



Travel ban stokes fears, worries amongst local Somalis

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February 4, 2017

Ifrah Ahmed remembers what it was like living in fear in Somalia, longing for an opportunity to leave her war-torn homeland for a better life.

That opportunity came, and she has made the most of it, settling into a new home in Garden City four years ago and making a life for herself as a Finney County Courthouse translator and supervisor at Tyson Fresh Meats.

While Ahmed's dream came true, she worries about the many Somalis anxiously awaiting the same opportunity. And now, with U.S. President Donald Trump having signed an executive order pausing the nation's refugee resettlement program for 120 days and ceasing the granting of entry visas to individuals traveling from seven Muslim-majority nations for 90 days while the federal government examines the U.S. security vetting process, Ahmed wonders if her friends and family back home will be as lucky as she was.

“Most of us still have families living in refugee camps,” she said. “They are still wanting to come, but do you know how heartbreaking it is to know that the only hope they have is a chance to have a new home? Trump just took that hope away from them. It’s not right.”

News of Trump's order, signed on Jan. 27 with the headline, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” caused tens of thousands of protestors to go to international airports across the country, holding signs and asking immigration officials to release immigrants detained because of the order.

By Jan. 29, the protests had reached Garden City, with a group of activists rallying in the 300 block of West Mary Street in front of an apartment complex where scores of local Somali Muslim residents live, holding signs and showing the support for the local Somali community.

The seven nations blocked by the order are Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Libya Sudan and Somalia.

Although it is difficult to get an exact number of Somalis and other refugees living in Garden City, the refugee resettlement agency International Rescue Committee has resettled 72 refugees from the outlined nations, 56 from Somalia and 16 from Sudan, since opening its local branch in November 2014. The IRC has helped 182 refugees from across the globe resettle in southwest Kansas.

“I really wasn’t expecting Donald Trump to win the election, and now everybody is talking about this,” Ahmed said. “We are scared because I have two friends that have green cards, but they went back home to visit and everybody was saying that they won’t be allowed to come back in.”

After some confusion at airports regarding the order, the Department of Homeland Security issued a statement saying that green card holders will be allowed back into the country after an additional security step, likely questioning at the airports upon landing.

Amy Longa, site manager of the Garden City branch of IRC, reported that the order did not affect any refugees in transit to southwest Kansas. The only refugees in the air when the order took place was a family from Burma, and they entered without difficulty.

Ahmed is a green card holder and has refugee status in the United States.

“I can only speak from the point of a refugee because I am refugee, and I know how it feels like,” she said. “How do you deny somebody the opportunity of getting another home? There are kids and women out there that have nothing but fear in their lives. They don’t know what is going to happen to them.”

Stepping up security

Motivation for the executive order is the belief within the Trump administration and among some U.S. leaders that the federal government needs to strengthen the vetting of refugees trying to resettle in the U.S.

U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., supports this increase in security, but questioned the application of the order.

“Keeping Americans safe should be our federal government’s top priority,” he said. “Strengthening our immigration system is critical to that end, and it’s common sense to have appropriate vetting procedures in place for individuals wishing to travel to our country. While I support thorough vetting, I do not support restricting the rights of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents.”

The IRC spells out the current vetting process on its website, saying refugees often are checked by 12 to 15 security agencies before arriving in America, and the process can take up to three years.

An IRC article on its website titled, "How the U.S. Refugee Vetting Process Really Works," reads: “The U.S. resettlement program gives priority to refugees, usually vulnerable families, who have been targeted by violence. The U.S. does not recognize as refugees people who have committed violations of humanitarian and human rights law, including the crime of terrorism, as refugees. They are specifically excluded from the protection accorded to refugees. Refugees undergo biographic and biometric checks, medical screenings, forensic document testing, and in-person interviews. Because of the complexity of the conflict in their country, Syrian refugees must go through extra review steps with intelligence agencies and Department of Homeland Security officers who have particular expertise and training in conditions in Syria and the Middle East.”

The CATO institute, in a September 2016 study, argued that current security vetting is sufficient, saying the chances of an American citizen being killed in the U.S. by a refugee that has undergone current security vetting are 1 in 3.64 billion a year. That same study states that no American has died from a refugee-led terrorist attack since 1975.

Ahmed Ali moved to Garden City last year, and is a Somali who worked with the Department of Homeland Security as a translator in Cairo for 17 years. He said the current process is sufficient because of the training DHS officers receive.

“When they interviewed people, they were trained to know when the people were lying or when they had a history of violence,” he said. “I don’t think they let terrorists in, nor should they. Americans are right to be afraid of Somali terrorists, but they must know that not all Somalis are terrorists.”

Referencing an alleged bombing plot that targeted the apartment complex on Mary Street that led to the arrest of three southwest Kansas men in October 2016, Ali said, “In Garden City, we were attacked by terrorists! They just so happen to be from Dodge City and Liberal, not Somalia.”

Muslim ban?

According to the IRC, less than 1 percent of refugees seeking resettlement receive it. Ali backs up this statement with a story about a refugee center in Egypt.

“I left Cairo last year, and there were more than 5,000 refugees waiting to have a chance to come to the United States,” Ali said. “Most of them I know, and I know they are not terrorists, but the reason they are not coming to the United States now is because of their religion. And I know that they are dying to have this life. They need a change in their situation right now, and Trump is saying no to that.”

Ahmed mirrors Ali’s statement, adding that Trump’s attitude seems to be encouraging hate toward Muslims.

“Islamophobia is going around like crazy,” Ahmed said. “Ever since Trump won, people who had these fears have been emboldened to lash out. It’s very disappointing because most of the Somalians right now in the U.S. are running away from violence and are just trying to start a peaceful life again. Coming over here and seeing that we are being targeted for something we were running away from, it’s all that people are talking about.”

Opponents of the order argue this is Trump’s “Muslim ban” because the seven nations listed are all Muslim-majority, and that a statement in the order says religious minorities in the affected nations have priority when the refugee program resumes.

The list of the seven nations comes from the Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act signed in 2015 during the Obama administration, which required anyone traveling from the seven countries to obtain a visa through an interview at a U.S. consulate or embassy before entering the U.S.

“Refugees in any religion or race are refugees and have the right to have freedom, a safe place to live, and a place that they feel like they own,” Ali said. “(Trump) is the leader of the free world, and he shouldn’t do this. He should respect all the communities he represents.”

Although the order does not mention any action toward immigrants currently living in the United States, some local Somalis still fear deportations.

Mursal Naleye, a Somali-born U.S. citizen, recently traveled to the Horn of Africa and said people there are expecting U.S. immigration policies to get worse.

“When I was back a while ago, people kept saying I had a place to live with them when Trump deports me,” Naleye said. “You are welcome to be an American refugee here. They think Trump is going to make me a refugee in my own country!”

Naleye adds that this order will just pause the influx of Somalis. He says that the conditions in Somalia are so bad that refugees will always try to leave.

“The Somali people will never stop trying to come to America,” Naleye said. “The man who comes here will see how great it is and try to bring his family. The America here now is a mix of people from all countries. The Somali people are a part of that, and we are all one family.”

Supporting the order

Garden City businesswoman Deb Fief said that although she sympathizes with the plight of refugees, she feels Americans must keep their families safe.

“I just feel like in the process of allowing foreigners to come into our country, there are terrorists hiding amongst them,” she said. “I lock my door at night not because I hate the people outside, but because I love the people inside. That’s the same thing with our country. We need to be more careful. It’s difficult where to draw the line between too much vetting and too little, and I don’t know if we need to have a stricter process, but all I know is that they are dumping a lot of refugees into this country.”

Several comments on a Garden City Telegram video of the local protest that were posted on the newspaper's Facebook page show that some Garden City residents agree with the executive order.

Some comments left on The Telegram's Facebook page by people saying they are supportive of Trump's order include “Go home now” and “Send them back to where they came from.” One respondent took the idea a step further, saying, “They are secretly planning to kill you! If you want them, bring them into your homes, ok, but do not risk my children's safety by betting they won’t.”

Other comments suggest that taxpayer funding should not go toward the resettlement programs.

“I don't like all the free money and services they get as we are taxed to death,” one respondent said. “Come to America bring your own money because it's not tax payers problem!”

The U.S. State Department allots \$925 per refugee that is resettled through an organization like the IRC. The IRC then must pay deposits on rent, utilities, acquire transportation, furniture and appliances with that money. After purchasing clothing and food for the individual, the IRC's Longa said, there is often little to no extra money left to be given directly to the person.

Supporters of the executive order state that in 2011, President Obama ordered a ban on visas from Iraq for six months. In 2011, two Al-Qaeda terrorists were discovered in Kentucky after fingerprints matched a newly compiled database of explosives in Iraq. Obama ordered all current visa applicants from Iraq at the time to be tested with this new database, which reset all the applications. Because of this, visas granted to Iraqis dropped significantly but were not banned.

The IRC states on its website that the 120-day pause in the refugee program could put the lives of thousands in danger.

“The Trump Administration policy will exacerbate the suffering of an estimated 60,000 vulnerable refugees who have been security vetted and are awaiting resettlement to the U.S.,” the site states. “Refugees already in the U.S. who have been waiting to be reunited with family members still in danger may never have that opportunity, or their reunion may be delayed for months or years.”

A welcoming place

Benjamin Anderson, CEO at Kearny County Hospital in Lakin who recently traveled to the Horn of Africa, shared a story of a Somali man's hospitality.

“A professor at the university where I was teaching sat down with me when I first arrived and said, ‘Ah, you are the one from Kansas. I am also a Kansan.’ He said in the late 1960s, he came to Kansas as an international student and spent five years there, and a white family took him into their home and loved him.”

Anderson said the man went on to say, "I was received well, and I have never forgotten the love they showed me, and I intend for you to be received in the same way here."

"Fifty years later, that love is still paying dividends," Anderson said. "Currently there are thousands of refugees coming into our country, and I wonder if in 50 years their story will be the same as the professor."

Anderson, along with several other medical professionals, have recruited doctors from across the country to come to southwest Kansas to specifically serve the refugee populations living here. He said that Somalis living in Kansas are a great benefit to our society.

“I think the Somali people are an invaluable part of southwest Kansas,” Anderson said. “I would tell you that there are many doctors that are relocating to southwest Kansas with specific interests in serving that population.”

Naley is still optimistic about the future of Garden City and the Somalis who call the community home, saying that this conflict can be a source for unification.

“I hope that this unites Garden City around each other,” Naleyee said. “We are one community, and this order is a chance for all of us to unite and say we are one family. We are from all over the world, but we have all ended up in Garden City. We have to be one strong community together.”