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Designating Muslims:
Islam in the Western Policy Imagination

■ Peter Mandaville | 2 August 2017

Summary

This essay tracks how Islam and Muslims have figured in American and European policy in recent years, and assesses the practical implications of specific Muslim-oriented policy initiatives. The central dilemma policymakers need to contend with is not one of determining the most appropriate policies for addressing challenges arising specifically from Islam and Muslims, but rather recognizing that in many respects the "Muslims" in question have been created by these very policies. From this insight follow a number of recommendations with respect to how governments can most constructively address the issues understood to surround Muslim communities while avoiding the exacerbation of those same challenges.

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The twin phenomena of Brexit and Donald Trump, both of which were accompanied by varying degrees of populist nationalism alongside upsurges in ambient xenophobia, have once again thrown into relief the idea of a "Muslim Question" at the heart of political discourse in Europe and North America today.[1]

Like successive waves of the "Jewish Question" (*la question juive/Die Judenfrage*) that animated so much discussion in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contemporary debates about Islam have been governed by the waxing and waning of multicultural ideals on both sides of the Atlantic. With the inauguration of Trump and after an election campaign characterized by unprecedentedly naked anti-Islamic sentiment, including Trump's call for "a total and complete shut-down of Muslims entering the United States," followed by early executive actions that appeared commensurate with the candidate's hardline rhetoric, the direct reflection in policy of this growing Islamophobia has led some to question whether American Muslims can feel welcome and safe in their own country anymore.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the anti-immigrant sentiment that characterized the debate on Brexit and the more specifically anti-Muslim mobilization that accompanied recent national elections in the Netherlands and France, have demonstrated that Islam—or, rather, the question of where one stands on Islam—has become a constitutive issue of political identity in Europe, particularly for the right. Outside of their borders, both Europe and North America have become mired in foreign policy challenges understood as rooted in various regional security risks that derive in whole or in part from Islamist movements and ideologies (e.g. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; ISIS; Global War on Terror). In other words—and here we depart from the limited geographies of the original Jewish Question—the "Muslim question" today appears to be global in scope. It is not only a matter of Muslim communities residing within European and North American space but also a question of how and where Islam figures within a broader set of world political issues—compounded, we might add, by a sense that these two domains are inextricably linked through transnational mobility and globalization.

This essay represents an effort to explore and track how Islam and Muslims have figured in American and European policy in recent years, and to assess the practical implications of specific Muslim-oriented policy initiatives while also keeping an eye on the longer-term and more systemic effects on Muslim communities (and how they are perceived) likely to arise from these policies.

I should make clear at the outset that this essay is not simply a cataloging of anti-Muslim and Islamophobic actions undertaken by (mainly) parties and organizations on the political right. One of my central contentions is that even policy initiatives designed to emphasize the positive contributions of, and build bridges with, Muslim communities—such as those pursued by the Obama Administration—have nonetheless reinforced the idea that there is something different or exceptional about Muslims, and have therefore served to set these communities apart. My reference to "designating" Muslims in the title of the paper thus has a dual connotation: at one level, it references recent security-oriented practices around the legal designation of specific groups and movements as terrorist organizations while also, on another level, referring to the broader effects of governments assigning the status of "Muslim"—and, by extension, ascribing certain qualities—to specific communities at home and abroad. In other words, I am interested here in

some of the ways in which governmental and broader public discourse functions to "manufacture" Muslimness in particular ways by, for example, promoting the idea that religious identity is the most relevant lens through which to define and engage specific populations. Put yet another way, we are inquiring about the conditions under which Muslims come to be constituted as discrete objects of governance.

The essay will proceed as follows. After a brief overview of how and where Islam figured in Western policy during the late twentieth century, I present a discussion of the evolving debate on Islam and Muslims in both Europe and North America in the years following 9/11 and in the wake of a succession of security incidents in Europe—a trend broadly thematized as the securitization of Islam. I then look at the rather different (on the face of it) tact pursued by the Obama Administration from 2009 when it sought to move away from the idea of Islam and Muslims as sources of risk and insecurity in favor of an emphasis on partnership and mutual interests between the United States and Muslim communities around the world. The next section of the paper explores these broader trends in relation to three specific and concrete domains of policy: (1) efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism; (2) the regulation of travel by Muslims and signs of greater "thought policing"; and (3) approaches to the question of Islamists and other Muslim groups within Western foreign policy. The concluding section of the essay looks at the cumulative body of policy effort in this space in the current climates of heightened populist nationalism and ascendant Islamophobia. I argue that the central dilemma policymakers need to contend with is not one of determining the most appropriate policies for addressing challenges arising specifically from Islam and Muslims, but rather recognizing that in many respects the "Muslims" in question have been created by these very policies. From this insight follow a number of recommendations with respect to how governments can most constructively address the issues understood to surround Muslim communities while avoiding the exacerbation of those same challenges.

Background: Islam in Western Policy During the 20th Century

For most of the twentieth century, Islam did not figure prominently—or even much at all—in the foreign policy calculus of most Western nations. Where Islamic groups or movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood did enter into U.S. diplomatic discussions and communications during the early phase of the Cold War, it was in their capacity as possible counterweights to the global spread of communism. French authorities in North Africa were confronted by declarations of "*Algérie musulman*!" in the late 1950s, but such slogans were intended (and also perceived) as aspirations for post-colonial independence rather than as mobilizations of religious ideology.

For the United States it is probably fair to say that Islam first presented itself as a distinctive *problématique* of foreign policy with the revolution that created the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 and the ensuing hostage crisis. These events flooded American living rooms with television footage of passionate anti-American speeches delivered by an old, bearded cleric—cementing such imagery as the iconic representation of political Islam in the American popular imagination. Yet only a few short years later, Washington reverted—at least partially—to its previous mode of figuring Islamic groups as a bulwark against communist invasion, most notably through its support for the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan.

With the end of the Cold War, communism disappeared as the primary ideological rival of the West—but it was not immediately replaced by Islam or Islamism. Francis Fukuyama's famous ode to globally triumphant liberalism, *The End of History*, was rather dismissive of Islam as a significant world-historical force after the fall of the Soviet Union. For Fukuyama, Islam did not represent a meaningful ideological rival to liberal democracy or capitalism because it offered no alternative model for managing the core problems (as he saw them) of governance and economy on a world scale. He also saw its appeal as culturally limited to the "heartlands" of the Middle East and South Asia and therefore unable to gain a global following in other regions. However, around this same time, Islam did begin to figure more

prominently in the domestic political realm of certain Western European nations. Britain experienced the *Satanic Verses* affair, perhaps the first time that the specific religious commitments of that country's South Asian population had become the primary focus of public discussion as distinct from questions of racial and cultural difference. Here also in Khomeini's global call for Salman Rushdie to be killed was the originary moment, at least in the contemporary period, of the idea that Muslims are somehow bound by transnational ties that perhaps supersede their citizenship commitments as British or German. France was also feeling the strain, with the 1989 *affaire du foulard* initiating an enduring debate about the presence and visibility of religious culture in public space, and the very nature of French identity. In both the UK and France, the 1990s saw heightened Islamophobia—a phenomenon blamed, at least by the authors of the 1997 Runnymede Trust Report on Islamophobia, on Muslim communities and European governments alike.

9/11 as a Pivotal Moment

While the turn of the millennium was accompanied, at least in Europe, by a positive trend with respect to the "Muslim question" (e.g. declining Islamophobia, positive indicators of Muslim integration in Europe), it was to be short-lived. The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath had a tectonic impact on the broader social, political, and policy conversation around Islam. These effects were far-reaching and encompassed not only immediate questions about terrorism and physical security but also eventually wider debates about the compatibility between Islam and—in the mind of some—something like the Western civilizational ethos. Here another infamous tract from the 1990s, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, seemed to take on new currency.

The 9/11 attacks introduced a new generation of Americans to a spectacle of violent Islam, but rather than representing a distant threat (as per Iran's 1979 revolution) the religion now came to be associated with immanent and direct risk. Where Muslims in America had never been particularly visible, and certainly not, as in Europe, a focus of public debate, the immediate aftermath of 9/11 saw a spike in reactionary anti-Muslim sentiment in the

United States. Once the connections were drawn between the 9/11 attackers and the "Hamburg Cell," U.S. security officials naturally engaged their European counterparts on the question of Islamist radicalization. It was a difficult conversation at first, often proceeding cross-purposes as each side reflected its unique understanding and experience of the issue. For the American government, newly cognizant of the presence of Muslim communities in the West, the issue was confined almost solely to security and the terrorism risk. Based on their much longer and more complex history with local Muslim populations, European colleagues saw the issue more in terms of immigration and social integration—with radicalization as a secondary and relatively minor consideration.

This began to change, however, as Europe experienced a series of its own security challenges starting with the Madrid train station bombings in 2004, the killing of the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh later that same year, and culminating in the London transportation attacks in July 2005. European governments were then quick to develop strategies for addressing the perceived radicalization problem within their own Muslim populations, with the UK's Prevent initiative as a paradigmatic example. While Prevent has clearly evolved through multiple iterations, learning from early mistakes along the way, it generated a deep polarization within British Muslim communities that continues to the present day—and that is now starting to appear to some extent in the United States as well.

Stated briefly, this polarization is produced by divisions within Muslim communities around the question of whether Muslims should cooperate with, participate in, and receive funding from government programs and policies designed to prevent radicalization. On one side of this debate are Muslims who perceive governments to be singling them out as potential radicals and interested in them only insofar as they may constitute a security risk despite the presence in their communities of many other social and economic problems that the government could choose to address. On the other side are Muslims who see radicalization as a genuine problem and one the community has been hesitant to discuss or address itself. For reasons I discuss in more detail in the section below on countering violent

extremism (CVE), the impact of governmental counter-radicalization policies have had on relations with—and *within*—Muslim communities are just as important to assess as the (often elusive) question of whether these policies are succeeding as a matter of security policy.

During this same period, tensions between Western governments and Muslim populations were also brewing on a global scale. The U.S.-led "Global War on Terror" saw the initiation of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that would last more than a decade. While the administration of George W. Bush insisted that these military actions were targeted at nations supporting terrorism, the dubious and discredited logic behind the war in Iraq coupled with reports of a global network of American-coordinated torture sites, the shocking images of Abu Ghraib, and the creation of a Muslim detention facility in Cuba (Guantanamo Bay), created the impression across much of the Muslim world that these actions were more akin to a War on Islam. There was a soft power aspect as well, as represented by various initiatives to create or fund networks of "moderate" Muslims or to prompt a broad-sweeping reform of Islam.[2] Other developments seemed to strain the credibility of U.S. claims to be targeting only terrorists. For example, the exclusion from the United States of the Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan—a thoroughly mainstream if not uncontroversial scholar with deep family ties to the Muslim Brotherhood—appeared to confirm in the eyes of many Muslims the suspicion that the United States had a very narrow definition of what constitutes acceptable Islam. Ramadan had his own difficult history in Europe, linked not so much to concerns about ties to terrorism (as per his U.S. experience) but rather as a function of the very public clash between his conception of a confident but distinctive European Muslim identity and the assimilationist model favored by French political culture.

In the latter years of the George W. Bush administration, the U.S. sought to repair its image among Muslims around the world. Former White House advisor and close presidential confidant Karen Hughes was appointed at Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and announced that she would undertake a "listening tour" of the Muslim world in order to better understand the almost universally negative views of the U.S. that had

been appearing in opinion polls such as the Pew Global Attitudes Survey. This public relations blitz also involved the production of glossy pamphlets replete with photos of happy Muslim Americans designed to project to global Muslims a particular image their co-religionists in America. Such overtures, however, did little to address more deeply-seated Muslim concerns about U.S. foreign policy conduct.

Obama's Pivot

The administration of Barack Obama in 2009 sought to signal a fundamental shift in the U.S. approach to Islam and Muslims from the very outset. Obama's inaugural speech directly referenced Muslims and in a subsequent address to the Turkish National Assembly the American president indicated that henceforth U.S. relations with Muslim communities would be focused on partnership and mutual interests rather than on security and terrorism. This trend was given its most full-throated articulation in Obama's Cairo Speech in 2009 when, speaking from the halls of Cairo University, he called for a "new beginning" in relations between the U.S. and global Muslim communities. In the aftermath of the Cairo speech, the U.S. administration created a new Special Representative to Muslim Communities at the Department of State, appointed a new Special Envoy to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (a position first created by the George W. Bush administration), and requested $100 million in funding for programs focused on human development and public diplomacy initiatives in the Muslim world.

While the foreign policy thrust of Obama's Cairo speech was roundly welcomed—support for Israel-Palestine peace, democracy in the Middle East, making a deal with Iran—the follow up was almost exclusively confined to the public diplomacy and development realm, with the U.S. administration touting initiatives such as Partners for a New Beginning (PNB), the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, and the U.S. Science Envoys as flagship efforts in a rapidly-emerging Muslim engagement industry. The trouble is that most people in Muslim-majority countries weren't interested in programs designed to engage and make nice with their "Muslimness"—rather, they were looking for the U.S. to take concrete steps on

tough geopolitical issues. The Obama administration's global Muslim engagement blitz thus appeared to be something of a bait and switch, with lots of emphasis on glitzy tech conference but little in the way of concrete follow up on core foreign policy concerns.

There was another dimension of the Obama administration's push on Muslim engagement that arguably had even further-reaching negative consequences—something that we might think of as its "constitutive effects." Even though the broad thrust of these policies was to repair relations between the U.S. and global Muslim communities and emphasize the potential for positive and productive partnerships between Americans and Muslims, there was also a sense in which the Muslim engagement effort served to reinforce the notion of Muslim exceptionalism. By defining programs, budgets, and position titles in relation to a specific religious community, the U.S. Government, even if inadvertently, caused the religious identity of its interlocutors and partners to become the defining frame. Never in its history has U.S. foreign policy singled out a particular world religion as an object of policy or the target of a "new beginning" in relations. Many of the "Muslims' involved in the resulting programs and projects were people who would not necessarily identify first and foremost in terms of their faith affiliation—but for purposes of U.S. policy (or, more accurately, U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communications), their Muslimness became their most important and defining feature. The Muslims in questions were of course also, variously, Senegalese, Jordanians, Bangladeshis, and Norwegians—but to some extent the policy approach here unrooted them from contexts of national citizenship in favor of shining a light on their membership in a transnational world religion. I will address some of the problems associated with such an approach later in the paper.

Muslims around the world continued to be acutely aware of the changing U.S. domestic climate around Islam, and this same period saw the rise of a new and well-funded Islamophobia campaign in America, as well as ongoing tensions in Europe regarding issues such as full veiling, mosque building, and funding for Islamic education (not to mention radicalization and

extremism). In the U.S., figures such as Pam Gellar and Frank Gaffney emerged as the ringleaders of an effort to sow suspicion across the American grassroots about Islam—arguing not simply that Muslims represented a terrorism risk to the United States but rather that the very religion of Islam was incompatible with and actively seeking to destroy American values. Varying degrees of this narrative became a standard bearer of the political right in the United States, and gained strong traction within particular communities—most notably evangelical Christians. Organizations such as ACT! For America, seemingly targeting imagined enemies, warned against the creeping tide of shari'a law in the United States. With a few notable exceptions, Obama himself remained somewhat disengaged from these issues, likely heeding the counsel of political advisors who warned that support for American Muslims might once again fuel rumors that Obama is himself a Muslim and affect his political fortunes. Towards the end of Obama's tenure, the White House did focus more on rising Islamophobia, including the appointment of a coordinator for outreach to the American Muslim community. But given the administration's simultaneous push on CVE in the context of ISIS, it was clear that the discussion of Islam had returned quite firmly to the realm of security.

In both Europe and North America, the two strands of socio-political discourse on Islam and Muslims—the narrative of (failed) social integration and cultural (in)compatibility, and the narrative of security—have become firmly inter-twined in a broader political context in which the "Muslim question' has become a mobilizing issue for forces of the political right and, at the very least, a major challenge for those in the political centre.

Trump/Brexit/Muslims

While the rise and eventual election of Donald Trump had a very different and more directly malignant impact with respect to Islam and Muslims than did the climate around Brexit, both events can be seen as simultaneous eruptions of populist nationalist sentiment involving heightened suspicion towards those deemed as "foreign" While the relationship of Muslims with the state had already seen difficult times under David Cameron's leadership (when current PM

Theresa May was serving as Home Secretary—and hence leading the UK's domestic counter-extremism efforts), the Brexit debate opened political space for groups further right on the spectrum to posit as direct and immediate threats to British identity and values a whole host of "Muslim issues" (burqas, shari'a, faith-based Islamic schools, honor killings, FGM). Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, the Trump campaign's flirtation with constituencies that might otherwise regard the Republican party as being too far to the left made space in American political discourse (by virtue of his association with one of the major political parties) for extreme anti-Muslim sentiment of a sort that had never found a place in mainstream discussion.

Muslim Americans watched the rise of trump with trepidation and fear, debating how to respond. Some counselled a boycott of the new administration as a response to what they perceived as anti-Muslim sentiment of a degree and kind that could post an existential threat to Muslim communities in the United States. Others urged direct and vocal engagement to make clear the nature of Muslim concerns with Trump's policy proposals, and to articulate those concerns in terms of American norms, values, and laws. Temperatures began to rise literally from day one when a controversy broke out over whether a Muslim speaker should appear at the National Prayer Service on the morning of Trump's inauguration (Imam Mohamed Magid of the ADAMS Center mosque did eventually speak at the service, quoting Qur'anic verses that enjoin pluralism and inclusivity).

In the first months of the Trump administration, there have been three policy initiatives (or, more accurately, one executive action and two policy discussions) that provide some indications of how the new team in Washington DC is approaching Islam in the context of U.S. national security policy: (1) The immigration and refugee restrictions commonly referred to as the "Muslim ban"; (2) White House discussion and Congressional action with respect to designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO); and (3) talk of jettisoning the policy framework of countering violent extremism (CVE) in favor of a more specific emphasis on Countering Islamic Extremism or Countering Radical Islamic Terrorism. I will discuss each of these in turn.

"Muslim Ban"

In late January 2017, the Trump administration issued an executive order focused on "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.' In addition to specifying seven Muslim-majority countries whose citizens would be prohibited from entering the United States for a period of ninety days (during which visa vetting procedures for those countries would be reviewed), the order suspended indefinitely the entry of Syrian refugees into the country as well as suspending temporarily the entry of all other refugees. It also introduced a number of other modifications to immigration policy and regulations (including a preference within refugee admission criteria for religious minorities subject to persecution for their beliefs). Following a chaotic rollout (which involved numerous permanent U.S. residents being prevented from entering the country), federal courts put a hold on the order's implementation. The administration issued a revised set of immigrant restriction on March 6 which met a similar fate in the court system within two weeks. At the time of writing, it is not clear whether the administration plans to pursue an appeal course that could eventually take the matter to the U.S. Supreme Court.

While Islam or Muslims were mentioned nowhere in its language and even though most of the world's Muslims were unaffected by the scope of the executive order, this action was widely characterized as a "Muslim ban" since Trump had specifically indicated during the election campaign that he wanted to ban Muslims from entering the United States. The administration also made the point that the seven countries (eventually six, after the exclusion of Iraq from the March 6 modification) targeted in the executive order were countries already designated in previous travel restrictions introduced by the Obama administration. However, the national security logic behind the earlier Obama restrictions—designed to address the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) risk—was fundamentally different. Obama did not target citizens of the seven countries. Rather, his restrictions were aimed at travelers

entering the United States on the Visa Waiver Program (which permits citizens of several dozen mainly OECD countries to enter U.S. without a visa interview) who had recently visited those seven countries.

As was widely pointed out by media analysts and commentators, there have been virtually no instances of citizens from the six designated countries attempting terrorist attacks in the United States in recent memory. Moreover, most of the countries whose citizens *have* actually been convicted on U.S. homeland terrorism charges—about 40 or so cases since 9/11—are not included in the travel ban. It is therefore fair to ask if this new policy really even gets at the problem it purports to address.

One positive development from the first to the second versions of the travel ban was the removal of the aforementioned language that provided preferential treatment for persecuted religious minorities applying for refugee status—broadly regarded as a measure designed to help Christians fleeing ISIS-affected areas. The inclusion of such language was problematic for at least two reasons. First, it violated a long-held norm in refugee resettlement policy that the primary criterion for assessing claimants should be level of vulnerability. Second, the policy would create, in effect, a hierarchy of religious preference by giving privileged access to the United States for adherent to a specific faith. Third, such a policy was potentially inconsistent with the U.S. Constitution by appearing to discriminate based on religion, and creating a situation where—as Elizabeth Shakman Hurd argued—U.S. Customs & Border Patrol agents would potentially be placed in the position of having to decide whether or not someone was a "true" member of a particular faith group.[3] There are existing precedents and procedures for making such determinations, but it raises broader questions about complications associated with governments having to define or validate religious membership.

Depending on the fate of the travel ban, perhaps its most worrying aspect going forward is the inclusion of broad language mandating screening procedures for identifying people entering the country who might harbor "malicious intent" regardless of what country they come from.

This is likely to lead to questions being asked about peoples' political views, the screening of mobile phone content, and other measures that essentially try to measure what visitors to the U.S. think and believe. Actual terrorists will likely have no problem circumventing such measures, and such tactics will likely discourage many people from traveling to the United States because they don't want be subjected to such indignities. This could have serious repercussions for the American tourism industry and for U.S. business.

Designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as an FTO

The criminalization and proscription of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has been longstanding goal of the anti-Muslim activist circles that began to emerge in the U.S. in the mid-2000s. In late 2015, bills were introduced into both houses of the U.S. Congress that sought to force the U.S. Secretary of State to issue a determination as to whether the Muslim Brotherhood meets the criteria for designation as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). While these bills passed out of the committee phase of the legislative process on a party line vote, they were never taken up by the full congress and so effectively expired. During the Trump campaign, some of his foreign policy advisors—most notably Walid Phares—indicated that designating the MB would be a priority for the new administration. In January 2017, and in parallel with potential White House action on the issue, Senator Ted Cruz (a key figure behind the original anti-MB legislation) re-introduced a bill to seek the FTO designation. The proposed designation of the MB has been met with almost universal condemnation from the community of policy and think tank experts in Washington, DC—even by some who are deeply skeptical of the MB. Some have cited the fiasco that arose from the recent Muslim Brotherhood review conducted by the UK government, the shortcomings of which were detailed in a subsequent inquiry by the British parliament.[4]

The current American MB FTO designation proposal has three major shortcomings. First, it is definitionally vague. It is clear that those pushing this effort have in mind something broader than the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood but there is no global-scale MB entity that can be designated.

What you have instead are a great many organizations, movements, and political parties across dozens of countries with varying levels of Muslim Brotherhood ("Ikhwanist") ideology in their DNA. These groups also vary enormously in their specific ideological commitments, political platforms, and activities. They include, for example, the governing party of Morocco, the largest democratically elected opposition party in the Jordanian parliament, the party of the Iraqi parliamentary speaker (a close U.S. partner), and numerous organizations woven into mainstream civil society across the Muslim world. Second, while it is the case that MB splinter groups that emerged in the 1970s went on to form the nucleus of groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Egyptian MB has officially and consistently eschewed violence as a matter of policy for over forty years. Groups with ideologies ties to the MB that *do* embrace violence—such as Hamas—have long been designated at FTOs. In short, there seems to be little evidence to support a terrorism designation even if there were a clear MB entity that could be designated. Finally, since the MB is widely regarded in the Muslim world as a mainstream and mostly moderate organization—one associated with the general cause of supporting Islam in everyday life—the designation of the MB as terrorists would likely lead many Muslims throughout the world to the conclusion that the United States is seeking to criminalize Islamic belief more broadly.

The FTO designation process is very stringent and meticulous and—perhaps cognizant of the likelihood of failure, it appears at the present time that the U.S. administration has backed off this particular effort, or at least placed it on the back burner.[5] However, there are mechanisms other than the FTO process that permit the U.S. Government to take action against groups it deems as having ties to terrorism and there is an ongoing risk that mainstream American Muslim organizations, many of which are accused by figures close to the Trump administration as being fronts for the Muslim Brotherhood, may find themselves the focus of attention from U.S. law enforcement and security agencies.

"Islamizing" CVE

During the presidential campaign, the importance of combating "radical Islamic terrorism" was the foreign policy issue upon which Trump seemed to place the greatest emphasis. Other than the travel ban discussed above, however, the U.S. administration has said little by way of laying out its overall counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies. Accusing the Obama administration of failing in this space due to an unwillingness to point to Islam as the primary source of the terrorism threat, the one idea floated by Trump's national security team relates to re-labelling CVE as Countering Islamic Extremism or Combatting Radical Islamic Terrorism. As of writing, neither of these new labels has been applied. Most career national security officials working on these issues have indicated that they have yet to receive any new information or instructions from the administration.[6]

Outside observers are therefore left to look at the views on CT/CVE held by members of Trump's inner circle. Three figures in particular, White House Senior Strategist Steve Bannon, short-lived National Security Advisor Gen. Michael Flynn, and Deputy Assistant to the President Sebastian Gorka, have a track record of articulating perspectives on these issues that fall well outside the mainstream of centrist national security thinking and policy. In his previous career as a media executive and frequent right-wing talk radio guest, Bannon has indicated sympathies for the perspectives touted by key figures within the U.S. Islamophobia industry, as well as indicating his view that a grand confrontation between Islam and the West may eventually be necessary. During the campaign, Flynn indicated on multiple occasions that he regarded Islam as a political ideology masquerading as a religion, or as being "like cancer."[7] It is however Sebastian Gorka—whose precise White House role remains unclear—that has offered the most extended reflection on U.S. counter-terrorism policy through his 2016 book *Defeating Jihad*.[8] In it, Gorka argues that global jihadism represents an existential threat to the United States on par with the Nazi war machine or the Soviet Union. In his accounting, recent U.S. administrations have failed to recognize that Islamic religious ideology is the root of the

problem. In his view the correct way forward is to mount a Cold War-scale global effort to discredit jihadi ideology. It is an approach, in other words, that brings us back to some of the immediate post-9/11 thinking around a "war of hearts and minds" or "battle of ideas" that animated policy discussion in the George W. Bush administration.

It is not clear how much influence such thinking is likely to have on the CT and CVE strategies of the Trump administration. Its key proponents have either left the White House (Flynn) or seemingly fallen into disfavor (Bannon and Gorka). The career national security professionals have been exerting themselves, led by Flynn's replacement as National Security Advisor, General H.R. McMaster, and he has made it clear that he views the emphasis on Islam—as well as the specific nomenclature of "radical Islamic terrorism"—as problematic.[9] It is nonetheless the case that figures holding very unconventional views on Islam and CVE continue to be present in Trump's inner circle as well as forming a not insignificant segment of his electoral base throughout the country—meaning that if Trump perceives himself to be losing support on core issues such as the economy and health care he may be tempted to please the crowds by getting tougher on "radical Islamic terrorism'.

A development perhaps even more worrying than the "Islamization of CVE" is something that we might think of as the "de-religionization of Islam." This refers to statements of the kind made by Michael Flynn during the 2016 presidential campaign, to the effect that Islam is not a religion but rather a political ideology. Such rhetorical maneuvers have the effect of trying to place Islam beyond the remit of religious freedom protections by removing from it the status of religion. This view has been increasingly common amongst some of the more extreme Islamophobes in the U.S. alongside their allies in the alt-right movement. Purveyors of such discourse tend to rely on extremely selective references to Islamic texts, reducing the entirety of Islam to a few abstract concepts (jihad, shari'a, din wa dawla) with little to no attention paid to how such concepts have been expressed in practice throughout the history of Islam. While the denial to Islam of the status of religion represents a fringe view—and one need only look to the fact that virtually all religious

leaders from other faiths recognize Islam as a religion (different from but certainly categorically akin to their own)—there may be increased space for such viewpoints in policy discourse due to some of the extreme positions taken by the new U.S. administration.

Recommendations

From this overview of post-9/11 governmental approaches to Islam and Muslims in Europe and United States as well as the discussion of recent Trump administration policy initiatives, it is possible to discern some implications and recommendations for policymakers working on these issues:

Governments need to be aware of the implications of using the label and term "Muslim" in describing particular communities—even when doing so is accurate. Given the current climate of suspicion around Islam present in both Europe and North America, emphasizing religious identity—to the exclusion of other potentially relevant identities that people hold—can be a distraction while also leading to a misplaced privileging of religious factors in understanding the matter at hand. In promoting and pursuing foreign policy programs and initiatives focused on Muslims, governments also run the risk of reinforcing the narrative of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS that argue for the preeminence of religious identity over national or local identities and citizenship.

Explore best practices in diversity and inclusion. While the trend in much of the Euro-Atlantic space since 2011 has been to move away from a commitment to multiculturalism and viewing diversity as a public good, there is a notable exception in Canada. Canada has maintained and in some respects enhanced the emphasis on inclusivity and multicultural pluralism within its policy frameworks. It would be worth looking closely at the Canadian case to identify which aspects of that experience may be transferable to other European and North American settings. Similarly, governments have a role to play in combating the rise of discrimination and hate speech towards all groups including Muslims.

Governments should steer clear of appearing to adjudicate "good" vs. "bad" Islam. Religious leaders, religious institutions, or particular interpretations of Islam endorsed or funded by Western governments because of their "moderate" nature are likely to lose legitimacy in the eyes of many Muslims—particularly where moderate is understood to refer to secular, or non-observant/non-practicing Muslims. If governments appear to perceive Islamic doctrine to be inherently exclusionary, non-pluralistic, and violent rather than a potential source of broadly-shared civic values then there is a strong likelihood of alienating or discrediting precisely those Muslims most capable of fostering and shaping productive discussions within their communities.

With a few exceptions, the same goes for initiatives by allied governments in the Muslim world that promise to generate and disseminate moderate Islam through their religious institutions and universities.[10] Above all, governments should not seek to create networks of religious moderates or stand up Muslim organizations promoting views conducive to their policy preferences (e.g. UK's Sufi Muslim Council). A recent report, "A French Islam is Possible" by the Institut Montaigne, for example, calls for the creation of an effort within French Muslim civil society to create an approach to Islamic doctrine compatible with French values.[11] A common Muslim response to such thinking is to point out that the scheme envisaged by this recommendation is still one in which the normative parameters of the resulting Islam would still effectively be dictated by the French state with seemingly little space for critical discussion of what precisely constitutes "French values."

There may however be a role for governments in using diplomatic leverage to open space for effective and transformative groups within Muslim civil society to have greater impact.[12] For example, some governments in the Middle East and Central Asia are inherently suspicious of civil society groups that identify in religious terms, viewing them—often inaccurately—as security threats or as political opposition. In such cases, diplomatic pressure from the West can help make the case that some of these organization can actually be part of the solution against hardline groups that pose a real risk to stability and security.

Religious leaders are more than purveyors of CT theologies. Muslim religious leaders are often of interest to Western governments insofar as they can produce ideological content designed to discredit or refute the religious interpretations of groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. While there is a role for this kind of work when it proceeds organically and on its own terms, it should not be the basis of governmental engagement with religious leaders. Rather, governments should be cognizant of and partner with religious leaders and institutions in addressing broader societal challenges around education, governance, and economic growth—all of which feed into dynamics around violent extremism, but which also go well beyond a narrow security focus.

Re-evaluate restrictions on Islamic charities and humanitarian efforts. Post-9/11 anti-terrorism regulations have had a freezing effect on the ability of many Islamic humanitarian relief, development, and charitable organizations to operate around the world. While it is important to recognize that there are legitimate concerns about terrorism with respect to a number of charitable organizations, the current system incentivizes financial institutions to, for example, withhold banking services from Islamic charities even where risks are negligible. What is needed is a coordinated dialogue between multiple stakeholders—government regulatory, law enforcement, and security agencies as well as financial service providers, insurers, and the humanitarian groups themselves—to identify sensible adjustments to prevailing practices in this area that can bring in additional flexibility while maintaining vigilance.

In addition to the tremendous good such organizations do around the world, opening greater space for faith-based organizations to do their work has the effect of demonstrating to socially and political conscious Muslim youth that positive transformation can arise from constructive and peaceful engagement. If Muslim civil society and humanitarian groups were given greater space to operate (while continuing to guard against legitimate security risks), they hold the promise of providing more constructive and peaceful options for young Muslims seeking to make a positive difference in the world. Enabling such engagement could be viewed as an approach to CVE that recognizes and validates the legitimate grievances

felt by many young Muslims, while channeling them in more constructive directions.

Finally, adopt a stance of "critical engagement" with the Muslim Brotherhood. There is great hazard in Western governments underwriting policies by regional allies that criminalize and ban groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Doing so hands to ISIS an Al-Qaeda a monopoly on Islamically-inspired political opposition, may serve to increase the willingness of some young people to consider violent options, and implies a willingness to collude with growing authoritarian tendencies in the region. "Ikhwanophobia," however, need not yield to "Ikhwanophilia"—a much less prevalent but nonetheless not entirely uncommon phenomena in which Brotherhood groups are viewed by certain observers as heroic and unproblematic democrats. Put another way, engagement does not have to connote endorsement. By and large, the Muslim Brotherhood remains illiberal, prone to anti-Western sentiment, and broadly supportive of groups such as Hamas. It is quite possible to engage with such groups—as Western governments do with political movements in other regions with whom they do not always agree—in order to better understand their analysis of regional dynamics and in order to have the opportunity to directly communicate concerns with their positions and actions. Such an approach should form the basis of European and North American engagement with the Brotherhood.

Notes

[1] There is no claim here that Trump/Brexit are uniquely responsible for increased populist nationalist or anti-Muslim sentiment. Indeed, these events are best understood as mass political expressions of a nationalist trend growing in recent years on both sides of the Atlantic linked to issues such as socioeconomic stagnation and the refugee crisis. On the idea of a contemporary "Muslim question" see Norton, Anne. 2013. *On the Muslim Question*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[2] Rabasa, Angel, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz, Peter Sickle. 2007. *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

[3] Shakman Hurd, Elizabeth. 2017. "Trump's Immigration Order Means Bureaucrats Have to Decide Who's a Real Christian," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/trumps-immigration-order-requires-bureaucrats-to-figure-out-who-is-christian-thats-not-easy/?utm_term=.5d99aca1406c.

[4] UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016. "'Political Islam', and the Muslim Brotherhood Review," Sixth Report of Session 2016-17, November 1, 2016.

[5] In a recent piece, Marc Lynch distinguishes two broad camps within Washington DC with respect to Islamists, "lumpers" and "splitters." The former tend to see any expression of Islamism—be it the Muslim Brotherhood or ISIS—as ultimately premised on totalitarian logic that must eventually produce a Caliphate. The latter, the "splitters," identify categorical distinctions between, for example, global jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS who reject the legitimacy of the nation-state system and groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and even HAMAS who work within nationalist frameworks and accept the modern nation-state. Lynch, Marc. 2017. "The White House has recently hosted two very different views about how to deal with Islamism." Carnegie Middle East Center. April 28, 2017. http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/68779.

[6] Author's personal interviews with senior U.S. Government CVE officials at Departments of State and Homeland Security, March 2017.

[7] "Michael Flynn: Islam Is A 'Cancer,' 'Political Ideology' That 'Hides Behind' Religion," November 18, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzh9b_vo4vs.

[8] Gorka, Sebastian. 2016. *Defeating Jihad: The Winnable War*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing.

[9] McCants, Will. 2017. "McMaster Has the Islamophobes Worried. Good." Politico Magazine, February 23, 2017. http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/mcmaster-has-the-islamophobes-worried-good-214815.

[10] Sheline, Annelle. 2017. "Middle East Regimes are Using 'Moderate' Islam to Stay in Power," The Washington Post, March 1, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/01/middle-east-regimes-are-using-moderate-islam-to-stay-in-power/?utm_term=.1a5205c2ccb6.

[11] Karoui, Hakim. 2016. *A French Islam is Possible*. Paris: Institut Montaigne.

[12] Mandaville, Peter and Melissa Nozell. 2017. "Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism," United States Institute of Peace.