

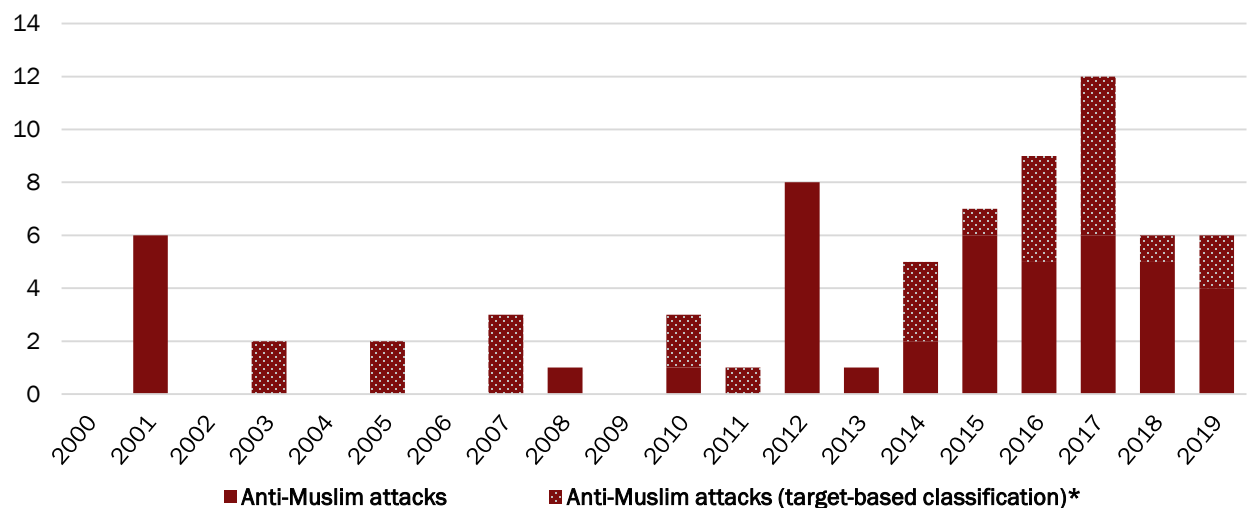
# Anti-Muslim Terrorism in the United States

In the early morning hours of August 5, 2017, an improvised explosive device detonated on the property of the Dar al Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, Minnesota. According to one of the perpetrators who claimed responsibility for the attack, the goal was to broadcast a direct message to Muslims in the United States: “You’re not welcome here, get the f\*\*\* out.”<sup>i</sup> This incident was one of dozens of violent terrorist attacks intended to intimidate Muslims in the United States in recent years. Using auxiliary data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), we identify critical data points and trends in anti-Muslim terrorism in the United States between 2000 and 2019.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Anti-Muslim terrorism in the United States increased in the last decade: of the 72 attacks between 2000 and 2019, 80% occurred after 2009.
- ▶ Two-thirds (67%) of anti-Muslim terrorist attacks directly targeted mosques or Islamic centers.
- ▶ The majority of anti-Muslim terrorist attacks (75%) did not result in casualties; however, the fatal attacks resulted in a total of 16 deaths.
- ▶ Incendiary weapons were used in nearly half (47%) of anti-Muslim terrorist attacks; these attacks did not cause any casualties. Firearms were used in six of the seven lethal attacks.
- ▶ Perpetrators were not identified in half of the attacks.
- ▶ Perpetrators who were identified included individuals who were involved in organized extremist movements (such as militias and white supremacist groups), as well as those with no known affiliations or engagement, suggesting that violent anti-Muslim sentiment circulates among organized extremist movements as well as the broader population.
- ▶ The growth of anti-Muslim terrorism over the last two decades parallels a growth in overall right-wing terrorism in the United States, which has increased 350% between the first and second decades of the 21st century, with an average of 4.8 attacks per year between 2000 and 2009, compared to 21.6 attacks per year between 2010 and 2019.

**Anti-Muslim Terrorist Attacks in the United States, by Year, 2000 - 2019**



Source: Global Terrorism Database

\*All 27 of the attacks that were classified based on the identity of the victims, rather than the perpetrators' statements, targeted mosques or Islamic centers.

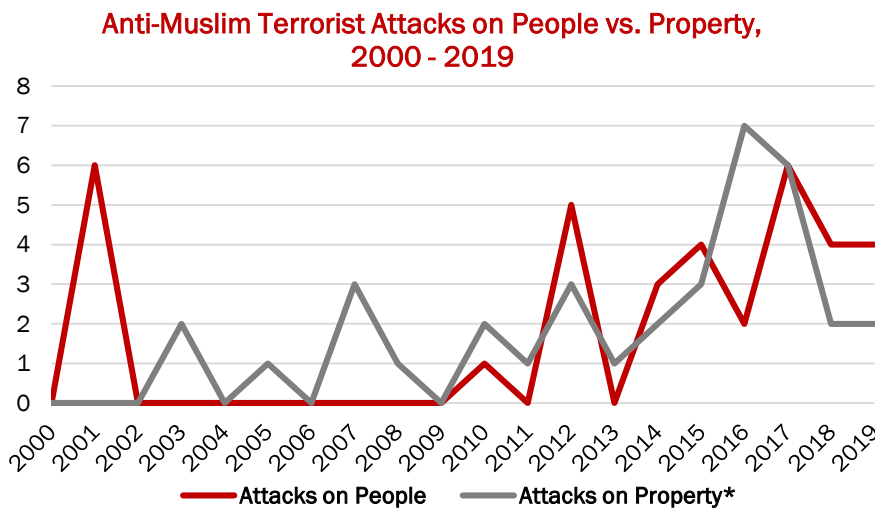
## DATA AND DEFINITIONS

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) records open-source information on the perpetrators, casualties, targets, weapons, and locations of terrorist attacks around the world. The GTD defines terrorism as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation,” and uses a series of inclusion criteria to determine if a particular event meets this definition.<sup>ii</sup> The data exclude spontaneous hate crimes, vandalism, non-violent threats and/or harassment—all tactics which, although not assessed here, constitute an enduring threat to Muslim communities in the United States.<sup>iii</sup>

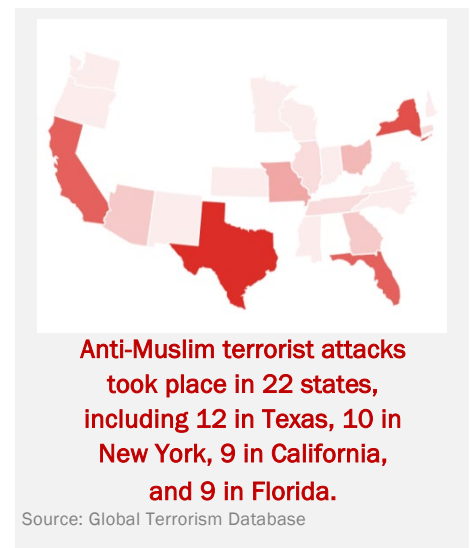
For this analysis, we used several criteria to categorize terrorist attacks as “anti-Muslim.” First, we included attacks that were characterized by expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment by the perpetrators (including both explicitly Islamophobic messages as well as more implicit rhetoric, such as accusations of being “a terrorist” leveled at victims). Second, we included attacks where no direct messages were present, but the target was known to be Muslim, (for example, attacks on mosques with unknown perpetrators), but marked these cases as “target-based.” Finally, we also included attacks where evidence suggested the perpetrator intended to target Muslims even if the victims were not Muslim. Attacks on non-Muslims in this context reflect the racialization of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States and are a critical dimension of anti-Muslim terrorism.<sup>iv</sup> Through this initiative to comprehensively classify anti-Muslim terrorist attacks in the United States, we identified 72 qualifying attacks that took place from 2000 to 2019.

## NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS OVER TIME

Anti-Muslim terrorist attacks in the United States increased in the last decade. After a spike in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the first decade of the new century saw between zero and three attacks per year. Starting in 2012, however, these numbers increased dramatically, including a high of 12 attacks in 2017. Over the period as a whole, attacks were evenly split between those targeting people and those targeting property, though attacks targeting property increased especially in 2016.



\*Attacks on property are defined as those intended to cause damage solely to property with no likelihood of harming people (e.g., setting fire to an unoccupied mosque in the middle of the night).

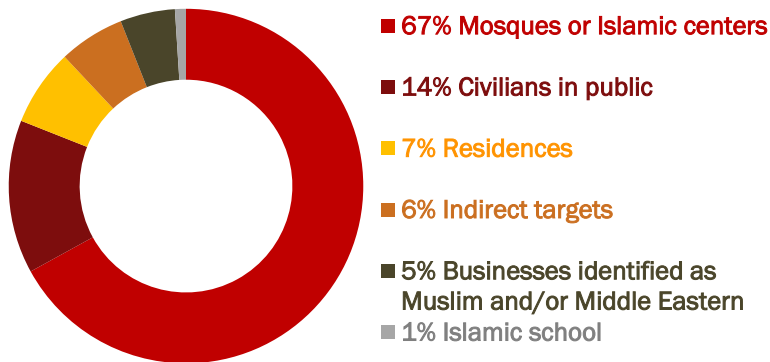


- ▶ Between 2000 and 2009, the data show an average of 1.4 anti-Muslim terrorist attacks per year, compared to an average of 5.8 attacks per year between 2010 and 2019.
- ▶ Terrorist attacks on both people and property increased in the 2010s. Since 2014, there have been at least two attacks targeting people and two attacks on property, motivated by anti-Muslim xenophobia, each year.
- ▶ Property attacks accounted for much of the noticeable spike after 2014, including seven violent property attacks in 2016 alone.

## TARGETS

Anti-Muslim terrorists in the United States have tended to target the most visible and widely-recognized representations of Islam; 48 (two-thirds) of the 72 anti-Muslim attacks targeted mosques or Islamic centers, and four attacks targeted women wearing hijabs. However, more than 10% of all terrorist attacks explicitly motivated by anti-Muslim sentiment mistakenly victimized people who were not Muslim. This pattern includes a 2012 mass shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, where seven people were killed (one person who was injured passed away in 2020). Other such attacks targeted civilians in public, businesses, and private residences.

### Targets



Source: Global Terrorism Database

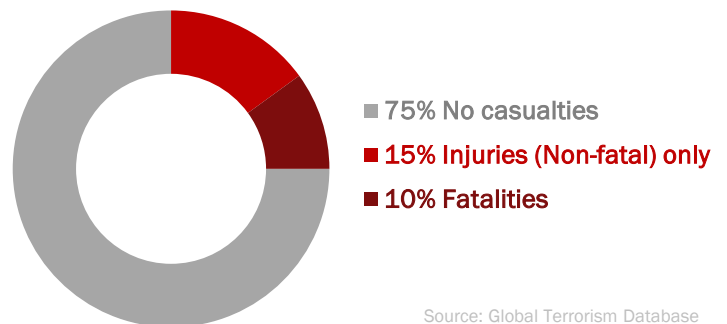
- ▶ Ten percent of all anti-Muslim terrorist attacks targeted individual civilians in generic public spaces.
- ▶ Five attacks targeted the private homes of people believed to be Muslim, while four targeted businesses associated with Muslims (for example, a convenience store with a common Muslim name). One attack targeted an Islamic secondary school.
- ▶ In four attacks, Muslims or people perceived to be Muslim were not the direct target, but evidence showed the attack was at least partially animated by anti-Muslim bias. For example, in three of these cases the perpetrator committed attacks intending to frame Muslim people as violent extremists.

### “Indirect” Anti-Muslim Attack

In January 2017, Thomas Dale Britton broke into St. Stephen’s Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, Texas. Over several hours in the middle of the night, Britton reportedly set five fires and destroyed valuable church property. Before he left, he wrote graffiti to implicate a terrorist group, described by law enforcement as “such as ISIS,” as responsible for the attack. Prior to the event, Britton’s Facebook page included a number of posts indicating that he was involved in the anti-government extremist militia movement, including various Three Percenter and Oath Keeper groups. He also posted anti-Muslim content. Britton was convicted of arson and criminal mischief in 2018.<sup>v</sup> This attack is one of the three “indirect” anti-Muslim attacks in which extremists appear to advance a stereotype of Muslims as violent radicals by committing terrorist attacks and blaming them on Muslim extremists.

## CASUALTIES

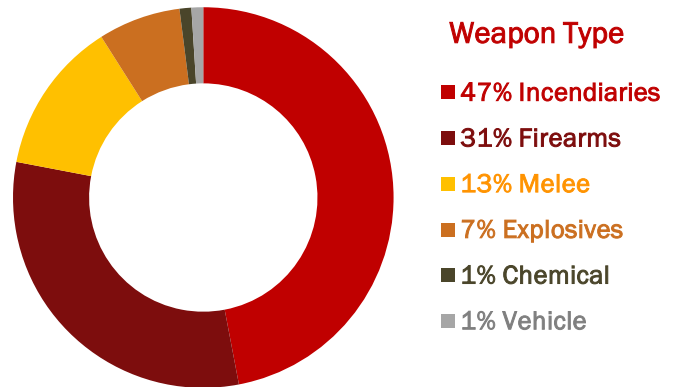
- ▶ Three-quarters (75%) of anti-Muslim terrorist attacks in the United States between 2000 and 2019 resulted in no injuries or deaths.
- ▶ Of the 16 attacks that did involve casualties, seven resulted in fatalities—a total of 16 people were killed.
- ▶ Nine attacks resulted in non-fatal injuries, with a total of 28 people wounded.



Source: Global Terrorism Database

## WEAPON TYPES

- ▶ Consistent with national trends on weapon use in terrorist attacks, the most common weapons used in anti-Muslim terrorist attacks in the United States were incendiaries, including Molotov cocktails or gasoline, which were used in almost half of all attacks (47%) between 2000 and 2019.
- ▶ None of the attacks in which assailants used incendiary weapons and/or explosive devices resulted in casualties.
- ▶ Firearms were the second most common type of weapon used. Assailants used firearms in 31% of anti-Muslim terrorist attacks, compared to 23% of all terrorist attacks in the United States during the same time period. The attacks involving firearms were much more likely to result in casualties, especially fatalities.
- ▶ While less than a third of anti-Muslim terrorist attacks involved firearms, six of the seven lethal attacks did, including the 2012 mass casualty attack at a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, where seven people were killed and three were wounded. In the seventh lethal attack, an assailant used a knife to assault passengers on a train in Portland, Oregon.



## PERPETRATORS

Half (36) of the anti-Muslim terrorist attacks from 2000 to 2019 were committed by unknown perpetrators. However, the attackers who were identified included actors with a range of known associations with organized extremist movements, as well as many without evidence of such connections.

### OUT OF 32 NAMED PERPETRATORS

12

Were known to be linked to organized, right-wing movements (including white supremacist and militia extremist groups).

20

Had no known links to organized extremist movements.

Source: Global Terrorism Database

- ▶ Among the 12 perpetrators linked to organized extremist groups and/or movements, six carried out their anti-Muslim attacks alone.
- ▶ The most violent attacks were more likely to involve perpetrators with known links to extremist movements, including five of the seven cases resulting in fatalities.
- ▶ Thirty-eight attacks were known to be perpetrated by lone actors, while four attacks involved more than one perpetrator (in two cases, witnesses saw a single assailant, but he was never identified).
- ▶ Four perpetrators were repeat offenders (two responsible for two attacks each and two responsible for three attacks each).
- ▶ Half of the anti-Muslim terrorist attacks in the United States were committed by unknown perpetrators. Most of these were arsons or other attacks on mosques, often committed at night or in attempted secrecy. However, even some brazen and violent attacks went unsolved.

## Unaffiliated Lone Actor

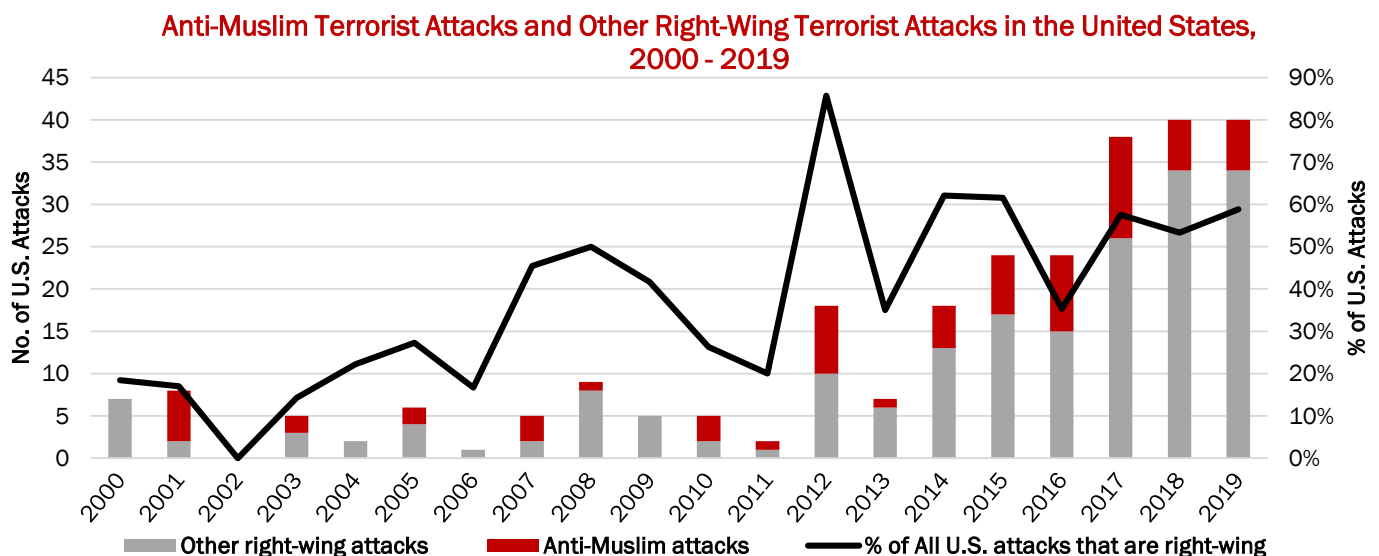
In September 2012, Randolph T. Linn entered the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo with a firearm and a canister of gas and attempted to set the building on fire. A sprinkler system prevented the fire from spreading, and no casualties resulted. Linn was later identified from security footage and made anti-Muslim comments during his arrest. An Indiana resident, Linn had reportedly observed the gold dome of the mosque from the highway on his drives as a trucker. Linn had no known affiliation with organized extremist groups or movements. Rather, he said in court that he thought “most” Muslims were terrorists<sup>vi</sup> and that what he knew about Islam and Muslims he learned from cable TV and on the radio.<sup>vii</sup> This case illustrates that anti-Muslim sentiment leading to violence is not limited to organized racist and other extremist movements, but also circulates among the broader population in mainstream discourse.

## Unknown Perpetrators

In April 2018, a woman wearing a hijab was stabbed by a man after he attempted to sideswipe her vehicle with his own and both parties pulled over to the side of the road. The victim was badly injured but survived. During the violent attack, the assailant yelled anti-Muslim epithets, but drove away and was never identified. This was one of several attacks that took place on or around a day designated as “Punish a Muslim Day” by online hate groups.<sup>viii</sup>

## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

- ▶ Nationally, the growth in anti-Muslim terrorist attacks parallels an increase in other types of right-wing attacks, including racist, xenophobic, anti-government, and social reactionary attacks during the same period.
- ▶ In some years, anti-Muslim sentiment appears to play a central role in driving this overall trend, notably in 2012, but also during increases in the number of attacks in 2014, 2015, and 2017.

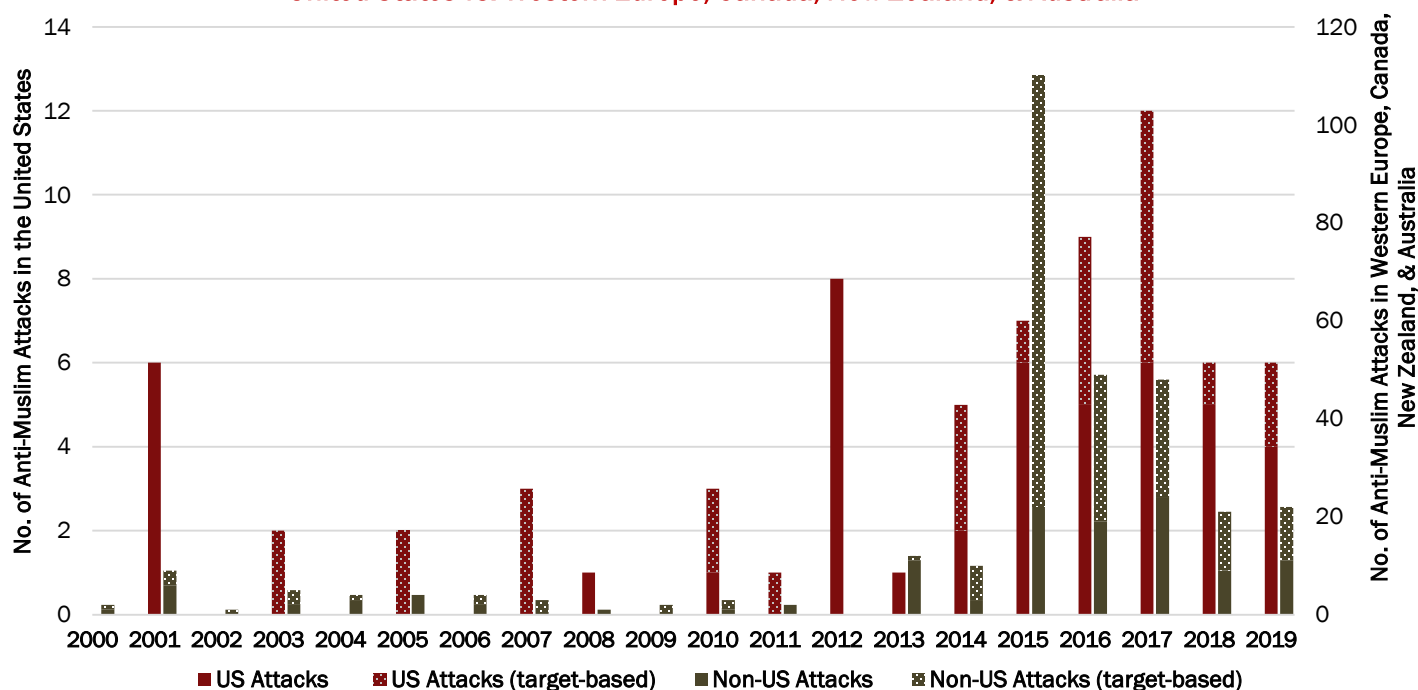


Source: Global Terrorism Database

- ▶ During this same time period, anti-Muslim terrorism also increased outside the United States. In certain contexts, there has been a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment directed at refugee populations that particularly exacerbated patterns of violence. For example, in 2015 and 2016, Western Europe experienced a sharp increase in terrorist attacks targeting refugees. This phenomenon was a key driver of an increase in anti-Muslim terrorist attacks that was much steeper than that in the United States.

- In the European context, we classified attacks on refugee centers where no other motive was indicated, as “target-based” if there was no explicit messaging indicating anti-Muslim ideology. The data include 123 such attacks, 80% of which occurred in 2015 and 2016, the point at which the Syrian war resulted in a growing number of refugees and became a central political issue in Europe, implicitly and explicitly evoking anti-Muslim sentiment in political dialogues.<sup>ix</sup>

### Anti-Muslim Terrorist Attacks, United States vs. Western Europe, Canada, New Zealand, & Australia



Source: Global Terrorism Database

\*In the European context, attacks on refugee centers where no other motive was indicated were classified as anti-Muslim, “target-based.”

Although it is outside of the scope of this brief to assess all of the potential causes of the growth in anti-Muslim terrorism, observers from a range of fields have suggested that particular events—or at least the political discourse surrounding those events—have increased violent anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States, and may contribute to the trend identified here.

- Several Salafi-Jihadist terrorist attacks in the West have been followed by spikes in anti-Muslim terrorism. Notably, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were followed by six anti-Muslim attacks in the United States in September and October of the same year. In several of these attacks, perpetrators described themselves as acting in retaliation for 9/11. However, research suggests that the sometimes-violent wave of Islamophobia following 9/11 was not entirely an instantaneous reaction, but at least partly the result of long-term dialogues that increasingly involved anti-Muslim actors in the media.<sup>x</sup> Likewise, terrorist attacks carried out or inspired by the Islamic State in 2015 in Paris and San Bernardino were also immediately followed by anti-Muslim terrorist attacks in the United States.
- In 2010, an Islamic community center and mosque was proposed in Manhattan, several blocks from the location of the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11, resulting in a wave of Islamophobic responses.<sup>xi</sup> Around the same time, the building of new mosques increased substantially,<sup>xii</sup> and anti-Muslim opposition to mosque construction and expansion was reported widely around the country.<sup>xiii</sup>
- In 2015 and 2016, the Syrian refugee crisis became a central political issue in the United States and the West generally,<sup>xiv</sup> coinciding with a large increase in attacks against refugee centers in Europe, and consistent with the steady growth of anti-Muslim attacks in the United States around the same time. Research suggests that political rhetoric portraying refugees as terrorists or other threats may have led to increases in anti-Muslim violence.<sup>xv</sup>
- The 2017 travel ban against citizens from Muslim-majority countries, and the rhetoric leading up to it, have been cited as a particular driver of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence.<sup>xvi</sup>



None of the assailants in this dataset were known to have directly conspired to commit attacks with individuals outside of the United States. However, in recent years, white supremacists have created a transnational community where Islamophobic vitriol and violent rhetoric is common. Several mass casualty terrorist attacks have been linked to such online communities, especially after the anti-Muslim attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019, where 51 people were killed and dozens more injured. In the following six months, three other assailants cited the Christchurch attack as an inspiration, including two in the United States. In one case, John Earnest attempted to set fire to a mosque in Escondido, California, leaving a note referencing the Christchurch attack. A little more than a month later, Earnest opened fire at a synagogue in Poway, California, killing one and injuring others. Before the attack, Earnest posted a manifesto in the same online location as the Christchurch shooter, describing himself as directly inspired by the Christchurch attack and linking his anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic motivations to broad, white supremacist ideologies that celebrate transnational racism.

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- viii Dearden, L. (2019). White supremacist behind 'Punish a Muslim Day' jailed for 12 years. *Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/david-parham-court-punish-muslim-day-sentence-white-supremacist-trial-a9090186.html>
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