

THE HUFFINGTON POST

In Terror's Wake, America Must Remain Our Brothers' Keeper

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" -- Genesis, 4:9

Brian Levin

November 27, 2015

Our Response To Terror

After the horrific mass attacks directed at France, Russia, Mali, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey, in recent weeks, the terror threat has understandably reemerged as the most significant concern of the American public. Respondents overwhelmingly, at a level of 83 percent, believe "Islamic terrorists will try to launch an attack on U.S. soil in the near future." I echoed these concerns in congressional testimony just prior to the Paris attacks:

The United States faces multiple severe risk factors and a diverse set of emerging contemporary actors in the area of mass terrorism with shots on goal increasingly coming from across both the ideological, geographical and competency spectrum... [T] here are significant qualitative and quantitative factors that plausibly skew our Center's current overall mass terror threat assessment toward violent Salafist Jihadists, such as ISIS and al Qaeda...

If our center's threat assessment, and that of the American public is correct, what shall we do next?

In striving to combat the most violent evil terror facing the world today, neither avoidance nor surrender is an option. This is true both for efforts to bring political stability to Syria as well as obliterating ISIS's barbaric command structure into a blackened heap of smoldering blowing desert dust. It is also true, however, for holding steadfast to our bedrock principles of American exceptionalism and inclusion.

As President Obama asserted Tuesday in a joint White House press conference with French President Francois Hollande:

[A]nother part of being vigilant, another part of defeating terrorists like ISIL, is upholding the rights and the freedoms that define our two great republics. That includes freedom of religion. That includes equality before the law. There have been times in our history, in moments of fear, when we have failed to uphold our highest ideals, and it has been to our lasting regret.

While American apprehension grows following the third worst terrorist attack to strike Europe in the post World II War era, the responses to the threat vary wildly. As New York Times columnist Frank Bruni asserted Sunday:

The way to get beyond any reflexive, visceral panic after Paris isn't to mock and belittle it. It's to explain, with gravity and respect, why certain courses of action would be imprudent and how they'd contradict the very American principles that we intend to be a stirring example to the world.

When Fears and Prejudice Coalesce

For a variety of reasons, factually anchored analysis proves elusive, even to those immersed in the field, because of a confusing barrage of often conflicting information. The evolving threat is at once both severe, yet partly unpredictable; opaque, but worse yet, accompanied by a masquerade of factually dubious prejudices. In our contemporary post truth political era, these religious and political prejudices and half-truths have elevated into shiny counterfeit currency.

Moreover, a quasi-ubiquitous Islamophobia, broadly casts a divisive web of suspicion and pain upon our 2.7 million innocent Muslim American neighbors, who interestingly are also derided by ISIS as docile "coconuts" for choosing to live here in freedom.

The wafting toxic vapor of this un-American bigotry is casting a pall across our land in small concentrated puffs on the Internet and at social gatherings, as well as in industrial strength bellows by an expanding constellation of Presidential carnival barkers. This snake oil is not only morally inapposite to our exceptional pluralistic democracy; it threatens our national security as well.

Wild pronouncements that prompt incomplete or misdirected responses can disproportionately focus attention to less threatening issues to the exclusion of other more urgent ones, leaving us comfortably oblivious, but more vulnerable. Ignorant or bigoted opportunists, who fan sincere sparks of fear into an intoxicating flame of bigotry, divide us but don't make us any safer.

In recent days politicians have broadly asserted, and sometimes backtracked on shuttering mosques, registering Muslims in databases, waterboarding, creating a government agency to promote "Judeo-Christian Western values," as well establishing a religious test for refugee admission and the presidency. The declining Ben Carson compared the task of vetting Muslim refugees to that of screening potentially rabid dogs.

The father of American religious liberty, Thomas Jefferson, offered a contrasting perspective on faith:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and State.

Thousands of Dancing Garden State Arabs

Frontrunner Donald Trump, who rarely met a stereotype or rumor he didn't like, follows Jefferson's wise counsel by condemning the actions of thousands of reprehensible, yet apparently non-existent, Arab Garden State residents at rallies and on television:

Hey, I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. And I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down. Thousands of people were cheering. (Birmingham, AL, November 21)

And then followed up on ABC on November 22:

STEPHANOPOULOS: Police say it didn't happen.

TRUMP: There were people that were cheering on the other side of New Jersey, where you have large Arab populations. They were cheering as the World Trade Center came down.

This divisive rhetoric is a far cry from previous Republican leaders like Senator John McCain and President George Bush, who rejected divisive slurs in their public addresses. Bush rejected anti-Muslim bigotry shortly after 9/11 in statements at a public photo-op with Muslim leaders, while McCain took the mic at a town hall from a supporter who criticized his rival as an "Arab." Contrast that with Mr. Trump's clumsy interchange with a bigoted supporter in Rochester, New Hampshire in September:

Questioner: We have a problem in this country and it's called Muslims. We know our current president is one. You know he's not even an American-

Trump [Laughing]: We need this question? This first one?

Questioner: We have training camps growing where they want to kill us. That's my question. When can we get rid of them?

Trump: We're going to be looking into a lot of different things. A lot of people are saying that and a lot of people are saying a lot of bad things are happening out there. We'll be looking at that and a lot of other things.

Our Failure to Dispel Fear, Not Just Bigotry Fogs Discourse on Refugees

One contentious debate, however, that cannot be dismissed as a mere exercise in bigotry is that of resettling a relatively small number of Syrian refugees to the United States. Americans were justifiably moved by the sickening images of a tiny lifeless three year old Kurdish boy named Aylan Kurdi, whose drowned limp body, clad in little black shorts and undone Velcro sneakers washed up face down onto the rock strewn Turkish shore in September. Even the beret capped, hunched, Turkish policeman who whisked away the silent little toddler, with the dangling limbs, averted his gaze.

Aylan's whole young family, except his heartbroken father, perished in the unforgiving sea, after the small dinghy they were crammed into capsized on a treacherous journey to Greece. The Kurdi family fled the war torn Syrian border town of Kobane, where our Kurdish allies faced pitched battles and medieval massacres at the hands of genocidal ISIS killers.

In only two attacks there this past June, suicide bombers targeting civilians killed 145 non-combatants including women, the elderly and kids. Kurds, Christians, Yazidis, Shia, opposing Sunni tribes and gays (who are thrown from the tops of buildings into chanting armed crowds) are among the targets for the barbarism of ISIS, while Sunnis face brutality and chemical attacks from the tottering Assad regime.

Refugees: Another ISIS Casualty?

Whatever goodwill was fostered for the refugee resettlement effort in the wake of the Aylan Kurdi tragedy was scuttled by revelations that a Paris suicide bomber "Ahmad Almohammad" arrived on the Greek island of Leros on October 3 with a counterfeit Syrian passport.

Ironically, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, whose state is not quite home to the Statue of Liberty, firmly declared that he would even deny entry to a five-year old Syrian orphan refugee. Perhaps his view of the New Colossus inscription on the statue that welcomed his ancestors is now obstructed:

With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

While not quite as strident, 30 other governors and the majority of Americans according to Bloomberg News, NBC and Fox News polls, also oppose the resettlement of refugees. The Obama administration is seeking to resettle only about 10,000 in 2016 of the over four million

refugees, while in Lebanon, 1.1 million refugees now comprise one-fifth of the small country's population.

The practical effect of legislation passed last week; by a veto proof margin of 289-137, including 47 Democrats; of the House of Representatives would halt the program if also passed by the Senate. It requires the FBI and Homeland Security director to personally guarantee each refugee, something no one can do.

Many, opponents, plausibly point to FBI Director Comey's testimony at October Congressional hearings as a basis:

We can only query against that which we have collected and so if someone has never made a ripple in the pond in Syria in a way that would get their identity or their interest reflected in our database, we can query our database until the cows come home, but ... nothing will show up, because we have no record of that person.

Further eroding the electorate's confidence is the rising disapproval of the President's handling of terrorism, which now sits at its highest level since he assumed office. According to a Washington Post/ABC Poll a full 43 percent strongly disapprove of his performance. With specific respect to ISIS, the President's disapproval level is even worse at 57 percent.

Criticism by other Democrats and former administration leaders about the lack of a firm plan, coupled with the president's own commentary has caused public trust in his administration's pronouncements regarding terrorism in general, and refugees in particular to plummet. The president's previous reference to ISIS as a "JV" team and his awkward, but technically correct, assessment of ISIS being territorially contained hours before the Paris attacks hurt him politically.

In Times of Fear, Honest Factual Analysis Is the Real Currency

While some in the progressive left have highlighted the reprehensible recent displays of xenophobia and bigotry, chronicled above, as the primary driver of American rejection of Syrian refugees, the answer perhaps lies more in the combination of sincere fear, the administration's lack of political capital, and the inability to get facts out about what we know, and don't know about the present risk. While the terror risk from Syrian refugees appears small, it is not non-existent.

Still, 67 percent of the Syrians the United Nations seek to resettle here are female, or males 11 or under. Over half of those admitted so far are children with only 2.5 percent being single males of combat age. Most candidates destined for the U.S., 93 percent, are anti-Assad Sunnis, who along with a smaller number of Kurdish or Shia families or gays, among others, hardly have a motive to want to support the very genocidal maniacs who either want to wipe them out or oppress them.

That is why 83 percent of Syrian refugees have a negative view of ISIS according to the Arab Center for Research and Policy in Doha.

Since 2011 when the crisis began, 2290 Syrian refugees have arrived in the United States and none have been implicated in any terror related crimes. Of the 784,000 refugees from various nations settled in the United States since 9/11 only three have been charged in terror related offenses according to the Center for Migration Studies in Washington, D.C. Note, that unlike migrants coming to Europe, the screening process for those coming to the United States, is the most comprehensive available involving delayed entry, biometrics, lengthy interviews and vetting by various agencies, lasting as long as two years.

What Would ISIS Do?: Their Available Options

Of course ISIS would do anything they could to hit us, including using refugees, women and others, but the most comforting reason with respect to this issue is also the most disturbing overall. They simply don't need to use refugees.

A two-year wait to plant a terror "Trojan horse" here is not outside the realm of ISIS evil, as it would certainly stoke backlash against Muslims, which they would like. That possibility, notwithstanding, refugees are a very suboptimal choice compared to all the other available options, which pose a much worse and more immediate threat.

As the CATO Institute observed, "Few ISIS soldiers or other terrorists are going to spend at least three years in a refugee camp for a 0.042 percent chance of entering the United States when almost any other option to do so is easier, cheaper, and quicker."

These other factors include the porous Syrian/Turkish border, which serves as a gateway to Europe for thousands of violent extremists, many of whom are radicalized European citizens and residents. Once in Europe, the open border policy amplifies the problem, as extremists plan and recruit in one country and attack in another, taking advantage of safe havens and intelligence gaps between countries.

The economically beneficial VISA waiver program that the United States has with 39 nations, also allows "clean" radicalized Europeans, not in databases, entry into the United States far more easily and quickly than for refugees. The 9/11 terrorists entered the country with visas.

Furthermore, ISIS's disgusting, yet sophisticated English language Internet recruitment operations radicalize people already here without the necessity of foreign travel, though they'd prefer that.

Moreover, ridiculously, people who are on our nation's terror watch list right now can't board a flight, but can legally buy firearms. From 2004-2014, 2,043 of them did, with only 190 denials. Former Homeland Security Committee Chair, Republican Congressman Peter King and Senate Democrat Dianne Feinstein, both seek to close that loophole.

A Small Risk, To Be Sure, But A Misplaced Response As Well

As Senate Armed Services Committee Chair John McCain explained, "I believe the overwhelming focus on the refugee program in recent days is misplaced... I especially encourage my fellow Republicans to recognize that refugees are not the problem -- they are the symptom of the problem." Other conservatives including the CATO Institute concluded:

The security threat posed by refugees in the United States is insignificant. Halting America's processing of refugees due to a terrorist attack in another country that may have had one asylum-seeker as a co-plotter would be an extremely expensive overreaction to very minor threat.

The Brookings Institution, recently designated as the world's most influential think tank, noted that neglected refugees could possibly morph into a security threat, but still concluded:

Concerns about terrorism and the refugees are legitimate, but the fears being voiced are usually exaggerated and the concerns raised often the wrong ones...The refugees themselves, fleeing war and extremism, are not strong supporters of the most violent groups: if they were, they would have stayed in Iraq or Syria.

Lastly, Anti-Defamation League Director Jonathan Greenblatt noted similarities to rejected Jewish Nazi era refugees:

[T]he solution can not be to send those fleeing that same brutality [of recent terror attacks] back into the hands of ISIS. Less than a century ago, xenophobia, religious bigotry, and hatred shut international doors in the faces of those fleeing Nazi Germany. The world cannot afford to make that mistake again.

We may have to make some tough choices, including some new restrictions and alterations to policy to better protect our country, including adjusting our current refugee program with respect to combat age males.

However, if America is going to live up to its definitional ideals, we cannot simply shun the rescue of a tiny portion of God's most vulnerable children from the fiery hell on Earth that they so desperately flee, irrespective of the faith they embrace.

As Noble Laureate Mother Teresa counseled those like us bestowed with so much: "Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work."

Amen.