News



Muslims hold signs saying "ISIS WILL LOSE" and "#TURNTOLOVE" on June 4, 2017, at the police cordon surrounding the site in south London of the deadly van-and-knife attack that killed several people. Many Muslims came out to condemn the attack. (AP/Raphael Satter)

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When people ask Todd Green why Muslims don't condemn terrorism — and they do ask, often — he has a quick response: "Have you ever Googled 'Muslims condemning terrorism'?"

One of the top search results is MuslimsCondemn.com, an online database created almost two years ago by a 19-year-old college student. "You could spend all day on that site reading Muslims' condemnations," Green said.

The site lists statements from organizations like the Muslim Public Affairs Council and Islamic Society of North America; religious leaders like Imam Omar Suleiman and Imam Suhaib Webb; and political leaders and civil activists like London Mayor Sadiq Khan and Linda Sarsour, former executive director of the Arab American Association of New York.

Fatwas have been declared, campaigns have been launched, memorials and prayer vigils have been held — all in the name of standing up against extremism.

But somehow, Green says, some people seem to have missed out on how vocally most Muslims stand against terrorism, extremism and violence. In his new book "Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn't Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorism," the associate professor of religion at Iowa's Luther College cautions fellow non-Muslim Americans against what he calls not only a "troubling and unethical" double standard, but also "a form of racist scapegoating."

And it's not just anti-Muslim groups doing the scapegoating. Plenty of bona fide liberals and interfaith proponents have fallen into that trap, he says. New York Times columnists, former President Obama and even Pope Francis have urged Muslim leaders to condemn terrorism as though they aren't already doing so, or asked why they are not.

"They've spoken out over and over and over again," Green told Religion News Service. "If we're still asking these questions, the trouble doesn't lie with Muslims at all. It lies with something deeper in the non-Muslim majority population. That is the normalization of Islamophobia."

The problem, Green says, is that the question in itself incorrectly presumes Islam causes terrorism. It also distracts from violence caused by Christians, Jews and atheists.

Green, who previously wrote "The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West," served as a State Department adviser on Islamophobia in both the Trump and Obama administrations. Now, he has focused on this particularly common form of prejudice that "demands that (Muslims) constantly perform that role in the script, condemning terrorist attacks even though you know that the next time around they're still going to ask you again."

Not all of the misunderstanding is innocent. Anti-Muslim activists have fastened on "taqiyya" — the idea that Muslims who are facing extreme religious persecution can refuse to name their faith if they have a gun to their head, proverbial or otherwise. Ben Carson once described the term as "a component of Sharia that allows, and even encourages you to lie to achieve your goals," a definition Islamic scholars criticized as a dangerously inaccurate oversimplification. But it has also been used to discredit Muslim condemnations of terrorism, along with anything else positive Muslims may do or so.

Green called this dismissal a time-honored trick used to demonize minorities, pointing to accusations in the early 1900s that Catholics were encouraged to lie to Protestants in order to impose the pope's rule in America.

Balancing acts

Muslim activists like Heraa Hashmi, the creator of MuslimsCondemn.com, are working to change this mindset. At the Islamic Society of North America's 2017 conference, Hashmi told how she was sitting in her class at the University of Colorado Boulder last year when another student sat down nearby. As their professor began lecturing on the the role of religion in European history, her classmate looked at Hashmi and asked, abruptly, "Why are Muslims so violent — and if they're not, why don't they condemn it?"

She told her classmate it was unfair to hold her to that standard, to ask her to apologize for the actions of a few, to paint an entire religion of 1.6 billion people with the same brush.

The conversation quickly turned tense, and Hashmi went home frustrated. She spent the next three weeks working on a 712-page spreadsheet listing examples of Muslim groups and leaders condemning violence, terrorism, sexual abuse, police brutality and more.

She posted the spreadsheet on Twitter, and within 24 hours it had been shared more than 15,000 times. With the help of two software developers who saw the tweet, Hashmi then turned her viral list into an online database that is continuing to expand.

Hashmi's website has been well-received, and last year it helped earned her the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research's Muhammad Ali Confident Muslim Award. But she told TRT World she now fears that the very act of amassing Muslim criticism of terrorist acts might be playing into a false dichotomy of peace-loving, moderate"good Muslims" versus the America-hating "bad Muslims."

Green, too, struggles to avoid the good Muslim-bad Muslim framework. How can he and his colleagues show Muslims' patriotism and their contributions to America, without pushing the idea that "good" Muslims join the army or the police academy while "bad" Muslims protest the Israeli occupation of the West Bank or the war on terror?

It's a balancing act nobody has quite gotten right, he said. In his book, he looks at the juxtaposition of Muslims serving in the New York Police Department even as the NYPD's controversial surveillance of Muslim communities has drawn federal lawsuits.

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The other victims

About a month after the National September 11 Memorial and Museum opened in New York City in 2011, Green visited the site. He left feeling more connected to the pain and loss that marked that tragic day, but he writes that the museum pays attention to only some of those hurt by the events 17 years ago.

"There are far more victims of the 9/11 attacks than the almost three thousand people killed that day," Green wrote. The memorial doesn't mention the many civilian casualties of the subsequent War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the documented torture that took place in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay or CIA black sites. America, Green says, has been quick to forget its Muslim victims.

Green began writing "Presumed Guilty" almost a decade ago. Since then, he told RNS, Islamophobia has gotten worse. In recent years, anti-Muslim hate crimes have reached a record high, far exceeding the spike in attacks that occurred in the wake of 9/11.

Green cites the way Islamophobia has become a campaign tool used to galvanize voters. During their presidential campaigns, now-President Trump famously said "I think Islam hates us"; now-Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson said Muslims shouldn't be allowed to become president; and Sen. Ted Cruz talked about patrolling Muslim neighborhoods.

While Green has plenty to criticize in the Bush administration's response to 9/11, he recalls how President George W. Bush moved to quell distrust of Muslims in the days after the attacks.

"We have regressed very far from his defense of Islam as a religion of peace," Green told RNS. "I can't imagine any major Republican candidate in the last election cycle using that language."