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Trump, Islamophobia and US-Middle East Relations

Oz Hassan

The University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Identifying the Trump administration's approach to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is problematic. Not only is one hundred days of a new administration too short a period to make an assessment of any potential "Trump Doctrine", especially given the size and complexity of the region, but Trump is himself unpredictable and consistently inconsistent (Rachman 2017). For some, this has been depicted as a result of Trump following the "Jacksonian" tradition in US foreign policy, emphasising a nationalist populism based on the physical security and economic well-being of the domestic population (Beinart 2017; Kilgore 2017; Mead 2017). This is certainly how Trump has sought to promote his presidency, portraying himself as embattled with traditional Washington elites, and someone that will bring government back to the people (Bouie 2017). Yet, defining the Trump administration in terms of appeals to the "Jacksonian tradition", does little to inform an understanding of the broader rationale of Trump's approach to foreign and security policy, and this administration's approach to US-Middle East and North African (MENA) relations in particular. Indeed, such appeals obscure the actuality that under the Trump administration, US-MENA relations are not being driven by persistent beliefs or long-term strategic vision, but rather by a spontaneous, impulsive and situational volition. As a result of this, Trump's Orientalism, Islamophobia and the securitization of Islam have come to define Trump's approach to the MENA more than any strategic rationale. In particular, this has manifested itself in the identity construction of 'Muslims' and 'Arabs' as an existential threat. In turn, this is leading to increasingly violent practices, informed by Islamophobia, that are further devaluing the civilian population in the MENA region.

The Securitization of Islam and the Middle East

Trump's Islamophobia is well documented. Trump keenly campaigned on a platform stating that 'Islam hates us' and 'we have to check the mosques', along with pronouncing fabricated events into an Islamophobic narrative of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. As Trump falsely declared,

I watched in Jersey City, N.J., where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down ... There were people over in New Jersey that were watching it, a heavy Arab population, that were cheering as the buildings came down. Not good (in Carroll 2015).

Through this Islamophobic lens, Trump articulated a national security problem that operationalised a "clash of civilisations" discourse. Domestically, this took the shape of muddled indications of establishing a "Muslim registry", combined with unequivocal calls for 'a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States, until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on' (Johnson 2015; Siddiqui 2016). In particular, Trump cast Syrian refugees as an existential threat, asserting that, '[r]efugees from Syria ... [I]ots [of] young males, poorly vetted,' and '[r]efugees from Syria are now pouring into our great country. Who knows who they are - some could be ISIS' (Trump 2015; Trump 2016). This added to his depiction of the Syrian civil war, where he noted 'the "rebels" are

just as bad as the current regime'; and 'Remember, all these 'freedom fighters' in Syria want to fly planes into our buildings.' (Trump 2013a; Trump 2013b; Trump 2013c).

Once in office, Trump attempted to actualize these concerns through the active securitization of Islam. Masked behind Executive Order 13769, entitled *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*, the Trump administration attempted to put in place a ninety-day ban on citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen and Iraq, entering the US, and a 120-day suspension of the US refugee admissions programme (Trump 2017a). Within the US, this attempted securitisation move was met with popular protests and legal action in the *State of Washington and State of Minnesota v. Trump* (C17-0141JLR 2017). However, the move itself had a wider impact on US-MENA relations, albeit with regional reactions being varied. Iraq threatened to retaliate with a ban on issuing US citizens visas but ultimately sought to have itself removed. Whilst Iran also declared it would reciprocated, as the executive order was seen to be part of a wider attack on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) over Iran's nuclear programme. The Yemeni and Libyan reaction was the most active in the region, casting what had been popularly termed a "Muslim ban", as 'unjustified', 'racist', and risked promoting terrorism (Abdelaziz 2017). Indeed, the administration was itself adding 'credibility to the jihadists' narrative of civilizational war' (Byman 2017).

However, not all of the MENA region met the Executive Order with hostility. Indeed, while Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon remained silent all Gulf countries, except Qatar, expressed support (Abdelaziz 2017). Notably, this was the result of the Trump administration's approach being seen to assist Saudi Arabia's hard-line sectarian approach towards Iran, as much as the wider calculation by the Saudi's over how they should engage the Trump administration. Similarly, Syria also backed the Executive Order noting that the Trump administration was less inclined to insist on the removal of President Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, this was supported with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's assertion that 'longer-term status of President Assad will be decided by the Syrian people', and US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, who declared that: 'Our priority is no longer to sit and focus on getting Assad out' (Labott, Gaouette, and Roth 2017). These statements echoed Trump's position on Syria, which was fairly consistent until April 2017. Namely, that 'We [the US] should stay the hell out of Syria' because '[t]here is no upside and tremendous downside' (Trump 2013b; Trump 2013d). Importantly, this shift on US-Syria policy was part of the manner in which the Trump administration's Islamophobia has translated into a further devaluing of the lives of the civilian population in the MENA.

Islamophobia and the Devaluing of Life

The devaluing of the lives of the civilian population in the MENA has become evident in the Trump administration's willingness to accept greater civilian casualties in the pursuit of its counter-terrorism strategy. Notoriously, Trump advocated for not only the targeting of members of terrorist organisations themselves but asserted that there was a need to 'take out their families' (LoBianco 2015). Within such a context, it was foreseeable that under the Trump administration, there has been a significant increase in civilian casualties. Indeed, estimates put 60% of all officially acknowledged civilian casualties from US airstrikes in Syria and Iraq as occurring within the first few months of the Trump administration (Borger 2017). In addition to this, there has also been an active abandonment of US democracy and human rights policy in the region, which is again informed by Islamophobia and contributing to the devaluing of human life.

Trump's desire to abandon democracy and human rights in the MENA predates his electoral victory. Indeed, Trump as a private citizen was opposed to the 2011 revolutions in the region and argued that 'Egypt is turning into a hotbed of radical Islam ... We should never have abandoned Mubarak' and 'We threw our ally Mubarak overboard and Egypt is now our enemy' (Trump 2011; Trump 2012). In office, this experience combined with his emphasis on transactional relationships and has led Trump to praise Arab strongmen. Within the first 100 days, Trump invited Egyptian President Sisi to the White House and made clear that counter-terrorism was more important than the human rights of the Egyptian people (Baker and Walsh 2017). Similarly, in prepared remarks to the *Arab Islamic American Summit* held in Riyadh, Trump laid out the new administration's position on democracy and human rights unequivocally asserting that,

Our friends will never question our support ... Our partnerships will advance security through stability, not through radical disruption ... We must seek partners, not perfection—and to make allies of all who share our goals (Trump 2017b).

Indeed, dropping the term 'radical Islamic terrorism' from the speech to the Arab world, Trump was keen to cleanse the speech of Islamophobic content, arguing instead that

Every time a terrorist murders an innocent person, and falsely invokes the name of God, it should be an insult to every person of faith ... Terrorists do not worship God, they worship death ... This is not a battle between different faiths, different sects, or different civilizations ... This is a battle between Good and Evil (Trump 2017b).

Nevertheless, the message to Arab Strongmen was clear; if they help fight terrorism, the US will not push for internal reforms and turn a blind eye to human rights violations. Indeed, this signal was received clearly from a US President that has dealt blow after blow to the liberal world order and the credibility of the U.S. as leader of the free world. With this being the start of the Trump administration's approach to the region, we should expect the regional security architecture to shift dramatically in favour of authoritarianism, sectarianism and a further downward spiral of violence in the forthcoming years.

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