

Guest editorial: America's greatest weapon against terrorism? The hyphen

April 19, 2016

Around the world, people are grappling with a fundamental question: How do we make sure terrorist strikes such as those in Paris and Brussels never happen again?

Politicians have been busy proposing all kinds of policy solutions—more security at airports, more drone strikes on terrorist cells. And some so-called solutions are likely to create more problems than they solve, including Ted Cruz's proposal to silo communities that would make young Muslim-Americans more alienated and vulnerable to extremist propaganda and ISIS recruiting.

Americans know the world is at war against radicalism. But few recognize this fight is different from wars of the past, because it's not only about winning on a battlefield, but also about winning the hearts and minds of individuals.

In this theater, America has a unique weapon. The hyphen.

Multidimensional identity

In America, Muslims can be Muslim-American. When people hyphenate, they express a multidimensional identity. Reconciling the different facets of personal identity is what allows people to integrate, to acculturate, to cease being "The Other." While emphasizing their own unique cultural traits, the hyphen also emphasizes what they share with their fellow countrymen.

For all of us, hyphens emphasize our essential identity as Americans yet acknowledge our hereditary and cultural extraction as Chinese, Mexican, Pakistani, Jewish, African and Muslim. Only in America can a person be many things all at once. Here we have the room to create identities large enough to accommodate any internal conflicts. In America, identities have room to breathe.

In Europe, Muslims are forced to choose. They can be French or Muslim, Belgian or Muslim. It is tough to be both at the same time.

The American Muslim population is far more integrated into the larger community than in Europe, where the Muslim communities—many of them still poor, struggling refugees from the Middle East—feel marginalized. Their enclaves and ghettos are becoming a breeding ground for extremism.

Defeating radicalism

What our European allies need in their plans for defeating radicalism is a hyphen.

Cultural isolation drives radicalization. When people are locked out of the culture, they become targets for extremist groups in the same way marginalized members of society become targets for gangs, cults or any group that offers them a chance to belong. The terrorists want this to be a clash of civilizations; they want Muslims to feel they cannot coexist with Europeans and Americans.

When people are free to embrace multiple selves without fear, they can live richer, deeper, more meaningful lives—lives that become more difficult to pull in a radical, dangerous or violent direction.

Choosing an ideology that advocates for violent destruction of one's adopted home can happen only if people have rejected—or have been rejected by—the country in which they live.

We must find better ways to integrate marginalized people—of all stripes, persuasions and backgrounds. And we need to expend just as much time, energy and resources in the struggle for hearts, minds and identities as we do on the battlefield.

In this fight, the hyphen is a small but potent weapon.

Mustafa Tameez is a former consultant to the Department of Homeland Security under the Bush administration. Now, he conducts cultural intelligence training for law enforcement agencies. He is Muslim-American and lives in Houston. Religion News Service distributed his column.