

## **Reaching Muslims From the Bully Pulpit: Analyzing Modern Presidential Discourse on Islam and Muslims From FDR to Trump**

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U.S. political discourse increasingly emphasizes Islam and Muslims. Rooted in political communication and religious discourse scholarship, this study seeks to identify broader trends and patterns in modern presidential discourse on Islam. Our quantitative content analysis builds on a sample of nearly 1,500 invocations of Islam and Muslims in U.S. presidents' spoken domestic communications, ranging from Franklin Roosevelt (1933) to Donald Trump (2018). Results indicate that Islam largely entered presidential discourse during the Iran hostage crisis in 1979. Since then, references to Islam and Muslims have risen (particularly since the Clinton administration) and have tended to be embedded in foreign rather than domestic contexts. Presidential discourse on Islam has primarily focused on people (e.g., Muslims, Muslim Americans) and over time has become less likely to be linked to other communities of faiths. Presidents have consistently associated Islam and Muslims with notions of violence, but, with the exception of Trump, portrayals frame them as opponents or targets rather than enablers of violence. Our empirical findings are discussed in their historical and sociopolitical context.

*Keywords: presidential discourse, religious discourse, Islam, Muslims, content analysis*

The topics of Muslims and Islam have become increasingly prominent in U.S. political discourse. Since the early 1990s and especially since September 2001, the U.S. political climate has highlighted Islam, with recent focal points being events such as the Arab protests in the Middle East, terrorist attacks in the name of ISIL, the growth of Islam both in the United States and abroad, and, in 2017, travel bans issued by the Trump administration targeting travelers and refugees from Muslim-majority nations. Days before signing the second executive order, Trump said at the annual conservative political action conference: "Let me state this as clearly as I can. We are going to keep radical Islamic terrorists the hell out of our country."

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While Islam and Muslims are central topics in current U.S. political discourse, Islam has been part of U.S. political life since the nation's founding (Spellberg, 2014). In 2017, Muslim Americans were estimated to be 1.1% of the population—about 3.45 million people in total (Mohamed, 2018). While these numbers are relatively small, especially vis-à-vis the nation's Christian population (Lipka, 2016), they signify demographic changes that shape public life, media coverage, and political discourse.

A vital component of U.S. politics is presidential communications with the public. Given the symbolic power of the office, a president's words carry particular weight in creating and influencing policy and public opinion (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Hinckley, 1990). Presidential discourse regarding Islam is an important opportunity to position Islam in the larger religious context of the nation and to shape public perceptions of Muslims. Traditionally, presidential discourse has referred to the Christian majority, but recent presidents (barring Trump) have deviated from this norm with efforts to breach lines of difference, acting with greater inclusivity toward marginalized groups and religious minorities such as Muslim Americans. For example, presidents frequently provide remarks on religious holidays and visit places of worship to reach out to people of faith. While visits to churches and synagogues have been presidential staples for a long time, speeches in Islamic centers and visits to mosques are more recent events. Dwight Eisenhower was the first president to visit such an institution. In 1957, he visited the Islamic Center of Washington (Begley, 2016). In 2001, that same center hosted George W. Bush shortly after 9/11 (Freedman, 2012). In 2016, Barack Obama made a similar appearance at the Islamic Center of Baltimore in response to heightened anti-Islamic sentiments and increased feelings of fear among Muslim Americans (Rhodan, 2016). Such choices and public appearances throughout the course of U.S. presidencies may indicate political efforts to strategically position Islam in the U.S. religious landscape.

This research empirically and systematically studies the broader trends and patterns of Islam and Muslims in presidential discourse. Specifically, we contribute to a growing body of scholarship that has largely been driven by in-depth rhetorical analyses of single presidents or particular speech events (e.g., Chirindo & Neville-Shepard, 2015; Kumar, 2010; Mohammed & Zarefsky, 2011). A quantitative analysis can provide valuable insight into U.S. presidents' incorporation of Islam and Muslims in their communications. The political presence of Islam has changed in recent decades, with the growth of the Muslim American population, religion-linked terrorism, and the greater weight ascribed to U.S. foreign policy involving Muslim-majority countries. Anchored in a larger context of U.S. religious-political discourse, this study seeks to answer two overarching questions: How has presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims developed over time? And what type of language do presidents employ when they talk about Islam?

This article first offers a conceptual argument locating our project within the larger context of political communication studies. Second, we outline how we tested our research hypotheses via a systematic content analysis of public domestic communications referencing Islam among 14 presidents, beginning with Roosevelt, whose administration is generally referred to as the beginning of the modern presidency (Greenstein, 2004), and ending with Trump (2018). We then present quantitative findings based on nine decades of presidential discourse. Finally, we contextualize and discuss the role and position of Islam in the discourse, with an emphasis on larger trends and patterns and the potential significance for both communication scholars and presidential religious discourse.

### **Conceptual Argument**

Presidential communication on Islam has become a more frequent subject of discourse in the larger trajectory of presidential religious communication. Since the country's founding, America's Judeo-Christian religious identity has been a crucial component of U.S. national identity (Domke & Coe, 2010; Hart, 2005; Straughn & Feld, 2010). Scholars of U.S. presidential religious discourse typically emphasize the sociological concept of "civil religion" to describe religious discourse that aims to engage its Judeo-Christian audience with shared symbols, beliefs, and rituals, often at the expense of people and groups that do not identify with the nation's religious majority (Bellah, 1967; Chapp, 2012; Domke & Coe, 2010; Gedicks, 2010). To gain support for actions with moral justifications, presidents have consistently portrayed themselves as spiritual men of faith (Coles, 2002; Wilcox, 1992), serving as the "high priest of the national faith" (Hart, 2005, p. 34) and the "de facto religious leader" (Coe & Chenoweth, 2013, p. 376).

In the early 19th century, the civil religious themes of mission and destiny, known as the myth of manifest destiny, became the doctrine that underlined America's expansionist motives and cultivated its imagined "divine mission" to spread civilization across the continent (Coles, 2002) over the bodies of Native Americans. Manifest destiny has remained a narrative recycled by political leaders, often fused with exceptionalist rhetoric, to justify policy and actions (Gilmore, 2014). Religious language, and particularly references to God, has generally increased during the modern presidency, especially since Ronald Reagan and peaking with Trump (Hughes, 2019). Presidential religious discourse aligns with the religious fervor of many and resonates with individuals' emotions and identities (Chapp, 2012). When communicating about domestic and foreign communities that do not identify with America's religious majority, such as Islam, the president's communication may encourage national inclusivity (perhaps drawing religious and sociocultural connections and alignments) or, conversely, incite alienation, discord, and hostility. As the topic of Islam has become more present in U.S. discourse, how presidents choose to talk about it has the potential to influence people's actions and attitudes toward the Muslim community and religion.

### ***Islam and Muslims in Presidential Discourse***

Globalization and a stronger U.S. engagement within the Islamic world have shaped recent presidential discourse. Global religious affairs have been redefined and reemphasized, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. As military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq intensified, Islam has become more prominent in U.S. discourse via news content, in presidential speeches, and in the form of personal experiences. The topics of violence, religious radicalism, and Islamic extremist militants have proliferated across news media discourse (Samaie & Malmir, 2017; Zhang & Hellmueller, 2016). To counteract this narrative, presidential discourse may serve to identify and address the negative sentiments that remain rooted between the Islamic world and the United States. Incorporating Islam more strongly into presidents' religious discourse has the potential to foster more national inclusivity. Coe and Chenoweth (2013) reveal an upward trend of inclusion since the Clinton administration. This trend deviates markedly from the communication of earlier presidents, whose focus was almost solely on Christianity. Given the scarcity of quantifiable data, our analysis seeks to identify distinguishable patterns of presidential discourse on Islam. As a starting point, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1: Presidents have increasingly spoken about Islam and Muslims in their public communications.*

The discursive engagement with Islam and Muslims is twofold among U.S. presidents: internally via domestic policy issues and externally via foreign policy issues. In the post-9/11 era, Islam has become a transformational force for U.S. foreign policy, with major decisions involving relations with Muslim-majority nations—most notably Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Iran. Mandaville (2013) observes that, “Where U.S. foreign policy traditionally regarded and treated individuals around the world as citizens of particular nation-states, this new trend affirmed the relevance and reality of a new category of transnational religious identity” (p. 237). This new category relates to a transnational Muslim identity spanning nearly 50 countries in which Islam is the predominant religion (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Clearly, there is no shortage of policy issues involving Islam in recent history, including debates over immigration control, tightening of security and domestic surveillance measures, the building and vandalization of mosques, and anti-Muslim hate crimes. Scholarship on presidential discourse has tended to concentrate on single presidents and specific policy issues involving Islam, such as George W. Bush’s rhetoric on the war on terror (Maggio, 2007), or single speeches to Muslim audiences, such as Obama’s Cairo speech in 2009 (Chirindo & Neville-Shepard, 2015; Gadalla, 2012; Taha, 2010). But no study to date has systematically analyzed the broader geographical contexts in which Islam and Muslims are positioned within presidential communications. Given the complex nature of U.S. foreign relations with Muslim-majority nations and Islam’s growth as a transnational force, we posit the following hypothesis:

*H2: Presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims is increasingly embedded in a foreign rather than domestic context.*

### ***Associations With Islam and Muslims***

Invocations of religious faith and groups can take a range of forms in presidential discourse. One clear distinction is between a faith-based belief system (e.g., Islam) and the followers of that faith (e.g., Muslims). The motives for these emphases can be manifold: Invocations of Islam may be more suitable in combination with less individualistic and more abstract elements of that belief system, including its values, principles, history, rituals, and symbols. Further, notions such as “our faith” appeal to a broader public than phrases such as “our Christian faith” (Coe & Chenoweth, 2013). Presidents, however, may choose to invoke the word *Muslim* or the phrase “followers of Islam” in an effort to reach out to this population, build rapport and empathy between Muslim Americans and other social groups, or personalize the overall political discourse regarding Islam by humanizing and giving a face to a religion. Indeed, one might hope that encouraging an understanding of different faiths would be a purpose of political religious discourse. If so, there is great value in reshaping the concept of civil religion so that it is inclusive of a wider range of faiths and believers, including Muslims. In line with recent trends toward featuring people in presidential discourse as a way to establish bonds, create sympathy, and justify policies (Coe & Neumann, 2011) and given Americans’ attention to and need to understand the Islamic faith in more humanistic terms, we expect the following:

*H3: In their public communications, presidents have invoked Muslims more than Islam.*

Presidential religious discourse is primarily shaped by the idea that the United States is a Judeo-Christian nation, but a significant growth of non-Christian faiths is likely to redefine some of the contours of this discourse to reflect the nation's commitment to religious pluralism. Specifically, while the Christian share of the U.S. population has been declining, numbers of people of other faiths and of those who are religiously unaffiliated have been on the rise and will likely continue to grow (Pew Research Center, 2015b). Driving factors such as generational replacement, an increased disavowal of organized religion, and heightened immigration from countries with primarily non-Christian populations have altered the nation's religious profile (Murphy, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015b). Newspaper coverage about Islam has not only become more frequent but also has increasingly been referenced alongside the nation's Judeo-Christian tradition (Hartmann, Zhang, & Wischstadt, 2005), forecasting that "a more pluralistic citizenry will likely encourage a more pluralistic approach to national discourse from the president" (Coe & Chenoweth, 2015, p. 769). This is not a small matter. When the president purposefully addresses not one, but multiple, religions, it helps to disestablish existing faith-based hierarchies and begins, perhaps, to deconstruct the historical dominance of the country's Judeo-Christian tradition. Mindful of these premises—the population's shift toward pluralism and its likely reflection in the form of a more inclusive religious discourse—we posit the following hypothesis:

*H4: Presidents have increasingly emphasized linkages between Islam/Muslims and other faiths/faith-based communities.*

As "interpreter-in-chief" (Stuckey, 1991), the president has a range of issues to choose from when speaking to audiences about Islam and Muslims. For example, presidents may address cultural traditions and religious holidays observed by Muslim Americans (e.g., Ramadan) or the role of Muslim Americans in U.S. history, national economy, and domestic or foreign policy. Earlier, we suggested that the nature of U.S. foreign relations with Muslim-majority nations and Islam's growth as a transnational force might have prompted presidents to discuss Islam and Muslims in a foreign context. Relations with the Muslim world have taken many forms in the past decades via development aid or economic assistance (e.g., Jordan, Egypt), trade (especially oil trade with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait), public diplomacy (e.g., Iran, Palestine), and military engagement (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan).

Since the 1980s, several militant Islamist-nationalist organizations (e.g., Hamas, Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, ISIL) have emerged and risen to prominence across the Middle East, inciting fear, violence, and terror in the region and beyond (al-Rahim, 2016; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016). While the leaders and followers of these radical organizations constitute only a minute fraction of Islam, it is plausible that presidents might choose to broadly associate Islam and Muslims with notions of violence. For example, some scholars argue that U.S. foreign policy discourse under George W. Bush adopted a good-versus-evil rhetoric, reminiscent of Cold War rhetoric (Coe, Domke, Graham, John, & Pickard, 2004), primarily to garner support for unilateral action and preemptive strikes (Bostdorff, 2003). In defending democracy and its values as a response to threats to national identity, presidents might promote the very mission claimed by these organizations—that is, to incite fear and conflict (Rowland & Theye, 2008). Further, in addressing the risk these organizations could impose and, in some devastating instances, the harm they have caused, presidents may unjustly link the actions of these groups with the entirety of Islam and Muslims.

Frequent references among media and political elites to Islam and Muslims as threatening may have inundated citizens' understanding of the religion and its followers with negative associations, as suggested by recent polls (Pew Research Center, 2016) and scholarship (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Margulies, 2013). For example, in the domestic context, violent acts such as the 9/11 attacks and the San Bernardino and Orlando shootings—which were committed by terrorists who pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda or ISIL—often lead right-wing political commentators to challenge the notion that Muslims are part of the nation's fabric, prompting some U.S. citizens to adopt the belief that Muslims are "anti-American" (Lipka, 2016) and that the teachings of Islam promote violence (Pew Research Center, 2016). In such moments, a president's choice of words and framing decisions are crucial. In effect, a president faces two choices: Suggest that there is a distinct relationship between Islam and violence via acts of terrorism, civil war, or the violation of human rights; or, conversely, avoid associating Islam with the concept of violence and adhere, instead, to the conception that any religious faith is primarily about an individual's tie to the divine. Al-Rahim (2016) identifies four distinct approaches in presidential discourse that rhetorically associate or dissociate Islam with violence: positioning terrorism as a perversion of Islam, explicitly extricating Islam from terrorism and violence, emphasizing shared values between Islam and the United States, or underscoring Islam's contribution to human civilization. Given the multitude of violent conflicts abroad, particularly in the Middle East, and fear of terrorism internally, presidents are likely to have adopted some of these approaches. In light of this likelihood, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H5: Presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims has increasingly associated Islam and Muslims with notions of violence.*

Finally, we explore presidential constructions of what Islam and Muslims are *not*. Specifically, we examine the use of negated statements. For example, the phrase "We are *not* at war with Islam" is an expression that has surfaced regularly since 9/11 (Cavanaugh, 2011; Martin & Phelan, 2002). The intentions of a president when employing negations cannot be known with certainty, but the rationale for using negated statements may be twofold. First, an image gaining notoriety in the public sphere, such as being at war, may be seen as requiring a strong political response. It is therefore plausible that presidents intend to directly argue against a dominant, concrete image that is present in the public discourse. A statement of negation, therefore, may be used to amplify a countermesssage to heightened media or public attention around particular issues, such as being in conflict with Islam. Second, presidents may actually wish to underscore the original message but appear to be challenging it. Lakoff (2004) has famously made the point that negation of an idea nonetheless functions to activate the original idea. Hence, in directly speaking against an object or an issue, the speaker in some ways strengthens it. A political leader may wish for such a discursive outcome but, for all kinds of reasons, not want his or her intention to be apparent. Without making any motive claims about particular presidents, we suggest that either of these outcomes could be politically valuable for a president. This idea leads to our final hypothesis:

*H6: When invoking Islam and Muslims, the rhetorical strategy of negation has been used more by post-9/11 presidents than by their predecessors.*

### **Method**

Our analysis builds on a large sample of presidential domestic discourse on Islam and Muslims spanning from Franklin Roosevelt (March 1933) to Donald Trump (September 2018), representing 14 presidents

governing over nine decades. Hence, the historical context of our study is the modern presidency (Greenstein, 2004). Transcripts were retrieved from the archive Public Papers of the Presidents (americanpresidency.org) by searching all presidential communications that include at least one reference to "Islam," "Muslim," or the precursor term "Moslem." Words were stemmed to ensure the inclusion of terms such as "Islamic" and "Muslims." Our analysis considers presidents' spoken domestic communications, including addresses, remarks, news conferences, interviews, and debates.

Using the archive's online search engine, we identified 887 domestic public communications.<sup>2</sup> We then used the content analysis software TextQuest (www.textquest.de) to both organize the transcripts based on president and year and isolate each reference (i.e., "Islam," "Muslim," "Moslem") within each transcript. A single explicit mention of those terms represents one unit of analysis. A total of 2,314 mentions embedded in the 887 spoken domestic communications were identified. Our analysis is based on the census of invocations made by the first 10 presidents starting with Roosevelt and ending with George H. W. Bush ( $n = 198$ ), plus those made by Trump so far ( $n = 95$ ). It also includes a random sample of more than half ( $n = 1,178$ ) of all mentions made by Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama, resulting in a total of 1,471 coded references.<sup>3</sup> Based on a close reading of approximately 200 randomly selected units (nearly 10% of all units), each reference was manually coded based on several categories guided by existing scholarship: geographical positioning, focus, pluralism, relation to violence, and negation. As a check of intercoder reliability, two coders first coded roughly 10% of the references ( $n = 212$ ). Using Scott's  $\pi$ , intercoder agreement for geographical positioning was 0.81; for focus it was 0.88; for pluralism it was 0.97; for violence it was 0.87; and for negation it was 0.80.

### **Measures**

#### *Geographical Positioning*

The geographical positioning category examines whether a president positioned Islam and Muslims in a foreign (e.g., "our Muslim friends in Afghanistan"), domestic (e.g., "Muslim Americans have long contributed to the strength of our country"), shared (e.g., "Muslims here at home and abroad"), or nongeographical space (e.g., "Islam comes from salaam—peace").

#### *Focus*

The focus category identifies the specific object that presidents mentioned concerning Islam, ranging from the most abstract to the most specific, including the faith/belief system (e.g., "Islam," "Muslim faith"), national/regional entities (e.g., "Islamic Republic of Iran," "Muslim nations"), institutional/organizational entities

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<sup>2</sup> The original search returned 1,289 results. A total of 402 speeches (about 30% of all initially identified transcripts) were excluded from the analysis because the references either appeared in the transcript's accompanying information or were part of another speaker's remarks or a reporter's question (as is common in press conferences). The utility of using TextQuest was twofold. First, it helped with data cleaning procedures by identifying speeches that had to be excluded. Second, using the keywords-in-context search, we were able to identify relevant units and the use of these units in their respective contexts.

<sup>3</sup> For Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump, test statistics and  $p$  values are reported in footnotes.

(e.g., "Muslim Brotherhood," "Islamic Center of Baltimore"), and people references to groups (e.g., "our Muslim friends," "Muslim Americans") and elites/leaders (e.g., "Muslim leaders around the globe," "Moslem leader of Egypt, Anwar Sadat").

### *Pluralism*

Based on the idea of religious pluralism, which is central to U.S. civil religion, and consistent with approaches used by other scholars (Coe & Chenoweth, 2015; Hartmann et al., 2005), we tracked references to other faiths and religious communities that were mentioned along with Islam and Muslims (e.g., "whether you're Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, don't believe in anything, you're equally American"; "in America, we can celebrate a nation in which Christians and Muslims go to Jewish community centers").

### *Relation to Violence*

The relation to violence category assesses whether and how presidents introduced violence in their discourse on Islam and Muslims. We explored this category in two ways. First, violence may be absent (e.g., "the world can learn from Islam") or invoked in a general sense (e.g., "conflict between Islam and Christianity"). Second, if there is reference to violence, Islam or Muslims may be portrayed as enablers of said violence (e.g., "Islamic radicalism") or as opponents or mitigators of violence (e.g., "Islamic faith teaches peace and is nonviolent").

### *Negation*

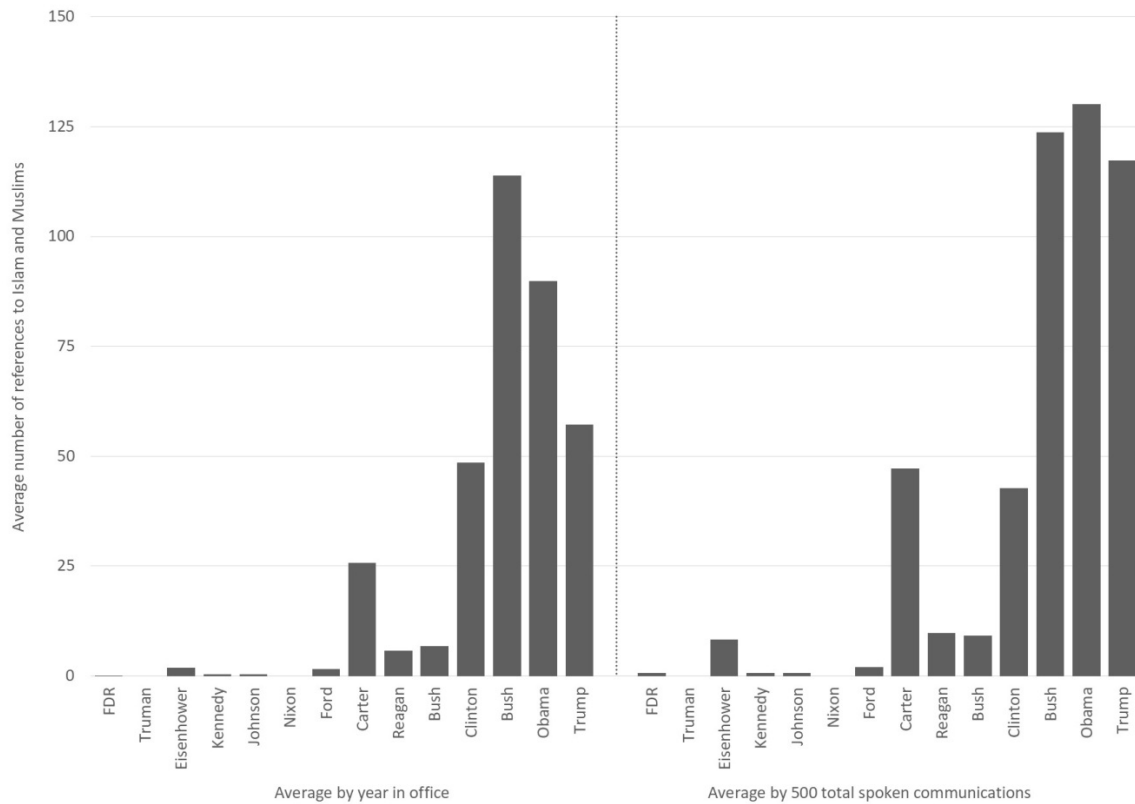
The negation category identifies the presence of negation in the discourse (e.g., "we are *not* at war with Islam," "the face of terror is *not* the true face of Islam").

## **Results**

To test our first hypothesis, we analyzed the extent to which presidents have referenced Islam and Muslims in their public domestic communications. Given the variation of presidents' time in office and in their number of communications, we controlled for both. As the two charts in Figure 1 indicate, references to Islam and Muslims were nearly absent during the first half of the modern presidency. The most (10 references at a single speech event) were made by Dwight Eisenhower during the opening ceremony of the Islamic Center of Washington in 1957. This changed with Jimmy Carter, who averaged 26 references per year. In Carter's presidency, the Iran hostage crisis in late 1979 brought Islam and Muslims into presidential communications in a tense, crisis-driven context. What followed was a period of relative silence by Carter's two Republican successors, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, who averaged six references per year. Bill Clinton reintroduced discourse invoking Islam and Muslims, averaging nearly 50 references per year, with much of it driven by the Bosnian War. George W. Bush's discourse amplified this trend, averaging 114 references per year, largely driven by 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Barack Obama mentioned Islam and Muslims an average of 90 times per year. Despite fewer mentions of Islam and Muslims by Donald Trump (57 references per year thus far), both Islam and the Muslim population over time have become a far more salient topic on the presidential agenda.



The patterns in the two data-analysis approaches shown in Figure 1 are largely the same, with one noteworthy distinction. Considering the total number of public communications by president, there are no substantive differences among George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump. Each of them made between 115 and 130 references to Islam or Muslims per 500 spoken communications. Overall, this indicates a higher density of such references compared with their predecessors’ domestic public discourse on Islam. However, further examining the number of references per communication involving Islam and Muslims (data not visualized), the ratio was highest for Obama (4.0 references to Islam or Muslims per communication that includes at least one such reference), followed by George W. Bush (3.0), Carter (1.9), Trump (1.8), Clinton (1.7), Reagan (1.4), and the elder Bush (1.2). Put differently, Obama averaged more than 30% more references per communication than George W. Bush and twice as many as Carter. Figure 1 also illustrates the wide variation between Republican and Democratic presidents and within each party. Specifically, a stark contrast exists among Republicans when comparing the younger Bush and Trump with Reagan or the elder Bush. Differences among the three Democrats were also apparent but showed less variation than the differences among the Republicans.



**Figure 1. References to Islam and Muslims in domestic presidential communications.**

We also analyzed the communications with the most references to Islam and Muslims (see Table 1). Among the 10 communications with the most mentions, three findings stood out. First, roughly 20% of all references to Islam and Muslims in modern presidential history are in only those 10 communications (see the cumulative percentage column). These 10 speeches represented only 1% of all communications that reference Islam or Muslims, indicating a high concentration of references in very few communications.

**Table 1. Presidential Domestic Communications With the Most References to Islam and Muslims.**

<b>President</b>	<b>Communication and location (primary audience)</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Mentions of Islam or Muslims</b>	<b>% (president)</b>	<b>% (all presidents)</b>	<b>Cumulative % (all presidents)</b>
Obama	Remarks at the Islamic Society of Baltimore in Catonsville, MD (Muslim community)	Feb. 3, 2016	107	14.9	4.6	4.6
Obama	Remarks at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (government officials)	Feb. 18, 2015	52	7.2	2.2	6.9
Bush	Remarks at a rededication ceremony at the Islamic Center of Washington (Muslim community)	June 27, 2007	36	3.9	1.6	8.4
Bush	Remarks on the war on terror in Tobyhanna, PA (military officials)	Nov. 11, 2005	35	3.8	1.5	9.9
Bush	Remarks at the Joint Armed Forces Officers' Wives Luncheon in Washington, DC (military officials)	Oct. 25, 2005	34	3.7	1.5	11.4
Bush	Remarks on the war on terror in Norfolk, VA (military officials)	Oct. 28, 2005	34	3.7	1.5	12.9
Bush	Remarks to the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, DC (organizational leaders)	Oct. 6, 2005	31	3.4	1.3	14.2
Obama	Remarks at an Eid al-Fitr reception in Washington, DC (Muslim community)	July 21, 2016	31	4.3	1.3	15.6
Obama	Remarks at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (government officials)	Feb. 19, 2015	29	4.0	1.3	16.8
Bush	Remarks at the Iftar dinner in Washington, DC (Muslim community)	Oct. 17, 2005	25	2.7	1.1	17.9

*Note. Percentages shown include only communication about Islam or Muslims; the primary audience for each speech was determined based on the speech title (e.g., "Remarks at Iftar Dinner"), the location (e.g., "State Department"), and content of the first paragraphs (e.g., "I'm pleased to see so many military veterans today" or "Eid Mubarak" [a traditional Muslim greeting]).*

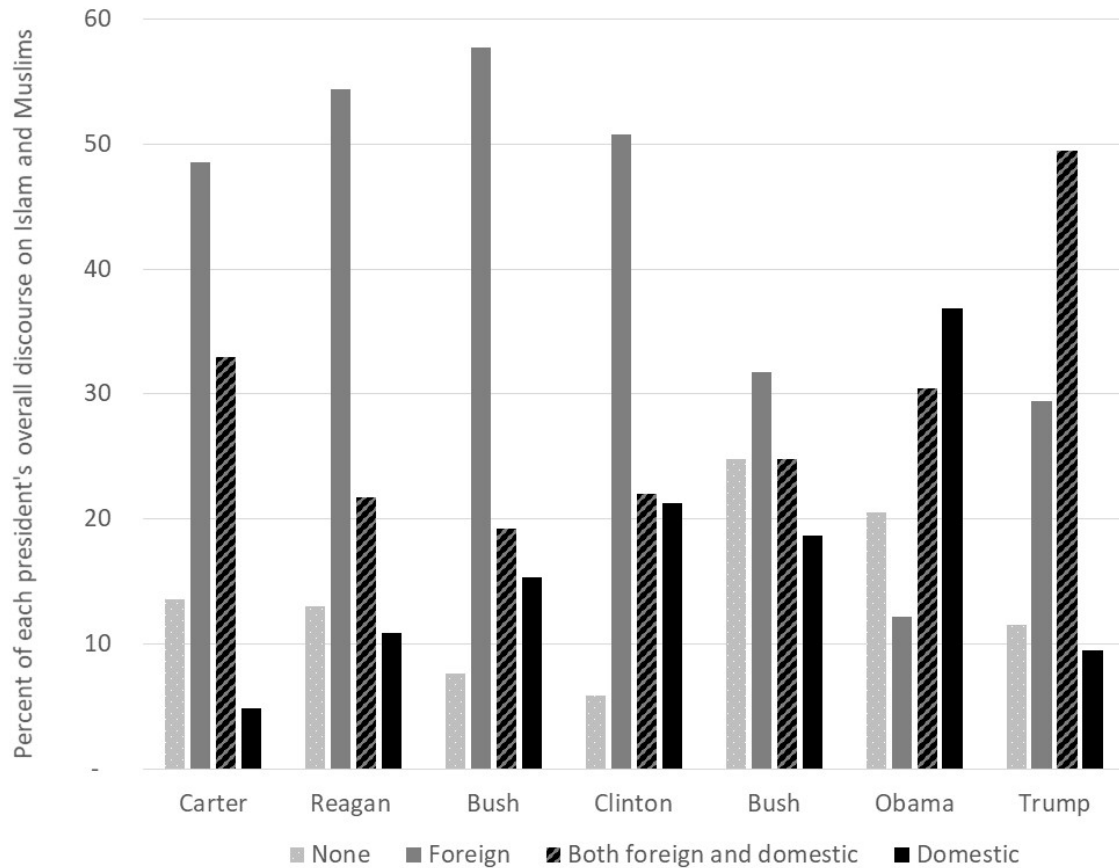
Presidents tend to focus their attention to Islam and Muslims narrowly on a handful of occasions and in a few contexts. Such a dense concentration might indicate that Islam and Muslims have not yet entered presidents' mainstream political discourse, as the topic occupies only a niche in the larger discourse. Hence, in the larger scheme of things, chances for journalists to cover these speaking events and thus for audiences to come across these seem small unless they are included in major presidential addresses (e.g., State of the Union addresses). Second, these communications are all made in the post-9/11 era; six were delivered by George W. Bush and four by Obama. This pattern confirms the trend shown in Figure 1. Third, all 10 remarks could be identified as narrowcast communications, aimed directly at specific audiences rather than to a larger national audience. Interestingly, these audiences are primarily not Muslims, but military and government officials (e.g., Bush's 2005 remarks on the war on terror, Obama's 2015 remarks on countering violent extremism). Six remarks were made to such officials, while the remaining four were delivered to Muslim communities (e.g., Bush's 2007 remarks at the Islamic Center of Washington, Obama's 2016 remarks at the Islamic Society of Baltimore). Presidents have used narrowcasting more to communicate *about* Muslims to other distinct, non-Muslim audiences who hold military or political power than to talk directly to Muslim audiences.

To conclude, H1 is confirmed: Presidents have increasingly spoken of Islam and Muslims in their public domestic communications. Taken together, the last seven U.S. presidents (Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump) account for roughly 99% of all references to Islam and Muslims made in modern presidential history. The subsequent analyses and discussion will therefore feature these presidents.

Next, we analyzed the geographical positioning used by presidents when discussing Islam and Muslims (H2). Figure 2 shows four trends. First, Islam and Muslims have been positioned primarily in a foreign rather than domestic context, averaging 41% and 17%, respectively, across all seven presidents. A foreign milieu has been the point of emphasis particularly for Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton (as indicated by the dark gray column). Second, however, beginning with Clinton (but barring Trump) the prominence of this foreign positioning has steadily decreased over time, while mentions of Islam and Muslims in domestic or shared (foreign and domestic) contexts have grown (as indicated by the two darker columns). Compared with his predecessors, the younger Bush made generally fewer references to Islam and Muslims in a solely foreign context, choosing instead to discuss these topics in a shared context or with no geographical positioning (as indicated by the light gray column). Third, Obama most clearly stands out from previous officeholders: More than a third of his references to Islam were set in an exclusively domestic context, positioning Muslim Americans in the nation's fabric, and another third were embedded in a shared context, frequently discussing U.S. diplomatic efforts to reach out to Muslims abroad.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, Obama's more inclusive discourse contrasts with Trump's approach of combining foreign and domestic elements, predominantly linking "radical Islam" as a foreign threat with national security and immigration policies. To conclude, H2 is partly supported: Presidents have embedded Islam less in a foreign context and more in a domestic context, but this trend has reversed during Trump's presidency.

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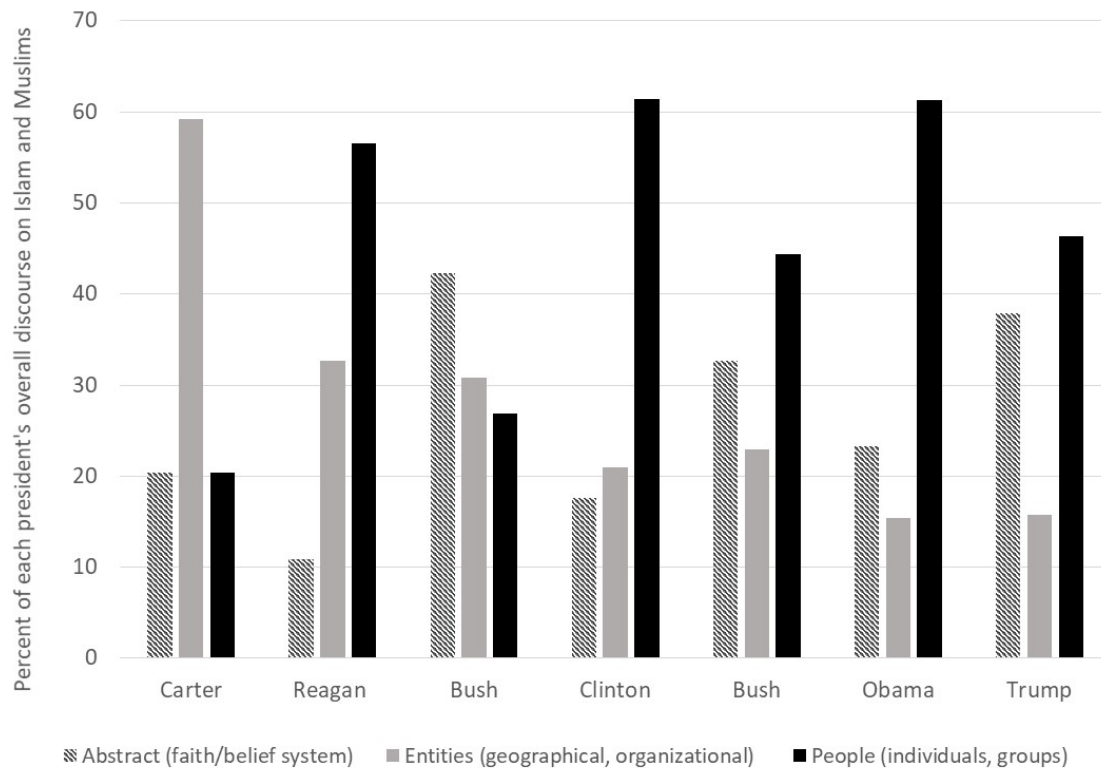
<sup>4</sup> The differences among Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump regarding geographical positioning of Islam and Muslims are statistically significant,  $\chi^2(9) = 178.49, p < .001$ .



**Figure 2. References to Islam and Muslims and their geographical positioning.**

We expected presidents to refer more to people than to Islamic institutions or the faith more generally (H3). Figure 3 illustrates three major patterns. First, references to people (e.g., “followers of Islam”) have become more common, and, except for Carter and the elder Bush, references to people represent the predominant form of political discourse referencing Islam. On average, 45% were references to people, with Reagan (57%), Clinton, and Obama (both 61%) scoring above this average, and Carter (20%) and George H. W. Bush (27%) scoring substantially below it. Second, references to Muslim-majority countries and Islam-oriented organizations have become rare in presidential discourse. The contrast is visible by comparing two Democratic presidents: Nearly 60% of Carter’s references were related to Islamic nations or organizations, primarily addressing the Iran hostage crisis, while only 16% of Obama’s references did so, making people rather than institutions more central to presidential discourse. Third, abstract references to Islam as a belief system have fluctuated over time, with some presidents placing more emphasis on invoking the Muslim faith (both

Bushes and Trump) than others (Reagan, Clinton, Carter).<sup>5</sup> To conclude, H3 is supported: Although references to people have waxed and waned, overall, presidents have mentioned Muslims more than Islam in their public domestic communications.

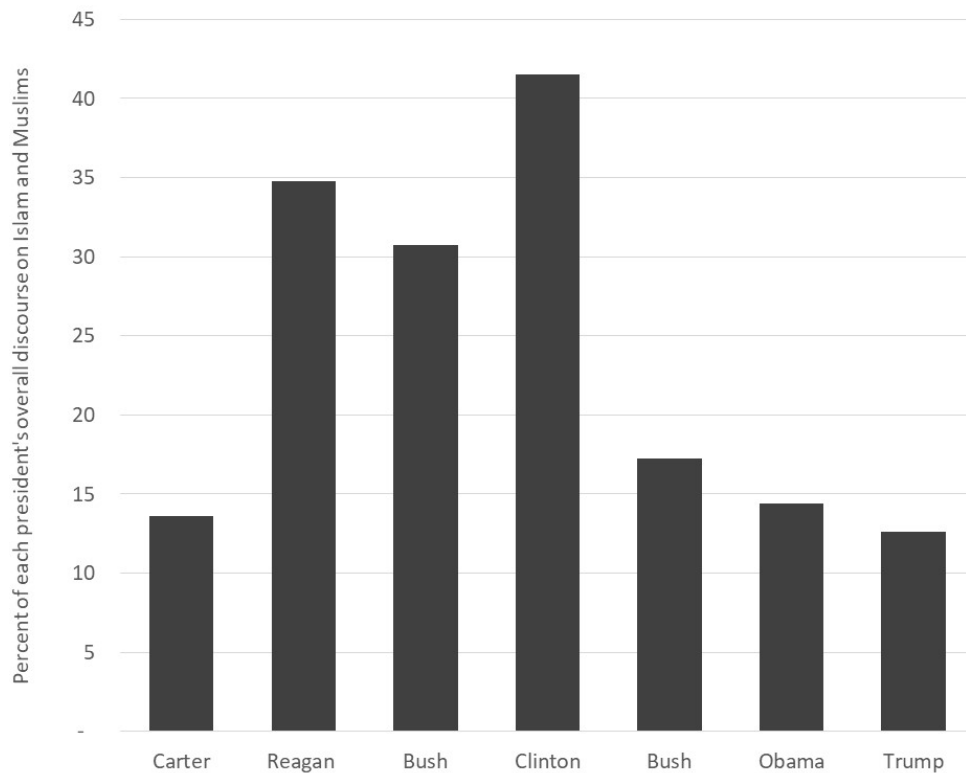


**Figure 3. References to faith, entities, and people associated with Islam or Muslims.**

As an additional measure for inclusivity, we examined how the idea of religious pluralism manifests in presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims (H4). Figure 4 shows that references to other faiths and religious groups were most common for Clinton (42%), Reagan (35%), and George H. W. Bush (31%). About a third of their mentions of Islam and Muslims were made in explicit association with other faiths, often emphasizing shared values and principles but sometimes also interreligious struggles as experienced during the Bosnian War. Since the presidency of the younger Bush (17%), pluralistic notions, typically made in statements about religious observations, have become less common. Trump has been least likely (13%) to connect Islam with other religions. Building on the findings reported earlier, this suggests that while Obama predominantly referenced Muslim people in a domestic context, highlighting their unique contributions to U.S. society, he did not often rhetorically engage them with other communities of faith.

<sup>5</sup> The differences among Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump regarding people, entity, and faith references are statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 44.78 p < .001$ .

Likewise, Trump, who primarily has referenced Islam in a shared (foreign and domestic) context, almost exclusively ties it to national security issues such as the Muslim travel ban or the apparent danger posed by radical Islam.<sup>6</sup> H4 is therefore not supported: Presidents have become less likely to establish linkages between Islam/Muslims and other religions/faith-based communities.

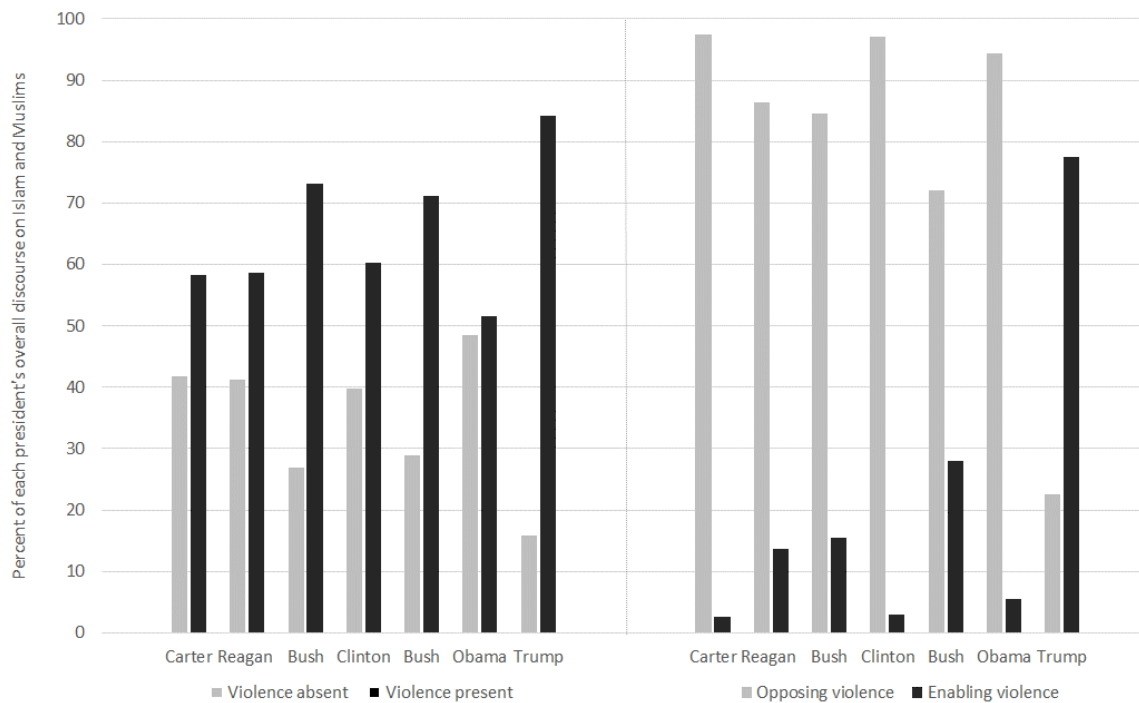


**Figure 4. References to Islam and Muslims in combination with other religions.**

Next, we examined whether Islam and Muslims have been increasingly tied to violence by presidents (H5). Three points emerged. First, Islam and Muslims have been linked to violence in presidential domestic discourse, on average, in two of three references. The dark columns on the left-hand side of Figure 5 indicate the presence of violence in presidential discourse (e.g., “war between Bosnian Muslims and Croats”), which was highest for Trump (84%), George H. W. Bush (73%), and George W. Bush (71%). The gray columns represent the proportions to which themes of violence are absent in referencing Islam and Muslims. Obama (48%) was

<sup>6</sup> The differences among Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump regarding their use of pluralism are statistically significant,  $\chi^2(3) = 86.37, p < .001$ .

highest in that regard, followed by Carter (42%), Reagan (41%), and Clinton (40%).<sup>7</sup> Second, when speaking about violence in more specific terms, all modern presidents except Trump primarily positioned Islam and Muslims as being opposed to violence (e.g., “peace-loving Muslims”) or targets of violence (e.g., “Islamic centers are under attack”); see the gray columns in the right-hand chart of Figure 5). Third, presidents—again, other than Trump—generally shied away from depicting Islam and Muslims as enablers of violence. Carter (3%), Clinton (3%), and Obama (6%) rarely made such remarks when mentioning violence in more specific ways. On the contrary, George W. Bush (28%) and, to some extent, the elder Bush (15%) and Reagan (14%) scored higher in that regard, using phrases such as “Islamic fascists,” “Islamic extremists,” or “Muslim fundamentalists.” On this aspect, Trump is a clear outlier (77%), regularly using phrases such as “radical Islamic terrorism,” thus portraying Islam as an enabler of violence.<sup>8</sup> H5 is partly supported: Despite fluctuations that seem to be shaped by a president’s party affiliation, presidential discourse has increasingly associated Islam and Muslims with notions of violence.



**Figure 5. Use of violence themes in association with Islam and Muslims.**

<sup>7</sup> However, Reagan made frequent use of the term *mujahidin*, typically in a conflict-laden but positively framed context, highlighting their role as valiant freedom fighters in Afghanistan. Invariably, this was in service of his anticommunism agenda. In context, it was clear from his remarks that the mujahidin were Muslim.

<sup>8</sup> Clinton’s, Bush’s, Obama’s, and Trump’s discourse on Islam and Muslims significantly differed in their use of violence-based themes,  $\chi^2(9) = 299.79, p < .001$ .

Our final hypothesis addresses the use of negated, antithetical statements when discussing Islam and Muslims (H6). Although this is a rather specific way to invoke Islam and Muslims, it is not completely uncommon for presidents to use such language. Understanding 9/11 as a pivotal moment, there had been wide differences among presidents until that point, with Reagan never, Clinton rarely (3%), Carter occasionally (9%), and George H. W. Bush most often (23%) employing this language (e.g., "our argument isn't with Islam," "not a Moslem war"). Barring Trump (1%), there was some continuity in using this language by the two post-9/11 presidents Obama (8%) and George W. Bush (7%), frequently (re)emphasizing the fact that the nation is not at war with Islam. To illustrate, when asked about improving relations with the Muslim world during a press conference in 2010, Obama articulated with reference to his predecessor: "One of the things I most admired about President Bush was after 9/11, him being crystal-clear about the fact that we were not at war with Islam. We were at war with terrorists and murderers who had perverted Islam." Overall, H6 is only partly supported: Incorporating negated statements in presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims has grown in absolute but not relative terms.<sup>9</sup>

### Discussion

The objective of our study was to identify major trends and patterns of presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims, with particular attention to the language that modern presidents have employed in communications to domestic audiences. A longitudinal look at the modern presidency reveals that Islam and Muslims truly entered presidential discourse during the Iran hostage crisis of 1979, when the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran, the outcome of Iran's Islamic Revolution, became a national security threat. Scholars argue that this crisis represents the United States' first confrontation with terrorism motivated by Islamic fundamentalism (Farber, 2005). This was followed by a decade of relative silence about Islam in an era characterized by the final stages of the Cold War and the fight against communism. Muslims played an important role in this fight and, as "freedom fighters," were considered allies against the Soviet Union in proxy wars, such as Afghanistan (Mamdani, 2004). Since the 1990s, this discourse has increased among modern presidents, with more than 90% of such references made by the last four officeholders (Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump). Presidents have become more likely to use the "bully pulpit" to frame the nation's relations with Muslims and Islam. George W. Bush and Obama incorporated Islam in their discourse more than their predecessors did (Coe & Chenoweth, 2013), and they made more use of targeted messaging, so-called narrowcasting (Coe & Chapp, 2017). For example, they often specifically addressed government and military officials when discussing Islam and Muslims. Addresses directly aimed at Muslim audiences (such as during the White House Iftar dinner held annually since 1996, except in 2017) allow the president to set the official tone for the wider, national discourse on Islam and Muslims.

Embedding Islam and Muslims in a foreign context has been the presidential norm, except for Obama, whose discourse centered more on the role of Muslims in shaping all strands of public life in the United States. However, what Obama shares with some of his predecessors (especially Clinton, but also

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<sup>9</sup> Although the differences among Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump regarding the use of negation are statistically significant,  $\chi^2(3) = 12.24$ ,  $p < .01$ , comparing the three post-9/11 presidents with their predecessors combined yields no statistically significant difference,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.31$ ,  $p > .05$ —that is, despite individual differences, negated statements were fairly common even before 9/11.



Reagan) is his focus on people—and, in his case, primarily Muslim Americans rather than Muslims abroad. In critique of the travel ban proposed by then presidential candidate Trump in 2016, Obama highlighted the nation's Muslim community: "It makes Muslim Americans feel like their government is betraying them. It betrays the very values America stands for." General references to the Muslim faith were also popular, especially among the Bushes and Trump. These findings underscore that presidents have made use of both more generalized and personalized rhetorical appeals. While Reagan, the elder Bush, and Clinton often engaged in discourse invoking Islam in tandem with other religions, such discourse has declined since George W. Bush's administration. All three post-9/11 presidents mentioned Islam more than their predecessors did, but they chose to make these references largely apart from discussions of other faiths, indicating more concentrated and pronounced mentions of Islam and Muslims in their domestic spoken communications. We argue that by focusing on Islam alone in their remarks—and specifically depicting Islam as a religion that has been seized to justify hostile action—both the younger Bush and Obama emphasized a need for a deeper, more authentic understanding of a misunderstood religion. By speaking more frequently about Islam—not merely in passing, conjoined with other religions, but as a central feature of a remark—presidents ask U.S. audiences to recognize and perhaps reconsider how Islam and Muslims should fit into the folds of the nation's fabric. This emphasis by George W. Bush and Obama, more than previous presidents, might also encourage religious pluralism, but this strategy stands in stark contrast to Trump's hostility toward Muslims and Islam as evidenced by his discourse.

Presidents frequently associate Islam and Muslims with notions of violence, both broadly (linking them to conflicts) and specifically (framing them as either enabling or opposing violence). However, presidents, with the clear exception of Trump, usually shy away from labeling Muslims as enablers of violence (e.g., "radical Islamists") and instead depict Muslims as victims or targets of violence and discrimination and Islam as a religion seized on to justify hostile actions. For example, in a speech on counterterrorism in 2016, Obama explicitly stated his reasoning for choosing not to use the term "radical Islam" when describing U.S. counterterrorism operations: "If we fall into the trap of painting all Muslims with a broad brush and imply that we are at war with the entire religion, then we are doing the terrorists' work for them." It should be highlighted, however, that this pattern was more common for Democratic than Republican presidents even before Trump.

To emphasize this distinction and avoid generalized, preconceived opinions, modern presidents, except for Reagan and Trump, have occasionally used antithetical statements by negating that the country is at war with Islam. Presidents may use such counterframes to publicly position Islam and Muslims against the violent actions of a few, especially in the context of historic events involving Muslim-majority countries or particular individuals from those countries. We can only speculate that by challenging a popular misconception, they might to some degree underscore an ideology of conflict with Islam and Muslims. For instance, in the wake of 9/11, George W. Bush went to great lengths to diminish anti-Muslim sentiment by repeatedly highlighting that Islam is a religion of peace and directly addressing Muslim Americans (Margulies, 2013). Nevertheless, a rise in Islamophobia occurred in the years that followed, leading to a backlash in response to Obama's discourse about Islam and Muslims, even in instances when it closely resembled Bush's communications. Specifically, whereas in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 expressing hostility toward Muslims was considered "un-American" and culturally inappropriate due to political elites' effective bipartisan efforts to shame such expressions, newly emerging narratives from the religious right

(denouncing all of Islam as a violent religion) and more secular conservatives (pointing to political Islam as distinct from Islam) acquired strength and portrayed themselves as new champions of the "American Creed," the notion that U.S. national identity mirrors a commitment to a set of shared values (Margulies, 2013). As a result, the political space for traditional liberal narratives around tolerance, diversity, and respect has greatly diminished. While Obama utilized inclusive language in line with those core values, he did so against the backdrop of a growing social hostility toward Islam and a distrustful portion of the public labeling him as Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2010). As a result, one might argue, he appeared less protective of and inclusive toward the Muslim American community than Bush given the sociopolitical circumstances. Thriving in this environment, Trump continues to feed the exclusionary anti-Muslim narrative from the religious right, with hate crimes reaching an all-time high during his presidency (Hayoun, 2018).

This study explores domestic discourse, but given the continued growth of the Muslim population and the rising political and economic power of Muslim-majority nations worldwide (e.g., Indonesia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran), it is important for future scholars to examine the role of international discourse on Islam in shaping U.S. relations with the respective nations and Muslim societies. Also, while this study addresses larger trends and patterns, providing a systematic account of discourse on Islam and Muslims, future qualitative and interpretive studies may shed light on recent discourse to identify more specific rhetorical themes, including relations among various religious groups (e.g., Christians and Muslims) or within a specific religious group such as Muslims (e.g., Shiites and Sunnis). The modern presidency is certainly not the only context in which the discourse on Islam and Muslims can be examined from a systematic viewpoint, but it is an important starting point. Future scholarship may expand this perspective by investigating other influential political elites whose communications are often under scrutiny by the press (e.g., secretaries of state, press secretaries, senators). It seems equally important to continue this line of research with a focus on future officeholders to determine how they fit into the patterns of modern presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims. This study is based on only the first one and a half years of the Trump presidency. Hence, it remains to be seen whether his discourse will change during the rest of his term. On the one hand, there are indicators of continuity in terms of the extent of referencing Islam and Muslims (resembling George W. Bush and Obama), embedding Muslims in a largely nondomestic context (as all modern presidents except Obama have done), and primarily using personalized appeals invoking people (as all modern presidents except Carter and the elder Bush have done). On the other hand, there are also signs of a radical discursive shift from the general trend set by Trump's predecessors, particularly Obama. Trump is markedly more hostile and alienating of Muslims and Islam. Specifically, in terms of conflating Islam with violence, with his mantra-like repetition of "radical Islamic terrorists," Trump has harmfully shifted presidential discourse in various ways throughout the first half of his presidential term, with accompanying executive actions blocking travelers and refugees from several Muslim-majority countries.

Trump's undisguised antagonism toward Muslims and Islam became evident during the presidential debates. He lamented the practice of communicating political correctness in framing terrorism and engaged in a war of words with his opponent, Hillary Clinton: "She won't even mention the word and nor will President Obama. He won't use the term 'radical Islamic terrorism.' Now, to solve a problem, you have to be able to state what the problem is or at least say the name." The phrase "radical Islamic terrorism" continues to permeate Trump's discourse and depict Muslims as foreign threats (e.g., "We don't want radical Islamic terrorists in our country. We've seen the total devastation in Europe") and enablers of violence (e.g., "Radical

Islamic terrorists are determined to strike our homeland”), markedly deviating from his predecessors’ style but strongly resonating with his conservative base, which prefers blunt talk over caution (Pew Research Center, 2016). While past presidents, such as the younger Bush, used phrases such as “violent extremism,” these remarks rhetorically disassociated terrorist acts from theology. Trump’s discourse seems to not only reverse Obama’s inward-looking trend of emphasizing Muslim Americans’ role in the nation (Trump, in contrast, communicates as though Muslims have never been part of the U.S. religious landscape) but also deviates from the outward-looking trend of other modern presidents largely seeking alliances and cooperation. To conclude, continuing scholarship that examines Trump and future presidents, paired with studies of news coverage and public opinion, will provide a holistic picture of how nations with limited experience of Islam, such as the United States, engage with Muslim communities at home and abroad via public discourse, including the potential effects and implications of those communications.

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