“They are Amongst us”. News About Islamist Terrorism, Perceptions of Sleeper Terrorists, and Negative Stereotypes Toward Muslims

Abstract

In the debate around Islamist terrorism, experts and journalists often refer to the notion of “sleeper terrorists”. This notion rests on the idea that Islamist terror attacks in the Western world are difficult to prevent, because potential terrorists typically live completely ordinary and inconspicuous lives amongst us while plotting terror attacks. We investigated how exposure to news about Islamist terror affects audience perceptions of sleeper terrorists, and how these perceptions influence negative stereotypes toward Muslims. A two-wave panel survey (*N*T2 = 524) showed that exposure to news about Islamist terror did not directly affect negative stereotypes, but increased the perceived existence of sleeper terrorists. These perceptions, in turn, had a positive influence on negative stereotypes. Additionally, we found an effect of negative stereotypes on sleeper terrorist perceptions, suggesting reciprocal relationships.

*Keywords:* terrorism news, Islamist terrorism, sleeper terrorists, stereotypes, Muslims

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