

San Francisco Chronicle

Gay Iranian refugee in U.S. worries about friends left behind

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March 9, 2017

Amir knows he should be happier. He is among the lucky ones, a gay Iranian man who gained refugee status and flew to San Francisco just a day before President Trump was inaugurated and a little over a week before he signed the first of two executive orders temporarily barring refugees from entering the country.

Instead, Amir sits alone in his room in the city and wonders: Why him?

He thinks about a fortuitous last-minute flight change that had him depart for San Francisco International Airport on Jan. 19 rather than Jan. 30 — a few days after Trump signed his initial executive order. More so, he worries about his friends left behind, like Ashkan, who was also set to come to the U.S. as a refugee but now may lose that opportunity altogether.

Amir spends his days on the phone with Ashkan and his other friends in Turkey, where as gay refugees who fled Iran together they formed a community in a small town where residents looked down on them. Now, his friends can neither go back to Iran nor come to the U.S. — and they have told Amir they have contemplated suicide.

“Is this the America they talked about, the one that valued freedom and human rights?” asked Amir, 31, who requested that his last name be withheld because he fears repercussions.

Amir and his friends are among those whose lives were thrown into disarray first by Trump’s Jan. 27 executive order, which froze all refugee admissions for four months. The move was struck down by federal courts, but on Monday Trump signed a follow-up order freezing admissions, while also temporarily halting the entry of all immigrants from Iran and five other majority-Muslim countries.

The second order, which is being challenged in the courts, is to take effect Thursday.

In the weeks since the first ban was struck down, more than 4,000 refugees have arrived. But many others in the pipeline were not able to make it.

The limbo for these people will continue. Roughly 11,000 refugees who have been vetted by government agencies including the Department of Homeland Security are standing by, as flights into the U.S. are not being booked for after Thursday, said Karen Ferguson, head of the International Rescue Committee’s Northern California office.

Ferguson and other advocates fear that the freeze will be disastrous for many. During the intense vetting process — which takes an average of 18 to 24 months — refugees run through numerous security and medical checks. But these clearances have expiration dates that Ferguson worries will lapse during the four-month suspension, effectively sending the applicants back to the start of the process.

“It’s going to leave people in harm’s way,” Ferguson said. “There will be tragedies. Some people will not make it through even when they would have.”

The Trump administration has said the freeze is a necessary step in boosting efforts to identify would-be terrorists and keep them out of the country.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions said Monday that more than 300 people in the U.S. who had been admitted as refugees were being investigated for potential terrorism-related activities. But Sessions did not provide details on the cases, or what precisely the number represented.

“We also know that people seeking to support or commit terrorist attacks here will try to enter through our refugee program,” Sessions said. “Like every nation, the United States has the right to control who enters our country, and to keep out those who would do us harm.”

But the focus on the country’s refugee program has ignited opposition from advocates and politicians who call it a critical humanitarian effort that has not proved to be dangerous.

Between 1980 and 2015, no U.S. resident who had arrived as a refugee was involved in a fatal terrorist attack, according to research by the libertarian Cato Institute. In 2016, a man who came to the country as a refugee and who officials believe may have been inspired by the Islamic State group injured 11 people by running them over at Ohio State University.

The White House says the stakes are high. So do advocates for refugees.

Around the Bay Area and the country, as arrivals of refugees have been put on hold, lives have been changed and families have been separated, as advocates try to figure out what’s next. While Amir got in, others were not as fortunate — including a Syrian refugee who lives in Jordan and was preparing, along with his wife, son and daughter, to join his sister in the East Bay.

Ahmed, whose family fled the fighting in Syria in 2013, had spent years seeking admission to the U.S. and was waiting for his airline tickets the day Trump signed the first ban. He had made all of his preparations for travel — ending his contract at work, selling his furniture and taking his children out of school.

Trump’s orders were more crushing than leaving his war-torn home country, because he dreamed of restarting his family members’ lives and giving his children opportunity, said Ahmed, who asked to be identified by a pseudonym.

Since then, his family’s refugee case has been suspended as organizations try to help. He said he was ready to contribute to the U.S., sending a reporter pictures of the tools he once produced at the factory he owned in Syria.

“Mr. President,” Ahmed said. “We are not terrorists. We want to live in peace.”

The changing plight of refugees goes beyond the 120-day freeze.

More than 37,000 refugees have been resettled in the U.S. this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. Because the Trump administration lowered the maximum number of refugees the country will take in during this period, from 110,000 to 50,000, the remaining slots are limited.

“The administration has the right to cap and put limits on the number of refugees it’s going to accept — there’s no legal obligation to take a particular number,” said Beth Van Schaack, a professor at Stanford Law School who once investigated war crimes in Syria for the State Department. “The issue is one of morality at some level.”

Polling shows the country is divided over the admission of refugees. According to a recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, 52 percent of respondents said it was appropriate to limit entry of refugees because of security risks.

It’s not the first time the country has been split over refugees. The Pew Research Center found that Americans have, in the past, generally not wanted to welcome them, regardless of their country of origin. In 1980, a poll found that 71 percent of Americans did not approve of Cuban refugees.

“We want the American administration to rethink this decision,” said Ahmed, “because we are a good people that loves peace, and what was imposed upon us was outside of our will.”