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Mass. is a magnet for foreign students, but they're anxious about Trump

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After graduating with two degrees and nearly perfect grades from Iran's top technical university, Mohsen Hosseini turned down PhD programs in Europe and Canada to study electrical engineering at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Over winter break, he returned to Tehran for his wedding. But he was unable to fly back to Boston when President Trump suddenly banned travel from Iran and six other predominantly Muslim countries.

The experience shook Hosseini, making him feel as though the instability he had left behind in Iran was taking root in the country he had revered as the preeminent place to do graduate studies.

"Now, I cannot plan for my future in the United States," said Hosseini, who is 26 and back in Amherst after the order was temporarily lifted by a judge. "It's a big problem for me and, at this moment, I don't know if I can bring my wife here or not."

Trump's order was designed to stop terrorists and others who would commit violence in the United States. But it has also ensnared a highly educated community of Iranian scholars, researchers, and professionals who, over the last century of immigration, have risen to the top echelons of Boston's academic, health care, and high-tech institutions.

Many were drawn by the promise of greater social and political freedom and better access to labs and technical equipment. They are the kinds of immigrants that politicians of both parties generally say they want to encourage. Most come here legally and ultimately work in science, engineering, and mathematics, fields that are integral to the economic health of the country.

Now, many question whether to remain in the United States or take their skills elsewhere, raising the specter of an exodus from some of the state's leading universities and medical centers.

"They love America," said Pardis Sabeti, an Iranian-born Harvard professor of evolutionary biology and immunology who has five students of Persian heritage working in her infectious disease lab. "But this changes the relationship. They're wondering: Does America love you back?"

Iranians have a long tradition of studying in the West, beginning in the 19th century, when many attended European universities, said Steven Ditto, the author of a report by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on the Iranian quest for US education.

The tide shifted to America in the 1960s and '70s, as growing Iranian oil revenues and a Cold War defense relationship with the United States brought more students to this country, Ditto said.

By 1975, Iranians comprised the largest group of foreign students in the United States, he said. The 1979 Islamic Revolution slowed the influx, but the numbers have increased gradually over the past several years.

As of November, 14,200 Iranians were studying at US colleges, including about 660 in Massachusetts, making the state the fourth-largest home to Iranian students, behind California, Texas and New York, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

More than 80 percent study at the graduate level, the highest percentage of any country that sends students to the United States, according to the Institute of International Education.

More than 75 percent study science, technology, and engineering, also the highest percentage of any group of foreign students. National Science Foundation surveys suggest 89 percent plan to remain after graduation, the highest "stay rate" of any country.

"Honestly, I can't imagine living anywhere else," said Siavash Zamirpour, a 19-year-old Harvard freshman and US citizen who plans to become a doctor like his father, an orthopedic surgeon who emigrated to Houston 15 years ago. "But it's hard to feel welcome in a country if the official stance is, we don't really want people from that country coming into the US."

Ditto predicted the ban will not deter Iranians from enrolling in American universities, just as they have through sanctions, nuclear tensions, and the 2009 protests that demanded the removal of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"These people ostensibly have been living under a religious autocracy for 25-plus years, so they have a sense of being patient and seeing things through," he said.

Iranians are also used to waiting for visas because the country is classified by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism, Ditto said.

"Iranian students are already subjected to the most stringent tools the government has, in terms of checking who they are and what their research interests are," he said.

Trump argues his travel ban will stop "potential terrorists and others that do not have our best interests at heart." But between 1975 and 2015, no Americans have been killed by acts of terrorism committed on US soil by citizens of Iran or the six other countries affected by his order, according tothe Cato Institute.

"It's definitely disheartening to have your identity be the only definer of your character and have that be denigrated and debased at such a high level," said Kian Sani, a 20-year-old Harvard

junior whose father is Iranian. “My life goal, now more than ever, is to educate others about the rich culture Iran has to offer, how friendly we are, and how welcoming we are.”

Houchang E. Chehabi , an Iranian-born professor at Boston University who came to the United States in the 1970s to get a doctorate in political science at Yale, took a more pessimistic view. He predicted fewer Iranians will come to this country if they sense Trump may take further steps to clamp down on them and others from majority Muslim countries.

“There’s just a general sense of being singled out, which is all the more painful in that we’ve done so well in this country,” Chehabi said.

“There’s a general sense of anxiety. What’s next?”