Is Cruz and Trump's Islamophobia the New McCarthyism?

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If there was any remaining doubt that the GOP will nominate an overtly anti-Muslim candidate for president, the front-runners dispelled it in their responses to this week's horrific ISIS-inspired attacks in Belgium.

On his Facebook page, Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) said, "We need to empower law enforcement to patrol and secure Muslim neighborhoods before they become radicalized."

His chief rival, Donald Trump, not only endorsed the Cruz proposal but reiterated his own intention to bring back the use of torture should he be elected.

Speaking of captured Belgian attacker Salah Abdeslam, Trump told CNN's Wolf Blitzer, "Well you know he may be talking, but he'll talk a lot faster with the torture."

The Cruz proposal to effectively "ghetto-ize" Arab- and Muslim-American communities into police and surveillance-saturated zones seems lifted from some dystopian fiction. But instead of a fictionalized due process-free United States in which Arab- and Muslim-Americans are presumed to be terrorists until proven otherwise, Cruz would bring that nightmare to life for over 3.5 million Arab- and Muslim-Americans.

And a President Trump would ensure that the scenario's torture scenes were anything but make-believe. Given how readily federal agencies went along with torture under the Bush administration—despite its clear prohibition under U.S. and international law—Trump's threat is a credible one.

Indeed, the detention of U.S. citizens by the American military for alleged terrorism involvement was made far easier under a 2012 change in federal law.

Given Trump's strongly stated intention to keep the U.S. military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, open indefinitely and send even more alleged or actual ISIS-inspired individuals there, Arab- and Muslim-Americans may well find themselves facing the kind U.S. government-sponsored discrimination and forced segregation suffered by Japanese-Americans in World War II.

And other Americans who previously had ties to Arab- and Muslim-American groups may sever those links out of a fear of being swept up in government dragnets aimed at members of those communities.

The Islamophobia-baiting contest that Trump and Cruz are currently engaged in echoes the worst excesses of the McCarthy-era anti-Communist witch hunts, albeit this time with overtly racist and ethnic overtones. What makes their proposals all the more chilling is that under the Obama administration, the governmental machinery for effectuating a new, ethnocentric form of McCarthyism has already been slowly becoming a reality.

Couched under the very reasonable sounding label of "countering violent extremism" (CVE), these programs emphasize identifying and ferreting out alleged political extremists within the Arab- and Muslim-American community. Since at least 2011 at the direction of the White House, the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security and State have been spending tens of millions of dollars on CVE programs, at home and abroad.

However, the very concept of CVE is based on two false premises: that there are discrete, identifiable indicators of radicalization, and that those signs are found most often among Arabs/Muslims. As multiple, published, peer-reviewed studies have found, there is no "conveyor belt to radicalization" among members of those ethnic and religious groups.

Almost a decade ago, the British Security Service (MI5) issued a report that analyzed "several hundred individuals known to be involved in, or closely associated with, violent extremist activity" and concluded that those who ultimately became terrorists "are a diverse collection of individuals, fitting no single demographic profile, nor do they all follow a typical pathway to violent extremism." The same holds true in the Arab and Muslim world as a whole, according to a 2013 United States Institute for Peace report on violent extremism.

Despite those facts, the FBI recently launched a CVE-related website that embraces discredited ideas about how and why people engage in politically motivated terrorism.

For example, anyone "spending a lot of time reading violent extremist information online, including in chat rooms and password-protected websites"—a prime activity of counterterrorism researchers. Or someone "using several different cellphones and private messaging apps"—in an age when most Americans already have multiple electronic devices that also have multiple messaging apps.

Also included are people "talking about traveling to places that sound suspicious"—a vague and nonsensical extremism indicator.

Another group of potential extremists are those "researching or training with weapons or explosives"—activities engaged in by law-abiding gun owners, those in the shooting sports, state and local first responders who deal with explosives or hazmat incidents and chemistry students and teachers, among others.

Those also potentially on the pathway to extremism are people "studying or taking pictures of potential targets (like a government building)"—something tourists visiting Washington, D.C., do every day.

Other potential "terrorists" include those "looking for ways to disrupt computers or other technology"—the very activities that privacy/civil liberties analysts, security researchers and members of the public concerned about the security of their personal information do in an effort to prevent Americans from becoming victims of identity theft or other kinds of cybercrime.

Discredited, constitutionally illegitimate counterterrorism proposals, backed by millions in taxpayer dollars, enabled by multiple federal departments with the power to detain—and potentially torture—alleged terrorism suspects at the direction of the president of the United States. This is the scenario that Election 2016 has made possible.

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