Muslims in the United States today are widely considered as actual or potential terrorists, with predictably negative consequences. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been a five-fold increase in recorded hate crimes against Muslim Americans. Assaults in which victims are targeted because they are Muslim, arson attacks on mosques, and related acts now make up 14 percent of hate crimes motivated by religious bias (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2013). Everyday expressions of hostility and insult are similarly widespread. Muslim Americans, as well as people perceived to be Muslim such as Sikh men, face abuse and discrimination in a variety of social settings and communities.

The actions of law enforcement and security agencies also suggest an official equating of America’s Muslims with terrorism. Muslim Americans are routinely surveilled and screened as threats to the public order, despite considerable evidence that such racial profiling is misplaced. Few Muslims in the United States (fewer than 20 per year) have been associated with any act or plan for violent terrorism in the United States in recent years (Kurzman 2015). Indeed, Charles Kurzman and David Schanzer’s (2015) national survey of law enforcement agencies found that 74 percent cited anti-government extremism as one of the top three threats of violent extremism in their jurisdiction, compared to only 39 percent that selected “Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism.” Such evidence to the contrary, efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism in the United States have focused almost exclusively on Islamic-related terrorism, with little attention to the more frequent plans for mass, politically targeted violence by anti-government extremists and white supremacists.

Media accounts commonly depict terrorism as essentially Muslim. Violence connected to Islam in any way is quickly framed as terrorism while nearly identical actions by anti-government “patriots” or white supremacists are described as an outcome of the perpetrator’s mental illness, troubled family, or shaky employment. The duality of this discourse can be quite stark. Mental health problems were widely cited as the cause of the mass murder of nine African Americans in a Charleston, South Carolina church by a white man who frequented white supremacist internet sites and posted his admiration for Hitler. In contrast, the assault on a Texas gathering that showcased cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad—in which only the assailants died—was framed as yet another instance of global Islamic terrorism.

What accounts for the widespread assumption that the threat of domestic terrorism lies within America’s Muslim communities and that any Muslim American might become a terrorist? A common answer points to a toxic synergy of racial-religious hierarchies and the events of 9/11. As outsiders to the normative and privileged status of whites and Christians, Muslim Americans have been vulnerable to negative labeling. Their outsider status as nonwhites and non-Christians has made it easy to target them as terrorists and enemies, similarly to how right-wing political commentators find it acceptable to label immigrants from Mexico as criminals because Mexican Americans are already regarded as racially inferior by many white Americans.

One immediate virtue of Christopher Bail’s Terrified: How Anti-Muslim Fringe Organizations Became Mainstream is to debunk this easy answer. In fact, non-Muslims in the United States did not become

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negative toward Muslim Americans simply because they regarded them as complicit in or sympathetic to the attacks of September 11. If that were true, there would have been a sudden uptick in unfavorable attitudes toward Muslim Americans after 9/11. But there was not. To the contrary, favorable opinions of Islam and Muslim Americans increased right after September 11 as interfaith and civic organizations and many prominent politicians, including President George W. Bush, made concerted efforts to distinguish the religion of Islam from the political agendas of those who perpetrated mass violence in the name of global Islam. In the confusing and fearful months that followed 9/11, most Americans continued to regard external self-described Islamic militants intent on harming the United States as essentially different from loyal, politically moderate Muslim American citizens. Even conservative Republicans became more favorable toward Muslim Americans after September 11 (Pew 2001).

If the devastating attacks on U.S. targets in the name of global Islam did not turn most Americans against Muslims in this country, why did Americans turn against their Muslim minority population years later? Christopher Bail’s superb research traces how a handful of civil society organizations shaped a remarkable transformation in public discourse years after 9/11, changing the popular image of Muslim Americans from that of an unremarkable religious group to that of a scary network of potential terrorists. More broadly, Bail undermines the conventional claim that the messages and frames that are broadcast by social movements and civic organizations are most influential with the public when they resonate with existing broad cultural understandings. Two innovative approaches allow Bail to unlock the circularity of assuming that new ideas best resonate with the public when they fit with existing ones. First, he moves beyond the traditional scholarly focus on success to look also at failure. Rather than concentrate on the movements and organizations that effectively reshaped public discourse about Muslim-Americans, he examines a broader population of civil-society organizations that disseminated messages about Muslims, both those whose messages were influential and those whose messages failed to attract an audience. In line with emerging scholarship in social movement and organization studies that seeks to avoid truncating the population under study, Bail’s study demonstrates the analytic leverage gained by comparing effectual and ineffectual attempts to forge cultural transformation.

A second innovation is his analysis of messages, rather than only the groups disseminating messages, as mainstream or fringe. This makes it possible to distinguish those civil-society organizations that are successful because their messages resonate with existing public understandings from those that are successful because they shift the cultural environment so that their messages become understood as mainstream. Considering mainstream as a dynamic concept allows Bail to show how anti-Muslim ideas moved from being fringe to being mainstream, or vice versa, and how such transitions reshape what is included within the boundaries of the cultural mainstream. Before and immediately after 9/11, for example, few Americans would likely have believed the claim by today’s conservative politicians and media outlets that President Obama was raised as a Muslim. Nor would most Americans have understood that this meant that Obama was not fit to be a national leader. Yet, after a concerted effort by a variety of organizations and movements to change the mainstream view of Muslim Americans, a distressingly large number of Americans now accept and understand this claim.

Bail argues that a handful of previously fringe anti-Muslim civic organizations were able to change broad public discourse in a relatively short time. It was not their networks or financial resources that made them successful, as one might expect. Rather, building from Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of emotional energy and communicative theories of the public’s taste for drama, Bail argues that it was the ability of anti-Muslim organizations to deliver messages that harnessed emotions of fear and anger in the wake of a major national crisis that made them effective. Civic organizations that sought to present a more positive view of Muslim Americans were generally less successful, despite their more substantial
organizations and broader networks. They were also caught in a downward spiral. Faced with the onslaught of anti-Muslim messages, they turned to attacking the hitherto-fringe anti-Muslim organizations. Predictably, these attacks backfired by increasing the public profiles of the anti-Muslim organizations and essentially shifting them from politically fringe to politically mainstream.

Anti-Muslim organizations, by contrast, moved in an upward spiral. Once they gained a measure of public visibility, they solidified their place in the mainstream discourse by creating an infrastructure of fundraisers, self-identified terrorism experts who could provide a quick analysis, public speakers, and an extensive media empire. Ideas that earlier seemed peculiar became the stuff of serious discussion. By 2012, for example, legislation meant to stop “creeping Shari-ah,” the imposition of Islamic law on U.S. citizens, was proposed in almost two-thirds of all U.S. states despite the legal and political implausibility of this scenario.

Beyond the time horizon of Bail’s study, the flood of anti-Muslim propaganda shows no sign of abating; and these ideas circulate through mainstream culture with remarkable speed. Media, internet sites, and politicians present as factual a variety of threatening possibilities with no evidence, most recently the ideas that “no-go zones” are being set up throughout American and foreign cities in which non-Muslims are barred or that a “flood” of Muslim American young adults are secretly leaving for Syria to become “foreign fighters” for ISIS and install an imminent Islamic caliphate.

*Terrified’s* ambitious process-oriented methodology opens new directions for researchers of social movements and civic society, particularly in the use of plagiarism-detecting software as an analytic technique. Bail uses this software to extract a variety of textual content, both verbatim and paraphrased, from the press releases distributed by pro- and anti-Muslim organizations and from a large body of materials published or broadcast by the media. By comparing text in press releases and media, he is able to trace whether—and how—the messages of civil-society organizations are picked up and circulated by the media. This analysis is extended with in-depth qualitative analysis of these civic and media organizations and actors and systematic examination of the precise nature of the transmitted content. The book largely discusses whether messages are positive or negative toward Muslims, although the frames from which these categories were derived, such as “Muslims as Enemies” and “Muslim Empowerment,” suggest that other dimensions can be explored.

Bail’s multiple measures and approaches provide unusually sharp insights into the mechanisms of cultural change effected by civic organizations. By including a broad range of civic organizations in the study, he captures how messages move from civic organizations to the media as well as when they fail to do so. The value of this comparison is illustrated by the cases of the Middle East Forum, a fervent anti-Muslim organization, and the Center for Security Policy, a conservative and hawkish organization focused on the threat of Islamic radicalization. Both appear unremarkable by comparison with other civil-society organizations that had influence on the media. Compared to all organizations that tried to distribute messages about Muslims, however, it is clear that they are on the fringe. Bail also traces the circulation of messages from media broadcast to the general public through a range of data collection and analytic approaches, ranging from conventional case studies, network analysis of interlocking connections among civic organizations, media, and politicians, and in-depth interviews to more novel big-data analyses of postings on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter.

A project of this scope necessarily leaves some avenues unexplored. One is the extent to which the broader conservative movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries set a foundation for the mainstreaming of anti-Muslim organizations and discourse. Certainly, media institutions like Fox News provided a powerful venue for disseminating both coded and openly hostile statements about Muslim Americans, which this book mentions. But conservatives also created a broader stage on which anti-Muslim organizations could appear legitimate in other ways, by establishing foundations, think-tanks, writers
and intellectuals, and networks of financial backing that could bring right-wing ideas into public discourse.

A follow-up study could explore a broader range of the anti-Muslim discourse that has permeated the political mainstream. Bail focuses mostly on terrorism, but issues of gender are also important. It is likely, for example, that one reason that anti-Muslim rhetoric can become acceptable in public discourse is its assertion of the need to protect women from purported abuse within Islam. Tracing the circulation of gendered anti-Muslim discourse would open a lens into the interconnections of anti-Muslim organizations and the set of right-wing groups, politicians, and writers that position themselves in a fragile political space of women’s rights, racism, and nationalism.

Finally, Bail studies cultural change after a major event. He shows that even an event of the magnitude of the 9/11 attacks did not itself prompt a drastic increase in unfavorable opinions about Muslim Americans, although it set the stage for anti-Muslim organizations to position themselves in the mainstream. Left open is the question of whether similar mechanisms of transition from fringe to mainstream (and vice versa) are likely to operate in the absence of extraordinary events. As an example, the recent history of the political right in the United States and, more dramatically, the mainstreaming of the traditional far-right French National Front show that such transition is possible; but the specific mechanisms by which rightist organizations and movements enter and exit the broader cultural environment are largely unexplored.

References