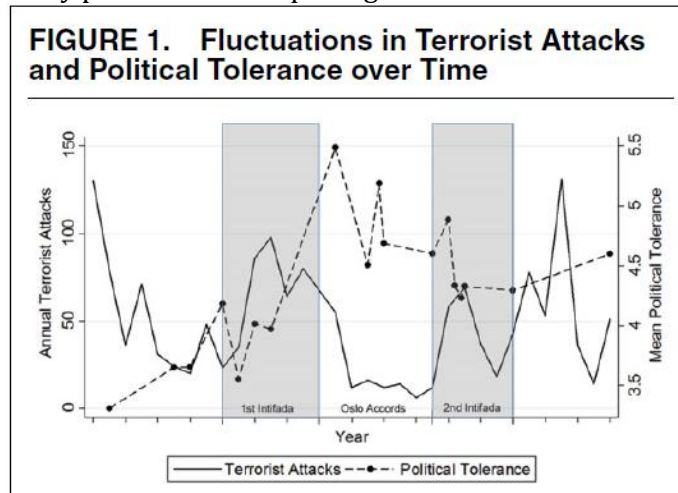


Terrorism and Tolerance

Landmark Study Published in *American Political Science Review*

By Rebekah Tilley

From the events of 9/11 to the recent shootings in San Bernardino and Orlando, acute terrorist actions in the United States and subsequent decrease in the public's support for civil liberties to minority groups have led some political scientists to despair over the health of democracy in our country. Will democracy endure in the face of persistent terrorism? Or, more specifically, [how does persistent terrorism impact political tolerance over time](#)? Dr. Mark Peffley, Professor of Political Science in the College of Arts & Sciences, collaborated with fellow political scientists at Tel-Aviv University and the University of Rhode Island to answer this question and their findings were recently published in the prestigious *American Political Science Review*.



Peffley teamed up with [Dr. Michal Shamir](#), Professor of Political Science, Tel-Aviv University and [Dr. Marc Hutchison](#), Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Rhode Island, and they looked to a democracy plagued with chronic terrorism: Israel.

Shamir has conducted 18 surveys on the Israeli public's levels of political tolerance from 1980 to 2011. Over that period, Israel experienced chronic terrorism – 1,500 attacks over 30 years – with 12 percent of the public being directly involved in an attack and 60 percent knowing a victim of terrorism. The surveys measured the willingness of Israelis to “put up with” people or ideas they find objectionable – a better measure of political tolerance than asking someone about their general support for civil liberties.

While social scientists sometimes have the reputation of being isolated in their research towers, the development of this research is a positive example of an “academic family” at work. Connections developed in Peffley's graduate school days led overtime to collaborations between these three academics drawn together by their mutual research interests. Peffley and Shamir knew each other as graduate students while at the University of Minnesota. Peffley served as dissertation advisor to Hutchison who was interested in Michal's work on tolerance in Israel.

“This was truly a collaborative project with Marc, Michal and I learning from each other every step of the way,” said Peffley. “Marc was an assistant professor with several publications by the time we worked on this paper. Still, publishing in a major political science journal requires a level of skill, hard work and meticulous attention to detail that is hard to overstate. We learned a lot – both statistically and theoretically – and managed to squeeze it into the article.”

The resulting data found that chronic terrorism has a “powerfully corrosive effect” in the public's willingness to extend political tolerance to disliked groups. They take those attitudes to the voting booth and often right-wing governments come to power on the tails of a terrorism onslaught.

These leadership changes have led to extremely troubling anti-democratic decisions made at the institutional level.

“One of the mistakes made by right-bloc governments in Israel is their vilification of Israeli Arab citizens, who comprise 20 percent of the population, after terrorist attacks,” explained Peffley. “Right-bloc parties in Israel regularly vote to disqualify Israeli Arab parties, and even current members of the Knesset, from running for office. Arab citizens of Israel are often accused by the Right of aiding the perpetrators of terrorism in the occupied territories. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Vilifying Arab or Muslim citizens of a country for political purposes not only undermines the legitimacy of a democracy, but by encouraging hate crimes and discrimination, Muslim or Arab citizens are less likely to assimilate into the dominant culture.”

More encouraging: the research demonstrated the strength and resilience of democracy over the long haul. The study looked at two major periods of violence – the First Intifada (1987-1993) and the Second Intifada (2000-2005) that bookend a period of peace following the Oslo Accords. While times of acute violence moved the public to greater levels of political intolerance, as the relatively young democracy of Israel matured the intolerance levels in the 2000s never reached the heights of the 1980s.

Landmark research such as this has become a hallmark of the UK Political Science program, and the department has a strong reputation of equipping graduate students in “the art of doing publishable research,” Peffley said. Each year he teaches the Research Writing seminar where graduate students come in with a seminar paper that they meticulously revise until its ready to submit to a journal.

“Just as important, our faculty do a lot of coauthoring with graduate students, which is another great way for them to learn how to publish,” continued Peffley. “All of these things take a huge amount of faculty and graduate student time, but it’s absolutely worth it to build a strong graduate program with a reputation for training students for today’s job market.”

Peffley observed this also serves to boost the quality of education at the undergraduate level by infusing the most up-to-date scientific knowledge into the classroom and exciting the passions of students.

Given the current American political environment, Peffley et al.’s research is instructive. “There may be a short-term gain for politicians who pander to the public’s fears,” said Peffley. “But in the long-term they do more harm than good—by serving as propaganda for jihadists like ISIS and tarnishing our reputation overseas, especially among the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. If we want to maintain our country’s reputation for being free, open and tolerant, the public and the media need to turn their backs on politicians who promote political and social intolerance.”