

# WHAT CAUSES TERRORISM?

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## Abstract

Identifying the causes of terrorism has been a goal of researchers for many years. By identifying what leads to terrorism, we can begin to fight it from the start. Finding one variable to blame it on has been practically impossible for researchers so far, which is why I believe it is a multi-faceted issue. I identified six variables within economic, political, and social areas that were tested against the number of terrorist incidents each country experienced over the span of 20 years. These were tested in a regression, as well as through ANOVA testing, and it was found that social inequality, democratization, respect for human rights, and school enrollment were all significant. However, I found that religion also plays a role, in that we can use the predominant religion of each state to locate the ones who suffer from the most terrorist incidents. By locating these nations, we can begin to combat the other issues listed above in order to decrease terrorism globally.

Are there fundamental causes of terrorism? Terrorism is an issue that affects the world and incidents have drawn much more attention since 9/11. Could the organizations of this world pinpoint the causes of terrorism and reduce the number of incidents? These are some of the questions that I will be looking to answer throughout this paper. Terrorism affects many nations through spreading violence, fear and instability throughout the region. Therefore, this issue needs to be addressed before states become consumed by the consequences of terrorism.

Previous research identifies some possible causes of terrorism. By identifying these variables, the goal is to find some causes of terrorism in order to predict and/or reduce future incidents. Finding one variable to blame it on has been practically impossible for researchers so far, which is why I believe it is a multi-faceted issue. I identified six variables within economic, political, and social areas that were tested against the number of terrorist incidents each country experienced over the span of 20 years. It was found that social inequality, democratization, respect for human rights, and school enrollment were all significant. However, I found that religion also plays a role, in that we can use the predominant religion of each state to locate the ones who suffer from the most terrorist incidents. By locating these nations, we can begin to combat the other issues listed above in order to decrease terrorism globally.

### Literature Review

Previous research suggests that multiple variables cause terrorism. Most likely, many circumstances converge to create the conditions for terrorism. However, there are variables I was able to identify that suggest if a state has these factors present, the chances of terrorism

taking place increase dramatically. There are different forms of terrorism, and each form has its own causes. Terrorism happens in both poor and rich countries, and regardless of the type of government (Bjorgo 2005). What is most likely is that any certain form of terrorism is the result of a combination of factors. Including political and economic modernization, deprivation, and class structure (Bjorgo 2005). The term used by the political science community to refer to these variables are “root causes”, either direct or indirect factors that help us understand various incidents of terrorism (Newman 2006). I will discuss three categories of root causes: economic factors, political factors, and social factors.

### **Economic Factors**

The most popular theory is that poverty causes terrorism. When people are deprived of certain resources and opportunities, poverty can create resentment and cause some to turn to terrorism in order to express their outrage (Newman 2006). The problem with the poverty variable is that it can encompass a large variety of other smaller variables that all contribute to what can define someone as being impoverished. One source used a variety of factors to measure poverty including social inequality, low GDP, and low literacy or education levels (Newman 2006; Gunaratna 2004; Pedahzur, Perliger and Weinburg 2003). Other sources included other factors such as population, unemployment rates, and inflation (Akhmat, et al. 2013). One of the difficulties with poverty as an explanation is that it can be tricky to quantify (von Hippel 2014). Many variables can be used to depict poverty such as the poverty gap, size of the homeless population, etc. In the Middle East, many societies have great potential yet there are many citizens left without jobs and this causes a lower standing of living (Mohammad

2005). When social inequality develops, many people become angry because they are unable to achieve what others are easily able to, thus creating internal conflict within certain geographic areas, and making it more likely for terrorism to occur as a result (Newman 2006).

Many variables could be used to represent poverty, including levels of education, poverty gaps, and social inequality (Crenshaw, Introduction 2011). To measure social inequality within a country, the GINI Index is a popular indicator of poor economic quality of a country (Abadie 2004). A combination of the variables above would contribute to the overall measure of economic stability. Many of these studies have concluded that there is an enormous significance between poverty and incidents of terrorism.

One interesting theory is that natural disasters create opportunities for terrorism (Berrebi and Ostwald 2011). However, this is another variation of the poverty theory. Berrebi and Ostwald argue that natural disasters create strain and hardship within societies. For example, the floods that took place in Pakistan in 2010 weakened the government and its resources, therefore creating an environment in which the Taliban and other terrorist organizations were able to operate more freely (Hasan 2010; Shakir 2010; Waraich 2010). This shows that the presence of overwhelming poverty within an area can definitely incite further activity by terrorist organizations because of the government's inability to combat it due to their resources being used elsewhere in the natural disaster relief efforts. The conclusion of the natural disaster study found that countries who had a low to middle GNP per capita were affected the most by the natural disasters that occurred, which supports the idea that poverty allows more terrorist activity to take place (Berrebi and Ostwald 2011).

A final argument consistent with the poverty theory says that economic sanctions increase the chance of terrorism (Choi and Luo n.d.). Choi and Luo argue that there is no evidence available to say that poverty alone will increase the presence of terrorism, but rather that other variables need to be included (Choi and Luo n.d.). When economic sanctions are placed on a nation, the economic conditions within that nation begin to decrease drastically. Therefore, those who are already in poverty, or right on the threshold of it, are pushed over the edge ever further and forced to make due with even worse conditions available. People who are placed into even worse conditions than what they were already in have to find other means to support themselves, which is where terrorist organizations truly thrive in their recruiting. They are looking for those who believe that their only option is to rebel against the government because the government let them down and led them into poverty.

One study found that lack of economic opportunities and economies with slow GNP growth had strong ties with numerous terrorist activities (Bueno de Mesquita 2005). Therefore, it is more the process of going into poverty, or increasing poverty that increases the chances of terrorism happening. Tied together with this, is the concept that modernization is to blame for complicating societies to the point of vulnerability, which in turn creates poverty situations (Crenshaw, The causes of terrorism 2011). Within this category of economic variables is also unemployment, and social inequality (Laqueur 2014). These variables can combine to produce a situation that is ideal for terrorist organizations to recruit. When the people of a given area are so dissatisfied with the state of their lives, they are more likely to turn to extreme measures, or are more likely to be persuaded to do so. All of this evidence shows that at least initially, economic factors may be an extremely strong predictor of terrorism.

## Political Factors

An alternative theory says that political factors like government repression leads to terrorism. Examples of variables used to measure government repression are political rights and civil liberties (Berrebi and Ostwald 2011). Unstable, and according to some, undemocratic societies form weak governments causing the people to suffer. Human rights abuses would also fall into this category since this is a direct result of government action, and would then be considered a form of repression (Newman 2006). Human rights violations, including dispossession and humiliation, result in people having severe grievances against the government (Newman 2006). Certain studies show that terrorism has a strong link with social injustice at the hands of the government rather than poverty.

When the government is unable to provide basic standard of living, citizens become displeased and this is when terrorist organizations are able to recruit. It is up to the government to provide the resources necessary for the people to survive. This includes hospitals, medical care, jobs and schooling. Many believe it is the job of the government to provide political freedom to their citizens. Studies have found that political freedom does relate to terrorism, but in a way most would not expect. Countries that are in the middle of the spectrum are the ones most likely to have incidents of terrorism (Abadie 2004). Free countries and the countries with authoritarian regimes are not the nations with the most terrorism issues. It is the transition period from authoritarian regimes to democratic ones that experience more incidents (Abadie 2004). When tested, it shows those who are in the middle have the most attacks (Abadie 2004). Nations going through transition periods are not able to give citizens

complete freedom, and this causes other areas to lack as well. Most would like to think the authoritarian nations have the most incidents, but studies have suggested it is indeed the middle we should be the most concerned with.

Repression can also emerge in more violent forms. A United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1985 found that one of the underlying causes of terrorism was racism and massive human rights violations (United Nations General Assembly 1985). When a state has very low respect for human rights, the citizens are more likely to have grievances with those in charge. In order to right the wrongs of the government, citizens may turn to terrorism. Terrorist organizations can provide members of their groups with the resources necessary to fight against political wrongdoings. Government repression in many of its forms has been shown that it contributes to the presence of terrorism (Basuchoudhary and Shughart 2010).

### **Social Factors**

Some other possible variables may be related to social issues. Levels of education have been mentioned in a few different studies, but there has not been much evidence to validate it as an important variable. However, it is still a good indicator of a social issue within a country and is therefore worth testing in my study. The Human Development Index includes per capita income, life expectancy, and education into account in regards to terrorism, and found that there is a correlation between terrorism and human development (Schmid 2005).

Religion is another social aspect that needs to be considered. Modern terrorism has seen an enormous increase in religious extremism, the scale of violence has intensified, and the global reach has expanded (Martin 2010). Religious terrorism can be defined as political

violence that is motivated by an absolute belief that an other-worldly power has sanctioned, or sometimes commanded, terrorist violence for the greater glory of the faith (Martin 2010). People who partake in religious terrorism believe that any acts they commit will be forgiven and perhaps rewarded in the afterlife (Martin 2010). Extremism is not limited to just one religion. There are many different forms of religious terrorism, but the most common is Islamic extremism (Martin 2010). Overall, there has been a dramatic increase recently in religious terrorism, making it one of the main contributors to terrorism globally. Therefore, the dominant religion of a country seems worthwhile to examine in order to see if religion plays a role in the number of terrorist attacks.

Although there does not seem to be too much variety or abundance of research available, there were some very positive variables that can offer some great theories. After going through all of this, I still believe that government repression will be the best indicator of the presence of terrorism within a society. However, I believe social and economic variables also play an important role. Therefore, I will be testing six hypotheses:

1. There is a positive correlation between unemployment and terrorist incidents.
2. There is a positive correlation between social inequality and terrorist incidents.
3. There is a negative correlation between respect for human rights and terrorist incidents.
4. There is a negative correlation between democratization and terrorist incidents.
5. There is a negative correlation between school enrollment and terrorist incidents.



6. The predominant religion of a nation has an effect on the number of terrorist incidents.

### Research Design

My hypotheses include the three categories of economic, political and social variables that could contribute to terrorism. The economic factors are represented by unemployment rates and social inequality measured by the GINI Index. The political factors are represented by respect for human rights and whether or not the nation is a democracy. The social factors are represented by school enrollment and the predominant religion of that nation. These hypotheses will be tested by multiple regression.

I have data coding for whether or not the state is a democracy that was available through the World Dataset on the SPSS program (Pollock III 2012). The variable was coded so that non-democratic states received a 0, and democratic states received a 1. The predominant religion of each country was also predetermined by this dataset. It was not coded in any particular order, but each religion was assigned a number. A 1 meant the country was predominantly Protestant, a 2 meant predominantly Roman Catholic, a 3 was Orthodox, 4 was Jewish, 5 was Muslim, 6 was Hindu, 7 was Eastern, and 8 was other. I also found data from the World Bank datasets and the CIRI Human Rights dataset (Cingranelli, Richards and Clay 2014) (World Bank 2009). The unemployment and school enrollment rates from the World Bank were measured by the total percent of unemployment and school enrollment for that given year. Social inequality measured by the GINI coefficient was also obtained through the World Bank.

The GINI coefficient is coded so that zero means there is absolute equality, and 1 is the greatest inequality. The CIRI Human Rights dataset measures various human rights abuses by governments. The variable I used was an indicator of how much the government respected human rights on a scale of 0 to 14, with 0 meaning absolutely no government respect for human rights, and 14 being total respect. The last dataset I used came from the Freedom House (Freedom House 1973-2015). I used the variables from these datasets in order to conduct my tests.

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) will be the main source of information for the dependent variable. This database includes information on terrorist incidents beginning in 1970 and going until 2013, and examines both domestic and international cases (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) 2013). I decided to examine terrorist incidents that took place from the beginning of 1991 to the end of 2011 because I wanted to have data from both before and after 9/11 due to many policies and changes in the dynamic of terrorism changing as a result of the attacks. The GTD has three possible criteria for a terrorist incident:

1. The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal.
2. There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims.
3. The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities, i.e. the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law (particularly the admonition against deliberately targeting civilians or non-combatants)

(National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) 2013).

I excluded any ambiguous cases and unsuccessful attacks. This was done in order to include only the attacks that have been definitively linked to terrorism and to eliminate incidents that would only qualify as an “attempt” rather than a successful attack. There was a total of 47,775 incidents throughout the span of two decades. After collecting data on each country, I created a variable that contained the number of terrorist incidents in each country throughout each year. I decided to include countries who had zero incidents as well, since many nations went without incident. I included countries that only had three out of the six variables. There were 179 countries included over a span of 20 years, so there were 3,580 cases in this study.

## Results

I ran a multiple regression with all six variables included. Overall, four out of the six were statistically significant, and three confirmed the hypotheses in this paper. The table below shows the results.

		<b>Coefficients<sup>a</sup></b>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	59.174	41.172		1.437	.152
	Predominant religion	3.040	2.034	.099	1.495	.136
	Total unemployment %	-.684	.477	-.075	-1.435	.152
	Overall school enrollment % (boys and girls)(net)	-.746	.374	-.107	-1.994	.047
	Is regime a democracy?	25.033	8.021	.183	3.121	.002
	Social Inequality (GINI) (0=Equality, 100=inequality)	.775	.336	.130	2.308	.022
	Overall human rights rating (0=No Govt respect for human rights 14=High respect)	-2.831	1.243	-.156	-2.278	.023

a. Dependent Variable: # of terror incidents in nation

For my first hypothesis, I used the unemployment rate of each country for each year over a 20-year span and compared it to the number of terrorist incidents that took place in that country each year. The hypothesis originally stated that the higher the unemployment rate, the more terrorist incidents took place. However, the correlation was actually negative, meaning

that as unemployment goes up, terrorist incidents go down. But, the significance came out to be .152 meaning it was not considered significant at all.

The second hypothesis said there is a positive correlation between social inequality and terrorist incidents. GINI was used to measure inequality and it was found to have a significance of .022, meaning it is significant. The relationship was positive, which means that as social inequality increases, more terrorist incidents take place.

The third hypothesis says there is a negative correlation between respect for human rights and terrorist incidents. The significance turned out to be .023, so it was indeed significant. There was a negative correlation, meaning that as respect for human rights got lower, the number of terrorist incidents in that nation increased.

The fourth hypothesis states there is a negative correlation between democratization and terrorist incidents. The significance came out to be .002, which means it was significant and it was the most significant number of all variables tested. However, it actually came out to be a positive correlation. This means that there were more terrorist incidents taking place in democracies than there were in non-democracies. The results here contradict the predicted hypothesis.

The fifth hypothesis states that there is a negative correlation between school enrollment and terrorist incidents. As school enrollment increases, the number of terrorist incidents should decrease. The significance came out to be .047 which shows this variable is indeed significant. The correlation was negative as well, and this means the original hypothesis was correct.

The sixth and final hypothesis states that the predominant religion of a nation influences the number of terrorist incidents. States with certain dominant religions would have more terrorist incidents than states who are predominantly of other religions. The significance in the regression turned out to be .136, showing it to not be significant at all. However, this could be due to the fact that this variable is nominal rather than ordinal and therefore different, potentially skewing the results. For this purpose, I ran a compare means on this variable alone to see what trends, if any, appeared. I also ran an ANOVA test to see how Muslim countries compared in relation to the others. The chart is shown below.

### Compare Means of Predominant Religion and Terrorist Incidents

#### Report

# of terror incidents in nation

Predominant religion	Mean Difference	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Roman Catholic	13.072*	8.99	1120	37.765
Protestant	16.899*	5.17	560	20.397
Orthodox	14.138*	7.93	280	22.605
Jewish	-13.733	35.80	20	27.647
Muslim		22.07	1020	97.010
Hindu	6.292	15.77	40	27.161
eastern	-1.118	23.18	320	72.869
other	20.589*	1.48	220	4.555
Total		13.07	3580	61.460

The numbers in this chart require some explanation. There is only one nation in the world who claims Judaism as their dominant religion: Israel. But, this chart claims there are 20 nations. This is due to Israel being included 20 times, representative of the 20-year span I tested. So, this compare means includes the entire range of 20 years. When looking at the

mean numbers for each religion, we see that Jewish, Eastern, and Muslim are the top three religions with the most terrorist incidents. After looking at the results in this table, it appears that predominant religion plays a more important role than the multiple regression originally depicts. Looking at the mean differences from the ANOVA test, it suggests that Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Eastern religions all experience more terrorist incidents than Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox states. The mean differences showed that there was a noticeable difference between the mean numbers of terrorist incidents that some religions experience compared to others.

### Conclusions

After running each of the tests examined above, it is clear that terrorism is a complicated and, most likely, multifaceted issue. I found previous research that suggested poverty, government repression or effectiveness, and other social factors contributed to the presence of terrorism within any given country. I chose variables that represented a wide range of issues that could possibly ail a nation and used these to see if any of them held an effect on the number of terrorist incidents that nation experiences. Almost all of the variables tested in this study are numbers that can be changed through state action or inaction. By this, I mean that they are numbers that can be improved in order to change the effects that variable has on terrorism in that nation.

Of the six variables tested, four were significant. The first variable was unemployment and this was one of the two that was not significant. Previous research suggested that poverty was a major cause of terrorism, yet poverty is a variable that has many other variables within it.

Poverty can be tested through the poverty gap statistics, however there was no indication of this variable being used in prior research. When examined, there was not a sufficient amount of data available on the poverty gaps within enough countries for a pattern to be established or identified. Unemployment was an issue that was indicated in multiple studies as something that could potentially create an atmosphere for terrorism to occur. Research suggested that high unemployment indicated poverty and that citizens would then turn to terrorism to fix their problems, or otherwise take their problems out on the government in the form of attacks. However, compared to the other five variables that were tested in this study, unemployment did not have a significant effect on terrorist incidents.

Social inequality can be another good measure of poverty in its own right. Many theories claimed the more social inequality within a country, the more terrorist activity there would be. This variable was found to be significant after testing, and therefore reinforces the theory that more inequality leads to terrorism. If this is certainly true, this means that states can begin to fix a problem like this in order to decrease terrorism activity in their countries. Many aspects of basic human needs and rights are encompassed within social inequality such as access to education, housing, the judicial system, transportation, banking and other goods and services. Each one of those items is something that can be fixed through either internal intervention or external aid. Some of the states experiencing vast social inequality do not have the funding to provide these resources to their citizens. The responsibility then falls on the rest of the global community to aid these states in order to reduce terrorism overall. It will be a complicated and expensive task, but one that can certainly be accomplished with the proper time and resources.



Respect for human rights plays a large role in the lives of citizens. It is the job of the government to ensure people are receiving the necessary care and resources. When this doesn't happen, it can cause the people to remain unchecked by the government. Or worse, it is the government itself that is the source of manifestation for these issues. The results show that low government respect for human rights leads to more terrorist incidents taking place. This concept fits in with previous research that said that government repression or effectiveness can contribute to terrorism. If a state fails to protect or uphold basic human rights standards, the citizens of that state cannot be expected to do the same. When their rights have been violated, they may seek out a way to fight back against the ones who wronged them, and that way could be through terrorist organizations. Many terrorists have joined their organizations as a result of some wrongdoing that happened to them or their families at the hands of their government, or even at the hands of the West. This creates anger and gives terrorists the motivation they need to carry out attacks. When governments all over the world begin to universally respect all human rights, there will be less grievances against those governments. This is yet another baby step that states can take to begin battling against terrorism.

Democracy was another variable tested in this study and the previous assumption was that democratic states would have less terrorist incidents than non-democratic ones. The results showed this to be the most significant variable out of the whole group, but the results are also backwards. According to this study, terrorism takes place more in democracies than in non-democracies. The reason behind this result could simply be that democracies are the nations that are attacked more. The variable representing the number of terrorist incidents for

every country each year does not only include attacks that came from citizens of that nation. This is to say that a foreign citizen could carry out an attack in a democratic state and it would still count towards that state's total. Perhaps this result really means that democracies are targeted more than others because they have the type of government that terrorists want to harm. Many of the extremist organizations out there have a vendetta against the Western culture, their ideologies, and against democracy as a whole. It could be for that reason that more attacks have been taking place in democracies for the last 20 years or so. If this is the case, then the United States ideology of democracy leads to peace will not work.

The United States views democracy in a different way compared to the rest of the world. When we hear democracy, we think rights of the people and limited government, but the rest of the world hears majority rule. Majority rule is not the system of government for everyone, and perhaps that could be leading to some "democracies" having more attacks. People are unhappy with the form of democracy they have and are doing something about it. Not everyone can do democracy like the United States does, and for this reason it may be smart for the U.S. to stop forcing democracy onto other nations. We may in fact be harming states by doing this, so maybe the United States needs to reevaluate their policies in this area.

However, the other possible explanation for the data not supporting the hypothesis could be the result of an issue with the data itself. This data was obtained through a pre-coded dataset in the SPSS program. The 0's and 1's could have been coded inaccurately which would explain the lack of results to support the previous research and hypothesis.

The fifth variable of school enrollment was also found to have a significant impact on terrorism. Results from the regression run in this study suggest that as school enrollment increases, terrorist incidents decrease. There could be a few possible explanations for this result. First, it could be that the more educated you are, the more likely you are to stay in school or get a job and less likely to turn to terrorism. However, this is refuted by many due to the fact that many of the leaders of terrorist organizations are extremely well-educated. So, this leads to possibility number two: that staying in school simply keeps the kids too busy and out of trouble. It is similar to other domestic criminal justice theories that claim if children are too involved in school and other activities, they will not have time to commit crimes. The same logic could potentially be applied to terrorism. If the kids are in school, they cannot be partaking in terrorist activities at the same time. Therefore, the higher the school enrollment in each nation, the less kids are on the streets, and the less chances there are of them becoming involved in terrorist activity. This means that states need to pay attention to their schools by giving them the supplies, the facilities, and the teachers that are necessary in order for children to earn an education. Keeping young children engaged and away from terrorism can give them the chance they need in order to grow up and become a productive and peaceful member of society.

The last variable of predominant religion of a state can have some different implications. This variable came pre-coded on the SPSS dataset and each religion was assigned a number. In the multiple regression, religion was found to not be a significant factor. To better test the hypothesis, I ran an ANOVA test to see if there were any differences in the number of terrorist incidents among the different religions. The results found there were more incidents taking place in states who were not of the Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox faiths. After

this, I came to look at the geography of the nations who were experiencing more attacks and discovered that there was a pattern. A majority of the nations who have issues with terrorism all reside in similar areas. This means that the religion variable, at least in this case, can serve as a proxy for region. If this concept holds true, it means we can use religion to help point us in the right direction of where terrorism is taking place. From there, we can look at the other factors that were tested in this study such as human rights, social inequality, and school enrollment, and begin to combat those issues within those states.

We will probably never be able to pinpoint what it is exactly that causes terrorism to happen. We have always been assuming that we could single out the cause of terrorism and that it can be found easily in a statistic. Perhaps the results showing the significance of many variables suggests that it is a multi-faceted problem. There are many variables that could occur in many different combinations that lead to greater chances of terrorism. If this is the case, then all that can be done is to do our best to build a list of all the possible variables and begin to combat them the best we can.

Maybe the real conclusion here is that there are simply not any easy options out there that can prevent and fight terrorism. We need to first understand the causes if we are to prevent them. However, we may be assuming too much in saying that overall terrorism takes place due to rational, concrete reasons. There is no data available to test religious ideology, but perhaps that is where the true answers lie. The statistical methods used here have the issue of reducing life to simple numbers and broad categories. Perhaps the answers are impossible using this method due to life being much more complex than a series of ones and zeroes.

This topic makes it possible to test a wide variety of options and there is so much more that can be done with the topic in the future. I hope to examine this further at some point in order to find at least one strong predictor as to why terrorism takes place. Maybe there are less politically correct causes such as religion that cause more abundant terrorism activity. This will be an issue that continues to plague the United States and the rest of the world, but it is one that is very important to international, as well as domestic, security. We can help countries with tangible issues, but we cannot change ideas.

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