

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

The solution to radicalization begins at home

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Here's one strategy for preventing terrorism: Slam the door to immigration.

Give in to our irrational fears, and shut them Muslims out. Put some boots on the ground, and wipe them out.

Problem solved.

Giving in to our fears arises from a perceived threat to our community. The instinct toward intolerance seems to be, or to have been, a healthy defense mechanism, protecting one's community from threats to its survival.

Unfortunately, this healthy defense mechanism, one that protects one's community, has a dark side; it has motivated vicious and even deadly acts of intolerance.

Intolerance served our ancient ancestors well at a time when their lives were much more

violent than ours. Prehistorians believe throughout early human history, the likelihood of an adult male being killed in battle was about 65 percent. Fear drove them to develop a natural suspicion and distrust of those not in their group — those different from themselves.

How does this psychological defense mechanism work?

Just as we do with trees, clouds and bodies of water, we categorize people into "kinds."

Think of all the ways we put people into categories — white, black, peasant, rich man, elegant woman, American, French, Arab, Rabbi, Muslim. Instantly, upon hearing these terms ascribed to a person, you think you know something about them.

When we categorize a person

— say, as Chinese or French or Muslim — we feel that we've got them figured out. We think we know something about that person because we assume that members of that group are all the same.

The Chinese are smart and respect their parents. The French are snobs. And it's hard to avoid associating "terrorist" with "Muslim." In spite of the fact that the vast majority of Muslims in America oppose radical Islam, we still fear and judge and alienate them.

This very human fear response has unintended, and even deadly, consequences.

Recent studies show our intolerance toward Muslims in our country contributes to radicalization. The more we make Muslims feel like they don't belong, the more likely some of them are to radicalize.

Go figure — if we look down on them, think of them as closet

terrorists, and fear them, some of them start to hate us. If we fight against the building of mosques, close our borders to Muslims, and threaten to register and monitor them, some of them might feel diminished and disempowered and want to strike back at us.

Turns out, no surprises here, people who feel insignificant, ashamed and hopeless, look for ways to feel significant, proud and hopeful. Radical Islam provides all three.

We are in a death spiral: as prejudice and intolerance against Muslims escalates, the conditions of radicalization dramatically increases.

This is precisely ISIS's strategy, and when we give in to our fears, ISIS wins.

But all is not lost. The same studies that show that our fears and intolerance and bigotry create conditions where radicalization festers, also show that the

more we make them feel like they belong, the less likely they are to radicalize.

Making them feel at home does not imply they need to become just like us.

We are a culturally pluralistic society, one that values (at least, in principle) difference. We need to embrace unity and diversity.

What better way, then, to make them feel at home than to invite them into your home? Sip some coffee, share a meal, talk about your children.

Turn a stranger into a friend. Break the cycle of radicalization, one friend at a time.

I'm often asked, what can we do in the Middle East? I always confess I don't know.

But I do know what we can do in the United States. Fight our fears, and then welcome our Muslim brothers and sisters into our homes.

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