

Trump's immigration ban will make America less safe

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On Monday, the Trump administration made a second attempt at restricting immigration from select Muslim-majority countries. While civil rights and immigration lawyers will no doubt argue against the order in court, it is also worth noting why U.S. President Donald Trump's policies on immigration and national security are at best misguided, and at worst unsafe from a national security perspective.

The greatest folly is the Trump administration's thorough misunderstanding of the threat, based on two erroneous assumptions. First, that terrorism comes from outside the United States, and second that it is solely from Islamic State or al-Qaeda inspired extremism.

In the first instance, it has been well-documented that terrorism is increasingly less likely to come from abroad and even less likely to come from refugees. Indeed, the six countries singled out by Mr. Trump (Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) are responsible for very few violent extremists in the United States.

A recent survey by the CATO Institute found that 15 individuals from these countries were convicted of terrorism offences between 1975-2015, and were responsible for exactly zero deaths. This is a small percentage of "foreign-born" terrorists, and a minuscule number compared to immigration from these countries over all. Moreover, it is not at all apparent that these individuals came to the United States radicalized, which may have happened over time on U.S. soil. For these reasons alone Mr. Trump's policies would have done nothing to stop either the 2015 San Bernardino, Calif., nor the 2016 Orlando attacks. Indeed, according to research by the New America think tank, every al-Qaeda/IS-inspired extremist attack inside the United States since 9/11 was committed by a citizen or legal resident.

Second, Mr. Trump's myopic understanding of violent extremism hides its true nature in the United States. According to the Extremist Crime Database, between 1990-2015 the United States experienced 39 attacks from Islamist-inspired extremism, but 178 incidents motivated by far-right extremism. Data show that Islamist extremist attacks are typically deadlier, but that far-right extremists tend to be more active in engaging in killing.

While groups such as al-Qaeda and IS want to attack the United States, they also recognize just how hard it is to get in. As such, they are turning to homegrown violent extremism – encouraging their followers to conduct attacks where they are if they are already in the West. This, on its own, is an argument for funding counterviolent extremism programs, not demonizing refugees. And yet, media reports have indicated that the Trump administration is considering renaming the Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism to "Countering

Islamic Extremism.” As is clear from his slow response to a recent wave of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attacks, Mr. Trump is willing to overlook any form of violent extremism that does not fit his erroneous worldview. This willful blindness to the diverse nature of the threat makes us all less safe.

Finally, it is important to consider the broader context. While Mr. Trump pretends his measures are making America safe, in reality his actions are disrupting counterterrorism efforts at home and abroad. Domestically, his actions are undermining the trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities that are most likely to be affected by violent extremism. Internationally, potential U.S. allies in the Muslim world in the global fight against extremism may become less likely to work with a country that may label them a security risk in the future.

There can be no doubt that vetting of immigrants and refugees is a good and prudent practice that should continue in an age of globalized terror. Aside from the legitimate and serious threat from al-Qaeda/IS-inspired violent extremism, there is also the threat of crime, espionage, human smuggling, etc. Yet the United States already has the most stringent process in the world, involving multiple levels of screening and taking 18 months to two years to complete.

It is a tragic irony that Mr. Trump’s actions are likely to make the United States less safe, while tearing families apart and undermining counterterrorism efforts at home.