



What Limits on the Movement of Marginalized Groups Reveal about Ethno-Racial Politics in the United States

Hadi Khoshnevis, Rhodes College

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump touted his travel ban – dubbed the “Muslim ban” – and a pledge to construct a full-scale border wall between the United States and Mexico. These slogans, which resonated with many US citizens, were framed as attempts to restrict the movement of “undesired” populations into the United States. Discussions of mobility were not limited to foreign nationals. The recent Republican support for “bathroom bills” to limit the movement of transgender Americans is a reminder of many historical attempts across U.S. history to define and confine the movement of marginalized citizens. Reservations for Native Americans, Jim Crow laws directed at African Americans, and urban segregation – all are examples of attempts to restrict the movement of minorities. The framing and content of these policies and the widespread support they receive show how physical borders and ideological boundaries can overlap, interact, and reinforce one another.

A Window into Limits on Group Movement

My research touches on one current part of the politics of mobility. I draw on observations made at a major southeastern U.S. airport and qualitative interviews I conducted with Iranian students. The research explores how populations who face restrictions and feel unwelcomed perceive their mobility options and how they navigate airports as their initial port of entry to the United States.

My research revealed that Iranian students evaluate their movement into the United States within the context of global geopolitics and the backdrop of recent enmity between the United States and Iran. They see themselves as nationals from a country known to Americans as an enemy country, and at the same time as people entering a country, the United States, known as the enemy of Iran. Given this fraught situation, Iranian student travelers take careful steps:

- They meticulously plan and regulate their movement into airports as gateways to the United States, understanding that they must guard against stereotypes and prove their desirability and eligibility to enter the country.
- As travelers who must carefully evaluate their own conduct and appearance, they assess different scenarios as they approach the gates and visa officers. They understand that visa officers may evaluate them based on a few cues, including the contents of their passports, their appearance, and their behavior during the officers' review of their travel documents.
- Although the time spent in airports is often considered “dead-time,” my research shows only certain passengers can relax or entertain themselves; others, such as the Iranian students, often must anxiously assess the situation, plan their transition, and imagine different possibilities.

- The treatment that travelers receive from visa officers shapes how newcomers perceive the host country. A pleasant treatment may induce feelings of hope, while an unfriendly treatment portends hardship and struggle.

Most research on immigration and migration focuses on the binary of documented versus undocumented travelers, but my research shows that the experience of transition is more nuanced. Despite holding valid travel documents, some groups – such as, in this case, students who hold “F-1” student visas – can find travel experiences taxing and anxiety-inducing. Although legal status matters, it is not the only determining factor, because travelers may view themselves as falling into stigmatized categories of people who, as they pass through airport gates and national entry sites, need to navigate through negative stereotypes and overcome tensions within global geopolitics and recent international history.

What Can Be Done

Travelers have already been vetted, policed, and surveilled at multiple stages. Some are visa holders who went through months of vetting during the visa application process. There is little reason for visa officers to do much more than carefully cross-check travel documents with travelers’ answers to basic questions. There is no need for these officers to deliver or imply personal judgments based on stereotypes.

Officials, however, are not the only ones who may hold and act in unfortunate ways upon unnecessary suspicions. In several cases, passengers have been removed from flights because they were communicating in languages unknown to other travelers – including Arabic in one instance and math formulas in another. Public education is thus essential in preventing further discrimination. Citizens as well as officials need to understand how thoroughly arriving foreigners have been vetted. Enlightening officials and citizens about the fact that terrorists killed 94 people inside the United States between 2005 and 2015, while during the same period of time, 301,797 in the US were killed by gun, may change people’s attitudes about real sources of threat.

Evidence shows that recent efforts at sensitivity training for airport staff and flight attendants have done little to reduce discrimination against travelers on ethno-racist grounds. True progress will probably depend on comprehensive immigration reform and overall efforts to improve official and citizen comprehension of real versus constructed security threats.

Read more in Hadi “Accountability in a State of Liminality: Experiences of Iranian Students’ at American Airports,” in *Mobilities*, 12, 3, (2017).