

Trump's far-right retweets draw British ire

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Anglo-American relations appeared to take a turn for the worse after US President Donald Trump retweeted videos shared by the far-right, anti-Muslim group Britain First, with many calling for a forthcoming state visit by the US president to the United Kingdom to be called off.

"After this latest incident, it is increasingly clear that any official visit at all from President Trump to Britain would not be welcomed," said London Mayor Sadiq Khan, who had previously called for the government to rescind an as-yet unscheduled state visit by Trump.

"The prime minister of our country should be using any influence she and her government claim to have with the president and his administration to ask him to delete these tweets and to apologise to the British people," he added.

Trump's retweets prompted a rare admonishment from 10 Downing Street. A statement released by Prime Minister Theresa May's office described Trump's actions as "wrong" but did not address calls for a state visit to be cancelled.

In a late-night retweet directed personally at the prime minister – but notably sent to the wrong Theresa May on Twitter – Trump said: "Theresa May, don't focus on me, focus on the destructive Radical Islamic Terrorism that is taking place within the United Kingdom. We are doing just fine!"

The British prime minister addressed the crisis during a visit to Amman, saying she was not afraid to criticise the US president and reiterating British criticism

of the retweets.

"I'm very clear that retweeting from Britain First was the wrong thing to do. Britain First is a hateful organisation. It seeks to spread mistrust and division in our communities. It stands against common British decency," May said.

The anti-Muslim videos retweeted by Trump to his nearly 44 million followers from the account of Britain First deputy leader Jayda Fransen purportedly show a Muslim migrant attacking a Dutch boy on crutches, a Muslim destroying a statue of the Virgin Mary and an Islamist mob throwing a teenager off a roof.

It is believed that the first video – "Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches!" – was fake news, with the aggressor in the video not actually a Muslim or migrant, Dutch media reported.

The second video – "Muslim destroying a statue of the Virgin Mary!" – is believed to show extremist cleric Omar Gharba, suspected of links with the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front in Syria in 2013.

The third video – "Islamist mob pushes teenage boy off roof and beats him to death!" – is believed to have been filmed during the ouster of Islamist Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi in 2013. Mahmoud Ramadan was found guilty of the attack and executed in 2015. Dozens of others were jailed for their involvement in the boy's death.

Fransen, 31, has a history of anti-Muslim rhetoric and is facing two trials for religiously aggravated harassment and for using threatening and abusive language. She was arrested and fined in 2016 for harassing a Muslim woman wearing a hijab.

British Muslim groups expressed concern over Trump's retweeting



Screechy retweets. The logo of the social networking website Twitter displayed on a computer screen in London.

(AFP)

Britain First content. "This is the clearest endorsement yet from the US president of the far-right and their vile anti-Muslim propaganda. We cannot give such bigotry a free pass. We hope our prime minister and home secretary will distance the UK from Mr Trump and his com-

ments and will reiterate the government's abhorrence to all forms of extremism," a statement from the Muslim Council of Britain said.

Tell MAMA, a national project that records and measures anti-Muslim incidents in Britain, also condemned Trump's retweets.

"Tell MAMA strongly condemns the actions of Donald Trump as the politics of Britain First has no place in our society, given their extreme view towards Muslims, the Romani and other communities, where they seek to sow division over dialogue, which promotes a vision of this country that is at odds with any sense of common decency, pluralism or religious and cultural tolerance," a statement said.

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"Today is a sad demonstration of how far extremism has moved further into the mainstream," the statement added.

The furore surrounding Trump's retweets led to an urgent question in parliament, with Home Secretary Amber Rudd saying the government would not withdraw an invitation for Trump to visit the United Kingdom but tacitly acknowledging that any visit would likely be delayed.

"An invitation has been extended and accepted... [but] the dates and the precise arrangements have yet to be agreed," she said.

Mahmud el-Shafey is an Arab Weekly correspondent in London.

Poll shows better image for Russia in the Middle East as US standing erodes

Thomas Seibert

Washington

People polled across the Middle East see Russia as an ascendant power in the region while the image of the United States has darkened, a poll indicates.

The survey comes as US President Donald Trump faces accusations of fanning anti-Muslim sentiments by sharing right-wing-extremist propaganda videos on Twitter.

Russia's military support starting in 2015 prevented the defeat of Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces. That, along with Russian President Vladimir Putin emerging as a potential broker of a deal ending the war and creating a post-war order, boosted Moscow's profile in the Middle East. The poll said majorities of people questioned in nine countries in the region said it was important to have good relations with Moscow.

In Turkey, 100% of respondents said good ties with Moscow were key, up from 24% in 2016.

The poll, by Zogby Research Services, was conducted in August and September in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates with more than 7,800 respondents who were surveyed mostly in face-to-face interviews. The poll was commissioned by the Sir Bani Yas Forum, convened annually in the UAE.

"If Putin has done anything, he has established Russia as a player

in the region," James Zogby, managing director of Zogby Research Services and president of the Arab American Institute, said during the presentation of the poll at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

Russia gained in the power perception ratings despite its role in the Syrian war being seen negatively in most countries. Most respondents said they did not think peace in Syria was possible with Assad, Russia's ally, staying in power.

Good ties with the United States were seen as more important than they were a year ago by most respondents. Turkey again was the outlier with 100% of those asked saying good relations with Washington were crucial.

"In almost every country the percentages of those who say it is important to have good relations with the United States and Russia are higher than they were in 2016," Zogby said in a summary of the poll results.

Trump's stance towards the Muslim world raised concerns in the region, the survey suggested. Most people polled in Egypt (55%) and pluralities in the Palestinian territories (44%) and Iran (39%) said changes under Trump had been negative.

"The policies of the new Trump administration towards any area of the Middle East are seen as positive only in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey," Zogby said. "Egyptians and Palestinians are the most negatively inclined towards the Trump policies, with the attitudes of the Lebanese, Jordanians and Iraqis mixed. Egyptians and Turks are the most opposed to the



Trump policy towards Iran."

He added that strong majorities in almost all countries surveyed said they did not believe that Trump would achieve peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Some perceptions of the US role in the region have roots that pre-date Trump's election by many years, Zogby said, drawing attention to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. "I don't think that anyone of us will be able to fathom the depth of the error of the Iraq war and what it did to the region and the consequences of basically weakening US standing" as well as the "unleashing of Iran," he said.

Trump has made efforts to regain the trust of Gulf Arab countries and a staunchly anti-Iranian stance is the heart of his Middle East policy. He has vowed to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unconfirmed media reports said Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and Middle East envoy, is to soon present an outline of the administration's peace initiative.

Trump caused outrage by retweeting three video clips of the right-wing UK group Britain First that purportedly showed violence by Islamist extremists. One of the clips, in which a dark-haired youth attacks a blonde teenager on crutches and which was presented as an attack by a Muslim migrant in the Netherlands, was exposed as fake by Dutch authorities. The Dutch Embassy in Washington said the violence took place between two teenagers who were born and

raised in the Netherlands.

The other videos show a man in Islamic clothes smashing a statue of the Virgin Mary and an alleged Islamist mob killing a boy. The New York Times said the clips showed 4-year-old events from Syria and Egypt.

Arab-American and Muslim rights groups in the United States said Trump was, in effect, calling on his supporters to attack Muslims; the White House said the president was trying to draw attention to the importance of border security.

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Another Zogby poll showed favourable opinions in the United States of Arabs have risen 7% since July. For Muslims, the increase is 9%, the Arab American Institute said in a statement announcing the poll's December 5 publication.

"A majority of Americans also hold favourable opinions of both Arab Americans and American Muslims. These upticks are the result of a more positive attitude among Democrats and Independents in the face of an atmosphere of heightened xenophobia and documented increase in reported hate crimes," the statement said.