How Society Perceives Terrorism

and Muslim Identity

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Abstract

This paper seeks to assess the relationship between Muslim identity and the likelihood of deeming a violent incident terrorism. Post 9/11 saw a spike in Islamophobia and anti-Arab rhetoric. Repeatedly, Arabs, Middle Easterners, Muslims, and sometimes even South Asians complain about the discrimination they face that surged due to this tragic event. In recent years, the media has been criticized for perpetuating these stereotypes and fueling the hate crimes that hate rhetoric is so often blamed for. This paper aims to assess this issue further by utilizing a number of statistical analyses and techniques to better understand, specifically, how the Muslim identity affects how society perceives acts of violence and what compels them to deem some terroristic and others not. This was done by extending on a study that analyzed this general topic overall. First, this paper analyzes the issue of Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment post 9/11 through a literature review. Then, the original study's methodology was analyzed. Finally, the original study was extending by performing a series of logit regressions and tests of robustness.

Keywords: terrorism, Arab, Muslim, Islamophobia, 9/11

Introduction

The violent impacts of terrorism are not limited to the tragic and senseless loss of human lives, nor the economic damages bestowed upon the societies that are victimized by these horrendous acts. Unfortunately, crime appears to be routinely used to propagate white nationalist or xenophobic talking points by painting certain groups of people as inherently backwards and criminal despite the lack of empirical evidence backing these claims. Arabs and Muslims in particular have experienced this unique sort of pressure post-9/11, being depicted as potential terroristic threats. In fact, the media has routinely come under attack for what appears to be discrepancies in their reporting techniques— labeling acts of violence committed by individuals with Muslim or Arab identities immediately as terrorism, whereas it appears that non-Muslim and white individuals seem to be labeled "lone wolves" or are even said to be excused through repeated claims of histories of mental health issues. The issue of anti-Arab and Muslim sentiments, however, transcends the problem of biased media coverage. The racism and Islamophobia appear to have materialized within policy changes that appear to function under the guise of safety or need, but disproportionately target Arab, Muslim, and South Asian Americans. For instance, Ahmed and Senzai (2004) point out how, at the time of their publication, the majority of complaints pertaining to the USA Patriot Act actually came from Muslims and Arab Americans.

Furthermore, the literature appears to support the contention that Arab and Muslim Americans seem to be characterized as potential threats of terrorism, and consequently treated as such, for nothing more than their mere identities. Although Arabs and Middle Easterners had been depicted as terrorists prior to the attack, numbers of their hate crime victimizations and the grotesque violations of their civil liberties spiked post 9/11. For example, Santoro and Azab

(2015) note that following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Arabs in Dearborn, Michigan, a city whose demographic was approximately one-third Arab at the time, protested the intense scrutiny they were experiencing from law enforcement in a march on November of 2001. They were protesting their immigrants being targeted for interviews by law enforcement (Santoro & Azab, 2015). The following year was also filled with numerous protests in response to "the deportation of a Muslim activist of Lebanese heritage on charges that his charity funded terrorism, the deportation of immigrant men of Middle Eastern background for visa violations, the freezing of assets of Muslim charities, harassment of Arab students, and airport and police profiling" (Santoro & Azab, 2015, p. 231). Moreover, it should be noted that the presidential response to the 9/11 was also responsible for fueling an enemy construct of the Arab/Middle Eastern man (Merskin, 2004). The addresses delivered by George W. Bush was permeated with stereotypical, racist anti-Arab rhetoric which only solidified the monolithic and xenophobic depictions of Arabs that American pop culture and media had developed in prior decades as "evil, bloodthirsty, animalistic terrorists" (Merin, 2004, p. 157). This formulated an "us vs. them" construct that isolated those of such descent and labeled Arabs and Middle Easterners as "the enemy" that the U.S. was supposed to neutralize (Merin, 2004, p. 157). More specifically, Merin (2004) points out that the words littered throughout these supposed well-thought-out addresses to describe the "them" or "the enemy" were very similar as those routinely used in the negative pop culture and movie portrayals of Middle Eastern people. This dehumanizing language justifies discrimination of people of such descent (Merin, 2004). A clear enemy discourse against Arabs and Middle Easterners has been established, which calls into question how recent acts of violence are perceived by society with the presence of certain factors. Although the media has come under attack by some for perpetuating the terrorist label as inherent Muslims, this paper

seeks to test the hypothesis that when actors of violence are Muslim, they are more likely to be perceived as acts of terrorism. It will also test how the hypothesis that Muslim actors with histories of mental illness will increase the likelihood of an act being perceived as terrorism, as well the hypothesis that acts of violence perpetrated by non-Muslim actors against Muslim communities will be less likely to be perceives as such. The final one assesses the function of Muslim identity as both actors and victims and how it may reveal underlying dehumanization. The article this paper analyzes, "How the Public Defines Terrorism" (2017) by Huff and Kertzer, assessed how ordinary citizens decide certain events are terrorism, with no particular focus. However, this paper focuses on the Muslim identity and extends their findings to analyze its impact on how citizens define terrorism when Muslims in some shape are involved.

Methodology

Huff and Kertzer (2017) employed a conjoint experimental design and surveyed citizens to understand what elements of violent incidents inclines them to perceive them as terrorism. The scholars pointed out two advantages to this system: being able to hold for confounding variables and having the ability to measure the effects of each individual feature of the incidents identified in the surveys utilizing experimental treatments, which they explain would otherwise not be possible (Huff & Kertzer, 2017). The unit of observation was violent incidents.

The surveys had seven attributes which had experimental elements that were manipulated each time a survey was generated, which are in the parentheses: "(1) tactic (protest, hostage taking, shooting, or bombing), (2) target (military facility, a police station, a school, a Christian community center, a Muslim community center, a Jewish community center, a church, a mosque, or a synagogue), (3) location (United States, a foreign democracy, a foreign democracy with a history of human rights violations, a foreign dictatorship, or a foreign dictatorship with a history

of human rights violations), (4) causalities (none, one, two, ten), (5) actor description (Christian, Muslim, left-wing, right-wing), (6) actor type (an organization, an organization with ties to the United States, an organization with ties to a foreign government, a group, an individual, or an individual with a history of mental illness), and (7) actor motivation (that there was no clear motivation for the incident, the incident was motivated by the goal of overthrowing the government, the incident was motivated by the goal of changing government policy, the incident was motivated by hatred towards the target, the individual had been in an ongoing personal dispute with one of the targets)" (Huff & Kertzer, 2017, pp. 60-62). The participants then took the surveys seven times each (Huff & Kertzer, 2017). The questions were structured in a way "to mirror what respondents would observe in the first few sentences of a newspaper article describing a recent incident" (Huff & Kertzer, 2017, p. 60). 1,400 adult respondents were sampled using Amazon's Mechanical Turk in 2015 to 1,400 adults, and approximately 9,800 responses were received (Huff & Kertzer, 2017).

Extension

Prior to running analyses to test the questions proposed, the datasets for the final surveys and data taken on violent incidents were analyzed for missingness. The first data set containing the final survey responses turned out to have no missingness (figure 5). The second dataset, terrorism.R (figure 6), appeared to have only 3% missingness— it only contained four variables that indicated missingness: high islamoprejudice, low islamoprejudice, highislamosec, and lowislamosec. The missingness detected in these four variables was remedied using variable mean imputation.

In recent years, the media in particular has been criticized for seemingly emphasizing Muslims perpetrators' religious identities and seemingly labeling their crimes as terrorism while,

it is argued, non-Muslims appear to be less likely to be framed in such a manner. It is for this reason that this topic is the main interest of this extension. The main hypothesis that this extension aimed to assess was that when perpetrators of violent acts are Muslim, they are more likely to be deemed acts of terrorism. A number of different statistical tests and analyses were performed to better understand how society perceives violent acts under these conditions.

First, a logit regression analysis was run with the binary dependent variable terrorbinarynew, which indicates the likelihood that an act of violence will be perceived as terrorism. The predictor variables in the model included a newly coded dummy variable for the ideology variable, the actor dummy variable, and the target dummy variable. The ideology variable, which would indicate if the perpetrator was either a Christian, Muslim, left-winger, or right-winger, was recoded into a dummy variable called Ideologynew, which was coded to Muslim (1) and non-Muslim (0). The actor variable previously discussed was also recoded into a dummy variable with regard to mental illness (0 = no history and 1 = history of mental illness), and target (0= non-Muslim; 1= Muslim) too.

The results of the above logit output indicated the following: The coefficient for the ideology dummy variable, 0.02388 is statistically insignificant ($p > .05$). It would have indicated that, all else being equal, cases with actors expressing Muslim ideology would be ~.0239 times more likely to to be deemed as terrorism by the survey participants. However, because it is statistically insignificant, this does not support nor refute the main hypothesis discussed. Further tests were run to better assess this question. The output for this logit model can be seen in table 1.

A few conditional hypotheses were run to assess the interaction effects of several variables to better understand how certain conditions in place can affect the how likely it is that

society will perceive a violent event as terrorism. The first hypothesis was that the likelihood of an act of violence being classified as terrorism when the individual has a history of mental illness only increases when the actor is a Muslim. It is often believed that mental illness is used to excuse terroristic incidents when the actor is white, therefore this study aims to assess how the presence of this factor when attached to Muslim identity may alter this reaction in society. A logit regression output was produced for this interactive hypothesis (table 2). The coefficient for the interactive variables Ideologynew and Actordummy was 0.0176. However, it was statistically insignificant ($p = 0.88234$). Then, a marginal effects plot was produced and used to assess the nature of this relationship since it is interactive (figure 1).

The plot in figure 1 indicates that the expected effect of actordummy (history of mental illness) on the likelihood that a violent event will be perceived as terrorism (terrorbinary) is positive and statistically significant as we change from non-Muslim to Muslim. This indicates that, all else being held equal, when acts of violence are committed by actors with a history of mental illness, they will be more likely to be deemed acts of terrorism when the perpetrator is a Muslim. The point for 'Muslim' is higher on the plot than that for 'non-Muslim', and the confidence intervals do not cross zero, indicating that these results are statistically significant. Therefore, there is evidence to back the conditional hypothesis that the likelihood of violence being considered terrorism increases for a person with a background of mental health problems only when they are Muslim.

This model was then further tested using Cook's Distance in order to determine if there were any outliers so that its robustness could later be assessed. It was determined that outliers or influential data points do exist in the model, and figure 3 depicts a Cook's Distance plot was that depicts this issue. It was determined that 10,169 observations were outliers or influential in the

model. Measures were taken to determine the robustness of the model, which can be seen in table 4. The coefficients for the predictors remained statistically significant in models two and three after removing three of the most influential points and remained so when all of them were removed in the third model. This indicates that the logit model is robust to the influence of these points.

The second conditional hypothesis assesses the involvement of Muslims in acts of terrorism from a different viewpoint—victimization. The juxtaposition between Muslim-involvement in acts of violence as both perpetrators and victims offers a deeper, well-rounded analysis of how the Muslim identity alters the perception of these violent incidents by society. The hypothesis posited was that the likelihood that an act of violence perpetrated by a non-Muslim actor would be deemed an act of terrorism by society decreases only when the target is a Muslim community center, as defined by the scholars. The logit output for this model is in table 3. Figure 2 contains the marginal effects plot for this model which indicates that the expected effect of a non-Muslim actor of violence on the likelihood that an act of violence will be perceived as terrorism for cases with Muslim community centers is negative. However, due to the confidence interval of the second point crossing zero, these results are not statistically significant, and therefore, we cannot conclude that it is less likely for cases with Muslim community centers to be deemed terrorism, and they cannot be used to draw any sort of valid conclusion about the hypothesis. Evidence does not exist that can be used to either support, nor refute this hypothesis unfortunately.

Tests were then undertaken to determine the robustness of this model. A Cook's D plot was produced for the model, indicating the presence of influential outliers in the model, as shown in figure 2. 10,169 outliers or influential points were detected in the original model. Two

more models were produced to assess its— one where three of the most influential points were removed and one where all 10,169 were removed. The results indicated that the model is robust to the influence of these datapoints since all the coefficients in the full model that were statistically significant remained so in both models two and three. Therefore, this concludes that the logit model is robust to the influence of these points.

Results

The results of this extension reveal first that, in cases where the actor has a history of mental health issues, they are more likely to be deemed terrorism only when the perpetrator is Muslim. The results for this assessment were in the predicted direction. The robustness of the model also held up to a test of Cook's Distance, even when all influential data points were removed, meaning that the logit model has validity. However, there was not evidence to support the hypothesis that in cases where the actor is non-Muslim and commits an act of violence, the likelihood they will be deemed terrorism by society will increase only when the target is a Muslim community center. However, this logit model did hold up to cook's distance. Overall, these findings suggest that further research into this nuanced topic is needed. Another conjoint experiment of this kind that solely focuses on assessing how Muslim identity as both actors of violence and victims of the violence affect how society is of much interest and should be employed in the future to better dissect this niche issue.

Figure 1

Marginal Effect Plot of the Impact of Mental Illness on TerrorBinary
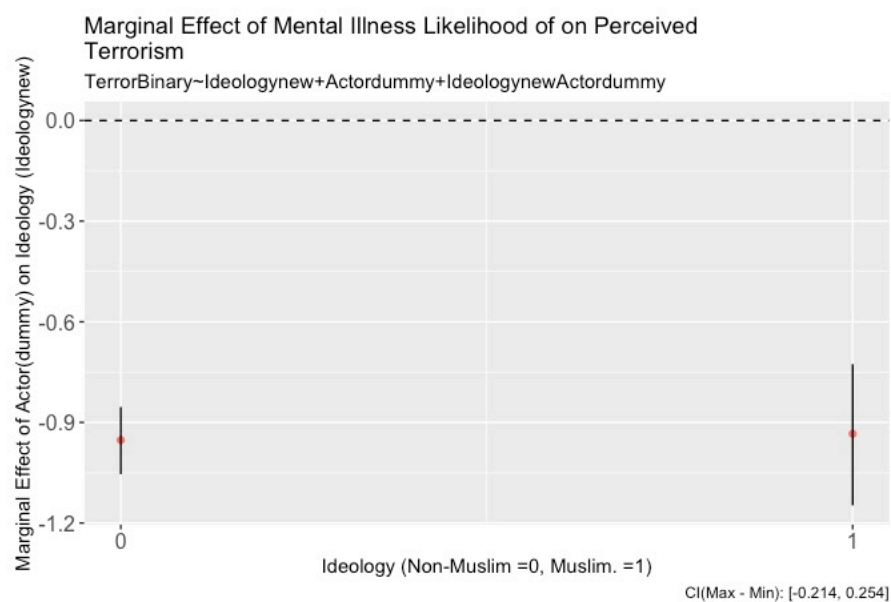
Figure 2

Marginal Effect of Targetdummy on TerrorBinary
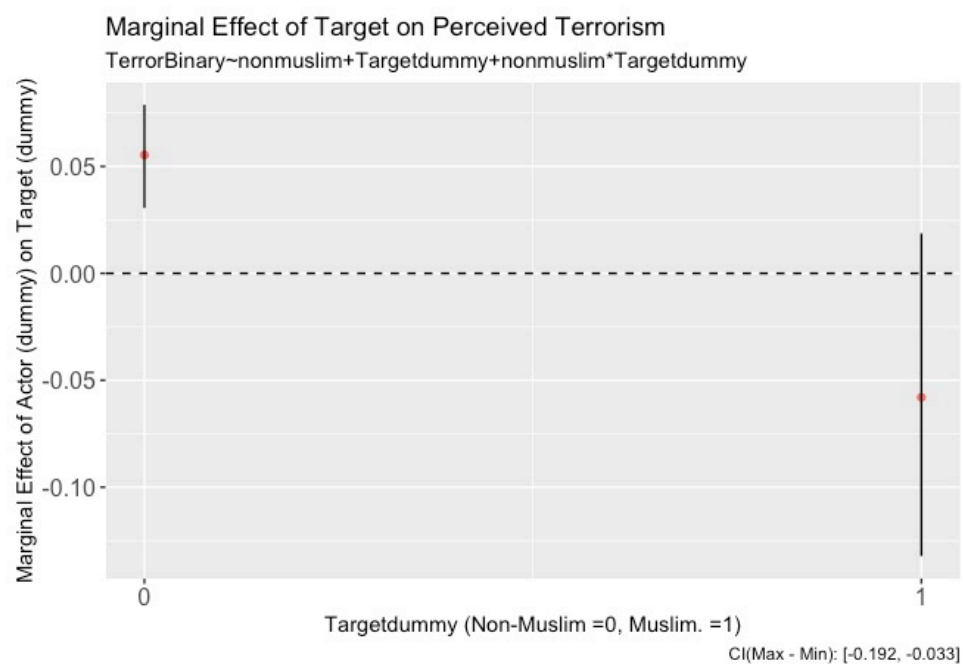
Figure 3

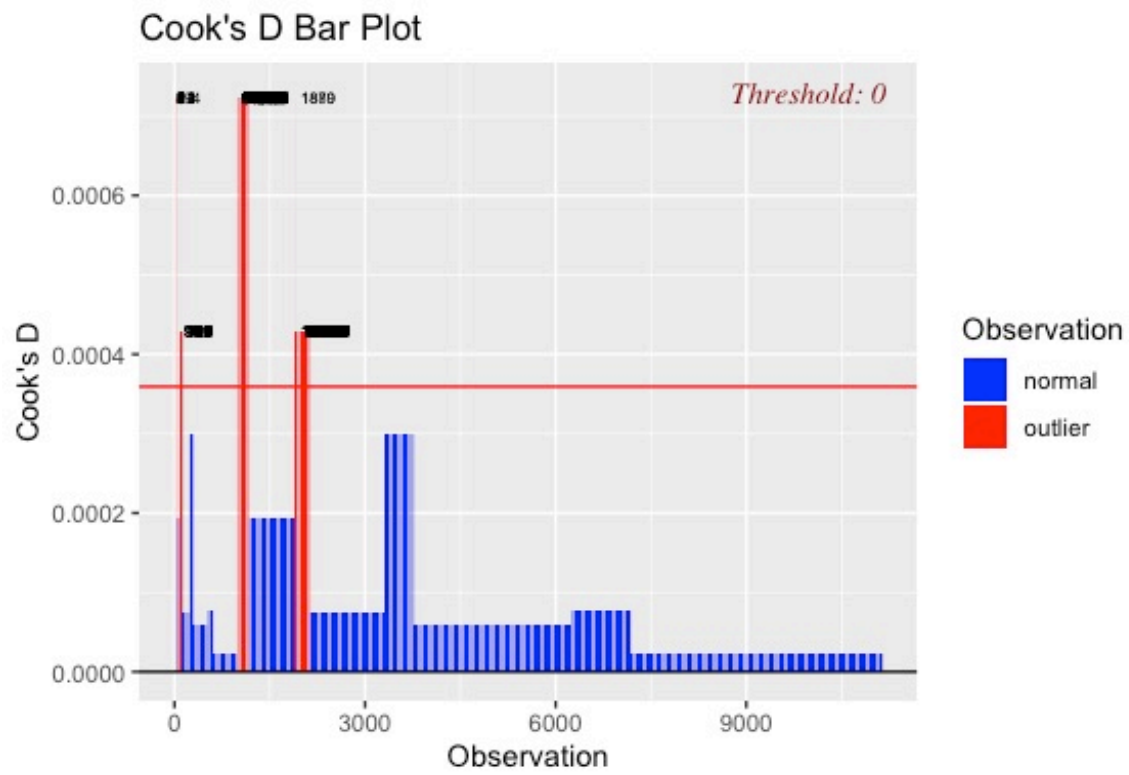*Cook's Distance for Ideologyfit*

Figure 4

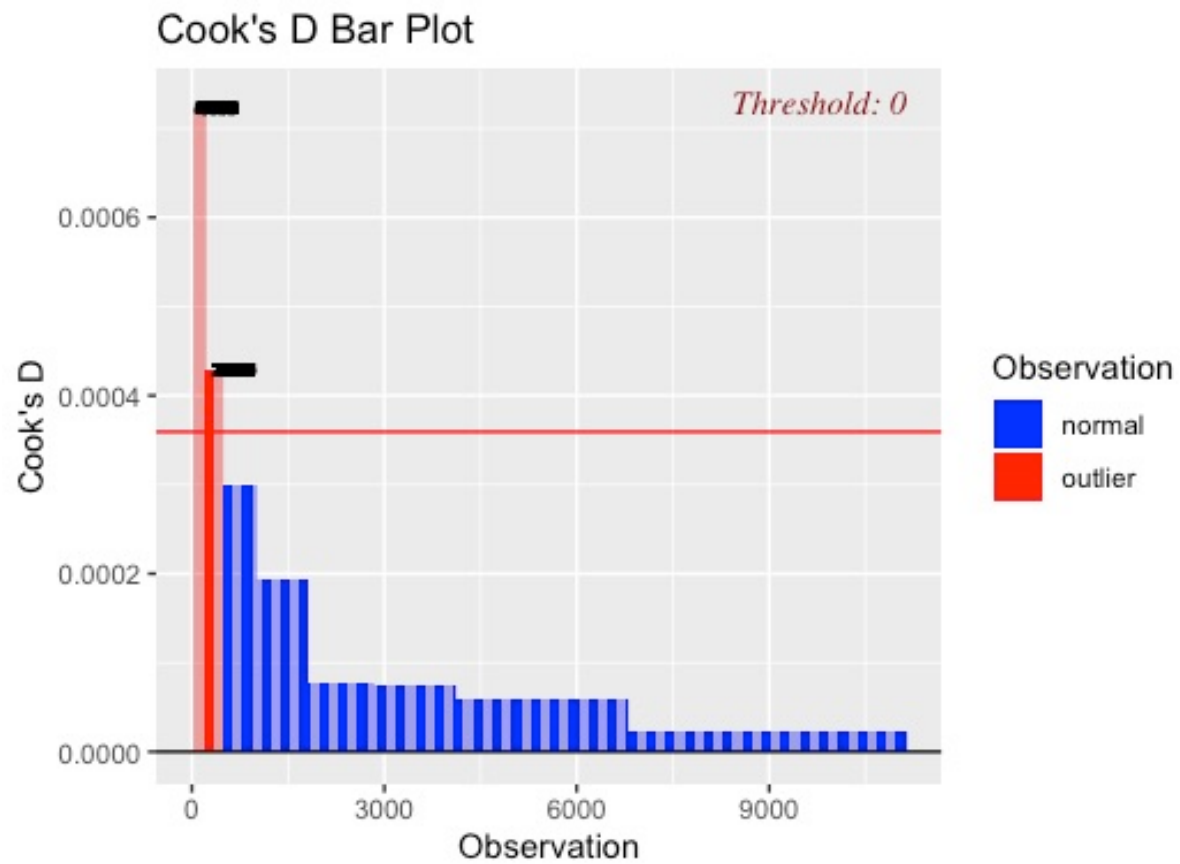*Cook's Distance for Communityfit.*

Figure 5

Missingness for Final Survey Data.
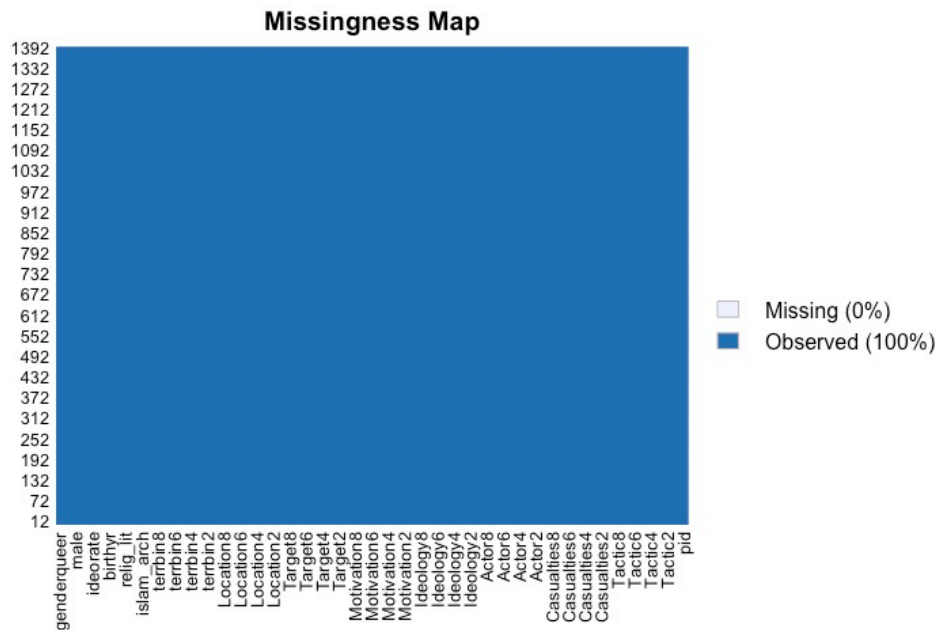

Figure 6

Missingness for Terrorism Data.
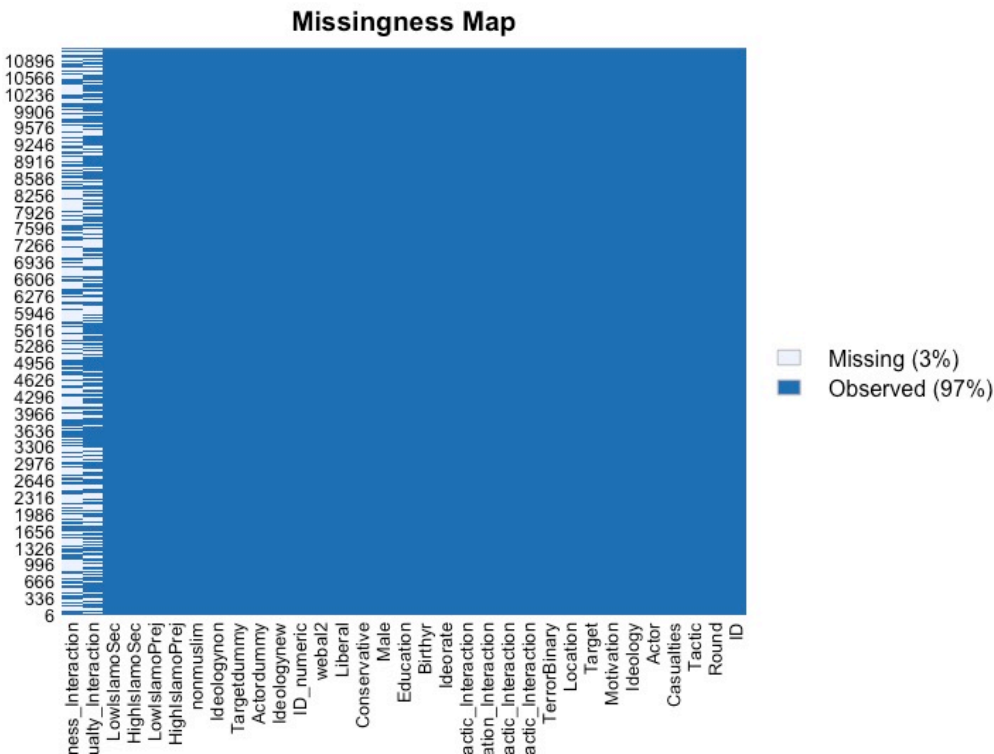
Table 1

Regression Output for TerrorBinarynew~Ideologynew+Actordummy+Targetdummy

Variable	Coefficient	s.e.	Z-value	p-value
Constant	0.47927	0.02472	19.392	< 0.00
Ideologynew	0.19686	0.05125	3.842	0.000122
Actordummy	-0.94973	0.04632	-20.502	<0.00
Targetdummy	0.02388	0.06946	0.344	0.731017
Observations	11,136			
Log Likelihood	-7,376.604			
Akaike Inf. Crit.	14,761.210			

Table 2.

The Impact of Ideology on TerrorBinary.

Variable	Coefficient	s.e.	Z-value	p-value
Constant	0.48204***	0.02454	19.639	<0.00
Ideologynew	0.19285***	0.05897	3.270	0.00107
Actordummy	-0.95298***	0.05136	-18.554	< 0.00
*Ideologynew*Actordummy*	0.01761	0.11895	0.148	0.88234
Observations	11,136			
Log Likelihood	7,376.652			
Akaike Inf. Crit.	14,761.300			

Table 3

The Impact of Target Type on TerrorBinary.

Variable	Coefficient	s.e.	*t*-test	p-value
Constant	0.25153***	0.02208	11.393	<0.00
nonmuslim	0.23023***	0.05296	4.357	0.0000133
Targetdummy	0.11522	0.07645	1.507	0.13178
*Targetdummy*nonmuslim*	-0.46614***	0.16837	-2.768	0.00563
Observations	11,136			
Log Likelihood	7,952.478			
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,185.500			

Table 4

*Cook's Distance for TerrorBinary~ Ideologynew + Actordummy + Ideologynew*Actordummy*

	Dependent Variable:		
	TERRORBINARY		
	Full	**-3 Incidents**	**-10169 Incidents**
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Constant	0.48204***	0.48204***	0.48204***
Ideologynew	0.19285***	0.19285***	0.19285***
Actordummy	-0.95298***	-0.95298***	-0.95298***
*Ideologynew * Actordummy*	0.01761	0.02895	0.02895

Table 5

Cook's Distance for TerrorBinarynew~nonmuslim+Targetdummy+nonmuslim

	Dependent Variable:		
	TERRORBINARY		
	Full	**-3 Incidents**	**-10169 Incidents**
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Constant	0.25153**	0.562552***	0.562552***
nonmuslim	0.23023***	-0.055609***	0.055609***
Targetdummy	0.11522	-0.028121	0.028121
*Targetdummy * nonmuslim*	-0.46614***	0.105467***	-0.105467***

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