla et al. 2015.
[14] Hellmich 2014, 242; Ingram 2017.
[15] Doosje et al. 2013; Mitts 2019.

economic deprivation as a group. This removes contextual factors conducive to radicalization and allows us to isolate the effect of Western political rhetoric by randomly exposing subjects to Muslim-related statements by Western politicians. Furthermore, Bosnia offers a relevant and realistic context for this study because (1) references to religious identity remain sensitive due to the 1990s ethno-religiously charged war, and (2) terrorist organizations target Bosnian Muslims with Western rhetoric, hoping to radicalize them.[16]

We study both pro- and anti-Muslim rhetoric by U.S. politicians and focus on three outcomes: (a) strength of Muslim identity, (b) out-group animosity (captured by anti-Americanism), and (c) condoning the use of violence to defend one's in-group. Contrary to expectations, we do not find that identity threat in the form of anti-Muslim rhetoric by U.S. politicians affects any of these outcomes. We find that pro-Muslim rhetoric does not affect the strength of one's Muslim identity or likelihood of condoning the use of violence. However, it leads to a significantly more positive view of the U.S. We interpret our findings as evidence that Western rhetoric alone is not likely to make people express radical attitudes.

Political Rhetoric, Identity Threat, and Radicalization

Radicalization is a multi-stage process that occurs over time and is not necessarily linear.[17] Analytically, it can be divided into cognitive radicalization (the process of developing extremist beliefs) vs. behavioral radicalization (the process of engaging in violence).[18] In this paper, we focus only on cognitive radicalization — expression of radical sympathies and attitudes,[19] including willingness to use violence to achieve political goals.[20]

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[16] Rose, Eleanor. 2016. "ISIS brings out Bosnian version of terror magazine." *Balkan Insight*, November 18. Rubic, Dado. 2015. "Islamic State flags appear, then disappear, in Bosnian village." *Reuters*, February 5.

[17] Borum 2011.

[18] Borum 2011; Neumann 2013; Nilsson 2018.

[19] Mitts 2019.

[20] Doosje et al. 2013.

Does hostile rhetoric by Western politicians lead to radical sympathies among Muslims?[21] While this question has not been studied directly, prior work has shown that group threat plays an important role in producing radical sympathies.[22] Drawing on social identity theory,[23] prior work argues that such threat against one's group is an attack against positive self-image that breeds resentment, anger, and frustration.[24] Hostile political rhetoric (e.g., name-calling, racial profiling, negative presentation of Islam, etc.)[25] by Western leaders can easily become a source of such threat because it targets Muslims as a group and portrays them in a negative, inferior light.[26] That is, it raises the salience of Muslim identity while simultaneously diminishing its value.[27]

From their desire to uphold positive self-image, individuals may respond to this threat by promoting their group's superiority or by negatively distinguishing the out-group.[28] The need to restore the positive value of one's own group may be accompanied by a desire for and approval of violent action.[29] In short, when their Muslim identity is threatened, individuals may respond with efforts to defend their identity's worth by (a) reinforcing feelings of in-group superiority, (b) intensifying negative attitudes toward the out-group, and (c) endorsing violence. We provide further detail on the theory in Supplemental Information (SI) section 1.

Prior work has focused only on the effect of identity *threat* on radicalization. However, political rhetoric can also be positive. Does such positive rhetoric weaken Muslim identity, out-group animosity, and radical sympathies? This flip-side of identity threat is not well understood or theorized despite its relevance. We draw theoretical guidance from the mutual intergroup differentiation model,[30] which suggests that positive political rhetoric has the potential to lower the threat to the identities of Muslims because it emphasizes equal group status and acknowledges

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[21] Because we isolate the effect of rhetoric, we leave further theorizing and empirical exploration of potential heterogeneous effects by context, length of exposure, etc. for future research.

[22] e.g., Doosje et al. 2013; Mitts 2019.

[23] Tajfel and Turner 1986.

[24] Doosje et al. 2013.

[25] Adida et al. 2016; Lyons-Padilla et al. 2015; Mitts 2019.

[26] Perez 2015 shows how xenophobic political rhetoric generates threat among immigrants in the U.S. for similar reasons.

[27] Doosje et al. 2013.

[28] Brewer 1999.

[29] Doosje et al. 2013.

[30] Hewstone and Brown 1986.

different perspectives in an appreciative manner. If this is true, then pro-Islam rhetoric may help downplay individuals' Muslim identity, and suppress out-group animosity and radical sympathies.

CASE SELECTION

While Western Europe has a significant and growing share of Muslims, it has a notable disadvantage as a potential research site for our study: Muslims are immigrants and, as a result, are systematically poorer, suffer from greater unemployment, and are underrepresented in public life.[31] These contextual factors amount to inferior social status for Muslims as a group, which can cause individuals to distance themselves from society and to become amenable to radical ideas or accepting of criminal behavior regardless of threats to their Muslim identity.[32] Because of this, studying Muslim *immigrants* does not allow for exploring whether and how much anti-Islam rhetoric alone, absent social disadvantage, affects radical sympathies.

    To overcome this challenge, we conduct an experiment with Muslim respondents in Bosnia — a European democracy where Muslims are natives and do not suffer from systematic socio-economic deprivation. Muslims constitute about 45 per cent of Bosnia's native population, with the rest divided between Orthodox Christian Serbs and Catholic Croats. Bosnian Muslims have similar incomes and literacy rates compared to Serbs and Croats and are equally well represented politically, with reserved legislative and executive seats for all three groups.[33] This parity in social status between Muslims and the rest of the native (non-Muslim) population makes Bosnia a setting where we can better isolate whether and how much Islam-related rhetoric alone affects radical sympathies.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

We conducted experiments — five separate studies — with a total sample of 2,608 Bosnian Muslims between March and July 2017. The experiments were fielded by IPSOS as part of

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[31] Dancygier et al. 2015.
[32] Adida et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2012.
[33] Hadzic et al. 2020; Jukic 2016.

nationally representative monthly omnibus surveys. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in native languages, and our experiment was included only in interviews with Muslim respondents across five waves of the survey. Each wave included an average of 522 Muslim respondents out of 1,200 total interviews (about 43 per cent). We combine the surveys into a single analysis, resulting in a highly-powered study ($N = 2,608$).

We use quotes from U.S. politicians as a realistic and representative source of Western rhetoric in the Bosnian context. These statements represent the kind of anti-Muslim rhetoric employed in the West and are often blamed for producing radical responses among Muslims. Additionally, Bosnian citizens have developed a special relationship with and interest in the politics of the United States because of (a) the role of the U.S. in ending the Bosnian War[34] and (b) the large Bosnian diaspora that resides in the U.S. In 2016, Bosnian news agencies produced myriad stories about the impact of the Bosnian vote in the U.S. presidential election.[35] Given the strong and unique ties between the two countries, statements by U.S. politicians are not likely to be dismissed and are likely to provoke strong reactions among Bosnian Muslims. We provide further justification for using quotes from the U.S. rather than Europe in SI.2.

Experimental Manipulation

We assigned each respondent into one of three conditions: (1) a *control condition*, which provided no Islam-related messages to respondents; (2) an *anti-Islam condition* that exposed respondents to messages, delivered by a prominent U.S. politician, that attack Islam; and (3) a *pro-Islam condition* that exposed respondents to quotes by a prominent U.S. politician portraying Islam in a positive light.

A common preamble preceded both treatments: 'The following comment was recently made by a prominent politician in America about U.S. immigration policy.' The respondents assigned to the anti-Islam condition then read the following message: 'I think Islam hates us. There is something there, a tremendous hatred. . . And we can't allow people coming into this country who

[34] Sarajevo Times. 2016. "Emina Bicakcic welcomed Hillary in Tuzla in 1996, now she supports her in the presidential Race." November 6.

[35] Sarajevo Times. 2016. "St. Louis: 'Bosnian Vote' will decide between Clinton and Trump?" September 5.

have this hatred of the United States.' Those assigned to the pro-Islam condition instead read: 'Let's be clear: Islam is not our adversary. Muslims are peaceful and tolerant people and have nothing whatsoever to do with terrorism. . . they need to feel not just invited, but welcomed within the American society.' The quotes are statements made by presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, respectively, i.e., these are not hypothetical or deceptive vignettes, which is important for maximizing external validity.[36] While not exactly symmetric, as we explain in SI.2, we expect the statements to be of equal strength because both include the same three essential components: they reference (a) Islam's perceived relationship to the U.S. (ally vs. adversary), (b) people who practice Islam and their traits (hateful vs. peaceful), and (c) immigration from Islamic countries.

Since both quotes refer to the issue of immigration, we were concerned about a potential compound treatment and included a question, presented immediately after the treatment, about the importance of immigration in Bosnia. This question primed respondents equally on the issue of immigration (see SI.2). Randomization and balance checks in SI.3 show that respondents' demographics do not predict treatment assignment.

Outcome Variables

Post-treatment, respondents answered items measuring the three outcomes of interest that follow from our theory: strength of Muslim identity, out-group animosity, and endorsement of violence. We relied on prior research to construct these items as described in SI.2.

First, to measure their strength of *Muslim Identity*, respondents were asked their agreement (on a 5-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') with the following statement: 'Being Muslim is unimportant to my sense of what kind of a person I am.' This is a standard way of measuring the strength of one's group identity,[37] and it allows us to test whether Muslims develop a stronger collective identity after being subjected to identity threat (or boost).

Second, we measure respondents' level of out-group animosity by inquiring about their views of the U.S. with the following question (variable name *U.S. Favorable*): 'Do you have a

[36] Hughes and Huby 2004.
[37] Perez 2015.

favorable or unfavorable view of the U.S.?' The response options for this item were binary, with 'favorable' coded as 1 and 'unfavorable' as 0. For our purposes, this item captures the strength of out-group animosity, although prior work has also treated anti-Americanism as one manifestation of radicalization.[38]

Finally, to measure respondents' level of sympathy with the use of violence — a radical tactic —, we asked respondents for their agreement (on a 5-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') with the following statement (variable name *Approve Violence*): 'I can understand others who use violence to defend their ethnic or religious group.' This item has been used in on prior studies of Muslim radicalization.[39]

RESULTS

We first analyze whether the pro- and anti-Islam treatments significantly impact respondents' strength of *Muslim Identity*.[40] Figure 1, panel A presents both anti- and pro-Islam treatment effects and shows that neither treatment has a statistically significant influence.

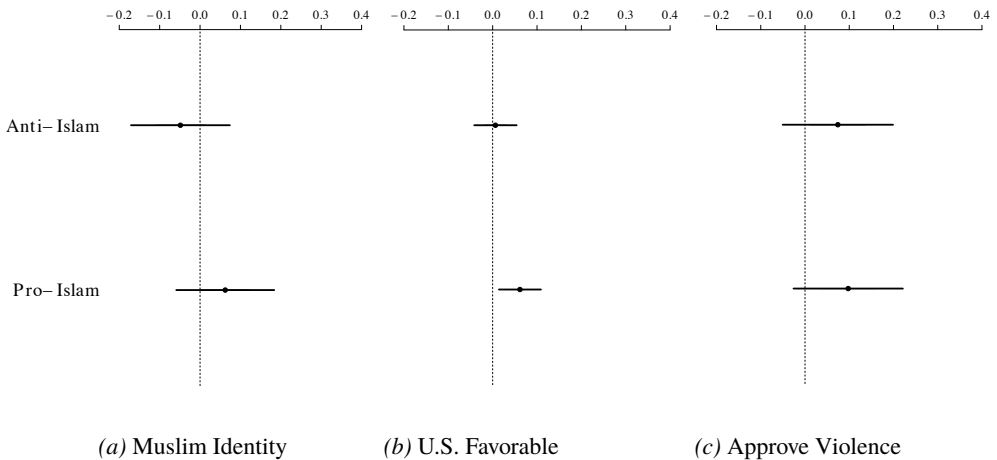*(a)* Muslim Identity   *(b)* U.S. Favorable   *(c)* Approve Violence

Figure 1: The Effect of Anti- and Pro-Islam Rhetoric on Radical Attitudes
Note: The panels display coefficients from OLS regression models and 95 per cent confidence intervals. Logit and probit results are in SI.4.

[38] O'Duffy 2008, see also Blaydes and Linzer 2012.
[39] e.g., van Bergen et al. 2015.
[40] Regression output appears in SI.4.

We explore further whether respondents react to pro- or anti-Islam messages by altering their opinions about the out-group. Figure 1, panel B indicates that this is true for only one of the treatments. The top section of the panel shows that the anti-Islam treatment has no effect on *U.S. Favorable*. Interestingly, respondents receiving the pro-Islam treatment reduced out-group animosity by a statistically and substantively significant amount. This asymmetry calls for further investigation. It is possible that respondents may be accustomed to anti-Islam identity threat and build this into their evaluation of out-group Western politicians, resulting in a null effect. The pro-Islam treatment might have been more unexpected and therefore provoked a stronger reaction. Of course, we cannot read too much into this single finding, and future work is needed to draw conclusions about the differential effects of positive and negative rhetoric.

With at best mixed results so far, we move to examining approval of violence. Panel C of Figure 1 shows that subjects exposed to negative messages about Islam were not more likely to express radical sympathies when compared to subjects in the control group. We find similar null results for the pro-Islam treatment.

Given the findings in previous studies of radicalization and theoretical expectations about the effect of identity threat, the null results are unexpected. This motivated us to perform additional robustness tests by including covariates, time fixed effects, exploring heterogeneous treatment effects (including whether the effects are different for the two regions of Bosnia — Republika Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina — given that sectarian tensions are greater in the former), and checking for floor or ceiling effects (see SI.5 and SI.6). Results of these robustness tests are consistent with those presented here.

We do not believe that our results are due to a weak treatment. The statements that we use are very strongly worded: the rhetoric in the anti-Islam treatment drew harsh criticism in Bosnia. Importantly, the pro-Islam treatment *does* produce a significant effect on out-group favorability, suggesting that it is unlikely that the treatment was weak. It is also not the case that in Bosnia Muslim identity is of low salience and therefore hard to provoke. Ever since the ethno-religiously charged war in the 1990s, references to religious identity remain sensitive,[41] suggesting that

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[41] Hadzic et al. 2020.

Bosnian Muslims should be *easy* to provoke. That we were unable to find effects despite Bosnia being a 'likely case' suggests that the null effect may be more general in nature.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We find that high-profile rhetorical attacks against Islam do not heighten Muslim identity, generate out-group animosity (anti-Americanism, in our case), or increase approval of violence. We also tested for the potential effects of similarly high-profile positive political rhetoric about Islam and found that Muslims' identity strength and radical sympathies are unmoved by such praise. Hearing high-profile praise produced one positive effect, however: it increased Muslims' favorability toward Western societies.

While we find that *anti*-Islam rhetoric from Western politicians alone fails to provoke radical tendencies in Muslim populations, it does not imply that hostile rhetoric never matters. It is possible that such rhetoric breeds radicalization only in combination with conducive contextual factors, some of which the existing literature has studied. For example, rhetoric from Western politicians might contribute to radicalization among Muslims who, as a group, *are* suffering from socio-economic deprivation.[42] Muslims who are functioning well within their community might be able to more easily play off threatening rhetoric as cheap talk. In contexts where Muslim are socio-economically deprived relative to other groups, however, identity threat may resonate more strongly because it gets magnified by socio-economic threat. Alternatively, extreme rhetoric may inspire the already radicalized; functioning as a catalyst for, and not necessarily an instigator of, radical tendencies. Or hostile rhetoric may need to be present for a longer period of time to take effect. Future research could more explicitly explore some of these possible conditions under which hostile rhetoric from Western political leaders propels Muslim radicalization.

Our findings about the positive effect of *pro*-Islam rhetoric are also noteworthy. The effects are limited, but still encouraging. While approval of the use of violence does not decline in response to pro-Islam rhetoric by Western politicians, anti-Americanism does. Some prior work

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[42] Adida et al. 2016; Blair et al. 2013; Fair et al. 2018; Krueger and Malečková 2003; Smith et al. 2012.

has treated anti-Americanism as one manifestation of radicalization.[43] That rhetorical tools can mitigate this animosity is promising and calls for more research into the potential positive effects of political rhetoric in advancing inter-group relations.

Finally, our hypotheses were informed by social identity theory, which prescribes that hostility toward one's group poses identity threat and triggers defensive response. Our null findings imply that further work is needed about the conditions under which hostility has these effects (as discussed above), the type of hostility that matters, and about whether identity threat is needed at all for radical attitudes to develop. If identity threat alone does not breed radicalization, some of the strategies designed to combat radicalization, like cultural assimilation programs, may not have their desired effect. Similarly, if positive effects of pro-Islam rhetoric hold under different conditions, policy-makers may use pro-Islam rhetoric to help facilitate relations among different groups.

Data Availability Statement

The data, replication instructions, and the data's codebook can be found at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UW5CSR.

[43] O'Duffy 2008.

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