

That Most Terrorists Aren't Muslim May 'Come as a Surprise'-If You Get Your News from Corporate Media

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Image: The New York Times depicts police at the scene of a terror incident at a Las Vegas Walmart—the kind of political violence the paper thinks will surprise its readers. (photo: Steve Marcus/Reuters)

Since the Al Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001, the New York Times ([6/23/15](#)) reports,

extremists have regularly executed smaller lethal assaults in the United States.... But the breakdown of extremist ideologies behind those attacks may come as a surprise.

The “surprise” is that more people are killed by “white supremacists, antigovernment fanatics and other non-Muslim extremists than by radical Muslims”: 48 vs. 26 since 9/11, according to a study by the New America Foundation. (More comprehensive studies cited in a recent New York Times op-ed-[6/16/15](#)—show an even greater gap, with 254 killed in far-right violence since 9/11, according to West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center, compared to 50 killed in jihadist-related terrorism.)

The Times suggests that “such numbers are new to the public”—but they won’t come as much of a surprise to those familiar with FAIR’s work. In articles like “More Terror, Less Coverage” (Extra!, [5/11](#)) and “A Media Microscope on Islam-Linked Violence” (Extra!, [8/13](#)), FAIR’s Steve Rendall has debunked the claim that terrorism is mostly or exclusively a Muslim phenomenon, pointing out that white, right-wing Christians are responsible for the bulk of political violence in the United States.

But in a piece all about the “mismatch between public perceptions and actual cases,” the entity most charged with making sure these match—the news media—doesn’t get much scrutiny, except from “some Muslim advocates” who “complain” of media double standards. There is research on this question—such as a [study](#) from University of Illinois communications professor Travis Dixon, summarized in the Champaign/Urbana News Gazette ([6/23/15](#)):

Between 2008 and 2012, about 6 percent of domestic terrorism suspects were Muslim, or about 1 in 17, according to FBI reports.

But in that same period, about 81 percent of the domestic terrorists described

on national cable and network television news programs were Muslim.

Statistics like these would go a long way toward explaining why there might be readers for whom reports of non-Muslim terrorism “come as a surprise.”

Reporter [Scott Shane](#) does note that instances of white supremacist terror have “drawn only fleeting news media coverage”—citing lethal incidents that FAIR has sought to call attention to, like the massacre at the Sikh temple in Wisconsin (CounterSpin, [8/9/13](#)) and a shooting spree by a far-right couple in Las Vegas (FAIR Blog, [6/13/14](#)). “To revisit some of the episodes is to wonder why” they didn’t get more press attention, Shane says—but why wonder why, when you can just, say, ask an editor?

The answers—of sorts—that the piece closes with come not from the media decision-makers who actually choose which violent incidents get spotlighted, but from academic terrorism experts. William Braniff, head of a terrorism think tank at the University of Maryland, asserts:

We understand white supremacists.... We don’t really feel like we understand Al Qaeda, which seems too complex and foreign to grasp.

And John Horgan, who studies terrorism at the University of Massachusetts/Lowell, gets the last word, saying of extremist violence: “Very often, it comes from someplace you’re least suspecting.”

The pronouns do a lot of work in these sentences. Who are “we,” exactly, that understand white supremacists so well that we don’t have to pay any attention to them; are “we” different from the “you” that doesn’t suspect that these well-understood white supremacists might be dangerously violent?

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