

DISSENT CHANNEL

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

TO:

FROM:

SUBJECT: Dissent Channel: Alternatives to Closing Doors in Order to Secure Our Borders

(U) The following is a Dissent Channel message from

(SBU) Summary: We are writing to register our dissent to the State Department's implementation of President Trump's Friday, January 27, 2017 Executive Order on "Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States," which, among other things, blocks the Department of State from issuing immigrant and nonimmigrant visas to citizens of Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen for a minimum 90 day period with an unclear timeline for when issuance would resume. As consular professionals, Foreign Service Officers, and members of the Civil Service, we see every day the value that "**Secure Borders and Open Doors**" brings to our nation. A policy which closes our doors to over 200 million legitimate travelers in the hopes of preventing a small number of travelers who intend to harm Americans from using the visa system to enter the United States will not achieve its aim of making our country safer. Moreover, such a policy runs counter to core American values of nondiscrimination, fair play, and extending a warm welcome to foreign visitors and immigrants. Alternative solutions are available to address the risk of terror attacks which are both more effective and in line with Department of State and American values.

This Ban Does Not Achieve Its Aims--And Will Likely Be Counterproductive

(SBU) This ban, which can only be lifted under conditions which will be difficult or impossible for countries to meet, will not achieve its stated aim of to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States. Despite the Executive Order's focus on them, a vanishingly small number of terror attacks on U.S. soil have been committed by foreign nationals who recently entered the United States on an immigrant or nonimmigrant visa. Rather, the overwhelming majority of attacks have been committed by native-born or naturalized U.S. citizens--individuals who have been living in the United States for decades, if not since birth. In the isolated incidents of foreign nationals entering the

U.S. on a visa to commit acts of terror, the nationals have come from a range of countries, including many (such as Pakistan or Saudi Arabia) which are not covered by the Executive Order.

(SBU) Given the near-absence of terror attacks committed in recent years by Syrian, Iraqi, Irani, Libyan, Somalia, Sudanese, and Yemeni citizens who are in the U.S. in after entering on a visa, this ban will have little practical effect in improving public safety.

(SBU) If this ban will not prevent terror attacks from occurring, what will it do?

- (SBU) It will immediately sour relations with these six countries, as well as much of the Muslim world, which sees the ban as religiously-motivated. These governments of these countries are important allies and partners in the fight against terrorism, regionally and globally. By alienating them, we lose access the intelligence and resources need to fight the root causes of terror abroad, before an attack occurs within our borders.
- (SBU) It will increase anti-American sentiment. When the 220 million citizens of these countries lose the opportunity to travel to the U.S. overnight, hostility towards the United States will grow. Instead of building bridges to these societies through formal outreach and exchanges and through informal people-to-people contact, we send the message that we consider all nationals of these countries to be an unacceptable security risk. Almost one-third of these countries' combined populations are children under the age of 15; there is no question that their perception of the United States will be heavily colored by this ban. We are directly impact the attitudes of current and future leaders in these societies--including those for whom this may be a tipping point towards radicalization.
- (SBU) It will have an immediate and clear humanitarian impact. Every day foreign nationals come to the United States to seek medical treatment for a child with a rare heart condition, to attend a parent's funeral, or to help a relative in distress. For citizens of these countries, a blanket ban on travel will not just ruin vacation plans but potentially cut off access to life-saving medical treatment or impose terrible humanitarian burdens. While the Executive Order allows for the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Homeland security to admit travelers from these countries on a case-by-case basis, it is unrealistic to think that this will be feasible to implements for the thousands of aliens with urgent and compelling needs to travel.

- (SBU) It will have a negative impact on the U.S. economy. According to the Department of Commerce, foreign travelers collectively injected almost \$250 billion into the U.S. economy in 2015 alone, supporting over one million American jobs. Foreign students alone contribute more than \$30 billion to the U.S. economy. Preventing travelers from these six countries from spending their money in the U.S. will immediately decrease that amount; more perniciously, this ban can be expected to cause an overall drop in traveler dollars as the U.S. quickly sheds its welcoming “Secure Borders, **Open Doors**” reputation.

(SBU) The end result of this ban will not be a drop in terror attacks in the United States; rather, it will be a drop in international good will towards Americans and a threat towards our economy.

We Are Better Than This Ban

(SBU) Looking beyond its effectiveness, this ban stands in opposition to the core American and constitutional values that we, as federal employees, took an oath to uphold.

(SBU) The United States is a nation of immigrants, starting from its very origins. The concept that immigrants and foreigners are welcome is an essential element of our society, our government, and our foreign policy. So, too, is the concept that we are all equal under the law and that we as a nation abhor discrimination, whether it is based on race, religion, sex, or national origin. Combined together, that means we have a *special* obligation to maintain an immigration system that is as free as possible from discrimination, that does not have implied or actual religious tests, and that views individuals as individuals, not as part of stereotyped groups.

(SBU) The Executive Order frames the ban as a 90-day suspension of entry for these nationals until their countries can set up arrangements to provide adequate information to determine that an individual seeking a benefit is who the individual claims to be and is not a security or public-safety threat. This is a high, vague, and nebulous bar. In some cases, the governments of these countries may be wholly incapable of providing this information; in others, the government may be unwilling. In either case, individual citizens will pay the price—a situation which runs counter to U.S. values of fair play and offering equal opportunities to all.

(SBU) Banning travelers from these seven countries calls back to some of the worst times in our history. Law enacted in the 1920s and which lasted through the 1960s severely restricted immigration based on national origin and, in some cases, race. The decision to restrict the freedom of Japanese-Americans in the U.S. and foreign citizens who wanted to travel to or settle in the U.S. during the 1940s has been a source of lasting shame for many in our country. Decades from now, we will look back and realize we made the same mistakes our predecessors: shutting borders in a knee-jerk reaction instead of setting up systems of checks that protect our interests and our values.

Alternative Ways Forward

(SBU) Just as equality and multiculturalism are core American values, so too is pragmatism. And there are pragmatic ways to achieve our common goals to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States and to secure a better and more prosperous future.

(SBU) Rather than a blanket ban on the travel of over 200 million citizens, we need to strengthen our targeted and interagency approach to deterring, detecting, and subverting attacks. We should not focus our screening and vetting on specific nationalities at the expense of missing the forest for the trees but should turn those tools to cover the full range of sources of terror, including those who may hold “friendly” or even U.S. passports.

(SBU) There is no question that the visa process can be improved and refined to better detect individuals who intend to exploit United States immigration laws for malevolent purposes. We need to expand existing interagency cooperation between the different elements of the government responsible for border security and protection of the homeland. This includes cooperation with state, local, campus, and tribal law enforcement, who in many cases are best situated to detect threats. The Visa Security Program which embeds Department of Homeland Security staff into consular sections around the world has proven the effectiveness of incorporating a law enforcement perspective into the visa process; this approach should be expanded.

(SBU) Continuous vetting program for visa holders--which looks at all visa holders, not just those of specific nationalities--allows our law enforcement and intelligence bodies to act on new information and to focus on individuals that may become radicalized. This vetting should be expanded and made more comprehensive. Likewise, the Visa Viper Program, which allows posts overseas to

report on potential threats, should be strengthened to become a more reliable source of intelligence.

(SBU) The Department of State and the U.S. government already has numerous tools already at its disposal to secure its visa process: access to law enforcement databases, biometric screening, Security Advisory Opinions, continuous vetting. If we haven't accomplished our goals so far, then let's strengthen and improve these tools. And let's develop new tools: cutting-edge data analytics, social media tracking, data mining, aggressive outreach.

(SBU) We do not need to place a blanket ban that keeps 220 million people--men, women, and children--from entering the United States to protect our homeland. We do not need to alienate entire societies to stay safe. And we do not need to sacrifice our reputation as a nation which is open and welcoming to protect our families. It is well within our reach to create a visa process which is more secure, which reflects our American values, and which would make the Department proud.