

# **Superordinate Identity and Attitudes toward Muslim Americans**

## **Research Note**

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### **Abstract**

We examine how making salient a superordinate national identity improves Americans' attitudes toward Muslim Americans. Using a national sample of 1,550 Americans, our experiment primed national identity by presenting respondents with profiles of Muslim American soldiers who served and died in Iraq. Our design varied the soldier's race-ethnicity, presenting both a white soldier and a soldier of Arab-descent. We find a positive priming effect in that respondents who were informed that the soldier was Muslim exhibited more positive attitudes toward Muslim Americans. This effect was asymmetric and conditional on the respondent's partisanship and the soldier's race-ethnicity. Among Democrats, the effect was particularly strong if the soldier was white, while among Republicans the effect was stronger if the soldier was of Arab-descent. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings on our understanding of the roles of superordinate identity in promoting positive outgroup attitudes and potential avenues for future research.

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Do efforts to reduce conflict through the creation of a superordinate identity depend on some preexisting level of shared identity? In the wake of 9/11 and recently under the anti-Muslim rhetoric used and policies imposed by the Trump administration, many Muslims face the contention that they are not American and are often perceived as a religious and cultural outgroup (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009). Despite this, empirical evidence suggests that the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) can eliminate intergroup boundaries by instead making salient an existing shared ingroup identity (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy 2007).

But, questions remain regarding the processes and limitations of making this superordinate identity salient. In the case of American Muslims, for example, does the CIIM suggest that the superordinate identity must overcome two layers of difference (religious and racial-ethnic) or must there be a thread of similarity in place at the subordinate identity level? We therefore test CIIM in the context of priming a superordinate identity with Muslims and focus on the role of race-ethnicity on the effectiveness of CIIM among Democrats and Republicans.

Through an experiment that primes the superordinate American identity with profiles of Muslim soldiers who served and died in Iraq, we find that information that the soldier was Muslim affects Democrats' and Republicans' attitudes toward Muslim Americans differently. The Muslim information treatment matters more among Republicans when the soldier is Arab, whereas for Democrats, it matters more when the soldier is white. This suggests that

superordinate identity is most impactful when the outgroup utilized to prime shared superordinate identity is perceived as very different from the individual's ingroup.

### **Intolerance towards Muslim Americans**

Hate crimes against Muslims in the U.S. have dramatically increased from their 2001 levels (Kishi 2017). This is a social and political problem that raises important questions about social identity and intergroup conflict. Social identity theory (SIT) contends that the process of group differentiation has profound consequences that manifest generally as ingroup love and outgroup hostility (Tajfel 1982). In addition, the process of self-categorization identifies how individuals form such ingroup attachments, mainly finding that identity attachment depends on identity salience (Turner 1985; Oakes, Turner, and Haslam 1991). Recent research finds that political identities follow these patterns of social identity and that intergroup conflict has important political consequences (Mason and Wronski 2018; Jardina 2020; Claassen et al. 2019).

The Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) proposes a solution to such intergroup conflict by making a shared superordinate identity salient. This process functions partially by recategorizing two or more subordinate identities into one inclusive superordinate identity (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). When successful, attachment to superordinate identity decreases bias against the former outgroup, while stronger subordinate identity attachment increases outgroup bias (Stone and Crisp 2016). In political science, scholars find that priming a shared American identity increases support for affirmative action programs among whites (Transue 2007) and causes partisans to like outpartisans more by seeing them more as fellow Americans than as political rivals (Levendusky 2018).

The potential of CIIM in the form of shared American identity could also reduce intolerance against Muslims. But, the case of intolerance against Muslims in the U.S. raises the question of ingroup-outgroup difference perception. On the one hand, outgroup difference may be seen as a deviation from an ethnocentrically-construed superordinate identity, such that a prime of American identity that deviates from the subject's ingroup identity will not work (Wenzel, Mummendey, and Waldzus 2007). For example, studies find that black Americans see Christian identity as central to American identity because black Americans tend to be more Christian and more religious, and so their perception of the superordinate identity is intricately linked with their own subordinate ingroup identity (Mummendey and Wenzel 1999). If this is the case, a superordinate identity must have some reflection of the subordinate ingroup in order to be effective.

On the other hand, priming a shared superordinate identity is meant to initiate the process of identity recategorization. By recategorizing subordinate identities, the primed superordinate identity lowers outgroup hostility, rather than preserving it (Riek et al. 2010). If this is the case, then a superordinate identity need not be constructed from key attributes of a subordinate ingroup identity to effectively reduce intolerance for an outgroup.

In American politics, partisan identities are centrally important, especially in an era of partisan polarization. Some contend that part of the puzzle of polarization lies in party asymmetry (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Converse 1964). These scholars characterize Democrats as a collection of diverse social groups focused on obtaining benefits for their constituent groups, while Republicans are more homogenous and composed of individuals with a shared conservative ideology. When the parties are asymmetrical in this way, it is unclear if the CIIM will equally impact partisans from each party. Because Republicans have a more

homogenous set of identifiers, they have fewer social identities composing the identity of Republican than Democrats, who have a more diverse set of social groups affiliated with the party (Mason 2018; Ahler and Sood 2018).

Further, Democrats and Republicans likely have a different conceptualization of American identity, especially because Republicans tend to identify more strongly with American identity (Rutchick and Eccleston 2010). As a result, the interaction between racial-ethnic identity of the treatment and partisan identity of the subject are likely to determine the effectiveness of superordinate priming, but the literature does not provide evidence for the expected outcome. Accounting for which groups Republicans and Democrats consider their in- and outgroups, therefore enables us to explain how partisans respond to a prime to see Muslims as American.

### **Expectations**

Our first hypothesis concerns the main effect of superordinate identity.

*Hypothesis 1: Priming respondents with a superordinate American identity improves their attitudes toward Muslim Americans*

Our second hypothesis, consisting of two competing predictions, concerns the effects of superordinate identity in the context of American partisanship and racial-ethnic relations. The first prediction is that priming shared superordinate identity with a group not understood as a traditional ingroup of the subordinate identity will cause greater change in positive affect felt towards that outgroup. We therefore expect that Republicans will be more responsive to a treatment of shared identity with Arab than to White Muslims, because Whites are already seen as a Republican ingroup and Arabs are seen as a Republican outgroup. Likewise, we expect that

Democrats will be more responsive to a treatment of shared identity with a White Muslim, because White are generally seen as a Republican ingroup, not a strong Democratic ingroup.

*Hypothesis 2A: The effects of the superordinate identity are stronger if the out subgroup is perceived of as very different from one's in-subgroup.*

The competing prediction expects that when defining a common identity, people often project attributes of their in-subgroup onto the superordinate identity. If this hypothesis is supported, Republicans would be more responsive to the White than the Arab treatments, because Whites are generally associated with the Republican Party. Democrats, on the other hand, would be more responsive to the Arab treatments because Arabs (along with other racial-ethnic minority groups) are generally associated with the Democratic Party.

*Hypothesis 2B: The superordinate identity matters more if the outgroup already has some affinity or shared attributes with the ingroup.*

## **Methods**

To test the aforementioned hypotheses, we conducted an online survey experiment in July 2017. A sample of 1,550 respondents were procured from Qualtrics, balanced by gender and age with 82.8% completion rate. Our experiment leveraged the fact that many Muslim Americans serve in the military and even die while in service. We presented respondents with information about two such soldiers, which in effect primed them to see Muslims as a part of the superordinate concept "Americans." The treatments took into account the effects of both race-ethnicity and religion. As such, we have four groups resulted from combining a two-level race-ethnicity treatment (i.e.,

whether the soldier is white or Arab-descent) and a two-level religion treatment (i.e., whether or not there is information that the soldier was Muslim).





We randomly assigned respondents into one of these four groups.<sup>1</sup> Following the treatment, we presented a filler question that asked respondents whether or not they thought that the soldier deserved the medals he had received. An overwhelming majority (97.2%) thought that he deserved the medals. Attitudes toward Muslims were measured with seven questions (Online Appendix) that directly followed this filler question. We took the average of each respondent's responses to these questions and used it as our dependent variable. The variables were coded such that higher values represent more positive attitudes toward Muslims.

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<sup>1</sup> The remaining 20% of the respondents (N=310) were not part of the experiment and intended for our other study on attitudes toward Muslims. These respondents received neither the experimental stimulus nor the filler question.

**Table 1. The Experimental Stimulus**

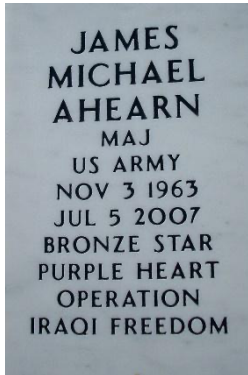
The following is a short description of a fallen soldier who was killed in action in Iraq. Could you correctly identify which medal (or medals) the soldier received posthumously given the description of events surrounding his death?

White – Control (N=315)	White – Muslim (N=312)	Arab Descent – Control (N=308)	Arab Descent – Muslim (N=305)
Major James Michael Ahearn was killed in Iraq on July 5, 2007. He was killed when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in Baghdad.	Major James Michael Ahearn was killed in Iraq on July 5, 2007. He was killed when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in Baghdad.	Staff Sergeant Ayman Abdelrahman Taha was killed in Iraq on December 30, 2005. He was killed when he was preparing a munitions cache for demolition and the cache exploded.	Staff Sergeant Ayman Abdelrahman Taha was killed in Iraq on December 30, 2005. He was killed when he was preparing a munitions cache for demolition and the cache exploded.
			
<p>Which medal(s) do you think was awarded to Major Ahearn by the Army?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bronze Star</li> <li>● Purple Heart</li> <li>● Defense Meritorious Service</li> <li>● Meritorious Service</li> </ul>	<p>Which medal(s) do you think was awarded to Major Ahearn by the Army?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bronze Star</li> <li>● Purple Heart</li> <li>● Defense Meritorious Service</li> <li>● Meritorious Service</li> </ul>	<p>Which medal(s) do you think was awarded to Staff Sergeant Taha by the Army?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bronze Star</li> <li>● Purple Heart</li> <li>● Defense Meritorious Service</li> <li>● Meritorious Service</li> </ul>	<p>Which medal(s) do you think was awarded to Staff Sergeant Taha by the Army?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bronze Star</li> <li>● Purple Heart</li> <li>● Defense Meritorious Service</li> <li>● Meritorious Service</li> </ul>

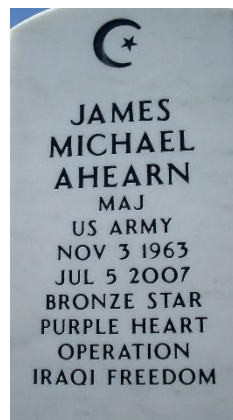


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As indicated on his gravestone, Major Ahearn was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals for his service and sacrifice.



As indicated on his gravestone, Major Ahearn was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals for his service and sacrifice. The crescent and star signifies his Muslim faith.



As indicated on his gravestone, Staff Sergeant Taha was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals for his service and sacrifice.



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## Results

Figure 1 presents the predicted attitudes toward Muslims across the groups, along with their 90% and 95% confidence intervals. It is evident that the Arab-Muslim and the White-Muslim groups exhibited more positive attitudes toward Muslims compared to their corresponding control group. A regression analysis (Online Appendix) shows that this difference is statistically significant ( $b=.101$ ;  $s.e=.06$ ;  $p<.08$ ) and that there is no statistically significant interaction between the race-ethnicity and Muslim information treatments, suggesting that the positive effect of the Muslim information is comparable between the white and the Arab-descent soldiers.

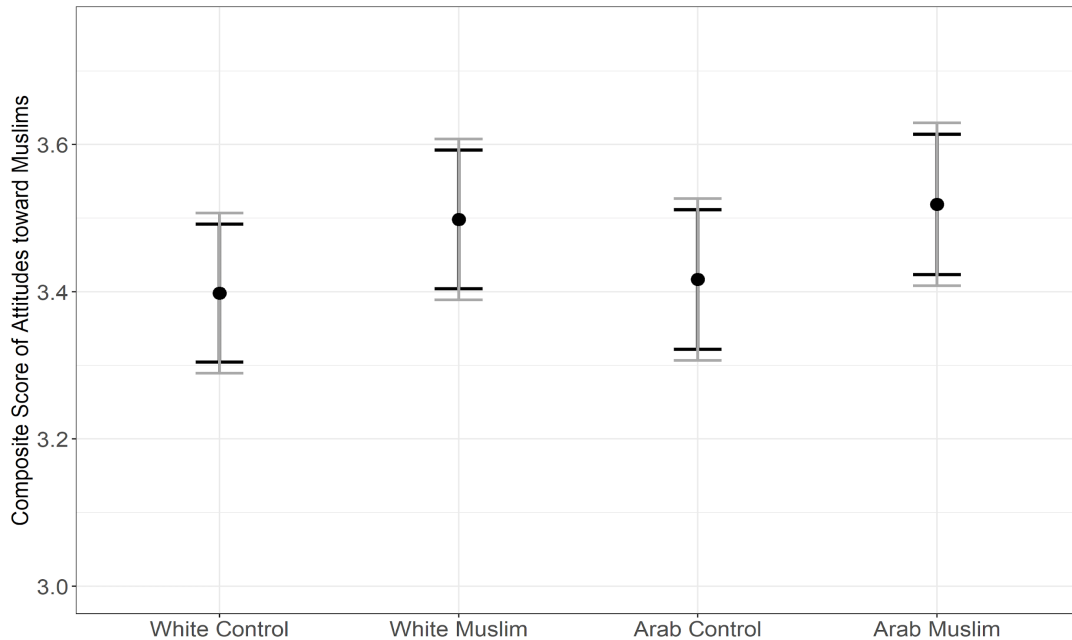


Figure 1. Attitudes toward Muslims across the Experimental Groups

Next, we examine whether the treatment effects vary by partisanship. Figure 2 presents the predicted levels of attitudes toward Muslims across the experimental groups among partisans.<sup>2</sup> We classified respondents into Democrats and Republicans based on their responses to the standard 7-point party identification scale and treated leaners as partisans (Keith et al. 1992).

Two significant treatment effects of the Muslim information are evident. First, among Democrats, the information that the soldier was Muslim led to more positive attitudes toward Muslims if the soldier was white ( $b = .245$ ;  $s.e = .12$ ;  $p < .05$ ). There was no effect if the soldier was of Arab-descent ( $b = .047$ ;  $s.e = .11$ ;  $n.s.$ ). Second, among Republicans, the opposite is true.

<sup>2</sup> In the Online Appendix we present a similar figure that includes Independents. Independents' attitudes toward Muslims are in-between Democrats and Republicans and are not statistically different across the experimental groups.

The Muslim information treatment significantly improved Republicans' attitudes toward Muslims if the soldier was of Arab descent ( $b = .204$ ;  $s.e. = .12$ ;  $p < .10$ ), as opposed to white ( $b = .034$ ;  $s.e. = .13$ ;  $n.s.$ ).

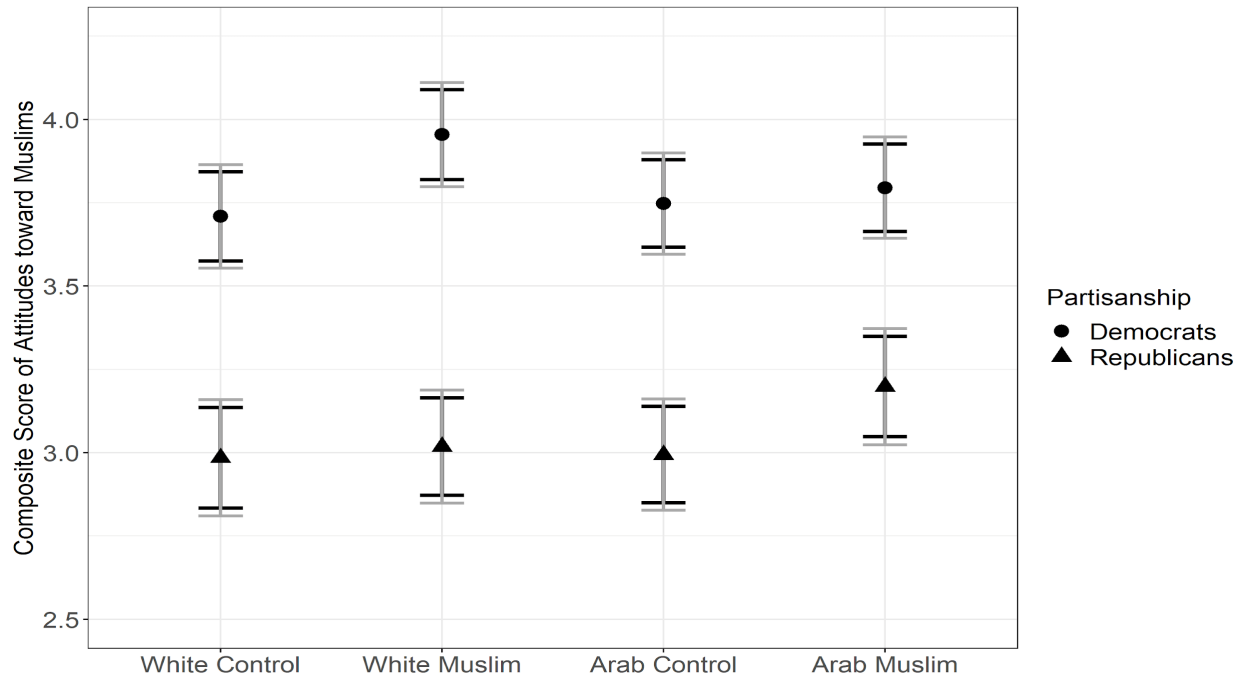


Figure 2. Attitudes toward Muslims by Treatment and Partisanship

### Discussion

Employing a survey experiment in which we primed profiles of Muslim soldiers, we find that respondents were more open toward Muslims if the soldier came from a race-ethnicity group not commonly associated with their partisan ingroup. This result is encouraging since it means that superordinate identity is particularly effective in engendering inclusion of groups that are otherwise excluded or perceived as very different from the individual's ingroup.

Two potential avenues of future research follow from our findings. First, since our study is concerned with attitudes toward Muslim Americans, it is worth asking if the positive effects

extend to Muslims in general. Particularly, it would be interesting to explore if the priming of Muslims as part of a superordinate concept “Americans” would have positive effects on individuals’ acceptance of Muslim immigrants beyond the effects of the immigrants’ skills and competence (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010).

Second, the military is one of the most positively viewed institutions in the United States (Leal 2005). As such, profiles of Muslim soldiers may be one of the more effective means to prime a superordinate identity. Less clear is the effectiveness of profiles of Muslims who are well-known, but also controversial. The boxer Muhammad Ali, for example, was an American sports legend. At the same time, he was a controversial figure due to his opposition to the Vietnam war. Would such a figure be able to prime the idea that Muslims are also part of the nation, just like the Muslim soldiers in our experiment? If so, under what conditions?

Answering this question is particularly relevant given Muslim politicians’ growing prominence and how these politicians are strongly associated with the Democratic Party. In the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, all three Muslim representatives (Andre Carson, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib) are Democrats. On the one hand, these politicians increase the visibility of Muslims in the public sphere. On the other hand, the increasingly polarized nature of American politics raises the question: to what extent is this visibility more associated with partisan identity rather than the broader American identity?

To conclude, we have shown the capacity of superordinate identity to improve attitudes toward Muslim Americans. We believe this finding would be advanced further by research that combines social psychological insights on social identity with insights from political polarization and party asymmetry in outgroup attitudes. More research on the topic, in turn, would place us in

a better position to develop strategies to promote inclusion of minority groups in the United States and around the world more generally.

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