

# Identification of explanatory variables pertaining to attack intensity on U.S. embassies in countries of the Middle East and North Africa<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This project examines the incidence of attacks on American Embassies located in the Middle East and North Africa. An attack intensity scale is developed based on a recent Department of State publication's description of attack events. Locational characteristics associated with attack intensity level are examined with multiple regression analysis. Identification of significant relationships between attack intensity and several explanatory variables produced a passing multivariate model that possessed a modest adjusted R Squared and a good R Squared value. The result indicates attack intensity correlated positively with tribalism, total literacy rate, GDP per capita and the number of mosques within range of the US Embassy. Negative correlations limiting the intensity of attacks include political stability, total dependency rate, refined oil exports, and life expectancy. The model's coefficients appeared stable because of minimal levels of multicollinearity present in the model.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Study area

Many countries that witnessed the Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011 currently face the acute challenge of Islamic militancy, especially from a strong ultra-fundamentalist power-driven entity called the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL). Recently ISIL threatened to use mobile bomb attack reprisals on all American Embassies if the United States decided to attack ISIL's positions in Iraq.

Moreover, the ISIL network has begun to appear quite frequently in popular newspapers that document how ISIL steers its insurgency narrative in light of the ongoing civil war in Syria and its recruitment of citizens of western countries. Presently, national leaders, notably European governments, have had to address a flood of Muslim refugees seeking sanctuary from civil war in Syria and other possibly related insurgent activities.

The MENA study area includes 25 different countries ranging from Morocco in the west to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan in the east. The MENA countries share a contiguous heritage of

Islam and are known for harboring animosities toward Westerners, Americans in particular. Sellami (2006) articulated, "Many people in the Arab world regard the Western way of life in rather negative terms, as materialistic, egoistic and decadent in social, cultural and family matters." Thus, American Embassies have sustained attacks in more than half of these countries, and attacks on American diplomatic extensions of many types have occurred in nearly all of them. Hence the following question: Does a discernable set of variables exist that can explain attack intensity against U.S. Embassies within MENA countries?

### 1.2. Diplomatic presence and security

One cannot understate the importance of diplomatic security. The American foreign presence abroad with its manifold components essentially serves as a symbol for the American ideology of competitive open markets, freedom of expression, and egalitarianism in governance. Additionally, U.S. Embassies provide hubs for intelligence sharing activities between host nationals and Embassy (Maertens, 2015, 2016). However, such a facility's presence can also serve as a target for those hostile to the American presence in their cultural realm. Indeed, American diplomatic personnel regularly experience political violence at or inside Embassies where they work. According to *Significant Attacks Against U.S. Diplomatic Facilities and Personnel 1998–2013* (U.S. Department of State, 2015),

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American Embassies sustained outbreaks of violence with varying degrees of severity in no fewer than 44 countries (Fig. 1). Discovering commonalities in countries where hostilities have occurred could inform policy makers where to focus attention in improving international relations and diplomatic security simultaneously.

Of the 44 countries where U.S. Embassies sustained attack between 1998 and 2013, about one third exist in MENA. The U.S. has not maintained an Embassy presence in Iran since 1979, although the Embassy of Switzerland serves to represent for U.S. citizens in Iran. During the study period Morocco, Algeria, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkmenistan did not produce any attacks on American diplomatic interests. The contiguity of those countries in connection with profoundly hostile countries of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen provides a stark contrast.

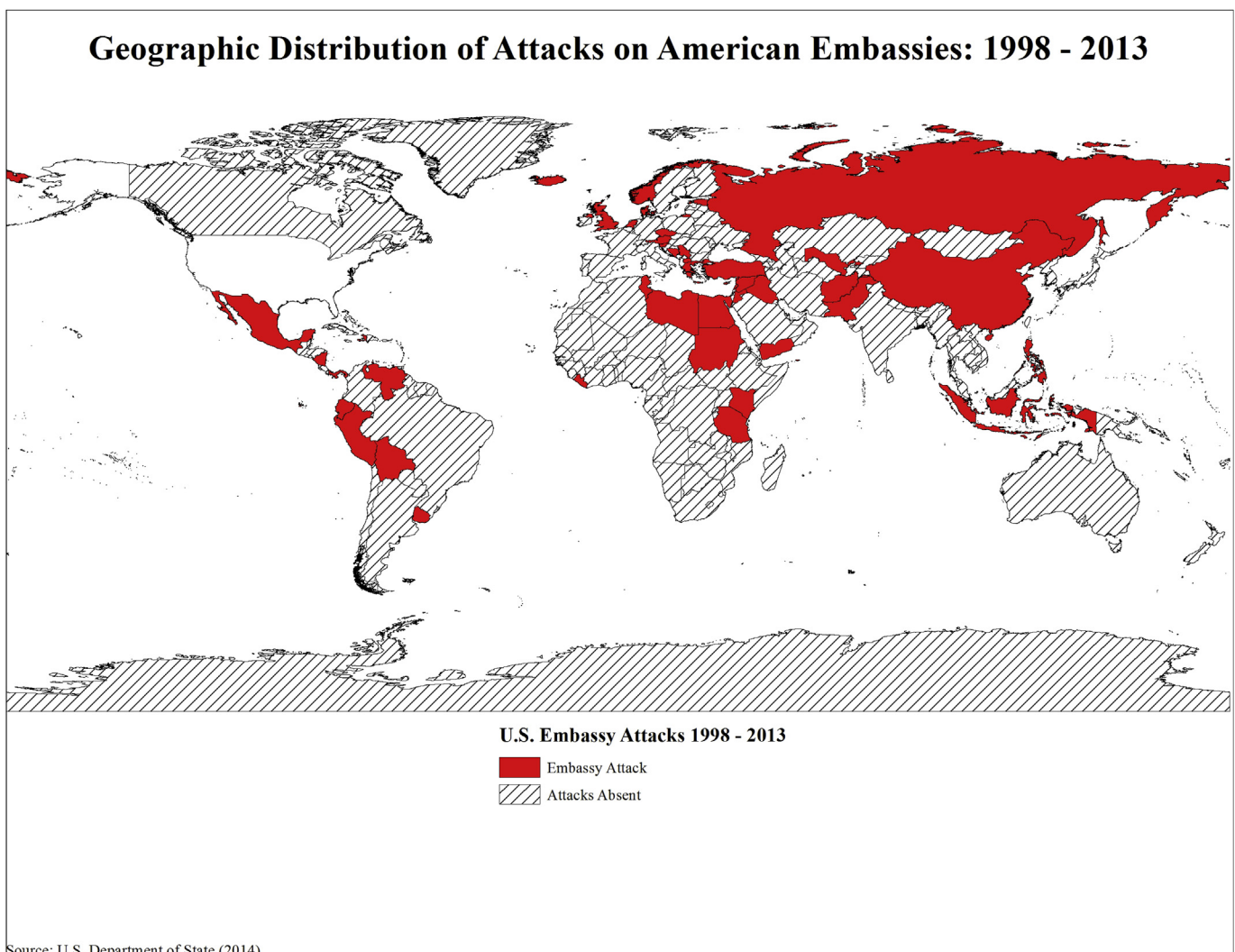
From transcribed Congressional Hearings of 2002 and 2008, one discovers that repositioning buildings, erecting stronger, higher fencing, and creating wider standoff distances can mitigate U.S. Embassy vulnerability. Each Embassy has received upgrades and installations of infrastructure costing hundreds of millions of dollars to American taxpayers. These security upgrades also send reified signals to host nations' populace (Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism, 2003). Others argue the most durable risk mitigation strategy available for American diplomacy could come from

improving cultural understanding and social relations between the American Ambassador, the Ambassador's colleagues, and the citizen base of the host countries (Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, 2009); however, this assertion may prove untenable in countries where the culture or significant portions of the population possess a strong dislike of the United States.

American embassies located in capital cities of MENA countries comprise the focus of this study. Consulates and Special Missions were excluded. This project utilizes multivariate regression to analyze characteristics common to most states in search for causal relationships between those characteristics and how they translate into the attack's intensity on an American Embassy. If a discernable set of variables appears to explain attack intensity, policy makers might choose to proactively address those variables in foreign policy decisions in tandem with repositioning and fortifying of embassy facilities.

### 1.3. Problem statement, objectives and limitations

Maintaining an American Embassy presence in MENA countries must continue in order to garner intelligence relevant to the increasing threat of Islamic terrorism in America and to contain the Islamic terroristic threat from expanding beyond certain



**Fig. 1.** Geographic distribution of attacks on U.S. Embassies between 1998 and 2013. Adapted from *Significant Attacks Against U.S. Diplomatic Facilities and Personnel: 1998–2013* (U.S. Department of State, 2015). GIS vector data from *GADM Database of Global Administrative Areas, 2015*.

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