

# “Grave and Growing Threats”: *The Association of Small Bombs* and the Persistence of Post-9/11 Narratives

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The intense fear and division experienced in the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 frequently turned into enmity toward Muslims in the U.S. and worldwide. Though political leaders, including President George W. Bush, were careful to specify criticism toward violent extremists, differentiating them from Muslims more broadly, these messages of caution did not fully stem the tide of fear and hatred aimed at followers of Islam.

Negative narratives about Muslims remain relevant in United States political communication today, as President Donald J. Trump faces ongoing court battles to defend Executive Orders aimed at banning foreign nationals from predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the country (“Timeline of the Muslim Ban”). Certainly, negative trends in media treatment of Muslims predate September 11 (Hirji 34-6). However, political narratives from that era about Muslims and Muslim-majority nations as monolithic potential threats to the American way of life are unique and have persisted in U.S. media—again, in spite of efforts even on the part of the Bush administration to convey more nuanced narratives. The continued relevance of these kinds of stories in U.S. media and politics suggest that Bush-era messaging may have reached levels of saturation that mirror those of effective pre-persuasion, a type of communication that essentially constitutes a subtle evolution in the predominant stories are told about certain issues.

This paper aims to identify the lasting effects of post-9/11 rhetoric about Muslims through a narrow examination of U.S. media responses to a single counter-message published fifteen years later: the 2016 novel *The Association of Small Bombs* by Karan Mahajan. The paper begins with a review of the literature on the tenor of post-9/11 media tropes related to Muslims and terrorism, relating these tropes to the kinds of narrative pre-persuasion that are often identified as precursors to propaganda. After justifying responses to Mahajan’s novel as an informative case study in the resilience of this pre-persuasive communication environment, this paper analyzes critical media responses to the book to understand which elements

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of post-9/11 political narratives linking Muslims and violent extremists have been the most persistent. In so doing, this study provides a new look at the ways in which even consciously nuanced strategic communication can be reduced to and linger in the form of misleading pre-persuasive narratives, in this case creating and maintaining a climate in the United States that is permissive of anti-Muslim politics and policies. It also emphasizes the role that well-researched, carefully crafted fiction might play in bringing nuance to damaging political stereotypes.

### Prior Research on the Nature and Influence of Post-9/11 Media Narratives

Much has been written on prominent themes in mainstream U.S. media after September 11. In general, research has focused on narratives used in political communication and the news media to justify military action (Miller). Religious language, for example, was often invoked in government and media rhetoric: President Bush termed the September 11 attacks a “wake-up call to America” and the subsequent campaign against terrorism a “crusade” (Maddox 398-402). This language set up a clear, binary demarcation between good and evil that made distinct a culpable elsewhere from the victimized, resilient United States. This was echoed in media coverage of the War on Terror. U.S. media were generally found to be “on message” with the Bush administration in terms of justifying the war in Iraq through emphasizing fear and fury—emotions that tend to subvert critical engagement—as responses to terrorism (Bennett 20-39; Snow and Taylor 389-407). Even when challenged, the Bush administration effectively maintained broad public support for the war in Iraq. This success can be traced to a few key factors: cohesivity, control over the timing of public discourse, and emotional appeals that the administration knew the public would accept because of continued “intense national anxiety” (Western 110-1). These strategies convinced voters in the U.S. that the threat that President Bush called “grave and growing” was real, and that it could be effectively countered only through aggressive, anti-Muslim policies and military action (Western 111-3).

It is again important to note that President Bush and his administration made careful attempts to create a more nuanced narrative. For example, the President noted in remarks delivered to Congress that “The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them” (Hilal). However, the overall message of the War on Terror was often largely interpreted as a war being waged against or in fear of Muslims or Islam, rather than extremists, and this simplified narrative seems to have persisted in the national imagination.

### Stereotypes, Emotions, and Pre-Persuasion

A great deal of research has found that media depictions of minority groups affect audience perceptions and opinions of those groups (Greenberg et al. 333-51). This is true even in works of fiction. Though readers and viewers can generally distinguish between fact and fiction in individual works, “this becomes increasingly difficult if a variety of media come together to create a consistent picture” (Hirji 37). In fact, media analysts tend to agree that counteracting innate stereotypic thinking requires discipline and awareness, but often, audiences of both news and entertainment media “have neither the motivation nor the skills to challenge aspects of their own deeply engrained thought processes” (Henry and Tator 29). This emotional bypassing of complex message processing makes pre-persuasion easy to execute and maintain—even inadvertently—through consistent media messaging. Pre-persuasion involves establishing a favorable climate for future messaging through determining how an issue is defined and discussed, essentially simplifying the narrative around the issue.

From there, delivering a message that controls the emotions of a receptive audience follows more easily (Pratkanis and Aronson). Simplified narratives tied to both pre-existing prejudices and fear or other heightened emotions can be particularly difficult for both communicators and audiences to detect or counteract, making the post-9/11 media climate a setting conducive to pre-persuasion. Indeed, remnants of the rhetoric employed at the time continue to facilitate a climate permissive of political communication framing Islamic extremism as justification for military investments and intervention. Further, narratives of fear continue to make policies like President Trump’s travel ban aimed at Muslim-majority countries seem not only viable but necessary. This political permissibility relies on persistent, consistent messaging, regardless of intention.

### The Persistence of Post-9/11 Narratives in U.S. Entertainment Media

The persistence of several key themes employed in political responses to September 11 illustrates the efficacy of repetition in messaging. Many scholars have explored the tangle of patriotism and prejudice that emerged at the time, tracking it from news and political rhetoric into popular culture. Though U.S. culture has shifted considerably in the ensuing decade, creating space for media with more nuanced representations of diverse religious and cultural groups, the general media discourse around Islam has remained shallow and often biased (Westwell 815-34). Most evaluations of post-9/11 themes in entertainment media identify superficial transformation in terms of increased references to diversity in general and Islam specifically, but highlight continued trends of negative discourse, particularly with respect to the themes of religious difference underpinning distinctions between good and evil (Castonguay 139-45; Hirji 33-47). The implicit justification for

military action in these kinds of narratives is often made explicit, such as when Hollywood films reflected and affirmed the policies and anxieties of the Bush administration, stoking emotional justifications for increased defense capabilities and military interventions internationally (Shailo 72-87; Alford 144-56). Even in the realm of professional wrestling, where “normative—and punitive—relationships between [...] American and foreign have played out week by week for decades,” scholars have traced stereotypic imagery that supported the urgency and clear-cut morality of the War on Terror (Nevitt 321–2).

Though evaluations of U.S. media are useful in identifying pervasive, anti-Muslim messaging, exploring counter-messaging and responses to Islamophobic discourses can also be instructive in terms of illustrating the saturation of pre-persuasive rhetoric (Devadoss and Cromley 380-96). For example, decriers of Islamophobic rhetoric after September 11 were criticized for their “blame America first” attitudes in a backlash against counter-messaging put forth at the time (Silberstein). However, research on challenges to the Islamophobic narratives have often focused on the news media (Entman 415-32). With respect to fictional or entertainment media, some have traced the evolution of more nuanced representations of processes of radicalization and fundamentalism (Morrison 567-84). Given the pervasiveness of anti-Muslim messaging in fictional entertainment media, examining responses to counter-narratives in that realm is worthwhile as a way of understanding their efficacy.

### Research Methods: Evaluating the Efficacy of a Counter-Message

To capture both the nature of the book as a counter-message and the resilience of Islamophobic pre-persuasion in contemporary responses to it, this paper uses thematic content analysis to identify themes in reviews of *The Association of Small Bombs*. Mainstream media responses to the book highlight its prominent themes both as an independent piece of art and as a piece of carefully wrought counter-messaging in response to the emotional, overly simplified anti-Muslim narratives in U.S. media after September 11.

*Why This Novel*. The persistence of post-9/11 pre-persuasive rhetoric even in response to counter-messages embedded in entertainment media is evident in the critical response to *The Association of Small Bombs*, a decades-later exploration of religious and political tensions similar to—but also quite distinct from—those so heightened in 2001. Indian American author Karan Mahajan had been working on the book since 2008, making it a carefully composed response to narratives about Muslims and terrorism, separately and in combination, by the time of its 2016 publication (Gardner). Though perhaps not the most overt literary response to September 11, the novel weaves together narratives of religious belief and nonbelief; the complexities of cultural, political, and social pressures worldwide;

and their culmination in a terrorist act and its aftermath. It is because of this multifaceted exploration of violence and victimization that this novel, and the reactions it inspired, constitute an apt site for an exploration of the resilience of 9/11-era Islamophobic pre-persuasion and the most effective approaches to countering such lasting narratives.

*The Association of Small Bombs* opens in a marketplace in Delhi in 1996 with an explosion of a car bomb, then follow the stories of the survivors of the attack, the families of those killed, and the terrorists who organized the bombing. Initially an intimate exploration of family life and Hindu-Muslim relations in contemporary India, the novel follows its characters to the United States when one of the protagonists attends college in California just before September 11. Once there, he faces prejudice based on his race, class, and religion. He eventually aligns himself with an organization whose members become involved in terrorist activities, not as religious extremists but political activists frustrated by alienation and the inefficiency of peaceful protests (Mahajan). Throughout the novel, the characters engaged in networks and individual acts of terrorism are not pardoned, but humanized: they are inept, disillusioned, angry, and lost. Though the book itself is divided into distinct sections—each neatly titled “Blast,” “Victims,” “Terrorists,” etc.—the narrative and its characters resist categorization into the distinct classifications of religious difference or of good and evil initially advanced in post-9/11 media. Instead, the book outlines a much more complicated web of violence and political culpability.

*Selecting Media Responses.* Sampling of media responses to *The Association of Small Bombs* was conducted on Lexis Nexis, where a search for the title on Lexis Nexis Academic (now Nexis Uni) identified 59 articles published in U.S.-based newspapers (including undergraduate-run college newspapers), magazines, journals, web-based publications, and blogs between January 1, 2016 and March 1, 2019. Articles that were published both in print and online were only counted once. Articles were also excluded from the sample if they did not contain substantive discussion of the novel and its contents. Thus, articles about awards that the book won, those written by the author that only mentioned the book’s title in a biographical note, and those that only included the title on a list of recommended books were excluded. Articles that centered on interviews with the author were only included in the sample if they also included at least two sentences reviewing the book. This reduced the sample size to seventeen articles, all of which are listed in the works cited (Alessio 40; Anderson; Byrne; Ealy; Fallon; Hong; Kelley; “Kirkus Review”; Littwin; Maazel; Majumdar; McCreary; *Publishers Weekly*; Sacks; Schwartz 82; Shetty; Walker).

While this sample is small, it does represent a nationwide coverage of a literary novel. It also exemplifies publications of many different sizes and scopes from a number of different regions, including national publications. This broad sample of

U.S. media responses to *The Association of Small Bombs* is therefore a good starting point in terms of the national reception of the novel. Of course, the reviewers whose responses to the book are captured here might not be representative of U.S. readers or residents more broadly. Different methodological approaches would be needed to understand the responses of the public. However, this sample does allow for hypothesis generation about reactions to counter-Islamophobic storytelling among those with an interest in narratives, who are likely to be more attentive to and critical of details others might overlook. This makes their responses an apt site for identifying nuanced responses to fictional messages that counter broader narratives.

*Thematic Content Analysis.* This study uses content analysis to identify themes in reactions to the novel that relate to themes in post-9/11 rhetoric about terrorism, Islam, and the intersection of politics and religion. The kind of thematic coding used herein involves a number of iterative steps (Braun and Clarke 77-101). First, initial codes capturing interesting features of reviews with respect to religion, politics, and morality were generated, largely using key words from the texts themselves. These codes were then sorted into three categories, which emerged as themes after the initial round of keyword coding. Each category relates to a quality of *The Association of Small Bombs* that was repeated as a theme in its reviews: the novel’s subversion of simple religious tropes, its efforts to humanize both the victims and perpetrators of violence, and its emphasis of the moral complexity of political life. Certainly, reviews had other common themes, particularly in terms of commentary on the novel as a work of fiction. However, these themes were set aside in this analysis, where the focus was specifically on reactions to the novel that contained echoes of or revisions to of the kinds of narratives that were prevalent in U.S. media after September 11.

This approach to content analysis is flexible, allowing for systematic analysis and detailed description of a dataset. While this is useful for a small sample size like this one, it also makes the study limited in scope. Further explorations of responses to other entertainment media that incorporate counter-messages to Islamophobic rhetoric would be necessary to get a sense of broader trends. Additionally, thematic coding reduces sample elements to their thematic components. This can flatten some of the discourse being examined by leaving out information related to the sources of particular ideas, discarding important topics that do not recur in the sample, and neglecting connections between some thematic elements.

Nonetheless, the level of detail this method allows makes it a constructive foray into generating hypotheses about the resilience and malleability of cultural narratives. Responses to *The Association of Small Bombs* illuminate the ways in which pre-persuasive narratives can capture national imaginations, as well as how they might be made more constructively complicated by alternative stories in fictional media.

## Findings and Discussion: Responses to Nuance in Narrative

The three core themes related to post-9/11 narratives about religion and politics identified in the content review were all noted by critics as strengths of the novel, painting a compelling picture of the way that these narratives have both evolved and remained the same since 2001. While outright recognition of and often praise for these themes illustrates a willingness to move beyond simple, often Islamophobic storytelling about terrorism, their absences in these reviews is also of interest. Where reviewers did not laud certain aspects of the novel, it may be either because they were not considered noteworthy or because they were not considered strengths. The former would suggest that post-9/11 Islamophobia has waned such that its counter-messages are no longer notable; the latter would suggest that counter-messages still ring false. Further research on when and where such messages are compelling to U.S. audience is needed to tell the difference. However, even this sample is instructive in identifying the ways in which the novel was received as a response to Islamophobia, as well as what those responses say about prevailing narratives of terrorism and religion.

*Subverting Religious Stereotypes.* Five of the seventeen reviews of the book highlighted its subversion of religious stereotypes as one of its strengths (Kelley, Maazel, McCreary, Sacks, and Shetty). For example, one noted that Mahajan describes Hindu-Muslim relations in India “frankly without depicting either as particularly incorrect or evil” (McCreary). Another found his “take on what it means to be a practicing Muslim [...] sophisticated and nuanced” (Maazel). Still others described the novel as “the finest I’ve read at capturing the seduction and force of the murderous, annihilating illogic that increasingly consumes the globe” (Sacks) and “a radical and extended act of empathy” (Shetty).

Notably, some read this approach to more nuanced representations of religion with something akin to surprise: “None of the terrorists in the novel are radicalized Muslims. None of them murder in the misappropriated name of Allah. Instead, they are political activists” (Maazel). Further, one reviewer criticized elements of the novel related to its religious—and cultural—nuance, suggesting that readers might get bogged down in unfamiliar terms in the deep description of life, both religious and secular, in India in its earlier sections (Kelley).

Though the least common of the three identified, this theme suggests that more nuanced narratives about religious groups, while commended by some reviewers, are still noteworthy even in fictional U.S. media. In some cases, this aspect of the novel was seen as a surprising strength. Though praise for its nuance suggests that some of the simplistic narratives about Islam that were so prevalent in the post-9/11 era have waned, that the religious and cultural specificity of the novel seemed surprising and even overwhelming to some reviewers suggests that this depth of

inquiry into religions and cultures frequently dismissed as different and even dangerous in media discourse remains groundbreaking even decades later.

*Humanizing Victims and Perpetrators of Violence*. Most reviewers—twelve of the seventeen—explicitly recognized the novel’s capacity to humanize both the victims and perpetrators of violence as one of its unique strengths: Anderson, Byrne, Ealy, Fallon, Hong, Kelley, Littwin, Maazel, McCreary, Schwartz, Shetty, and Walker. Though the narration does not excuse involvement in orchestrating atrocities, it does outline something of an explanation for the way it often comes about for people who are often themselves victims of both manipulation and circumstance: “men corrupted by political inefficiency and injustice” (McCreary). Most reviewers held up this aspect of the novel as effective in terms of humanizing characters that are typically flattened in media representations, setting it apart from “popular sensationalist literature and films” that perpetuate anti-Muslim tropes (McCreary). One reviewer admired Mahajan’s “gutsy” narrative, which “(a) forces us to care about just another terrorist attack in a market in Delhi and (b) insists that we consider—and possibly even like—the people for whom terrorism exerts its appeal” (Maazel).

Another noted that Mahajan portrays characters “as angry, frustrated, obsessed, perhaps deluded— as killers but not as monsters” (Anderson). In general, the consensus among reviewers was that the novel is a “tour de force of psychological probing and empathy” (Ealy, “Terror Attack”). In interviews about the book, Mahajan notes that this process of humanizing characters readers might otherwise dismiss as one-dimensional was one of his goals. Notably, his goal seems to have been tracing the origins of terrorism to facilitate its prevention. In his words:

One of the key points that the novel is trying to get across is that we have to deglamorize terrorism and strip away the many layers of fear we attach to the word. And if you see people who are perpetrating these attacks as incompetent and fearful, then you at least have to see how this entire crisis of terrorism could be defused [...] I think the populace can live in less fear than it does, which would in turn make them less susceptible to all sorts of demagoguery. (Ealy, “Karan Mahajan”)

Mahajan’s objective in empathizing with the characters in his novel who become involved in or manipulated by terrorist organizations is not to condone their decisions but to explain them, with the goal of identifying ways to prevent the despondence that can drive such choices. In his view, overly simplified narratives about these organizations and their perceived connections with regions or religious groups create fear, which gives way to policies and politics that perpetuate enmity. His novel is intended as an answer to that fear; the complicated tragedy he outlines is meant to broaden readers’ views of injustice and violence, as well as their ability

to imagine how to address both.

This aspect of the novel discomfited some reviewers.. One took issue with Mahajan's investigations of the internal lives of all of his characters as a question of craft, arguing that some moments of introspection by certain characters were hard to believe (Schwartz 82). Others found the novel's investment in both victims and perpetrators of violence "dissonant" and "unsettling" (Sacks; Byrne). This uneasiness with nuanced explorations of terrorism contains echoes of simplified, stereotypical post-9/11 narratives. That adding nuance to these stereotypical stories remains difficult even in fictional media points to their durability, but the novel's success also suggests that imaginative explorations like Mahajan's hold promise as new ways of understanding and addressing the root causes of violence.

*Emphasizing Moral Complexity.* Creating a more complex universe of political motivations and outcomes is the third aspect of the novel that was commonly identified as one of its strengths, with seven of the seventeen highlighting this aspect of the book (Alessio 40; "Kirkus Review"; Maazel; McCreary; Schwartz 82; Shetty; *Publishers Weekly*). The way in which the novel seems to argue that "there are no heroes here" was read as "subversive and refreshing" (Maazel). A brief review in *Publishers Weekly* spent considerable space on this aspect of the book: "Mahajan's talent is in conveying the sense that the world is gray, not black-and-white, and he accomplishes this by weaving together the evolving motives and passions of his characters so intricately that in the end we see each as culpable and human" (176). This theme is a crucial disruption of the kinds of media messaging that increased in prevalence after September 11, which centered on a narrative of a world where all actors are strictly either good or evil.

Interestingly, however, it was the moral complexity of the novel that was most commonly criticized among reviewers, with four—more than half of those who discussed this quality—describing the novel's commitment to a nuanced narrative in ways that highlighted reviewers' discomfort with this approach. Some felt *The Association of Small Bombs* was "too restless" and so "wearily complex" that it lacked a clear central purpose (Alessio 40; McCreary). Others felt the novel oversold "the point that radicalism makes for unlikely bedfellows" in what became a "screed against coherence" ("Kirkus Review"; Shetty). Interestingly, this aspect of the novel was criticized both for being both overly complicated and narratively heavy-handed. This suggests that some found the nuance the novel explores dizzying, while others found it self-evident.

Attitudes of both irritation and overwhelm in response to more nuanced storytelling illustrate the breadth of reactions made possible by patchy evolution in the prevailing narratives on an issue. That the central moral complexity of the novel inspired somewhat mixed reviews suggests that one aspect of post-9/11 pre-persuasive narratives that persists in the U.S. consciousness is their moral simplicity. Discomfort in response to more complex political stories are echoed in

debates around President Trump’s Muslim travel ban. The lack of ambiguity of post-9/11 political narratives may be their most persistent quality. However, that the nuanced explorations of these themes in *The Association of Small Bombs* inspired many positive responses suggests that thoughtful fictional media may hold promise in expanding our capacity to imagine terrorism and ways to prevent it.

## Conclusion

*The Association of Small Bombs* was named a finalist for the National Book Award in 2016, and the judges’ citation captures the elements that make it an illustrative example of counter-messaging in the face of propagandistic narratives about Muslims and terrorism: “Karan Mahajan explodes the notion that anything or anyone is truly mundane, perforates the border between perpetrator and victim, and cautions us that weapons have no masters” (*National Book Foundation*). The primary trends in U.S. responses to the novel—admiration for its efforts to disrupt religious stereotypes and humanize both victims and perpetrators of violence, and both praise for and discomfort with its complex view of political morality—highlight the ways in which post-9/11 narratives about terrorism remain salient. The persistence of simplistic, fear-based media messaging, even in spite of attempts by political leaders to add nuance to those stories, merits further study, as do the ways in which fictional and factual media interact to influence public opinion.

How to respond to atrocities with political stories that are both impassioned and accurate remains an urgent question today. The groundwork of Islamophobic narratives laid in the post- 9/11 era can be permissive of the kinds of anti-Muslim politics and policies that *The Association of Small Bombs* investigates as potential contributors to the appeal of extremism. Mahajan’s novel makes a still-timely argument for finding ways in our public speech to vehemently and unequivocally decry acts of violent extremism without vilifying people from religious, philosophical, and cultural backgrounds that are unrelated to those acts.

In *The Association of Small Bombs*, Mahajan not only subverts overly simplistic Islamophobic rhetoric, but also more accurately depicts violent extremism as a social and political concern. In his words, “Most modern-day terrorists have been middle-class individuals with degrees [...] It’s scary for us to imagine that someone who shares our sensibilities could turn to terror” (Majumdar). He describes his goal in the novel as one that involves inspiring a different kind of fear than that typically activated by political narratives about terrorism. *The Association of Small Bombs* inspires a fear of alienating others rather than a fear of the others themselves, and in this way, subverts the kind of pre-persuasive messaging that may make military intervention or a blanket travel ban seem like the only solution to the threat of terrorism.

Ultimately, this novel and the reactions to it exemplify the potential fiction has

to make complex narratives that become dangerous when oversimplified in stories told in politics or media. Though elements of some Islamophobic narratives from the post-9/11 era have persisted in the U.S. consciousness, maintaining a political climate that allows for anti-Muslim politics and policies, others have grown more nuanced. Reactions to *The Association of Small Bombs* suggest that fiction can be a space in which collective pain might be investigated and reimagined, deepening our knowledge of complicated issues and their potential solutions in the service of more just political life. A better understanding of what makes such efforts most effective could inform future attempts to prevent reductive narratives from capturing the public's imagination in harmful ways, and to instead advance stories that acknowledge the complexities of individual actors and the social, political, and spiritual worlds they inhabit.

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