

Lives turned upside down at the stroke of US President Donald Trump's pen

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The absurdity of the perceived threat posed by refugees and immigrants from ‘banned’ countries is about politics not US security, writes Tania Karas.

Farah Marcolla's life has been upended by the stroke of US President Donald Trump's pen.

The United States government hired the Iraqi citizen — then a young co-founder of her family's engineering firm — to manage construction projects on a Baghdad military base during the Iraq War.

Her husband, bodyguard and driver were killed in retaliation for her work with the Americans. In 2012, after more than four years of waiting, Marcolla and her two sons came to America on a special immigrant visa for US-affiliated Iraqis.

But her parents and two sisters in Iraq are still awaiting approval. And now, with Iraqis included in a sweeping executive order that suspends entry into the US by refugees and citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries, she worries they'll never get to safety.

“Now all of a sudden why is my family a national security threat?” asked Marcolla, a green card holder who lives in Virginia. They were vetted before working for the US military in Iraq, and Marcolla had to pass multiple background checks and security clearances before she finally got her US visa.

For years before Trump entered office, the rest of the family was trapped in an endless circle of bureaucratic hell called “administrative processing”. They now fear they'll never escape it.

Marcolla's family's case illustrates the absurdity of the perceived threat posed by refugees and immigrants from the “banned” countries.

The executive order — which entails a 120-day suspension of entry for all refugees and indefinite suspension for Syrians; a 90-day entry ban for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen; and extra screening for green card holders with dual nationality from those countries — makes little sense, given that there have been no fatalities in the United States caused by extremists with family backgrounds from those countries.

Trump's measures will do little to make America safer. In fact, the unintended consequences could seriously harm the United States by damaging diplomatic relations, lending fodder to US enemies, or inviting retaliation.

“I am loyal to the US government, and I will always be,” said Marcolla, 35, who has since married an American and will sit for her US citizenship exam next week.

“I understand the attacks in Orlando and San Bernardino were a big influence and give us a bad reputation. But those are extremists, and they don’t represent us.”

The executive order’s title declares a noble endeavour: “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry to the United States.”

But in reality, this is about politics, not security. Numerous studies show one’s chances of being killed in an immigrant-linked extremist attack in the United States are infinitesimal, if anything.

One recent report by the libertarian Cato Institute found that the likelihood of an American perishing at the hands of a foreign militant on US soil is 1 in 3.6m. The chance of being killed by an extremist refugee is even smaller: 1 in 3.64bn. And nearly all deaths from immigrant-linked extremist attacks through 2015 — 98.6% — come from a single event: September 11.

According to another report, by Duke University’s Triangle Centre on Terrorism and Homeland Security, Muslim-American extremists killed 54 people in 2016 — and the majority died in one horrific attack: The June mass shooting at an Orlando nightclub.

By comparison, nearly 12,000 Americans die in gun homicides yearly. Shouldn’t Trump set his security priorities based on these cold, hard numbers?

Or are “alternative facts” so tempting as to permanently distract him from addressing national security risks that affect much broader swaths of Americans?

There’s an important reason for those low fatality rates. Our immigrant and refugee vetting system works, and it is already extreme.

“Well over 90% of refugees worldwide are not considered for resettlement, because they have to be referred by the [United Nations Refugee Agency], and fewer than 1% are ever resettled to any country,” said Betsy Fisher, policy director of the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), a legal aid and refugee advocacy group.

IRAP has helped Marcolla and thousands of others through the years-long, 21-step clearance process to enter the United States. It includes at least three background checks and interviews with US consular officials.

Refugee applicants may be disqualified for small mistakes such as confusing details of their life’s timeline.

And they must provide significant documentation. For example, as part of Marcolla’s visa process, she had to go back to her home in Babylon, Iraq — which she fled after armed men killed her husband and bound her to a stairwell — to retrieve extra paperwork.

Experts across the spectrum, from refugee-rights activists to current and former government officials, have said Trump’s order on immigration does little to combat terrorism.

A temporary pause can prompt authorities “to devise a better system for vetting refugees, to the extent we have deficiencies,” said Jonathan Schanzer, vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a former terrorism finance analyst for the US Treasury Department.

But he is not aware of any problems, he added, noting that the Trump administration has so far not addressed the root causes of the refugee crisis: long, overlapping wars in the Middle East.

As for harm to diplomatic relations, the order has already drawn global backlash.

Iraq, for its part, has asked Trump to “reconsider” the travel ban following calls from its parliament to “retaliate” by barring American citizens from entering their country. (Small reminder: Iraq is a US ally in the fight against Islamic State and hosts 5,000 American troops.)

At best, Trump’s order is an enormous, irrational overreaction to the actual risk posed by refugees and immigrants to the United States. It directly feeds into the fears extremists hope to spread through their attacks.

And at worst, it’s a thinly veiled attempt to fulfil his discriminatory campaign promise of a “Muslim ban.”

“I understand the national security of the United States is the most important thing in the entire world,” Marcolla said. “And I understand the role of the president is to protect the people.”

“But this is too extreme. And for those of us who put our lives on hold waiting to come to the US, it’s a devastation.”