
Heightened Scrutiny of Iranians Shows Trump Administration ‘Extreme Vetting’ in Action

Iranians, frequent U.S. visa applicants, are facing more hurdles getting approval.

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Iranians trying to enter the United States are running into obstacles and facing heightened scrutiny, despite the court-ordered freezes on President Donald Trump’s two travel bans.

Frequent travelers to the United States, Iranians are seen as a bellwether for how the Trump administration will impose a new vetting regime on people from Muslim-majority countries even if its executive orders are overturned. Of the six nationalities targeted by the March 6 travel ban who received visas to enter the United States in fiscal year 2015, Iranian nationals made up 57 **percent**.

Sima Alizadeh, an immigration lawyer who mainly works with Iranians, said barely any of her clients have successfully moved through the visa process since the end of January, even after Trump’s first travel ban was halted by federal courts. Normally she has far more success digging her clients out of bureaucratic black holes.

“It’s very weird not to see visas being given to Iranians abroad for such a long period of time,” she said.

Iranians, more than any other group targeted by the travel bans, are being watched by lawyers and advocates seeking to anticipate how the administration may tighten the visa process for Muslim travelers. Unlike other applicants covered by the bans from Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, who are more likely to come to the United States through the refugee resettlement program, Iranians have deep ties to America. Almost 500,000 Iranian-Americans live in the country and Iranian nationals often travel to the United States on family or marriage visas, tourist visas, or for work and study. Out of 15,453 **foreign students** studying in the United States last year from the six banned countries, 12,269 came from Iran.

Four Iranian-American organizations and more than 20 individuals have filed a lawsuit against the executive orders and their implementation in Washington, D.C. Their case, headed to court on April 13, documents unresolved arbitrary visa process interruptions and denials that occurred despite the travel bans' legal limbo.

In one declaration included in the suit, a woman reports that her Iranian parents were asked about her religion during an application for a tourist visa, a question they never received on previous applications. They said they were Muslim and were denied.

U.S. consular officials have broad discretion to vet visa applicants. Even before the executive orders, applicants deemed high-risk were routinely denied without any explanation or recourse to appeal. During previous administrations, Iranians already were subject to a lengthy vetting process that required significant documentation and traveling to consulates in nearby countries for interviews.

Still, immigration lawyers from multiple Iranian-American groups say they have noticed a distinct trend. Alizadeh, who works at Pars equality center, a nonprofit that provides legal services to Iranian-Americans, estimated she was usually able to push 70 percent of her visa cases abroad through the process and averaged three to five visa approvals a week in her six years of working mainly with Iranians. Now more than 80 percent of her cases have stalled, she estimated.

Alizadeh has also noticed her clients are getting more scrutiny. While Middle Eastern male applicants are sometimes flagged for extra screening because their names may match those with links to terrorism, now even her female clients are getting stuck. "You know it's not the normal rhythm, so you can see the weirdness in it," she said. "Most of the holds seem baseless."

Jamal Abdi, policy director of the National Iranian American Council, also said he had seen a "chilling effect," with visa interviews cancelled during the roll out of the travel ban and never rescheduled.

Lawyers advising immigrants and tourists said it was difficult to distinguish between a directive-driven shift in the application of the law and, say, the whims of a subset of bureaucrats who may be responding to the administration's tone. "Much of what is going on is happening behind the scenes and we only see glimpses into it when a person reaches out," said Babak Yousefzadeh of the Iranian American Bar Association.

Trump's March 6 travel ban executive order was accompanied by a less-scrutinized memorandum, that calls for "immediate" heightened screening protocols and procedures for issuing visas. The memorandum is not specifically blocked by courts.

Recently leaked internal cables from the State Department, first reported by *Reuters*, offer a small window into how the administration aims to implement stepped-up vetting through avenues outside the executive orders. They instruct consular officials to more deeply scrutinize a wider pool of applicants and focus on applicants' links to the Islamic State. They also cap visa interviews to 120 per adjudicator per day, noting that "limiting scheduling may cause interview appointment backlogs to rise."

A State Department official said the department was taking steps "to further strengthen our already strong screening and vetting procedures."

It's unclear if the instructions differ significantly from previous diplomatic memos on vetting procedure since those have rarely been disclosed. Immigration legal advocates are sounding the alarm that new vetting protocol could amount to "a backdoor" to achieving the same aims as a so-called "Muslim-ban." But the cables have left even counterterrorism experts perplexed, though for somewhat different reasons. They said vetting procedures are already rigorous and effective, and most of the instructions in the memos seemed at once redundant and oddly imprecise.

Parts of the State Department instructions seem to rehash standard practices, they said, like asking for a traveler's personal information, contacts, and checking social media activity. "Anyone seeking a visa from those countries listed in the cable would be heavily scrutinized because those countries are current conflict zones," said John Cohen, a former counterterrorism coordinator at the Department of Homeland Security.

Rick "Ozzie" Nelson, a national security expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the administration seemed to be trying different strategies all at once "to make it very difficult for people from these countries to get visas or be able to travel."

Vague language in the instructions, such as targeting "populations warranting increased scrutiny," might encourage consular officials to be overly restrictive. "You don't want to be that officer and embassy that is doing extreme vetting and lets the wrong person in the country," Nelson said.

“We might as well shut down the consular affairs offices, because it’s getting to the point of diminishing returns and even silly.”

This post was updated to include a quote from Jamal Abdi, policy director at the National Iranian-American Council, at 1:55 p.m.

This post was updated at 3:45 p.m. Sima Alizadeh has been working with Iranians for six years, not 10. A previous version also stated Iranians are “commonly flagged.” Alizadeh has seen Middle Eastern men, not just Iranians, sometimes put on hold for name checks related to terrorism, not “commonly.”

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