



U.S. Approves Far Fewer Muslim Refugees, Immigrants, & Travelers

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President Trump's campaign promise to ban all Muslim immigration will play an important role in the arguments against his "travel ban" executive order at the Supreme Court this week. While Trump later clarified that the "Muslim ban" actually referred to more targeted policies-such as the ban on certain countries and other "extreme vetting" measures-he consistently argued that the goals of the Muslim ban and these other policies were the same. It is now apparent that these policies are working.

91 Percent Drop in Muslim Refugees

During the campaign, Trump referred to Muslim refugees as a "Trojan horse" that could bring down the United States from the inside. Not surprisingly then, Muslim refugees have seen their numbers slashed most dramatically. From October 2015 through December 2016 ("FY 2016"), monthly arrivals of Muslim refugees averaged 3,076. From January 2017 through October 2017 ("FY 2017"), they fell to 951 per month. During the first six months of FY 2018, they have fallen to just 275 per month-91 percent below their rate in FY 2016. Sunni Muslims have seen their numbers cut by 98 percent and Shi'ite Muslims by 86 percent.

At the same time, however, President Trump is not keeping his promise to prioritize Christian refugees. Their numbers have plummeted as well, falling 63 percent from 2016 to 2018. Nonetheless, Muslims were disproportionately affected. In 2016, one in two refugees were Muslim, while just 1 in 6 were in 2018.

26 Percent Drop in Immigrants from Majority Muslim Countries

The State Department issues visas to immigrants-i.e. permanent residents-and nonimmigrants or temporary visitors, guest workers, and students. It does not record the religious affiliation of immigrant visa applicants, but its data indicate a substantial decline in immigrant visa approvals for nationals from the 48 majority Muslim countries-more than a quarter below the prior rate.

In Fiscal Year 2016 ("FY 2016"), immigrants from majority Muslim countries averaged 9,787 permanent residency visas per month. The State Department has only published monthly data starting in March 2017, but from March 2017 to September 2017 ("FY 2017"), monthly arrivals fell to an average of 8,366. From October 2017 to February 2018 ("FY 2018"), they

averaged just 7,241-26 percent below the rate for FY 2016. The share of immigrants from majority Muslim countries also fell from 19 percent to 16 percent.

32 Percent Drop in Temporary Visa Issuances from Majority Muslim Countries

Temporary visa applicants also do not tell the State Department their religious affiliation, but the department's data show a large decline in approvals for nationals of the 48 majority Muslim countries-nearly a third below the prior rate. In Fiscal Year 2016 ("FY 2016"), travelers from majority Muslim countries averaged 71,407 visa approvals per month. The State Department has only published monthly data starting in March 2017, but from March 2017 to September 2017 ("FY 2017"), monthly arrivals averaged 8,366. From October 2017 to February 2018 ("FY 2018"), they fell to 7,241-26 percent below the rate for FY 2016. The share of travelers from these countries also fell from 8.3 percent to 7.5 percent.

As I have noted before, during the last decade, majority Muslim countries have never-even during the recession-seen temporary visa issuances fall by more than 1 percent in a single year and immigrant visas never more than 7 percent. From 2007 to 2016, temporary visa approvals for nationals of these countries actually grew 8 percent annually and permanent visas 9 percent annually. Again, compared to the expected increases, the declines are even more remarkable.

"Travel Ban" Countries: 60 Percent Drop in Both Temporary & Immigrant Visas

Of the 48 majority Muslim countries, 33 saw immigrant visas fall, while 45 saw temporary visa numbers decline (excepting Albania, Kosovo, and the Gambia). Some nationalities were much more negatively affected than others. President Trump has, at various times, placed eight majority Muslim countries on his "travel ban" lists: Iraq (January 2017 to March 2017), Sudan (January 2017 to September 2017), Chad (September 2017 to April 2018), Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen (all January 2017 to now). These countries have seen much more severe declines in immigrant and nonimmigrant visa issuances.

Nationals of the eight majority Muslim travel ban countries have seen immigrant visa issuances fall from 2,654 per month in FY 2016 to 918 per month in FY 2018, a 65 percent decline. These nationals saw their nonimmigrant visa approvals fall from 5,851 per month in FY 2016 to 2,279 in FY 2018, a 61 percent decline. Despite the president removing Iraq and Sudan from the list, their visa numbers did not recover. The declines for each country started before the Supreme Court allowed the travel ban to take partial effect in June and then full effect in December, but they fell more steeply after each ruling.

Causes of the Decline

The decreases in Muslim arrivals have multiple causes. Refugee admissions are entirely controlled by presidential proclamations. President Trump initially suspended the refugee program, and then, when blocked by the courts, he simply cut the refugee limit in half. His administration has failed even to achieve this target. The administration also directly controls the type of refugees admitted, so the entire decline in Muslim refugee numbers and their share of total arrivals is a consequence of policy choices. President Trump promised to "prioritize"

Christian refugees, and while he has cut the number of Christians as well, he has increased their *share* of total numbers.

Travel ban countries also explain more than two thirds (68 percent) of the decline in immigrant visa issuances from 2016 to 2018, implying that the explicit singling out of those nationalities—including the ones subsequently removed from the list—had a major effect on their ability to obtain or willingness to apply for visas. Travel ban countries also account for 16 percent of the decrease in temporary or nonimmigrant visa issuances from 2016 to 2018. This implies, however, that other causes may be more important in driving that trend.

The State Department rolled out a new “extreme vetting” form, the DS-5535, that requires far more documentation from visa applicants, in the State Department’s words, “who have been deemed to warrant additional scrutiny” (i.e. Muslim applicants). This form—in conjunction with other policies—has resulted in more Muslim visa applications disappearing into the “administrative processing” queue, according to a new report from the American Immigration Lawyer’s Association (AILA). “Administrative processing” is code for “meets the requirements but subject to further security screening.” Unfortunately, the State Department publishes no figures on the frequency of this phenomenon.

Anecdotal reports of visa denials for Muslim applicants began to receive attention in 2017, but the State Department fails to publish visa refusal figures by country of origin, so we cannot put hard numbers behind the reports. Muslim travelers may also want to avoid the United States during President Trump’s presidency. His rhetoric may have scared off some visitors, and stories of lengthy detentions and other mistreatment of Muslims at airports and border checkpoints may discourage others.

Conclusion

President Trump appears to be fulfilling his campaign promise. The United States is accepting the fewest Muslim refugees in decades, and immigration from the Muslim world has received an unprecedented cut under his administration. On the campaign trail, President Trump assured voters that the Muslim ban would be a “temporary ban.” In the coming months, we will find out how temporary these policies discouraging Muslim immigration turn out to be.

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