



Use of ‘Fiancée’ Visas by Muslims Is a Rare Occurrence

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The K-1 visa — known the “fiancé(e) visa” — used by San Bernardino shooter Tashfeen Malik, the Pakistani wife of U.S. citizen Syed Rizwan Farook, to enter the United States is one rarely used by Muslims — and is almost always approved.

The K-1 program, which gives legal U.S. entry to foreign citizens who are engaged to Americans, is relatively small. Federal data show that 35,925 K-1 visas were issued in fiscal year 2014 out of a total 9.9 million so-called non-immigrant visas that are given out for temporary travel or marriages.

Of the K-1 applications, 519 were issued in Pakistan, 71 in Iraq, and just four in Saudi Arabia. Compare that to the Philippines, where 7,228 K-1 visas were given in a population that is only 5 percent Muslim, or mainland China, where 1,910 were handed out in a country where fewer than 2 percent follow Islam.

This proves to be the case historically as well, as the chart below shows. According to data compiled by the Cato Institute, the Philippines accounted for more than 17 percent of all K-1 applications between 2005 and 2013. Its closest competitor was China, with more than 6 percent. None of the top 10 countries have Muslim majorities.

According to David North, a fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, a nonprofit that advocates for immigration restrictions, K-1 applications are almost always approved, at least as of last year. For every one K-1 application that was denied in 2014, North said, 304 were given out. In other words, 99.7 percent of applicants are allowed to enter the United States.

As far as visa success rates go, “the only group of applicants with a comparable score are NATO officials, like Norwegian admirals and German diplomats,” North told Foreign Policy on

Tuesday. He called it “a reflection of Uncle Sam being overly friendly to romance and marriage.”

The State Department did not return a request for comment on North’s analysis.

President Barack Obama has called for a review of the K-1 program, as have lawmakers in Congress. On Tuesday, the House approved tightening the U.S. visa waiver program, which allows travelers from 38 countries to enter the United States without entry documents. The measure, which passed 407-19, would also prohibit visa-free travel for people from the 38 nations who have visited Iraq and Syria in the last five years.

Obama supports the measure, though it would not have prevented Malik from entering the country.

However, according to Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, this does not mean Malik’s vetting wasn’t stringent. “The K-1 visa has all of the same interviews and biometrics of a green card,” he said.

“It’s as tough a look that you can get,” he said. “They take your fingerprints, conduct background checks and interviews at the consulate. There can be several rounds of interviews.”

He said the only vetting process that is tougher than the one done on K-1 applicants is that of refugees who want to come to the United States. Until now, “we haven’t seen too many people saying there needs to be changes to K-1 visa standards.”