

Demonstrators, Civil Rights Orgs Rally in Defense of Immigrants, Muslims after Executive Orders

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by Chris Fuchs

Civil rights groups, elected officials, and ordinary people voiced outrage across the country Wednesday as President Donald Trump [signed executive orders](#) to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and eliminate federal funding to cities that shield undocumented immigrants from deportation.

"Many in our communities are targeted because they are considered 'un-American,' and we will not stand by while our communities continue to be attacked."

In New York City, home to a large Muslim-American population, approximately 1,000 demonstrators descended on Washington Square Park in Manhattan's Greenwich Village Wednesday night, according to officials, vowing to stand side-by-side with Muslims, undocumented immigrants, and anyone targeted by Trump's executive orders.

Another executive order [expected as early as this week](#) would temporarily ban most refugees and block visas for citizens of Middle Eastern and African countries seen as harboring terrorist organizations.

That, too, has stoked fear among some that Trump will make good on a [campaign promise](#) to temporarily [ban Muslims](#) from entering the country.

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"This policy does not make 'America great again' as it does nothing to reinforce American security," Ani Zonneveld, president and founder of Muslims for Progressive Values, told NBC News in an email statement. "But what it does do is fuel the prejudice against Muslims in the president's base, which if you recall was how he rose to the top of the Republican ticket, by riding on the misery of Syrian refugees."



Trump Signs Two Executive Orders Related to Immigration Agenda 1:28

Organized in less than a day by the New York chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a civil rights nonprofit, the the New York City rally summoned a bevy of locally and federally elected officials who took turns addressing the crowd.

Among them was U.S. Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-NY) who boycotted Trump's inauguration last week.

"Each one of us has seen the pictures of the children in Aleppo, the children running with fear in Central America," Velazquez said. "It breaks my heart. So we are here to say, to our Muslim brothers and sisters, tonight, today, and in the future, I too am Muslim."

Feeding off the still palpable energy of the [Women's March on Washington](#) and in cities across the country this past Saturday, protesters hoisted up handmade signs and chanted rally cries like "no ban, no wall, New Yorkers for all" that could be heard from blocks away.

The New York Police Department set up metal barricades in front of the Washington Square Arch to control pedestrian traffic, and officers asked passersby not to stop on the sidewalk in front of where speakers were addressing the crowd in the park.

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One of the protesters, Ann Toback, executive director of The Workmen's Circle, an activist group founded 117 years ago by Eastern European Jewish immigrants, told NBC News that the same battle they fought in 1900 has reemerged during Trump's rise to power.

That, she said, is why she and between 50 and 60 members of her organization turned out to Washington Square Park.

"We came to a country that didn't welcome us, where we didn't have safe jobs or fair pay or a lot of the benefits that were so necessary," Toback said. "We were refugees coming from countries that were persecuting us."

Weighing heavy on the minds of rally participants were the two executive orders Trump signed Wednesday taking aim at reining in illegal immigration. [One calls for redirecting Department of Homeland Security funds to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico](#) and allocating resources to construct detention facilities there.

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The other [threatens to cut off federal money to so-called sanctuary cities that shield undocumented immigrants from deportation](#) and that do not comply with federal immigration enforcement agents except as is necessary for law enforcement purposes.



Migrant rights groups look on during a vigil to protest against US President Donald Trump's new crackdown on "sanctuary cities", outside the City Hall in Los Angeles, California on January 25, 2017. MARK RALSTON / AFP - Getty Images

The executive orders won praise from Republicans, including Sen. David Perdue of Georgia who said in a statement that they were "a good first step towards fixing our immigration system and solving our national security crisis."

As helicopters hovered overhead and nightfall moved in, New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer told the audience to cheers and applause that New York is and will always remain a sanctuary city.

"I'm also here today to make it very clear that as a Jewish American, I stand with the Muslim community because today and every day in New York City, we are one people," he said.



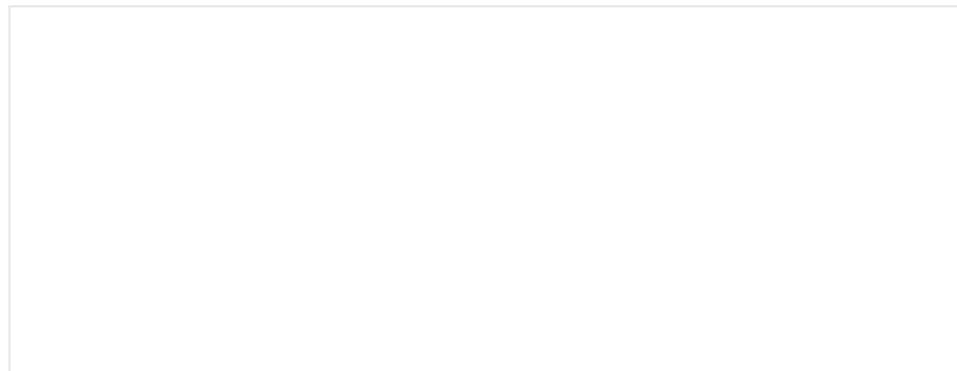
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A Muslim-American woman attending the rally who asked NBC News only to use her first name in fear of retaliation, Widad, said she was also worried about the executive order Trump is expected to soon sign that addresses refugees and people in seven Muslim-majority nations who seek U.S. visas.

The order will halt refugees from entering the U.S. from Syria and will suspend entry for those from Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Yemen as permanent rules are considered, [according to Reuters](#), which saw a draft of the document.

Widad said this will especially impact many living in New York City.

"They have families all around the world, and you do have a large population of Middle Eastern[s] and Muslims who live in New York, and this stops people from seeing their families," she said.



Muslim women shout slogans during a rally against President Donald Trump's order cracking down on immigrants living in the U.S. at Washington Square Park in New York, Wednesday, Jan. 25, 2017. Andres Kudacki / AP

New York City Public Advocate Letitia James packaged her message about the order in a chant she shouted that echoed through the park.

"Say it loud, say it clear, refugees are here to stay," James said as participants repeated the refrain.

City Councilman Corey Johnson, who is gay and HIV positive, connected his own background to those for whom the demonstration was held — his mother's grandparents were from Ireland, he said, and his father was an adoptee from Seoul, South Korea, who came to the U.S. at the age of 3.

"We are here today to let everyone know that our solidarity, our strength, lies in our diversity, and our mission is to make sure that everyone receives justice and that this is truly an indivisible nation."

"Any of us who are not Native American are immigrants in the United States," Johnson told the crowd to loud applause.

Meanwhile, a number of Asian American and Pacific Islander civil rights organizations also roundly denounced the presidential actions.

"Trump's executive orders today confirm that he intends to build a costly police state that will terrorize our immigrant and refugee communities and traumatize millions of families," the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center said in a statement. "We call on our members of Congress to express their opposition to these un-American policies."

RELATED: [Trump Signs Executive Orders Aimed at Cracking Down on Illegal Immigration](#)

Suman Raghunathan, executive director of South Asian Americans Leading Together, said in a press call Wednesday that her organization is working with elected officials and its 54-community based organizations across the country to stand up for its neighbors.

"We've been documenting hate violence and xenophobic political rhetoric, and clearly, today's executive orders are a troubling, very detailed illustration of much of the divisive political rhetoric that reinforces problematic views and stereotypes aimed at South Asians and Muslims and all who can be perceived as Muslim in the election cycle," she said.

In a statement, the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA) also spoke out against Trump's executive orders, saying NCAPA stands behind immigrants, refugees, and Muslim Americans.

"Many in our communities are targeted because they are considered 'un-American,' and we will not stand by while our communities continue to be attacked," said national director Christopher Kang.

Back at the rally, CAIR-NY executive director Afaf Nasher said her organization was honored, humbled, and grateful for the outpouring of support within just one night.

"We are here today to let everyone know that our solidarity, our strength, lies in our diversity, and our mission is to make sure that everyone receives justice and that this is truly an indivisible nation," she said.

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