



“America First” Will Compromise Homeland Security and Disrupt American Soft Power

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The Trump Administration’s two promises—pursuing an “America first” policy and exterminating radical jihadism—require an investment in American soft power that would prioritize diplomacy over military spending. Yet the involvement of a high number of military brass in the administration and the presence of public hostility against career diplomats raise significant questions in the Arab world. Will the United States gradually leave the region, pivoting to the Far East? Or is the Trump Administration willing to embrace adventurist militarism in the Middle East? After the controversial refugee ban that targeted seven Muslim-majority nations, even [more questions rushed](#) into the Arab street: what happens if and when the Trump team actually pursues a systematic anti-Muslim campaign, which may become “a self-inflicted wound” in the words of Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham?

Trump’s “America First” policy may be seen as an outcome of the [English-only language](#) approach and a plethora of similar anti-immigration movements whose public campaigns targeted Spanish-speaking Hispanic immigrants in the past two decades. Galvanizing the Tea Party movement in the Obama era, anti-immigrant sentiments have gradually been transformed into an “America First” perspective as both Hispanic and Muslim Americans began to be portrayed through national security lenses.

Two upcoming critical decisions will help to gauge how far “America First” may reshape the American policy agenda toward Arabs and Muslims, inside the country and abroad: (1) the Trump Administration’s plan to transform the “Countering Violent Extremism” program into one of “Countering Islamic Extremism,” and (2) the proposed “Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act,” which [was introduced](#) in the US Senate by former presidential hopeful Ted Cruz in the final days of the Obama Administration. If approved, both policies would have serious implications for both homeland security in the United States and American soft power in the Middle East.

“Countering Islamic Extremism”: A Victory for ISIS?

The Trump Administration’s plan to [revamp and rename](#) the “Countering Violent Extremism” program, introduced by Barack Obama in 2011 and better known as CVE, will have serious implications for the country’s homeland security. In rebranding the program “Countering Islamic Extremism,” the administration would shift the focus to American Muslims and stop targeting white supremacist groups involved in terrorist activities.

Muslim American organizations have long been skeptical about the CVE efforts in the Obama era. Many factors that most CVE programs highlight to determine an individual's propensity to engage in violence are "broad and amorphous," [state](#) experts at the University of California at Berkeley, "such that participating in routine religious, political, and other constitutionally protected activities are criminally suspect." Thus, the argument goes, Muslim communities are increasingly vulnerable to over-policing and securitization.

According to a [comprehensive study](#) conducted by Duke University, titled "Promising Practices for Using Community Policing to Prevent Violent Extremism," Muslim American suspicion that other communities are not equally asked to address violent extremism is not baseless. The study concludes that "while many policing agencies have robust efforts to conduct outreach with Muslim Americans, they do not have organized, overt efforts to reach out to non-Muslim communities that may be targeted for recruitment by anti-government, racist, or other extremist movements." Strikingly, the survey results in the study suggest that the police perception of threat validates Muslim American views of the issue. Fully 74 percent of 382 law enforcement agencies rated anti-government extremism as one of the top three terrorist threats in their jurisdiction. Assigning a ranking of 1-5 of the terrorist threat, 170 police departments ranked "other" forms of terrorism higher than al-Qaeda in their jurisdictions while 21 departments ranked al-Qaeda higher. Moreover, the report found that police agencies perceive dramatic differences between Muslim communities and right-wing community organizations that breed sovereign-citizen movements. "The major difference is that Muslims are coming to us with open arms and asking for assistance," says one police agent. "The right-wing groups are not coming to us with open arms and open ears and trying to cultivate a relationship," he continues. "That makes a difference. We do try to talk to them, but the conversations are very limited."

The Obama Administration's response to the aforementioned criticisms was largely a symbolic but significant message that CVE activities would never lead to profiling of Muslims. As J.M. Berger [rightly notes](#), renaming CVE as "Countering Islamic Extremism" may not necessarily transform the content of a program that already targets Muslims in general. However, President Trump's message will also be a symbolic but significant one as it would remove white nationalist hate groups from the program and draw attention to "the threat of Islam." As Trump notoriously [put it](#), "I think, Islam hates us!"

Given the fact that fighting "Islamic extremism" was his election campaign promise, the US president may ignore the protests of Muslim American organizations for the sake of his populist agenda. Elimination of homegrown radicalization, however, largely depends on building trust with local community members. More alienation of Muslims in the United States will mean increasing mistrust between local communities and security officials. Such a policy shift, therefore, is counterproductive at best and dangerous at worst, as it may well buttress the propaganda of the Islamic State that the West is at war with Islam.

Criminalization of the Muslim Brotherhood: Yet Another Self-Inflicted Wound?

President Trump’s phone conversations with Arab leaders now include talk of the Muslim Brotherhood as a “shared enemy,” [mention](#) that Osama bin Laden was “recruited at an early stage” by the organization. Although the group was designated as terrorist by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, many other US allies in the region including Turkey and Qatar have good relations with Muslim Brotherhood members who sought refuge in those countries after facing a brutal crackdown following the Egyptian military coup in 2013. In Tunisia, some Muslim Brotherhood affiliates have proven to be effective in restoring democracy, which is often dubbed as “the Tunisian model.”

If the US Congress approves the bill to outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood, all political Islamic parties in the region would face a difficult dilemma: should they work within the “western” system of democracy where they might be crushed as “terrorists,” even if they may win the ballot box, or should they rather choose a more radical path to seize power in their countries through non-democratic means?

Indeed, such questions go to the very fundamentals of “political moderation” theory discussions in academic literature. Providing a thorough analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood, Shadi Hamid’s book, [Temptations of Power](#), depicts how political Islamists’ path to democracy is not easy under ruthless dictatorships. “Opposition moderation did not produce regime moderation,” writes Hamid. “The confounding reality is that moderation is precisely what autocrats find so threatening.” The best example, perhaps, was the Assad regime’s latitude to ISIS radicals to crush the Syrian opposition.

Expanding the war on ISIS to include political Islamist activists is neither a viable nor a sustainable strategy without major US military intervention in the region. In fact, designating the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist had never been a serious agenda item for mainstream Republicans. Given that such implausible views were only exchanged in far-right networks, there remains a question about the domestic implications of the bill. After the lone wolf terrorist attack that killed six Muslims during their prayer service in a mosque in Quebec, some US media outlets [claimed](#) that the mosque “has strong ties to terrorism,” pointing to an alleged link of some members to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In a similar fashion, smear campaigns against American Muslim leaders have been on the rise since the introduction of the bill in the US Congress. Frank Gaffney, who has long [led](#) a systematic anti-Muslim campaign and has now [become](#) an advisor to President Trump, [insulted](#) Imam Mohamed Magid of the Muslim [ADAMS Center](#) for being “a Sharia supremacist, a top Muslim Brotherhood operative.” If the bill passes, it is easy to see how the ADAMS Center and many other prominent voices of peaceful dialogue would face “terrorism” stigma. The possibility of branding the pro-interfaith ADAMS Center with a stamp of terror signals how “guilt by association” can get out of control, making ordinary Muslim Americans public enemy number one. Eventually hate crimes against Muslims would most likely increase—and it is important to note that already in 2016, the [FBI reported](#) that crimes against Muslims had spiked most in comparison to those against

other minority groups. In addition, it is also likely that the numbers of home-grown radicals who would swear allegiance to ISIS would increase as well.

Such dark scenarios may sound like an unrealistic dystopia. Fringe ideas, however, are now being contemplated in the higher echelons of power. Sarah Posner [points out](#) that the Steve Bannon-Jeff Sessions-Mike Pence nexus to understand how Islam is systematically portrayed as a “political ideology” (read: *not* “religion”) could pave the way to stripping Muslim Americans from the protection of religious freedom enacted in the First Amendment. Indeed, in [the words](#) of Michael Flynn, the top national security adviser to the president, “Islam is a political ideology” that “hides behind the notion of it being a religion.” Further, Christopher Bail’s award-winning book, [Terrified](#), traces hundreds of thousands of newspaper articles, television transcripts, legislative debates, and social media messages to conclude that “anti-Muslim fringe organizations became the mainstream” in defining the public discourse on Muslims in recent years.

Thus, criminalization of the Muslim Brotherhood would usher not only a war against nonviolent political Islamist activism in the Middle East but also a domestic witch-hunt that would compromise homeland security. In tarnishing the social fabric at home, the United States may further deteriorate its global soft power, which is already in decay.

American Soft Power in Shambles: Will Senate Republicans Act?

As traditional defenders of American military might and national security, the Republican Party’s leadership may stand silent in the face of “America First” policies that restrict individual freedoms. The new debate in Washington, however, will focus on whether such measures will deliver their promise of better homeland security, or will backfire.

Putting Iran on the list of the travel ban was a case in point. The question for most Republicans is not about being tough on Iran—a policy they would welcome—but the effectiveness of punishing ordinary Iranians who are potentially good allies in the fight against the Iranian regime. Similarly, losing hearts and minds of western Muslims may lead to severe setbacks against the war on terrorism. According to [a study](#) by the New America Foundation, *Terrorism in America After 9/11*, “the large majority of jihadist terrorists in the United States have been American citizens or legal residents”—only eight out of 499 extremists were illegal residents, whereas 83 percent of the extremists were American citizens and permanent residents. Hence, compared to the small numbers of refugees who are already facing many years of a vetting process, the “America First” policy that exacerbates domestic tensions appears to be more dangerous in compromising homeland security.

The shifting of language toward a xenophobic national security landscape is destined to mark a long-lasting impact on US foreign and domestic policies. From now on, Trump’s plan to revisit—and persuade others on—policies regarding torture, for example, will employ discourse that is not based on human rights but simply on the policies’ effectiveness. Such a sea change in discourse will upset young reformists in the Middle East, who still perceive American ideals of freedom and democracy as beacons of hope—despite inconsistent and confusing messages they receive from

western policy makers. If Washington totally abandons its now severely debilitated soft power, there will surely be major consequences in Middle East realpolitik as well—and often not in favor of US strategic interests.