

Kurdish girl, hundreds more Iraqis left in limbo by Trump's visa ban

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SULAIMANI, Kurdistan Region — US President Donald Trump's recent executive order banning travel to the United States for most Iraqis doesn't reflect American principles of freedom, a tenth-grade student from the Kurdish city of Sulaimani explained, as she waits to see if the ban will be lifted or altered to allow for her and 225 other young Iraqis to go to the United States for a leadership program.

"It's against the American values, which we learned about in history," the student, who hopes to participate in a US state department exchange program, told Rudaw English. "[We learned] the principles of the US are based upon freedom of worship, freedom of want, and these types of things. And for Trump to disprove it is unfair."

She hasn't ever travelled outside of Iraq, but she spoke with sagacity and ambition. The Kurdish girl has attended an international school, where students are taught math, science, and social studies — exclusively in English.

"When I heard about the news at school, I was really devastated," she said. "I discussed it with some of my teachers who were aware that I had applied for IYLEP (Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program), we discussed it, and we were really disappointed for Trump to just ban it for certain countries because of their religion."

Universities in Canada, Australia remain options, but attending prestigious Harvard University in Massachusetts to study political science is the teen's goal. She believes IYLEP is a stepping stone to that dream.

"They contacted me for an interview a while back in mid-January," she said. "We had an

interview and then they said we had to wait until March, and they would get back to us.”

IYLEP is highly competitive and a geographically-balanced program that aimed to bring 125 high school and 100 college students from Iraq to the United States for a month of leadership training this July; however, the program is in limbo after Trump’s executive order halted entries into the United States for nationals of seven countries.

Since the 90-day ban was issued on Jan. 27, the student said no one from the program or the state department had contacted her.

“I think it’s going to continue, but I don’t know ... they did not tell us anything,” she said.

IYLEP is one result of the Strategic Framework Agreement established in 2008 to normalize the US-Iraqi relations with strong economic, diplomatic, cultural, and security cooperation and has served as the primary reference for the two nations' bilateral relations.

“I think in Iraq because of the situation we lack good leadership. That allows so many extremist groups to develop in Iraq,” she added.

“We need good leadership and I could see some of those qualities in myself, so I want to participate in IYLEP to develop those qualities.”

Henry Haggard, then-acting US consul general, discussed educational exchange program opportunities like IYLEP during a ceremony honoring the region’s top honors students on Jan. 18, but since the Trump ban, the Erbil consulate has been unable to provide further information regarding IYLEP and other programs which would require visas.

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