Under attack.

As terrorist groups sour the international reputation of Islam, Muslim students feel the effects

"It's really harsh to see what my family has to go through."
—Azra Korajcevic, 11

"They're completely misinterpreting what my religion really is."
—Hamad Megahed, 12

"I am not oppressed."
—Samina Ismail, 12

Kathy Xie
@kathyidk

For Azra Korajcevic, living in a prejudiced society is all too familiar. Since elementary school, the junior has experienced countless microaggressions because of practicing Islam.

Korajcevic is white, with jet black hair that starkly contrasts porcelain skin. Because of this appearance, which is incongruent with the public's view of a "typical Muslim," Korajcevic and their brothers know they face less Islamophobia than those with perhaps a darker complexion.

They go to school. They make friends. They sometimes forget that such prejudice and hatred is present in this world.

But then they remember again.

"I don't wear the hijab, so people don't know I'm a Muslim; they just assume I'm Christian," Korajcevic said. "Then I tell them [about my religion], and they just stop talking to me. I've lost friends over it."

And then comes the jokes.

"You hear the terrorist jokes, the 9/11 jokes, and they're brought up every time I mention I'm a Muslim," Korajcevic said.

Over the years, they've learned to take the quips with a grain of salt. But, tolerance to the insensitivity is low.

"It's like, 'Oh, that's funny... that's *so funny*.'"

According to Gallup polls over the last decade, Islamophobia (the dislike of or prejudice against Islam or Muslims) has been on the rise since 9/11. In a 2011 meeting, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations identified Islamophobia as an area of concern. However, this prejudice has skyrocketed since the the formation of ISIS and most recently, the bombings in Paris organized by the group's members.

When the US toppled Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, it unintentionally sparked a civil war where extremist groups like al-Qaeda flourished. A subgroup within the organization, which later became ISIS, used this opportunity to build a support base. al-Qaeda eventually declared ISIS as too brutal and split with the group in 2014.

Since then, ISIS has taken over a mini-state, spanning 80,000 square kilometers (roughly the size of South Carolina) across Iraq and Syria. The organization has either inspired or been directly responsible for over 50 terrorist attacks around the world, including the Nov. 13 Paris attacks that killed over 130 people.

Huffington Post reported over 52 Islamophobic incidents in North America since Nov. 13, marking almost one every day.

Superficiality of hatred

Unlike Korajcevic, senior Samina Ismail has faced direct discrimination on the basis of her appearance. She states that the insensitive remarks and dirty looks usually come from older people, and stem from the fact that she dons a hijab.

"Many people have come up to me, concerned, saying 'Oh honey, this is America, you don't need to wear that anymore!'" Ismail said. "I don't think they understand the fact that no one forced me to wear hijab. I wear it because I want to and nothing you say is going to make me stop."

Ismail wears the hijab because it gives her "a sense of identity, awareness, security and comfort." She finds it most ironically offensive when women object to her choices of clothing, demanding her to take off the hijab and stop wearing long sleeves, jackets and cardigans.

"They fight for their right to wear whatever they want, but don't think it's OK for me to wear whatever I want," she said. "I am not a poor oppressed girl whose father forces her to look like a paper bag and who has no education. Quite the contrary, to be honest."

Fuel to the fire

Recently, politicians have used the ISIS terrorist attacks as ammunition to promote anti-Islamic policies. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump suggested keeping a database of all Muslim residents and banning all Muslim travel to the United States.

"Until we are able to understand this problem and the threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life," Trump said in a statement to CNN last week.

Such statements incense senior Hamad Megahed.

"They're completely misinterpreting what my religion really is, and it makes me feel like some sort of criminal," he said. "They're basing all beliefs on what ISIS does alone, but that's a terrorist group! It's ridiculous that they just believe all Muslims would do everything that ISIS is doing."

According to Megahed, the actions of militant groups have no bearing on the Islamic faith. "I'm pretty sure most of them have never learned about the religion. They've probably never opened up the Quran," he said. He believes in the importance of global cooperation to defeat organizations like ISIS.

In the end, despite the bullying, prejudice and insensitivity, Megahed stands with steadfast conviction about the true meaning of his religious ideology.

"The Islam that I am following and the Islam that 1.6 billion other people are following is truly a religion of peace."
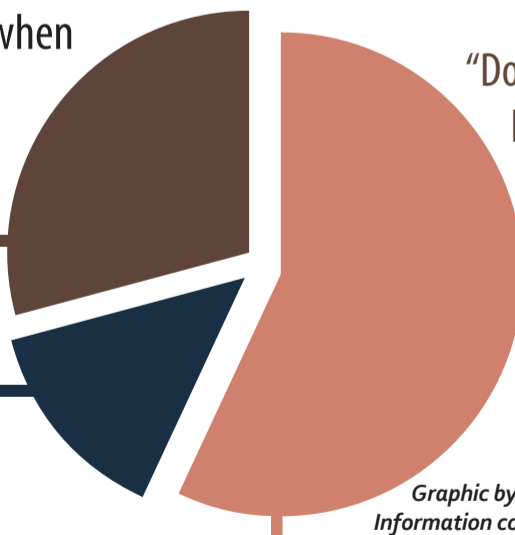
Daniel Hamilton, Shreya Patel and Amber Shemesh contributed to this report | Photos by Dana Dinh

We asked 173 students what they thought of when they heard the word **"Islam"** or **"Muslim."**

29% of responses were negative

14% of responses were positive

57% of responses were neutral

"Do you agree with presidential candidate Donald Trump's plan of banning all Muslim travel to the United States?"

18% of students said yes

Graphic by Annie Aguiar
Information compiled by Shreya Patel and Alex Morrison

MESSAGE BOARD

Following the Paris attacks, presidential candidates voice their opinions

Information compiled by Shreya Patel | Photos courtesy Creative Commons

"The attacks are a wake-up call to the fact that what we're involved with now is a civilizational conflict with radical Islam."
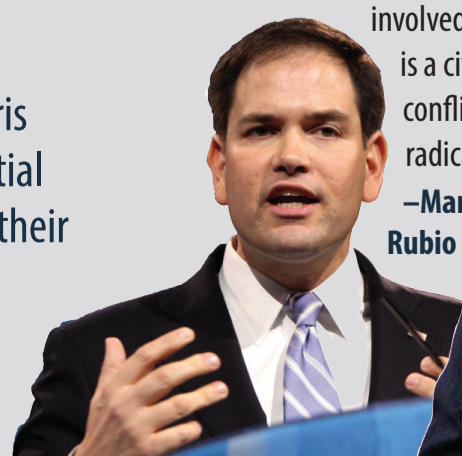—Marco Rubio

"There are those who have a thirst for blood in an attempt to spread their philosophy across this globe. We must redouble our efforts to resist them."
—Ben Carson

"We have to look at ISIS as the leading threat of an international terror network; it cannot be contained; it must be defeated."
—Hillary Clinton