

# Islamophobia in Canada

RESEARCH BRIEF (JANUARY 2019)

## SUMMARY

- Public commentary concerning social issues involving Canadian Muslim communities includes both overt and covert forms of Islamophobic rhetoric
- There is often qualified support offered for certain categories of Muslims and certain interpretations of Islam
- Disagreement exists as to where to draw the line between censoring hateful speech that targets a particular religion or religious group

# INTRODUCTION

The Quebec City mosque shooting on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, shocked many Canadians and brought Islamophobia back into the limelight in Canada. In the days immediately following the attack, the Canadian media and several political figures spoke out against Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiment within Canada, broadly, and the province of Quebec, specifically.

As a result of the Quebec City attack and increasing social tensions, [M-103](#),<sup>i</sup> the anti-islamophobia motion tabled in late 2016 by the Liberal Party of Canada Member of Parliament (MP), Iqra Khalid, gained popularity and was debated in the House of Commons.

Importantly, this motion calls for government to:

- (a) recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear;
- (b) condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination.

While the House of Commons ultimately passed M-103, the motion was not without its critics. Specifically, the majority of the Conservative Party of Canada's MPs voted against the motion, arguing that it interfered with section 319 of the Criminal Code (hate speech vs free speech) and accorded special status to a particular religion.

## HATE CRIMES TARGETING MUSLIMS IN CANADA

Statistics Canada gathers information regarding police-reported hate crimes in Canada. Data gathered in 2017 indicate a sharp rise in police-reported hate crimes—up 47% over the previous year (Statistics Canada, 2018).

Both the increase in the amount and type of police-reported hate crimes varied across and within provinces. For instance:

Among the provinces, the greatest increase in the overall number of police-reported hate crimes was observed in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, where incidents rose from 612 in 2016 to 1,023 in 2017 (+67%). This increase was largely tied to more hate crimes targeting the Muslim (+207%), Black (+84%) and Jewish (+41%) populations.

Quebec reported a 50% increase in hate crimes, rising from 327 to 489. The increase was the result of crimes against the Muslim population, which almost tripled from 41 in 2016 to 117 in 2017. Reports of hate crimes against Muslims peaked in February, the month following the mass shooting at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Québec, and accounted for 26% of Quebec's annual reported incidents targeting Muslims. (Statistics Canada, 2018)

The increase in hate targeting Muslim populations is not limited to the offline world. Hate in the form of Islamophobic rhetoric is also prevalent within online environments (cf. Thomas, 2015).

# METHODOLOGY

## CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CACDA)

The present study uses corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis [CACDA] (Thomas, 2015) to uncover linguistic patterns in online conversations pertaining to the January 2017 Quebec City mosque attack and M-103 motion.

CACDA combines conventionally quantitative corpus linguistic techniques with typically qualitative critical discourse analytic methods. It provides an effective means of mapping out frequency information and association patterns related to linguistic phenomena appearing within large volumes of electronically encoded text.

Specifically, CACDA enables a researcher to identify the word pairs that appear frequently within a data set and the statistical significance of the pairings. Furthermore, it allows for an analysis of how statistically significant word pairs are used in context.<sup>ii</sup>

## REDDIT

This research brief analyzes online conversations appearing on [reddit](#), a publicly available, open source website that is most aptly understood as a hybrid forum-based social network/news aggregator site.

As of November 2017, reddit counted over 330 million active monthly users, 138 thousand active communities (subreddits), and was ranked as the fifth most visited site in the United States.<sup>iii</sup>

Registered reddit users are able to customize what they see on their personal account pages by subscribing to 'subreddits'. Any registered user may create a subreddit on any topic and under such categories as: educational subreddits, entertainment subreddits, discussion subreddits, and humour and image-sharing subreddits.

Registered reddit users are also able to submit content to the site in the form of a link (e.g., link to a news article, photo, video) or as a text ("self") post. Once content has been submitted, registered users can then vote it 'up' or 'down', which moves this content to a different rank on the website's pages. Users are encouraged to 'upvote' content if they

think that it contributes to the conversation and to ‘downvote’ content if they think that it is off-topic; in short, “the popularity and prominence of material on the site are determined by voting from the reddit community” (Duggan & Smith, 2013, p. 2).

Registered users are equally able to comment on one another’s content and to vote on these comments, thus enabling discussion and accentuation of issues that users themselves deem relevant and meaningful.

Importantly, the voting functionality provided by the reddit platform is central to CACDA in that it provides one measure of how online content is being received by audiences.

This approach assumes that the more upvotes that content receives (i.e. the higher its point value), the more its audience agrees with it or sees it as valuable in some way. Whereas, the more content is ‘downvoted’ (i.e. the lower its point value or if it carries a negative point value), the less its audience agrees with it or sees its value.

Moreover, when content receives a high number of downvotes, it becomes ‘downvoted into oblivion’ and effectively disappears from reddit’s main interface, thus potentially signaling disagreement or resistance to mainstream thought patterns.

## DATA SET

Conversations that covered topics pertaining to the January 2017 Quebec City mosque attack and M-103 motion were sampled using combinations of the following search terms: Canad\*, “Quebec City”, mosque, (mosque AND (shooting OR attack), M-103.

All conversations contained within the data set were created in 2017 and 2018.

**Table 1. Data set overview**

Conversation Threads	Number of Words	Primary Language
40	188,741	English

The data set used for the present analysis contained 40 conversation threads written predominantly in English, which stemmed from primarily the r/Canada and r/CanadaPolitics subreddits.

# FINDINGS

Analysis of the conversation threads contained within the present data set revealed several salient terms. The frequency of these key terms is represented in Figure 1—the larger the size of a word, the more frequently it appeared in the data set.

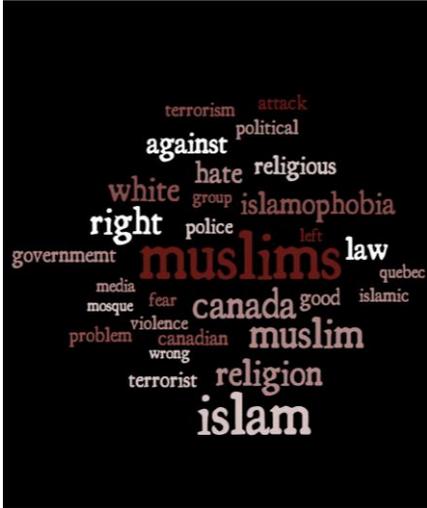


Figure 1. Frequent salient terms

Analysis of these salient terms revealed several meaningful linguistic patterns. Of these, the following three terms held associations that reveal particularly interesting discursive patterns: Muslim [Muslims], Islamic, Islam.

## MUSLIM

Within the present data, analysis of the key word “Muslim [Muslims]” revealed frequent and strong associations with terms such as: Canadian, moderate, hate (dislike), countries.

These word pairings (highlighted in Figures 2 and 3, and Table 2) were predominantly used to provide nuanced arguments in support of, or against, Muslims and Islam.

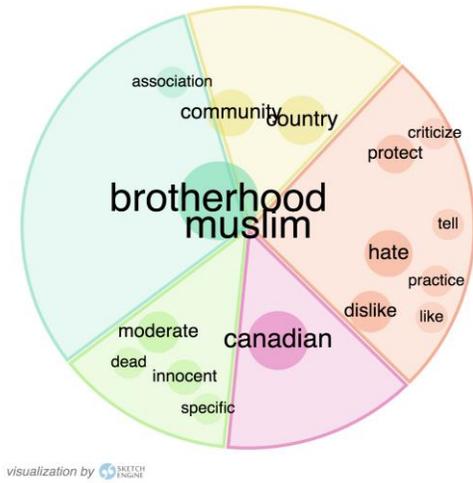


Figure 2. Terms associated with “Muslim”

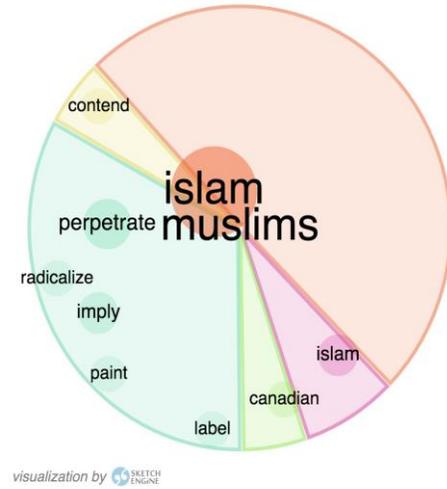


Figure 3. Terms associated with “Muslims”

Table 2. Collocation analysis of “Muslim [Muslims]”

Keyword	Freq.	Associated terms	logDice <sup>iv</sup>
Muslim [Muslims] (noun)	483	Canadian	10.68
		moderate	10.11
		hate (dislike)	10.02
Muslim (adjective)	174	countries	10.96

The word pair “Canadian Muslims” was used to differentiate between different types of Muslims and to show support for Muslims within Canada:

*Canadian Muslims are moderate. (6 points)*

*Who did it and why? Awful! So some hardcore radical Syrian Muslims are trying to hurt our progressive peaceful Canadian Muslims? Wtf Canada! Help protect our Muslims! We have the best Muslims they don't hurt anybody they pay their taxes and live in peace as we all should. (47 points)*

*Islam is an Iron Age ideology that includes a big bunch of barbaric ideas many of which are LAW in countries where Islam has total control like*

*Iran and Saudi Arabia. Thankfully few Canadian Muslims accept the bad parts of [Islamic] ideology. (2 points)*

*Many Canadian Muslims do not believe or practice [Islam] in a dangerous way. (25 points)*

Similarly, the term “moderate Muslim” was used to argue for differentiating between Muslims:

*I firmly believe that the moderate Muslim is not anywhere near as bad as ISIS in any way shape or form. I do however hope that the moderates come together and reform their religion. (3 points)*

Interestingly, while the word pair “hate Muslims” was used to signal disdain for Muslims—

*I think that forcing people who hate Muslims to live with Muslims is an insane and dangerous philosophy. Separating Muslims and people who don't want to live with them seems like the most rational course of action. (11 points)*

—it was also used when specifying the difference in attitudes towards Muslim people and the Islamic religion:

*I've read the Quran, informed myself on Islamic doctrines and the hadiths and I have a very negative appraisal of Islam but do not dislike individual Muslims. (2 points)*

*I don't hate Muslims [...]. Islam is a religion/ideology not a person or people. (6 points)*

*Islamophobic [...is] a bridge term for so much more than just hating Muslims. (6 points)*

Correspondingly, the associative relationship between “like” and “Islam” supported the above distinctions:

*Lots of people don't like Islam with legitimate reason. (2 points)*

*There are truckloads of reasons not to like Islam. (6 points)*

Unlike the use of the word pairings highlighted above, which were used to provide nuance to arguments, the word pair “Muslim countries” was frequently used within the conversations to paint a rather homogeneous and negative portrait of Muslim (majority) countries:

*If Muslims ever had a majority in this country well... just look at all the other Muslim majority countries to get a glimpse of that future. (9 points)*

*You do understand that the reason Muslims are currently overrepresented in violent terrorism acts is because most of the wars and civil wars today happen to be in Muslim majority countries. (3 points)*

*Most Muslim countries have tremendous problems that continue to grow. (1 point)*

*Muslims have higher birth rates because Muslim countries and Muslim immigrants tend to be poorer. (1 point)*

*Are you aware of the restrictions on western White people entering Muslim countries and their activities if they are granted access? If we treated them anywhere close to how we are treated if we are allowed into their countries it would be decried at the worst abuse the world has ever seen. (17 points)*

*Meanwhile a bunch of Muslim countries just had a big meeting to try to determine how they can police 'the social media' to make sure they can prosecute blasphemy. Because that's progressive. (3 points)*

*We shouldn't be looking to any Muslim country as an example of how to structure our society. (1 point)*

## ISLAMIC

Analysis of the key word "Islamic" revealed frequent and strong associations with the term "terrorism". The word pair "Islamic terrorism" (highlighted in Figure 4 and Table 3) was used to describe the scope and scale of the phenomenon:

*The definition of 'terrorism' is very broad if you look at global terrorist acts " upwards of 85% of deaths as result of terrorist acts are the result of Islamic terrorism. (9 points)*

*Studies on the number of terrorist attacks for decades show that the strong majority is Islamic terrorism. (4 points)*

*So again, Islamic terrorism is the terrorism de jour. It's a problem. (7 points)*

*Pretty sure radical Christian terrorism doesn't have the same level of support worldwide as Islamic terrorism. (5 points)*

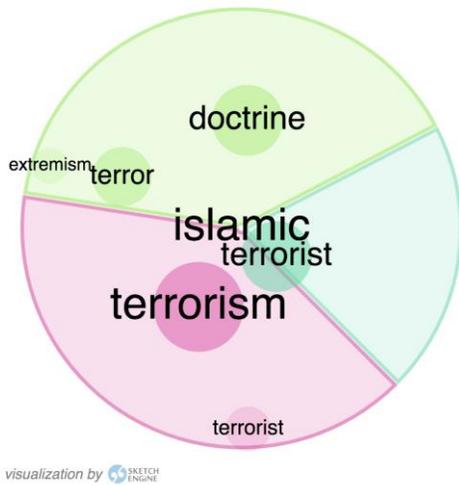


Figure 4. Terms associated with “Islamic”

Table 3. Collocation analysis of “Islamic”

Keyword	Freq.	Associated terms	<i>logDice<sup>v</sup></i>
Islamic (adjective)	126	terrorism	11.01

## ISLAM

Analysis of the key word “Islam” revealed frequent and strong associations with terms such as: radical, criticize, ideology (cult). These word pairings (highlighted in Figure 5 and Table 4) were used frequently within the conversation to distinguish between different interpretations of Islam, as well as to debate the possible merits of openly criticizing the religion.

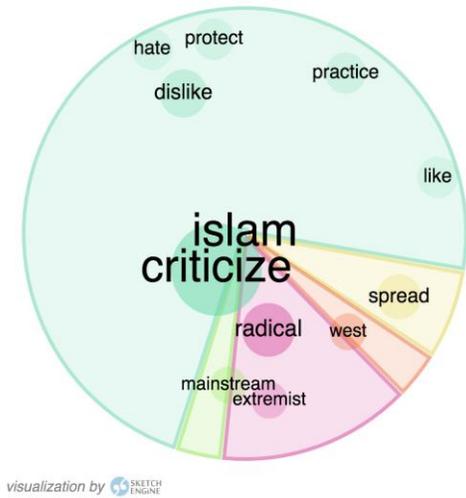


Figure 5. Terms associated with “Islam”

Table 4. Collocation analysis of “Islam”

Keyword	Freq.	Associated terms	<i>logDice</i> <sup>vi</sup>
Islam (noun)	531	criticize	12.91
		ideology (cult)	11.41
		radical	11.13

The use of the term “radical Islam” within the online discussions sampled for the present study is noteworthy because the term was used to articulate a careful distinction between Islam, writ large, and the more extremist interpretation of the religion:

*It is not logically sound to attribute the horrible things associated with radical Islam solely to the existence of Islam. (1 point)*

*Right now, I think part of the problem is the West has trouble distinguishing between fundamentalist/radical Islam and mainstream Islam. There's still a perception that mainstream Islam contains a number of unenlightened doctrines and mainstream Muslims support them. (2 points)*

Moreover, the word pairing was used to downplay the danger posed within Canada by proponents of “radical Islam”:

*Radical Islam is not a threat in Canada. (6 points)*

*I fully agree and appreciate that radical Islam is a serious threat. The observation here is that the damage done and deaths caused in Canada has been relatively limited. (3 points)*

When used specifically in reference to the M-103 motion, comments advocated for open critique of the extremist ideology:

*Radical Islam is a serious threat that needs to be constantly addressed and not shut down. (19 points)*

This position, however, was not uniformly supported by all commentators.

For instance, comments within the M-103 discussions used the term “criticize Islam” to highlight the need to go beyond critique in order to effectively mitigate the potential negative consequences of radical Islam in Canada—

*How many tens of millions of people need to be negatively affected by a certain interpretation of Islam before it's considered representative? Regardless, instead of trying to prohibit the public from criticizing Islam why not fight back against the radical elements of the ideology and reform it? Then there wouldn't be a need to constantly disassociate 'true Muslims' from 'extremists.' (68 points)*

—while other comments highlighted the perceived futility in criticizing Islam:

*It's not Islamophobic to simply criticize Islam but I would argue it's a waste of effort in anything beyond an academic exercise. (11 points)*

Criticism and hate towards Islam were, nevertheless, widespread within the conversations analyzed herein. In particular, comments that exploited the relationship between “Islam” and “ideology” or “cult” abounded:

*Islam is a cult not a religion, don't be confused. (3 points)*

*Islam is an ideology. I'm free to hate it all I want and those who practice it... Nothing to do with racism. Fuck Sharia law. (16 points)*

*Islam is a supremacist ideology that is fundamentally undemocratic. (10 points)*

*When did I say that Islam is a peaceful ideology? (5 points)*

*Islam is an Iron Age ideology that includes a big bunch of barbaric ideas many of which are LAW in countries where Islam has total control like Iran and Saudi Arabia. (2 points)*

# DISCUSSION

The online conversations analyzed as part of this research brief highlight the nuances and distinctions that are made when discussing issues relating to Muslims and Islam in Canada. Significantly, the word pair “Canadian Muslims” was used within the conversations to denote the *type* of Muslim who is perceived to be ‘peaceful’ and to contrast this description with ‘dangerous’ Muslims from other parts of the world.

Additionally, overt distinctions were frequently made between Muslim people and the Islamic religion, as well as between Islam and Radical Islam.

Distinctions about the former were mainly used to assert support for Muslim people and disdain for the Islamic religion. Distinctions about the latter were mainly included within comments in order to highlight the perceived threat posed to Canada by proponents of an extremist interpretation of Islam.

Importantly, while there were instances of qualified support for certain categories of Muslims and certain interpretations of Islam, the use of hateful and Islamophobic rhetoric was, however, ever-present.

# REFERENCES

Duggan, M., & Smith, A. (2013). 6% of online adults are Reddit users. *Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project*. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/reddit.aspx>

Statistics Canada. (2018). *Police-reported hate crime, 2017*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/181129/dq181129a-eng.htm>

Thomas, T. (April 2015). *Analyzing online discourses of Canadian citizenship: O Canada! True north, strong, and free?* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada.

## URLS

[M-103](http://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members/Iqra-Khalid(88849)/Motions?documentId=8661986%2520) [[http://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members/Iqra-Khalid\(88849\)/Motions?documentId=8661986%2520](http://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members/Iqra-Khalid(88849)/Motions?documentId=8661986%2520)]

[reddit](http://www.reddit.com/) [<http://www.reddit.com/>]

## SUGGESTED READING

Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. (2018). *Taking action against systemic racism and religious discrimination, including Islamophobia*. Ottawa, ON: House of Commons Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/CHPC/report-10>

Thomas, T. (April 2015). *Analyzing online discourses of Canadian citizenship: O Canada! True north, strong, and free?* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> **M-103:** Systemic racism and religious discrimination. This motion was tabled by Mississauga-Erin Mills Liberal MP Iqra Khalid on Dec. 5, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> For a full discussion of CACDA methodology, see the resources on the [Project Someone: Prejudice du jour web page](https://projectsomeone.ca/prejudicedujour). [https://projectsomeone.ca/prejudicedujour]

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.redditinc.com/press>

<sup>iv</sup> The *logDice* statistic is an account of how often two words appear within a body of text both next to, and away from, each other. The *logDice* statistic carries a theoretical maximum value of 14; word pairs (collocations) with a *logDice* value of 10 or greater are considered to be exceptionally strong discursive relationships. For a full discussion, see Rychlý, 2008.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.