Misguided surveillance

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Muslim teenagers bowling in San Francisco. Thinkstock.

In urging the United States to start singling out Muslim Americans for special surveillance, presidential candidates Ted Cruz and Donald Trump draw precisely the wrong conclusion from the terrorist bombings in Brussels, Paris, and elsewhere. Cruz, seconded by Trump, says the United States needs to “empower law enforcement to patrol and secure Muslim neighborhoods before they become radicalized.” Such effort is needed, he says, to avoid the “toxic mix” of European cities, where terrorists take up residence in “isolated, radical Muslim neighborhoods.”

But such a policy of religious profiling—and the inflammatory rhetoric that goes with it—not only goes against the American tradition of religious liberty but would likely

end up imposing isolation on Muslim Americans and hampering the police from doing their work.

The type of surveillance recommended was, in fact, tried in New York City after 9/11 and later rejected as unproductive if not counterproductive. According to the New York Police Department, six years of spying on Muslim neighborhoods and eavesdropping on conversations did not generate any significant leads on criminal cases. It did, however, generate a major civil rights lawsuit, which the city lost. The FBI later complained that the surveillance program had made its work harder by creating a new level of distrust in the Muslim community.

These candidates are also ignoring the distinctive profile of the Muslim community in the United States. Compared to Muslims in Europe, American Muslims are notably contented. In fact, according to a 2011 Pew poll, more Muslim Americans (56 percent) are satisfied with the way things are going in this country than is the public at large (23 percent).

The Pew poll found that 82 percent of Muslim Americans are satisfied with their lives and 79 percent rate their communities as good places to live. Muslim Americans tend to mirror the general population in education and income levels. In short, Muslim neighborhoods are far from being isolated hotbeds of discontent and despair that foster radicalization.

Part of the explanation for this is circumstantial. The Muslim community in the United States is proportionally smaller in number and more diverse than it is in Europe, and many Muslims arrived in this country with marketable skills and a good education.

But part of the explanation is the cultural and religious openness that has allowed Muslim Americans to imagine this country as home. It’s that experience of openness and fairness that makes them generally eager to work with law enforcement officials.

Shahed Amanullah, an adviser to the U.S. Department of State on Muslim issues, noted after the Paris bombings last fall that working-class Muslim immigrants in the United States have a hope for the future and a belief in upward mobility that doesn’t exist among many Muslims in Europe. It would be tragically shortsighted for Americans to let fear of terrorism undermine the very strengths in American life that help to combat it.