



Iranian couple at NMSU worries over Trump's now-frozen travel ban

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Meet Reza and Fahimeh Foudazi.

He is an assistant professor at New Mexico State University with a Ph.D. in chemical engineering and a passion for water research. She is a visual artist studying for Master's in Fine Arts at NMSU.

They are husband and wife, Iranian, Muslim, legal permanent residents of the United States – and adopted Las Cruces.

And they are worried, for themselves and their Iranian friends and family.

President Donald Trump's executive order temporarily banning people from seven predominately Muslim countries – now halted under a court injunction – hit New Mexico's Iranian community especially hard. As is true nationwide, at New Mexican universities Iranians make up the largest share of foreign students and faculty from the seven countries.

There are currently 12,269 Iranian students studying at U.S. colleges and universities, according to a 2016 report by nonprofit Institute of International Education.

In New Mexico, the state's three research universities host nearly 200 Iranian faculty and students, most of whom are studying at the graduate or doctoral level. The universities have advised even those holding green cards not to leave the U.S., as they may not be able to return as long as the ban is in place.

The Trump administration says the three-month ban is necessary to protect the country from foreign terrorists. A federal appeals court last week upheld a lower court's preliminary injunction, freezing the ban after citing that the government submitted "no evidence" that nationals of any of the seven countries had perpetrated a terrorist attack in the U.S.

A study by the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, also showed there have been no lethal attacks by citizens of any of the seven countries on U.S. soil.

Trump indicated in a message on Twitter that he would continue to fight for his order to be reinstated.

But the situation is in flux and already has wreaked expensive havoc: For the Foudazi's family, friends and students, international flights and visa interview appointments have been automatically canceled, suddenly reinstated, and missed; there is no U.S. embassy in Tehran, and Iranians must travel to Dubai to secure permission to come to the U.S.

NMSU recruited Reza for his pioneering work using polymers to conserve water in agriculture – research that eventually could be applied to New Mexico's chile, pecan, onion and other fields. Fahimeh's art is focused on the mysticism and spirituality of Islam – and changing Americans' notions about her religion and her hijab, the head scarf she wears as part of her devotional practice.

He, the scientist, speaks optimistically about the power of science to unite across borders. She, the artist, speaks gravely about the times.

“Science doesn't have borders,” Reza says, talking in his small office in the College of Engineering. “It doesn't matter for me if my students are American, Asian, African. I don't see the borders in science. All scientific communities are like that. People from different countries, different cultures, they get along, they share their ideas. So it's somehow very difficult for scientists to face this issue.”

Fahimeh meets me at a Middle Eastern restaurant. I tell her she'll spot me with my reporter's notebook. She says in an email, “Since I am wearing a scarf, you might recognize me immediately.”

Diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran have been frozen since the 1979 revolution that established the Islamic Republic, when conservative clerical forces deposed the ruling monarch and established a theocracy in Iran. The U.S. considers Iran a state sponsor of terror but, despite a fraught relationship, the two countries have a common enemy in the Islamic State, or ISIS.

The U.S.-Iran relationship began thawing in the last years of the Obama administration, including the relaxing of visa requirements. The new rules allowed students and professionals like the Foudazis to obtain multiple-entry visas, allowing them to come and go from the U.S. to Iran and other countries; in years prior, Iranians could only obtain single-entry visas under great pains.

Fahimeh describes it as a claustrophobic feeling, like “you are in a cage” – Iranians could not travel home to visit family under the old single-entry card. Even though she now has permanent legal residency, the new travel ban evokes a similar feeling, she says.

Trump has taken a tougher line in the first few weeks of his presidency, amping up rhetoric and adding new sanctions after the Iranian government performed ballistic missile tests and sharpened its own rhetoric against the U.S. following the travel ban.

The Foudazis don't care much for politics. For Reza, science transcends politics. For Fahimeh, religion is a spiritual, not political, practice.

“What I want to convey in my art, I want to dispel the impression Western people have of Islam,” she said. “The core of most religions, specifically Islam, is to appreciate the beauty of Allah's, or God's, creation – different species, races, genders, languages, cultures.”

When Trump announced the travel ban, one of the Foudazi's neighbors left a card on their door, offering support, letting them know they shouldn't worry, Reza said. Fahimeh says Las Cruces always has been very welcoming, but she has sensed a change since the presidential election – something in the way people look at her, a stray comment under someone's breath at a store.

“I am carrying the flag,” she says of her hijab. “It is with me. You can't hide that you are Muslim if you are woman.”

Reza sees hope in his students.

“I have American, Chinese, Iranian, Hispanic and non-Hispanic students,” he said. “My group is very diverse. They all get together very good. I hope the world should be like that.”