



Rumored Expansion of Muslim Travel Ban Exposes Trump's Election-Year Calculus

Sasha Abramsky

November 5, 2019

Late last week, amid the welter of new details surrounding Trump's now-infamous phone call with the Ukrainian president, Team Trump tried to switch the conversation back to Trump's home turf: immigrant-bashing and anti-Muslim extremism. Unnamed administration officials let news outlets know that the president was considering expanding his Muslim travel ban to as many as four additional countries. Exactly which countries were under consideration, they didn't say.

If these rumors prove to be true, the consequences will be devastating to ever more families. Since the original Muslim travel ban was upheld by the Supreme Court last year, more than 31,000 people from the impacted countries have been denied entry visas into the United States; counted among these, as of January 1 of this year, were nearly 4,000 spouses or fiancés of U.S. citizens and more than 5,000 adopted children. Each one of these people denied entry represents a fractured family and a broken dream. By the end of the year, the combined number will grow to over 15,000, according to research by the Cato Institute. It is an unconscionable abuse of state power.

After the Muslim travel ban was upheld, the Trump administration also moved ruthlessly to curtail the ability of asylum-seekers from Central America to come north. It put enormous pressure on Mexico to lock down its southern border. It began sending many asylum seekers who did make it into the U.S. — including families with young children — back to refugee camps in Mexico while their cases were being processed. There are now at least 26,000 people waiting in Mexico until their court dates in the U.S. And, most recently, the Trump administration implemented a new rule asserting that anyone who transited through Mexico en route to the U.S. and who didn't first apply for and get rejected for asylum in Mexico, would be unable to claim asylum in the U.S. The administration has also moved to drastically curtail the refugee admissions cap, which in the next year will be 18,000, less than 20 percent of what it was when Trump came to power.

All of this has been done without congressional input. These new rules, which in practice are complete rewrites of immigration, asylum and refugee policy, will have the impact of making it ever harder for poor, nonwhite migrants to gain legal status in the United States.

Now, with an expanded travel ban — presumably to be implemented using the same national security arguments the Supreme Court upheld in its ruling on the constitutionality of the travel restrictions — the administration wants to expand this circle of misery.

A week before rumors of the expanded exclusion system began to circulate in D.C., Trump had announced, in a speech laden with bloody imagery and hyperbolic claims, that U.S. special

forces in Syria had succeeded in tracking down and killing ISIS (also known as Daesh) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In the wake of this, and with the media putting out a slew of new stories about the ghastly ISIS organization, the administration seems to have concluded that it has a window of time in which it might be possible to once again manipulate public fears about Islamic fundamentalist terrorism for partisan political advantage.

Faced with powerful, potentially fatal, political headwinds, Trump is banking on being able to stoke racial and religious animus as a way to preserve his hold on power.

For, while opinion poll research shows that strong majorities of Americans would be OK with having a Muslim neighbor, at the same time polling from earlier this autumn suggests an uptick in the percentage of Americans “very worried” that they or a close family member will be victims of a terrorist attack. More generally, an unease about the presence of large numbers of Muslims in American society remains prevalent. In fact, only 43 percent of Americans tell pollsters that they see Islam as a religion that can be a part of “mainstream” society. All of this adds up to a well of anxiety that a demagogue such as Trump knows all too well how to take advantage of.

Not surprisingly, discomfort with Islam among Republicans runs far deeper than it does within the public at large. In the run-up to last year’s mid-term elections, the centrist think tank New America conducted detailed polling on the issue: The think tank’s researchers found that 7 out of 10 Republican voters believed Islam was not compatible with “American values”; 60 percent of GOP voters said Muslim Americans weren’t as patriotic as their non-Muslim counterparts; and 56 percent said they would be concerned if a mosque or Islamic center were established in their neighborhood.

These numbers were remarkably similar to data generated in the year leading up to Trump’s election. In December 2015, with Trump touting a complete lockout of Muslims, just over three-quarters of Republican voters polled said that Islam was “un-American.”

When I interviewed Nevada caucus-goers who were supporting Trump in February 2016 for a story I wrote for The Nation, several of them told me that they believed Muslims in America should be given a choice between being killed or being exiled.

These men and women saw Trump’s inflammatory comments about Muslims and about Islam — including his egregiously untrue claim that thousands of Muslims in New Jersey danced in the streets when the World Trade Center buildings were attacked in September 2001 — as simply the candidate straight-talking. Far from being embarrassed by his language and his policies, they embraced him all the more because of his extremist language. When Trump verbally attacked Khizr and Ghazala Khan, whose son had been killed while serving in the U.S. army, during the 2016 election campaign, Trump supporters stuck with him instead of recoiling from his contemptuous behavior.

At the end of the day this cruel and tyrannical man isn’t interested in anyone’s safety or well-being but his own.

Of course, Donald Trump’s pandering to these bigotries has been extraordinarily dangerous. In each of the years that he has been president, the number of hate crimes tallied by the FBI has increased. Extremist rhetoric from the top percolates downward. When Donald Trump told crowds earlier this year that Somali-born congresswoman Ilhan Omar should “go back” to

Somalia, crowds of his supporters responded by shouting that she should be “sent back,” implying that the state itself should get into the business of deporting U.S. citizens who get on Trump’s wrong side. Omar has averred that the number of death threats she receives spikes whenever Trump attacks her.

Now, faced with powerful, potentially fatal, political headwinds, Trump is banking on being able to stoke racial and religious animus as a way to preserve his hold on power. It’s the quintessential demagogue’s calculus.

Trump’s Muslim travel ban was never really about making the U.S. and its residents safer. It was, quite simply, a dragnet designed for easy-headline posturing. Banning Yemenis, or Libyans, Syrians, Iranians, Somalis and others may have created good copy, but as a counterterrorism tool it made absolutely no sense — it targeted people because of their nationalities rather than their known affiliations with terrorist groups. So, too, the drastic restrictions on asylum and refugee admissions are all about throwing racist red meat to the conservative base.

If Trump unveils an expansion of this ban over the coming weeks, expect it to make as little moral and practical sense as the original version. It will be just more crass, bigoted, election-year posturing, more pandering to prejudice and to fear. And if Trump wins in 2020, it’s entirely possible these bans will become ever more widespread and pernicious.

Trump talked about a complete shutdown of Muslim migration into the United States as a candidate the first time around; if he thinks a push to implement this in the run-up to 2020’s election or in its aftermath will benefit him politically, he likely won’t hesitate to go down that road. For make no mistake, at the end of the day this cruel and tyrannical man isn’t interested in anyone’s safety or well-being but his own.