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Tennessee immigrant group: Revised Trump travel ban still harmful

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President Donald Trump has signed a revised travel order Monday temporarily banning travel to the U.S. by people from six Muslim-majority nations.

The latest order was issued in an effort to address legal issues with the original order, which caused confusion at airports, sparked protests around the country and was ultimately blocked by the courts.

In the latest order, Iraq has been removed from the list of banned countries, marking a win for the local Kurdish population in Nashville and their families abroad.

The Trump administration's decision to issue a new order followed pressure from the Pentagon and State Department, which urged the White House to reconsider, given Iraq's key role in fighting the Islamic State.

Nashville has the largest population of ethnic Kurds in the nation, with estimates ranging from 12,000 to 17,000 residents. The majority of the population in Middle Tennessee come from Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous region in Iraq.

The revised order is narrower overall and specifies that a 90-day ban on people from Sudan, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen does not apply to those who already have valid visas. No new visas will be issued in those countries for at least the three-month period, and then only if the six countries meet information-sharing standards set by the Trump Administration. Additionally, Syrian refugees are no longer banned indefinitely.

Iraq welcomed its removal from a revised U.S. travel ban on Monday, calling it a "positive message" at a time when American and Iraqi forces are battling the Islamic State group together.

But Jeger Ali, a family engagement specialist at Metro Nashville Public Schools and a Kurdish community leader, said taking Iraq off the list is not enough.

"Just because it does not affect you doesn't mean it's right," Ali said. "It's still not right."

Ali also serves as a board member for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

He said that trying to protect the nation is a good thing, but the travel ban "makes no sense" since it targets the wrong people.

No one from any of the original seven Muslim-majority countries has carried out a terrorist attack on U.S. soil since at least 1975 through the end of 2015, according to a report by the Cato Institute, a Washington public policy think-tank.

Although the executive order references the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, none of the perpetrators' countries of origin are included in the ban.

"The revised ban makes some changes to the original order in an effort to pass legal muster and avoid the chaotic implementation that plagued the first order," the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition said in a statement. "However, the intent and impact of this sweeping executive order remains intact."

In a statement Monday morning, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions defended the new order.

"We cannot compromise our nation's security by allowing visitors entry when their own governments are unable or unwilling to provide the information we need to vet them responsibly – or when those governments actively support terrorism," Sessions said. "This executive order provides a needed pause, so we can carefully review how we scrutinize people coming here from these countries of concern."

The initial travel ban led to chaos at U.S. and international airports as tens of thousands of visa holders were blocked from entering the country or detained after arriving in the U.S., including a family of Iraqi Kurds on their way to Nashville. It was ultimately blocked by a federal appeals court.

Many of the American Kurds came as refugees during the early 1990s after Saddam Hussein attacked them using chemical weapons. Others have come more recently after working for the U.S. government abroad.

One such family was stopped at a Cairo airport on the way to Nashville and deported back to Iraq. Fuad Sharef Suleman was given a special visa to the U.S. after working as a regional translator for RTI International, a research organization with a contract through a U.S. government agency that works to end extreme global poverty and promote democracy abroad. He and his family arrived after widespread pressure from activists, protesters and lawmakers.

Suleman's son, Bnyad Sharef, said that under the latest ban, his family would not have been initially sent back to Iraq. But he said that doesn't justify the revised version.

"It's a little less harsh, but still it's a hugely discriminatory order," he said. "It'll probably ruin a lot of people's lives."

Sharef said Trump's directive will add months to the already lengthy vetting process refugees must go through in the other six countries. It took his family two and a half years to come to Nashville, he said.

Now an intern at the TIRRC, Sharef credits public activism for the first ban being blocked. In Tennessee, more than 10,000 individuals participated in a statewide day of action Feb. 1 to denounce the executive actions, according to TIRRC.

"My message to everyone is to keep fighting against this order, because I think there's a real chance we can get rid of it and make the lives of refugees easier," he said.

TIRRC said that even though the Kurds are no longer included, Nashville still has a sizable population of refugees, including those from Somalia and Sudan.

In the past year Tennessee ranked fourth in the nation for Sudanese refugees, according to data obtained by the Associated Press. Out of 1,574 total in the U.S., 111 Sudanese arrived in Tennessee from January 2016 to the end of January 2017. Most headed for Nashville or Chattanooga.

The executive order persisted in cutting the annual number of refugees admitted to the U.S. by more than half, from 110,000 to 50,000, causing faith-based refugee resettlement organization World Relief to announce it will close five offices, including the one in Nashville, and lay off more than 140 staff members.

So far for fiscal year 2017, the U.S. has accepted 35,544 refugees, according to the U.S. State Department's Refugee Processing Center. Under Trump's order, fewer than 15,000 refugees can come to the U.S. this fiscal year. Catholic Charities of Middle Tennessee also announced they would reduce their resettlement staff by 30 percent, TIRRC said.

U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., and the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, criticized the initial executive order. Corker called it "poorly implemented."

On Monday, Corker said he is encourage by the approach the administration took, working with other agencies in the federal government on the new order.

"I also am pleased that Iraq, a critical partner in the fight against ISIS, has been removed from the countries subject to visa restrictions based on the commitments Secretary (of State Rex) Tillerson has secured from the Iraqi government," Corker said in a statement.

"We all share a desire to protect the American people, and reviewing our nation's screening and vetting procedures is an appropriate step. Following a thorough review and implementation of necessary security enhancements, I am hopeful these programs will be reinstated."

U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., who initially took issue with the order turning away green card and visa-holders and said it came too close to a "religious litmus test," said Monday the revised ban is "a wiser approach."

ACLU of Tennessee Director Hedy Weinberg said the order remains at its core a "Muslim ban," like the one the president promised to enact while on the campaign trail. She vowed the ACLU would continue to fight the "discriminatory ban."

About a week after Trump signed the first order, U.S. District Senior Judge James Robart of Seattle on Friday issued a nationwide restraining order blocking the travel ban.

About a week later, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit said the executive order violates due process rights of people affected without a national security justification, upholding that ban.

The 29-page order represented a wide-ranging rebuke of Trump's travel ban. The judges found that the plaintiffs in the case — the states of Washington and Minnesota — had shown that the order may have violated the due process rights of foreigners who had valid visas and green cards. They also noted the "serious nature" of the religious discrimination claims made by the plaintiffs, but did not rule on that issue.

Refugees who represent a religious minority in their country of origin, including Syrian Christians, would have been admitted under Trump's initial order, but the revised order left out that religious exception.

"Contrary to speculation last week that the president was 'softening' his approach to immigration, today's executive order makes clear that his administration is intent on taking a wrecking ball to the Statue of Liberty," said TIRRC Co-Executive Director Stephanie Teatro. "We expect that once again the courts will serve as an important check on the president's unconstitutional and un-American instincts, but we also believe that Congress must play the same role."