

ELECTIONS

Rhode Islanders criticize Trump's 'ideological test' for immigrants

Mark Reynolds mreynold@providencejournal.com

Published 9:23 p.m. ET Aug. 15, 2016 | Updated 9:23 p.m. ET Aug. 15, 2016

Donald Trump's latest comments on immigration, including his call for an "ideological test" for admission to the United States, drew criticism Monday from an East Providence lawyer familiar with the existing immigration system and from two others who are knowledgeable about challenges faced by Muslim immigrants.

The lawyer, Roberto Gonzalez, said Trump's comments were not surprising and are in sync with the candidate's general pursuit of raising barriers to block foreigners who are not white western Europeans.

Meanwhile, Trump's proposals for specifically questioning prospective immigrants about ideology, tolerance and values are nothing new, Gonzalez said.

"The problem for what he's saying is we already screen for all those things," Gonzalez said, adding that refugees, for example, from the Middle East are already "triple and quadruple vetted" to the point that the process can take years.

"He just wants to shut down these processes entirely," Gonzalez said. "That's his agenda."

Imam Farid Ansari from the Rhode Island Council for Muslim Advancement said he believes that Trump's proposals reflect an interest in "trying to ride a wave of anti-Islamic sentiment ..."

Ansari said all immigrants, not just Muslims, or just immigrants from countries associated with terrorism, should be vetted.

Citing the history of the Irish Republican Army, Ansari asks if travelers from Ireland would receive visas if Trump were to follow through on his promise to suspend visas for people from countries that export terrorism. Ansari suggested they would receive visas.

But Ansari also said he sees value in processes that weed out criminals as well as dangerous terrorists who call themselves Muslims but violate basic tenets of the faith, which has no place for compulsory requirements or coercion.

As a chaplain for the Bristol County Sheriff's Office in Massachusetts, Ansari says he carefully questions prisoners who request special religious privileges.

Omar Bah, founder and executive director of the Refugee Dream Center in Providence, said that Trump's politics aim to compartmentalize the population in an effort to draw support from a fearful segment that believes Muslims, or immigrants in general, pose a threat.

It's a "slippery slope" to a "hateful atmosphere" where people fear neighbors who do not look like them, Bah said, adding, "that is not what America is about."

"It's a very scary moment in American history," he said.

W. Terrence Gorman, a Lincoln man who is frequently at the State House lobbying for the enforcement of immigration laws, has no problem with Trump's comments.

"He just wants to make the country safer," Gorman said, "by having a viable vetting process, which we don't have now by any means."

— *mreynold@providencejournal.com*

(401) 277-7490

On Twitter: @mrkrynlds