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Thursday's Editorial: Trump's executive order on refugees may do far more harm than good

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Providing citizens with security is a crucial job of government.

That's why President Donald Trump signed an executive order Friday that suspends refugee admissions and bans entry to the United States from seven Muslim-majority countries.

But global counter-terrorism experts are dismayed by Trump's order.

Even a writer for the right-leaning Cato Institute, Alex Nowrasteh, called the fear of refugees "a phantom menace."

And Ohio Gov. John Kasich — like Trump, a Republican — said the order was "ham handed," has "sowed much confusion" among international travelers and "sent a message that somehow the United States was looking sideways at Muslims."

Meanwhile, Mayor Lenny Curry's support for Trump's order seemed to be driven more by politics than pragmatism.

Here are the ACTUAL FACTS

So what is the information that Trump should have taken into account?

- Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2011, not a single U.S. citizen has been killed on U.S. soil in a terrorist attack by someone who either emigrated from, or even whose parents emigrated from, the seven countries pinpointed in the executive order.
- The list of seven countries does not include other countries — such as Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, from which came the 9/11 attackers — that are known hotbeds of terrorism.

- While thousands of refugees, people fleeing life-threatening situations in their own countries, are admitted to the United States every year, no refugee admitted to the U.S. since 1980 has ever been involved in a terrorist attack on American soil.
- A whopping 82 percent of people who commit terrorist acts here were U.S. citizens or legal residents.

EXTREME VETTING already exists

An additional claim made by Trump focused on his oft-repeated campaign statement that refugees needed additional vetting before they should be allowed to enter this country.

That couldn't be further from the truth.

Refugees already undergo an extensive vetting process that takes from 18 months to three years to complete before they can be approved for resettlement in the United States.

The New York Times itemized 20 different steps in this process. (See the list attached to this editorial on jacksonville.com/opinion).

The process includes a series of interviews and background checks that increase in intensity with each level passed.

bad consequences

This ban has hurt thousands, ranging from the frightened refugees stranded in often-inhuman camps abroad to local refugee-assistance agencies.

Because of the ban, agencies like World Relief may be forced to cut staff as well as services, and those cuts will undoubtedly negatively impact the refugees already in Northeast Florida.

It's the innocent — persecuted, frightened refugees and loyal, committed staff members — who will be suffering.

JIHADISTS CHEER

In fact, Trump's ban may ultimately put Americans in greater danger.

All around the world, jihadist groups are celebrating the president's order because it plays into their evil hands.

And into their evil plans.

In his "Letter to America" in 2002, Osama bin Laden claimed that the United States was at war with Islam.

But President George W. Bush and other major political leaders, along with American Muslims, insisted it was bin Laden that was the outlier, that the U.S. has successfully assimilated Muslims into this nation.

Because it targets people from Muslim countries, the Trump order validates the contentions that America was a treacherous enemy all along.

According to The Washington Post, one person posting to social media on a pro-Islamic site called Trump's order the "blessed ban" and others cheered the order as they saw it as a tremendous recruitment tool for their movements.

So what can concerned Americans do at this point, now that the executive order has been signed?

- Make your concerns heard.
- Reach out to those in the community from other countries or who practice a different religion — and assure them that they are valued neighbors.
- Reach out to the refugee resettlement agencies — World Relief, Lutheran Social Services and Catholic Charities — with offers to help both financially and by providing aid to those refugees already in Jacksonville who may be left without services due to staff cuts.

We all want to be safe.

And America's security systems ought to be constantly scrutinized and updated.

But it needs to be done the right way.

RIGOROUS VETTING OF REFUGEES

Already in effect, refugees seeking to enter the United States must complete these 20 steps:

1. Register with the United Nations.
2. Interview with the United Nations.
3. Refugee status granted by the United Nations.
4. Referral for resettlement in the United States.
5. Interview with State Department contractors.
6. First background check.
7. Higher level background check for some.
8. Another background check.
9. First fingerprint screening; photo taken.
10. Second fingerprint screening.
11. Third fingerprint screening.

12. Case reviewed at United States immigration headquarters.
13. Some cases reviewed for additional review.
14. Extensive, in-person interview with Homeland Security officer.
15. Homeland Security approval is required.
16. Screening for contagious diseases.
17. Cultural orientation class.
18. Matched with an American resettlement agency.
19. Multi-agency security check before leaving for the United States.
20. Final security check at an American airport.

LOCAL RESOURCES FOR LEARNING ABOUT MUSLIMS

Sabeen Perwaiz, a Muslim-American resident of Jacksonville and an advocate for refugees, offers a safe space to learn about the refugee issue.

Here are five resources available right here, right now:

1. Educate yourself on the Executive Order: A lot of confusion exists right now around President Trump's Executive Order. It is important for people to read and understand the order, rather than secondary sources that reinforce their existing view. You can attend an event this Saturday at the Florida Coastal School of Law to understand the legality of the order. Website: <http://bit.ly/flacoastalevent>

2. Volunteer: Three resettlement agencies in Jacksonville will likely be laying off staff because the Executive Order has frozen the refugee program for at least 120 days and reduced the annual national refugee cap from 110,000 to 50,000. You can volunteer with Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services or World Relief to help them through a difficult time. They would welcome your questions and your time!

3. Meet a Muslim! According to Pew, roughly 200 million Americans have never met a Muslim. There are nearly 8,000 Muslims in Jacksonville. Get to know one personally! If you don't know where to begin, email me at meetamuslimjax@gmail.com and I will work with you to introduce you to one of the many Muslims residing in Duval County. You can invite a Muslim family to your place of worship, or meetup for dinner. Also, the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida is hosting several events in the coming weeks. You can rsvp for one here:

<http://bit.ly/islamiccenterevent>

4. Talk to your community: Church and synagogue volunteer groups have consistently helped refugees on the First Coast. Congregations have welcomed refugees and provided friendship to many who had no sense of community upon their arrival. Reach out to Riverside Presbyterian or

Jacksonville Jewish Center and learn about their congregation's experience. You can then engage your own place of worship:

<http://bit.ly/worldreliefjax>

5. Break bread with people from around the world: Take the opportunity to enjoy Jacksonville's rich cultural diversity. You can learn about the many people and cuisines that make up our region's culinary identity by attending one of Global Jax's Culinary Connection events: