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Iranian couple nearly split by Trump's immigration order

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When Mohammad Meerzaei heard Wednesday about the proposed U.S. travel ban targeting several Muslim-majority countries, he panicked.

His wife, Azadeh Najafian, had just left Nashville for Iran, where she planned to work on her doctoral dissertation in Persian literature and visit family.

But less than 24 hours later, Najafian was racing back to the U.S., passing through customs at New York's JFK Airport just two hours before Trump signed the document and customs agents began detaining travelers from any of the countries on Trump's list.

"We were among the luckiest, but I know that there are lots of people – lots of people and lots of families – being divided and being separated by this order," Meerzaei said, sitting beside his wife. "I really don't love saying that."

President Donald Trump signed an executive order Friday banning legal travel by citizens of Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen for at least three months. The order also suspends the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program for at least four months. After the respective time periods, the nation will only accept travelers from countries with "sufficient safeguards" to ensure the "security and welfare of the United States."

Syrian refugees are banned until further notice despite a global refugee crisis that has seen more than 4 million Syrian nationals flee their homes.

Syrian Christians and Jews are still allowed, however, since the order makes an exception for refugees whose religion is a minority in their country.

Almost immediately after the order was signed, reports began pouring in of refugees who'd already been granted visas and legal U.S. permanent residents being detained at U.S. airports or prevented from boarding their flights home.

At JFK alone, nearly a dozen people were detained, including a former Iraqi translator for the 101st Airborne Division based in Fort Campbell.

Both Meerzaei, 32, and Najafian, 30, are from Iran and are currently pursuing doctorates – Meerzaei in religious studies at Vanderbilt University.

The night before Najafian came home, Meerzaei laid on their couch in West Nashville having a panic attack.

"What if she cannot get back? What if she cannot go through the immigration check points, then what will happen?" he said. "When will we be able to be together again?"

Najafian, who had been looking forward to visiting her family in Shiraz, Iran, remembers the single day she spent with them as a blur.

"It was like a nightmare really," she said.

It is Iranian tradition to pour a bowl of water behind a traveling loved one to symbolize flowing water that will carry the traveler safely and bring them back home soon.

But Najafian's mother did not pour any water behind her daughter this time. Mother and daughter have no idea when they will see one another again, not without it potentially costing Najafian her degree or her life with her husband should the ban on Iranian travelers continue past the 90-day mark.

Ban sparks outcry

The fallout from the temporary ban sparked immediate legal challenges, airport protests, condemnations from politicians and denunciations from advocacy groups.

Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition Co-Executive Director Stephanie Teatro said Friday that Trump's executive order equates to a "backdoor Muslim ban."

In brief remarks while signing his latest executive orders Saturday, Trump maintained the order isn't a "Muslim ban."

"It's working out very nicely," he said. "We're going to have a strict ban, and we're going to have extreme vetting, which we should have had in this country for many years."

No one from any of the seven Muslim-majority countries has carried out a terrorist attack on U.S. soil since at least 1975 through the end of 2015, according to [a report by the Cato Institute](#), a Washington public policy think-tank.

On Saturday, protests erupted at airports across the country, and a U.S. District judge in Brooklyn [granted an emergency stay](#) to anyone who had already arrived in the U.S. or are in transit with valid visas.

Meerzaei used to think America was all about families, but he said all this order is going to do is prevent families from getting together. He worried that hate speech will be institutionalized and normalized. And Najafian wished that when Americans hear about people different from themselves, they try to put themselves in the other's shoes before making any judgments.

The couple said they enjoy Nashville and described the city as kind and open-minded, but they said they will most likely not look for a career here after Trump's latest presidential actions.

"We are real people with real lives, but politicians think about people as a whole, as a general term," Najafian said. "The politician doesn't think that when he or she signs a paper, it affects real lives, real people and real relationships, and maybe can destroy everything."