

# Despite terrorism fears, economic relationships drive visa decisions, study finds

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Despite heightened focus on preventing global terrorism since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a University of Kansas researcher has found that the economic relationship between two countries is the most significant factor in determining the acceptance or rejection rate of visas.

"The general trend seems to be the case that despite much ado about security and how that's going to impact closed borders, we don't really see that at the aggregate. The data is not in line with that," said Nazli Avdan, assistant professor of political science who examined data that covered visa rejection rates from 1968 to 2007 of 207 countries and independent political units.

Avdan detailed her findings in the article "Controlling Access to Territory: Economic Interdependence, Transnational Terrorism and Visa Policies," published in the June print edition of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. Past [political science](#) research on the topic has largely ignored visa policies.

She said the findings that trade interdependence influences visa acceptance and rejection rates more so than security factors do seem to oppose conventional wisdom, especially based on the amount of attention transnational terrorism receives post-9/11.

"The unexpected side of the story is that states are reluctant to impose these short-term restrictions upon countries with which they enjoy bilateral trade ties," Avdan said.

She did find security concerns do have a direct effect on visa restrictions and other measures in the wake of a direct terrorist attack on a country's own soil, such as 9/11, the 2004 Madrid train bombings or the 2005 bombings in London.

"That's more visible. It's more tangible," Avdan said. "It's more likely to foment anger on the part of the public."

However, absent a direct incident of terrorism, the data supports that countries will be less likely to reject a visa from a resident of a country that is a key trade partner. For instance, 15 of the 19 plane hijackers on 9/11 were citizens of Saudi Arabia, which still enjoys an important trade relationship with the United States.

"Surprisingly what I find is the global reputation a state garners as a prominent origin of terrorism has a very minute impact when you take into account trade interdependence," Avdan said.

Visa controls enable countries to screen threats from people who are seeking to enter their borders but don't officially represent another state, and it's one way countries can seek to guard against threats from potential terrorists, illegal migrants, smugglers and traffickers.

She said the findings that economic ties influence visa policies would likely excite researchers who examine globalization and conflict behavior, because a major theory is that economic interdependence can stop countries from going to war against each other. But Avdan said economic interdependence and security has implications for controlling human mobility as well.

Avdan said she originally took an interest in how countries consider visas after growing up in Turkey and noticing the glaring discrepancy between how citizens of countries in the industrialized West have a great degree

of freedom to travel compared with citizens of the developing world. She has also found that when certain countries do reach agreements with each other, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, which includes the United States, they relax visa restrictions for countries who belong to the group. However, it's more likely for citizens of non-OECD [countries](#) to have a visa application rejected.

"It's very limited to this club. The reciprocity and relaxation of visas doesn't apply outside of that," Avdan said. "If you want to foster economic exchange and make it easier, then you basically have to rethink this automatic sort of mimicking behavior of imposing a [visa](#)."

**More information:** Nazli Avdan. "Controlling Access to Territory: Economic Interdependence, Transnational Terrorism, and Visa Policies." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. June 2014 58: 592-624, first published on March 22, 2013 [DOI: 10.1177/0022002713478795](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713478795)

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