



Cruz, Trump blast Obama administration 'political correctness'

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The terrorist attacks in Brussels Tuesday revived familiar complaints about the U.S. government's counterterrorism efforts and the perception that political correctness is standing in the way of keeping Americans safe.

Belgium has become a breeding ground of Islamic terrorism because of a growing Muslim population that is poorly assimilated into the culture, overwhelmed security agencies, and an ongoing failure to detect and deter radicalization.

Republican presidential candidate Sen. Ted Cruz has railed against the "political correctness" of the Obama administration and called for police to step up patrols in "Muslim neighborhoods" to prevent similar problems in the U.S.

In interviews with CNN, Cruz did not identify any specific neighborhoods where these measures would be needed, but he cited a controversial New York Police Department program that surveilled Muslim communities and mosques. Cruz blamed political correctness for the demise of that program, but it resulted in several lawsuits and a police official admitted in testimony that it did not lead to any terrorism investigations.

"He doesn't know the hell what he is talking about, to be frank with you," NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton said of Cruz on "CBS This Morning" Wednesday.

Republican candidate Donald Trump endorsed Cruz's idea of increased surveillance of Muslims, though, in addition to renewing his calls to stop accepting Syrian refugees and to temporarily ban all non-citizen Muslims from entering the country.

Some conservative commentators have alleged that the Obama administration has allowed public relations concerns and political correctness to put Americans in danger.

President Obama responded to Republican criticism and to Cruz's surveillance proposal at a press conference in Argentina Wednesday.

"As far as the notion of having surveillance of neighborhoods where Muslims are present, I just left a country that engages in that kind of neighborhood surveillance," he said, referring to his visit to Cuba. "Which, by the way, the father of Senator Cruz escaped for America, the land of the free. The notion that we would start down that slippery slope makes absolutely no sense. It's contrary to who we are. And it's not going to help us defeat ISIL."

According to Trevor Thrall, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, the risk of being killed in a terrorist attack in the U.S. is still very low, but it is also very hard to prevent without restricting civil liberties beyond reason.

"Terrorism in open societies is just a problem you cannot eradicate," he said.

Despite the criticism and the understandable concern about terrorism, law enforcement and intelligence agencies are still doing a very thorough job of combating potential threats.

"It would take a truly unprecedented violation of civil liberties to do better than we're doing now," Thrall said.

Although law enforcement is engaging in many security activities, Matt Mayer, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said police need the cooperation of people in the community.

"I think we should reassess the level of our community vigilance because fundamentally law enforcement can't do it alone," Mayer said.

He pointed to reports that neighbors of the terrorists who killed 14 people in San Bernardino in November failed to report suspicious activity because they did not want to appear to be profiling Muslims.

"Law enforcement cannot be everywhere and we don't want them to be everywhere," Mayer said.

It might be better to have "robust" outreach programs in local law enforcement and partner with the Muslim community to detect and address potential security concerns.

"The communities are trying to make sure that there are no bad apples that brush them with the broad stroke of terrorism," he said.

Thrall also dismissed the notion of police patrols of Muslim neighborhoods.

"I cannot see how that would be helpful," he said. "In fact, I think it would probably produce the opposite result."

An overreaction against innocent Muslims may only increase the risk of radicalization. Thrall pointed out how years of tension between the black community and law enforcement agencies that they felt mistreated them have spawned the Black Lives Matter movement.

"When cops are seen focusing on a minority group, resentment follows, almost certainly."

One complaint about Obama frequently made by conservatives is that he refuses to say the words "radical Islamic terrorism" when discussing ISIS.

Cruz argued Wednesday that the Obama administration's hesitation to refer to ISIS attacks as "radical Islamic terrorism" is hindering the government's response. But some experts believe any statement that could be interpreted as denouncing Islam would feed into the narrative ISIS is promoting about a western war against Islam.

"I don't think Obama's under any confusion about the danger from radical Islam," Thrall said.

However, Mayer said there are consequences to not "bringing clarity to what we face by calling it by its name."

"I think there is truth to the allegation that the left's obsession with political correctness has resulted in a failure to call something what it is," he said.

According to Mayer, not identifying ISIS as a radical Islamic group inhibits the ability to reach out to moderate Muslims and communicate about the threat.

"I think a Muslim in America is as opposed to the idea of jihad as it is characterized by ISIS as I am, and by not simply calling it by its name, we don't give them the opportunity to say, 'That's not my Islam,'" he said.

He sees three problems that need to be solved to defeat ISIS, and accurately identifying the threat can help with that. The U.S. and its allies need to prevent ISIS from planning and operating in the Middle East, aggressively counter its methods and outreach efforts, and create security mechanisms that keep the U.S. and Europe secure.

"We cannot shut our eyes and ears to the fact that ISIS does believe it is pushing Islam as it defines it," Mayer said. "Words do have meaning."

Immigration and border security is another issue where some conservatives see political correctness run amok, while other observers feel sufficient safety measures are in place.

Cruz claimed political correctness prevented immigration officers from reviewing San Bernardino terrorist Tashfeen Malik's jihadist social media postings prior to granting her a

fiancée visa. Although there has been debate within the administration about how to incorporate social media activity in the application process, Malik's comments in support of jihad were posted in private messages that still would have been hidden.

Cruz and Trump have evoked the fear of terrorists slipping into the U.S. among Syrian refugees and argued that liberalism is driving the Obama administration to accept thousands of refugees despite that risk.

While many of the suspects involved in the terrorist attacks in Paris in November had traveled to Europe from Syria, proximity to the Middle East and porous borders make that trip much easier than getting to the U.S. Refugees hoping to enter this country must pass a thorough vetting process that can take more than two years.

Law enforcement officials have acknowledged the refugee screening process is imperfect, but it remains an impractically long, difficult, and heavily scrutinized path for a sleeper terrorist to take into the U.S.

"There's a lot quicker and easier ways to get into the United States than to wait two years on a list... That seems like a pretty dumb terrorist to me," Thrall said. "A smarter terrorist wouldn't bother."

Still, Thrall said some added caution in vetting refugees for extremist views and terror ties is a reasonable response to increased fear.

Shutting down tourism or other forms of immigration to keep terrorists out could have serious consequences because the economy depends on the international flow of people, goods, and services.

There are areas where immigration screening could be improved, though. Mayer specifically noted a reliance on flawed security information from European agencies.

"That could cause security issues for us more quickly than we think," he said.

European countries have shown less ability to keep track of who is coming and going across their borders and have found it difficult to effectively share information with each other. This failure impacts the U.S. government's screening of immigrants.

"I think it's stuff that's fixable but that means Europe needs to wake up to the problem within its borders."

Mayer said U.S. officials must be more aggressive in collecting accurate information from their European counterparts.

Several members of Congress dismissed the idea of specifically restricting Muslim immigration in interviews with Sinclair Wednesday, citing practical and legal considerations.

"What's next?" said Rep. Steve Russell (R-OK). "Inside our own borders, do we start putting 'M's on driver's licenses? Maybe we have them wear a crescent and a moon on their breast."

"If in the process of getting the bad guys, we trample on the rights of the good guys, then the bad guys win," Rep. Jose Serrano (D-NY) said.

"To have any additional restrictions based solely on somebody's religion is a step too far," said David Jolly (R-FL).

Trump's proposal of a temporary Muslim ban remains popular with GOP primary voters, often drawing the support of large majorities of Republicans in exit polls despite the concerns of lawmakers and experts.

Thrall argued that much of what Obama's critics have labeled as "political correctness" is the result of law enforcement and intelligence officials pursuing policies that they believe are most effective.

"It's not political correctness to use data-driven and common sense approaches to law enforcement," he said.

People may have legitimate reasons to doubt the value of certain surveillance and profiling measures that go beyond assuaging the fears of angry liberals.

"You have to respect the Constitution," Thrall said. "You have to respect what's pragmatic and what's useful."