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Congress can and should end Trump's travel ban

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As President Donald Trump considers adding several additional countries to his travel ban, the nation only has Congress to count on to step up and ensure America's immigration and travel policies are based on facts, not irrational fear.

Thankfully, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced Monday that Congress will be voting on the bicameral NO BAN Act in the coming weeks.

Sen. Chris Coons, D-Delaware, the Senate sponsor of the bill, pulled no punches last April when he unveiled the bill, which could help put an end to Trump's existing travel ban that restricts entry from seven countries (including five Muslim-majority countries), calling it "profoundly un-American" and promising to prevent "future discriminatory plans."

Coons' NO BAN Act is a commonsense bill that would ensure the American values of religious freedom and openness are reflected in the nation's immigration laws.

The bill would amend the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (INA) by strengthening the "nondiscrimination provisions," which state that discrimination or special treatment cannot be granted to visa applicants based on race, religion, country of origin or sex. This is long overdue—the NO BAN Act is a much-needed reform that has the support of dozens upon dozens of organizations, ranging from churches to veterans groups to LGBTQ+ organizations.

In 2018, following Trump's executive order banning travel from several majority-Muslim countries, the State Department denied a staggering 37,000 visa applications, compared to less than 1,000 such denials the prior year. This ban clearly discriminates against Muslims, and negatively impacts Americans with family members abroad. Worse, it unjustly targets those fleeing war-torn nations, without any evidence of higher crime rates among immigrants and refugees.

Many of the people denied entry into the country are the immediate family members of U.S. citizens. The ban has forced them to miss major life events like weddings, births and funerals. In some extreme circumstances, children of U.S. citizens have been refused entrance to the country while trying to receive medical treatment for life-threatening illnesses. Clearly, a child trying to access much-needed medication—whose parent is a U.S. citizen—does not pose a threat to our national security.

While it is true that this list of countries featured in the ban was first concocted by the Obama administration, that doesn't excuse the fact that Trump initially proposed during his campaign a "complete and total shutdown of Muslims" entering the United States. The targets for the ban as

implemented are clearly based more on religious discrimination than an interest in preventing dangerous people from coming here. Five of the seven nations—Yemen, Libya, Iran, Syria and Somalia—are majority-Muslim. Of those five, none are in the top 10 in the world for crime rates.

Syria ranks the worst of the five, coming in at 16th in overall crime rate. When it comes to murder, Somalia has the highest rate among the five, but is still only 77th in the world. As for the two nations on the current ban list that aren't predominantly Muslim, Venezuela is first on the crime rate index and second when it comes to murder, and data on North Korea is hard to come by. But even in the higher crime countries, the people who are leaving are not the dangerous ones. As the Cato Institute's Alex Nowrasteh has repeatedly pointed out, immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans. This is because America is historically great at assimilating immigrants.

While the crime and murder rates in the five majority-Muslim countries may be relatively low, that does not discount the fact that many folks in these countries are nonetheless fleeing persecution, war or famine. The U.S. used to resettle more refugees than any other nation, but we have fallen way behind under the Trump administration. In fiscal year 2016, America welcomed about 85,000 refugees, which was about one percent of the world's refugees. Now, in fiscal year 2019, the Trump administration has set a cap at 30,000 refugees.

It is immoral and un-American to turn away those fleeing war, religious persecution or starvation, especially at a time when the number of worldwide refugees is at a record high, and when the U.S. has record numbers of job openings that refugees and immigrants could fill.

Congress has an opportunity to right this wrong. As Sen. Coons said during his press conference, when the Supreme Court ruled to uphold the legality of the president's current travel ban, it didn't decide that the ban was the right policy—that's not the role of the court. It's the role of Congress to make just laws, and the Trump administration's ban is obviously not one.

So it's time to strengthen our laws to ensure once and for all that discriminatory practices are never the basis on which U.S. immigration policy is decided.