

'Travelling fear' in global context: Exploring everyday dynamics of in/security and im/mobility

Aydan Greatrick and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh put Trump's recent "Muslim Ban" (and the exceptional responses to it) in context by focusing on the everyday dynamics of exclusion, immobility and insecurity that have long framed the lives of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants.



For Muslim (or perceived to be Muslim) Americans, Trump's ban intensifies, regardless of their politico-legal status, experiences of precarity and exclusion (Photo credit: Wikipedia Commons)

The shock that greeted President Trump's travel ban ruling was seismic, inspiring massive demonstrations against the Executive Order barring individuals from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the USA. While Judges found the original ban to be unconstitutional, Trump's administration has since asserted a new ban blocking the entry of refugees and migrants from Iran, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Libya and Sudan. This highlights the insecurity that individuals, families and entire communities will continue to face throughout the foreseeable future.

Reflecting on these recent, and ongoing, events is crucial. From the perspective of our *Refugee Hosts* project this is a pivotal issue for many members of the refugee and host communities we are working with in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. In addition to these impacts on refugees' and hosts' lives, it is important to develop a grounded analysis of 'the ban' that centralises refugees' lived experiences of different forms of displacement *and* immobility – **past, on-going, overlapping** – within and from the Middle East.

Putting exclusion and im/mobility in context

Implicit within the shocked responses to Trump's ban is the recognition that the policy has both prevented refugees', migrants' and citizens' *arrival* in the US, and also blocked people from *leaving* different spaces. American green-card holders, as well as refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants, have had their mobility restricted: people have been prevented from *arriving*, and many American Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) now feel unable to *leave* the USA.

This sense of involuntary immobility – of being “**internally stuck**” – is not unique; the travel ban is just one of the many processes that restrict both the entry *and* exit of people.

Such processes have a long history. It is clear that Trump’s actions are neither new nor exceptional: in effect, the travel ban has many commonalities with other exclusionary policies, such as the recent decision by the UK government to **cease its obligations to child refugees under the ‘Dubs’ agreement**, thereby leaving them stranded in precarious camps in France, or the infamous **EU-Turkey deal** which has seen Syrian refugees pushed back to Turkey from Greece, breaching long-standing norms of *non-refoulement*.

All of these policies have been framed by a politics of exclusion and immobility. They share in and contribute to a climate of Islamophobia and xenophobia that have for decades shaped the experiences of refugees living in Europe and North America. For instance, research conducted over the past decade has evidenced the unequal impacts that British anti-terrorism measures (and the related global in/security context) have had on Muslim Middle Eastern asylum-seekers and refugees in that country:

“Muslim asylum-seekers’ and refugees’ identities have been transformed in/by the public imagination, moving from an emphasis on their ‘refugee-ness’ and categorization as either ‘bogus’ or ‘genuine’ asylum-seekers, to a primal concern with their Muslim identity, which is equated with a threatening identity.”

This **assessment** corroborates the rhetoric surrounding Trump’s travel ban: meeting the protection needs of refugees is overruled by ‘national security’ concerns, and the need for ‘**extreme vetting**’ which – in this instance – calls for *heightened scrutiny* not of the validity of a refugee’s claim to asylum, but of the extent to which their ‘Muslim-ness’ (real and imagined) makes them a security risk.



Protesters gather at an airport in the USA following Trump’s “Muslim Ban” (Photo credit: Wikipedia Commons)

Spaces of everyday in/security

The forcible unveiling and inscription of identity markers – ‘as’ a ‘Muslim’, a ‘Middle Easterner’, a ‘refugee’, an ‘Other’ – that are playing out in the queues for passport control both at Arrivals in US airports *and* in Departures (and **runways**) across the Middle East and Europe – are reminiscent of

the processes long-experienced by refugees and asylum-seekers in airports and immigration reporting centres, but also in seemingly innocuous spaces such as **post-offices** across the UK.

Whether arriving, departing or just trying to remain in place, such spaces have long been part of the everyday landscapes in which 'Muslim-ness', 'Refugee-ness', and 'Other-ness' have been placed centre stage. Indeed, as **Qasmiyeh** has noted with regards to the space of the post-office, where asylum seekers in the UK used to cash their living allowances,

“Subtly withdrawing their [identification document] from a pocket or wallet, attempting to minimize disclosure, the [refugee] feels that this space/place becomes a stage where all lights are on him/her.”

As such, global trends in terrorism-related in/security policies have encouraged a combination of regional and religious identity markers – regardless of whether they are real or imagined – to define both officials' and many citizens' perceptions of Muslim refugees, and how these refugees themselves experience, resist, negotiate and respond to this everyday scrutiny on the other. As succinctly noted by Um Omar, born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria and interviewed in the UK by **Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh** in 2010: “Things are hard. There is racism and I am very concerned about my children. They are attacked and insulted, both at school and on the street.”

Travelling fear and hospitality

Importantly, this insecurity characterises life across a range of geographies and temporalities. For example, within the Middle East, Palestinian refugees who hold Jordanian citizenship have repeatedly been stripped of their nationality and **rendered stateless once again**. Indeed, as Elena has argued **here**, we might think of this in relation to the concept 'travelling fear' (drawing on Said's 'travelling theory'): the fear – that can travel with a refugee throughout their lives and their journeys from the Middle East to the global North – that a 'former' refugee may have of being stripped of their seemingly 'stable' legal status, and of their rights.

For instance, Marwa, a 30-year-old born in a refugee camp in Syria and interviewed in Sweden in 2014, argued that:

“The fear becomes part of your identity because wherever you go, you are not fully accepted. Sweden can today be the perfect partner but still there is a fear that this relationship can change and end.”

*Cited in **Fiddian-Qasmiyeh**, 2016*

Importantly, well before the 'Muslim Ban', refugees and 'former' refugees have framed this fear in relation to the ambiguities of democratic politics, which in theory allows a newly elected president to call for the deportation of a certain group of refugees and asylum seekers, even after they have ostensibly 'become' new citizens of the state.

While this scenario has not materialised in *Sweden*, in a particularly prescient statement, 33-year-old Faisal, who was born in a refugee camp in Lebanon and was also interviewed in Sweden in 2014, expressed his concern that there was no

“guarantee that the next president or government will not do the same thing as previous governments... Palestinians probably think that Sweden can one day have a racist government and can deport them.”

*Cited in **Fiddian-Qasmiyeh**, 2016*

This resonates clearly with the concept *hospitality* astutely theorised by Derrida, highlighting that “hospitality” is always “parasitized by its opposite, ‘hostility’” (see [here](#)). As such, hospitality itself inherently bears “its opposite” but also its own opposition, the ever-present possibility of hostility towards the Other who has, at one time, been welcomed at the threshold, and yet, “Perhaps no one welcomed is ever completely welcome”.

As such, Trump’s travel ban, and the insecurity it has brought to thousands of Muslim refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants *and* citizens, is far from unique. It may be particularly conspicuous both in its declarative nature and in the massive mobilisation of resistance and solidarity it has prompted, but its implications will be familiar to many (currently and formerly) displaced people, and to many Muslims (and many people perceived to be Muslims) in the Global North.

This is of course also true for refugees and asylum seekers in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey (our [Refugee Host](#) project’s key ‘research sites’). Confronted by the EU’s ‘[pathology](#)’ of [historical denial](#) and increasingly securitised borders, refugees in the Middle East are also “stuck”, forced into a situation of [intense uncertainty](#). Indeed, it is important we recognise that nationality-based restrictions of movement are widespread around the world, including in the Middle East. The inability of Syrian refugees to safely (or legally) cross the borders of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon (and other international borders) often remains invisible to the international community, including to the crowds that are so vocally protesting the US travel ban.

Conclusion

Far from starting with Trump or in the US, these processes of in/security and im/mobility have deep historical roots. Meaningfully overcoming these processes demands that we develop a more nuanced understanding of local encounters that frame the everyday experiences of refugees and migrants, a key aim of the [Refugee Hosts](#) project. This is vital if we are to ensure that solidarity and protection can be expanded for – rather than withdrawn from – those fleeing from conflict and widespread violations of human rights and dignity around the world.

About the authors



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