

# **The Face of The Enemy: Images, Stereotypes, and Perception of Threat**

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\*\* This is an early draft of a new project. Comments, criticism and suggestions are welcome, but please do not cite or circulate without permission.

## Introduction

For contemporary Americans, the international system appears to be rife with threats to their country's security and well-being. For instance, a 2016 Gallup poll produced a long list of "critical threats" to the vital interests of the United States, including international terrorism (79%), the development of nuclear weapons by Iran (75%), cyberterrorism (73%), the spread of infectious diseases (63%), the conflict in Syria (58%), the military power of North Korea (58%), large numbers of refugees trying to come to Europe and North America (52%), global warming (50%), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (45%).<sup>1</sup> China and Russia also loom large in Americans' perceptions of threat from beyond their borders, with 50% saying China's emergence as a world power represents a major threat to the well-being of the United States and 42% expressing the same view about tension with Russia.<sup>2</sup>

These popular perceptions of threat can have an important impact on the course of both domestic and foreign policy. As Huddy et al. (2005) summarize, perceived threat "lead[s] to the vilification of the source of threat, limit[s] support for government actions that might assist members of the threatening group, promote[s] support for belligerent solutions directed at threatening individuals or groups, and heighten[s] in-group solidarity" (594). For instance, after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Americans who felt more threatened by the prospect of future terror attacks were more likely to support both the restriction of civil liberties at home and the use of military force abroad (Huddy et al. 2005, 2007). Indeed, threat is one of the main drivers of hawkish foreign policy preferences (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser 1999; Huddy et al. 2005; Huddy et al. 2007; Maoz and McCauley 2008; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Gadarian 2010; Hetherington and

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<sup>1</sup> Conducted by Gallup Organization, February 3 – February 7, 2016. Based on 1,021 telephone interviews. Sample: National adult.

<sup>2</sup> Survey by Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Conducted by Abt. SRBI, April 12 – April 19. Based on 2,008 telephone interviews. Sample: National adult.

Suhay 2011). Thus, Hetherington and Suhay (2011) write, “changes in Americans’ perceptions of threat are critical to understanding changes in aggregate levels of public sentiment toward the use of force and civil liberties” (546).

How do ordinary Americans determine whether a particular actor or event represents a serious threat? Unlike political elites, who have access to an array of information about both the capabilities and intentions of other actors (Press 2005; Yarhi-Milo 2014), the average citizen lacks the both the factual knowledge and the political sophistication to make the same kind of careful threat assessments. In this paper, I argue that media coverage, and particularly the propensity of the media to personify foreign adversaries plays an important role in threat perception at the mass level. Personification refers to the use of specific individuals, usually leaders, to stand in for more abstract entities like states or terrorist groups (Lakoff 1991; Ottosen 1995; Rojo 1995; Connors 1998; Vincent 2000). Given the media’s reliance on visual imagery to attract and keep the attention of viewers (Zaller 1999), personification often involves widespread dissemination of the image of the enemy leader. For instance, in the aftermath of 9/11, the image of Osama bin Laden was so ubiquitous that he actually appeared on American television more frequently than President George W. Bush (Robinson 2012, 394). Thus, the face of the leader often becomes the face of the enemy.

I argue that the face of the enemy has the power to influence threat perception by activating out-group stereotypes concerning violence and trustworthiness. However, the effect of a particular image will depend on its stereotypicality—i.e., the fit between the individual depicted and the stereotypical attributes (appearance, behavior, etc.) of the relevant out-group. Stereotypes are applied more readily to stereotypical individuals as compared to counter-stereotypical individuals (Maddox 2004; Ramasubramanian 2011; Kahn and Davies 2011;

Osborn and Davies 2013; Blair et al. 2002; Eberhardt et al. 2006; Messing et al. 2015). Thus, media coverage of a crisis or conflict featuring a stereotypical leader image should raise the salience of out-group stereotypes and increase the perception of threat among those individuals who hold strong negative stereotypes of that group.

Using a survey experiment administered online to a convenience sample of 645 adult U.S. residents, I find results that both support and add nuance to my argument. A stereotypical leader image does have the power to make a potential foreign adversary appear more threatening to those who are predisposed to view the relevant out-group as violent and untrustworthy. However, that same image can also reduce threat perception for individuals who hold positive stereotypes of the out-group as peaceful and trustworthy. Thus, the effect of a stereotypical leader image on the overall level of threat perception in the population depends on the ratio of negative to positive out-group stereotypes. These results have important implications for the repression and mistreatment of domestic out-groups and for democratic accountability.

### **Media Coverage and the Perception of Threat**

In contrast to leaders and other political elites, most ordinary people do not experience political issues and events directly, especially in the realm of foreign affairs. Instead, they come into contact with the world beyond their nation's borders through their radios, newspapers, televisions and computer screens. Even individuals who are not attentive to politics and who do not consume hard news end up learning about important foreign policy events through their consumption of entertainment programming (Baum 2002).

The canonical view of the media's role in politics has long held that the media serves as a "conveyor belt" for information about politics, but that it plays little independent role in shaping

public opinion about foreign affairs, either because media outlets faithfully parrot the official White House line (Robinson 2012), or because they tend to “index” the views present in elite debates (Bennett 1990, Zaller and Chiu 1996). However, these elite-driven theories have been challenged by scholars who argue that the media is better understood as a discrete strategic actor that can have an independent causal effect on public opinion (Iyengar 1994; Entman 2003; Baum and Groeling 2009).

According to Baum and Potter's (2008) “market framework,” the media is best understood as a “middleman or trader of information, simultaneously beholden to two actors whose interests often conflict: leaders and the public” (50). On the one hand, political elites, as the primary suppliers of information, seek to frame that information in a way that advances their interests and to see those frames delivered intact to the public. On the other hand, members of the public, as the primary consumers of information, have an interest in receiving objective facts that will allow them to evaluate the performance of their leaders. Media outlets and individual journalists must navigate this tension while simultaneously competing with one another for access and eyeballs, and adhering to the norms of their profession. Consequently, the content of media coverage often departs from what elite-driven theories would predict in ways that shape the contours of public opinion.

For instance, Hayes and Guardino (2013) show that while dissent was largely absent from domestic elite debates over the Iraq war, the journalistic norms of balance and conflict led media outlets to report on criticism from foreign elite voices, such as allied leaders and UN officials, as a substitute, leading to decreased support for the war among both Democrats and independents. Because media outlets did more than simply index the largely one-sided views being expressed in Washington, President Bush faced a public that was far more divided than it would otherwise

have been, leaving him with “a considerably weaker base of support from which to draw as the war grinded on and the situation in Iraq deteriorated, hastening the slide in his approval ratings and accelerating public dissatisfaction with the conduct of the military operation” (4). Other studies have found media effects on approval of the president during and after foreign policy crises (Groeling and Baum 2008; Iyengar and Simon 1993), support for the Gulf War (Iyengar and Simon 1993) and the war in Afghanistan (Edy and Meirick 2007), and attitudes towards humanitarian intervention (Berinsky and Kinder 2006), to name just a few examples.

When it comes to perception of threat, media coverage can influence public opinion in a number of ways. The volume of media coverage devoted to different threats can have an agenda setting effect (Iyengar and Simon 2003; Wanta et al. 2004), i.e., those threats that receive the highest volume of news coverage will be those deemed most serious or critical by the general public. The framing of news stories has also been shown to affect threat perception (Woods 2011). Both agenda setting and framing have to do with the way in which factual information is delivered to the consumer. However, studies have shown that the visual aspects of news coverage have an important impact on public opinion, above and beyond the factual content that they accompany (Gadarian 2010; Druckman 2003; Brader 2006).

In order to attract and keep consumers, media outlets rely on graphic and arresting images (Zaller 1999). These images shift attention, enhance memory and retrieval, influence emotional reactions, and shape how individuals evaluate the political figures or policies associated with a particular image (Graber 1996; Gadarian 2014). Indeed, since the Vietnam War, when the American media was accused of undermining the war effort by exposing the public to graphic wartime imagery (Robinson 2012), the belief that such images can sway public opinion has been widespread among journalists, politicians and scholars alike (Gadarian 2014).

A number of recent studies have examined the impact of wartime imagery on public opinion (Pfau et al 2008; McEntee 2015; McKinley and Fahmy 2011; Scharrer and Blackburn 2015; Pfau et al. 2006; Gartner 2011), particularly in the context of the war on terror. In the United States, emotive images of terrorism are a regular feature of national news (Iyengar 1994; Nacos et al. 2011), and images associated with 9/11 have been shown to have an enduring impact on Americans' attitudes, including their perception of threat, support for hawkish counterterrorism policies, presidential approval, and support for political candidates (Gadarian 2010, 2014; Huddy et al. 2003; Breckenridge et al. 2010; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009).

This body of research, while clearly demonstrating the importance of the visual dimension of wartime media coverage, has focused primarily on images that represent 'us' in some way, e.g., the grieving family members of *American* soldiers, an *American* smart bomb dropping straight down the chimney of an Iraqi Air Force building, *Americans* leaping out of the twin towers on 9/11. In contrast, far less attention has been paid to the images that are used to represent 'them'—the enemy—during times of crisis or conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Yet media coverage frequently personifies the adversary by focusing on individual leaders who stand in for their state or their group (Ottosen 1995; Rojo 1995; Connors 1998; Vincent 2000), and whose names and images become intimately familiar to the public, as was the case with Osama bin Laden after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks (Robinson 2012, 394). According to Lakoff (1991), this "ruler-for-state metonymy" is a more natural fit to the narrative of a just war, in which there must be a villain, a victim and a hero (27). It is easier to cast an individual in the role of the villain than an abstract and amorphous entity like the state. Personification of the adversary also resonates strongly with the average news media consumer.

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<sup>3</sup> See Maoz 2012 for a notable exception.

As McGraw and Dolan (2007) put it, “because states are abstract entities, they frequently require physical embodiment in order for ordinary citizens . . . to make sense of them” (300). Or as the inimitable Walter Lippmann (1922) observed:

Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it. She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefield. Pictures of French and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. No one, in fact, can imagine them. . . . If she is to think about the war, she fastens upon Joffre and the Kaiser as if they were engaged in a personal duel. (12-13)

Does the picture that Miss Sherwin has in her mind of the Kaiser matter? In the next section, I develop a theory of the conditions under which the images of enemy leaders that individuals encounter in their media consumption will influence their perception of threat.

### **Stereotypes and Threat**

The human psychological architecture is highly sensitive to faces, and numerous studies have shown that people draw rapid, unreflective and surprisingly persistent inferences about traits such as competence and threat from the faces of other people (Carre et al. 2010; Oosterhof and Todorov 2008; Todorov et al. 2008).<sup>4</sup> The inferences that people draw from faces are often rooted in stereotypes. As Messing, Jabon and Plaut (2015) explain, people’s physical features and self-presentation “tell us about the categories to which they may belong, causing us to associate character traits with that person. These associations can become salient so quickly and

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<sup>4</sup> The facial perception literature has shown that these trait inferences can have an important impact on various aspects of the democratic political process, including candidate evaluations and vote choice (Todorov et al. 2005; Ballew and Todorov 2007; Laustsen and Petersen 2015; Lawson et al. 2010; Lenz and Lawson 2012; Little et al. 2007, 2012; Murray 2014). Candidates whose faces convey competence, dominance, masculinity and trustworthiness enjoy an electoral advantage, regardless of the policy platform they offer or their record in office.



automatically that we remain unaware of the process” (46).

Out-group stereotypes are known to play a key role in determining threat perception. For instance, due to pervasive stereotypes of Black men as aggressive and violent, white Americans are more likely to perceive similar actions and facial expressions as more threatening when the target is Black versus White (Duncan 1976; Sagar and Schofield 1980; Cothran 2011). Moreover, this effect is most pronounced among individuals who exhibit the strongest implicit bias against Blacks (Hugenberg and Bodenhausen 2003). A particularly troubling series of studies have shown that in computer based simulations, both college students and police officers are more likely to shoot unarmed Black suspects than unarmed White suspects (Correll et al. 2002, 2007; Greenwald et al. 2003; Plant et al. 2011). Again, the magnitude of this bias is related to stereotypes of African Americans as dangerous (Correll et al. 2007). Importantly, this phenomenon is not limited to African Americans. Other studies based on the shooter paradigm have shown a stronger bias (i.e., a propensity to shoot unarmed subjects) against individuals who look stereotypically Muslim (Unkelbach et al. 2008, 2011).

Which stereotypes are most relevant to the perception of threat from foreign actors? In general, stereotypes are defined both by their substantive content and by the out-group to which they are attached. While an ‘us versus them’ mentality is a near universal feature of violent conflict, the relevant out-group of a foreign adversary will depend upon the specific context. In terms of their substantive content, stereotypes can be quite diverse, but Sides and Gross (2013) argue that they generally fall along two central dimensions: warmth and competence. The function of group stereotypes is to rapidly and effectively categorize individuals according to their group membership in order to make judgments about how they are likely to interact with us and how we, in turn, should interact with them. The warmth dimension refers to the group’s

intentions. In other words, are they out to help me or hurt me? Groups that are perceived as violent and/or untrustworthy fall at the negative end of this dimension, while groups that are perceived as peaceful and/or trustworthy fall at the positive end. Competence refers to the group's ability to act on its intentions and accomplish its goals. Groups that are perceived as lazy and/or unintelligent fall at the negative end of this dimension, while groups that are perceived as hardworking and/or intelligent fall at the positive end.

How do warmth and competence relate to threat? The evidence indicates that warmth stereotypes rather than competence stereotypes are the primary driver of perceptions of threat. According to Sides and Gross (2013), "the influence of stereotypes is greater when there is a link between the content of the policy and the stereotype," and questions about the threat posed by an adversary and the appropriateness of a military response are directly linked to assessments of its violent intentions (589). Moreover, it is not clear how the competence dimension translates into threat. One could argue that the most threatening enemy is one who is simultaneously violent and competent, but incompetence combined with a propensity for violence can also be a dangerous mixture. Moreover, in their study of Muslim stereotypes and support for the war on terror, Sides and Gross (2013) find no interaction between warmth and competence stereotypes and little effect of competence stereotypes alone. Their results clearly show that it is negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims—i.e., as violent and untrustworthy—that lead people to support increased spending for the War on Terror, increased defense spending, decreased spending on foreign aid, and the restriction of civil liberties at home.

This suggests that the images of enemy leaders that individuals encounter in the media can influence their perception of threat by activating out-group warmth stereotypes. However, not all images are equally likely to activate these stereotypes. Research has consistently shown

that within an out-group, there is substantial variation in the extent to which its members experience stereotyping and its negative effects (Maddox 2004; Ramasubramanian 2011; Kahn and Davies 2011; Osborne and Davies 2013; Blair et al. 2002). The most important determinant of this variation is stereotypicality, or the fit between the individual and the attributes of the group, either in terms of appearance or behavior. For example, “people more readily apply racial stereotypes to Blacks who are thought to look more stereotypically black, compared with Blacks who are thought to look less stereotypically black” (Eberhardt et al. 2006, 383), a phenomenon that has been observed in contexts ranging from capital sentencing decisions to presidential elections (Eberhardt et al. 2006; Messing et al. 2015). Conversely, a counterstereotypical exemplar can reduce or even prevent the activation of negative stereotypes (Ramasubramanian 2011).

Thus, the impact of media coverage featuring images of the enemy leader will depend on the interaction between the stereotypicality of the image and the preexisting biases of the individual consumer. Specifically, we would expect that.

*H1: Out-group warmth stereotypes will become more salient to the perception of threat in the presence of a stereotypical leader image as compared to a counterstereotypical leader image.*

*H2: The use of a stereotypical leader image (versus a counterstereotypical image) will increase the perception of threat among those individuals who hold negative out-group warmth stereotypes.*

Consequently, the use of a stereotypical leader image should increase the overall level of threat perception in the population. However, the size of that increase will depend on the distribution of negative out-group warmth stereotypes. If these stereotypes are held by a large number of people, then a stereotypical should produce a significant increase in the level of threat

perception. However, if negative out-group warmth stereotypes are relatively rare then the level of threat perception will not rise by much.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

To test these hypotheses, I designed a survey experiment in which I presented respondents with information about a hypothetical foreign policy crisis. Respondents read the information in the form of a newspaper article and then answered a series of follow-up questions. The experimental treatment consisted of the image that accompanied the article, which I describe in more detail below. The advantage of taking an experimental approach is that it allows me to isolate the causal effect of the image while holding all other information about the situation constant. The tradeoff is a certain lack of realism in presenting respondents with a single news article in contrast to the high volume information environment they would likely encounter during a real foreign policy crisis. However, in a relatively new area of research there is good reason to establish whether an effect can be observed in a controlled setting before going hunting for it in the real world.

I collected an online convenience sample of 645 adult U.S. residents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk website) in May 2015. MTurk is "an online Web-based platform for recruiting and paying subjects to perform tasks" (Berinsky et al. 2012, 351). MTurk "workers" are not representative of the U.S. population (Huff and Tingley 2015; Levay et al. 2016). MTurk samples tend to overrepresent individuals who are younger, more liberal and have lower incomes, and underrepresent Blacks and Hispanics (Berinsky et al. 2012). However, the subject pool is substantially more diverse than a typical student sample and prior studies have generally found good results in replicating well-established findings with MTurk samples (Berinsky et al.

2012; Mullinix et al. 2016). Thus, MTurk provides a cost-effective way to conduct an initial test of my hypotheses. Later on, I discuss how the composition of the sample may affect the generalizability of my results. The key points of the scenario described in the article are as follows:

- UN weapons inspectors have discovered a secret nuclear weapons program in Jordan.
- King Abdullah of Jordan says his country only wants nuclear weapons to defend itself from Iran.
- Sources inside the White House say the president thinks Jordan wants nuclear weapons to gain more power in the Middle East.
- The president is considering ordering a major air strike to destroy Jordan's nuclear facilities.<sup>5</sup>

I designed this scenario with a number of considerations in mind. First, I wanted to create a situation in which there was ambiguity about the adversary's motives in order to induce variation in threat perception. Hence, the article offered respondents both a reason to believe Jordan's intentions are benign (King Abdullah's statement that Jordan only wants to defend itself against Iran) and a reason to believe that its intentions are threatening to the U.S. (the President's belief that Jordan wants to use nuclear weapons to dominate the Middle East). Second, I set the scenario in the Middle East in order to build on and extend existing research on Americans' attitudes towards Muslims and the implications of those attitudes for American politics (Sides and Gross 2013; Saleem et al. 2015; Piazza 2014; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). Indeed, since 9/11, Muslims have arguably been the most salient out-group in the domain of U.S. foreign policy. Third, I chose the issue of nuclear proliferation in order to test whether the effect of

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<sup>5</sup> The article also provided respondents with a wealth of other information about the scenario, including the amount of time until "breakout" (2 years), Jordan's historic rivalry with Iran, its membership in the NPT, its history of good relations with Israel and the United States, the size of the air strike (20-30 cruise missiles), and the number of expected civilian casualties (minimal). The full text of the article can be found in the appendix at the end of the paper.

Muslim stereotypes and the images that conjure them travel outside the context of the war on terror, which has been the focus of most existing studies. Moreover, nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is an important foreign policy concern for the United States and this scenario can offer some valuable insight into how Americans might react to the prospect of a “Muslim bomb” that is not in the hands of Iran. Finally, I chose the country of Jordan both because it is a plausible proliferator and because its leader, King Abdullah, is a highly visible ruler whose public self-presentation varies substantially in its stereotypicality. This allows me to manipulate the stereotypicality of the image in the article without changing any other details of the story.

What determines whether an individual is perceived as stereotypically Muslim? As a group of over one billion people, Muslims are incredibly diverse. However, as with all stereotypes, the category of ‘Muslim’ is associated with particular phenotypes, traits and behaviors. Absent any studies of which of these attributes are considered most stereotypical, we can make some inferences based on how Westerners tend to stereotype Muslims. Analyses of Western popular culture, news coverage and public opinion suggest that two of the most prominent stereotypes of Muslims concern violence and religiosity (Sides and Gross 2013; Fischer et al. 2007; Shaheen 2012; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). For instance, Sheikh et al. (1995) show that news stories about Muslims were often connected to crises, war and conflict, and over half of such stories featured words like “fundamentalist,” “militant,” “terrorist,” “radical” and “extremist,” and Fischer et al. (2007) find that Muslims are perceived as more aggressive and more intrinsically religious than Christians. Thus, the presence of visible external markers of violence and religiosity—guns, military uniforms, long beards, head scarves, etc.—are likely to make a substantial contribution to whether or not a particular individual is perceived as stereotypically Muslim.

Figure 1 shows the two images that I used in my study. The first image is a stereotypical image of King Abdullah of Jordan wearing a military uniform (signaling violence) and a head scarf (signaling religiosity). The second is a counter-stereotypical image of King Abdullah, who appears clean-shaven and wearing a Western suit. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive an article with one of these images, yielding two treatment groups.

**Figure 1 – Treatment Images**



Following Sides and Gross (2013), I measure individual differences in warmth stereotypes of Muslims by asking respondents to rate Muslims as a group along two dimensions: peaceful-violent and trustworthy-untrustworthy. Each dimension was measured on a seven-point scale. For the peaceful-violent dimension, respondents were instructed that a score of 1 “means you think almost all of the people in the group are peaceful,” a score of 7 “means you think almost all of the people in the group are violent,” and a score of 4 “means you think the group is not toward one end or the other.” They received similar instructions for the trustworthy-

untrustworthy dimension. I combined these two items into a scale ranging from 1 to 7, with higher values indicating more negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims.

**Figure 2 – Distribution of Warmth Stereotypes of Muslims**

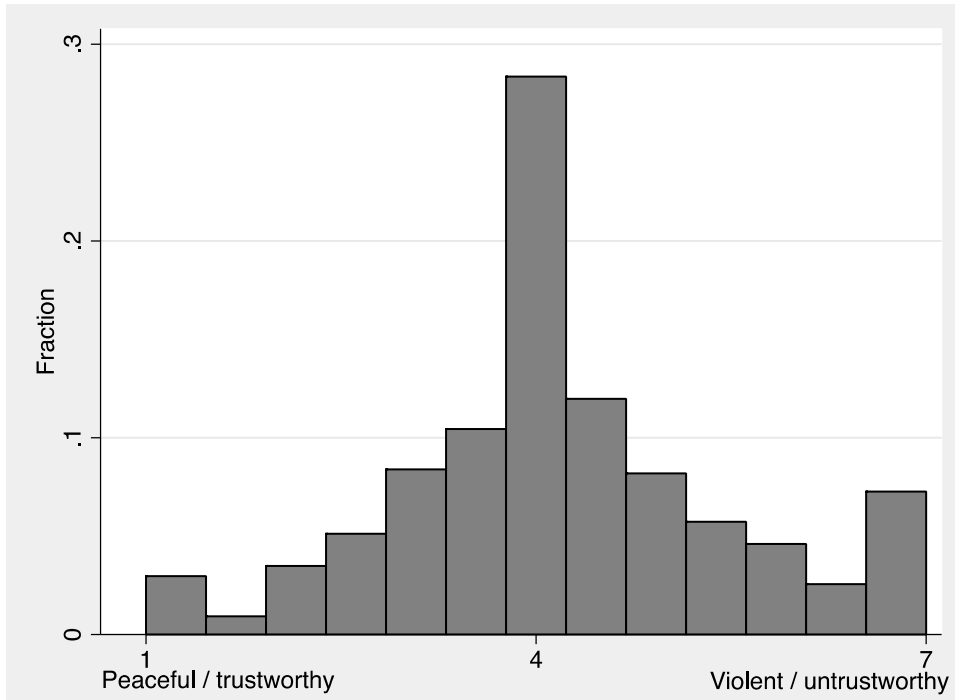


Figure 2 presents the distribution of this variable in my sample (mean = 4.21, s.d. = 1.37). Overall, 40% of respondents fell above the midpoint of the scale, indicating that they hold negative views of Muslims in terms of warmth, while 31% fell below the midpoint, indicating that they hold positive views of Muslims on this dimension. The remaining 28% fell at the midpoint of the scale, indicating that they have no explicit bias in either direction. This is consistent with Sides and Gross’ (2013) finding that Americans generally view Muslims “as more violent than peaceful and as more untrustworthy than trustworthy” (587).

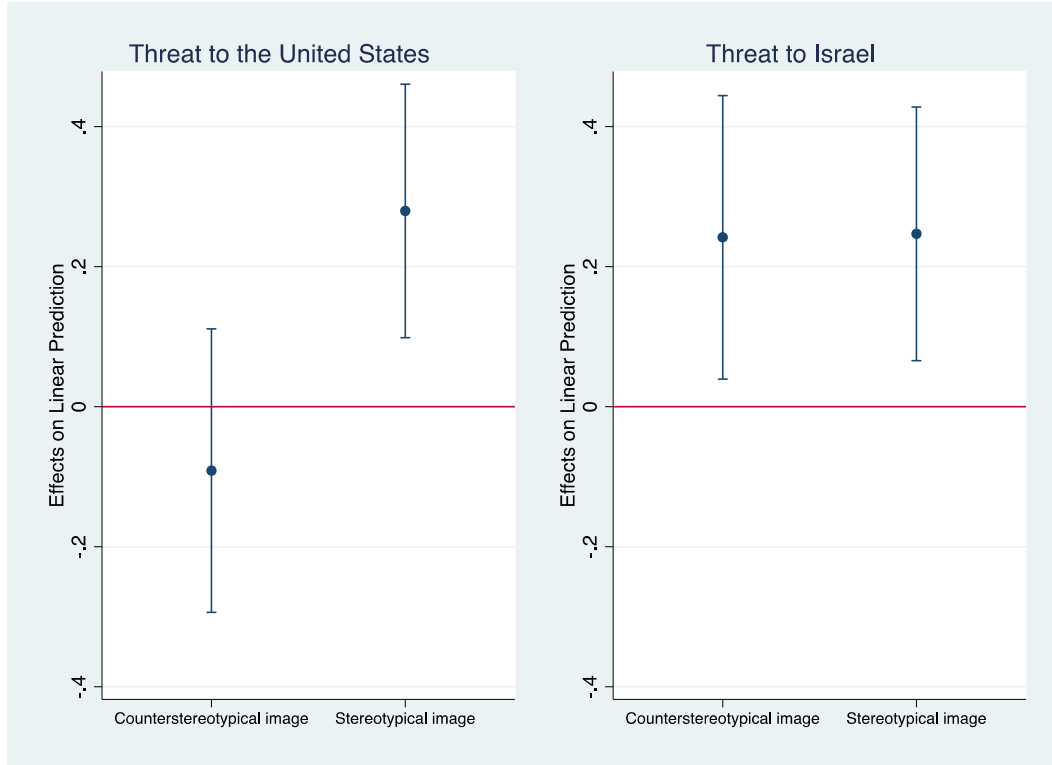


To measure perception of threat, I asked respondents to rate the seriousness of the threat posed by Jordan's nuclear program both to the United States and Israel. Response options ranged from 0 ("none") to 10 ("extremely serious"). The mean response for threat to the United States was 4.09 (s.d. = 2.51), with 28% of respondents falling above the midpoint of "moderately serious." Perception of threat to Israel was somewhat higher, with a mean of 4.83 (s.d. = 2.51) and 37% of respondents above the midpoint.

## **Results and Discussion**

I now turn to testing my main hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 predicts that out-group warmth stereotypes will be more salient to the perception of threat in the presence of a stereotypical leader image as compared to a counterstereotypical leader image. In my experiment, this means that negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims should be a stronger predictor of threat perception in the stereotypical image condition versus the counter-stereotypical image condition. Figure 3 depicts the average marginal effect of negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims in each treatment group. For simplicity, all results reported in this section are from linear regression models without controls. The pattern of results does not change when controlling for demographic characteristics and political attitudes that are plausibly correlated with both threat perception and stereotyping, including age, race, gender, education, party identification, political ideology, and interest in politics.

**Figure 3 – Effect of Negative Warmth Stereotypes on Threat Perception**



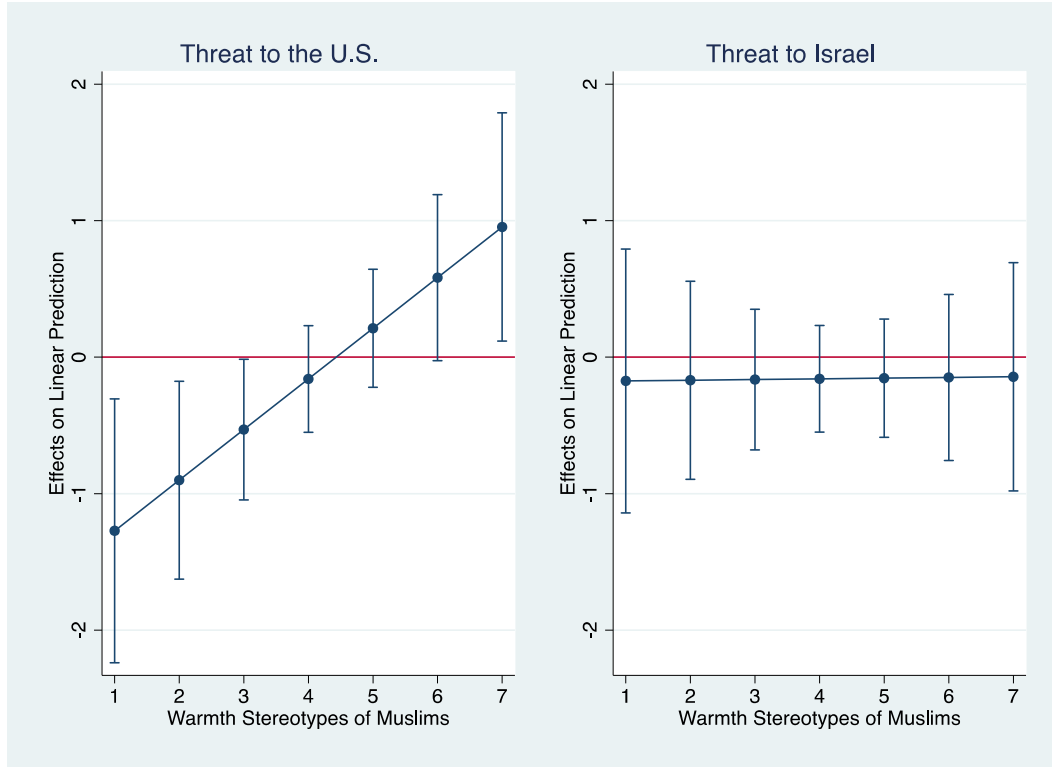
Looking first at the results for the United States, we can see that negative warmth stereotypes have no significant effect on perception of threat in the counterstereotypical image condition. In other words, when presented with a counterstereotypical image of King Abdullah, respondents who view Muslims as violent and untrustworthy are no more likely to perceive Jordan’s nuclear program as a threat than respondents who have neutral or generally positive views of Muslims. By contrast, in the stereotypical image condition, negative warmth stereotypes are a positive and significant predictor of perception of threat. Here, respondents who hold the most negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims rate Jordan’s nuclear program 1.7 points higher on the threat scale than respondents who hold the most positive warmth stereotypes. Thus, it appears that the stereotypical image of King Abdullah activates respondents’ stereotypical

beliefs about Muslims' violence and trustworthiness, causing them to rely on those beliefs when evaluating the threat posed by Jordan's nuclear program.

Interestingly, when it comes to Israel, warmth stereotypes of Muslims have a significant effect on threat perception regardless of whether respondents were in the stereotypical image condition or the counterstereotypical image condition. Hence, while the evidence for the U.S. supports Hypothesis 1, there are clearly cases in which these stereotypes will be highly salient regardless of the stereotypicality of the leader image to which respondents were exposed.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that the use of a stereotypical leader image (versus a counterstereotypical image) will increase the perception of threat among those individuals who hold negative out-group warmth stereotypes. To test this hypothesis, Figure 4 plots the treatment effect of the stereotypical image across the full range of the warmth stereotypes scale. Recall that individuals who score at the low end of this scale have strong positive warmth stereotypes of Muslims (as peaceful and trustworthy), while individuals who score at the high end of the scale have strong negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims (as violent and untrustworthy). If hypothesis 2 is correct, we should observe the greatest effect of the stereotypical image among the latter group.

**Figure 4 – Conditional Marginal Effects of the Stereotypical Leader Image**



Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the stereotypical image has a significant positive effect on perception of threat to the U.S. among respondents with the strongest negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims. However, it also has a significant negative effect among respondents with the strongest positive warmth stereotypes of Muslims. Simply put, the stereotypical leader image simultaneously increases threat perception for those who view Muslims as violent and untrustworthy, and decreases threat perception for those who view Muslims as peaceful and trustworthy. Clearly positive warmth stereotypes can have just as powerful an effect on threat perception as negative warmth stereotypes. Conversely, when it comes to Israel, the stereotypical leader image has no significant effect on perception of threat regardless of the respondents' preexisting stereotypes of Muslims. Again, there is something about shifting the target of threat from the United States to Israel that appears to sap leader images of their power in this scenario.

Finally, does the use of a stereotypical leader image increase the overall level of threat perception? Unsurprisingly, there is no significant difference between the treatment groups for perception of threat to Israel.<sup>6</sup> However, contrary to my expectation, when it comes to perception of threat to the U.S., there is also no difference between the two groups.<sup>7</sup> This lack of a main effect can be attributed to the fairly even distribution of respondents across the range of the warmth stereotypes variable (31% positive, 28% neutral, 40% negative). Thus, the increase in threat perception among respondents at the negative end of the scale is canceled out by the decrease in threat perception among respondents at the positive end of the scale, leaving the overall level of threat perception unchanged. In their study of Muslim stereotypes and support for the war on terror, Sides and Gross (2013) find a substantially higher proportion of people who hold negative warmth stereotypes of Muslims in their national sample (51% versus 41% in my sample). This suggests that in a nationally representative sample, with more people at the negative end of the warmth stereotypes spectrum, a main effect of the counter-stereotypical image might emerge.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, personification of the adversary is a common feature of media coverage of crises and conflicts, and because ordinary Americans rely on the media for their political information, the images of enemy leaders featured in that coverage have the potential to influence their perception of threat. The power of these images, however, is contingent on the interaction between the image and the viewer. Images facilitate categorization and the

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<sup>6</sup> Mean threat in the stereotypical image condition = 4.66 (0.13). Mean threat in the counterstereotypical image condition = 4.81 (0.14). Difference = 0.15 (t = 0.74, p = 0.45).

<sup>7</sup> Mean threat in the stereotypical image condition = 3.96 (0.14). Mean threat in the counterstereotypical image condition = 4.02 (0.14). Difference = 0.06 (t = 0.28, p = 0.78).

application of stereotypes—both positive and negative—regarding the warmth of particular out-groups, and these stereotypes can serve as an important heuristic for determining the degree of threat posed by a member of the out-group. However, in order to exert their influence, stereotypes must be made salient, and they are more likely to be activated by images of highly stereotypical individuals. Thus, when respondents in my experiment evaluated the threat posed by Jordan's nuclear program to the United States, the stereotypical image of King Abdullah increased the salience of out-group warmth stereotypes, causing those with strong negative stereotypes of Muslims to increase their perception of threat and those with strong positive stereotypes of Muslims to decrease their perception of threat.

Contrary to my expectation, however, the overall level of threat was no higher in the group that received the stereotypical image than in the group that received the counterstereotypical image. This may have been due to the relatively symmetrical distribution of Muslim stereotypes in my MTurk sample, which suggests that the effect of a stereotypical leader image on the overall level of threat perception in the population depends not only on the prevalence of negative warmth stereotypes, but on the ratio of negative to positive stereotypes. Further testing using different out groups for which this ratio varies could help to establish whether this is indeed the case, and to identify those groups for which media coverage featuring a highly stereotypical leader image is likely to lead to significant threat inflation. My analysis also produced an anomalous set of results concerning the perception of threat to Israel. Here, stereotypes of Muslims were salient regardless of the stereotypicality of the leader image. This raises an important question for future research: when do stereotypes become chronically salient to a particular issue, event or actor, and when do they remain latent and available to be activated by the images that individuals encounter in their media consumption?

Indeed, given the current political climate, including Republican primary candidate who proposed banning all Muslims from entering the United States and subsequently went on to win his party's nomination, the fact that Muslim stereotypes were *not* salient in the counterstereotypical image condition is worth highlighting. The article clearly informed respondents that Jordan is a majority Shia Muslim country located in the Middle East—there was no mistaking that a Jordanian nuclear weapon would be a “Muslim bomb.” Yet respondents’ relied on their stereotypes of Muslims to evaluate the level of threat posed by Jordan’s proliferation only in the presence of the stereotypical leader image. In other words, even in an environment where we might expect Muslim stereotypes to be automatically salient to any crisis in the Middle East regardless of the details, a counterstereotypical image may have the power to suppress the activation of those stereotypes.

More broadly, if counterstereotypical images can reduce or even eliminate the salience of stereotypes, their effects may go well beyond the perception of threat from foreign adversaries. First, decreasing the salience of out-group stereotypes by providing counter- stereotypical exemplars can reduce dehumanization of the out-group (Prati et al. 2015). Dehumanization is frequently the basis for “justifying the social and moral exclusion” of out-groups, and has been linked to some of the worst forms of aggression and discrimination (Prati et al. 2015). Thus, the presence of counter-stereotypical leader images in media coverage of foreign adversaries may help to humanize the out-group in ways that spill over into other issue areas, and reduce support for domestic discrimination or repression targeted at out-group members.

Second, the greater the role of stereotypes, the farther the reality of public opinion deviates from the rational model of opinion formation, in which individuals’ foreign policy preferences are the product of a clear-eyed assessment of the costs and benefits of different

options (Gelpi et al. 2009). Indeed, the idea that popular support for war rests on citizens' assessments of the costs and benefits of fighting often lies at the heart of the argument that the conflict behavior of democracies is constrained by leaders' accountability to the public. This accountability can be compromised when leaders engage in "threat inflation," as the Bush administration did prior to the Iraq War (Kaufman 2004), and campaigns of threat inflation may be particularly likely to succeed when they tap into pre-existing negative stereotypes that predispose individuals to perceive the out-group as threatening. Thus, if the availability of counter-stereotypical images of enemy leaders can lessen individual reliance on stereotypes, they may help to move public opinion close to the rational model and maintain democratic accountability.



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