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Commentary: New travel directive is wrongheaded

Farhana Khera | The Progressive Media Project

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The new travel directive from the Transportation Security Administration won't make us safer. And it may make tracking down criminals more complicated than ever.

The TSA recently announced that travelers from 14 countries (13 of which are majority Muslim) can expect enhanced screening of their bodies and belongings prior to entering the United States.

Yet, as many security experts caution, such dragnet profiling is virtually worthless in detecting actual criminal behavior. Singling out travelers based on ethnicity, national origin or religion also betrays our nation's ideals. And the list of 14 countries would have been no help in catching two al-Qaeda terrorists: Richard Reid, the shoe-bomber, was a British citizen of Jamaican descent; and the so-called 20th 9-11 hijacker, Zacarias Moussaoui, held French citizenship.

Would the TSA's new directive have helped airport security staff members apprehend Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab if they'd been told to search mostly Arab and South Asian travelers? Not likely, since he was perceived as a "young, poor black kid" by passengers.

What if resources poured into one set of nations neglects us from catching "backdoor" entries of criminals from non-designated countries? And since al-Qaeda has already recruited individuals from nations that are not under scrutiny, it's likely to continue to do so.

Thankfully, there is a solution that experts agree helps us catch criminals and avoids charges of discrimination. It's called behavioral profiling.

Effective security is based on observing behavior and gathering facts and connecting these bits of information to identify terrorists and keep them off planes.

President Obama has admitted that we didn't connect the dots in the Abdulmutallab case. Federal authorities overlooked such clues as the alleged bomber's improper attire for the Detroit winter, purchase of a one-way ticket, the United Kingdom's rejection of his visa request and his own father's efforts to alert authorities about his son's recent extremist tendencies.

The TSA should require its staff to follow fact patterns and visual clues - not just their nationality - that may predict the criminal intentions of travelers. The TSA should also train staff and airline personnel to identify dangerous behavioral clues.

We shouldn't focus on what a terrorist looks like, but on what a terrorist acts like.

Only then will we be safer.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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