



Trump's refugee ban is frightfully arbitrary: Our view

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In President Trump's dark view of America, thousands of shadowy foreigners from the Middle East are infiltrating our neighborhoods and waiting for an opportunity to kill us. "We have evil that lurks around the corner," he told *Fox News'* Sean Hannity last week. "They're sneaky, dirty rats."

This kind of indiscriminate fear-mongering is bad enough as campaign rhetoric. It's outright harmful to innocent people when ham-handedly translated into White House policy.

On Friday, which happened to be International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Trump signed an executive order suspending admission of any refugees to the U.S. for 120 days and banning entry for 90 days of people from seven predominantly Muslim nations: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. The prohibition on Syrians, millions of whom are women and children fleeing a war-ravaged humanitarian crisis in that country, is open-ended.

The predictable result: chaos and confusion at the borders for people who had been legally eligible to enter the United States. Refugees were halted at airports. An Iraqi man who had risked his life working as an interpreter for U.S. troops was temporarily barred. Students admitted to some of the nation's finest universities were prevented from starting school. And an Iranian scientist who had been awarded a fellowship to study cardiovascular medicine at Harvard found that the visas for him and his wife had suddenly been suspended.

Even legal U.S. residents, people holding green cards who had left the U.S. to visit relatives, were being prevented from returning. When a lawyer representing one of the dispossessed at Kennedy International Airport demanded answers, a border agent responded: "Call Mr. Trump."

In issuing his order, Trump at least stopped short of his hyperbolic demand during the Republican primary for an all-out ban on Muslim foreigners. But not by much. He directed that Christians and members of other minority religions be given preferential consideration over Muslims on future immigration decisions involving the nations covered by the order. Trump took the action after telling the Christian Broadcasting Network on Friday that it was "almost impossible" under the Obama administration for Christian refugees from Syria to be allowed into the USA.

That's untrue, according to Pew Research Center figures showing equal numbers of Christian and Muslim refugees admitted last year.

For any other new chief executive, a temporary and measured pause in immigration, to examine program efficacy, might be a reasonable step. But Trump, who within his first week in office has already demonstrated a frightening detachment from facts, has now disrupted countless lives with a bludgeoned approach to immigration.

For an executive order aimed at keeping out terrorists, it is strangely arbitrary. The 9/11 terrorists were from Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all of which were exempted from the order. And since 9/11, no one has been killed in the USA as a result of a terrorist attack by an emigrant from the seven targeted nations.

The president has enormous discretion under the immigration laws. But he doesn't have a blank check. His decision to give priority to religious minorities could violate First Amendment safeguards against discrimination based on religious beliefs. And by selectively banning all people from certain countries, Trump could run afoul of 50-year-old revisions in the immigration law preventing discrimination based on country of origin. All this is likely to be fought out in court; late Saturday, a federal judge temporarily blocked part of Trump's order.

For all of the new president's tough talk about imposing "extreme vetting" on refugee and immigration processes, the current policies were already pretty stringent. The 12,587 Syrian refugees allowed into the country last year waited, on average, two years as the vetting process played out.

The libertarian Cato Institute estimates that the chances of a refugee killing an American in a terror attack are extremely remote: one in 3.6 billion annually. Trump would caution us to be afraid, very afraid. But fear itself shouldn't be allowed to undermine America's values.