

Threats of terrorism perceived differently depending on identification within a group

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People who see their group as more homogenous - for instance, the more one thinks Americans are similar to each other - are less likely to be influenced by external terrorist threat alerts, according to research from NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

"Among people who viewed their group to be homogeneous, external [threat](#) did not translate to higher perceived threat, and they did not influence beliefs about the legitimacy of the U.S. military intervention in Iraq," said study author Rezarta Bilali, assistant professor of psychology and social intervention at NYU Steinhardt.

The findings, published Nov. 24 in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, suggest that people interpret terrorist threats in very different ways.

Terrorist threats communicated through mass media, government agencies, and other sources influence levels of perceived threat. In the aftermath of Sept. 11, the U.S. government created a color-coded warning system to alert Americans to the level of threat facing the country. From 2002 through the system's dissolution in 2011, the warning level never dropped below "yellow," a three out of five on the alert scale.

Bilali's study examined the effect of [external cues](#) of security or threat - manipulated by the researchers - on perceived threat and legitimization

of the U.S.'s war in Iraq, based on a person's identification with being American and beliefs about the degree to which Americans are similar to each other.

The study, conducted in two stages, included 147 American university students. In the first stage, participants completed questionnaires measuring their identification with their American nationalities, and whether they perceived Americans to be similar to each other or different.

A few months later, participants completed additional tasks for the study's second stage. In one task, the participants read a fake newspaper article that was manipulated to communicate either security or a threat to America. Subsequently, participants completed questionnaires to gauge their opinions on the war in Iraq and whether they agreed with the U.S.'s decision to intervene.

Bilali found that participants legitimized the U.S. military intervention in Iraq to a higher degree when they were exposed to threat cues versus when they were made to believe that the U.S. is safe from terrorism. She found that participants who saw their group to be unlike each other were more likely to perceive greater threat when exposed to external terrorist threats, and they were more likely to legitimize the U.S.'s involvement in the war in Iraq. By contrast, individuals who viewed their group to be homogeneous - in other words, viewed Americans to be like them and similar to each other - were less likely to perceive heightened threat when they read about a terrorist threat to the U.S.

"Perceiving the group as similar to one another seems to disrupt the expected relationship between external cues of threat and subjective perceptions of threat," Bilali said. "There's some evidence that homogeneity is related to increased feelings that you can cope with a disastrous event, so these results can be interpreted by looking at the role

of homogeneity in increasing the perceived ability to cope with threats toward the group."

The results shed light on the potential impact of terror warning systems and media influence on different segments of the population.

"While the study creates more questions than answers, it suggests that terror threat alerts are not affecting everyone equally," Bilali said.

Provided by New York University

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