A Ban by Any Other Name

Adnan Ahmed, MB, BS

J Am Acad Psychiatry Law 45:348–49, 2017

In January 2017, President Trump issued an executive order temporarily barring entry of immigrants from certain Muslim-majority countries to the United States. I am a U.S. citizen and do not belong to any of the banned countries. I was raised as a Muslim, but now identify as an atheist. In fact, many of my Muslim friends and family members who know about my apostasy think of me as a traitor and feel hurt by my decision to leave Islam. One could argue that the Muslim ban technically does not affect me in any adverse way. However, it does.

The president's executive order, titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," barred people from seven Muslim-majority countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen) from entering the United States for 90 days.[1] It also barred all refugees from entering the United States for 120 days and indefinitely barred refugees from Syria. The rhetoric from President Trump during his presidential campaign, as well as an interview of New York's ex-Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, after the order was issued, made it clear that the executive order is specifically intended to prevent Muslims from entering the country. There has been talk of expanding the scope of the order to include other Muslim-majority countries.

The ban affects every individual in the United States who self-defines as Muslim, by labeling Muslims as "the other." Initially, the order even barred permanent residents (green card holders) from one of the banned countries from re-entering the United States, taking away their legal rights without due process. In addition to rejecting people based on religion and nationality, a convenient by-product of this executive order is the disenfranchisement of an entire group of people who live peacefully in the United States. It normalizes the othering of many people without credible evidence that they pose a risk. Imagine being a person who fits the stereotypical profile of a Muslim walking into a coffee shop. For me and many of my Muslim friends and family members, this seemingly ordinary experience now engenders an uneasy feeling of being out of place. We have not experienced this in decades of living in the United States. The order is blatantly xenophobic and dangerous. It attempts to label falsely a diverse group of people as potential terrorists. The Muslim ban has emboldened people who hold racist views to come out of the woodwork and express their views proudly. At the same time, President Trump has expressed plans to revamp Countering Violent Extremism programs to focus solely on Islamist extremism while completely ignoring the danger posed by white nationalists.

I have been a staunch critic of religious orthodoxy for many reasons, including its treatment of dissenters like me. However, on January 29, 2017, I joined hands with Muslims and non-Muslims outside the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport to protest the immigration ban. I felt a sense of solidarity that I had not experienced in a long time with people who are different from me.[2]

I see patients from all walks of life during my work as a psychiatrist. Ardent Trump supporters, orthodox Muslims, and everyone in between. Our profession teaches us to deal with countertransference. I was taught in residency that if I could find just one quality that I liked about a patient, I would be able to work with that individual. The patients sitting across from me are more than their religion or political beliefs. These are persons with relationships, ambitions, dreams, and resentments, just like anyone else.

Dr. Ahmed is a Fellow in Forensic Psychiatry, University of MN, F282/2A West Building, 2450 Riverside Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55454. E-mail: adnan@umn.edu.

If the Trump administration is serious about combating terrorism, then instead of banning people from coming here and alienating lawful residents and citizens who live here, it should focus on creating dialogue between people. Like any other religion, Islam is complicated. We need to understand that people of Muslim background are diverse. The spectrum ranges from ultraorthodox Muslims to ex-Muslims. Although people feel strongly about the positions they presently hold, I suspect that many of them change their positions and go back and forth as they search for answers to existential questions. Many people remain peaceful without resorting to violence in the name of religion. When we talk about terrorism in Islam, we are talking about a very small number of people who decide to resort to violence in the name of ideology.

We know from comparisons of violent extremists to ordinary violent offenders that violent extremism is associated less with mental illness or psychopathy and more commonly with a sense of deep conviction and moral justification for an action.[3] Given what we know, it is reasonable to believe that the immigration ban will only fuel the fire of radicalization. If the goal of the immigrant ban is to counter an ideology and, specifically, a violent interpretation of a religion, then banning an entire group of people will do only the opposite. It will cause them, both Muslims and non-Muslims, to become more insular.

Soon after I moved to the United States in 2003, I took my old Toyota in for some repair work. The mechanic was somewhat rude and dismissive toward me. He fixed my car and as he handed me my keys he asked me, "So why do you guys hate us?" I was taken aback. But the question led to a conversation and, later, to a friendship. I kept going back to him for the next four years until I moved out of state. I miss that time when it was acceptable to ask questions, even those based on somewhat biased premises. Especially those based on outright prejudice. These days we do not pose questions. We make assumptions, and then we follow with accusations based on our assumptions. We surround ourselves only with people who we think are like us. Everyone else is "the other." We are all guilty of this. Our social media profiles are a monument to our narcissism. Anything short of validation is unacceptable and tantamount to a declaration of war. People are ending friendships based on the divisions created by the toxic political climate.

On February 3, 2017, in the wake of massive protests around the country, federal district court judge James Robart of Seattle issued a nationwide temporary restraining order (TRO) blocking President Trump's travel ban.[4] The Trump administration appealed the TRO and asked the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals for an emergency stay of the TRO. As of this writing, the Ninth Circuit has denied the request for an emergency stay, leaving the TRO in effect.[5] In other words, the Trump administration is still temporarily prohibited from enforcing the travel ban. President Trump has vowed to appeal this decision.

Even if the travel ban is eventually determined to be unconstitutional, it has in a way already served an unfortunate purpose. It has made it socially acceptable for ordinary citizens to profile those who they feel do not belong in this country. Clearly, the fight is not over. The work has only begun for many of us to counter the politics of fear.

Acknowledgments

I thank Chinmoy Gulrajani, MB, BS, for his generous support, encouragement and insights for this article.

References

1. Executive Order: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/27/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states/. Accessed February 7, 2017
2. Thousands in Twin Cities turn out to oppose Trump travel ban. Available at: http://www.startribune.com/franken-and-klobuchar-call-trump-ordered-travel-ban-irresponsible-and-probably-unconstitutional/412089013/. Accessed February 7, 2017
3. Sageman M: Understanding Terrorist Networks. Philadelphia, PA. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004
4. State of Washington v. Trump, Case No. C17-0141JLR, Temporary Restraining Order (February 3, 2017). Available at: http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/2017_2003_robart_tro_ruling.pdf/. Accessed February 7, 2017
5. State of Washington v. Trump, Case No. 17-35105, Order on Motion for Stay of an Order of the United States District Court for the Western District of Washington (February 9, 2017). Available at: http://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2017/02/09/17-35105.pdf. Accessed February 9, 2017