

# How war on Islam became central to the Trump doctrine

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DAVID SHARIATMADARI

It was the moment the world sat up and started to take notice of the US presidential campaign. Donald Trump had made headlines before, in June 2015, when he had called for a "great, great wall" along the Mexican border. Back then, he was hovering around ninth place in a crowded field of Republican candidates. But by December 7, when he released a short statement calling for the "total and complete shutdown" of Muslim immigration, he was the frontrunner for his party's nomination. His message, that Islam itself was a threat to America, was heard loud and clear across the globe, not least by 1.6 billion Muslims.

Now, as president, he appears to be following through. On Friday he stunned us again by announcing that citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries – encompassing around 220 million people – would be barred from entering the US for 90 days. On Sunday, his long-time ally, Rudy Giuliani, traced the order back to a conversation about the "Muslim ban" in which Trump asked him to "show me the right way to do it legally". While commentators have had their work cut out trying to follow the twists and turns of Trump's logic on everything from climate change to the CIA, on this issue his attitude has been

advising the president on foreign policy and intelligence. Members of that team differ in the extent to which they distinguish between Islam and violent distortions of it. Before his appointment to the administration, Flynn, for example, tweeted a YouTube video with the title "Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL" from his verified account. The tweet has not been deleted. In contrast, special assistant to the president, Derek Harvey, believes that "the threat is the extremist interpretation of Islam". Macfarland has written: "Not all the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are extremists or terrorists. Not by a long shot." However, she warns that "even if just 10 percent of 1 percent are radicalised, that's a staggering 1.6 million people bent on destroying western civilisation". One 2014 estimate put the number of active jihadists at between 85,000 and 106,000 – or around 0.006 percent of all Muslims.

Trump's own understanding of Islam appears to be superficial. "I've had good instincts in life, and a lot of this is instinct," he told the *Washington Post* last year. It's also the influence of men including Frank Gaffney, whose thinktank, the Center for Security Policy (CSP), briefed Trump on sharia law before the crucial Iowa caucuses in February 2016. The CSP believes that "American civil and political society is under systematic, sustained and seditious assault – a 'Stealth Jihad' – by adherents to Shariah". Incredibly, Gaffney himself suggested that the Obama administration had inserted an

has got other kinds of problems, in populism, in reaction against globalisation, in the fragmentation of political cultures, in the rise of the local over the collective. I would put terrorism way down the list of real existential concerns." He describes it, instead, as a "lethal nuisance".

In terms of the fight against Isis, he expects American action around Mosul to continue, with the focus moving, in due course, to Raqqa. Eliminating these strongholds is unlikely to be the end of the story, however. "You've got to look at what other kinds of terrorist action are going to be stimulated by the loss of territory where Isis had wanted to form a caliphate ... they will have to start showing that terrorism has teeth in other ways, including presumably, in incidents in western democracies."

This is not an argument for allowing Isis to remain in Syria and Iraq, he says. Instead, "if there is to be a global anti-terrorist coalition that is effective, it's got to deal with some of the causes of it, rather than the symptoms. It's got to deal with governance in the Middle East, it's got to deal with ungoverned space in other territories ... I don't see any signs from Trump yet that he has formed a proactive, comprehensive policy that deals with the whole phenomenon of 21st-century terrorism."

Despite this, Trump's strong-man stance has fans – and not just among the 65 percent of his voters who viewed terrorism as a "major problem". James Carafano, a fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation who served on the

you can't eliminate all poverty' ... nobody has a problem with that."

There is a home front to this ramped-up "war on terror", and many Muslim Americans are profoundly anxious about the possible impact on their lives. Moustafa Bayoumi, professor at Brooklyn College and author of *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?* says: "It's clear that Trump uses Islam as a kind of rhetorical prop to feed his populism. But I think that he has also developed a cabinet that has some internal contradictions. There is Flynn, for sure, and he's not inconsequential, but [John] Kelly, on the homeland security front, seems more reasonable." Does he think Trump has a fear of Muslims? "That's a good question, and I think it asks for coherence from an incoherent mind."

The 15 years since 9/11 have been difficult for the Muslim community – he cites, among other things, warrantless surveillance and FBI informants. "But, on the other hand, the state has functioned on many levels to preserve the sphere of civil society for Muslim Americans. Things such as the justice department filing suit for problems with mosque construction." Under Obama, the federal government sued several cities for religious discrimination after they had refused permits for new mosques. "I'm not sure that we're going to see that from a Jeff Sessions justice department. I'm not sure we're going to have the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission take on Muslim discrimination cases with the same kind of interest."

lives you put in harm's way."

There are many reasonable Americans who would counter that, whatever the antecedents, Iraq is now a safe haven for many violent jihadists. Doesn't it make sense to reduce the likelihood of one of them getting through to zero? "There have not been problems with people coming from Libya, Syria, or Iraq, because they are very carefully vetted. So I think this just plays to a general fear."

The hard edges of Trumpian counter-terrorism represent an attempt to placate the people who supported him, says Atran, and "to give a general sense that he's trying to protect the American homeland. I don't think it will be very effective or meaningful, except that it works psychologically on voters." Moreover, the idea that everyday Islam shades into violent jihadism is "a disastrous line to take. It's one that plays directly to the Islamic State's desire to eliminate the grey zone between believers and non-believers, by saying that the overwhelming majority of Muslims who simply want a more peaceful life are in essence no different from the people who commit murder and wish to harm innocents. How can that possibly be useful? It risks only fanning the flames of anger, violence and opposition to peace, not only among American citizens, but across the world."

The problem is that tough talk on Islam, never mind terrorism, is a vote-winner. One analysis from June found that people who felt the word "violent" was a good way to describe Muslims had much more positive views of Trump than of Clinton. "They're actually expressing what is becoming the popular way of thinking about Islam," says Dalacoura, of Trump's circle.

So how would Atran, who is steeped in the first-hand reality of terrorism, begin to explain to a Trump voter that Muslims are not the enemy? Evidence and truth aren't always effective tools of argument, he says. Instead, the key is to start by appealing to the emotions, perhaps by invoking admired figures such as Muhammad Ali, or Kareem Abdul Jabbar. "If then I can make some inroads, I'd show that leaders of eight Muslim countries have been women, and then go down the line of some of the great achievements of Muslim civilisation, and then recognise that, certainly, in this time and geopolitical space, there is a very cruel, revolutionary strand of fundamentalist Islam that is a real danger not only to people in the United States, but much more so to Muslims around the world."

There is a mirror image of that fundamentalism in the west. "Xenophobic ethno-nationalist extremism ... is also gaining ground. In fact, there's an unholy alliance between these two movements that's tearing apart western society to some extent. It's very similar to what fascism and communism were doing in the 1930s. They need one another."

"The more [xenophobes] attribute all the ills of society to immigrants and especially Muslim immigrants, the more the strategy of Islamic State and al-Qaida to drive a wedge between Muslims and their host societies in the west, or between Muslim-majority societies and western societies,



Donald Trump signs an executive order to impose tighter vetting of travellers entering the US, targeting Muslim-majority countries and shutting down refugee entry.

PHOTO: REUTERS

consistent. If there is a Trump doctrine, "war on Islam" has to be a strong contender.

An apocalyptic view of Islamist terrorism is the thread that connects many of his appointments, be they military men, Breitbarters or TV pundits. National security adviser Michael Flynn has written: "I'm totally convinced that, without a proper sense of urgency, we will be eventually defeated, dominated, and very likely destroyed," adding: "Do you want to be ruled by men who eagerly drink the blood of their dying enemies?"

Flynn's deputy, KT Macfarland argued that without American leadership, global jihadism will "usher in its version of paradise – the destruction of the apostates and unbelievers and the triumph of the caliphate". National Security Council member Sebastian Gorka wrote: "America is now in a threat environment that makes some ... look back wistfully at the cold-war years when the only real threat was the spread of communism". Today, the official Trump platform includes the pledge: "We will defeat the ideology of radical Islamic terrorism just as we won the cold war."

Steve Bannon, the man whom many regard as the ideological linchpin of the administration, believes we are "at the beginning stages of a global war against Islamic fascism". In a surprise move at the weekend, Bannon was appointed to the council, the principal body

Islamic crescent moon into the logo of the Missile Defense Agency.

Gaffney hasn't, as yet, been rewarded with a post in the administration. But Flynn's and Bannon's closeness to the president means their clash-of-civilisations rhetoric and blurring of the line between Islam and jihadism carry real authority. The question is: what effect will this actually have on terrorism, in the US and around the world?

Katerina Dalacoura, associate professor of international relations at the London School of Economics, thinks Flynn's framing of the problem is wrong, for a start. "We have a situation very different from the cold war one," she says. "Within the Soviet Union and eastern Europe generally, you had the population at large being sympathetic to the United States. The US was able to play a role of upholder of certain values because politically it had been unable to interfere. In the case of the Middle East, the US has no such standing. In fact, it's the opposite – I think that through decades of intervention, [it] has been turned into an illegitimate actor."

"It may be able to play that role in 10 or 20 years, if it continues to pull out of the Middle East. But not at this moment."

Sir Jeremy Greenstock, a former chair of the UN Security Council's counter-terrorism committee, is similarly sceptical. "I don't think Islamic terrorism is an existential threat to western democracy. Western democracy

Trump transition committee, sounds as if he is looking forward to the change in tone. "The previous administration, because they didn't want anything to be perceived as anti-Muslim or focused on a specific religion, kind of tried to vanilla-ise or neuter the programmes by using terms such as 'countering violent extremism', 'counter radicalisation', or whatever else. And I think that will go away. Very clearly the administration will say look, we're focusing on stopping ... Islamist-related transnational terrorism." One unambiguous token of this came on Saturday, when a US raid in the Yakla district of Yemen was said by the Pentagon to have killed 14 members of al-Qaida.

Will a military solution result in blowback? Carofano calls this argument "stupid". "At the peak of hard power [from] the US, which is about 2007-2008, when they crushed the uprising in Iraq, the terrorism numbers actually plummeted. And when Obama went to this kind of 'let's move away from hard power into the more soft power and more stealthy approach', the numbers skyrocketed." Carofano is right that total deaths from terrorism dipped after 2007, but they rose above those levels only after the beginning of the Syrian civil war, in 2011.

Was Trump's promise to eradicate "radical Islamic terrorism ... from the face of the earth" realistic? "Here's why this is a stupid question: people all the time say we want to eliminate poverty, and nobody says, 'Well that's stupid,

"Even George W Bush," Bayoumi says, "was trying to preserve a certain sense that the government will be in charge of patrolling Muslims, not vigilantes. Whereas, under Trump, I could see how that they could just both become the same thing. We'll lose that sense of guarantee of equal protection under the law."

That raises the prospect of a vicious circle. Enhanced vetting for Muslims will just make everyone else more suspicious. "I know when I fly, on those few occasions when I've actually been taken away from the line for a special screening then taken back to the line, it hardly makes anybody, myself included, feel more comfortable," he laughs. "The extra scrutiny is just going to make everybody more Islamophobic, and this is just going to make Muslims feel more alienated."

Scott Atran, an anthropologist with unrivalled field experience of radicalisation – he's just come back from interviewing members of Islamic State near Mosul – deplores the visa ban and many of the other signals coming from the Trump team. "That stigmatises all citizens of those countries, many of whom sacrificed their lives for what they thought was advancing the values and goals of both countries. Just take Iraq – the US invaded Iraq, the country fell apart, tens of thousands of people tried to help the United States in their efforts there, and now you're basically saying they're not allowed in either? You can't just turn your back on people whose

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progresses. It's reaching alarming levels. And that comes together with the fact that nations themselves are starting to break the rules of the international order, which can rapidly develop into a free-for-all, as happened before the first world war."

In his 2016 book *The Field of Fight*, Flynn wrote: "We're in a world war, but very few Americans recognise it, and fewer still have any idea how to win it." If the Trump doctrine holds sway, the general, his lieutenants and their commander-in-chief may indeed get the war they seem to crave. Despite what they claim, however, the losers won't be the terrorists, but all of us.

The writer is an editor and writer for The Guardian. Copyright: The Guardian