My Turn: Aubrey Westfall: Banning mosques is a bad idea

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A recent survey published by the CATO Institute reveals that 28 percent of Americans and 47 percent of Republicans would support legislation banning the construction of mosques in their communities. We can't know the reason behind their support of this idea, but given the relationship between international terrorism and radical Islamic ideology, a likely possibility is the assumed relationship between mosques and Islamic terrorism.

This perspective misses the point. If communities wish to confront radicalization, they should encourage the construction of mosques.

Those making a connection between mosques and terrorism have been publicly affirmed in their false assumptions. Several political leaders have forcefully linked the two, including President Trump, when he called for the closure of certain mosques in America in the wake of the mass killings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2015.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich also did so when he responded to a proposal to build a Muslim community center a few blocks away from the site of the World Trade Center with: "Nazis don't have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington. We would never accept the Japanese putting up a site next to Pearl Harbor. There's no reason for us to accept a mosque next to the World Trade Center."

The presumed relationship between American mosques and terrorism is not supported by evidence. While there may be isolated examples of certain mosques being associated with religious extremists, research on the social attitudes and political behaviors of Muslim Americans demonstrates that those who attend mosque are more likely to be engaged in their local communities and participate in politics. This is because mosques build community, promote service, and build social capital.

The results are even stronger when the community in the mosque is ethnically and socioeconomically diverse, and the Muslim community is the most diverse minority group in the United States. In this regard, mosques are no different from churches, synagogues, or other clubs and associations that bring people together: these organizations are sites of civic inclusion, not isolation or radicalization.

Radicalization at the hands of an organization like ISIS preys on solitude, where messages are electronically submitted and instructions are downloaded in a one-way flow of information. Correspondence is limited to other like-minded individuals in a digital echo chamber. This was exactly the case with Omar Mateen, the Pulse gunman, who was radicalized on the internet. It also appears to be the case with Sayfullo Saipov, the Uzbek national who killed eight pedestrians on a bike path in New York.

The greatest enemy of organizations like ISIS are venues where likely recruits will meet and talk with others who highlight theological inconsistencies and expose misinformation, or where recruits will find a social network of friends who will reduce feelings of alienation. In the American context, these organizations are most likely to be mosques. This is why ISIS is quick to discourage their followers from attending local mosques and in some cases calls for violence against Muslim imams and scholars in the West. ISIS correctly identifies mosques as the first line of defense against radicalization.

If the concern of those who oppose the construction of mosques is Islamic fundamentalism, radicalization, or terrorism, communities should encourage and celebrate the construction of mosques and endeavor to build links between mosques and other community organizations. However, if the objective of banning mosque construction is to isolate or stigmatize Muslims, an ambition rooted in Islamophobia or racism, that's another issue entirely.