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Carnival sideshow of Trump's tweets confuses US foreign policy

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“The disturbing tweets will not help combat Islamic-inspired terrorism nor advance US foreign policy interests and objectives in the Middle East.”

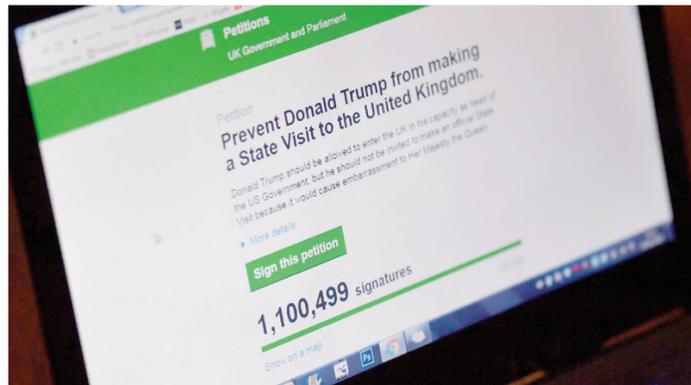
US President Donald Trump has devoted much of his time as commander-in-chief to communicating with his 40 million Twitter followers, who are predominantly members of his political base. The president's tweets have become like a carnival sideshow in American politics, 140-character insights into Trump's mind.

The presidential tweets predictably take one of several forms: Boasting about real (or fantasised) Trump accomplishments; excoriating, often in libellous and slur-filled language, political opponents; picking fights where none previously existed, such as against US professional athletes; and punishing members of his own administration, such as Attorney General Jeff Sessions, when they don't toe his line.

One objective, however, often runs through all his tweets: stoking fear.

Demagogues – and let's call Trump what he is – base their power on arousing popular emotions, passions, prejudices and, especially, fears. The classic demagogue message is: “You should be very afraid and only I can make you safe.”

Trump's recent tweet – in which he retweeted three videos purporting to show Muslim-inspired terrorist acts – is a case in point. One of the videos was outright “fake news” – it simply showed two Dutch teens fighting, with no indication that either was Muslim or inspired by Islam. The other two apparently were real, one being an al-Qaeda propaganda video that has been around for years. The source of the videos was a far-right-wing, ethno-nationalist UK organisation that has faced criminal charges for its actions.



Blowback. A laptop screen displays a parliamentary petition on the website of the British government demanding Britain cancel a planned state visit by US President Donald Trump. (AFP)

These tweets raise many questions: Why did Trump choose now to bring attention to extremist Muslim violence? He could as easily have retweeted videos of Muslim Rohingya refugees who have been violently driven out of Myanmar or Palestinian children being brutally assaulted by Israeli soldiers or a born-in-America gunman slaughtering innocents at a music concert in Las Vegas. Those atrocities, however, apparently do not inspire fear among Trump's base.

And what does Trump's validating use of videos being spread by a patently racist British organisation say about the US president's tolerance of ethnic hatred and incitement? Remember, this is the same person who said that the neo-Nazi protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, included “fine people.”

Another question: In the Dutch video – the one proved to be fraudulent – Trump referred to the supposed perpetrator as a “Muslim migrant.” Not a terrorist but a migrant.

Does this suggest that Trump intends these videos to signal support for anti-immigrant parties in Europe – as well as for his domestic agenda of restricting Muslim immigration to the United States?

Ironically, these tweets may make it harder for him to achieve the latter goal as they indicate his proposed immigration restrictions are indeed based on religion, a violation of the US Constitution.

Did Trump consider the possible consequences of spreading these videos? For example, could his tweets influence US policies and goals in the Arab and Muslim worlds or make US diplomats and citizens a greater target of terrorism? What about the more than 3 million US Muslim citizens, as well as visa-holders from Muslim countries who attend US universities or work in jobs such as medicine and engineering? Have their odds of being victims of hate crimes risen in the wake of Trump's tweets?

It is doubtful that Trump considered any of these potential consequences.

Whatever one feels about Trump's tweets or the justification for sending them, it is certain that these disturbing tweets will in no way help to combat Islamic-inspired terrorism nor advance US foreign policy interests and objectives in the Middle East.

Speaking of US foreign policy interests and objectives, just hours after Trump's tweets, rumours erupted in Washington that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was likely to soon be replaced by CIA Director Mike Pompeo. Trump and Tillerson have rarely been on the same foreign policy page on major issues from Iran to North Korea and Trump's displeasure with his top diplomat has been apparent for some time.

In many ways, Trump and Tillerson were a bad fit from the get-go. Trump boasts of being a powerful CEO but, in fact, headed a privately held family real estate empire. Tillerson is the real thing, having steered one of the world's largest publicly listed companies – Exxon Mobil – with thousands of employees. Trump loves to be the bombastic centre of attention; Tillerson built his business career on quiet negotiations.

Pompeo is a Trump loyalist and avid supporter of the White House line on most foreign policy positions. Unlike Tillerson, he is not used to being in charge and will not push back against the president. The good news, therefore, is that the US administration would likely speak in a more unified voice with Pompeo at the State Department. The bad news: That voice would be the unfiltered and unchecked opinions of Donald Trump.

Iraqi Kurds should pursue coexistence, not secession

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“The reality is that the peshmerga are divided by party and not national loyalties.”

It has been about two months since Iraq's Kurds started their emotional roller coaster journey from glimmers of independence to the dark chasms of defeat and the reality that they will be stuck with federal rule from Baghdad. The Kurds had never felt so strong and self-assured and likely believed that they could achieve anything.

However, reality proved that no amount of self-belief could surmount the insurmountable. They are left with their leadership in disarray and factionalism tearing what remains of that leadership apart.

How did it all go so horribly wrong for Iraq's Kurds? Ever since the Islamic State (ISIS) burst onto the scene in a violent orgy of death and mayhem in 2014, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which rules the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, had actually been a net beneficiary of the terror group's onslaught. Not only were rival Iraqi government forces roundly defeated by ISIS, they were also put to flight, with thousands of soldiers deserting and abandoning their posts in the face of ISIS's rapid advance.

One of the areas the Iraqi government abandoned was Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Long claimed to be the “Kurdish Jerusalem,” the KRG deployed its militia, the peshmerga, to the oil-rich and ethnically diverse

city and, with the aid of extensive US air support, took control of Kirkuk. The capture of Kirkuk was the realisation of a long-held Kurdish separatist dream. It inflated the Kurds' self-confidence to dangerous levels. This would cause them serious trouble three years later.

Not only did the KRG under then-President Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), hold Kirkuk, it also cut a deal with Turkey to export some of Kirkuk's vast oil resources without Baghdad's authority. Even though the KRG had financial problems due to the federal government's decision to withhold the Kurds' 17% share of the Iraqi budget, Erbil did not seem to mind. It was acting as a state in all but name and selling oil to international markets via Ankara's good offices, including to Israel.

Throughout the 3-year conflict against ISIS, Baghdad moaned and complained but could not really do much. Its resources were being expended on fighting ISIS, as well as financing the corruption within the government's halls of power. Also, the federal authorities had little support, as the United States and Turkey stood by Erbil and Iran had little appetite to intervene on Iraq's behalf while fighting ISIS in Iraq and assisting Syrian President Bashar Assad in slaughtering his own people.

This changed when the Kurdish

leadership, in its hubris, miscalculated international support for secession from Iraq and called for an independence vote, including in areas disputed between Erbil and Baghdad. The call for independence was also to mask the KRG's cash problems and came about under pressure from the KDP's rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is closely linked to Iran. Hind-sight is always 20/20 but it is doubtful that Barzani would have called the referendum if he knew that the PUK would ultimately betray not only him but the 92% who voted “yes” to secede from Iraq.

While people often imagine the peshmerga is an effective and united force, it is anything but. This mythology was encouraged by the US-led coalition, which often described its Kurdish allies as “the most effective force on the ground” against ISIS. However, the peshmerga is divided by party and not national loyalties and, without US air support, it would have been mauled by ISIS exactly as the Iraqi Army was in 2014.

As it turned out, the PUK encouraged the referendum while secretly using it as an opportunity to bring about the downfall of Barzani. Members of the Talabani family, who have led the PUK since its inception, felt that Barzani controlled too much while they had too little. When

the leader of Iran's al-Quds force, Major-General Qassem Soleimani, knocked on their door, they were only too happy to oblige him and ordered their peshmerga fighters to hand over military installations to the advancing Iraqi forces without a shot being fired.

By October 16, it was all over, as the KDP peshmerga was surrounded, outgunned and outmanned in Kirkuk. The rapidity with which its forces abandoned their apparent Jerusalem should serve as a remarkable reminder to all how symbolism and ideology only last for as long as one group feels empowered. The second the Kurds realised that no one was coming to save them this time, they abandoned the city that they said they would die for.

After Barzani resigned following his failure to realise Kurdish independence and the shrinking of the KRG's territory by a woeful 40%, his successors have been making offers to Baghdad to surrender all claims to any oil fields, as well as to hand over control of all international borders to the federal government. While the Kurds will likely not abandon hopes for independence any time soon, the humiliation they have felt even when they were at their strongest will make them consider mutual coexistence with their Arab and Turkmen countrymen as being the best long-term option.

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