

Do Muslim immigrants assimilate?

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In Trump's recent interview with Fox News' Tucker Carlson, the President said that for American Muslims, "assimilation has been very, very hard. It's been a very, very difficult process." His comments echoed his earlier statements about Muslim immigrants made to Sean Hannity back in June:

Assimilation has been very hard. It's almost—I won't say nonexistent, but it gets to be pretty close. And I'm talking about second and third generation. They come—they don't—for some reason, there's no real assimilation.

As is the case with many other issues, Trump is wrong. After consulting data and experts, this claim was deemed "false" by Politifact. The reality is that Muslim immigrants successfully assimilate into American society.

Trump had laid out in a public statement, still available on his website, the sources that led him to make such a claim. Oddly, he cited the Pew Research Center first, even though the Pew Research Center summed up its massive 2007 study of Muslim Americans by saying, "Muslim Americans appear to be highly assimilated into American society."

Pew's follow-up study confirmed the initial conclusions, and found "no evidence of rising support for Islamic extremism among Muslim Americans."

Trump's other source was a poll conducted by Kellyanne Conway for the conspiratorial Center for Security Policy, which traffics in the theory that the Muslim Brotherhood has penetrated the U.S. government.

Now, an ad hominem is not necessarily a reason to discount the poll, but it does reveal the strong potential for bias. In any case, the opt-in methodology of the online poll and some strange reported characteristics about the sample led experts to conclude the poll was "shaky," "shoddy," and "deeply flawed."

BEYOND TRUMP

To be fair, the evidence Trump points to is not the best that skeptics of Muslim immigration to the United States can muster. The more sophisticated critic might freely

concede that a poll by the Center for Security Policy is shaky, comfortable in the belief that there is stronger evidence to bolster his case. But the evidence does not make the all-too-popular case the skeptic thinks it does.

Muslim immigration skeptics in the United States are quick to point to Europe as an example of what to avoid. But as New York Times columnist Ross Douthat pointed out, Europe and America are different. America not only has a more inclusive national identity than Europe and a stronger tradition of assimilating diverse groups of immigrants, it has greater protection for religion practice, more practice with religious diversity, and its citizens are more religious than Europeans. Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute also points to important policy differences between the United States and Europe, which afford the U.S. an advantage in integrating Muslims.

Therefore, if we are concerned about Europe, then perhaps the best thing we can do as Americans is accept a greater proportion of Muslim emigrants here, where assimilation is even more likely to succeed. The same is true for Canada, where institutions might be even better at assimilating diverse immigrants than in the United States.

But the question remains: just how concerned should we be about assimilation in Europe in the first place?

REPORTS OF A CULTURE CLASH HAVE BEEN GREATLY EXAGGERATED

Fear about a culture clash between Islam and the West began well before the current European migrant crisis. The demography may be changing, to be sure, but are newcomers assimilating? For all the stereotypes, assumptions, and misleading (or outright false!) statistics about Muslims in Europe, let's examine what the research actually shows.

Alan Manning and Sanchari Roy, economists at the London School of Economics, kick-started the literature on cultural assimilation with their 2007 paper testing whether Muslim immigrants in the U.K. assimilated any more slowly than other immigrants. Maybe, they conceded, policy interventions were needed if cultural assimilation of some groups was not fast enough.

They concluded, however, that "we find no evidence for a culture clash in general, and one connected with Muslims in particular." In other words, Muslim immigrants assimilate no slower than do any other immigrants.

That conclusion was called into question the next year when economics professors Alberto Bisin, Eleanora Patacchini, Thierry Verdier, and Yves Zenou published their paper (ungated version here) "Are Muslim Immigrants Different in Terms of Cultural Integration?" in the Journal of the European Economic Association. The authors criticized Manning and Roy's metric for integration and proposed their own, along with a model to test for group variation. After conducting their analysis, they concluded that, "Muslims integrate less and more slowly than non-Muslims."

However, when a team at Stockholm University attempted to replicate Bisin's paper in 2011, they discovered a coding error in the original analysis. They wrote, "our examination of the data using their variable definitions and the same set-up indicates

that their claims about differences between Muslims and non-Muslims[...]does not hold.” Bisin’s team tried to respecify their model (a red flag) to resuscitate their findings but even then, conceded that their revised findings were “less clear-cut.”

Rigorous studies in other countries are unfortunately sparse. A study by demographers Charles Westoff and Tomas Frejka looking at religiousness and other indicators of difference between Muslims and non-Muslims across Europe led the authors to conclude that “differences[...]will continue to diminish” and that the data “shows signs of convergence over time.” The sociologist Sabine Pokorny conducted a representative survey of immigrants in Germany for the CDU-affiliated Konrad Adenauer Foundation. She paid special attention to Muslim immigrants. Again it was found that assimilation was coming along apace and, interestingly, that Muslims were not more religious than Christians in Germany.

It is important to note that decreased religiosity need not be seen as the indicator of Muslim assimilation. It’s not just that the ideals of religious pluralism (more popular in America than in Europe) are compatible with religiosity. In addition, the evidence does not show that strong religiosity is problematic. Reviewing the literature on religious change in the descendants of Muslim immigrants to the west, social science professors David Voas and Fenella Fleischmann point out that the most recent research suggests that there is probably no association (or maybe even a positive association!) between religiosity and structural integration.

The research that does exist on France paints a bleaker picture than the other research discussed so far. Claire L. Adida, David D. Laitin, and Marie-Anne Valfort looked at the descendants of both Christian and Muslim Senegalese immigrants in a study published in the *Journal of Population Economics*. They found that “Muslim immigrants show significantly lower assimilation...than do their Christian counterparts. Furthermore[...]assimilation levels do not converge over[...]time.”

But Adida and her coauthors conducted a field experiment to carefully tease out the causes of French non-assimilation. What they discovered is that it arises from actual discrimination by the French, and the perception among Muslims that systemic discrimination exists.

Their subsequent research has found compelling evidence of systematic discrimination against Muslims blocking successful integration. Other research supports the notion that traditional French aversion to minority rights contributes to lower rates of assimilation.

CONCLUSION

The takeaway is that there is nothing inherent to Islam that makes Muslim immigrants any slower to assimilate than any other group. The migrant crisis represents new—and, yes, difficult—challenges to the project of assimilating Muslims. But the best research indicates that we shouldn’t think these problems are insurmountable—they are challenges that have institutional solutions.

There is no culture clash to fear, except to the extent that Western countries aren’t hospitable or welcoming. In fact, the risk of native backlash is perhaps the “real assimilation dilemma,” rather than any supposed non-assimilation of immigrants. To

paraphrase Franklin Roosevelt, the only thing we have to fear about Muslim immigrants, is fear itself.