

Omaha World-Herald

Hansen: It's hard to find an expert who says Trump's order makes the U.S. safer

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February 3, 2017

Let's assume for a second that you are a fan of President Donald Trump's executive order barring citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. Let's assume you support it because your chief concern is terrorism. Let's say you support the executive order because it makes you feel safe.

This week, as the dust settled on the president's move to temporarily bar large swaths of the Middle East and North Africa from entering our country, I took that viewpoint to experts of all stripes.

I read what counter-terrorism experts, analysts, diplomats and military think tankers — people who have studied and fought against Islamic extremism for decades — had written. I called them on the phone and asked two questions: Does this make the United States more or less safe? And why?

What I heard back was striking. These experts, who are of varying political backgrounds and viewpoints, don't tend to agree on much. But they mostly agree on this: The executive order does not make America safer.

It's likely to do the opposite.

"This creates more problems than it solves," says William Lawrence, a former State Department official under three U.S. presidents with decades of experience in North Africa and the Middle East. "More screening and more vetting is good. It's important. But in the long term (the executive order) increases the danger. It makes us less safe."

Before we get to why, let's start with a few numbers.

Zero. That's the number of citizens of the seven countries now barred who have committed a lethal terrorist attack on U.S. soil in the past 40 years.

219 million. That's the number of people who live in the seven barred countries and can no longer come to the U.S. for virtually any reason, including fleeing some of the world's most violent wars, until further notice.

One in 3.6 billion. Those are the odds that an American will be killed by a refugee terrorist in any given year, according to analyst Alex Nowrasteh at the Cato Institute, which describes itself as libertarian, who analyzed four decades of data. Of the 3.3 million refugees our country took in between 1975 and 2015, only three turned out to be terrorists who killed an American. Those three were Cuban refugees who killed three people in the late 1970s.

"The United States government should continue to devote resources to screening immigrants and foreigners for terrorism or other threats, but large policy changes like an immigration or tourist moratorium would impose far greater costs than benefits," Nowrasteh wrote before the executive order.

Most of the seven countries affected by the ban are, in fact, dangerous places, the experts told me. And most have a terrorist group operating inside them: the Islamic State, remnants of al-Qaida or al-Shabaab.

And it is possible to find experts who support the ban, though those experts tend to work for groups that have long supported slowing or halting immigration.

Mark Krikorian, director of the Center for Immigration Studies, told Public Radio International that it makes sense to temporarily ban refugees so the U.S. "can figure out whether the screening we do now is appropriate or needs to be tightened. This isn't an indication of what the actual policy three or four months from now will be."

Few experts I spoke with think we should do nothing — many, in fact, believe that we should spend time and money on both improving and streamlining the vetting process for refugees, immigrants and visitors.

But temporarily or permanently barring citizens from those seven countries misunderstands the frequency and the manner by which those terrorist groups actually threaten us, most experts say.

It also ignores the idea that an act that will be largely perceived as "the Muslim ban" makes those terrorist groups very happy.

"This ban gives unprecedented life to the worst jihadist narrative — the idea that the West has declared war on Muslims," wrote Robert Pape, a leading expert on terrorism, who as director of the University of Chicago's Project on Security and Threats has analyzed each of the 5,000 suicide terrorist attacks worldwide since 1980. "This narrative is not just talk. It is the principal catalyst for ISIS and other radical Islamic terrorist groups' ability to carry out attacks that kill Americans."

Since Sept. 12, 2001, the main terrorist danger in the U.S. hasn't been citizens of other countries. Nor, as the numbers above illustrate, has it been recent immigrants from the now-banned countries or refugees.

By far the largest danger to the United States: American citizens, including some whose families came from Muslim-majority countries, experts say. The San Bernardino shooters, the Boston Marathon bombers and the Orlando nightclub shooter mostly fit inside this last category, though it's worth noting that none of their families hail from countries barred by the executive order. It's also worth noting that the Charleston church massacre, the Sandy Hook school shooter and both acts of mass killing in Omaha in the past decade were committed by young men from Christian-American backgrounds.

The temporary ban on the Muslim-majority countries is already shocking, scaring and inflaming Muslim-American communities in the United States, experts say. While 99.999 percent of these citizens will show their fear and their frustration through normal democratic channels, a select, troubled few may instead gravitate toward violent ideology, which is easily found online.

"If you are on the extremist, violent fringe of any community, policies like this could easily be some of the reason you are motivated to act," Lawrence says. "It makes domestic terrorism more likely."

The other prime way that the executive order makes America less safe is how it potentially alienates most of the people who live in the seven barred countries, the experts say.

The United States has long relied on moderate Muslims to work with us when we go abroad, either diplomatically or militarily. In Iraq, for example, hundreds of thousands of citizens have fought the Islamic State, served as guides and interpreters for the American military or otherwise supported U.S. efforts. In Libya, Lawrence says, he has seen many examples where good relationships with individual Libyans led to tips that kept America safer.

The U.S. also heavily leans on moderate Muslims to counteract the violent ideology of groups like the Islamic State.

In this war of ideas, we need moderate Muslims, experts say. And it is moderate Muslims in key countries like Iraq who the United States may have just lost.

"The very thing we use to incentivize Muslims to work with us in those places is the idea of America as something larger, something open, something free. If you shut the door like this, shut it on the people we need, you have just lost the war," says James Le Sueur, who teaches, researches and writes about the history of terrorism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

So the experts are scared, too. They like safety, just like you. But they believe their fear is based on facts — on an understanding of the actual situations that put the United States in danger.

Be afraid, they told me. But we need to be afraid of the right thing.

“We shouldn’t dismiss the threats, but we should look clear-eyed at what the real threats are and come up with a real cost-benefit analysis and a real plan,” Lawrence says.

“None of the experts I know think that this is what (the executive order) does. ... Instead, you are going to have 200 million plus people who wake up each morning thinking, ‘The U.S. doesn’t like me or people from my country. Because we’re Muslim.’ And I guarantee you that is a bad thing for the United States.”