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The Wrong Way to Stop Terrorism
What the Data Show About Attacks and Immigration
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On January 27, true to his campaign promise [1] to suspend Muslim immigration, U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order restricting all immigration from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, and indefinitely barring Syrian refugees from entering the United States. By doing so, the Trump administration has taken a definite stance on what it holds as the threat posed by immigrants and refugees to U.S. security. As we argued in April 2016 [2], however, democracies like the United States "are not opening their doors to terrorism when they let in Muslim immigrants."

The order's proponents, echoing Trump's rhetoric during his presidential campaign, argue that the United States must avoid the kinds of attacks that Europe has suffered in recent years. [3] But the United States is different from countries like France, where four men posing as Syrian refugees carried out a major attack in November 2015, because those with terrorist intentions from the Middle East cannot slip through American borders as easily. The small number of refugees who are referred by the UN for resettlement [4] in the United States had already been required to undergo three background checks, three fingerprint screenings, two interviews, and two security checks. Syrian applicants have been subject to additional scrutiny, in a process that usually lasts between 18 and 24 months [5].

It is therefore no surprise that in recent years, terrorist attacks in the United States have been in decline, despite Trump's suggestions that the country

has failed to keep its citizens safe. According to the Global Terrorism Database [6], between 2001 and 2008, there were 168 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, leading to 3,010 deaths, of which 2,996 resulted from the September 11 attacks. Between 2009 and 2015, there were 137 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, in which 114 people were killed. (Russia experienced 929 terrorist attacks between 2009 and 2015—over six times more than the United States.) Although Trump characterizes his predecessor as weak on national security, the incidence of terror on U.S. soil decreased under former President Barack Obama. Additionally, the two deadliest attacks during Obama's presidency—the one at Fort Hood, which killed 13 people, and the one in San Bernardino, in which 16 people died—were perpetrated by American and Pakistani citizens. The Boston marathon bombing, which left three dead, was perpetrated by two brothers born in Kyrgyzstan and Russia. And the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks were immigrants from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Lebanon. None of those countries are included in the executive order.

Fear is a natural response to the threat of terrorism. But fear-based policies that target groups of people according to their religion or region of origin are counter-productive. Our own research [7], which explains the failed integration of Muslim immigrants in France, suggests that such policies can feed into a vicious cycle that damages national security. French Islamophobia—a response to cultural difference—has encouraged Muslim immigrants to withdraw from French society, which then feeds back into French Islamophobia, thus further exacerbating Muslims' alienation, and so on. Indeed, the failure of French security in 2015 was likely due to police tactics that intimidated rather than welcomed the children of immigrants— an approach that makes it hard to obtain crucial information from community members about potential threats.

As we have previously argued, the key to the United States' security is the successful integration of a diverse population eager to become productive members of society. Such integration builds trust. With trust, new Americans are more willing to tip off law enforcement about those contemplating terrorist acts. New York City, for example, has avoided another large-scale terrorist attack in part by cultivating ties with local Muslims without concern for their immigrant status. An overwhelming number of immigrants and refugees [8] from the countries targeted by the Trump administration's order are appalled by terrorism; indeed, many of them have been victims of it. By ignoring that their incentives align with those of the United States, the executive order makes the country less safe.

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[1] https://www.donaldjtrump.com/press-releases/donald-j.-trump-statement-on-preventing-muslim-immigration

[2] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-04-26/dont-fear-muslim-immigrants

[3] https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/825692045532618753

[4] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/29/us/refugee-vetting-process.html

[5] http://www.npr.org/2015/11/17/456395388/paris-attacks-ignite-debate-over-u-s-refugee-policy

[6] https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/

[7] http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674504929

[8] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2015-12-09/dont-fear-refugees