

Muslim Americans involved in terrorism up, but threat exaggerated

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The number of Muslim Americans involved in terrorism cases “rose dramatically” in 2015, but the overall threat they posed to public safety has been exaggerated, says the author of a new terrorism study.

“The demonization of Muslim Americans in some American social and political spheres has created a hostile climate far out of scale with the actual number of Muslim Americans involved in violence,” said University of North Carolina sociologist Charles Kurzman, author of the report.

Even so, attacks and disrupted plots by Muslim Americans in 2015 more than doubled over 2014, according to the report, published by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security.

Highest number involved in violent extremist plots since 9/11

Kurzman’s seventh annual look at the numbers found 81 Muslim Americans were associated with violent extremist plots in 2015, the highest annual total since 9/11.

This brought the total number of Muslim Americans involved in violent extremism since 2011 to 344, an average of 26 per year. The total number of U.S. terrorism-related fatalities that resulted in the same period was 69.

Put it into perspective

To put that in perspective, Kurzman said, more than 220,000 Americans

have been murdered since 9/11—including 134 in mass shootings.

“Each year since 2010 when I began doing this report, I try to remind readers ... that among the threats to public safety that Americans face year-in and year-out, Islamic terrorism has played a very small role,” Kurzman said.

“Even the numbers of disrupted plots remain much lower than the public debate would lead us to believe. And yet it remains the focus of so much of the security discourse in American politics.”

Fatalities attributed to three people

All 19 of last year’s fatalities occurred in attacks carried out by three people.

A Muslim American gunman killed five military personnel in a shooting attack in Chattanooga, Tenn., in July, and a Muslim American man and his immigrant wife killed 14 people at an office Christmas party in San Bernardino, Calif., in December.

“A handful of individuals can affect perceptions and hide overall trends,” said Kurzman, a specialist on Islamic movements and author of *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists*.

In his detailed look at perpetrators and suspects in 2015, Kurzman found 28 were associated with plots against targets in the United States. Most of the plans involved travel (22 individuals) or attempted travel (23 individuals) to join militant groups based in Syria.

Of the 41 Muslim Americans known to have joined the Islamic State group since 2011, nearly half (20) have died, 16 men and women are alive in ISIS territory, and five were arrested on return to the United States, including one accused of planning an attack here.

The actual numbers could be higher, Kurzman said. He cites research by J.M. Berger that “suggests that the ‘Islamic State’ may be keeping some of its American fighters ‘on the down-low,’ in order to ‘conserve their Americans for when they need to make a big splash.’”

The report also found Muslim Americans involved in terrorism in 2015 were:

- Younger than before—two in three were ages 15-24, compared to half in previous years.
- Most likely born in the United States—two in three in 2015, compared to half before that.
- Diverse in ethnic background, although, as in years before, nearly 25 percent were Arab-Americans and one in three was a convert to Islam.