

American Islamism Flourishes under Trump

by Sam Westrop

On the campaign trail, presidential candidate Donald Trump spoke clearly and forcefully of the threat posed by radical Islam. During a speech in Youngstown, Ohio, in August 2016, the presidential candidate [said](#) that defeating Islamism would require a battle against its underlying ideas: “We must also speak out forcefully against a hateful ideology that provides the breeding ground for violence and terrorism to grow.”¹ He pledged that one of his first acts as president would be “to establish a Commission on Radical Islam—which will include reformist voices in the Muslim community.” Unequivocally, he articulated a mission to ensure that “support networks for radical Islam in this country will be stripped out and removed one by one.”²

Three years later, there is still no Commission on Radical Islam, despite a [detailed proposal from the Middle East Forum](#) about how it might look.³ Nor has any other



President Trump pledged that one of his first acts as president would be “to establish a Commission on Radical Islam.” Three years later, there is still no commission.

¹ *The Hill* (Washington, D.C.), [Aug. 15, 2016](#).

² [Ibid.](#)

³ Daniel Pipes and Christopher C. Hull, “[Defeating Radical Islam](#),” *The Washington Times*, Feb. 19, 2017.

body been established to tackle the problem of domestic extremism. Is the government working to tackle Islamism quietly behind the scenes? Or has this administration failed to provide the clear and forceful response it promised?

A False Promise

In the early months of 2017, hints of change were in the air. The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program was mostly shut down, with several grants initially issued under the Obama administration cancelled or returned because Islamist groups had [been deeply involved](#).⁴

But the effective closure of the CVE program quickly proved to have been an exception. As early as August 2017, just seven months into Trump's presidency, presidential advisor Sebastian Gorka, who wrote the Youngstown speech, was [pushed](#) out of the administration.⁵ Explaining his departure, Gorka [claimed](#) that "forces"⁶ within the White House had "removed any mention of Radical Islam or radical Islamic terrorism" from the president's first national security address and that he and others concerned with radical Islam had been "internally countered, systematically removed, or undermined in recent months."⁷

Meanwhile, prominent Islamist groups and operatives have not been excluded but, rather, embraced by parts of the administration. On the second day of Trump's

presidency, a traditional service held at Washington National Cathedral to mark the inauguration [featured](#) a sermon from Mohamed Magid, imam of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) and former head of the Islamist-founded Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).⁸

But, what a difference fifteen years makes. In 2002, federal agents [raided](#) ADAMS⁹ because of its [involvement](#) in a terror-financing network.¹⁰ In 2007, federal prosecutors [named](#) ISNA an unindicted co-conspirator in the largest terror finance case in U.S. history,¹¹ leading the Justice Department to [cancel](#) events at which Magid would be present.¹² Although many observers claim the cleric has since moderated, Magid still works closely with some of America's most extreme Islamist activists. In 2018, at the ADAMS annual dinner, he hosted and shared the stage with Siraj Wahhaj, the imam of the at-Taqwa mosque in Brooklyn, who has [denounced](#) homosexuals, non-Muslims, and "Satanic"

⁴ Sam Westrop, "[Countering Islamist Extremism the Right Way](#)," *The National Review* (New York), Feb. 22, 2017.

⁵ *The Hill*, [Aug. 25, 2017](#).

⁶ *Politico* (Arlington, Va.), [Aug. 25, 2017](#).

⁷ *The Hill*, [Aug. 27, 2017](#).

⁸ CNN, [Jan. 21, 2017](#).

⁹ M. Zuhdi Jasser, President, American Islamic Forum For Democracy, "[Willful Blindness: Consequences of Agency Efforts To Deemphasize Radical Islam in Combating Terrorism](#)," testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight, Agency Action, Federal Rights and Federal Courts, of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Washington, D.C., June 28, 2016.

¹⁰ Oren Litwin, "[Terrorism Financing: It's Time to Take Care of Unfinished Business](#)," *The National Review*, Oct. 6, 2017.

¹¹ Attachment A: List of [Unindicted Co-conspirators](#), United States of America vs. Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas, Dallas Division, CR No. 3:04-CR-240-G.

¹² *Newsweek*, [Aug. 7, 2007](#).

America, and has advocated jihad and the killing of adulterers.¹³

Under the current administration, both ISNA and ADAMS continue to enjoy federal contact. The United States Institute of Peace continues to [host](#) Magid.¹⁴ [Sam Brownback](#), the administration's ambassador at large for international religious freedom, and [Mark Green](#), head of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have tweeted their delight upon visiting ADAMS and meeting with Magid.¹⁵ [Brownback](#) and Department of Education officials [speak](#) at ISNA events.¹⁶ And the Pentagon still [requires](#) that clerics applying for its chaplaincy program have secured the endorsement of ISNA¹⁷—a policy [criticized](#) by leading Democratic Party senators Chuck Schumer and Dianne Feinstein as early as 2003.¹⁸

But, it is not just ISNA and ADAMS. A variety of other dangerous Islamist groups continue to enjoy gov-



Islamic Relief has been banned in the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and regions of Bangladesh. It has also been named an Islamist institution by German and Swedish officials. Yet, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Federal Emergency Management Agency list it as a partner.

¹³ See, for example, [“Siraj Wahhaj Lectures,”](#) Halal Tube.

¹⁴ [Iftar post,](#) United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., Facebook, May 23, 2019.

¹⁵ Sam Brownback, [@IRF_Ambassador,](#) Twitter, [Oct. 12, 2018;](#) Mark Green, [@rizwanjaka,](#) Twitter, [June 14, 2018.](#)

¹⁶ Dean Obeidallah, [“Why Are So Many 2020 Dems Ignoring Muslims?”](#) *The Daily Beast* (New York), Aug. 29, 2019; Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Facebook, [Jan. 19, 2019.](#)

¹⁷ [“Muslim \(IMAM\) Re-compete,”](#) beta.SAM.com, U.S. General Services Administration, Washington, D.C., Feb. 27, 2019.

¹⁸ “Terrorism: [Radical Islamic Influence of Chaplaincy](#) of the U.S. Military and Prisons,” Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, S. Hrg. 108-443, Oct. 14, 2003.

ernment approval and partnership. USAID openly urges Americans to donate to terror-linked charities such as LIFE for Relief and Development,¹⁹ the [target](#) of multiple federal terror finance investigations, which led to several convictions of its officials.²⁰ USAID also encourages donations to the Zakat Foundation of America, a charity that [funds](#) groups in Gaza linked to Hamas and is [closely tied](#) to the Islamist Turkish regime²¹ and to Islamic Relief, the [flagship financial](#)

¹⁹ [“Crisis in Syria,”](#) USAID, Aug. 12, 2019.

²⁰ Benjamin Baird, [“Life Goes on for Embattled Islamist Charity,”](#) *The Daily Caller* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 23, 2018.

²¹ Sam Westrop, [“How American Charities Fund Terrorism,”](#) *The National Review*, Jan. 12, 2017; [“ZF Executive Director Meets President Erdogan,”](#) Zakat Foundation of America, Worth, Ill., n.d.

[institution](#) of the global Muslim Brotherhood.²²

Islamic Relief is the largest Muslim charity in the Western world. Yet it has been [banned](#) in the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and regions of Bangladesh where Rohingya refugees live because of its reported radicalization efforts.²³ It has also been named a leading Islamist institution by German and Swedish officials.²⁴ Yet Islamic Relief still enjoys a close relationship with various components of the U.S. government. Both the [Department of Agriculture](#) and the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) list it as a partner.²⁵ In May, USAID [hosted](#) Islamic Relief for an *iftar* meal.²⁶ And in 2018, Acting Assistant Attorney General John Gore agreed to be the [guest of honor](#) at an Islamic Relief reception on Capitol Hill.²⁷

Other endorsements of Islamist groups announced by federal bodies include the terror-tied [Council on American-Islamic Relations \(CAIR\)](#), which was established as



The White House hosted a “Faith-Based Community Safety and Security Symposium,” attended by Vice President Mike Pence (right) and other officials. Oussama Jamal of the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations, and a prominent Islamist operative, was invited.

part of a Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas network in the United States,²⁸ and the [Islamic Circle of North America](#), which is [linked](#) to the violent South Asian Islamist movement Jamaat-e-Islami.²⁹ In addition, officials at one of CAIR’s most extreme branches, CAIR-Florida, have been [meeting](#) Department of Justice and DHS officials.³⁰

Occasionally, the government has shown itself willing to sideline Islamists when confronted. In late August 2019, the U.S.

22 [Islamic Relief: Charity, Extremism & Terror](#), Middle East Forum, Phila. Pa, June 20, 2018.

23 *The National* (Abu Dhabi), [Apr. 17, 2019](#); *BDNews24* (Dhaka), [Aug. 31, 2019](#).

24 *The National*, [Apr. 17, 2019](#); Magnus Norell, [Muslimska Brödrskapet i Sverige](#), Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, Stockholm, Nov. 2016.

25 “[Partnerships](#),” Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., Mar. 25, 2019; “[Volunteers Play an Integral Role](#) in Disaster Relief and Recovery Efforts,” FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, Washington, D.C., Sept. 18, 2017.

26 Max Finberg, @maxfinberg, Twitter, [May 31, 2019](#).

27 John Gore, acting assistant attorney general, U.S. Dept. of Justice, remarks, Capitol Hill Ramadan, Washington, D.C., [May 15, 2018](#).

28 “Council on American-Islamic Relations: [What is CAIR?](#)” Islamist Watch, Middle East Forum, Phila. Pa, n.d.

29 “Beyond Malcolm: Muslim Leadership for the 21st Century,” Message International (New York), Oct., 1996; “An IPT Investigative Report on Jamaat-e-Islami Network’s Support for Jihad and Islamism,” Investigative Project on Terrorism, June 2019.

30 Rebecca Witonsky, “[South Florida Islamists Undermine National Security by Partnering with U.S. Government Officials](#),” *PJ Media* (Camarillo, Calif.), June 6, 2019.

Census Bureau announced a partnership with CAIR, only to [terminate](#) it days later when *Fox News* asked about the arrangement, citing the Islamist organization's previous ties to the terror group Hamas.³¹

But this rejection of Islamist influence was fleeting. On September 25, the White House [hosted](#) a "Faith-Based Community Safety and Security Symposium," which was attended by Vice President Mike Pence and other administration officials.³² Oussama Jamal, secretary general of the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations (USCMO), was also [invited](#). Jamal is a prominent Islamist operative. In 2003, he [raised](#) \$50,000 for the legal defense of Sami al-Arian, the North American representative of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a designated terrorist organization. Jamal claimed a "Zionist agenda" was behind Arian's prosecution.³³ Both Jamal and the USCMO are closely tied to the Qatari and Turkish regimes.³⁴ In fact, just a few days before the White House symposium, Jamal and other leading Islamists met with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in New York.³⁵

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Funding Islamists, Ignoring Moderate Muslims

The problems of mere contact between federal officials and domestic Islamists all seem rather benign alongside the enormous amounts of federal funding wending their way to Islamist organizations under Donald Trump's presidency.

Earlier this year, the Middle East Forum reviewed millions of dollars of grants cataloged by the government's [USASpending.gov](#) website. If the government's own data is accurate, between 2017 and 2018, the amount of taxpayers' money given to organizations either influenced or controlled by Islamist activists more than [tripled](#) from \$4 million to \$13.5 million. Under the Obama administration, the amount given to Islamist-linked organizations averaged a mere \$1.7 million each year.³⁶

The bulk of monies given out were handed to the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), a [proxy](#) for Jamaat-e-Islami,³⁷ whose branch in Kashmir was recently [banned](#) by the Indian government under anti-terrorism laws.³⁸ ICNA received \$8.7 million in 2018 from the U.S. government for "disaster assistance projects." Months earlier, in 2017, an ICNA subsidiary named Helping Hand for Relief and Development—a registered 501c3 non-profit organization—openly partnered with the designated Pakistani terrorist organization

³¹ *Fox News*, [Aug. 30, 2019](#).

³² "CISA Participates in [Faith-Based Community Safety and Security](#) Symposium," *Security Magazine* (Troy, Mich.), Sept. 26, 2019.

³³ *The Chicago Tribune*, [Feb. 8, 2004](#).

³⁴ Cynthia Farahat, "[Islamists with Direct Ties to Terrorists Lobby Congress](#)," Middle East Forum, Phila. Pa, n.d.

³⁵ "[Islamic Movement Leadership Penetrates the Trump White House](#)," Center for Security Policy, Washington, D.C., Oct. 4, 2019.

³⁶ "[SQL Database Downloads](#)," USASpending.gov.

³⁷ [Islamic Circle of North America \(ICNA\)](#), The Investigative Project on Terrorism, June 2019.

³⁸ *India Today* (New Delhi), [Mar. 2, 2019](#).

Lashkar-e-Taiba, which was [closely involved](#) with the deadly 2008 Mumbai terror attack.³⁹ There is no evidence of any current or past investigation into this flagrant breach of the law.

Other recipients of government funding under the current administration include a grant of \$800,000 to Islamic Relief; \$780,000 to the Islamic Institute of Knowledge, which is [linked](#) to Hezbollah and the Iranian regime;⁴⁰ and \$160,000 to branches of the Muslim American Society, the Muslim Brotherhood's leading activist organization in the United States, whose Philadelphia branch recently [broadcast](#) footage of children at one of its centers happily singing about plans to "chop off [the] heads" of Jews.⁴¹

Again, reformist and moderate Muslim groups have been largely marginalized. Since 2017, the Middle East Forum [found](#) that only 15 percent of federal grants to domestic Muslim organizations has been given to Muslim groups free of Islamist influence.⁴²

Could this habit of working with Islamists be the result of politicians and civil servants just not knowing any better? It is certainly possible that some, or even all, of

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the monies distributed under Trump were initially approved under Obama. But it is already known that the current administration cancelled

Obama-era grants issued through the disastrous Countering Violent Extremism program. Why were similar reviews not conducted in other federal departments and agencies?

While Islamists remain the beneficiaries of federal largesse, reformist Muslims do not appear to have been embraced at all despite Trump's 2016 pledge. Speaking to the Middle East Forum, leading reformist writer and activist Shireen Qudosi said America needs

a powerful counter message against Islamists from within the Muslim world. That counter message is Muslim reform, and many of us are already in North America on the frontlines in the ideological war. ... Since Trump's presidency, American Islamists have been ascending to political power and winning the cultural narrative tied to a larger effort to undermine American sovereignty. It's not enough to simply beat Islamists; the ideology needs to be annihilated, and we do that by empowering Muslim free thinkers in our generation.⁴³

Some Muslim activists are, nevertheless, optimistic. Oz Sultan, who served as an advisor on cybersecurity and Middle Eastern affairs for Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, argues that,

³⁹ Steven Tankel, "[Ten Years after Mumbai, the Group Responsible Is Deadlier Than Ever](#)," *War on the Rocks* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 26, 2018.

⁴⁰ "[SQL Database Downloads](#)," USASpending.gov; Sam Westrop, "New Research Uncovers \$41 Million of [U.S. Taxpayer-Subsidized Islamism](#)," *The Daily Wire* (Sherman Oaks, Calif.), May 1, 2019.

⁴¹ *Philly Voice* (Philadelphia), [May 6, 2019](#).

⁴² "[SQL Database Downloads](#)," USASpending.gov.

⁴³ Author e-mail correspondence with Shireen Qudosi, Aug. 16, 2019.

the State Department and the administration are now beginning to talk to people in the Muslim community. And Pompeo is beginning to work with the Muslim community to forge relationships that have been needed for a very long period of time.⁴⁴

In Obama's Footsteps?

In October 2018, the Trump administration [published](#) its “National Strategy for Counterterrorism.”⁴⁵ Although lightly peppered with the pugnacious language expected of President Trump, critics [noted](#) that much of the document could have been written by any centrist government.⁴⁶

This document, along with other pronouncements by Trump and federal officials, does mark a significant change from the Obama administration in one key way: It names radical Islam as a threat. This is a far cry from the Obama administration's clear [policy](#) to avoid mentioning Islam most of the time when discussing terrorism⁴⁷—an approach that made it impossible for federal agencies to tackle Islamist ideology or support Muslim reformers.

Despite this welcome change in messaging, the administration's counterterrorism strategy did not actually ex-



While some Islamist-influenced domestic initiatives to counter extremism were shut down, other State Department programs have continued, such as a 2018 department grant to tackle radicalization by studying “gender identities” and toxic masculinity in Kenya.

pand on Trump's 2016 commitment to tackle Islamist ideology and work with reformers. The few references to domestic extremism only blame the Internet for radicalization (an oft-cited but never truly justified claim) and express a vague intention to form “partnerships” with American Muslims, whom it never defines—a necessity given the enormous diversity of American [Islam](#) and Islamism. In this regard, the Trump counterterror doctrine appears little different from the counterterror strategies it succeeded.

In addition, rhetoric from Trump's advisors has been mixed. While serving as the president's national security advisor, H.R. McMaster did offer strong words on the role of Qatar and Turkey, [stating](#) that the two countries had become the chief sponsors of international Islamism and conceding that the United States “didn't pay enough attention” to how radical Islamist ideology uses “charities, madrassas and other social

⁴⁴ Author e-mail correspondence with Oz Sultan, Aug. 30, 2019.

⁴⁵ “[National Strategy for Counterterrorism](#) of the United States of America,” The White House, Washington, D.C., Oct. 2018.

⁴⁶ James Stavridis, “[Trump's National Security Strategy](#) Is Shockingly Normal,” *Bloomberg Opinion* (New York), Dec. 18, 2017.

⁴⁷ CNN, [Sept. 29, 2016](#).

organizations.”⁴⁸ Conversely, however, McMaster also [re-portedly](#) told staff not to use the label “radical Islam” and has echoed the disingenuous, un-helpful claim that ISIS is “un-Islamic.”⁴⁹

Trump specifically promised an ideological effort. Domestically, nothing appears to have been done. Internationally, his administration mostly continued questionable Obama-era CVE programs. While Islamist-influenced domestic CVE initiatives were shut down, nonsensical State Department CVE programs endured, [such as](#) a 2018 State Department grant aimed at tackling radicalization by studying “gender identities” and toxic masculinity in Kenya.⁵⁰

Given the much-discussed audacity of the current administration, many Americans hope there exists the possibility of change in policy areas from which other administrations would surely shy away. And yet the question of domestic extremism seems to be the one area in which the current administration has been markedly cautious despite it being subject to some of Trump’s most fervent rhetoric.

This might be because of ideological splits in the White House; John Bolton’s recent departure is a particularly [vivid example](#) of that.⁵¹ Or perhaps, the media furor around the purported “surge” of “white supremacist” attacks caused the administration to buckle and avoid focusing too closely on radical Islam. Few sensible observers can look at the recent horrors of far-right violence—which has [not significantly increased](#) in the last thirty

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years⁵²—and claim that white supremacists threaten anything like the potential casualty count or society-changing

effects of international and domestic Islamism.

What’s Needed Now

In Youngstown, Trump promised change. He dared state the name of a threat whose very existence the Obama administration preferred to deny. But beyond the welcome change in rhetoric, there has been a consistent lack of action from the administration. There is no Commission on Radical Islam; reformist Muslims have not been appointed to advisory positions or promoted in other ways; support networks for radical Islam remain intact, and leading Islamist organizations continue to enjoy government endorsement and patronage.

Islamism in America is flourishing. Not only have Islamist groups carefully placed themselves at the forefront of the progressivist legal and political fight against the Trump administration’s policies, these same Islamist groups continue to enjoy federal support. U.S. officials must recognize the dangers inherent in all forms of Islamism, end all federal backing for such groups, and champion Muslim reformists.

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⁴⁸ *The National*, [Dec. 14, 2017](#).

⁴⁹ *The Washington Post*, [Mar. 1, 2017](#).

⁵⁰ *Fox News*, [Jan. 22, 2018](#).

⁵¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, [Oct. 21, 2019](#).

⁵² *Ibid.*, [Apr. 5, 2019](#).