



Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2001-2020

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Seven Muslim-Americans were arrested or killed during alleged involvement with violent extremism in 2020, the lowest total since 2008 (see Figure 1). This continues the decline since the peak of 90 cases in 2015.

Muslim-American extremists caused no fatalities in 2020. The total number of fatalities in the United States from Muslim-American violent extremism since 9/11 remained at 141. Over this same period, there have been more than 309,000 murders in the United States.¹ In other words, the number of fatalities caused by acts of violent extremism by Muslim-Americans in 19 years is about the same as the number of murders that take place every three days in the United States. In 2020 alone, 179 Americans were killed in mass killings,² according to the federal definition of mass killing as incidents involving three or more fatalities.³

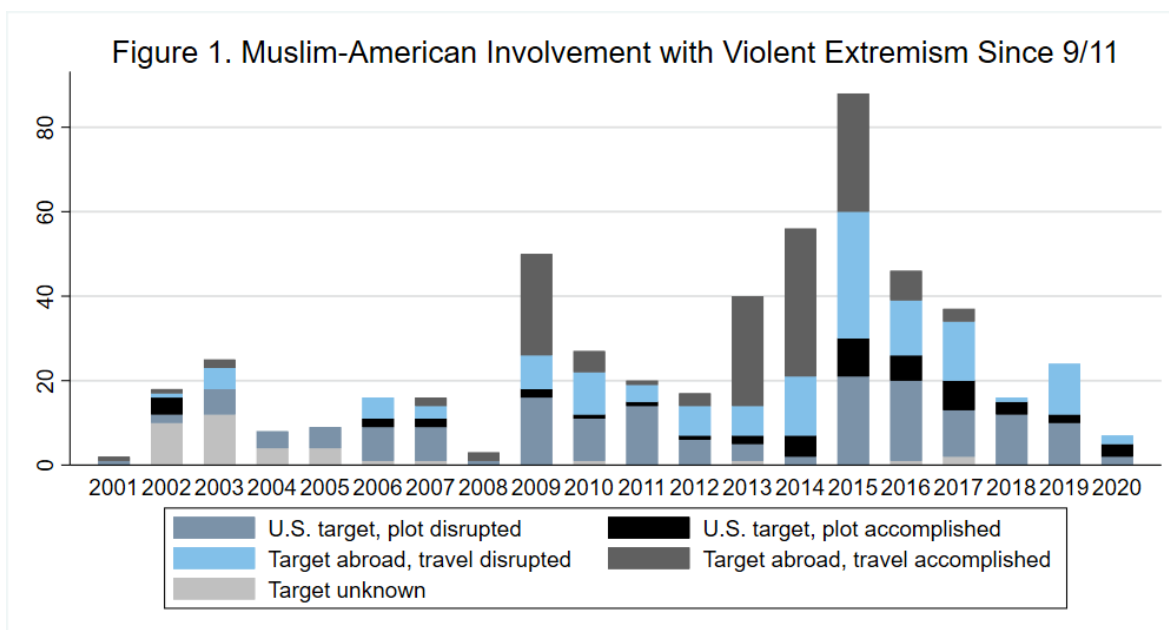
Islamic extremism played almost no role in the considerable unrest that the United States experienced in 2020: protests for racial justice; protests against public health measures, including a plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan; protests leading up to and following the elections in November; and

This is the 12th annual report on Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators published by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security (<https://sites.duke.edu/tcths>). These reports, and the data on which they are based, are available at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism/annual-report>.

a vehicle suicide bombing in Nashville in December, whose motivation remains unknown.

Political violence involving Muslim-Americans consisted of two knife attacks on police officers, one shooting at a military guard, and one plot to shoot FBI officers, all of which occurred in a span of two weeks in late May and early June. The weapon in the plot to shoot FBI officers was a fake firearm provided by an undercover FBI employee.

The Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Threat Assessment, issued in October 2020, identified white supremacist extremists as "the most persistent and lethal threat" posed by violent extremism in the United States, followed by "anti-government/anti-authority violent extremism," including



anarchists, opponents of measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus, and conspiracy theorists. The report listed the threat from Islamic violent extremism below these other forms of extremism, and said this threat was expected to “remain overseas in the coming year.”⁴ This was a reversal from the prioritization of threats one year earlier, when counterterrorism policy statements by the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies had emphasized threats from Muslim-American “homegrown violent extremists” above non-Muslim “domestic terrorists.”⁵

The Department of Homeland Security’s report in October 2020 attributed the decline in threats from Islamic violent extremism to “sustained U.S. counterterrorism pressure.”

Federal authorities disrupted only four plots in 2020, down from 24 the previous year. Of these four plots, two came to the attention of law enforcement when the defendants contacted undercover officers online.⁶ One was arrested in California, where an undercover FBI employee had told him a cargo ship would take him to “Islamic State” territory. The other was arrested in Arizona, after an undercover FBI employee helped her book an airline flight to Turkey to join al-Qaeda in Syria. A third arrest resulted from intelligence collected by the United States Postal Service that weapons parts were being

shipped to the defendant.⁷ A fourth arrest came about due to information from a university that recorded the defendant’s false bomb threat during a Zoom class.⁸

In addition to these plots of violent extremism, five Muslim-Americans were arrested in 2020 for nonviolent support for a foreign terrorist organization, the lowest annual total in 20 years. One of the five was charged with sending \$3,250 to a militant with the “Islamic State,” and four were charged with operating social media accounts in support of the “Islamic State.” Two of the defendants operating social media accounts set up an encrypted chat group with an undercover FBI employee; according to the criminal complaint, the chat group grew to include 19 individuals, not including six undercover FBI employees and six informants.⁹ The other 19 participants in the chat group do not appear to have charged with crimes, at least publicly.

Terrorism Experts Predicted More Violence, Not Less

In late May and early June, the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy convened a virtual roundtable of five terrorism experts from academia and the private sector, four of whom had served in government agencies. The prompt for the discussion was: “As you think about COVID-19 and look toward the near-term future, what do you see as the initial implications for the issues of terrorism and counterterrorism?”¹⁰

Figure 2. Alleged Muslim-American Involvement in Violent Extremism, 2020

Name	Location	Plot or alleged plot	Disrupted	Status of case
Muhammad Masood	Rochester, MN	Attempted travel to join “Islamic State”	Early	Trial pending
Adam Alsahli	Corpus Christi, TX	Shot and injured military guard	No	Killed in attack
Muhammed Al-Azhari	Tampa, FL	Plot to shoot FBI agents	Early	Trial pending
Heba Al-Azhari	Temple Terrace, FL	Stabbed and injured police officer	No	Killed in attack
Dzenan Camovic	Brooklyn, NY	Stabbed, shot, and injured police officers	No	Trial pending
Jill Marie Jones	Phoenix, AZ	Attempted travel to join al-Qaeda	Early	Trial pending
Ibrabeem Al Bayati	Houston, TX	False bomb threat	No	Trial pending

Early disruption is defined here as coming to the attention of authorities prior to obtaining weapons or explosives.

All five experts said they expected more violent extremism globally as a result of the pandemic:

Expert 1: “[T]raditional forces of order such as navies, armies, police forces, and even border guards are struggling to execute their missions as they face exposure, quarantine, contagion, and infection. ... Meanwhile, terrorist groups have shown interest in technologies such as armed UAVs, 3D-printed weapons, facial recognition tools, and a wide range of internet-connected devices. Now they have the time and space to develop new skills.”

Expert 2: “[T]he aftermath of today’s pandemic will be characterized by terrorism finding a more hospitable global environment for recruitment, growth, and action than before. ... [D]espite enormous expenditures of blood/treasure to “kill, capture, arrest” our way to strategic counterterrorism success, there are more terrorists globally today than on 9/11, and COVID-19 will probably lead to the creation of more.”

Expert 3: “COVID-19 and extremism are the perfect storm. Salafi-jihadists have exploited the COVID-19 crisis for multiple purposes and see it occurring within a larger eschatological framework as divine punishment against infidels and destroying the West’s societal infrastructure and economy. ... Within the West, jihadi extremists have sought to use the social isolation to target and prey on new recruits and to flood social media with propaganda to sympathizers. Violent extremists are also infiltrating gaming platforms to find new recruits.”

Expert 4: “The COVID-19 pandemic has also provided fertile ground for the disinformation-terrorism nexus to take root. With the increased time people are spending online coupled with rampant modern disinformation campaigns spread by state and non-state

actors alike, terrorist organizations have increased opportunities to peddle hate, recruit, and promote acts of violence.”

Expert 5: “As with any crisis, terrorist groups and networks will take advantage of the weaknesses in governments’ overwhelmed capabilities and find the seams in the system, whether from weakened responses, failed international cooperation, or a diminished focus on terrorist operations. ... The prowess of extremist groups to recruit online and to create digital or anonymous arenas for like-minded voices to congregate is only amplified in a period of physical distancing and social isolation.”

As of the end of 2020 – six months after the roundtable – these expert predictions have not held true on a global scale, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a nonprofit research organization funded in part by the U.S. Department of State and the foreign ministries of the Germany and the Netherlands. Incidents of violence by rebel groups were 24.6 percent lower in 2020 than in 2019.¹¹ Incidents of violence by the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” and other prominent Islamist revolutionary groups dropped by 9.4 percent.¹²

ACLED began collecting data on conflict in the United States in mid-2020. Between May and the end of the year, the number of violent incidents by non-state actors dropped each month.¹³ (Events thus far in January 2021 may reverse this trend.)

As for Muslim-American involvement with violent extremism, the trend is even starker: incidents and arrests have become *less* widespread, not more widespread, contrary to the experts’ expectations.

This fits the longstanding pattern that I noted

in my book, *The Missing Martyrs* (2019), of terrorism experts consistently overestimating threats and facing little accountability for false alarms.¹⁴

Department of Justice Removes More than 100 Names from List of International Terrorism-Related Convictions

Since October 2001, the Department of Justice has periodically released lists of people who were charged following investigations related to international terrorism or convicted in cases related to international terrorism. Releasing the first batch of 93 names a month after 9/11, Attorney General John Ashcroft told reporters, “The Department of Justice is waging a deliberate campaign of arrest and detention to protect American lives. We’re removing suspected terrorists who violate the law from our streets to prevent further terrorist attack. We believe we have al Qaeda membership in custody, and we will use every constitutional tool to keep suspected terrorists locked up.”¹⁵

An audit by the Department of Justice’s Inspector-General found that the department had “significantly overstated” the number of terrorism-related convictions, because the department “initially coded the cases as terrorism-related when the cases were opened, but did not recode cases when no link to terrorism was established.”¹⁶

Nonetheless, the list of international terrorism-related convictions – including the same individuals whose names were publicized in October 2001 – continued to be updated and released in subsequent years. By 2010, the list of “International Terrorism and Terrorism-Related Convictions” had grown to 403 names.¹⁷

Beginning in 2012, the list separated out the names of 119 individuals who “were identified

during the course of the nationwide investigation conducted after September 11, 2001, ... regardless of whether investigators developed or identified evidence that they had any connection to international terrorism.”¹⁸

In June 2016, Senators Ted Cruz of Texas, who had just suspended his presidential campaign, and Jeff Sessions of Alabama, who would soon be appointed Attorney General, publicized the names again, removing the Department of Justice’s disclaimer and describing the entire list as “individuals convicted of terrorism or terrorism-related offenses.”¹⁹

In the most recent release from the Department of Justice, all but three of these 119 names have been removed from the list. A footnote explained: “Prior versions of this chart included a group of defendants who were identified during the course of the nationwide investigation conducted after September 11, 2001, and were subsequently charged with a criminal offense. Individuals whose convictions arose from that initial terrorism investigation were included on prior versions of the chart regardless of whether investigators developed or identified evidence that the defendants had any connection to international terrorism. The current version of the chart only includes those defendants from that group who were charged and/or convicted of Category I offenses.”²⁰ (Category I offenses involve statutes with terrorism in their title, plus hostage taking, crimes targeting aircraft, and weapons of mass destruction.)²¹

It appears that the intensive manhunt after 9/11 turned up far fewer al-Qaeda operatives than originally indicated.

Meanwhile, even as the Department of Justice repeatedly publicizes the names of U.S. citizens charged with international terrorism-related offenses, it refuses to identify the

larger set of people convicted of domestic terrorism-related offenses, citing concern for their privacy rights. The Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University School of Law and I are suing under the Freedom of Information Act to obtain this information.²²

About the author:

Charles Kurzman is a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a specialist on Islamic movements. His book, *The Missing Martyrs: Why Are There So Few Muslim Terrorists?*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2019 in a revised edition, updated for the age of ISIS. He can be contacted through his website, <http://kurzman.unc.edu>.

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Notes:

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, 2018, Table 1, "Crime in the United States by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1999-2018." The estimate for 2019 is extrapolated from preceding years.

² Gun Violence Archive (<http://gunviolencearchive.org>), accessed January 3, 2021, counted 46 incidents of gun violence with three or more fatalities.

³ 28 U.S. Code 530(C)(b)(1)(m)(i)(I), enacted into law by the "Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012," January 14, 2013: "the term 'mass killings' means 3 or more killings in a single incident".

⁴ Department of Homeland Security, "Homeland Threat Assessment," October 2020, pp. 18-19.

⁵ Department of Homeland Security, *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, September 2019; Russell Travers, acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center, and Christopher Wray, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, testimony before the House Homeland Security Committee, October 30, 2019, and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, November 5, 2019.

⁶ United States of America v. Muhammad Masood, United States District Court for the District of Minnesota, Criminal Complaint, March 19, 2020, p. 5: "On or about January 24, 2020, the user contacted CHS-1 [Confidential Human Source] via encrypted SMP [Social Media Platform] username 'BB' and requested assistance from CHS-1 to make Hijra." United States of America v. Jill Marie Jones, U.S. District Court, District of Arizona, Criminal Complaint,

July 23, 2020, p. 5: "On or about March 4, 2020, JONES initiated contact with an FBI Online Covert Employee (OCE-1)."

⁷ United States of America v. Muhammed Momtaz Al-Azhari, United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Criminal Complaint, May 26, 2020, p. 9: "After the package containing the items had shipped from Texas to Tampa, but before it was delivered to AL-AZHARI, the FBI learned from the USPS that the package was en route to his residence."

⁸ United States of America v. Ibraheem Ahmed Al Bayati, United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas, Criminal Complaint, September 4, 2020, p. 2.

⁹ United States of America v. Jaylyn Christopher Molina and Kristopher Sean Matthews, United States District Court for the Western District of Texas, Criminal Complaint, September 17, 2020, p. 5.

¹⁰ Paul Cruickshank and Don Rasler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: A Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and Counterterrorism," *CTC Sentinel*, June 2020, pp. 1-14.

¹¹ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), data downloaded from <https://acleddata.com> on January 12, 2021. For an overview of the dataset, see Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data," *Journal of Peace Research*, September 2010, vol. 47, no. 5, pp. 651-660. For the years 2018-2020, the dataset covers Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. For present purposes, I have counted only events categorized in the dataset as battles, explosions/remote violence, or violence against civilians, that were perpetrated by actors categorized in the dataset as rebel groups or external/other forces.

¹² For present purposes, I am counting only events perpetrated by the self-proclaimed "Islamic State," al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

¹³ ACLED, US Crisis Monitor, <https://acleddata.com/special-projects/us-crisis-monitor/>, data for April 1-January 8, 2021, downloaded on January 13, 2021. For present purposes, I have counted only events categorized in the dataset as battles, riots, and violence against civilians, that were not categorized in the dataset as having been perpetrated by state forces.

¹⁴ Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why Are There So Few Muslim Terrorists?*, revised edition, updated for the age of ISIS (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Department of Justice, "Attorney General Ashcroft Provides Total Number of Federal Criminal Charges and INS Detainees," November 27, 2001, https://www.justice.gov/archive/ag/speeches/2001/agcrisisremarks11_27.htm.

¹⁶ Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, Audit Division, "The Department of Justice's Internal Controls over Terrorism Reporting," February 2007, p. viii, <https://oig.justice.gov/reports/plus/a0720/final.pdf>.

¹⁷ Department of Justice, "National Security Division Statistics on Unsealed International Terrorism and Terrorism-Related Convictions, 9/11/01 - 3/18/10," May 2010, <http://web.archive.org/web/20100528153616/http://www.justice.gov/cjs/docs/terrorism-convictions-statistics.pdf>

¹⁸ Department of Justice, "Introduction to National Security Division Statistics on Unsealed International Terrorism and Terrorism-Related Convictions," June 2, 2012, p. 2, <https://fas.org/irp/agency/doj/doj060612-stats.pdf>.

¹⁹ Jeff Sessions and Ted Cruz, letter to President Barack Obama, June 14, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20161109030307/http://www.sessions.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/f9d1d9f4-6ee8-42ff-a5f2-29a2518fe2f7/06.14.16-sens.-sessions-cruz-to-president-obama-on-terrorism-immigration.pdf. The list of names, reformatted without the disclaimer, was posted online at https://web.archive.org/web/20160906022314/http://www.sessions.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/e93b5041-ae9-4289-acd2-ee46822c402e/06.14.16-doj-nsd-list.pdf.

²⁰ Department of Justice, "Introduction to National Security Division's Chart of Public/Unsealed International Terrorism and Terrorism-Related Convictions from 9/11/01 to 12/13/17," April 20, 2018, p. 2, https://cdn.muckrock.com/foia_files/2018/08/07/NSD_Chart_of_Convictions_9-11-01_to_12-31-17_Updated_4-20-18.pdf.

²¹ Department of Justice, "Introduction to National Security Division's Chart of Public/Unsealed International Terrorism and Terrorism-Related Convictions from 9/11/01 to 12/13/17," April 20, 2018, pp. 3-4.

²² Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law and Charles Kurzman v. United States Department of Justice, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, August 8, 2018; Charles Kurzman, "The Privacy Rights of Terrorism Defendants, Muslim and Non-Muslim," *Lawfare*, April 5, 2019.