



Trump's characterization of refugees warps reality

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Last summer, I volunteered to work with refugee children at a camp on the island of Evia, Greece. News of this elicited a range of reactions from people I know. Many were supportive, while others expressed concern for my safety, the assumption being that I'd be working with a dangerous population. But the most surprising reaction came from several people who were sympathetic to the cause.

While they supported the idea of helping refugees, they also had reservations, though they couldn't express what those reservations were. Despite having empathy for the people, they couldn't look beyond the stigma that has been created over the years.

Let's be clear: Refugees are not terrorists or criminals, nor are they "trying to take over our children," as Donald Trump stated during his 2016 presidential campaign. They are victims of horrible oppression — endless war, persecution, corruption and brutality, poverty, natural disasters. They are innocent people in need of help.

And no, there is no evidence of any refugee committing a terror attack in the United States since we established the Refugee Act of 1980, a law that put in place systematic vetting procedures. Studies by both The Migration Policy Institute, an independent think tank in Washington, and the libertarian Cato Institute have come to the same conclusion: at no time have refugees posed any danger to the United States.

Yet an increasing number of Americans consider the people a threat, mostly due to misinformation and fear-mongering by politicians and political pundits. Last March, after implementing a travel ban that has turned away thousands of refugees, Trump announced, "America is a proud nation of immigrants and we will continue to show compassion to those fleeing oppression, but we will do so while protecting our own citizens and border. ... This is not about religion — this is about terror and keeping our country safe."

Statements like this are precisely the problem. They associate refugees with terrorism when there is no evidence to support such a claim. And this false equivalence leads us to an important question. As we combat the very real threat of terrorism in the United States, why are we blaming the wrong people?

The very idea that extremists might enter other countries through the refugee process is ludicrous. Consider what refugees must endure. Most refugees from the Middle East travel through Turkey at great expense, then pay smugglers to put them on inflatable boats for the 12 kilometer journey from Turkey to Lesbos, which is made in complete darkness and frigid temperatures. The boats are unsafe, without a captain, and filled well beyond capacity, and most of the people don't know how to swim. (It's so dangerous that some people change their minds and are forced onto the boats at gunpoint.) Many people suffer considerable trauma from the horrifying experience, while others never make it to shore. The U.N. refugee agency has reported more than 2,400 people dead or missing in 2017.

And life in the camps is extremely difficult. The camp in Oinofyta, where I was assigned, houses mostly Afghan refugees. Since the United Nations does not consider Afghanistan a "war-torn" country, Oinofyta doesn't receive as much financial assistance as other camps. Residents live in an abandoned factory with entire families placed in tiny rooms. Despite the tireless efforts of humanitarian workers and volunteers from around the world, the facility is not a suitable environment in which to live.

There was clearly no extensive cleanup of the factory prior to its conversion to housing. One can only imagine the toxicity after years of use, but the children sleep on the concrete floor and spend their days playing in a loading bay. The average waiting time at the camp is in excess of two years and the entire journey often lasts more than five. That's five years living in unimaginable conditions without a home, job, school, a normal way of life.

Yet the people take on such tremendous risk and endure these harsh conditions on the mere hope that they might live peaceful, productive lives, the same motivation as nearly everyone who has immigrated to the United States throughout our history.

So what are the people like? Despite all they've been through, I found the residents of Oinofyta to be kind and hopeful and grateful for the help they've received. Most speak English at different levels of proficiency, and many of the adults are well-educated and were working professionals in their home countries. They often invited volunteers into their living quarters for tea or offered us dinner at the end of the day. They talked about the hardship they faced in their home country and asked about our lives.

The children, who make up the majority of all refugees (not adults, as is often assumed), are very much like American children.

On my first day several of the younger kids covered my eyes from behind then happily revealed themselves. They held my hands or simply leaned against me. They crave structure and enjoy the same activities as most other children, such as sports, dancing, games, working on crafts.

Several children gave me gifts on my last day: slices of melon, homemade pancakes, bracelets and cookies.

But this isn't the image most Americans have in mind when they think of refugees. We have instead placed them in the same category as terrorists, even though those two groups have nothing to do with each other.

While the United States can't take in all refugees, it's important that we do our part. Instead, as a result of the travel ban, we have chosen to turn our backs, and we do so at a price. Shutting out

people in need of help is not only callous, it's also bad policy. Taking in refugees as a productive part of society would add to our already diverse culture and help us better understand the region — the language, culture, politics, the people themselves — so that we might help broker peace and stability. But first we must have an honest conversation about the real threats to our nation and those born of baseless fear.

Our elected officials show no sign understanding the difference. In a transcript of Trump's phone call with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Turnbull tells the president he must honor the U.S. commitment to accept refugees housed in Australia, a group of people who have been vetted for over three years.

Although Trump refuses to hear it, Turnbull emphasizes, again and again, that the people are in no way associated with terrorism. They are economic refugees, he explains, not violent extremists. "These guys are not in that league."