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# Let Iranian Students Work After Graduation

Suspensions of OPT processing are leaving Iranian students—and other students impacted by travel bans—in limbo.

By [James Kaemmerer](#)



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**T**here are more than 12,000 Iranian students currently studying in the United States. Last year nearly 1,800 participated in the postgraduation work-authorization program known as Optional Practical Training. But this year, the number of new OPT approvals could drop to zero.

That's because U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency tasked with approving work authorization for international students, instituted an indefinite hold on the adjudication of benefit applications from individuals from certain countries, including Iran. The pause has relegated thousands of upcoming graduates to uncertain administrative limbo.

But with the stroke of a pen, USCIS has the power to benefit the U.S. economy, support the Iranian people and deny the Iranian regime a source of talent by putting the skills of those students to work here in the U.S. The pause should be lifted.

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## **Administrative Limbo**

The current situation stems from a series of executive actions beginning in mid-2025. On June 4, 2025, President Trump issued Presidential Proclamation 10949, which, citing national security grounds, imposed a full travel ban for all immigrant and nonimmigrant visa categories, which includes F-1 student visas, from nationals of 12 countries, including Iran. A second proclamation on Dec. 16 extended the ban and added more countries subject to full or partial travel bans.

Connected to these actions, USCIS issued a pair of policy memos, one in December and one in January, that called for the immediate “hold and review” of USCIS benefit applications filed by nationals from countries on the travel ban list. The Jan. 1 memorandum called for a “comprehensive review of all policies, procedures, and screening and vetting processes” connected to benefit requests.

According to USCIS, the pause was meant to “ensure that aliens are vetted and screened to the maximum degree possible,” although they acknowledge that it “may result in delay to the adjudication of some pending applications.” In USCIS’s view, these delays are justified “when weighed against the agency’s obligation to protect and preserve our national security.”

But USCIS has not offered a timeline for how or when its “comprehensive review” will conclude.

In the meantime, graduates from Iran and 38 other “high-risk” countries, in addition to individuals holding passports issued by the Palestinian Authority, face uncertainty about their eligibility to work through OPT after graduating. USCIS approves applications for OPT, which grants 12 months of postgraduation work authorization to eligible international students, and an additional 24 months for those with STEM degrees.

Affected students can still submit their applications for work authorization to USCIS, and USCIS will still accept their \$470 application fee, but until the pause is lifted, they cannot expect any final decision on their applications to be made. They would remain indefinitely and precariously in F-1 visa status—neither studying nor employed—pending OPT approval.

## Iranian Students

According to the latest Open Doors report, Iran currently ranks 16th in the number of students studying in the U.S., and Iranian students contributed more than half a billion dollars to the U.S. economy in 2024.

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They are also the most highly educated group of international students currently studying in the United States. Eighty percent of Iranian students were studying at the graduate level last year. Moreover, 95 percent of Iranian students study at doctoral universities.

As spring graduation approaches, and without work authorization, Iranian students could lose the financial ability to remain in the U.S., and the skills and knowledge they gained at American universities would go unapplied in the U.S. workforce.

Right now Iranian graduates have no good options: Without OPT, they can choose between languishing indefinitely in liminal visa status, starting a new academic program (that is unwanted, unnecessary or unaffordable), or exiting the U.S. and returning to an active war zone.

## Existing Controls

International students are already among the most vetted entrants to the United States, going through multiple layers of academic, financial and personal scrutiny before they are issued an F-1 visa.

Iranian students are subject to additional security measures—federal law explicitly denies Iranian students visa issuance and entry to the United States if they intend to pursue coursework in preparation for careers in Iran's energy sector, or in nuclear science, nuclear engineering or related fields.

Iranian student researchers are also subject to cyber- and research-security policies and export-control protocols. Universities employ export-control officers whose job it is to review any technology, software or equipment that could be accessed or used by an Iranian national in order to be in full compliance with the export controls outlined by the Export Administration Regulations, the International Traffic in Arms Regulations and the Office of Foreign Assets Control.

Beyond this, the visa statuses of all international students are monitored by their schools' international advisers, or Designated School Officials, who regularly update and maintain students' F-1 records in the federal international student database known as SEVIS.

When international students graduate and apply for OPT, they submit their application documents to USCIS to be screened and adjudicated. USCIS also now effectively requires a biometric appointment for students to have their photo taken in person at one of its Application Support Centers located around the country. The OPT application process itself can take three months or longer to complete.

For students who are finally approved for OPT, they still have regularly mandated reporting requirements to the government regarding their physical address and employment information. And they have to go through the USCIS vetting process all over again for the OPT STEM extension, which involves additional requirements including participation in the E-Verify system for employers and extensive training plans completed in cooperation with their employers.

Suffice to say, international students generally and Iranian students in particular have long been subject to extensive federal screening, monitoring and regulatory control.

## **A Partial Fix**

My main argument here is to lift the USCIS pause for Iranian students. But they are not the only ones affected. In total, the pause impacts more than 58,000 students from almost 40 countries, including Nigeria, which ranks eighth among all countries in terms of the number of students in the U.S., with 21,847 students. The 38,389 students from just the top three travel ban countries—Iran, Nigeria and Venezuela—together contributed an estimated \$1.57 billion to the U.S. economy last year.

Ultimately, lifting the USCIS pause is only a partial fix. With the travel ban still in place, no new students from Iran have been allowed to enter the country to study since June 2025. On a long enough timeline, the most highly educated

international student group in the country will disappear from American classrooms.

Wanting to ensure the integrity of the OPT application process is not unreasonable. But any such effort should acknowledge the real and ongoing contributions these students have made to academics and research, campus life, our communities, the U.S. economy and America's global standing and competitiveness.

With successes seemingly in short supply of late, lifting this pause is an achievable if temporary win. So let's lift it and let students get back to work.

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