



## Muslims are seen as a threat in the US - but the Florida shooter wasn't. Why?

Trita Parsi

February 25, 2018

Last week's horrific school shooting reminded us that Donald Trump has made America less safe. While mass shootings predate Trump, he has done something his predecessors did not: domestically, he's shifted our focus towards immigrants and Muslims as threats, while willfully neglecting the threat posed by racists and rightwing extremists.

Internationally, he's imposed a Muslim ban that targets citizens of countries with no history of engaging in terrorism on US soil, at the expense of far more accurate predictors of violence.

There were many signs that Nikolas Cruz posed a severe threat. He wrote on social media that he was going to be a professional school shooter. He talked about killing animals. According to his fellow students, he held racist views, degrading black people, Latinos and Muslims.

“[H]e would degrade Islamic people as terrorists and bombers. I've seen him wear a Trump hat,” Ocean Parodie, a student at the school, told the Daily Beast.

“He would always talk about how he felt whites were a bit higher than everyone,” another student added.

But despite his classmates predicting that he'd shoot up a school, despite local police paying 39 visits to his house since 2011, and despite the FBI receiving at least two warnings about him, no investigation took place and Cruz could easily buy an arsenal of weapons.

Because Cruz did not match Trump's definition of a threat: immigrants, African American youth, and Muslims – that is, non-white people.

Neither did the 17-year-old alleged neo-Nazi in Virginia who is charged with killing Scott and Buckley Fricker right before Christmas – parents of my son's soccer teammate.

The teen's neighbors said he mowed a swastika about 40ft across into the grass of a community field. They raised the issue with his parents, but they never called the police. A few weeks later, he was charged with murdering Scott and Buckley.

Would the neighbors have called the police had the 17-year-old mowed 40ft Isis logos? Or would they just have complained to his parents? Had the FBI received reports that Cruz was a dangerous Isis sympathizer, would they have failed to investigate?

The more immigrants and Muslims are seen as threats, the more America's racists are compelled to back Trump.

We may never know. But much indicates that law enforcement would diligently follow up on any tips regarding Isis terrorists for a very simple reason: the political signal is that they are the priority – and everything else is not. It is a signal even ordinary people feel, people who would probably report an Isis sympathiser, but not an alleged neo-Nazi.

This Trumpian signal is not rooted in a neutral threat assessment. Rather, it is itself motivated by politics: Trump apparently considers neo-Nazis, white supremacists and those motivated by racial and cultural anxiety as his constituency. Depicting them as a threat counters his interests while depicting those whom they hate as dangerous serves his agenda. The more immigrants and Muslims are seen as threats, the more America's racists are compelled to back Trump.

This makes Americans less safe. Not just because it turns Americans against Americans, but because Trump further shifts our focus away from the threat of rightwing extremists and racists even though they are at least as dangerous as Isis extremists. (Between 12 September 2001 and 31 December 2016, far-right elements committed 62 acts of terror, while Islamic extremists committed 23, though the latter group is responsible for more deaths, 119 to 106.)

But Trump is not only jeopardizing America's security domestically. His Muslim ban follows the same pattern of shifting our focus towards politically convenient threats at the expense of real and existing threats. According to the Cato Institute, citizens of the seven countries included in Trump's initial ban accounted for zero terrorist-related deaths in the United States.

More than 94% of all American terrorist-related deaths between 1975 and 2015 were perpetrated by citizens of three US allies who were not included in the ban. But more importantly, a homeland security report concluded that citizenship was "likely an unreliable indicator" of terrorist activity – undermining the very basis of Trump's ban.

Isis-inspired terrorists obviously do constitute a threat. But instead of addressing them – which would entail pressuring US allies who fund the terrorist network – Trump chose the politically convenient path of targeting Muslim-majority countries whose citizens were less geopolitically costly to ban.

That way he could perpetuate the idea that immigrants and Muslims constitute a central threat, appease his base by imposing a ban, while willfully neglecting terror-supporting governments his administration considers allies.

As willfully neglected rightwing extremists perpetuate more massacres, Americans are starting to recognize how Trump is playing politics with their security. Hopefully, the American public will also recognize that he is doing the same with their border security.