

President Trump's Islamophobia and the Muslims: A Case Study in Crisis Communication

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Abstract: During his highly controversial presidential election campaign, President Trump successfully but bizarrely exploited anti-Muslim rhetoric, among other factors, to capture the White House. His post-election policy actions, particularly the executive order to ban Muslim entry into the US, first issued on January 27 and followed by a watered-down version on March 6, has also officially exposed his anti-Muslim biases creating a crisis in Muslim – US relations. This article presents President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies in historical perspectives, comparing them to other great American narratives of the post-World War II period. It ends up making two important conclusions: first off, Trump's anti-Muslim stand galvanized, and now keeps alive, his political support base of the white underclass Americans; and, secondly, although motivated by political needs, his anti-Muslim rhetoric contributes to an increasing divide between the Muslims worldwide and the non-Muslim racist and Islamophobic white Americans.

Keywords: President Trump, anti-Muslim ban, Trumpism, American foreign policy narratives, 'America First', Israel – Palestine conflict, Iran – US nuclear deal.

The 2016 US presidential campaign was marred by unprecedented political rhetoric, outbursts of racist tones and anti-Islamic tirades. Then presidential hopeful Donald Trump promised to build a wall on the US – Mexico border, branded Islam a religion of violence and declared to ban the entry of Muslims to America, pledged a crackdown on China's unfair trade practices, expressed the determination to force America's allies to pay more for their own defenses, and declared the resolve to "bomb the shit out of ISIS". Soon after taking oath as the 45th president of the US on January 20, 2017, President Trump issued an executive order (officially titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States") on January 27 banning the entry of Muslims from seven Muslim-majority states of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (a watered down version of the executive order issued on March 6 excluded Iraq from the ban). This was shocking news for Muslims worldwide, though not unexpected. The American as well as the global press was quick to label the new president's rhetoric and policy actions to capture the attention and shore up his white political support base as "Trumpism". Whatever ways the press and the public interpret the meanings and implications of Trumpism, President Trump is the first self-declared anti-Muslim president of the US. Neither did he hide his anti-Muslim biases nor his disliking for Islamic religion during and after the race to the White House— a sort of Islamophobia that has created a crisis situation in the relationships between the Muslims and Trump's America.

This article explores President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions in historical perspectives, linking them to other post-World War II great American foreign policy narratives. It makes two observations: firstly, President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions serve the political purpose of galvanizing and maintaining his political support base of white underclass Americans [1]; and secondly, they further sharpen the Islam – West divide, already created by the 9/11 attacks and America's so-called global war on terror. The divide looks set to get bigger as the new president is making some shifts in America's traditional Middle East policy.

TRUMPISM AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY NARRATIVES

Both as a concept and a reality, Trumpism injects some fresh ideas, negative or positive, into America's domestic and foreign policies. It talks of the negative consequences of a globalized world for the common Americans, makes racist appeals to white nationalism and a vague promise of "Make America Great Again." To capture what he intends for America, President Trump has frequently used the term "America First", making it a great narrative of his administration. To better understand and grasp the meanings of this narrative [2] one must relate it to the historical and political contexts in which it has emerged and how it relates to other great narratives that defined and dominated American foreign policy in the post-Second World War period. Previously, the two great narratives of "the cold war consensus" and the "war on terror", among others, set the basic parameters of America's relations with the outside world, particularly the Muslim

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Middle East and North Africa, and determined its responses to meet security threats primarily emanating from outside America's national borders [3]. "America First", in contrast, combines domestic concerns as well as external issues to reinvigorate America's position in the world [4] – a response to the diminution in America's global supremacy in recent years.

The narrative of cold war consensus dominated American foreign and security policies from the mid-1940s to 1991, the year Soviet Union collapsed and the cold war-defined bipolar world structure completely broke down. This period saw a remarkable bipartisan American consensus on foreign and security policies. Americans of all stripes, supported by their European allies and partners around the world, reached the final conclusion that the communist Soviet Union was a mortal threat to the free world led by America. The Soviet communist system was seen as a huge challenge to the democratic and capitalist systems of the West, and that freedoms and human rights were under constant threats. The decision that arose out of the necessity to fend off this impending danger was to confront the Soviet Union politically, militarily and ideologically. America got the west European states to rally behind its flag to launch NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1949 as a defense shield against Soviet communist threats. There ensued an arms race between the two rival blocs – ranging from conventional to nuclear to thermonuclear arms production and deployment. Additionally, the US took the lead position to create a host of other regional military alliances (such as the now-defunct Central Treaty Organization, which was created in 1955 and dissolved in 1979) to check communist incursions into various world regions. Eventually, America won the cold war competitions once the Soviet Union was formally dissolved in December 1991.

At the end of the long cold war, America emerged as a unipolar superpower, seizing the moment to unilaterally decide and determine much of the course of world politics. But a big rupture developed after the execution of the 9/11 attacks by al-Qaeda, the shadowy organization of bin Laden. The George W. Bush administration immediately moved ahead with the various pieces and contents of the next powerful narrative of American foreign policy – the "war on terror". Al-Qaeda-led Muslim fundamentalism was projected as the biggest threat to American security and to American lifestyles and values. The Bush administration declared its determination to deal a massive blow to al-Qaeda and successfully got all

Americans lined up behind it. In almost all speeches President Bush made during his two terms in the White House (2001 – 2008) there were obvious references to al-Qaeda and "Islamic terrorism". This was music to the ears of almost all Americans, irrespective of their diverse political and ideological predispositions. Afghanistan and Iraq soon fell prey to devastating US military invasions in a short gap of only two years after the 9/11 attacks, with millions of Afghans and Iraqis killed, maimed, internally displaced or forced to become refugees in foreign countries. But the narrative kept enlivening most Americans until the Barack Obama administration captured the White House in January 2009.

President Trump's "America First" narrative is partially a continuation of the Bush administration's anti-Muslim stance, legitimized under the rubric of "war on terror"; and partially, it is also a response to overcome America's domestic weaknesses first and eventually bolster America's global standing. The narrative targets a different audience, an audience which is culturally conservative, detests Muslim terrorism, eager to arrest America's global decline, scared of the negative impacts of globalization for the American economy, and fed up with their declining economic conditions [5]. This audience, the underclass white Americans question the traditional bipartisan understandings about America's national safety and economic prosperity and favors an inward-looking strategy to revamp America's domestic base by reducing internationalist orientations and engagements. The US withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January 2017, a 12-nation trade deal that covers 40% of the global economy, is a case in point.

President Trump captured the essence of his "America First" narrative by clearly stating this in his inaugural address: "Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families" [6]. He also said the US will follow two simple rules: "Buy American and hire American", by raising the specter of protectionist policies to promote America's self-interests at the cost of global interest – an apparent shift from the US-created liberal global trade order to unilateral trade practices. Militarily, the narrative talks of rebuilding the American military to discourage peer competitors to match or rival America's military capabilities. Though President Trump initially sounded anti-NATO, he has off late accepted the rationale for this age-old organization in the wake of rising tensions with Russia following America's airstrikes on a Syrian

military airfield in early April this year. That marked a major shift from the previous Obama administration's foreign policy of "diplomacy first, war last". President Obama, who is often dubbed a "war-weary" president, inherited two major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and was determined to pull the US out of the Iraq war and reduce America's involvements in foreign conflicts. His foreign policy was more or less based on what is dubbed the "smart power approach", an approach that attempted to combine a whole range of political, economic, military and diplomatic tools to pursue American foreign policy interests [7]. It marked a major shift from the previous Bush administration's force-based foreign policy approach in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Interestingly, the three narratives, it can be easily observed, address the American audience in three different contexts shaped by different sets of historical realities. All three narratives have one common interest – to strengthen America's global power and influence either by projecting military prowess on the global stage, as President Bush did, or by bolstering domestic economic and political base, what President Trump intends to do. Either way, all three narratives are about America's power and position on the world stage justified either in the name of protecting the nation from foreign threats or revamping the declining domestic economy to make the nation fit to lead the world again.

"AMERICA FIRST" NARRATIVE AND THE MUSLIMS

The "America First" narrative, however, concerns the Muslims most because of its anti-Muslim biases, which President Trump is actually following through. The travel ban on Muslims from seven Muslim majority countries (with Iraq being excluded later), though found unconstitutional and directed against a particular religious group by a bevy of US federal district judges, actually set the prelude to a host of other policy changes the Trump administration is looking to pursue in the areas of Israel – Palestine conflict, nuclear deal with Iran, the Bush era policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East etc.

Definitely, it is President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and policy actions that have made him look weird in the eyes of most Muslims – an Islamophobe. But he is hardly the only American or Western leader with terrible anti-Muslim mindsets. President George W. Bush, in the run up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, had branded the Muslim Iraqis "Gog" and "Magog" [8], a Biblical reference to the enemies of God to justify the invasion. Incumbent French President

Francois Holland, in an interview with two French journalists, also identified Islam as a problematic religion, especially in the area of human rights. He opined that Muslim women, if freedoms were granted, would throw out the veils and become Marianne, the female symbol of the Republic of France. All three leaders are, by beliefs and values, deadly opposed to Islamic fundamentalism and the violence it breeds. For President Trump, the Islamic State is the number one concern. He declared on the campaign trail quite a few times that the fight against the Islamic State, which also goes by the acronyms ISIS, ISIL or Da'esh, to be reinvigorated to eliminate the Islamic terrorists once and for all. At the same time, the Trump administration has moved away from the policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East pursued by the Bush administration. In the Republican National Convention speech in late July 2016 [9], he lambasted US actions to overthrow dictatorships in Iraq, Egypt and Libya by the Bush and Obama administrations and dubbed democracy promotion as a "failed policy" of nation-building and regime change. Such policies, he strongly opined, undermined regional stability and US counterterrorism efforts.

In the area of Israel – Palestine conflict, President Trump has taken a radical position to further hurt Muslim feelings, signaling a major shift in traditional US policy to the conflict. During the presidential campaign, in an attempt to woo the Jewish voters and donors, he promised to relocate the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a promise the Palestinians as well as many Arab and Muslim states roundly criticized and have so far stopped him from following through. On a gloomier note, he has ditched the traditional American policy to support the two-state solution to solve the conflict [10], and has emboldened the Israeli right-wing forces either to deny or prolong the possibilities of a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Recent American administrations (particularly the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations) have undertaken and tried a series of diplomatic initiatives, strong or lukewarm, to permanently settle the conflict but of no avail. President Obama and his foreign secretary John Kerry created considerable pressures on the right-wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to negotiate peace and make compromises with the Palestinians but only to see a sharp decline in Israel – US relations at the end of the day. Trump's backing away from the commitment has created much uncertainty about the future prospects of a Palestinian state. This is perhaps more or at least as much shocking as the ban on Muslim entry into the US.

The nuclear deal with Iran, signed in mid-July 2015, perhaps remains the most explosive issue in Trump's America's relations with the Muslim Middle East. The Obama administration signed the deal with Iran, with active support from the other permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, to end the nuclear standoff with Iran. Officially dubbed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the deal seeks to curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relief from various US, EU and UN sanctions imposed in the post-1979 period. On the campaign trail, President Trump threatened to tear up the deal, creating new tensions in Washington's relations with Tehran. The threat of ditching the deal sounded real since America has a record of violating international agreements and treaties whenever they were deemed unsuitable to America's national interests. Take, for example, the cases of Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty signed with the Soviet Union in 1987 or the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1970 on which the US reneged on different excuses. The Iran – US nuclear deal looks more vulnerable to threats due to the fact that it is neither an international treaty nor a legally binding agreement between the US and Iran. The deal is simply a political agreement which either of the two parties can cancel whenever it deems so [11].

The oft-repeated threats to the deal by President Trump or Iran's strong reactions to that do not guarantee a long life for the deal. Still, both parties are holding onto the deal apparently because the prevailing regional and international situations hardly permit either of them to walk away and bury the JCPOA. For the Trump administration, backing away from the deal means loss of international credibility and support of traditional European allies, while Iran has every benefit to make out of the deal as it has allowed Iran, by lifting most of the sanctions, to reintegrate into the global economy, particularly in the areas of trade, investments and global financial transactions. It looks like the deal will hold for some years to come, despite President Trump's anti-deal rhetoric. At the same time, tensions in Iran – US bilateral relations are likely to ratchet up occasionally. A breakdown in bilateral relations in the form of an actual shooting war, which currently seems a remote possibility, between the two countries may further aggravate Muslim – US relations and destabilize the whole Middle East region.

CONCLUSION

President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and his narrative of "America First" have initiated a negative

chapter in Muslim – US relations. His anti-Muslim speeches and actions serve his political purpose but at a high cost to the Muslims. Most Muslims interpret his statements and actions concerning the Muslim Middle East as against their religious belief and interests. He has no doubt aggravated the Muslim – US relations by openly siding with Israel and officially backing away from the two-state solution, not to mention the complete shut down on Muslim entry into the US. This is by means an abrupt development; it reminisces what has been occurring in the Middle East since the 9/11 attacks. President Bush set the stage right after the 9/11 attacks by illegally invading Iraq and President Trump is simply following up that more bluntly in a new American context. This crisis in Muslim – US relations has no immediate solution; it is likely to linger on as long as President Trump remains in the White House. The Muslim mindset will, however, be shaped in the way the crisis relationship keeps unfolding and how the Trump administration keeps spin-doctoring the relationship.

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