




Here's How the Travel Ban Is Crippling Dance Music

Even with the federal ruling halting the controversial executive order, DJs and producers are already reeling from its effects.



By [Sophie Weiner](#)

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Since President Donald Trump signed an executive order in January barring people from Muslim-majority countries from the US, more than 100,000 people have had their US entry visas revoked, spreading a rippling turmoil through thousands of lives around the world. Despite a federal ruling on Sunday temporarily halting the order, the travel ban has hit the electronic music community hard, as international artists scramble to cancel tours and figure out their options.

Muslim-American [DJ Khaled](#) and artist-activist [Grimes](#) were among many prominent musicians to speak out after the ban was announced. Over in the underground, hundreds of musicians on Bandcamp came together to financially support the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the organization at the forefront of fighting the order. Notwithstanding these actions, musicians from the affected countries have seen their lives thrown into disarray. Many are afraid to leave the country, lest they not be let back in. This would be a problem for any musician. But for electronic music, an art form where revenue is particularly contingent on international touring and cross-cultural pollination, the impact of such a ban could be tremendous.

"I had a lot of plans that went to shit," says the Iranian-born hip hop producer and film scorer Mahdyar, who moved to Paris in 2009, after multiple run-ins with the Iranian government around the content of his music forced him to leave his homeland. His hip-hop collective, [Moltafet](#), was planning a world tour this year. Now, the American stretch of dates has been put on hold. "For six months I was planning this thing," he says. "There was a documentary; we were going to do an album. We had sponsors aligned, so many things planned. And now half of our plan is nothing, for the moment. We don't know what's happening; the sponsors are backing out."

Since the day Trump issued the order—which prevents anyone from Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and Iraq from entering the country for at least 90 days, even if they had a previously approved visa or in some cases permanent residency—large protests have formed at airports and in other public spaces around the country. A federal ruling from a Seattle judge has since ordered a temporary nationwide halt to the ban. On Tuesday morning, the ruling was in effect—airports and airlines began letting visa holders

from barred countries into the country on Sunday. But Trump angrily tweeted over the weekend that the ruling would be overturned, and the White House ordered the Department of Justice to appeal the decision. An appeals court ruling is expected this week that will decide whether the ban will stand. But it's anyone's guess what might happen next, and regardless of the outcome it's little comfort to those whose plans have already been uprooted by the ban.

Over Skype with THUMP, Mahdyar says there's almost no way for Iranian rappers who still live in the country to make money from their work, besides touring. Sanctions imposed by the West mean that the global banking system, SWIFT—which allows for direct-deposit-style payments—doesn't work inside Iran, making it very difficult for artists to receive payment for their music. "The only way [to get payments from abroad is] to use an Iranian bank card and Iranian payment gateways, and in order to use those you need to sign a bunch of contracts which mean [the government] can arrest you easily if something goes wrong," Mahdyar says.

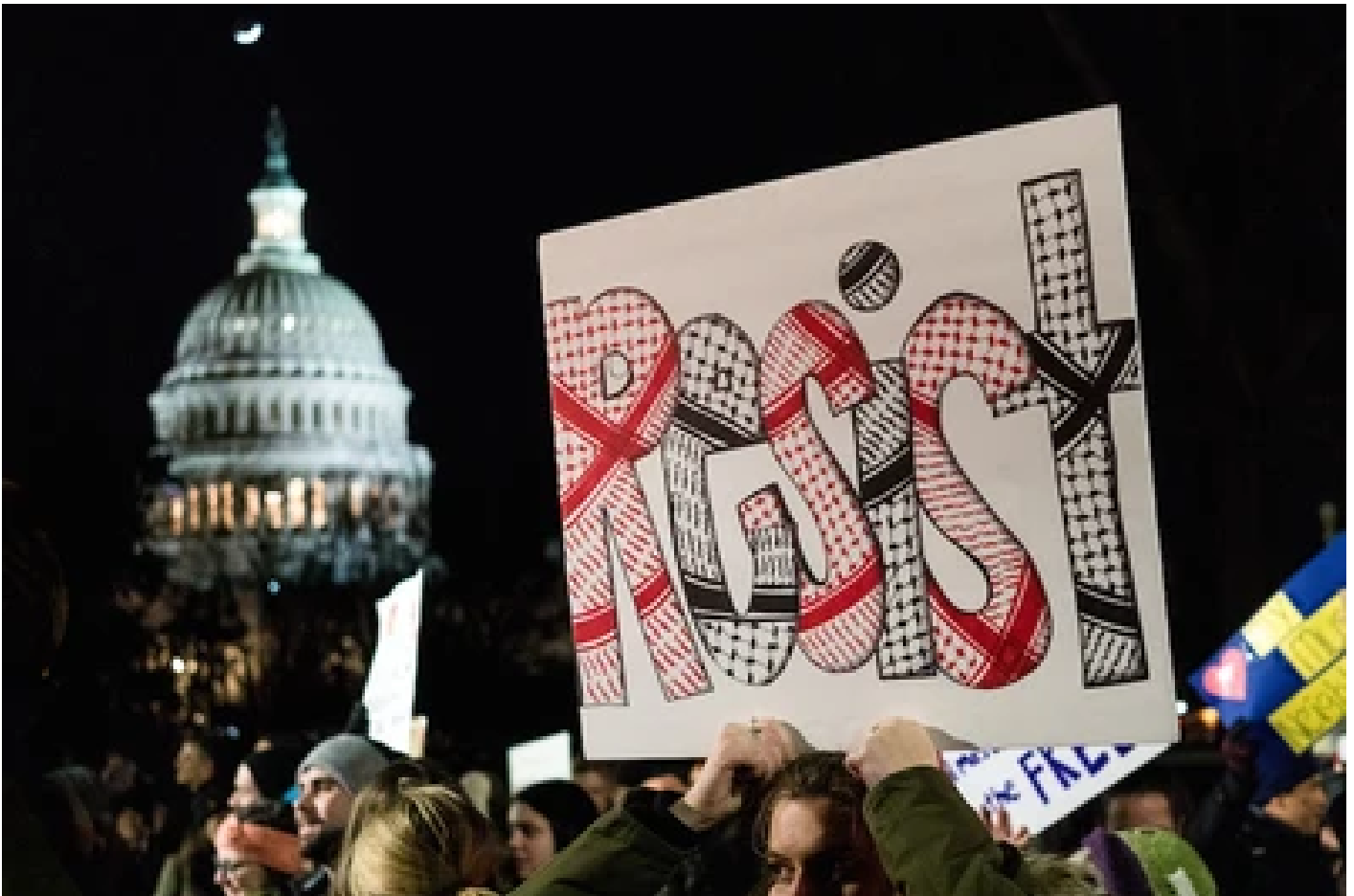


PHOTO OF ANTI-TRAVEL BAN PROTEST BY LORIE SHAULL/FLICHR

The world tour with his collective was a way that Mahdyar planned to support the many popular Farsi rappers who use his beats, yet struggle to make ends meet. These include Hichkas, often known as the father of Persian hip-hop, one of the oldest rappers on the scene, and Dariush, an up and comer whose recent single "Hert" received attention in the West. "They can't get money in Iran because [the government] says we aren't Muslim enough, and so the only chance was to get money outside of Iran," he laughs ruefully. "And now that plan is gone because the US says that we are *too*Muslim."

Mahdyar's friend, the London-based Iranian electronic artist Ash Koosha, also had to put some of his plans for this year on hold, including a tour, a film shoot, and a move to LA. But for Koosha, being refused entry to the States is nothing new. Last year, he was forced to cancel a US tour and an appearance at the FORM: Acrosanti music festival in Arizona when due to administrative delays with his visa. Over Skype with THUMP from London, he relays a chilling memory about the first time he successfully entered the US in 2016: the border officer asked him, incredulously, how he had managed to secure a visa at all with Iranian nationality.

Koosha says that even without the ban, this kind of treatment from Western immigration officials and the uncertainty of visa applications is commonplace for people with less freedom of movement than US citizens have. In 2016, US citizens could enter 174 countries without a visa, according to the [Visa Restriction Index](#). Iranians could visit 37. "We're always ready for a borderline catastrophe to happen in our lives," he says. "This time is different. I am not going to be silent about it. I'm kind of fed up." To that end, Koosha published an impassioned [statement](#) last week, explaining his objections to the ban as an Iranian artist.

Kuwaiti producer Fatima al Qadiri often uses her work to comment on her experience as a person of Middle Eastern descent living in countries where people like her are seen as suspect. "I need a visa to take a shit," she tells Thump over the phone from Los Angeles. "Kuwait is in the middle of countries, as far as freedom of movement goes. It's not the worst, but it's certainly not like Western countries where willy-nilly you can just get on a plane and go anywhere. There's definitely a hierarchy with freedom of movement that Western people are really woefully unaware of. You don't understand how many times I have not been able to do gigs or have not been granted a visa because of my passport."

Al Qadiri says that the ban, though shocking, is in a lot of ways a continuation of an approach to border policing that [gestated under the Bush and Obama administrations](#), when expanded government powers under the Patriot Act allowed for a crackdown on anyone suspected of terrorist activity. "I know after 9/11, a lot of Kuwaiti male students left the States because they were being interrogated," she says. "My cousin was interrogated by the FBI, only because he was a Kuwaiti male student. There has been profiling since that time. There was the no fly list." Al Qadiri says she sees the ban as the culmination of a "bubbling brew" that has been boiling over in American foreign policy for the past 16 years. "It didn't come out of nowhere," she says. "To say otherwise is to be naïve of what has been happening since 9/11."



PHOTO OF FATIMA AL QADIRI COURTESY OF ARTIST

Al Qadiri, whose home country is not on the list currently banned from entering the US, came to America as a student in 1999 and lived here until 2014. She has an O-1 artist visa, and just left Los Angeles last week, where she'd been living for the last few months, to return to her current home of Berlin. For Al Qadiri, the fact that Kuwait isn't on Trump's ban list is of little comfort. "I was hoping to move back here eventually, but if they can just snatch residency and legal visas... visas cost so much money," she says. "I'll be so sad if I could never come back to this country. I'll be devastated, but I'm not someone who has a home here, who has a family here, who has stuff here."

Artists from affected nations have responded to the ban in a variety of creative ways. The Iranian-Dutch avant-pop singer Sevdaliza, who lives in Amsterdam, released a

track, "Bebin," last week in response to the ban. "In protest of the current inhumane political climate, I could not rest my head in privilege," she wrote on SoundCloud. "I wrote 'Bebin' in Farsi [instead of English] in [solidarity with the affected artists]."

The London-based producer Kasra V, also a native Iranian, made a mix of Middle Eastern music for FACT Magazine in an attempt to highlight the decades of oppression experienced by those in the Middle East, at the hands of both their own governments and the West. He told FACT he wanted to "reflect the feeling of pain and suffering that those countries—and the Middle East in general—has been going through as a region over the past 20-30 years." Kasra V is another artist who wouldn't be able to enter the US for the duration of the ban.

Some artists from the west have decided to protest the Trump administration by refusing to play in the US. The UK techno DJ Dave Clarke announced after the travel ban that he wouldn't be touring to the US for the duration of Donald Trump's presidency. "I simply cannot consider coming to the US professionally when there is a Misogynist Narcissist Racist President in office," he wrote on Facebook.

All the artists who spoke to THUMP emphasized the devastating effects the ban would have on refugees—many of whom have already spent years in the arduous process of gaining entry into the US, only to be turned away at border the last minute—as well as on permanent residents separated from their families, jobs, and lives in the US. Though some of these people will be able to enter the country during the period that the temporary lifted ruling is in place, there's no guarantee for the over 100,000 whose visas were revoked in the last week and a half.

Koosha says that it's the refugees fleeing Syria who are in the most immediate danger. "They are actually more important than all the others [affected by the ban]," Koosha says. Mahdyar agrees: "The reality is that we [artists] are the lucky ones. We will find ways to survive and put out music in the digital world. But there are people who have no other options and are fucked totally, basically." Prior to the ban, the US was already accepting very few Syrian refugees—12,000 in 2016 according to the State Department's Refugee Processing Center, compared to 300,000 that Germany took in—but now, their chances of getting into the country are likely to be even slimmer.

Still, Koosha and Mahdyar say that the financial repercussions of the order on musicians will not go unnoticed. "Financially, we are getting hurt bad," Mahdyar says. "We are losing a lot of money. Mahdyar, for his part, is currently in negotiations with a London label to put out his solo debut this year. "I don't think this will fuck me up," he says, "but at the same time, I don't have [access to] the American market."

▮ "Certainly, their summers are screwed."—Matthew Covey, lawyer

Matthew Covey, a lawyer and the executive director of Tamizdat, a nonprofit that helps bring foreign artists to the US, and the founder of law firm CoveyLaw, says this financial pain will be widely felt. "There are a number of artists who were planning to start tours that were obviously thrown into turmoil," he says. "Obviously the artists [are going to] lose

their guarantees. And if they have a short-term visa that just covers this specific period, they probably just lost the cost of the visa. Acts usually spend anywhere from \$1500 to \$6000 to get their US visas sorted out."

Covey adds that any concerts by artists affected by the ban over the next 90 days will probably be cancelled by venues as well—it's too risky to book an event when you can't be certain the talent will be able to play. Even if the Seattle judge's new ruling is truly an end to the ban, it's unlikely that many of these artists will be able to reverse decisions to cancel tours they had in the works for months.

The ban may also have a long-lasting effects on artists from the barred nations. For example, it's possible few US promoters will want to take a chance on acts that may not be able to show up for gigs, should further rulings allow the ban's enforcement. For artists like Mahdyar, who was planning on touring the festival circuit after the release of his debut solo album sometime this spring, such an outcome could make or break the success of a release.

Covey puts it bluntly: "Certainly, their summers are screwed." Covey's law firm has promised provide pro bono to artists from affected countries, to offset visa costs. They will keep providing this service while the ban is temporarily lifted, as Covey believes the ban will continue to have an impact on these artists.

Whether the current suspension of the ban holds or not, the artists THUMP spoke to are prepared to fight whatever else might come in the next four years and beyond. "Rising out of despair, not letting despair overwhelm you, is important," Al Qadiri says.

Koosha thinks the ban may provide an urgency for artists that could translate into better work. "This Trump phenomenon is going to make people wake up, think about issues on a daily basis," he says. "The importance of awareness and critical thinking will be included more in people's projects from now on."

But there's no sugar coating it: this is a dark time for anyone who is Muslim or brown and has an interest in traveling to America. And the cruel truth is that this is doubly the case for many who have already dealt with censorship and oppression throughout their lives. "Western civilization is going to shit," Mahdyar says. "We came here because the Middle East was shit; now, here, it's becoming maybe worse than that? That's the scary part."