POLITICO

Terrorists are not just Muslims

By: Rep. Bennie Thompson
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The Sept. 11 commissioners had it right when they said, "The U.S. has to help defeat an ideology, not just a group of people."

Americans have almost been conditioned to believe that the majority of people who seek to do us harm are those of Muslim descent. Capitalizing on this fear, House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Peter King (R-N.Y.) wants to hold narrowly focused hearings — only on the threat posed by foreign jihadist groups.

If law enforcement officials have told King that the Muslim community has been systematically uncooperative and wholly prone to radicalization, as he has repeatedly stated, I invite those officials to step forward.

In fact, tips from the Muslim community have directly led to foiling numerous plots — including the case of the Northern Virginia Five and the Times Square bomb plot.

When I served as the committee chairman in the 111th Congress, the panel regularly heard testimony from top law enforcement and intelligence officials. None of these officials has backed King's assertions that the Muslim community has not been helpful in thwarting terrorist attacks.

While I agree that homegrown terrorism and the jihadist threat deserve continuing attention, a single-minded approach ignores all other threats.

Today's terrorists do not share a particular ethnic, educational or socioeconomic background. Recently, when state law enforcement agencies were asked to identify terror groups in their states, Muslim extremist groups ranked 11th on a list of 18.

Law enforcement agencies identified neo-Nazis, environmental extremists and anti-tax groups as more prevalent than Muslim terrorist organizations. The sophisticated explosive device found along a parade route in Washington on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, an act of domestic terrorism clearly motivated by racist ideology, should prove that other groups are just as willing and able to carry out horrific attacks on Americans.

In addition, terrorist groups are not our only threat. According to the Department of Homeland Security, "lone wolves and small terrorist cells" may be the single most dangerous threat we face. Attacks are just as likely to come from lone-wolf extremists — like James Wenneker von Brunn, the Holocaust Memorial Museum shooter, or Jared Lee Loughner, who is charged with the tragedy in Tucson, Ariz. — as they are from Muslim extremist groups.

And what do von Brunn and Loughner have in common with Muslim extremists like Nidal Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter, and Colleen LaRose, also known as Jihad Jane? All allegedly espoused radical views on the Internet through extremist websites, chat rooms and popular sites like Facebook.

This starkly illustrates what should be common sense: The most effective means of identifying terrorists is through their behavior — not ethnicity, race or religion.

While knowing these facts puts us at an advantage, just being aware is not enough. The nation's law enforcement resources are already stretched thin. We must ensure that we are using these resources to yield the best results.

Devoting all of our assets to investigate only the Muslim community leaves a gaping hole in our security. Holding hearings is not only likely to increase the level of government mistrust within the community, but it will weaken counterterrorism cooperation by ignoring the long history of Muslim cooperation. Poisoning this relationship through inquisition-style hearings would substantially risk losing this crucial cooperation.

We must maximize our efforts to counter violent extremism, radicalization and recruitment in the United States, and stop using xenophobia and ethnic stereotyping. If we are going to move forward and protect this nation, we must recognize trends in terrorist activity.

We cannot cripple ourselves by ignoring the fact that terrorist activity knows no race, ethnicity or religion. Doing so would be a grave disservice to our nation — and would disrespect those who have sacrificed their lives as a result of terrorist activity.

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