Theories of Prejudice and Attitudes toward Muslims in the United States

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Abstract

This study aims at providing theoretical analysis of the nature, causes, and manifestations of prejudice against Muslims in the United States. The study employs personality-centered theories, culture-based theories, and power conflict theories to examine prejudice and analyze its causes and manifestations. Evidence of prejudice against Muslims was derived from samples of relevant public opinion polls, academic articles, and professional institutions' projects about Muslims and Islam in the United States. Results show that prejudice is a very complicated multifaceted social phenomenon. Thus, no single theory is capable of providing full explanation of such serious problem, its causes and manifestations. More details are discussed in the article.

Key Words: Theory, Prejudice, Attitude, Opinions, Muslims, USA.

Introduction

This study aims at providing theoretical analysis of the nature, causes, and manifestations of prejudice against Muslims in the United States. The study employs social and social-psychological theories to examine prejudice and analyze its causes and manifestations. Unfavorable Sentiments toward Muslims in the United States can be easily tracked in a number of relevant public opinion polls, academic articles, and professional projects about Muslims and Islam in the United States Contrary to the common belief that lumps Muslim Americans in a single monolithic category, U.S. Muslims are in fact among the most diverse groups in society (Schaffer 2006). Virtually, diversity underlines everything about Muslim Americans in terms of times of arrival, points of origin, ancestral background, and religious beliefs and practices (David, 2004). Unless stated otherwise, Muslim Americans, American Muslims or U.S. Muslims will be used interchangeably in this article.

Muslims began arriving to the New World as early as the 15th century during the slave trade. It was estimated that about 14 to 20 percent of enslaved West Africans were Muslims (U.S. State Department, 2010). On the other hand, Muslims' voluntary migration to the United State began between late 19th to early 20th century. A number of Middle Eastern countries like Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine contributed to such early immigration to the U.S. Since then, Muslim immigration to the country increased particularly in the post-world war II era. Most new Muslim immigrants were college students who came to study at American universities. In the end, the majority of Muslim immigration to the United States has come from Southeast Asia like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia (Schaffer, 2006; U.S. State Department, 2010).

While there are no official figures of Muslim population in the United States because the Census Bureau does not track people's religious affiliation, recent estimates range from about 2.5 millions (Pew Research Center, 2009) to almost 7 millions (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2010). It was also estimated that close to three fourth (77.6%) of Muslims in the U.S. are first generation immigrants versus about one fourth (22.4%) are U.S. Born (U.S. State Department, 2010). However, 77 percent of Muslims in the United States are U.S. citizens (U.S. Department of State, 2008). Moreover, Muslim Americans identify themselves with various racial and ethnic groups. Based on a Pew Research Center survey (2007), 38 percent of Muslim Americans described themselves as white, 26 percent black, 20 percent Asian, and 16 percent reported others or mixed racial background. Yet, the survey showed significant racial variation between U.S. born Muslims and foreign born ones.

In this respect, 56 percent of U.S. born Muslims described themselves as black, 31 percent white, and 2 percent Asian. On the other hand, about 44 percent of foreign born Muslims identified themselves as white, 28 percent Asian, and 18 percent associated themselves with a mixed or other racial affiliation. Just 10 percent of foreign born Muslims reported that they were black. Likewise, Muslim Americans vary in their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, 26.2 percent of Muslim Americans described themselves as Middle Eastern Arabs, 24.7 percent South Asians, 23.8 percent African Americans, 10.3 percent Not Arab Middle Eastern, 6.4 percent East Asian, and 11.6 percent associated themselves with other ethnicities. Finally, it is important to understand the difference between Arab and Muslim Americans. Although Arab and Muslim Americans overlap with some Arabs are Muslims, almost two third of Arab Americans are non Muslims and most Muslim Americans are non Arabs (Schaeffer, 2006).

Muslim Americans also belong to various religious traditions in Islam including both Sunnis and Shia (Shiites). Based on a 2006 study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), about 40 percent of Muslim Americans considered themselves as 'just Muslims, 36 percent Sunnis, and 12 percent Shia. The rest (12%) identified themselves with other Islamic traditions like Salafi, Sufi, and others. CAIR's findings were confirmed by the results of a similar study conducted by the Pew Research Center. According to the Pew study, about half U.S. Muslims considered themselves as Sunnis, 16 percent Shia, and 12 percent identified themselves with other Islamic traditions. Yet, about 22 percent of the respondents did not associate themselves with any single tradition. Despite these differences, "all Muslims, Sunni, Shi'i, African Americans or Asian Americans can pray together in the same mosque without any theological or ethnic segregation" (Halim, 2006, p. 241).

Generally speaking, Muslim Americans are best described as mainstream traditional Muslims. Almost all U.S. Muslims believe in one god 'Allah' and the Prophet Muhammad as the Messenger of God. In addition, the vast majority of Muslim Americans believes that the Qur'an is the 'word of God'; however, half of them say that the Qur'an is to be read literally (Pew Research Center, 2006).   In terms of ideology, Muslim Americans tend to be socially conservative and economically liberals. On the one hand, they strongly oppose homosexuality, premarital sex, and abortion. They also believe that the federal government should do more to protect morality in society. On the other hand, Muslim Americans believe in a big government, more governmental services, and that the government should do more to help the needy. Although most Muslim Americans viewed themselves as politically moderate, 63 percent were democrat or leaning democrat, 26 percent independent, whereas only about 11 percent affiliated themselves with the Republican Party (Pew Research Center, 2006).

In addition, Muslim Americans 'mirror' the general public relative to their educational attainment and income levels. However, immigrants Muslims were somewhat more affluent and better educated than U.S. born Muslims. In terms of this, 24 percent of all Muslim Americans and 29 percent of immigrant Muslims were college educated compared to 25 percent of the U.S. general population. Furthermore, 41 percent of U.S. born Muslims and 45 percent of immigrant Muslims reported annual income of $50 thousand or higher with 19 percent of immigrant Muslims reported an annual income of $100 or higher (Pew Research Center, 2006). Finally, despite the diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, time of arrival, points of origin and ancestral background, Muslim Americans have been singled out as one category, negatively stereotyped and faced various degrees of prejudice and discrimination.

Theories of Prejudice

Prejudice is the "tendency of an individual to think about other groups in negative ways, to attach negative emotions to those groups, and to prejudge individuals on the basis of their group memberships" (Healey, 2006, p. 26). Prejudice has two aspects: a cognitive (thinking) and affective (emotional) aspects. Usually, a prejudice person views other groups in terms of stereotypes (cognitive prejudice), "generalizations about other groups of people that are exaggerated, overly simplistic, and resistant to disproof" (Healey, 2006, p. 78). For example, those who are prejudiced against Muslims may believe that 'Muslims are dangerous'. Those who are prejudiced against women may view 'women as emotional'. Those who are prejudiced against black people may assume that 'blacks are prone to crime'. Also, a prejudiced person expresses negative emotional responses to other groups (affective prejudice) like contempt, hatred, or disgust. For example, a person who is prejudiced against Muslims may say "If I could, I would avoid contact with Muslims" or "to be safe, it is important to stay away from places where Muslims could be" (Healey, 2006). Stereotypes are explained, in part, by the attribution theory which describes the way humans perceive and judge each other (Ashmore & Delboca, 1976).

In terms of this, people endeavor to understand other groups' actions and to explain their behavior. Sometimes people explain other groups' behavior by attributing these behaviors to personality traits or internal dispositions like 'they are poor because they are lazy'. In other times, they may attribute such behavior to particular situation or external factors such as 'they are poor because their factory closed and moved overseas' (Healey, 2006). For a prejudiced person, other groups' negative or undesirable behavior is caused by internal (innate) or personality traits like 'they were not that intelligent to go to the Medical School.' However, if members of the prejudiced against group succeeded 'were admitted to the Medical School', then, there must be an external factor that helped them to do so: 'they were admitted to the Medicine School because of Affirmative Action'. On the other hand, a prejudiced person sees his/here own group's success as an indicator of a positive internal or personality character like "they were admitted to the Medical School because they are intelligent hard working students". However, if members of the prejudiced group failed, such failure must be due to an external factor like reverse discrimination "they were not admitted to the Medicine School because of Affirmative Action".

Several theoretical approaches have been developed to answer questions like why prejudice does exist and how and why it lasts and passes from one generation to another (Schaeffer, 2006). The following section will review three major theoretical approaches to prejudice including:
      (1) Personality-centered approaches
      (2) Cultural-based approaches
      (3) Power-conflict approaches

Personality centered approaches to prejudice aim at locating the causes of prejudice within personality dynamic and early childhood experience. Having this in mind, prejudice exists because it plays an important emotional function for prejudiced people. Prejudice enables prejudiced people to project onto others characteristics and feeling they cannot admit they have themselves. In this context, projection means "seeing in others characteristics or feelings we cannot admit we have ourselves" (Healey, 2006: 83). For example, intolerant people may not only deny their intolerance but also they may project such intolerance onto a minority group like Muslim Americans. Projection may develop and take the form of scapegoating others for one's own problems. Often, rather than targeting the real causes of our own problems and accepting our share of responsibility, we may transfer such responsibility to a vulnerable group or groups (Schaeffer, 2006). Scapegoat theory links prejudices to the need of dealing with problems like frustration, anger, and hostility. If the cause(s) of frustration, anger, and hostility is an abstract like economic downturn, too powerful like big corporations, or unavailable like a terrorist group, people tend to find a substitute target, a scapegoat which is weak and unable to respond in kind, to vent onto their frustration, anger, and hostility (Healey, 2006; Schaefer, 2006).

Although scapegoating theory "adds to our understanding of why prejudice exists, [it] does not explain all its facets" (Schaefer, 2006, 40). Also, scapegoat theory does not explain why a specific group is selected and why frustration is not taken out on the real cause when possible. Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect an increase in aggression, prejudice, and discrimination against minority groups in bad economic times (anti- Latino immigrants sentiments), national trauma like 9/11 attack (anti-Arab/Muslims sentiments), and during acts of war like 1941Pearl Harbor Attack (anti-Japanese sentiments). Yet, scapegoat theory fails to explain why prejudice continues in peaceful and good times and during economic growth periods. To answer such question, we may turn to the authoritarian personality theory.

Authoritarian personality theory relates prejudice to personality traits which develop from an early age like adherence to conventional values, uncritical acceptance of authority, and concern with power and toughness (Schaefer, 2006). Authoritarian personality develops among those raised in family situation where discipline is harsh; communication with parents is very limited, and when parents are emotionally cold, stern, and distant (Healey, 2006). Since a child is unable to express his/her anger and hostility toward his/her parents, the child learns to displace these emotions and project them on out-groups, minority in particular. Nonetheless, authoritarian personality theory is criticized for focusing on the individual in isolation and for not taking into account the social setting or the extent and the history of group relationship (Brown, 1995). Finally, besides childhood experience and personality traits, prejudice is influenced by other social forces like education, social class, job security, race and ethnicity and gender to name a few (Simpson & Yinger, 1985).

Cultural-based approaches to prejudice take the view that prejudice is influenced by cultural norms and social situations. Social situations may encourage prejudice or discourage it.

As well, cultural norms shape the environment for prejudice or lack of it. It also dictates what racial and/or ethnic groups are to be favored or despised (Schaeffer, 2006). In contrast with personality-centered approaches that view prejudice as an indicator of a malfunction personality, culture-based approaches see prejudice as an indicator of a normal and well-adjusted personality to its prejudiced environment. In this context, prejudice functions as a way to express social solidarity and connection with others in such a prejudiced community. In this environment, prejudice is a predictable result of growing up in society that incorporates racial and ethnic prejudice based on group membership. Thus, prejudice can be seen as a normal result of conforming to a culture that values prejudice and rewards it directly or indirectly (Healey, 2006).

The relationship between culture, racial inequality and the development of prejudice is explained, in part, by Gunnar Myrdal 1962 *An American Dilemma*. According to Myrdal, culture, racial inequality, and prejudice reinforce each other overtime and operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy or a vicious cycle. In this case, a certain condition like an inferior status is assumed to be true about a minority group. Then, forces are set in motion by the dominant group to make such condition comes true via denying the minority group resources necessary to get them out of such enforced inferior status. For example, if the dominant group believes that minorities are less intelligent and incapable of performing important, complex, and more lucrative positions, training to assume such positions is denied for minorities and minority employees have no chance but to assume society's inferior jobs. As a result, the false premise (minority inferior status) becomes real in society (Schaefer, 2006).

Social distance theory also provides further evidence that prejudice is rooted in culture. Social distance refers to the degree of intimacy to which individuals are willing to admit persons of other groups. Degree of social distance ranges from the most intimate like close kinship to the most distant like exclusion from the country. Decades of relevant studies in the United States demonstrate the undeniable notion that prejudice does exist and pass from generation to generation. Over the years, Americans reported least social distance from white-European groups and most social distance from non-Europeans groups and people of color (Healey, 2006). However, a situation (situational effect) may influence levels of prejudice in society forcing an unprejudiced person to discriminate and preventing the most bigoted person from expressing prejudice and discrimination (Merton, 1968). A situation may include laws and regulation, the desire to look tolerant and social, or to make a business deal.

Personality-centered and cultural-based theoretical approaches to prejudice provide important analysis concerning how prejudice passes from generation to generation; how it persists, and why it varies from person to person. Nonetheless, these theories fail to explain why and how prejudice begins in the first place (Healey, 2006). To answer such question, social scientists may turn to power-conflict approaches to prejudice.   Prejudice, according to power-conflict theories, begins as a result of competition over scarce resources between and among groups in society. It originates as a way to rationalize exploitation and racial and ethnic stratification (Healey, 2006). For example, slave trade was seen by power-conflict theorists as another way of recruiting labor to exploit natural resources in the New World. Obviously, skin color was not that important. What was important is that those Africans were the best workers found for the heavy labor in mines and plantations (Cox, 1948).

Thus, a search for cheap labor led to a system of racial subordination where whites became the masters/slave owners and black Africans turned into slaves. To maintain such subordination, a racial prejudice developed as an ideology to rationalize subordination of African Americans (Feagan & Feagan, 2003). Based on the social-conflict theories, the elite classes not only control means of production in society but also control ideas and intellectual activities of that society. Whenever the elite's high status requires the subordination and exploitation of a minority group, the elite will develop ideologies to explain, justify, and rationalize relevant arrangements (Healey, 2006). For example, slave owners in U.S. South used to spread anti-Black prejudice and employ them to justify slaves' exploitation. If it were commonly believed that blacks were inferior and incapable of taking care of themselves, slavery would seem less oppressive and unjust. Rather, it would seem the right policy to implement (Healey, 2006). To sum it up, power-conflict theories take the view that prejudice exists and lasts because someone benefits from or some group gains by it. Yet, power-conflict theories do not explain why individuals who have no material stakes in minority group subordination can still be very prejudiced (Healey, 2006).

Attitudes toward Muslims in the United States

Like everything else, Americans are divided in their attitudes toward Muslims and Islam. However, since the September 11, 2001 attack, public opinions toward Muslims and Islam have shifted to the negative side. This shift has been captured by a number of polls, surveys, and studies conducted since 2001.

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For example, a CNN/USA Today/ Gallup Poll (2002) showed that most Americans believed that Muslims do not respect Western Values; about one third thought Islam promotes more violence than other religions; and 41 percent indicated having negative views of Muslims (CNN.com, March 4, 2002).

An ABCNEWS poll conducted in September 2003 captured the growing anti-Muslim sentiments following September 2001 attack. According to this poll, 34 percent of Americans believe Islam encourages violence compared to only 14 percent who reported such notion in 2001. Moreover, the percentage of those who believe Islam does not teach respect for non-Muslims beliefs doubled in two years period from 22 percent in 2001 to 43 percent in 2003. However, the poll showed a divided public over Islam where 38 percent of the poll's respondents expressed an unfavorable opinion of Islam relative to 39 percent who indicated an otherwise opinion (Morris, 2003).

A survey conducted by Cornell University (2004) revealed more controversial results. The survey showed that nearly half Americans (44%) support restricting Muslim-Americans' civil liberty. Conversely, 48 percent of the survey respondents opposed such measure. The survey also found that almost one in every four Americans (27%) support enacting new policy requiring all Muslim-Americans to register where they live with the federal government. Additionally, 29 percent thought government agents should infiltrate Muslim civic and volunteer organizations. Finally, Republicans and highly religious people expressed more support curtailing Muslims' civil liberty compared with Democrats and those who are less religious (MSNBC.com, 2004). Nevertheless, Americans views of Muslims continue to fluctuate and have not yet settled down. For instance, a 2005 Pew Research Center survey indicated that the majority of Americans (57%) maintained favorable or somewhat favorable views of Muslims. However, when it comes to Islam, almost two third of Americans (67%) expressed the belief that Islam is more prone to violence than other religions (Pew Research Center, 2005).

Furthermore, a majority of American people (55%) believed that the relationship between Muslims and Westerners are generally bad relative to 32 percent who believed otherwise (Pew Research Center, 2006). Besides, the survey showed a divided public concerning whether there is a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern country. In term of this, 40 percent of Americans believed there is a conflict, yet 42 percent thought otherwise. The survey also provided a snap shot of Americans perception of Muslims in the United States. For example, 67 percent of Americans believed that Muslims are devout; honest (44%), generous (26%), tolerant (28%) and 19 percent believed Muslims are respectful for women. On the other hand, 43 percent of Americans thought Muslims are fanatic; violent (43%), arrogant (35%), selfish (27%), greedy (24%) and 19 percent believed Muslims are immoral (Pew Research Center, 2006).

A 2006 survey conducted by the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) provided similar results. According to CAIR, about 25 percent of Americans believed Islam is a religion of hatred and violence. The survey also found that one in four Americans tended to agree with one or more of the following statements: 'Muslims teach their children to hate unbelievers; Muslims value life less than other people; and Islam teaches violence and hatred.' Moreover, about one in five Americans supported the notion of restricting Muslims' civil liberty. Also, about 17 percent of Americans supported the idea of locking up Muslims just in case they are planning terrorist attack. Finally, Consistent with previous findings, older, less educated, conservatives and Republicans were the ones who expressed the highest level of prejudice against Muslims and Islam (Council of American-Islamic Relations, 2006).

Interests in tracking Public opinions about Muslims and Islam slowed down between 2006 and 2009. However, such opinions continue to decline and show no sign that they will get any better any time soon. ABCNEWS/Washington Post poll (2010) reported that favorability of hit bottoms reached its lowest point since 2001. According to this poll, only 37 percent of Americans expressed favorable opinion of Islam compared to 47 percent in the wake of September 2001 attack. On the other hand, 26 percent indicated having some feeling of prejudice against Muslims. Consistent with previous results, Republicans, older, less educated, and religious people are more likely to view Islam less favorably than other demographic segments in society. For example, 43 percent of Republicans said mainstream Islam encourages violence against non-Muslims compared to 24 percent of Democrats and 29 percent of independents (McMorris-Santoro, 2010).

Furthermore, a majority of American people (55%) indicated knowing someone who has prejudiced feeling toward Muslims. More interestingly, about one in five Americans reported having such feeling themselves.

Men, Southerners, and those between 45 and 64 were slightly more likely to report anti-Muslim sentiments than other Americans (Montopoli, 2010).   A recent Pew Research Center surveys (2010) confirmed the previous results showing a deep decline in public opinion toward Muslims and Islam. According to this survey, only 30 percent of Americans said they view Islam favorably. Likewise, 35 percent believed Islam encourages violence more than other religions. As indicated earlier, Republicans, older, and less educated were more likely to express prejudiced attitudes toward Islam than Democrats, Independents, young, and educated segments in society (Pew Research Center, 2010). Although the current survey tracked public opinions toward Islam, their effect on attitudes toward Muslims is expected to follow the same trend. For many Americans, Islam and Muslims are two manifestations of the same entity.

Discussion

No doubt that Muslim are prejudiced against and widely stereotyped in the United States. This claim is supported by a number of studies, polls and surveys tracking public opinions in the United States. As it was discussed earlier, Muslims have been singled out and viewed by plurality of Americans as a monolithic group despite all the racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic diversity shaping every aspect of Muslim's lives. Actually, plurality of American people views Muslims negatively and expresses unfavorable opinions of Muslims and Islam. More importantly, about one fifth of Americans support enacting policies to restrict Muslims civil liberty like requiring Muslims to register where they live with the government and making it legal to infiltrate and wiretap Muslims civic and volunteer organizations. Also, Muslims have been accused of disrespecting American values and for abiding by a faith that so-called *promotes violence* and *encourages hate* (Council of American-Islamic Relations, 2006). In addition, Muslims are thought of as violent, fanatic, intolerant, disrespectful for women, and unable to live in a modern country to name a few.

Yet, someone might argue that prejudice against Muslims is taken out of context and overblown. Prejudice against minority groups like Muslims is a normal cultural phenomenon and an integral part of the American way of life. For example, despite strong ideas, laws, and regulations about individualism and freedom, Americans continue to judge others on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion and social class. In particular, Americans value whites over non-whites and favor those with northwestern European backgrounds over others (Macionis, 2006). Thus, prejudice against Muslims might not be seen any more than a normal expression of negative sentiments against an out- group for the country's Christian majority. Also, it might not be viewed any different than prejudice against Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, or Asians.

As it was previously discussed, prejudice may persist because it plays an important emotional function for people with prejudice. Prejudice helps those people maintaining their mental health and emotional stability by projecting their unadmitted prejudice onto others. Often, people with prejudice strongly deny harboring this negative attribute. To get away with it, they ascribe prejudice to and project it onto another person or group that is weak and incapable of resisting this projection. Therefore, those who hate Muslims are expected to say that Muslims hate them. Those who are intolerant are expected to accuse Muslims of being intolerant. Likewise, violent or yearn to violence people may blame Muslims for being violent. In the end, projection helps prejudiced people venting their biases and expressing their ill-feeling without being stigmatized or seen as anti-social or anti-minority group. Often, projection takes the form of scapegoating and displacing blame on a substitute target-a scapegoat- rather than the real deal.

American Muslims have been scapegoated and used as a substitute target for a number of problems that cause public frustration, anger and hostility. Frustration about economic downturn, ongoing wars, and terrorism is understandable. However, blaming U.S. Muslims for those very expensive American wars or scapegoating them for the extreme ideology and violent actions of a terrorist group like Al-Qaida is a little off target. In particular, Americans' hostile feeling toward Al-Qaida has been displaced and projected onto Muslim Americans, in part because they are just Muslims. Obviously, sharing the same religion with Al-Qaida does not mean that American Muslims or even Muslims at large are destined to support Al-Qaida's extreme ideology and endorse its violent actions. Nonetheless, because Al-Qaida is like an abstract or covert organization for the general public, Americans direct their anger or hostile feeling onto U.S. Muslims and use them as a substitute target (scapegoat) for Al-Qaida. As history taught us, unchecked scapegoating is very dangerous. Scapegoating Jews for Germany's economic downturn in the first half of the twentieth century, blaming Japanese Americans for the war with Japan in the 1940s, and holding Muslims accountable for former Yugoslavia political, ethnic, religious and territorial problems in the 1990s led to exterminations, concentration camps and ethnic cleansing.

In addition to personality approaches for prejudice, culture plays a major role in setting and perpetuating prejudice in society. Culturally-rooted prejudice against Muslims began centuries ago during a long-lasted clash between European Christians and Middle Eastern Muslims. Coinciding with another political and military conflict, cultural clash developed soon after the rise of Islam in the seventh century, persisted, and transferred to the U.S. with European immigrants since the very beginning of the country (Suleiman, 1999). Therefore, Americans inherited a major part of their negative views of Muslims from their European ancestors who, due to centuries of animosity with Muslims in the Middle East, portrayed Muslims very negatively (Suleiman, 1999). Negative views of Muslims increased rapidly with the translation of the *Arabian Nights* and the publications of a number of European and American orientalists who intentionally or unintentionally distorted reality, exaggerated the negatives, and fueled anti-Muslims and Islam sentiments (Suleiman, 1999). Furthermore, the idea of race plays a role in establishing the negative views of Muslims. In particular, immigrants from southern Europe and the Mediterranean were seen as inferior races especially in the early years of the twentieth century (Suleiman, 1999). Cultural based prejudice persisted and nourished by more recent conflicts including the September 11 attack, wars, and 24/7 media frenzy.

All the above has placed American Muslims in a vicious cycle. Often, Muslims' patriotism has been doubted; their loyalty to America has been suspected; their citizenship, hard work, peacefulness, civility and their desire for a better life have been questioned. To cope with this, Muslim Americans followed separate paths. Obviously, most Muslims went about their lives normally despite prejudice. Some might consider their loyalty to America and some others might denounce their Americanism and decry American society. A handful of Muslims went extreme and resorted to violence and/or terrorism. Nonetheless, that extreme reaction by the few was generalized and attributed to all Muslims. Such reaction validated prejudice against Muslims and made the false perception that Muslims are violent becomes true. Eventually, this vicious cycle will create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Self-fulfilling prophecy develops whenever a person or a group described as having particular traits begins to display the very characteristics attributed to him or them (Schaefer, 2006).

Furthermore, recent social distance studies conducted in the U.S. found a clear culturally based prejudice against Muslims. In terms of this, Americans reported the most social distance from Muslims and Arabs (Parrillo, 2003). Muslims and Arabs were ranked the lowest in the degree of intimacy to which Americans are willing to admit persons of other groups. Many Americans would prefer excluding Arabs and Muslims from America and even banning them from entering the country (Parrillo, 2003). However, the situation a person finds himself/herself in may influence his/her expression of prejudice and discrimination. A Fair-minded, unprejudiced and non-discriminatory conservative Republican person may resort to prejudice just to maintain his/her social solidarity and connection with prejudiced members of his or her conservative group. On the other hand, a bigoted and discriminatory liberal may refrain from showing his/her anti-Muslim sentiments to avoid being rejected and/or stigmatized by his/her liberal groups. In this context, most of those demanding a ban on mosques building are the old religious conservative Republicans. In contrast, most of those opposing such ban are the young less religious liberal Democrats. Therefore, a very religious conservative who believes that Muslims have the right to legally build their worship places anywhere in the country may keep a low profile for fear of his/her base disapproval. Likewise, a bigoted liberal who opposes mosque building may distance himself/herself from such issue to avoid his/her group's criticism or condemnation.

Finally, prejudice against Muslims is greatly influenced by centuries of conflict between the West and Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East. Such conflict is driven by an array of issues including which culture to dominate and who to controls the Holy Land. In addition, conflict has been raging access and control over Middle Eastern economic and geopolitical resources specially oil and natural gas. The conflict is shaped by long-term misunderstanding, mistrust, cultural clash and military conflict. As a result, Muslims were stereotyped by their European opponents as the enemy, the violent, the evil and the fanatic to name a few. Such conflict began soon after the rise of Islam in the seventh century when Arab Muslims clashed with the Roman Empire which used to control most of the Middle East. As a result, the Roman Empire was defeated fairly quickly and forced out the region by a rising Muslim power. Few centuries after that defeat, European Christians waged their Crusade War (11th-14th centuries), occupied large regions of the Middle East especially the Holy Land. It took Muslims about four centuries to drive the Crusaders out. Toward the end of the Crusade War, the Ottoman Muslim Empire (1299-1923) was established. In few centuries, the Ottomans controlled most of the Middle East, North African, Central Asia, and South East Europe.

Ottomans rule over large parts of Europe fueled Europeans' resentment and increased their hostility toward the Ottomans in particular and Muslims in general. From the eighteen to the twentieth century, Europeans rebounded and colonized almost all Muslims lands in the Middle East and North Africa. Conflict peaked in the twentieth century: fight for independence, conflict over the establishment and the unwavering support for Israel by the West, Arab Israeli war, Iraq war 1990, September 11, 2001attack on New York and Washington DC., Afghanistan war, the second Iraq war, and the on-going war on terror.

Besides, access to and control over Middle Eastern oil sparked an ongoing conflict between the West and Arabs/Muslims in the Middle East. To maintain a safe access to Middle Eastern oil, the West, especially the United States, has protected and maintained a full support for undemocratic and totalitarian governments in the Arab and Muslim world despite Arabs and Muslims opposition to such support and despite the fact that such support contradicts with the West own values in respecting freedom, human rights, justice, self determination.
Because of the long-lasted multifaceted and multidimensional conflict with the West, Muslims were portrayed by as the opposite, the outsiders, the evil, and the enemy. Ironically enough, prejudice against Muslims in the U.S. is being used by conservative Republicans as a sign of loyalty and patriotism to their country. In their conflict over power and political offices, conservative Republicans question Liberals and Democrats loyalty and patriotism because of their positive or even neutral views of Muslims and Islam. Liberals are even of being an un-American and unpatriotic for their inclusive and relatively even-handed approach toward the countries racial, ethnic, and religious problems.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide a theoretical discussion of prejudice against Muslims in the United States. In doing so, the study relied on analyzing different aspects of American public opinion toward Muslims. The paper also mapped some of the major historical, cultural and political causes of prejudice against Muslims. American attitudes toward Muslims and Islam is a very sophisticated phenomenon. As the paper showed, Americans were not united in the way they perceived their fellow Muslims. While the majority of Americans assigned negative views toward Muslims, the level of negativity has varied across social, political, and personal factors. For example, older Americans, in general, had radical views against Muslims; however, those old but educated and liberal tend to show relatively different views. Furthermore, diversity of views toward U.S. Muslims is an important issue because it explains the way political, cultural, demographical and personal factors influence prejudice and make it the norm in some situation. Prejudice is not a natural behavior of human beings. Therefore, the emergence of prejudice in the U.S. does not come from vacuum.

The study also argued that as political, social, economic, and personal conditions change, prejudice against minority will, as well, changes. Despite the overwhelming negativity in public opinion towards Muslims, there seems to be an opportunity to improve public opinion about Muslims. If political conditions improve, for example, Americans may no longer perceive Muslims in the Middle East as their enemy. Similarly, when the media quit charging the U.S. public against Muslims, Americans may improve the way they perceive Muslims. On the other hand, Muslims should do their homework. They should get involved more often in American politics and show much more concern about American social problems like poverty, racism, equality, justice and, of course, terrorism. They also need to more tolerant toward non-Muslims and non-Muslim norms and values. In particular, they should adapt to the American way of life by showing respect to American norms and American values. Moreover, they should express their loyalty and allegiance to the U.S. more overtly as their own country. In the same token, they should voice their political views strongly, however, peacefully and respectfully.

It is essential to realize right now that prejudice against Muslims is not an isolated problem in American society. On the contrary, it is strongly tied to other economic, political, historical, and personal factors. The best way to mitigate prejudice is to eliminate the environment that encourages it like public frustration, ill-education, unemployment, intolerance, religious and cultural extremism, media misinformation and or disinformation, political and economic conflict and war. In the end, while U.S. Muslims have not, yet, being tied to any collective wrongdoing against America, they continue to be blamed for offences they never commit.

Finally, prejudice is very complicated and multifaceted issue. Rather no single theory has been able to provide a full explanation to prejudice and its causes and manifestation. It is also important to remember that prejudice does exist side by side by norms and values of equality, fairness, and justice in society (Healey, 2006). Furthermore, some types of prejudice are more susceptible to change than others.

For example prejudice caused by personality needs is more resistant to change than other forms of prejudice developed as a result of racist socialization or due intergroup conflict. Time will tell if new communication methods and social media will break the ice and enable people to judge others based on what they do rather than who they are.

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