


Nov 04, 2016 by [Neal Rosendorf](#)

A State's Affairs and Affairs of State: Arizona's Immigration Law ^[1]

It's hard to tell whether Arizona's reputation at home and abroad is going to be damaged more by enactment on April 23rd of the state's draconian new immigration law or by the WE cable network's new reality program "Sunset Days," a sort of *Geriatrics Gone Wild* in a Phoenix-area retirement community. But for purposes of this essay, let's assume it's the new law, which has been denounced by no less than the hard-nosed sheriff of Arizona's Pima County as "unwise, stupid and it's racist."

SB 1070, the "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act," has spurred considerable high-profile international criticism of Arizona. José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the Organization of American States, has declared that "this law would make immigration equivalent with crime and create foundations for racial discrimination which we consider unacceptable." [Human Rights Watch](#) has also weighed in, stating that SB 1070 "violates an international anti-racism treaty that Arizona state officials are obligated to uphold." The staid—and globally ubiquitous—*Economist* has excoriated the Arizona statute as "Hysterical Nativism: A Conservative Border State is at Risk of Becoming a Police State."

But the injury Arizona is inflicting with SB 1070 is not merely upon itself. The law also has the potential to diminish American soft power, the international power of persuasion and attraction. As was the case during the Civil Rights era  a half-century ago, the policies of individual states or regions can have significant foreign relations effects.

Here are just three examples.

First, SB 1070 provides adversaries with a handy cudgel to wield against the U.S. As journalist Mort Rosenblum has noted, Al Jazeera made the new law its lead topic when the story broke, and they have continued their coverage since then. China's official Xinhua news agency has gleefully reported that the "Arizona Immigration Bill Further Divides U.S." Cuban propaganda media declared that the law "appears to have been written by Nazi Germany or Apartheid South Africa," which might seem overblown except that the Catholic Archbishop of Los Angeles has described SB 1070 in similar terms. And Hugo Chavez's Venezuela has added the criticism that the law "is inconsistent with human rights....an ongoing violation against our Latin American compatriots."

Second, and related to the previous example, the Arizona law will erode American moral authority, especially if other states follow the Grand Canyon State's example. This, in turn, makes it harder for the U.S. to engage in important foreign policy efforts such as advocating tolerance and civil rights for minorities like the Uighurs and Tibetans in China, Sunnis in Iraq, Arabs in Israel, Baha'is in Iran, and Chechens in Russia. Even before the enactment of SB 1070 the Kremlin swatted away the most recent U.S. State Department Human Rights Report

as rank hypocrisy, coming from a country rife with "racism and xenophobia toward migrants." This kind of dismissive response to U.S. human rights advocacy will only get easier in the wake of the Arizona law.

Third, the Arizona Law will dissuade many foreign students from attending American colleges and universities, which figures like Joseph Nye and Colin Powell identify as a key U.S. soft power vector. Dr. Ángel Cabrera, the president of the Glendale, Arizona-based Thunderbird School of Global Management, one of the world's top-ranked business schools, which draws more than half of its student body from outside the U.S., is anxious that SB 1070 runs completely counter to his institution's mission and interests: "The whole message of the school is that we are an open place....You want to give a message as Arizona as an open land of opportunity. This is a big blow to our brand." Similar concerns are being raised by the state's public colleges and universities, with the University of Arizona's President reporting, "We have already begun to feel an impact from SB1070." For the moment the negative soft power effect is limited to Arizona, but again, the results will be greatly multiplied if SB1070 is emulated elsewhere in the U.S.

It's unfortunate that Arizona has taken a starkly different path from its eastern neighbor New Mexico, a state that explicitly celebrates its ethnic diversity. The promotional literature for Santa Fe's current 400th anniversary celebration touts the New Mexican capital's history as an Indian settlement, Spanish capital, Mexican capital, and U.S. state capital over the past four-plus centuries. New Mexico's multi-cultural tradition contributes mightily to the U.S. State Department's use of Santa Fe as a regular stop on its International Visitor Leadership Program—just one example of New Mexico as a U.S. soft power asset. (For other examples see my earlier CPD essay on the subject.) Given New Mexico's heritage, it's not surprising that both Governor Bill Richardson and Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish, the presumptive Democratic gubernatorial candidate in the upcoming election, have come out strongly against the Arizona law.

Localities in the U.S. all too often act in what they believe is their parochial interest, without considering the larger ramifications of their internal policies. But the international scrutiny of Arizona SB 1070 is a reminder of how closely the world watches America—not just Washington, but the individual states as well.

The equation is simple. When the world perceives America to be living up to its ideals, it enhances soft power. When the world sees America falling short of its ideals—and that's the effect of the Arizona law—soft power goes down. We can only hope that other states will think twice before going down Arizona's restrictionist path and causing a full-blown American soft power crisis.
