

Religiosity and Secularism: A Text-as-Data Approach to Recover Jihadist Groups' Rhetorical Strategies

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Overview

Religiosity characterizes the fourth, i.e., the most recent, "wave" of terrorism. This project is going to:

- Measure religiosity and secularism from an original Jihadist periodical database;
- Examine how these words relate to violent actions.

A Unified Theory of Jihadists' Violent and Non-violent Tactics

This project theorizes that Jihadist groups favor religiosity when facing setbacks and shift toward secularism as their power increases. This is because small groups prioritize their core members who advocate radical fundamentalism, while their larger counterparts need broader support from the secular world.

Data Collection of Jihadist Periodicals

- An original database of 129 periodicals in 12 different languages published between 1984 and 2019 from 32 Jihadist groups;
- Documenting the specific group in charge, publishing languages, publishing date, self-claimed type (magazine, newsletter, etc), and the gender of the target audience.

Number of Collected Magazines in Different Languages

| | | | | | | | |
|---------|----|------------|---|---------|----|--------|---|
| Arabic | 84 | Bengali | 1 | English | 20 | French | 3 |
| German | 2 | Indonesian | 1 | Kurdish | 1 | Malay | 2 |
| Russian | 2 | Swahili | 2 | Turkish | 2 | Urdu | 9 |

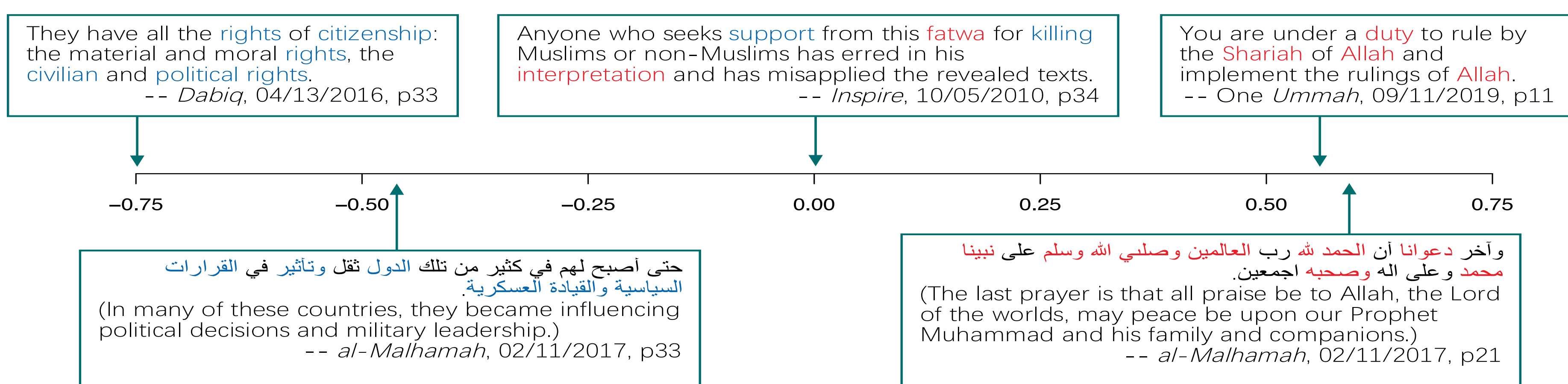
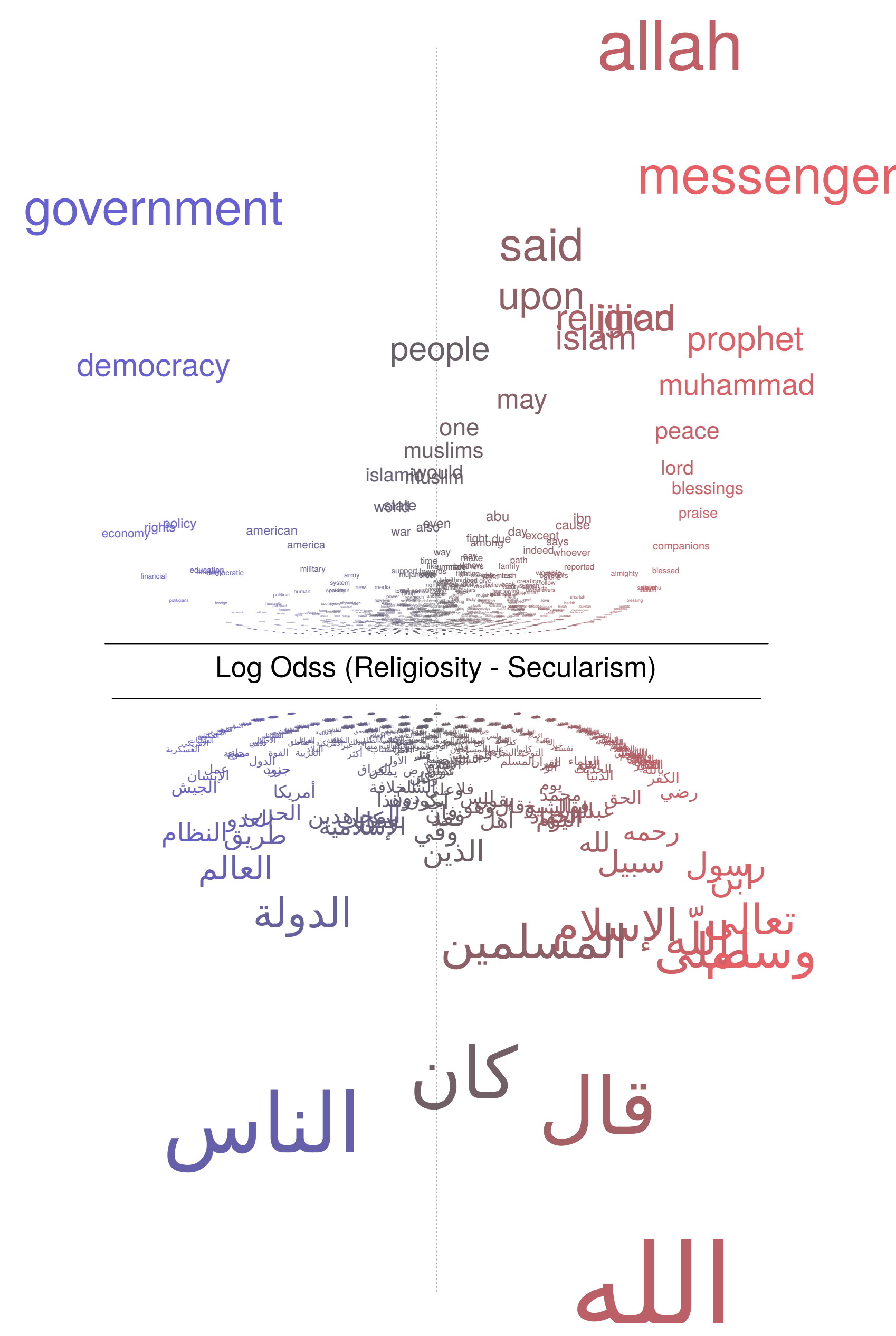
These periodicals were circulated on communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. I digitized each page using Optical Character Recognition (OCR).



- 1 tesseraact
- 2 80, 325 pages from 2, 132 issues

Measurement: Modified Keyword-based Semi-Supervised Algorithm for Bipolar Latent Traits

Corpora in different languages are trained separately, starting from the same seed words. The algorithm then picks up unique patterns of expression in different languages. Colored text indicates modifications made to King, Lam and Roberts (2017).

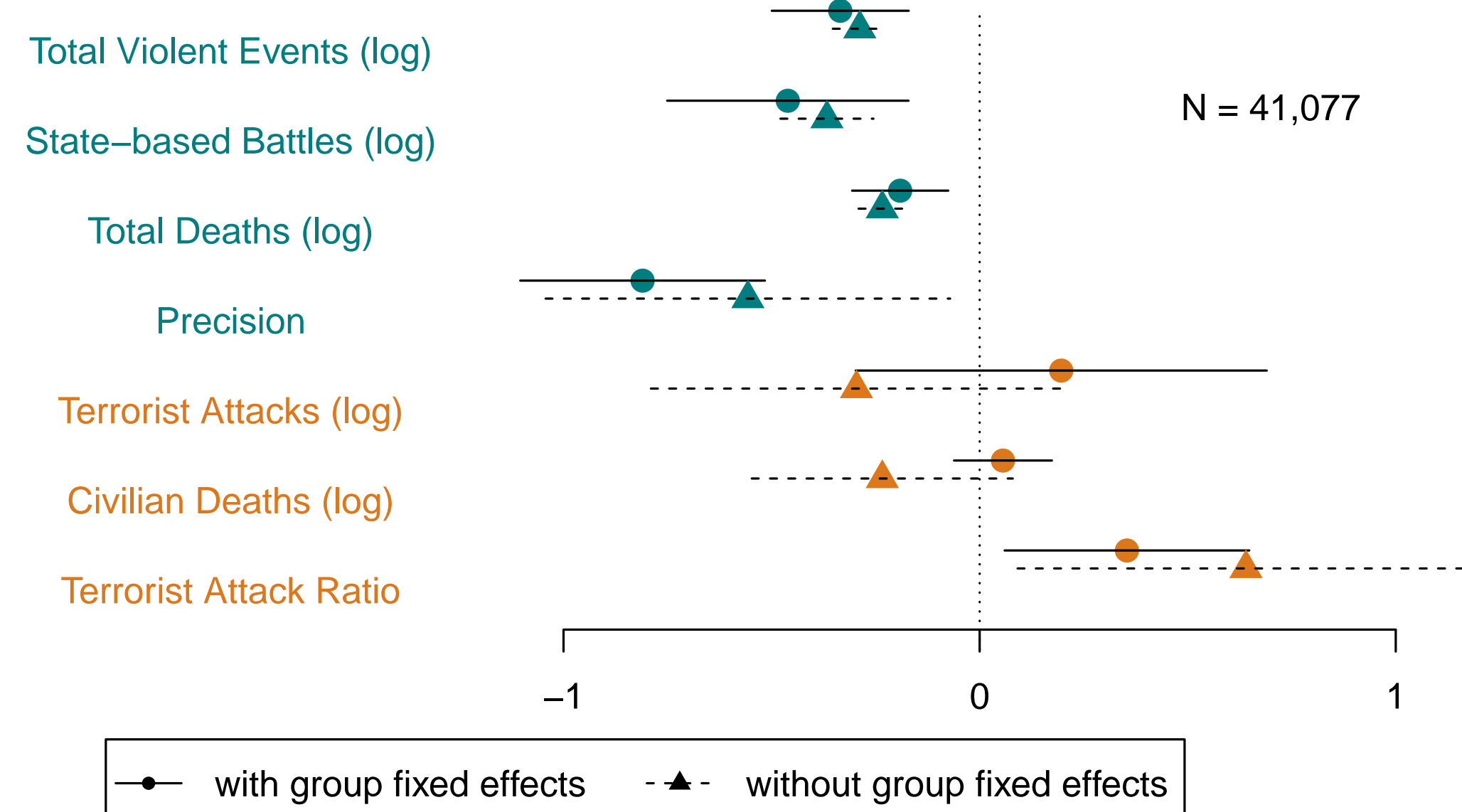


Note: Religiosity scores are calculated as they were in step 1 above. Sentences written in different languages are comparable to one another.

Results: Religiosity as a "Weapon of the Weak"

Results from ordinary least squares (OLS) estimations confirm the expectation:

- The proportion of religious rhetoric is negatively associated with several indicators of group strength.
- The relationship does not hold with terrorist attacks, which themselves have been characterized as a "weapon of the weak."



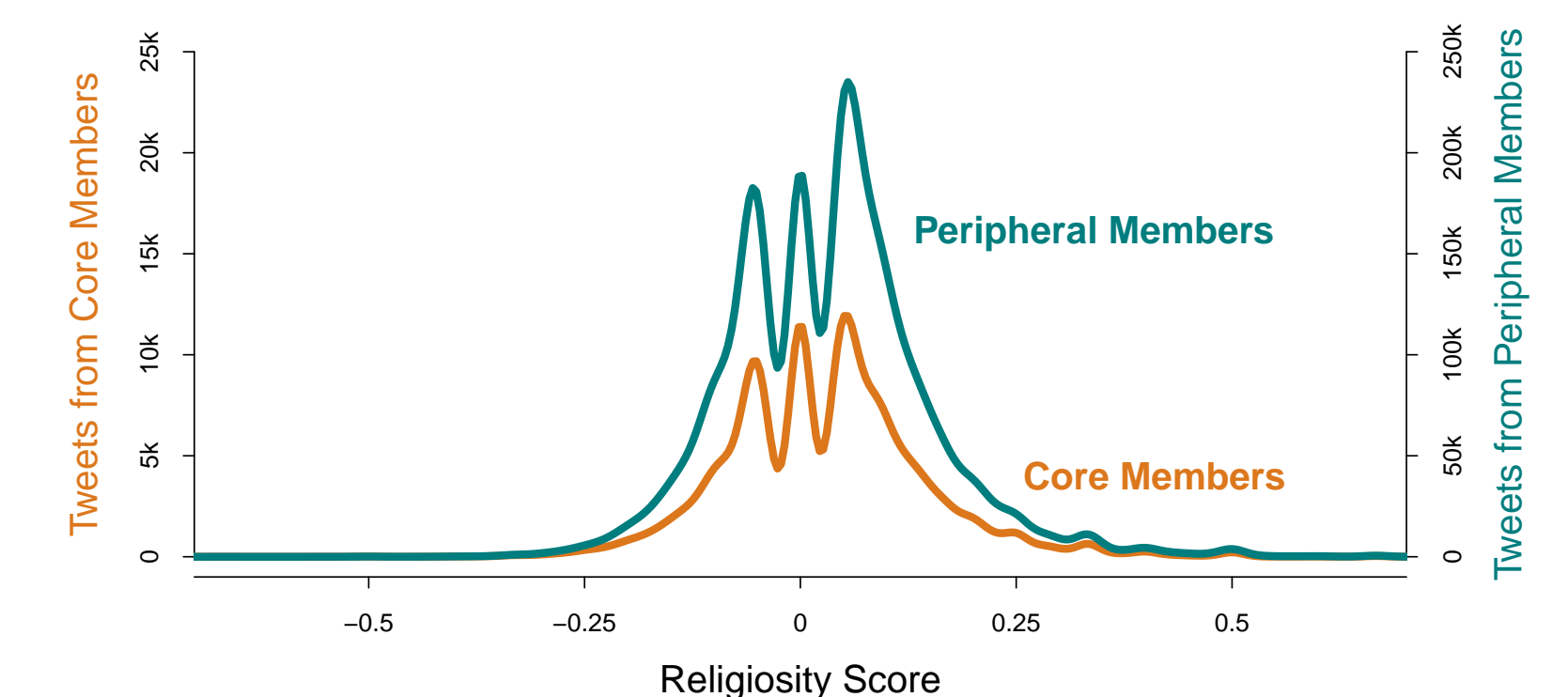
Mechanism: Twitter Analysis

To examine the mechanism, I leverage more than 18 million Twitter posts from ISIS-related accounts in 2015. The goal is to examine the extent to which a certain type of Tweets is disseminated among ISIS core members, ISIS peripheral members and outsiders. These user types are defined by:

$$\text{User} \in \begin{cases} \text{Members}, & \text{if } S = 1 \\ \text{Outsiders}, & \text{if } S = 0, \end{cases} \begin{cases} \text{Core}, & \text{if } PR(f) \geq 0.95 \\ \text{Peripheral}, & \text{if } PR(f) < 0.95 \end{cases}$$

where S is an indicator of account suspension and PR is the percentile ranking of the tweet based on the number of followers.

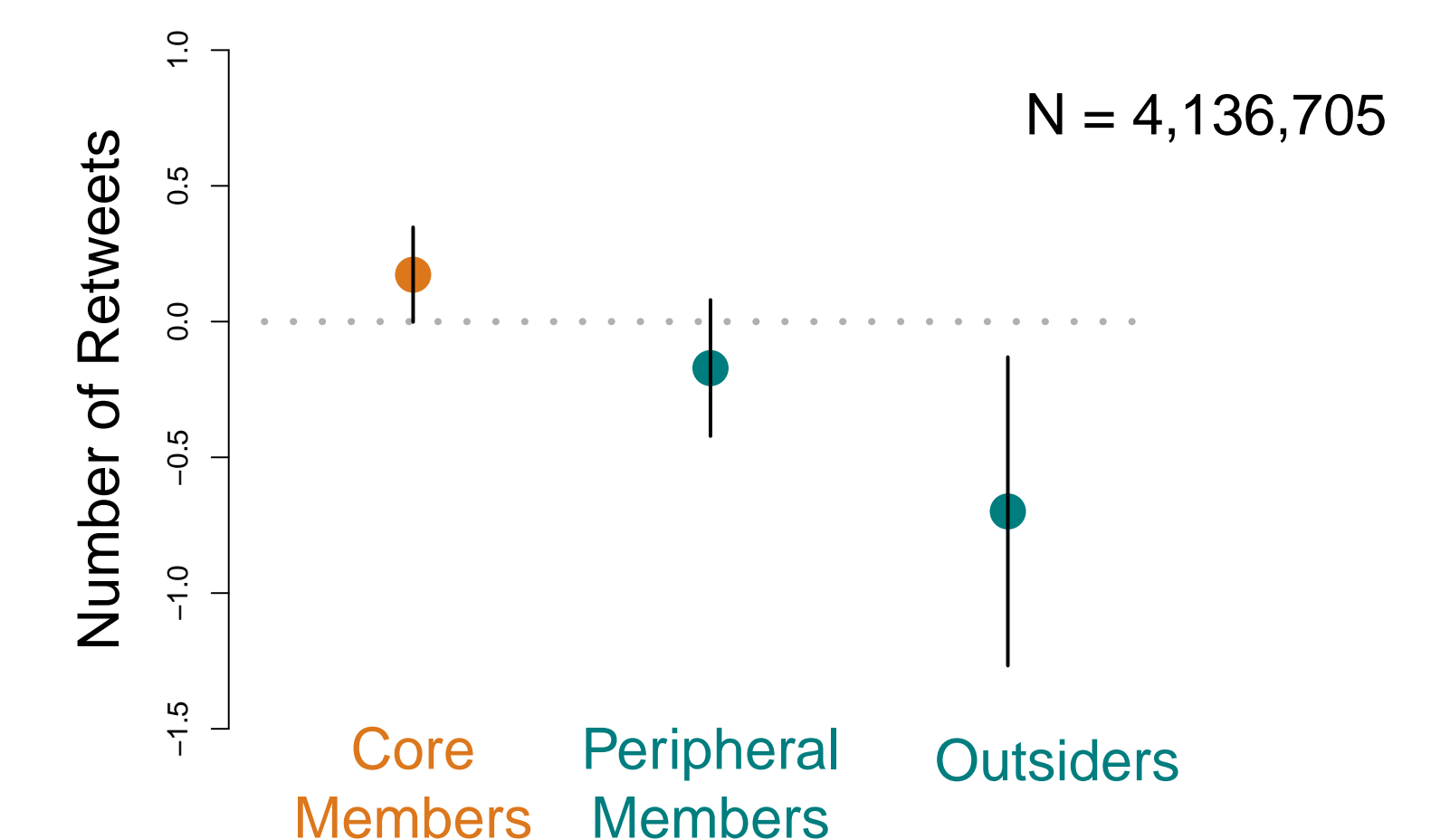
Religiosity scores are measured using the same modified keyword-based semi-supervised algorithm.



Note: Religiosity score distributions of Tweets written by core members and peripheral members mimic each other.

Results from three separate negative binomial (NB) models where Number of Retweets is the outcome and Religiosity Score is the explanatory variable:

- Religious rhetoric is more appealing among core members.
- Secular tweets are more circulated among peripheral members and outsiders.



Conclusion and Implication

Evidence from these analyses reveals a paradoxical phenomenon: the Jihadists' ultimate goal is to govern religiously, but they become less religious as they come closer to that goal.

Reference:
King, Gary, Patrick Lam and Margaret E. Roberts. 2017. "Computer-Assisted Keyword and Document Set Discovery from Unstructured Text." American Journal of Political Science 61(4):971-988.