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Note to Trump: Know What You Call Muslims Who Reject Radical Islam? Refugees

Angela M. Banks

William & Mary Law School, ambank@wm.edu

Nathan B. Oman

William & Mary Law School, nboman@wm.edu

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OFFICIAL INDIFFERENCE

Angela Banks and Nathan B. Oman column: Note to Trump: Know what you call Muslims who reject radical Islam? Refugees

By Angela Banks and Nathan B. Oman Feb 2, 2017

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Religion often plays a role in America's immigration policies. In the 1970s, for example, Soviet Jews suffering persecution at the hands of the communists were welcomed to America as refugees. However, we also have an ugly history of exclusion based on religious bigotry. In the past, the government has targeted both Catholic and Mormon immigrants, groups that proved to be peaceful, productive and patriotic citizens. Unfortunately, religious fear is again shaping policy.

Following through on a campaign promise to keep out Muslim refugees, President Trump has banned all refugees for 120 days, all refugees from Syria's brutal civil war until further notice, and non-refugee Iraqi, Syrian, Iranian, Sudanese, Libyan, Somalian, and Yemeni nationals for 90 days. While his executive order does not explicitly mention Muslims, it is clearly directed toward Islamic countries and will make it more difficult for Muslims fleeing violence to gain sanctuary in the United States.

The president claims that the ban is necessary to tighten screening for potential terrorists. However, it simply is not true that under current procedures refugees are inadequately vetted. It takes months — sometimes years — to complete the process, which requires applicants to prove that they are not tied to terrorist groups. The order is a solution in search of a problem.

Refugees are first screened by the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, which collects biodata and biometrics, and interviews the applicant. The United States then conducts its own screening. The FBI, Department of Homeland Security, State Department and the National Counterterrorism Center all screen each applicant. The agencies look for information indicating that the individual is a security risk, has connections to known bad actors, has outstanding warrants, or has committed immigration or criminal law violations. Individuals who pass this security check are interviewed by Homeland Security agents and fingerprints are checked against FBI, DHS and Department of Defense databases.

In addition to singling out refugees from Muslim countries, the executive order also requires that new regulations favor refugees who are members of minority religions facing religious persecution in their home countries. While it is unclear precisely what this will mean in practice, as applied to Middle Eastern refugees it is potentially troubling.

It is undeniable that Christians and other minority religions have suffered persecution at the hands of ISIS, Iran and others. Trump rightly recognizes that the United States should extend asylum to those fleeing such attacks.

However, the majority of those seeking asylum for persecution in the Middle East are Muslims who reject militant forms of Islam. Singling out these victims of radical Islamic terrorism for indifference because they are Muslim is a terrible mistake. It is not the act of a strong nation, but of someone who is frightened of suffering and powerless people because they happen to be Muslim.

First, it will do nothing to keep Americans safe from terrorism. There are more than a billion Muslims on planet Earth. Being Muslim doesn't convey any useful information about whether someone is a terrorist. Our energies would be better spent identifying actual terrorists rather than excluding their victims.

Second, those fleeing persecution at the hands of radical jihadists are precisely the people most likely to turn against murderous perversions of their own religion. These are Muslims who the United States should be supporting and encouraging rather than turning away.

Third, singling out Muslims for special indifference alienates our allies in the war on terrorism. They are rightly horrified at America's actions, which makes cooperation with them more difficult. This hinders the fight against terrorism.

Fourth, it encourages the belief in the Arab world that America hates Muslims and is indifferent to their suffering. This is precisely the message that radical Islamic terrorists use to recruit their next generation of jihadists.

Finally, singling out any group of persecuted people for official indifference on the basis of religion violates America's deepest traditions of religious freedom and equality. We have no established or preferred church. Rather, we are a nation created for those fleeing the pernicious idea that the state should play favorites among religious believers. Trump has called on the nation to reject that tradition.

We should not listen.

Angela Banks is a professor at William & Mary Law School specializing in immigration law; contact her at ambanks@wm.edu.

Nathan B. Oman, also a professor at William & Mary Law School, writes on law and religion, and may be contacted at nboman@wm.edu.

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