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## America's ban on Iranian citizens has handed hardliners ammunition

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'I never thought I'd have the chance to see you again before I died, thank you for making this happen." A month ago, the gratitude in my ailing mother's voice travelled across thousands of miles from Iran, to reach me in the United States. It brought tears of relief to my eyes, that finally we would have the opportunity to reunite.

After almost nine years of not being able to see my family, I made a promise to my mother and sisters that I would do everything in my power to see them for a week or two. Our visit would have to take place in a third country or in the US if possible. Not only did I want to embrace the family I'd been torn from, but I also wanted to use the opportunity to take my mother to specialists who might be able to help her in her battle against heart disease and to finally relieve some of her pain, by getting her knee and hip replacements.

All seemed possible then, before the latest news broke – and the realisation that distance wasn't the only thing to overcome.

In one of his first acts as president, Donald Trump issued an executive order that bans nationals of seven Muslim-majority countries, including Syria and Iran, from entering the United States for at least the next 90 days. My mother is not only a Syrian citizen, a Syrian refugee, but she is also an Iranian citizen; she is from two out of the seven banned countries.

According to the ban, issued by the state department, all of our plans had to be cancelled. As I recall the hope in my mother's voice, my heart breaks. We will not have our reunion, and most importantly, her health will continue to deteriorate, her pain will increase, all while I am helpless to intervene.

Despite the chaos caused for most, there is one group in Iran which appears to be capitalising on the travel ban and exploiting it to advance their political interests. That political faction is made up of the hardliners, primarily the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the senior cadre of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's judiciary and intelligence.

Shila, an Iranian university student from Tehran, pointed out that "they are flooding TV and newspaper reports with messages stating that they have long warned the youth of Iran not to trust the US. They are using this ban to declare a victory, as proof that their radical views of the West have always been true. Our society is filled with questions, and there are no other answers to give."

Iran has one of the most pro-American societies in the Middle East. I was raised for part of my life in Iran under Mr Khamenei's leadership and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government, and I came to see first hand how the dream of an overwhelming majority of educated Iranian people was to come to the US and how many Iranians share American values.

Iranians normally would not believe the Iranian government's propaganda against many countries, primarily the US. The more the Iranian government lashed out at the US, the more the Iranians appeared to be attracted to the US.

Nevertheless, now the Iranian government is heavily using the travel ban as robust and undeniable evidence to buttress its long-standing arguments against the US. Iranian officials and newspapers are bursting with statements meant to inflame and enrage the Iranian people: the US is exclusive, the US is not a melting pot, the US does not like Muslims, the US is not a utopia, the US does not like the Iranians, the US is the Great Satan, the US is the enemy of the Islamic Republic. The fearmongering is endless.

Iran's hardline newspaper Etelaat (Intelligence) called the US racist and projected an image of the whole world protesting against the United States.

Iran's hardliners are also using the travel ban as a victory against the reformists and moderates who advocate for more rapprochement with the West, in order to preserve the political establishment of the Islamic Republic.

These masters of manipulation have long searched for a strong pretext to pursue their militaristic ambitions, as well as to further suffocate and isolate the Iranian population from the rest of the world. According to Mr Khamenei, their top concern is to prevent Western infiltration of the Iranian culture, and creating further division between Iran and the US will make it far easier for the hardliners to control society, as well as clear the way to pursue their regional hegemonic ambitions.

Now these men, once thought of as extreme traditionalists in a modernising culture, are using the travel ban to justify their actions. Right after the executive order was issued by the White House, IRGC leaders test-fired a ballistic missile. Iran also stated that it "will take appropriate consular, legal and political measures" against Mr Trump's travel ban. Iran declared that it will dump the US dollar in response to the travel ban.

In addition, the groups are also using the travel ban to further ratchet up anti-Americanism in the region and beyond. Mr Khamenei and the IRGC are bolstering their position that their concerns and beliefs have been validated, and only they can be regarded as the guardians and leaders of the Muslim world.

If the objective of the US was to fight terrorism by preventing some countries, including Iran, from exporting terrorism, one of the most effective and enduring approaches to achieve that is to tackle the problem at its roots.

For example, in the case of Iran, the underlying cause can be addressed by standing with the overwhelming majority of the Iranian youth who support a democratic system of governance, reject military adventurism by the IRGC in the Middle East, and oppose Iran's arming and financing of Shia militia groups in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

Iran has a large population of young people, who are disaffected and dissatisfied with the political establishment. More than 60 per cent of the Iranian population is under 30. Other methods to foster a greater bond between these young people and the future for their country that they yearn for include supporting and facilitating access to technological and social media platforms; focusing on Iran's human rights violations of its own citizens; giving voice to the oppressed religious and ethnic minorities of Iran (Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Christians, Jews, Sunnis etc); concentrating on Iran's military interference in other countries; disclosing Iran's sectarian agenda as well as highlighting Iran's breach of international laws and UN resolutions.

There are Iranian groups inside and outside of Iran that oppose their government's policies and strive to bring about democratic reforms. Offering them support would be a very effective path to pursue.

Those Iranian leaders who seek to create hate and violence should not be given opportunities to advance their revolutionary and regional hegemonic ambitions.

Yesterday, as I heard my mother's voice across thousands of miles once more, she asked again if I am going to see her soon. Aware that she is oblivious to global news, I intended to explain to her the legal issues of the travel ban. But the weakness in her voice silenced me

It was possible that this conversation would be our last and I didn't want my final words to her to be heartbreaking. Instead, I offered her the only comfort I could: hope.

"Yes, soon hopefully mother. A few things have come up, I'm sorry, but once they are settled, we will see each other again." Perhaps, I said it to comfort myself as well.