

# Perceived race of victims, location determine concern in terrorist attack

June 28 2018

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In response to an international terrorist attack, the public's level of concern has to do with the locations of the attacks and the perceived identities of the victims, according to a new study by two University of Kansas researchers.

In November 2015, a group of Islamic State in Syria, or ISIS, terrorists carried out a series of coordinated attacks that killed 130 [people](#) and wounded 367 more. The Paris attacks were widely covered in the Western media, generated an unprecedented amount of public attention on [social media](#) outlets and were a major topic in the political debates over the course of the following year.

While most Americans remember the terrorist attacks in Paris, they are less familiar with similar terrorist attacks that happened in the same year. In April 2015, four gunmen belonging to the Somalia-based terrorist organization Al-Shabaab killed 147 people and wounded 79 at Garissa University College in Kenya. And in October 2015, just one month before the Paris attacks, two ISIS suicide bombers killed 97 people and wounded 400 in Ankara, Turkey.

These attacks were only marginally covered in the Western media and did not generate the same kind of public reaction.

"It highlights this idea that the public fear and outrage of terrorist attacks is driven in large part by identity and not the violence itself. Not as many people cared as much about the first two, but in reaction to the Paris

attacks, Facebook allowed you to put the French flag over your profile picture, for example," said Clayton Webb, assistant professor of political science. "After all, these events were only a month apart. It really put into contrast the way that people react to attacks in places Paris compared to ones in places like Kenya and Turkey."

Webb and Nazli Avdan, assistant professor of [political science](#), co-authored a recent study in *Political Research Quarterly* that found the salience of a terrorist attack in the minds of the public is based on not only physical proximity but a perceived personal level of connection to victims, mostly based on the perceived national identity of the victims, or likely the majority race and ethnicity of the country attacked.

In most cases, people do not know about the characteristics of terrorism victims, the researchers said. In the absence of information, people tend to impute the characteristics of the victims based on the country where the attack occurred. These perceived identities, in turn, augur the public response to terrorist attacks.

The researchers conducted two experiments involving a sample of U.S. voting-age citizens to test their hypotheses on proximity and the threat perceptions of an international terrorist attack. Participants were given a brief description of a hypothetical attack and asked a series of questions, including their feelings about the attack.

In one experiment, a majority of participants perceived hypothetical attacks as more threatening in Romania and Albania—majority white countries than attacks in Zambia and Guinea—majority nonwhite countries.

"When a [terrorist attack](#) occurs, people evaluate the threat they perceive of it based on the affinity they feel toward the victims and how similar they appear to be to them," Webb said. "After Paris and Brussels in

2016, people, especially in United States, seemed to say, 'That could happen here.'"

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"We focused on different determinants of public attitudes toward terrorism, specifically teasing out the 'empathy gap' in terms of differential responses to violence," Avdan said.

Their findings seem a bit bleak, Webb said, but there could be practical implications.

"If anything would be useful about the findings, hopefully it causes people to be more cognizant in the way they are processing news about terrorist attacks," Webb said.

There are examples of ways to break through this apparent baseline on violence and war as well, he said, especially if images emerge from [attacks](#) and perhaps go viral on the news or social media, such as the 2016 photo of 5-year-old Omran Daqneesh, who was rescued after a bombing in Aleppo, Syria, amidst the ongoing civil war there. The photos and news coverage of it elicited strong calls on social media and among members of the news media for U.S. politicians and presidential candidates to try to broker peace in Syria.

"You can rupture that, and these images end up playing a big role in that," Webb said. "In the absence of shocks like that of this kind of human suffering that is exposed to people, then people will go about their days and likely ignore it, unless it happens in communities they perceive to be like their own."

**More information:** Nazli Avdan et al, Not in My Back Yard: Public

Perceptions and Terrorism, *Political Research Quarterly* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1065912918776118](https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918776118)

Provided by University of Kansas

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