

What can the UK learn from President Trump's travel ban?

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The US travel ban has sparked outrage both within and outside the country. The alleged motive behind it – to protect the nation from terrorists – is of particular importance to the UK, where terrorism also remains a key concern since 9/11. [Lee Jarvis](#) explains what lessons Britain can take from the situation.



On Friday 27 January, President Trump signed his Executive Order introducing a series of 'extreme vetting' measures, whose provisions include prohibiting travel to the United States from seven, predominantly Muslim states, and suspending the US' wider refugee programme. The [order](#) – titled *Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States* – immediately, and predictably, proved divisive and chaotic. Protests [have been organised](#) across the world, including the UK; online frustration coalesced around the now-familiar #MuslimBan; the Acting Attorney General [has been sacked](#) amidst accusations of 'betrayal' after she instructed officials not to enforce the order; families have been inconvenienced and much worse; and the long-term consequences for national and international security – to say nothing of human rights and democracy – remain unknown.

Although we should not lose sight of the step-change signalled by this blanket ban, it might be useful to situate this Executive Order in a wider, post-9/11 context, of counter-terrorism that extends beyond the US. This is worth doing not to diminish its absurdity: [as has been widely noted](#), the immediate target states – Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, and Somalia – have collectively spawned a negligible number of terrorist incidents within the US to date. Rather, because so doing might help to highlight continuities within the security paradigms in what used to be termed the 'war on terror'; and, to point to potential lessons for the United Kingdom. Four thoughts immediately come to mind.



Blurring the lines between terrorism and other risks

First, the ban reinforces the persistently ambiguous designation of terrorism as a security threat. On the one hand, this makes terrorism unique in its exceptionality (and so requires extraordinary responses such as bans, border walls, and – for Trump, quite possibly – [torture](#)). On the other hand, it makes it equivalent to – perhaps even interchangeable with – other contemporary security challenges, including refugeeism and transnational crime. So, it's not only that measures such as travel bans promise to target a wide range of risks whose resemblances might seem less than familial; it is the very blurriness of the distinctions between such risks – such that refugees might also be, or might also become, terrorists – that renders 'us' vulnerable and in need of new forms of protection.

The multiple functions of the ban

Second is the questionable importance of considerations of effectiveness in evaluating the ban. Measures introduced to counter terrorism often seek to fulfil multiple functions at once: to increase national security, reassure anxious publics, communicate support to allies, or communicate resolve to adversaries. President Trump's travel ban, in other words, has targets beyond reducing the '[likelihood that terrorists will use any means possible to enter the United States](#)'. None of this is to say that the ban's questionable effectiveness for countering terrorism should not be highlighted and critiqued. It should. But it does suggest that demonstrating the ban's dubious effectiveness does not, necessarily and in itself, end the argument.

The long-term implications

Third, the travel ban may well have long-term implications for how the US is viewed by citizens, residents, or visitors within and beyond its borders. [A research project I was part of with Michael Lister](#) uncovered a huge range of public anxieties around the UK's contemporary menu of counter-terrorism powers. These included concerns that such powers were engendering a culture of suspicion; discriminated against members of minority communities; did little to make the UK more safe from terrorism; and had considerable civil liberty implications, including around political participation and freedoms of speech. The UK and US are, of course, different political entities with distinct experiences of political violence, citizenship, and immigration. Yet, the wide-ranging and often profound concerns raised by some of the citizens within our research were articulated, typically, in the context of far less draconian initiatives than those we have seen emanating from the United States over the last week or so.

The 'us' and 'them' distinction

Finally, in some ways the ban seeks to reify a distinction between inside and outside – between 'us' and 'them' – which has been central to the contemporary counter-terrorism experience on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US context, the ban builds upon President Bush's earlier warning, shortly after 9/11, about the '[evil folks \[who\] still lurk out there](#)'. In the UK – particularly following the London bombings of 7 July 2005 – the inside/outside distinction has been primarily a normative rather than spatial one: the primary threat being one represented by those 'radicalised' individuals who would seek to harm 'our' values and ways of life as well as our citizens.

A problem in both of these cases is that neat distinctions between inside and outside rarely remain neat. People and ideas continue to cross borders – whether based on geography or identity – and the policing of those borders seldom proceeds without collateral damage – whether in the creation of 'suspect communities' or actual border deaths of would-be migrants. A cautionary note, therefore, might be taken from the [on-going frustrations faced in the UK government's Counter-Extremism Bill](#). This is a Bill which appears to continue to fail to satisfactorily define its subject – 'British values' – *and* its object – 'extremism' – and one which continues to attract criticism for its potentially discriminatory manifestations. President Trump's ban may face fewer definitional challenges, yet the security it promises to an(other) imaginary community is likely to prove as elusive.

About the Author

[Lee Jarvis](#) is Reader in International Security at the University of East Anglia. His books include *Security: A Critical Introduction* (with Jack Holland) and *Anti-terrorism, Citizenship and Security* (with Michael Lister). He is currently PI on the RCUK-funded project [British \[Muslim\] Values](#).

