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Collateral Damage: How Verified Islamist Extremism Fuels Islamophobia Against Innocent Muslims in the West

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Abstract:

This article examines how verified Islamist extremist violence drives measurable spikes in Western islamophobia, while ordinary Muslims absorb the resulting backlash. Drawing on Cohen's (1972) moral panic theory and scapegoating theory, it analyzes two recent cases, the 2024 Solingen stabbing and the 2025 New Orleans attack, both showing the same sequence: extremist violence, political amplification, and generalized suspicion cast onto uninvolved Muslim communities. Responsibility, it argues, lies with extremists, not the broader Muslim population.

Key words: islamophobia, moral panic, Islamist extremism, scapegoating

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamophobia has become one of the most visible and well-documented forms of discrimination in contemporary Western societies, manifesting in hate crimes, discriminatory policy, and hostile media coverage directed at Muslim communities (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights). Public and scholarly debate on its causes tends to polarize around two positions. The first holds that islamophobia is a largely irrational prejudice rooted in older colonial and civilizational narratives, substantially independent of any real security threat (Said, 1978). The second holds that Muslims themselves, as a religious or cultural group, bear responsibility for provoking hostility through the actions of a violent minority acting in their name. This article rejects both extremes. It argues instead that verified acts of Islamist extremist violence, rather than Islam as a religion or Muslims as a population, constitute the proximate trigger for measurable spikes in Western islamophobia, and that ordinary, non-extremist Muslims are its principal and largely undeserved casualties.

Two recent cases illustrate this pattern with unusual clarity. The first is the August 2024 stabbing attack in Solingen, Germany, for which German federal prosecutors formally attributed a radical Islamist motive and which the Islamic State publicly claimed (CBS News, 2024). The second is the January 2025 vehicle-ramming attack on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, carried out by an attacker who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in videos recorded hours before the attack (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025). In both cases, a confirmed act of

extremist violence was followed within days by a measurable rise in anti-Muslim hostility directed at communities who had no connection to, and in most cases explicitly condemned, the violence committed in their name. Read alongside Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panic and the broader social-psychological literature on scapegoating, these cases suggest a consistent mechanism: a real, if numerically marginal, threat becomes the pretext for generalized suspicion cast over an entire religious community. The purpose of this article is to trace that mechanism carefully, assigning responsibility for the initiating violence to the extremists who commit it while resisting the collapse of that responsibility onto the broader Muslim population that suffers its consequences.

The article proceeds as follows. The subsequent section situates the analysis within Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panic and the broader social-psychological literature on scapegoating, establishing the theoretical framework through which the two case studies are read. Two cases are then examined in turn: the Solingen attack of August 2024 in Germany, and the Bourbon Street attack of January 2025 in New Orleans, each substantiated by evidence of Islamist motivation. A cross-case analysis follows, identifying the pattern common to both incidents, after which the article turns to the analytical distinction between Islamist extremism and the Muslim population from which it falsely claims to derive legitimacy. The penultimate section engages the strongest objection to the article's thesis, namely that islamophobia predates and exceeds any single act of extremist violence, and proposes a synthesis reconciling the structural and situational accounts. The article concludes by reaffirming that

responsibility for the initiating violence rests with extremist actors rather than with the broader Muslim communities that bear its social consequences.

2. Theoretical Framework: Moral Panic and Scapegoating

Cohen's (1972) concept of the moral panic remains the most durable framework for understanding how societies respond to a real but statistically marginal threat with a reaction disproportionate to its scale. In Cohen's original formulation, a specific event or group is identified as a threat to social values, is then stylized and amplified by media coverage, and is ultimately generalized into a broader social anxiety directed at a whole category of people, whom Cohen termed 'folk devils.' Crucially, moral panic theory does not require that the underlying threat be imaginary; it requires only that the societal response to it be disproportionate to the actual risk posed and that the response generalize beyond the specific actors responsible for the precipitating event.

This distinction is essential to the argument advanced here. Applying moral panic theory to islamophobia does not entail denying that Islamist extremist violence is real, nor minimizing the deaths and injuries it causes. It entails observing that the public and political response to such violence routinely exceeds the bounds of the specific extremist act and its perpetrators, extending instead to Muslim populations as a whole, the overwhelming majority of whom have no connection to extremism and frequently condemn it (Pew Research Center, as cited in Syed, 2025). This generalizing move is closely related to what social psychologists describe as scapegoating: the attribution of blame for a threat, harm, or social anxiety to an

entire out-group rather than to the specific individuals or subgroups responsible for it. Where moral panic theory explains the amplification dynamic at the level of media and political discourse, scapegoating theory explains the psychological mechanism by which individual audiences come to hold an entire group accountable for the actions of a fringe minority within it.

Together, these two frameworks yield a testable expectation: following an Islamist extremist attack, one should observe (a) rapid political and media amplification that extends the frame of the attack beyond the individual perpetrator, and (b) a measurable rise in hostility, whether in the form of hate crimes, discriminatory rhetoric, or exclusionary policy, directed at Muslim populations broadly rather than at extremist networks specifically. The two case studies that follow test this expectation against recent, well-documented events.

3. The Solingen Attack

On the evening of August 23, 2024, a mass stabbing occurred at the 'Festival of Diversity' in Solingen, Germany, a celebration marking the city's 650th anniversary. Three people were killed and eight injured before the attacker fled the scene. Following a 24-hour manhunt, police arrested Issa al Hassan, a 26-year-old Syrian national whose asylum application had been rejected in 2023 and who had evaded a prior deportation order to Bulgaria. On August 24, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack through its Amaq news agency; the following day it released a video showing a masked man swearing an oath of

allegiance to the group's leader and describing the attack as retaliation for the deaths of Muslims in Syria, Bosnia, Iraq, and Palestine. Germany's federal prosecutor subsequently stated that the attacker had acted on the basis of radical Islamist convictions and intended to kill as many non-believers as possible at the festival (CBS News, 2024). In September 2025, al Hassan confessed to the killings at the outset of his trial and received a life sentence with subsequent preventive detention.

The political and social response was immediate. Chancellor Olaf Scholz described the attack as terrorism against the whole of German society and called for accelerated deportation procedures. Opposition leader Friedrich Merz, of the Christian Democratic Union, called for an immediate halt to the acceptance of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan (Soufan Center, 2024). Within a week, the federal government proposed tightened weapons laws and asylum restrictions, including expedited deportation for rejected or security-flagged asylum seekers (Misbar, 2024). The attack also became a significant factor in the September 1, 2024 state elections in Thuringia and Saxony, held only days later, in which the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party won its first-ever plurality in a German state election, taking 32.8% of the vote in Thuringia and running a close second in Saxony (OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 2025; France24, 2024).

Crucially for the argument of this article, the backlash extended well beyond the individual perpetrator and even beyond Islamist extremism as a category. German authorities recorded a documented rise in attacks on asylum accommodation and mosques in the surrounding period, occurring against a

backdrop in which officially reported islamophobic crimes in Germany had already more than doubled in 2023, rising to 1,464 incidents from 610 the previous year (Misbar, 2024). Investigations following the attack identified coordinated disinformation campaigns that exploited the Solingen stabbing to intensify anti-Muslim sentiment well beyond the facts of the case itself (Misbar, 2024). In other words, the empirically confirmed extremist act became not merely a policy trigger aimed at Islamist networks or failed asylum procedures, but a pretext for a broader social hostility toward Muslim and migrant communities collectively, precisely the generalizing dynamic that moral panic theory predicts.

4. The Bourbon Street Attack

On January 1, 2025, Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a 42-year-old American citizen and army veteran, drove a rented truck into a crowd of New Year's revelers on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, killing 14 people and injuring at least 57 before being fatally shot by police. An Islamic State flag was found affixed to the truck, and Jabbar had posted a series of videos in the hours before the attack declaring that he had joined the Islamic State and pledging allegiance to the group (FBI, 2025). The Federal Bureau of Investigation classified the attack as an act of terrorism and, while it found no evidence of direct contact between Jabbar and Islamic State operatives, noted that his method closely followed instructions the group has circulated in its own online publications for lone-actor attacks.

The case is especially instructive for the argument advanced here because the anticipated backlash was recognized, and preemptively addressed, by the Muslim community itself. Within a week of the attack, Muslim residents of the greater New Orleans area organized a seminar titled 'Responding to Islamophobia' to help community members process both grief over the attack and fear of retaliatory hostility (Syed, 2025). One community member interviewed for local reporting noted frustration that public and media attention had fixated on the perpetrator's religious identity while largely ignoring that he was a U.S. military veteran with a documented history of other personal difficulties (Syed, 2025). This response mirrors a well-established pattern: CAIR (the Council on American-Islamic Relations) reported receiving more than 2,000 complaints of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian bias in the 57 days following the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, a period in which no domestic Islamist attack on American soil had occurred at all, indicating that the mechanism of generalized suspicion can be activated even by extremist violence occurring on the other side of the world (Syed, 2025).

As in the Solingen case, political actors moved quickly to frame the attack within a broader, and more contested, narrative. An early and inaccurate Fox News report claiming the attacker had recently crossed the U.S.-Mexico border was retracted within hours, but not before it was amplified by Donald Trump and several congressional Republicans, including Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (Krishnakumar & Yilek, 2025). Even after Jabbar was confirmed to be an American-born citizen and military veteran with no connection to unauthorized

immigration, Trump continued to attribute the attack to border policy, a framing subsequently echoed by House Speaker Mike Johnson (Grace, 2025; Krishnakumar & Yilek, 2025). The pattern again illustrates the moral panic dynamic: a real and confirmed act of Islamist violence, followed by rhetorical and social generalization that extended well past the individual responsible, in this instance onto an unrelated policy debate over immigration.

5. Cross-Case Analysis: A Consistent Pattern

The Solingen and New Orleans cases, though geographically and politically distinct, exhibit a consistent sequence. In both instances, a lone actor carried out a confirmed act of Islamist-inspired violence, evidenced by direct claims of allegiance to the Islamic State, in one case corroborated by the organization's own claim of responsibility and in the other by the perpetrator's own recorded statements. In both instances, political actors and media coverage rapidly extended the frame of the attack beyond the individual perpetrator, invoking immigration policy, national security, and, in the German case, electoral politics. And in both instances, the resulting social hostility, whether measured in hate-crime statistics, attacks on religious and community institutions, or anticipatory fear within Muslim communities themselves, fell overwhelmingly on populations with no connection to the violence.

This consistency across two cases separated by continent, political system, and five months in time suggests that the mechanism described by moral panic theory and

scapegoating theory is not incidental to any single national context but reflects a more general feature of how Western publics process Islamist extremist violence. The extremist act supplies a real precipitating event; the media and political response supplies the amplification; and the diffuse, poorly targeted hostility that follows supplies the harm borne by ordinary Muslims.

5.1 The Extremism/Islam Distinction

A central commitment of this article is that the responsibility for extremist violence lies with the individuals and organizations that commit and direct it, not with Muslims as a religious or demographic category. This distinction is not merely a rhetorical caveat; it is supported by the empirical record in both cases examined here. Major Muslim organizations condemned both attacks without reservation. Community leaders in New Orleans organized proactive educational responses precisely because they anticipated, correctly, that public suspicion would fall on believers who had no connection whatsoever to the attacker's actions. Survey research consistently finds that the overwhelming majority of Muslims, in both Muslim-majority and Western societies, reject Islamist extremist violence and regard groups such as the Islamic State as a distortion of their faith rather than an expression of it (Pew Research Center, as cited in Syed, 2025).

The distinction between extremist ideology and the faith and community from which it claims to draw legitimacy is analytically important because collapsing the two is precisely the reasoning error that islamophobia itself depends upon. To hold

Muslims collectively responsible for Islamist violence is to apply a standard of collective guilt that would not be applied to other religious or national groups following acts of violence committed by individuals claiming to act in their name. Maintaining this distinction is therefore not incidental to the article's argument but constitutive of it: the thesis that extremism drives islamophobia only holds together if extremism and the broader Muslim population are kept conceptually separate.

5.2 Islamophobia as a Pre-Existing Structure

A serious objection to the argument developed here holds that islamophobia significantly predates the contemporary wave of Islamist terrorism and is rooted in older colonial and civilizational narratives about the Muslim world, most influentially articulated in Said's (1978) account of Orientalism. On this view, the West's habit of imagining Islam and Muslims as a single, static, threatening 'other' long precedes al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, or any of the attacks discussed in this article, and contemporary extremist violence functions merely as an accelerant, or a convenient pretext, for a hostility that already existed in Western political culture, rather than as its root cause. The Runnymede Trust's (1997) influential report, one of the first to systematically define islamophobia, located its origins in exactly this kind of enduring civilizational suspicion rather than in any specific security event, and subsequent scholarship has extended the argument further. Sayyid (2014, as cited in Massoumi et al., 2017) and Massoumi et al. (2017) advance the concept of the 'Islamophobic state,' arguing that counterterrorism

law, surveillance infrastructure, and border policy function as durable institutional machinery for anti-Muslim racism that does not depend on any single triggering incident to operate; on this account, the state apparatus built around securitizing Muslim populations predates, and would likely outlast, any particular attack. Proponents of this position would therefore point out that even in a counterfactual world with no Islamist terrorism at all, a residual structure of prejudice and institutional suspicion would likely persist and find other pretexts, whether demographic anxiety, cultural difference, or unrelated security concerns, for its continued expression.

This structural account is well evidenced and should not be dismissed, but taken on its own it struggles to explain a feature of the data that the case studies in this article make difficult to ignore: the tight temporal clustering of hostility spikes around specific, verified extremist attacks. If islamophobia were driven primarily, or entirely, by a stable civilizational prejudice operating independently of real-world events, one would expect the rate of hate crimes, mosque attacks, and discriminatory political rhetoric to rise and fall relatively smoothly, tracking slow-moving demographic or cultural anxieties rather than spiking sharply within days of a specific incident. Instead, the data reviewed above show islamophobic crime in Germany more than doubling in the specific window following the October 2023 Gaza war and the August 2024 Solingen attack (Misbar, 2024), and Muslim community organizations in New Orleans organizing an emergency response to anticipated backlash within a single week of the Bourbon Street attack (Syed, 2025). A purely structural account, absent a

triggering mechanism, does not straightforwardly predict this kind of sharp, event-linked timing. A second limitation is that a wholly structural account risks a different kind of overcorrection: by locating islamophobia entirely in enduring Western civilizational psychology, it can understate the reality and specificity of the security threat that Islamist extremist organizations, including groups that self-identify as acting in the name of Islam, actually pose, and can make it harder to draw the analytically important line, defended earlier in this article, between extremist organizations and the Muslim populations they claim to represent.

The most defensible position is not to choose between the structural account and the triggering-event account but to treat them as operating at different explanatory levels, each addressing a different part of the phenomenon. The structural account, developed by Said (1978), the Runnymede Trust (1997), and later by Sayyid (2014) and Massoumi et al. (2017), explains why Western societies possess a ready-made cultural and institutional lens through which to interpret Muslims as a suspect category in the first place, and why counterterrorism and border-security infrastructure is available to be mobilized quickly whenever a new incident occurs. The triggering-event account developed in this article, grounded in Cohen's (1972) moral panic theory, explains why hostility spikes precisely when and where it does, tracking specific attacks rather than moving independently of them. On this synthesis, the pre-existing structure functions as the loaded mechanism, and the verified extremist attack functions as the event that discharges it: neither is sufficient without the other to account for the pattern observed

in the Solingen and New Orleans cases. This two-level account also clarifies what would be required to reduce islamophobia in practice. Addressing only the structural level, for example through long-term efforts to revise civilizational narratives in media and education, would leave the triggering mechanism intact and vulnerable to reactivation by the next verified attack. Addressing only the triggering level, for example through more responsible media framing of individual incidents, would leave the underlying structure available to generate hostility through other pretexts. A complete account, and a complete response, requires attention to both.

6. CONCLUSION

The cases examined in this article, the August 2024 Solingen stabbing and the January 2025 Bourbon Street attack, demonstrate a consistent and troubling pattern: acts of Islamist extremist violence reliably precede measurable spikes in hostility directed not at extremist networks specifically, but at Muslim communities broadly. This pattern is well explained by Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panic and by the broader social-psychological literature on scapegoating, both of which describe how a real, if statistically marginal, threat becomes generalized into a diffuse social anxiety directed at an entire group. Responsibility for the initiating violence in each case belongs squarely with the individual perpetrators and the extremist ideology that inspired them. It does not belong with the millions of ordinary Muslims in Germany, the United States, and across the West who share no connection to that violence, who frequently condemn it more forcefully and more immediately than outside commentators, and who nonetheless absorb its

social consequences. An accurate account of islamophobia's causes must hold these two facts together without collapsing one into the other.

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