

Trump's refugee plan divides religious leaders

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* For a week after President Trump's executive orders suspending visas and immigration to the United States for nationals of seven predominantly Muslim countries and temporarily stopping refugee resettlement, protesters massed outside airports, attorneys filed lawsuits across the country, and thousands of immigrants to the United States were thrown into legal limbo.

Then, a federal judge in Washington State temporarily blocked the order from being enforced nationwide, [with a federal appeals court panel upholding that decision in a ruling February 9](#), and for a time the Department of Homeland Security has stopped enforcing it. The State Department allowed those with valid visas to enter the country after saying it had revoked as many as 100,000.

Previously, President Trump had said, "This is not about religion, this is about terror and keeping our country safe."

In the days following the order, customs officials detained travelers arriving from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Protesters at airports argued that these people had already been vetted and were being unfairly detained.

Yet beyond that controversy, Trump's order also includes an extra provision: once the immigration system is overhauled and a revamped "extreme vetting" process is put in place, his administration will prioritize the petitions of Christian refugees and other religious minorities fleeing persecution in war-torn regions.

"We share a concern for persecuted Christians, for Yazidis, for Shi'a Muslims," said Bill O'Keefe, head of government relations and advocacy at Catholic Relief Services. "But human need is not restricted to these groups."

O'Keefe, who traveled to Iraq earlier in January, noted that his organization works in all of the countries surrounding Syria. "We know that restricting the ability of people fleeing violence is going to jeopardize the lives of innocent people."

In prioritizing the threat faced by Christians above those faced by Muslims, the Trump administration is opening itself up to claims of being “Christians first,” just as it vows to be “America first.”

For many of Trump’s most ardent followers, the push to offer asylum to Christians persecuted in Muslim-majority nations has been building for more than a decade.

“I agree with the president in prioritizing along religious lines, because the religion of Islam is what does propel the radical jihadists to do what they’re doing,” said James Linzey, state chaplain for the California Council of Chapters of the Military Officers Association of America. “We are a Christian nation, we were founded as a Christian nation, that’s the nature of America.”

Meanwhile, other Christian and Jewish leaders opposed the travel ban along with political conservatives such as Charles Koch, who called the action “authoritarian,” and Senators John McCain (R., Ariz.) and Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), who said in a statement, “This executive order sends a signal, intended or not, that America does not want Muslims coming into our country.”

For his part, Trump insisted that his order was not a “Muslim ban” like the one he proposed after the San Bernardino terrorist shootings in 2015. It is a focus on terrorists within “countries of particular concern,” Trump said.

Critics point out that many countries where terrorists have come from in the past—such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan—are not part of the ban. Meanwhile, no refugees from six of the seven countries included in the temporary ban have carried out terrorist attacks. The exception is Somalia; a Somali refugee used his car and a knife to carry out an attack in Columbus, Ohio, last November.

The pending religious litmus test for prioritizing refugees does not favor Christians per se, according to the order, but favors “claims made by individuals on the basis of religious-based persecution, provided that the religion of the individual is a minority religion in the individual’s country of nationality.”

For many, however, the image of Muslim travelers who have committed no crime and have their travel papers in order being detained at U.S. airports pointed to a callous lack of concern.

“My father still lives in Syria, and I have family and friends who are refugees all over parts of Europe today,” said Isa Rahman Ibrahim, who spoke in front of a chanting crowd of more than 1,000 protesters gathered in Manhattan’s Washington Square. “These are times of uncertainty . . . when sisters and brothers in our community are being singled out.”

The size of the protests that emerged this weekend spoke to concerns that spread far beyond the Muslim community. Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote in an open letter that he worries that the executive order would lead to increased threats for Christian aid workers abroad.

Rachel Kahn-Troster, director of programs for T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, a Manhattan-based group of rabbis and cantors from all streams of Judaism, noted that immigration restrictions in the United States and Canada during the 1940s caused many refugees fleeing the Nazis to perish.

“It goes against what it means to me to be an American,” she said. “Although I absolutely appreciate that there are Christians who are targeted in Muslim majority countries, just as many Jews are, to write this executive order to prioritize one group of refugees over another is really appalling. . . . This is real history for a lot of American Jews, who know that even when we faced such significant dangers in Europe during the time of the Holocaust, America closed its doors to them since they thought they were national security threats.”

[As of February 8, more than 3,500 interfaith religious leaders had signed a letter supporting refugee resettlement, published on the website of the Interfaith Immigration Coalition. “It is important to recognize that the United States has the most rigorous refugee screening process in the world,” the letter states. “The U.S. Refugee Resettlement program has been and should remain open to those of all nationalities and religions who face persecution on account of the reasons enumerated under U.S. law.”] —*The Christian Science Monitor*

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