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Trump's Unwise Travel Ban

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The leaked draft of an executive order to, among other things, bar the entry of travelers from certain Muslim countries for at least thirty days immediately generated intense controversy, mixed with outrage. The final version proved to be even harsher, with a ninety-day ban. A court challenge, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, immediately followed, with a federal judge issuing a stay. In the meantime, though, hundreds of Middle Eastern travelers were stuck at airports in the United States.

Trump's order reflects a thoroughly unwise policy. Putting out the unwelcome mat to a major portion of Middle East populations is hardly a way to reduce the already strong anti-American sentiment in that region. For example, the order would effectively bar students who wish to study at American colleges and universities. Yet those young people are precisely the future opinion shapers that U.S. leaders need to cultivate to develop a friendlier attitude toward the United States and toward Western values. At a minimum, Trump's executive order would greatly retard that process.

There is also a curious selectivity in the nations targeted for this restriction. The order identified seven countries for the blacklist: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. Some of the targets are unsurprising. Given Washington's long-standing feud with Iran, for example, it would have been startling if Tehran had not been included. However, some of the others are highly questionable. Iraq has been and remains a U.S. ally in Washington's war against ISIS. Indeed, U.S. military personnel are currently supporting the Iraqi military's offensive to retake the city of Mosul. Barring Iraqi citizens from traveling to the United States would seem to be a kick in the teeth to that ally, and the leaked draft order quickly generated angry reactions in Iraq.

Other nations on the list have produced few, if any, terrorist attacks or even attempted attacks on the American homeland. A study by Cato Institute scholar Alex Nowrasteh regarding the national origins of individuals who committed terrorist attacks on U.S. soil from 1975 through 2015 indicated that the targets of Trump's order are largely misplaced. For example, no Syrian or Libyan nationals carried out such attacks. Two Somalis made attempts, but did not kill a single person, and the same was true of two Iraqis. A Yemeni national made one failed attempt. U.S. authorities thwarted terrorist forays by six Sudanese and six Iranians over that period. Once again, no fatalities occurred.

Some of the most numerous and deadly perpetrators of terrorism on American soil came from four countries: Egypt, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Yet none of those countries are covered in the travel ban. Eleven Egyptians were responsible for 162 deaths of Americans, while fourteen Pakistanis were responsible for three deaths. (However, the ending date of the study in 2015 meant that the Pakistani couple guilty of the fourteen San Bernardino killings was not included.) Two individuals from the United Arab Emirates caused 314 deaths. Finally, Saudi Arabia holds the distinction of producing the most numerous and deadly terrorists targeting the American homeland: nineteen nationals causing 2,369 deaths. Indeed, fifteen of the nineteen terrorists who conducted the devastating attacks on 9/11 were Saudi nationals.

If the Trump administration is determined to pursue the myopic policy of a travel ban on selected Muslim countries, it makes no sense to exclude the nations that are primarily responsible for terrorist attacks on the United States. Saudi Arabia is an especially glaring omission. In addition to the dominant role in the 9/11 attacks, that country has been the godfather of violent Islamic extremism generally. For decades, Riyadh has funded madrassas in Pakistan and other countries that inculcate students to hate the United States and Western values. As far back as the 1980s, Saudi officials (working with the Pakistani government) steered the vast majority of U.S. military aid earmarked for the Afghan mujahedin opposing the Soviet occupation to the most extreme Islamist factions.

Riyadh's behavior has not improved much with the passage of time. The Saudi government funded and helped equip Sunni extremist forces in both Iraq and Syria trying to unseat the Shia-led governments in those countries. Several of the Saudi-backed factions later coalesced to form ISIS. Far from being a friend or ally of the United States, as too many American political leaders and journalists tend to describe Saudi Arabia, the kingdom has probably done more than any single country to undermine American security interests.

Yet that perfidious ally is exempt from the Trump administration's executive order. That omission suggests that the travel ban has less to do with security considerations and more to do with placating xenophobic constituencies in the United States by targeting long-standing adversaries like Iran and Syria, and an assortment of weak countries that have no influential American supporters. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has achieved a disturbing degree of influence in both the Democratic and Republican parties that gives Riyadh virtual immunity from punitive measures.

The travel ban is, therefore, cowardly as well as myopic. The administration wants to punish nationals from countries that have not constituted a major terrorist threat to the American homeland. Meanwhile, Washington omits such terrorist sponsors as Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. Even worse, the administration exempts the country that has been Terrorism Central. The cynical hypocrisy of that approach is appalling.

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