

## **In an Election Year, Trump’s Anti-Muslim Sentiments Again Loom Large**

Kourosh Ziabari  
February 11, 2024

For many young Iranians reeling from the Islamic Republic’s authoritarianism, education and exchange programs overseas represent a breakout opportunity to pursue a new life in relative freedom and safety. There are 9,295 students from Iran studying in the U.S. as of 2022, making Iran the 15th-ranked country of origin of international students in America, despite the absence of diplomatic relations between the two nations.

As the presidential race heats up this election year, the potential return of Donald Trump to the White House has given renewed impetus to anti-Muslim sentiments nationwide. And the former president is poised to again target immigrants, including those hailing from Muslim-majority countries. As Trump’s *bête noire*, Iran is expected to be caught in the crosshairs, and young Iranians, including exiled professionals and students, fear they may face renewed reprisal—because of their country of birth.

The American Middle Eastern Network for Dialogue at Stanford, known as AMENDS, is a student-led initiative founded in 2011 that brings youth leaders from the Middle East and North Africa, including Iran, to Stanford University in California to take part in programs aimed at forging closer ties with the U.S. Each year as many as 30 participants – among them aspiring entrepreneurs, artists and activists – participate in sessions in which they can share their achievements and perspectives with members of the campus community.

Esmaeil Pirhadi, a musician and traditional multi-instrumentalist from Iran, was 25 years-old when he learned he had been accepted as a 2017 AMENDS fellow. He was told his flight tickets would be purchased, his lodging would be arranged and he would receive a letter inviting him to apply for a visa at a U.S. embassy in a neighboring country. Before he could embark on his journey, then-President Donald Trump introduced Executive Order 13769, better known as the Muslim ban. Pirhadi, now 32, has yet to visit the U.S.

“Myopia doesn’t have borders,” Pirhadi said. “It can be the product of an undemocratic system or the product of the thinking of an intolerant leader in a democratic country.”

He completed his master’s in ethnomusicology at Tehran University of Art in fall 2021 and now works as a part-time lecturer at his alma mater.

The executive order, signed by Trump on Jan. 27, 2017, was superseded 38 days later by another presidential directive that blocked the nationals of six Muslim-majority countries — Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen — from traveling to the U.S. Iraq was originally on the list and then removed in the modified version of the travel ban. The order, which faced legal challenges as unconstitutional by enforcing religious discrimination and violating the Establishment clause of the First Amendment, was upheld by the Supreme Court.

The ban followed through on Trump's pledges as a presidential candidate. "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States," he said in December 2015. Trump ramped up his anti-Muslim rhetoric throughout the 2016 election campaign and the travel ban was one of his first major policy initiatives in office.

President Joe Biden has since lifted the moratorium and Trump has vowed to reinstate a more comprehensive version if he is reelected to the White House in November.

The restrictions were conceived on the assumption that Muslim migrants, as well as dual citizens, posed a threat to the U.S. and that denying them travel rights would make the country safer. The order referred to protecting the nation from "foreign terrorist entry" as its goal. Critics of the ban say there is little evidence that Muslims constitute an existential threat or that the prohibitions strengthened U.S. national security.

"The domestic law enforcement agencies have repeatedly highlighted that the greatest terror threat facing the United States comes from groups associated with the far-right, not those associated with militant jihadism," Jon Hoffman, a policy analyst in defense and foreign policy at the Cato Institute in Washington, said in an interview with Columbia News Service.

According to the Government Accountability Office, domestic terrorism-related activity increased by 357% from 2013 to 2021. From Sept. 12, 2001, when President George W. Bush declared the War on Terror, to April 2017, radical Islamists were responsible for 27% of the 85 violent extremist incidents that resulted in death on the U.S. soil, while white supremacists and far-right terrorists perpetrated 73% of the lethal violence. Trump never railed against domestic terrorists.

Biden revoked the travel ban on his first day in office and introduced measures to remedy some of the damage caused to individuals and families by his predecessor. For example, Biden proposed that immigrant visa applications of people from the targeted countries who were turned down because of their national origins should be reconsidered. He said the previous actions were "a stain on our national conscience" that defied the nation's history of welcoming people of all faiths.

Recent studies point to continuing harm caused by Trump's travel ban, other immigration policies and derisive rhetoric. The effects include an erosion of mental and physical wellbeing of those targeted by the actions. Studies reveal a surge in anxiety and trauma across the demographics that were singled out by the former president.

Researchers at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University in Providence, R.I., link the travel ban to an increase in missed primary care appointments and more frequent emergency department visits among people from Muslim-majority countries living in Minnesota. In their study, published in 2021, the researchers, led by Elizabeth Samuels, followed nearly 18,000 residents in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area born in nations targeted by the travel ban and tracked their health from 360 days before the order was signed until 360 days afterwards.

The researchers concluded that in the period following the presidential order, people from the targeted countries made 232 additional emergency department visits to clinics and hospitals in the region and missed 101 additional appointments than what they were otherwise expected to miss. A surge of emergency hospitalizations was attributed to a jump in stress-related diagnoses. The missed scheduled appointments, analysts said, were due to these people being increasingly fearful of being asked questions about their origins.

“It’s clear that U.S. immigration policies can have significant effects on the health of people living here in the U.S.,” Samuels said in an interview posted on Brown’s website.

The executive order reinforced concerns among Muslims about Islamophobia in the U.S., according to Eli Clifton, a research director at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a Washington-based research group.

“Trump’s Muslim Ban confirmed the worst suspicions for much of the Muslim world about U.S. antipathies towards Muslim, and non-white, populations,” he said in an interview. “The ban explicitly targeted a group for their religious affiliations while making exceptions for Muslims from countries that had long standing security or military aid agreements with the U.S., such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan.”

Amna Khalid, an associate professor of history at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., said the travel ban mirrored deep-seated though unfounded bias against Muslims by U.S. policymakers. “The ban was rooted in ridiculous assumptions,” she told Columbia News Service. “I doubt it had any impact on safety in America.”

Hoffman of the Cato Institute said Trump used the travel ban simply as a political tool. “Trump does not care about the human costs since he wants power,” Hoffman said. “If Islamophobia is viewed by him as a lucrative political currency among his base of supporters, he will continue to exploit it for his own gain.”

Despite the anti-Muslim suspicions that were elevated by Trump, Muslim-Americans are by some measures among the nation’s most successful minority groups. According to the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, U.S. Muslims are more likely to have earned a college degree compared with their fellow residents. In the 25 or older age group, 46% of Muslim-Americans hold college degrees, compared with 38% for the overall population.

Iranian-Americans in particular excel in education and achievement. According to the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, a Washington-based nonprofit, 86% of Iranian-Americans hold at least one college degree. One in five Iranian-American households have annual income exceeding \$100,000, compared to the median income of \$74,580 for all U.S. households, according to 2022 Census data.

Trump acknowledged the accomplishments of Iranian-Americans in a message on the occasion of the 2017 Persian New Year, Nowruz. “For many years, I have greatly enjoyed wonderful friendships with Iranian-Americans, one of the most successful immigrant groups in our country’s contemporary history,” he said in a statement published by the White House.

Still, under the former president, U.S. relations with a number of Muslim countries deteriorated after improving during the administration of Barack Obama.

Trump’s rhetorical attacks on Muslims added to a climate of fear toward the nearly 3.5 million Muslims in the U.S. and landed amid rising Islamophobic violence. In July 2019, he aimed a series of derisive tweets at four Democratic congresswomen, which included two Muslims, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib.

“Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came,” the then president wrote.

Michael Flynn, Trump’s first national security advisor, was one of the influential administration officials voicing negative views of Muslims. In November 2016, speaking at the Ahavath Torah Congregation in Stoughton, Mass., Flynn referred to “Islamism” as “a vicious cancer inside the body of 1.7 billion people on this planet and it has to be excised.”

In the first year of the Trump presidency, anti-Muslim hate crimes increased 15%, surpassing the 2001 levels, according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations. In a survey in the early months of the Trump presidency, the Washington-based Pew Research Center found unprecedented anxiety and unease among Muslims in the U.S. Although most of them said they still believed in the promise of the “American Dream,” 75% of American Muslims reported that they perceived a lot of anti-Muslim discrimination.

“There is no question that former President Trump’s various and eventually successful efforts to enact a Muslim ban did tremendous harm to relations between the United States and Muslim communities everywhere,” Caleb Elfenbein, a professor of history and religious studies at Grinnell College in Iowa, said in an interview. “It eroded a good deal of whatever trust there might have been, as bad policies often do. The effects and legacies of policies always outlast implementation.”

According to Elfenbein, Trump capitalized on anti-Muslim social movements that grew between 2001 and his election in 2016 and created the conditions for that momentum to be rekindled.

“His Islamophobic rhetoric built on a movement that merely required activation to achieve a more prominent place in American public life,” Elfenbein said.

Louise Cainkar, a sociology professor at Marquette University, maintains that the Trump administration’s anti-Muslim policies were less an anomaly than an extension of U.S. politics in the post-9/11 era. American Muslims have generally found it difficult to integrate into mainstream life or have been met with conditional inclusion while being scapegoated.

“I think the Muslim world is used to this kind of anti-Muslim stuff emanating from the U.S. – it is nothing new,” she said in an interview. “Trump did not start the flames of racial intolerance but hate crime data shows he increased them and made them more violent.”

While the Biden administration has rescinded the travel ban and recently unveiled the country’s first National Strategy to Counter Islamophobia, Muslims remain a vulnerable community in the U.S. The ripple effects of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip portend a new challenge for Muslim Americans.

In the view of Muslims around the world, Islamophobia is entrenched in U.S. society, according to Lawrence Pintak, former dean of the Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University and author of “America & Islam: Soundbites, Suicide Bombs and the Road to Donald Trump.”

“Calls in recent weeks for the revoking of visas for Palestinians or even the expulsion of Palestinians already in the country, against the backdrop of the Biden administration’s ironclad support for Israel, confirm that for many,” Pintak said in an interview. “There is every evidence that anti-Muslim sentiment will again be weaponized in the 2024 election cycle as a result of the Gaza conflict.”