



Omar Souleyman's homemade statement to Trump. (Provided photo)

When [Sevdaliza](#) heard about President Donald Trump's new travel ban, she set aside the music she was mixing in the studio. The Iranian-born, Netherlands-based artist typically sings in English; one recent track, "[That Damaged Girl](#)," features [A\\$AP Ferg](#). But she devoted the next three days to a new song in her native Farsi because, she tells me via Skype, "I felt it was necessary to show the path of an immigrant becoming a world citizen."

Having fled Tehran with her mother and lived in a refugee camp before establishing herself in Rotterdam, Sevdaliza has traveled this path herself. The result of her ban-inspired songwriting is the shuddering baroque-R&B opus "Bebin" (meaning "look"), sales of which she has promised to donate to charities "supporting victims of racial exclusion." Though Sevdaliza, like other musicians affected by the new White House policy, does not want to be seen as a victim, it is true that she likely won't be performing "[Bebin](#)"—or any of the songs from her forthcoming debut—in the United States anytime soon. That, of course, is thanks to Trump.

Late on Friday, January 27, the new president signed an [executive order](#) shutting the U.S. border to citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries for at least the next 90 days—a

move since met by resistance from federal judges. The order applies to people born in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, including refugees. Though the ban carries out Trump's campaign promise of "extreme vetting," it was reportedly done with little vetting by career officials in the agencies charged with carrying out the ban, and has yielded worldwide confusion. Trump being Trump, the details of the order—which he has claimed, without meaningful explanation, "is not a Muslim ban"—are as unclear as his usual word-salad public remarks.

The music community is no exception to the chaos. Musicians hailing from the affected countries tell me their ambitions for U.S. tours and other international dreams have been upturned overnight. "There is no question that this [ban] will impact artists, tours, venues, and fans," says Matthew Covey, founder of Tamizdat, a nonprofit that helps musicians facing visa issues, in an email. (In a rare bit of good news, Tamizdat and Covey's law firm have offered to work *pro bono* on visa petitions for performers from the banned nations.) What we still don't know, he continues, is if the order applies to expatriates from those seven countries who are now citizens of another country. If it does, then the impact will be even broader.

For those who have already escaped from repressive governments in their homelands, America's nativist lurch offers few silver linings. Seven years ago, Ashkan Kooshanejad—whose band Take It Easy Hospital was featured in a documentary on Tehran's underground music scene, 2009 Cannes selection *No One Knows About Persian Cats*—told me, "We are blessed not to be executed." Currently living in London as a refugee, where he makes sample-warping electronic music as Ash Koosha, he'd grown used to having U.S. gigs nixed by administrative hassles even prior to Trump. With the ban, he feels he has to speak out. "It's not about me anymore," he tells me via Skype. "It's about the whole world going crazy."

Mahdyar Aghajani, who composed the *No One Knows About Persian Cats* soundtrack, has been in the midst of making a deal with a UK label for his next album. The Paris-based, Tehran-born producer, who records as simply Mahdyar, has also been planning a six-month global tour showcasing multiple generations of Iranian hip-hop, including plenty of stops in the States. “All our plans are basically nothing right now,” he tells me via Skype. “Just because of this stupid thing that is happening.”

For Mahdyar, too, Trump’s policy takes already-unfriendly treatment from U.S. officials to a darker extreme. “It was awful in the first place,” he explains. “As soon as they see that passport, they are like, ‘Are you a terrorist?’ Now it’s like, ‘Clearly, you *are* a terrorist.’”

There is a bitter irony to all this. “I can’t go to Iran because they think I’m not a Muslim,” Mahdyar says. “I can’t go to the U.S. because they think I’m a Muslim.”

Mina Tosti, the manager and agent for Syrian singer Omar Souleyman, doesn’t intend to buckle under Trump’s pressure. “We will never give up until the last moment on this,” Tosti tells me in an email. “Omar has been everywhere in the world and in the U.S. on 16 separate visas since 2010. I have been against so much red tape from countless

immigration policies the world over and have many times been able to turn things around in Omar's favor."

The U.S. consulate in Istanbul, where Souleyman has to get his visa, has posted an urgent notice warning that citizens of the banned nations will not be issued visas "until further notification." That would seem to put a damper on already-booked U.S. tour dates in May. But Tosti has been through challenging times with Souleyman before, including almost missing a scheduled New Year's Eve gig in Austin this past December. An official had questioned Souleyman alone in a separate room, with Tosti translating over the phone, and had flaunted his authority to grant or deny entry, despite Souleyman's valid visa.

"This however isn't anything new—in Texas it has always been like this, or very similar," Tosti adds, noting that New York has usually been slightly less headache-inducing. "We are not altering any of our plans, and I will fight to my last breath."

Along with musicians unable to travel, the ban also hurts the U.S. communities that will no longer have access to their music. The Cedar Cultural Center, located in a Minneapolis neighborhood that is home to a sizable Somali community, has booked the famous Somali singer Maryan Mursal and the Somali hip-hop group Waayaha Cusub as part of a multi-

week residency program called Midnimo, launched in 2014. “The travel ban further targets and endangers our community and the artists we work with,” the Cedar executive director Adrienne Dorn says in a statement.

It doesn’t help, either, that the ban is the latest in a string of perhaps unimaginable setbacks for liberal openness on a global level, including Brexit. Paris-based, Iranian-born electronic act 9T Antiope sees Trump’s executive order as yet another action making people’s worlds a little smaller. “It’s a pity how the whole concept of race, or personal belief, is moving backwards,” the duo’s Nima Aghiani and Sara Bigdeli Shamloo write via email.

Due to the travel ban, AlHaj has scrapped a tour to Canada with an Iranian national he worried would not be allowed back into the United States. But AlHaj, too, stresses that the ban is about much more than his canceled plans, or his chosen art form. “It’s not just musicians who will be affected—the whole planet is going to be affected,” he says. “It’s doctors and engineers and scientists, and plumbers and mechanics, and writers and poets. We are talking about everything in life. That’s how we make our countries really beautiful. Otherwise, why do I need to be here anyway? If I am treated like I was under Saddam Hussein, why do I need to be here?”