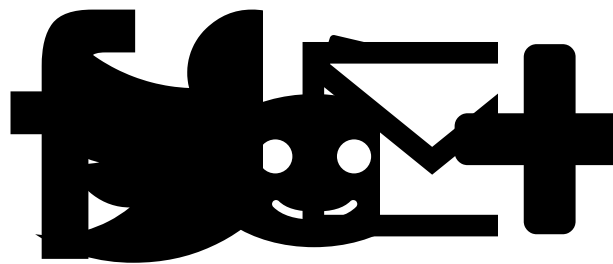


# Trump's Overturned Travel Ban Is Still Causing Chaos for Musicians

Though the short-sighted executive order was blocked, it has enacted a chilling effect whose end result is unknown

By **RICHARD GEHR** 



**Syrian singer Omar Souleyman performs at Malmö Festival in Sweden.**  
Tommy Lindholm/Pacific Press/ZUMA

Even before 9/11, it was no picnic for foreign musicians to perform in the United States. Work visas could be paid for and acquired, venues could be booked, publicity purchased, hotel reservations nailed down, airline tickets bought – but the heavily vetted artists could still be held up at any point in the process, up to and including arrival at JFK, LAX or MIA.

With his signature on a January 27th executive order ostensibly intended “to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States,” President Trump erected an even higher wall, if you will. The order banned virtually anyone from seven mostly Muslim nations – Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen – from entering the U.S. for at least the next 90 days (or, in Syria’s case, indefinitely). And while Trump tweeted that “[o]nly 109 people out of 325,000 were detained and held for questioning” following his order, the Justice Department estimates that as many as 100,000 visas were revoked.

A week of protests ensued, here and abroad, as hundreds of thousands of people took to airports, political offices and the streets. On January 30th, during a show in Adelaide, Australia, Bruce Springsteen introduced “American Land” as an “immigrant song,” and told his audience, “Tonight we wanted to add our voices to the thousands of Americans who are protesting in airports around our country, the Muslim ban and detention of foreign nationals and refugees.”

On February 3rd, federal judge James Robart in Seattle reversed the ban by upholding claims that the states of Washington and Minnesota had the right to challenge Trump’s order. The Department of Homeland Security suspended its enforcement, and the State Department began returning visas to those who’d lost them. The White House

immediately appealed Robart's ruling, but a federal appeals court rejected the Justice Department's request to immediately restore Trump's travel ban.

During the first chaotic weekend after Trump's decree, the wildly popular Iranian singing star Googoosh was among those afraid she wouldn't be allowed back into the U.S. – where she has lived for more than a decade – from London, where she'd been recording. "She was distraught and distressed," says her lawyer Sourash Shahram. "She felt history was repeating itself, almost like a *déjà vu*." In 1980, while en route to Tehran from London, Googoosh got a phone call telling her not to go back to Iran, where the Ayatollah Khomeini had banned all non-religious women from singing.

**"No agent's going to say, 'I'm going to take on a Syrian artist for next fall.'"**

Googoosh and other green-card-holding permanent residents of the U.S. were excluded from Trump's travel ban a few days after his executive order. She has returned home to Los Angeles and will perform upcoming concerts in Arizona and elsewhere. But even before learning she would be allowed back in the U.S., Shahram says, Googoosh told her management that, "I made a promise to myself: Nothing will ever prevent me from going back onstage. I want to go back [to the U.S.] and we'll take it from there."



Internationally acclaimed Syrian wedding singer Omar Souleyman fled to Turkey after civil war broke out in his home country in 2011. Although he maintains a low political profile, Souleyman's omnipresent aviator shades, keffiyeh headdress, and fulsome mustache no doubt make him a tempting target for TSA employees. Nevertheless, he

has been in the U.S. on 16 separate visas since 2010 and plans to tour here again in May. Trump singled out Syrian refugees in his order as being particularly “detrimental to the interests of the United States,” and forbids their entry indefinitely. Will Souleyman be barred as well? According to Mina Tosti, his manager, Souleyman “is confident that this cannot be so and that he will, in the end, join his fans despite all this nonsense.”

“We don’t plan to cancel anything,” Tosti adds. “Performing in the U.S. is of course hugely important to Omar – his audience is very large and significant not only in numbers but in enthusiasm and common spirit.”

Relatively few musicians come directly from the nations in question; most, for economic and other reasons are based in the U.S., Canada, or Europe. Yet no one could be blamed for detecting a sinister underside to the Trump administration’s ill-conceived and amateurishly executed order ban on predominantly Muslim travelers. Sprung without warning, it plunged the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the world into chaos.

The Monday after it was announced, “the visa chief in London was getting diametrically different info than I was getting at Customs and Border Protection at JFK,” says Matthew Covey of Tamizdat, a Brooklyn firm that files hundreds of visa applications for foreign arts organizations each year. “Totally different.”

Non-Western artists are used to confusion. “The visa process has been grueling and mysterious for everybody since the Immigration Act of 1990 went into effect,” Covey says. “It’s always seemed arbitrary, especially to artists coming from that part of the world. They’re used to not knowing if their tour’s even going to happen. They could go in for a visa and it could be denied for absolutely no reason.”

Other musicians, though, were plenty shocked. “I think to myself, ‘Are we being punked? Where’s the cameras?’” says Marwan Hussein of Acrassicauda, subjects of the 2007 documentary *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*. The band’s drummer came to the U.S. as a child refugee from Iraq, but his mother’s visa has long been denied. “It’s ridiculous,” he says of Trump’s dictum. “Who would do that?”

If nothing else, the ban is making Muslim musicians more outspoken about the discrimination they experience. So while Acrassicauda may have previously considered itself an apolitical act, Hussein sees “no escape from that. We’ve got to talk about it.”



Ahmed Gallab, the Sudanese musician who performs as Sinkane, has been a U.S. citizen since his parents decided to apply after 9/11 (“so we wouldn’t have to deal with anything like this”). Gallab has been experiencing discrimination on the road long before the ban.

“You’d be surprised how often even I get ‘randomly’ checked at airports,” Gallab says. “I’ve gotten used to it, and it’s not as bad as it used to be. But I’m always the one who gets the random check at the ticket counter, security checkpoint, or right before we get on the plane. Let’s call a spade a spade: I understand that I have a name that gets red-flagged all the time. But I’ve gone through the whole vetting process for Global Entry so I don’t have to deal with this stuff – and I still do!”

Gallab’s not alone: A former prime minister of Norway was detained and questioned at Washington Dulles airport on January 31 because his diplomatic passport noted a 2014 trip to Iran.

The Nile Project, which contains musicians from all seven “countries of concern,” arrived in the United States on January 18 to begin a four-month tour that includes several academic residencies. They perform, participate in workshops, and offer perspective-broadening opinions on international and domestic issues. It’s a beautiful example of how American citizens can meet and interact with everyday Muslims, possibly for the first time. The Nile Project is quite literally trying to bring cultures together.



The travel ban, however, is achieving the opposite effect. “Psychologically, it has caused a lot of anxiety in the group,” says manager Mina Gergis. “For many of these musicians, who include former refugees, it’s their first time traveling in the U.S. They’re already having a fairly difficult time learning about the U.S., and this makes it much harder.”

The Nile Project’s workshops include a version of the Zar ceremony, a healing ritual that exists in all Nile countries. “In Atlanta,” Gergis says, “everyone was like, ‘Can you do this for America? Because we really need it right now.’”

Paranoia about the executive order rose rapidly among the many refugees from those seven countries who already live in the U.S. but were suddenly unable to travel abroad and feared imminent deportation.

Approximately 85,700 Somalis live in the U.S. and some 25,000 of them reside in Minnesota, mostly in the Twin Cities area, a.k.a. Little Mogadishu. The popular Somali musician Dalmar Yare lives in Waite Park, Minnesota, and is in residence at the innovative Cedar Cultural Center’s innovative Midnimo project. Yare says the ban affects every Somali person in the U.S., including himself. “Everybody’s worrying about what will happen next. Everybody’s expecting the knock on the door where somebody will tell them they’re being deported.”

Yare was a founding member of the Somali hip-hop group Waayaha Cusub, many of whose members live in Holland. They’ve received death threats, and one member was shot multiple times, due to their lyrics criticizing the militant Al-Shabaab, the “Mujahadeen Youth Movement.”



Cedar Cultural Center executive director Adrienne Dorn launched Midnimo (the Somali word for “unity”) in 2014 to help preserve Somalia’s rich lyrical and instrumental traditions and to increase understanding and awareness of Somali culture.

“Here’s a group of artists who fled Somalia to go to the refugee camps in Kenya,” Dorn says. “They were basically kicked out of Kenya and had to seek asylum in Holland because it wasn’t safe for them to go back to Somalia based on who they are. And now they might not even be able to come to the U.S.”

Whether the ban is overturned or not, musicians will certainly experience fallout from Trump’s anti-immigration mania in the form of an overall chilling effect on music from Muslim-majority nations. Isabel Soffer, a longtime concert producer who is one of the co-founders of annual international-music showcase Globalfest in New York, is seeing a repetition of what happened in the presenter community after 9/11.

“One group of presenters says, ‘Now’s the time for us to really promote cultural understanding by presenting music from Muslim countries.’ The other side says, ‘I’m not going to take on the economic risk of working with artists from those parts of the world.’ And both sides are right.”

Matthew Covey agrees. “Arts presenters book several months out,” he says, “and not one of them is thinking, ‘I’m pretty sure this law’s going to be wrapped up by the end of the month, so I’m going to book this group from Egypt for my summer festival.’ No agent’s going to say, ‘I’m going to take on a Syrian artist for next fall.’” Covey’s also skeptical about the order’s temporary status.

The difficulties experienced by musicians need to be put in perspective, of course. Artists, academics, scientists and IT workers are all being victimized by Trump and Steve Bannon’s discriminatory travel ban. And yet, “I wouldn’t necessarily call myself a ‘victim,’” says Ashkan Kooshanejad, the Iranian producer who records electronic music as Ash Koosha, “because I’m in a fucking great situation compared to all the refugees dying in Syria.”

“The saddest people are those in Ethiopian, Kenya, and all around the world who were waiting to come to America,” says Dalmar Yare, who is uplifted by the support being shown refugees by those motivated to resist, “and we really appreciate that.” He’s taking advantage of his Cedar residency to share his stories through new songs based on Somali protest music.

But it might get worse. “This is just the beginning,” says Isabel Soffer. “If anybody thinks it’s going to end with these seven countries, I think they haven’t woken up to the reality of what’s coming next.”

Reads the order: “At any point...the Secretary of Homeland Security may submit to the President the names of any additional countries recommended for similar treatment.”

In fact, Brooklyn percussionist Matt Moran’s Slavic Soul Party! recently lost work performing for an American-Pakistani couple’s wedding. Pakistan is not currently under Trump’s eye, but the couple nonetheless postponed largely because of the current political climate. “It’s my understanding that travel to the U.S. for their Pakistani relatives was too fraught to plan on at this point,” Moran says.