

MAGAZINE FEATURE

Muslim Musicians, Execs Fear the 'Chilling Effect' of Trump's Travel Ban

By Mary von Aue

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ARTIST MENTIONED



President Donald Trump's Jan. 27 executive order banning travel from seven Muslim-majority nations for 90 days has deeply complicated plans already in motion involving sectors of the U.S. music industry that work with those countries. Not only has the ban -- which includes Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan -- restricted the movement of those traveling into or out of the United States, but American labels and managers are scrambling to protect artists vulnerable to Trump's policy.

The annual South by Southwest festival, which takes place in March and is thus within that 90-day period, was quick to denounce the edict. "We are working to understand how the ban will impact our participants and how we can use our voice to support those directly affected by this executive order," reads its statement, which also notes that the ban flies in the face of the mission of the festival, which brings more than 2,000 artists to Austin -- nearly

which brings more than 2,000 artists to Austin -- nearly 600 of whom are international acts -- each year.

“Participation... from around the world is crucial to the creative mix of ideas that makes our event meaningful.”

Already it has forced one SXSW artist, Raam Emami, the Iranian musician behind the rock project **King Raam**, to cancel his appearance at the festival. “I am terrified to come to the U.S.A. to be detained and ridiculed at the border,” he told *Billboard* in an email. “This is not the America that people dream about coming to anymore.”

Nicki Minaj, DJ Khaled & More Musicians Continue to Protest
President Trump's Immigration Ban

Similarly, as new music discovery has become increasingly global, artists with particular entry stamps on their passports also worry about their freedom of movement, or that once they leave, they won't be allowed back --
America's version of no ins and outs

American-Iranian band **Tehranosaurus**, which includes two members born in Iran who are in the United States with legal green cards, scrapped an 11-date overseas tour over concerns that those members would not be able to return to the country afterward. Many more are worried about whether they will have issues at the border -- and about what might come next.

"There are so many of us in this industry, and I don't know how we'll travel when all of our teams -- artists, managers, publicists -- will have someone affected by this ban," says Enigma Management founder **Azar S. Bogon**, who was born in Iran, is a Canadian citizen and is based in New York. "I've been advised by [legal organization] CUNY Clear not to leave, even though I have a green card."

Bogon, who represents such songwriters as **August Rigo** (One Direction's "Gotta Be You," Justin Bieber's "U Smile") and Sony/ATV's **Ginette Claudette**, hasn't visited Iran since 1989. And even though she carries a green card, the ban still applies to her. "All my documentation says I was born in Iran: my green card, my Canadian passport. I can't get away from it. Not that I'd want to -- I'm proud of my heritage -- but it would make my life a lot easier when I need to work or be with my family."

Like many immigrants, Bogon was heavily vetted long before the ban. Before earning her resident alien status, she navigated the bureaucratic maze of visas while studying or working in the music industry. She says that she has experienced harassment and suspicion at border controls in the past, but never expected a removal of her right to visit family in Canada. That uncertainty is a

common theme, with miscommunication and confusion over the exact ramifications of the executive order, and what will happen after the 90 days expire, making planning for tours or travel a guessing game.

Syrian-American Punk Singer on President Trump's Immigration Ban: 'This Is Definitely Very Scary'

“There's the logistical concern of getting stuck somewhere en route to do a tour, tours getting canceled -- obviously, that's an economic disaster, a career disaster and a creative disaster for those artists,” says **Matthew Covey**, partner at CoveyLaw which specializes in assisting more than 1,000 international acts each year acquire visas to work and perform in the U.S. “I think there's going to be a chilling effect on the ability of artists from these nations [to book tours] for the foreseeable future. I don't think anybody is going to touch them until there's some

indication that this ban is actually going to be lifted.”

Racial profiling is also a concern for artists and their teams who hail from Muslim-majority countries, even on domestic flights. Musicians from **The Nile Project**, two of whom are from Sudan, arrived in the States on Jan. 18 for a U.S. tour, days before the ban took effect. “No one really understands who this applies to and who it doesn’t,” says **Mina Girgis**, producer and CEO of the Nile Project, which is a network of platforms aimed at promoting unity among the people of countries along the Nile River. “It’s a huge risk factor when we’re walking into an airport -- there is so much anxiety around. Am I going to be boarding a plane and then someone tells me that I have to go back home or I’m getting detained?”

Bandcamp CEO Blogs in Support of Immigrants, Donating Proceeds to ACLU

Cherine Amr of **Massive Scar Era**, a heavy metal duo from Alexandria, Egypt, says she is also concerned about the ripple effect of the ban on musicians from all Muslim-majority countries, not just those on the seven-nation list. “I’d think that booking agents and record labels wouldn’t want to invest in a band that might get banned from

entering the U.S. at any time, or detained at the airport and forced to cancel shows.”

“There's no way to predict what's happening right now,” Covey says, mentioning the possibility that more nations could be added to the list. “The wheels of civil society need some grease, and if we don't have artists to do that it's going to be tough.”

Amr draws parallels between Trump’s recent policies and Egypt’s dictatorial history. “We were raised under a government that expressed our voice, that could put you

government that oppressed our voice, that could put you in jail for a tweet or status on Facebook,” she says. “One of my songs got banned in Egypt because it mentioned the word ‘military.’ If we face that in the U.S., I fear nobody is going to help us.”

Iranian-Dutch Singer Sevdaliza on How Immigration Ban Inspired Her Reflective Song 'Bebin'

Mahyar Dean, guitarist for Iranian group **Angband**, echoes that fear. The band planned to record a new album this year with an American singer; with the ban in place, those plans are now up in the air. “[Due to the ban we can't play any live show in the States,” he says, before ironically alluding to the long-held ban on Western music in his country. “Which is funny: We can't play any live shows or sell CDs in Iran, either -- but for a different reason.”

Additional reporting by Gil Kaufman and Dan Rys.

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