



Ten Days of Trump: Prospects for Democracy and Human Rights vis-à-vis the Arab World¹

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In his first 10 days in office, President Trump signed executive orders and made statements that greatly influence US foreign policy, from suspending refugee resettlement and instituting the travel ban to reports of de-funding the United Nations and designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. What is the potential impact of Trump's policies thus far on the prospects for democracy, security, and human rights in the Arab world?

On January 20, Donald J. Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States. His inauguration [speech](#), largely populist and anti-establishment in tone, mostly discussed domestic issues while reviving the “America First” approach. In it he also expressed a generally flawed perception that US spending on international aid was at the expense of domestic issues and security. The lone mentions of foreign policy directions promised to “eradicate [radical Islamic terrorism] completely from the face of the earth” and tighten immigration.

Trump's agenda and the positions of his cabinet appointees signal a dangerous direction for US foreign policy, particularly toward the Middle East. Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump promised to “take” Iraq's oil, ban Muslims from entering the United States, set up a Muslim registry, halt admitting refugees, bomb areas under ISIL control, kill family members of suspected terrorists, and subject terrorism suspects to “a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding,” most of which would constitute human rights abuses and war crimes.

During his first 10 days in office, the new president started fulfilling his campaign promises one executive order after another. As Trump settles into his position as president of the United States, what global leadership role should we expect America to play in support of human rights and democracy, especially in the Arab world?

The Era of “Strongmen” and Renewed “War on Terror” Abuses

Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump expressed admiration for “strongmen” and spoke fondly of authoritarian leaders in the Middle East and beyond.

¹ This is an update of a previously published article titled “Arab democracy and human rights in the Trump era,” which [appeared](#) in *The New Arab* on November 17, 2016.

Following his victory, heads and proponents of authoritarian regimes welcomed the results of the election and maintained that Trump will be a strong leader and a positive force in fighting terrorism. Trump equally expressed his support for what he calls "strongmen" in power like Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

From his end, Trump also communicated his intentions to improve relationships with Sisi and Erdoğan, declaring that Erdoğan deserves "credit" for turning around the coup attempt in Turkey in 2016 and that he respects the role of strongmen like Sisi who fight against terrorism. He even once said that dictators like Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qadhafi were good at fighting terrorism. After his inauguration, Trump expressed intent to work with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and with Russia to fight ISIL.

Clearly, Donald Trump has no interest in democracy and human rights in the Arab world and will support and enable autocratic regimes—re-establishing relations with them while overlooking their human rights abuses under the pretext of "counterterrorism."

The excuse of fighting terrorism has been one of the primary enablers of human rights abuses in the Arab world and in the United States. While members of Congress have tried, unsuccessfully, for years to pass legislation designating the Muslim Brotherhood a foreign terrorist organization, Trump is [reportedly](#) considering an executive order on the matter with the support of his recently approved Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

The implications of such a designation, and similar approaches, present enormous challenges for both Arab democracy and US national security. First, defining what the Muslim Brotherhood is and which groups it encompasses is very difficult, especially that Brotherhood-inspired groups vary greatly by context, ideology, and level of espousing violence. Trump's designation would provide a green light and legitimacy to autocratic regimes to persecute opposition members and violate human rights and political freedoms under the banner of fighting terrorism. Second, by launching an attack on the "moderate Islamists" who are involved in governance in parts of the Middle East and who have cooperated with the United States (such as in Turkey, Tunisia, Jordan, Kuwait, and others), the Trump Administration risks alienating key allies in the region and promoting a perception that it is launching a war on Islam. Moreover, outlawing groups and organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood by the United States and in their respective countries, along with the ensuing restrictions and human rights abuses, can possibly push their members to formally adopt violent outlets. Lastly, a designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization would risk criminalizing Muslim Americans, who support social development through religious organizations, as aiding terrorist groups.

Trump also promised to re-instate his version of the disastrous Bush-era "war on terror" campaign. During his inaugural speech, Trump said he wants to "unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism." A few days after taking office, there was a [report](#) of a draft order to lift the ban on CIA "black sites" of prisons around the world and on torture techniques.

In an [interview](#) on January 26, Trump confirmed his earlier position on waterboarding. “We have to fight fire with fire” he said, confirming that “people at the highest level of intelligence” believe that torture “absolutely” works and he is open to bringing it back.

Torture techniques are [prohibited](#) under international and humanitarian laws, which are in turn incorporated into several international and regional treaties that were signed and ratified by the United States, such as the United Nations Convention Against Torture and [Article 5](#) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The latter explicitly states that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

In the United States, the Bill of Rights ensures protection against torture. Moreover, in 2015 the US Senate [codified](#) President Obama’s executive order ban on torture, which was then signed into law. In contrast to Trump’s belief, the Senate intelligence committee’s 2014 [report](#) on torture, detention, and interrogation found the practices ineffective.

The grave danger lies in the belief by Trump and his cabinet that Islam itself as a religion is a threat. Trump’s cabinet includes right-wing, hawkish, and Islamophobic senior staff who conflate Islam with terrorism and support extreme measures against Muslims and terrorism suspects of Muslim backgrounds.

President Trump is in full force, satisfying his voter base with anti-Muslim efforts that violate international law and human rights, all the while jeopardizing human rights and democracy in the Arab world and—with them—US national security interests.

“America First” and the Muslim Ban

"From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land," Trump [said](#) in his inauguration speech. "From this day forward, it's going to be only America first, America first." The crowd cheered. But instead of promoting global leadership in defending democracy and human rights, Trump’s “America First” approach promises to build walls, increase sanctions, ban people, withdraw from the international system, and cancel international agreements.

The “America First” phrase, often emphasized by the new president, hails from a dark tradition of ultra-nationalism in support of Nazi Germany and association with anti-Semitism. The America First Committee (AFC) was the primary group opposing US intervention in World War II and included anti-Semitic members and spokespersons.

Perhaps most reminiscent of that era is the image of turning away refugees. In 1939, the United States turned away Jews seeking refuge in the country, hundreds of whom were killed in the Holocaust upon return to Germany. On Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, President Trump signed an executive order suspending refugee resettlement for 120 days, and indefinitely for Syrian refugees, while banning entry to the United States of nationals from seven Muslim-

majority countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, totaling about 218 million people. The travel ban was set for 90 days and originally was communicated as applying also to green card holders. It also includes an exception for religious minorities from those countries. Trump has repeatedly made claims about oppressed Christians from the Middle East, claiming that they have not been admitted to the United States as refugees. In reality, overall the United States [admitted](#) almost an equal number of Muslim and Christian refugees in 2016.

The Muslim ban idea was born and announced during Trump's presidential campaign following the San Bernardino shooting, in which 14 people were killed at a family center in San Bernardino, California. Trump falsely and repeatedly accused other Muslims of having prior knowledge of the shooters' plans without reporting them. In his most recent media interview, Trump [defended](#) his policy of banning Muslims and refugees by citing the September 11 attacks and the San Bernardino shooting.

However, the San Bernardino attackers were a Pakistani national and her Pakistani-American husband who had spent some time in Saudi Arabia, while the individuals involved in the 9/11 attacks were from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. Those countries and Pakistan are excluded from Trump's travel ban and, incidentally, the president has [business interests in the three Arab countries](#). Moreover, a [report](#) by the conservative right-leaning Cato Institute noted that no Americans were killed on US soil by nationals of those seven countries. Evidently, the executive orders are not based on national security concerns; rather, they are a media stunt to satisfy the president's supporters while maintaining his business interests.

Such efforts to ban nationals from Muslim-majority countries and halt resettlement of Syrian refugees are not without damaging ramifications. First, with the exception of Iran and Sudan, the countries on the list were [bombed](#) by the United States in 2016, and their citizens have been subjected to both US attacks and persecution by terrorist groups; yet some of them have assisted the US military in its mission. Second, notwithstanding the responsibility of the United States toward those countries and their victimized citizens, the travel ban and suspension of refugee resettlement violate international law as well as international treaties and conventions to which the United States is a signatory, including the Geneva Convention and the 1951 Refugee Convention. Such international systems of responsibility-sharing were set up to protect civilians fleeing violence as well as to maintain the order of international security. To be sure, refugees go through a thorough and rigorous two-year vetting [process](#) before being admitted to the United States.

Furthermore, this form of religious discrimination and abuse of civil liberties violates the US constitution and the First and Fourteenth Amendments, which prohibit discrimination based on religion and guarantee equal protection under the law. Finally, such a large-scale attack on Muslims as a whole feeds into the narrative of violent extremist groups like ISIL and Al-Qaeda that a war exists between Muslims and the West. This "clash of civilizations" framework, perpetuated through Trump's policy and cabinet members, stands against US national security interests by creating a counter-effect by Muslims around the world, including in the United States,

who feel abandoned and attacked. Despite what the “Trumpologists” claim, research has consistently [shown](#) that group-based injustice is the primary driver of the violent extremism that motivates Muslims to join groups like ISIL. The arbitrary travel ban against Muslims is an example of injustice against Muslims at large, and this will likely backfire.

While Trump’s travel ban has been challenged through legal measures and mass protests and by members of Congress, governors and mayors, Democrats and Republicans, federal judges, and government agencies charged with implementing these orders on the ground, it remains to be seen whether a presidential executive order of this scale can be overturned, especially with Trump announcing his supreme court justice pick on January 31.

Another effect of Trump’s “America First” direction includes the proposals to withdraw US membership and funding from international organizations and alliances like NATO (calling it “obsolete”) and the United Nations. The Trump Administration’s [proposal](#) to reduce US voluntary funding to the UN by 40 percent and limit US participation in UN agencies, including peacekeeping missions and development work, will be based on US agencies identifying what is “compelling national interest.” As the largest [contributor](#) to the UN regular budget (22 percent) and the UN Peacekeeping operations (28 percent), the United States’ diminished role in the United Nations is likely to have dire consequences, particularly for developing nations. By withholding such a significant portion of funding, programs designed to prevent human rights abuses, foster democratic development, and institute the rule of law are likely to be abandoned. The United Nations’ struggling ability to cover program costs is likely to be exacerbated in the face of severe international humanitarian crises. Moreover, the decision by a superpower not to participate in international standards of health, trade, environmental regulation, and human rights is likely to cause regressions in countries that no longer see the benefits of participating in the international order.

While Trump might believe that his aggressive foreign policy strategy is intended to increase US national security, the effects of destabilizing already fragile conflict zones and launching a blanket attack on Muslims will, in effect, only further threaten US national security interests.

Belligerent Isolationism

While the majority of the Arab public is [opposed](#) to US intervention in the region, Trump’s “America First” approach will not necessarily translate into sovereignty and self-determination. His isolationism is combined with belligerence and a fondness for dictators.

On January 28, Trump [signed](#) a directive giving the Pentagon 30 days to submit a plan to defeat ISIL. “I think it’s going to be very successful,” Trump said. “That’s big stuff.” President Trump and his Defense Secretary James Mattis have advocated a more aggressive military approach and American troops on the ground. However, aggressive military strategies have not worked in the past; they are unlikely to create any lasting solutions, the human cost is devastating, and ISIL

ideology cannot be defeated only militarily. Most alarming, perhaps, is Mattis's [consideration](#) to loosen restrictions on US airstrikes and raise the “acceptable” number of civilian casualties.

Trump's belligerent isolationism is likely to destabilize the region even further. His hawkish positions toward what he calls “radical Islamic terrorism” and disregard for the lives of Muslim civilians, combined with his isolationist approach toward any measures that promote democracy and human rights, will increase the influence of groups like ISIL and Al-Qaeda. Such groups will surely exploit this divisive president to recruit new members, and even call for lone-wolf attacks in the West.

This reductionist counterterrorism strategy of military measures, while disengaging from democracy, human rights, and state-building in the region, has long proven unsuccessful, and even counterproductive.

Losing Soft Power

Soft power is a nation's ability to shape world affairs through culture and values, rather than through coercion and military means (hard power) or financial measures. For decades since World War II, one of the important elements of American global appeal has been its commitment to the values of multiculturalism, equality, and democracy, which might mitigate some of the resentment towards US foreign policy and military adventurism around the world.

The election of Donald Trump and the vicious campaigning that preceded it demonstrate that the United States is losing the very values of liberal democracy, justice, and freedom. Indeed, Trump ran his campaign and his first ten days in office on policies that endanger the notion of American freedom, including attacks and threats against religious and ethnic minorities, disrespect and objectification of women, threats against the media and journalists, religious discrimination, and the use and promotion of violence at Trump rallies.

Although Trump was democratically elected on the basis of the US Electoral College system, he represents a movement that does not care for such democratic values as pluralism, equality, and human rights. His path to the White House was filled with xenophobia and right-wing populism.

Trump's path to the presidency was further marred by misogyny. He made several derogatory remarks about women, bragged about groping women and admitted to sexual assault, and was accused of sexual assault by a dozen women. In his first week in office, he [signed](#) an executive order reinstating what is known as the “Mexico City policy,” thus freezing funding to international organizations that offer abortion counseling—essentially de-funding vital health programs for women globally. The longstanding US role in promoting women's rights in the region will be difficult to maintain.

Moreover, Trump's attacks on the press have only intensified since he took office. During his first press conference as president, Trump refused to take questions from CNN and BuzzFeed, calling

them fake news, and has attacked the media for not reporting positively on him—actions classically suggestive of authoritarian leadership. More recently, Trump's White House chief strategist, right-wing Steve Bannon (who now holds a regular seat on the National Security Council) [told](#) the media that it should "keep its mouth shut." Threatening the freedom of the press is a clear violation of the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

The Trump presidency signals a sharp turn in US foreign policy and standing in the world. In the Trump era, US “soft power” and credibility as the leading global power committed to equality and human rights have already suffered greatly. The United States can no longer assume the role of the leading superpower in championing the values of pluralism and inclusion. Trump’s rhetoric and policies thus far have narrowed and exposed the weaknesses in America’s ability to lead internationally in the areas of promoting human rights and equality, fostering civil liberties, and preventing torture and human rights abuses.