

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Trump's Islam-Focused Policies Are An Example Of How Not To Fight Terrorism

The president's targeting of Muslims is dangerous, counterproductive and un-American.

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February 1, 2017

Late last Friday, in the wake of a flurry of executive orders, U.S. President Donald Trump affixed his signature to his 14th executive order in his first turbulent week in office, this one titled, "Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry To The United States." And on Wednesday of this week, Reuters reported that the administration was looking to "revamp and rename" a counter-extremist program so that its sole focus would be on Islam.

The controversial executive order, which some are now referring to as a "Muslim ban," stops immigration to the U.S. for all nationals of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Sudan and Yemen for at least 90 days. All refugee admission is also suspended for at least 120 days, with the acceptance of Syrian refugees indefinitely suspended. It also contains a provision giving preferential treatment to minority religions, that is non-Muslims, in these countries. Trump himself announced that priority would be given to Christian refugees. And Wednesday's move, if it proves true, reinforces the administration's apparent focus on Islam as a means to defeat terrorists.

While there has been much debate and protesting over the weekend and in the nearly week since its signing, this executive order — and indeed this proposed policy revamp — represents only a small part of a much broader problem: the rhetoric and actions of President Trump and his administration are fueling the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bigotry that exists among Trump supporters. Even if this order is deemed unconstitutional and struck down permanently by a court, more worrisome are the long-term consequences of the Trump administration's policies — like the one floated on Wednesday — and attitudes towards both the Muslim community and the Muslim world. Actions such as these further alienate our allies abroad and exacerbate Islamophobia in the United States. Instead, Trump should be focused on engaging the Muslim community and making them feel welcome within American society.

The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that in just the month following Trump's election, 112 anti-Muslim incidents occurred nationwide, with only anti-black and anti-immigrant incidents surpassing it in numbers at 221 and 315 incidents, respectively. Following the election, for example, letters advocating for the genocide of Muslims were sent to mosques around the country. They praised then-President-elect Trump, calling him the "new sheriff in town" who will "cleanse America and make it shine again," and warned, "He's going to do to you Muslims what Hitler did to the Jews."

Beyond words of hate, there have also been physical attacks, such as a January 26 incident in which a man at John F. Kennedy International Airport kicked a Delta employee wearing a hijab and shouted at her, "Trump is here now" and "he will get rid of all of you."

And multiple mosques have seen arson, including the early morning burning of a mosque in Texas mere hours after Trump signed his executive order.

But the policies and rhetoric of the Trump administration don't just incite hatred, they also expose the administration's fundamental misunderstanding of terrorism in the United States and the most effective ways of challenging it.

Even just looking at the statistics of terror attacks in the U.S., it is clear that Trump does not understand the origin of the current terror problem the world faces. And in order to address the problem, one has to understand the problem.

During the period from 1970 to 2015, according to data from the Global Terrorism Database, there have been 2,692 terrorist attacks in the United States. Muslims committed only 26 of these attacks, and, of these 26 attacks, the vast majority were committed by U.S. citizens as opposed to refugees or recently arrived immigrants. Pro-life, environmental, racially motivated or anti-government extremists accounted for the majority of these terrorist attacks, including a number of attacks targeting Muslims and their mosques. And in the United States, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, you are as likely to die by being crushed by heavy furniture as you are by being killed by a terrorist.

In fact, a recent Cato Institute study shows that the likelihood of an American dying in a terrorist attack committed by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year. But some may cite the fact that exactly three refugees have been arrested in connection to terrorist activity in the U.S. as a justification for the ban, and while that is true, according to the Migration Policy Institute, two of the arrests were for activities abroad and the other suspect had no credible plans.

According to the Global Terrorism Database, of the terrorist attacks in the United States, there have been 24 attacks by Muslims (19 by U.S. citizens) that have occurred since 9/11, the attack that transformed how the U.S. both understands and interacts with the Muslim world and its Muslim population and is still cited by Trump and his officials as reasoning for current Middle East and immigration policy.

What is often not discussed when these post-9/11 attacks are mentioned, is that some of these attackers have cited their own difficulties and persecution they have felt as American Muslims as cause for their actions. While that does not justify horrendous acts or serve as a model for others in the community — most of whom do not follow that path — it is worth noting that many of

these attackers are young, and feel disconnected and alienated from both their Muslim community and the larger American community, often resorting to seeking religious guidance over the Internet.

There are countless examples of American Muslims being harassed or even attacked because of their faith. One of the Tsarnaev brothers suspected in the Boston Marathon bombing described himself as not having any American friends, despite mostly growing up in the U.S. Omar Mateen from the Orlando nightclub attack complained of constant taunting for being Muslim at his job as a security guard. These individuals often act as lone wolves, as they feel they are in their daily lives, and when they do claim group membership it is usually a tenuous claim.

It should be noted that the actions of these attackers are not widespread within the American Muslim community nor should they be used to reinforce stereotypes about it. But also important is that feelings of alienation among American Muslims has been exacerbated by the Islamophobia that has been a creeping and constant presence in the United States and their lives over the past 15 or so years.

Trump's actions, therefore, do nothing to help solve the problem of terrorism and actually make it worse by creating an atmosphere of fear and hate towards American Muslims that can push some of these alienated individuals further to the extreme, potentially in the hands of terrorist groups who can use this as tool for recruiting. Extremist groups have already praised Trump's executive order for making it appear that the U.S. is "at war with Islam," thereby improving their ability to recruit American Muslims to their cause. One pro-Islamic State social media account named Trump as "the best caller to Islam" and one branded his immigration ban as a "blessed ban."

And as the boost this ban gives extremist groups becomes more clear, the U.S. needs to be working to better integrate and build bridges with the Muslim community, rather than shutting them out. This does not mean simply creating informants for the government within Muslim communities, but more importantly working to ensure that all Muslims in the United States feel welcomed and accepted as Americans first and foremost. This integration and acceptance will in turn build a closer working relationship between Muslim community leadership and law enforcement. This is essential to keeping everyone safe. But one surefire way of ensuring that the Muslim community is not an ally is to enact policies that target the religion as the cause of terrorism.

This would be counter to the ideals of pluralism established by the Founding Fathers, who specifically welcomed Muslims to their new nation. In 1783, George Washington wrote, "The bosom of America [was to be] open to receive ... the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges" and later "They may be Mohometans, Jews or Christians of any sect, or they may be atheists." And Thomas Jefferson codified the laws of colonial Virginia, "to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination."

President Trump needs to act with great urgency to reach out to the Muslim community and demonstrate in his presidential rhetoric, as opposed to his campaign rhetoric, that the U.S. does

not view the actions of terrorists as representing all Muslims, as former President George W. Bush did in the days following 9/11. He should nullify his executive order and at least maintain the numbers of refugees being accepted into the United States, actions that Washington, Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers would applaud. This symbolism is important for both the relationship with America's Muslim community and with Muslim nations abroad. His immigration ban sends the signal to our Muslim allies that America sees Islam and Muslims as the enemy in the war against terror. It will be impossible to fight terrorism without a close relationship with Muslim communities, including many of the nations listed in the immigration ban. This is something Trump should keep in mind in light of his recent executive order charging the Pentagon to draft a plan of action against the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

If these steps are not taken, then Trump is continuing to send the message that Islam is America's opponent, which itself could inspire further violence against Muslims and increase the likelihood of another Orlando, San Bernardino or Chattanooga attack. If President Trump is serious about making "America safe again," rather than just political posturing for his supporters, he needs to reverse course very, very quickly.