

**Opinions**

Trump has misled the public on terrorism. Time to correct the record.

By Joshua A. Geltzer and
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It's generally dangerous for the government to spread misleading information to the American public. It's *particularly* dangerous when that information is about terrorism, as terrorists themselves seek to distort public understandings of the threat to sow fear and stoke division.

Yet that's exactly what the Trump administration has done by promoting false assertions linking immigration to terrorism. Now the administration has a chance to correct the record under a mechanism known as the [Information Quality Act](#). As former senior counterterrorism officials, we strongly urge it to do so. Allowing disinformation on terrorism to seep further into the public consciousness serves terrorists' interests and thwarts effective counterterrorism.

In January, the Justice Department and Department of Homeland Security issued a [report](#) purporting to lay out statistical connections between terrorism and foreignness. Within hours of the report's release, President Trump triumphantly [tweeted](#), "New report from DOJ & DHS shows that nearly 3 in 4 individuals convicted of terrorism-related charges are foreign-born."

But the report contorted its characterizations, categories and numbers to find a correlation between terrorism and foreignness that simply isn't there. Four key defects plagued the report.

First, the [executive order](#) mandating the report sought information about "foreign nationals" linked to terrorism. But the [report](#) instead provided information on "foreign-born" individuals, inventing a misleading and odious new label that divides U.S. citizens into two classes: those born here and those born abroad. Among the "foreign-born" individuals in the report, 148 were naturalized U.S. citizens. Removing them from the report's calculation reveals that fewer than half of those charged or convicted of international terrorism-related offenses in the relevant time period were, in fact, foreign nationals.

Second, even that statistic is inflated because of another flaw in the report. Besides including foreign-born U.S. citizens among individuals “who have been charged with” or “convicted of terrorism-related offenses while in the United States,” [the report](#) also, astonishingly, included individuals “who committed offenses while located abroad, including defendants who were transported to the United States for prosecution.” It therefore included [almost 100 individuals](#) who committed a terrorism-related offense *overseas* and whose only connection to U.S. soil is having been forcibly brought here for prosecution and subsequent imprisonment. This further distorts the public’s understanding of the terrorist threat by misleadingly inflating the apparent number of terrorist acts committed in the United States by foreign nationals.

Third, the report unfairly suggested that an individual’s foreign origin meaningfully predicts whether he or she will — even decades later — engage in terrorism. Our experience suggests the opposite. In understanding what drives individuals to terrorism, the most important question is not, as the report implied, where they were born. The better question concerns where, and more importantly *why*, they radicalized. The real numbers reveal, as the Rand Corp. has [shown](#), that foreign-born jihadists spent an average of 12 years in the United States before planning or participating in their attacks, indicating that jihadism on U.S. soil is not an immigration problem but a radicalization problem.

Fourth, despite the executive order’s instruction to provide information on “terrorism-related offenses,” the report ignored offenses perpetrated in the United States without connections to international terrorist groups — also known as domestic terrorism, which we’ve seen in tragedies from Oklahoma City to Charleston, S.C., to Charlottesville. This dramatically skews the results. A 2017 [Government Accountability Office report](#) found that, of the 85 violent extremist incidents that resulted in deaths in the United States since 9/11, violence from far-right extremist groups accounted for 62. Incidents involving radical Islamic extremists, although they can be deadlier per event, accounted for 23. By focusing solely on offenses perpetrated with links to foreign terrorist groups, the administration artificially inflates the apparent involvement of foreign-born individuals in terrorism on U.S. soil.

The government’s disingenuous report undermines its credibility and politicizes its counterterrorism efforts. If the administration’s goal is to prevent terrorist attacks in the homeland, demonizing foreign-born individuals and pursuing draconian measures to restrict future immigration are not the answer.

Worse, the report serves the interests of terrorists, who seek to weaken stronger adversaries by distorting the threat, sowing societal discord and advancing the false narrative that the West is at war with Islam. Effective counterterrorism requires secure borders and robust vetting of people entering the country. But it also means ensuring that the public accurately understands the terrorist threat. The Trump administration has done just the opposite, perpetuating — not countering — the narrative of terrorists.

That’s why we and 16 of our former government colleagues signed a [letter](#) last month urging the government to correct the record. The government has already resisted similar efforts, but others have

filed formal [requests](#) for the government to reconsider under the [Information Quality Act](#), which mandates that such public reports meet standards of “utility, objectivity and integrity” and, in general, not serve to mislead the public.

This is an opportunity for the Trump administration not only to ensure that government reporting is accurate but also to advance the counterterrorism efforts that remain vital to protecting American lives.

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