February 14, 2017 Statement by Omar Al-muqdad

Hello everyone. My name is Omar Al-muqdad. I'm a Syrian journalist based in Washington, DC since 2012. I'm also a documentary filmmaker, and I majored in political science and international relations at the University of Damascus. Years before the unrest started in Syria, I was taken into trial in a military court for writing and speaking out against the Syrian Assad regime. I was denied a lawyer and was systematically tortured during my two years in prison. The newspaper I founded and reported for in Syria was shut down three times by Syrian security forces for publishing articles critical of the regime.

Since I arrived to the United States, and even after I found myself a new beautiful home in the deep south of Arkansas, and later settling down and working in Washington, DC, I was still constantly worried about the fate of my immediate family that I left behind in Syria. Each member of my family had their own share of suffering during this whole time. My mother, brothers, and sisters all went through so much hardship since the beginning of the conflict. One very hard and sad moment for me was two years ago when I learned that my youngest brother who was a student in his fifth year in medical school in Damascus, had been detained by the Syrian regime for only being related to me. He was too taken to a trial in a military court and was jailed and tortured for a year before he was released. My mother and younger brother fled Syria immediately after his release. He is now in Germany thankfully, and working hard on his medical degree.

Eventually, the rest of my family left Syria, but my older sister, a pharmacist, and her medical doctor husband and their five kids were the last ones to stay behind. My sister and her husband decided to stay and offer medical help and assistance in our hometown where most hospitals and medical facilities were bombed or shut down. Even when their field clinic was targeted by aerial bombardment, they still persisted and kept working trying to save lives. Once they ran out of all medical supplies and after their own home was targeted by shelling and crossfire, they decided to flee. Sadly, they had to endure even worse conditions for a whole month while trying to just reach the Turkish border. Thankfully they finally made it into Turkey safely. We are all now scattered around the world. All my brothers and sisters are doctors, pharmacists, artists; each one of us is a refugee, who lost all what we’ve achieved and worked hard for. Now we are trying our best to build a new life for ourselves and families.

Refugees do not choose to leave their homes. They are forced to escape their homelands. They escape it when it is no more safe for their lives or the lives of their loved ones to be in their homelands. America can and should continue to protect itself against terrorist threats, but it can do so while still admitting more refugees for resettlement. The Administration’s Executive Order, which put a halt on accepting refugees into the country and a ban on resettlement of Syrian refugees indefinitely, shows a lack of fairness to refugees, especially Syrians.

Refugees are the most vetted traveler to enter the United States, and the current U.S. security vetting process for is the most extensive security mechanism in the world. Yet, the Administration is now making an impossible request from the governments of these refugees. It’s impossible to request cooperation to receive information and documentation on refugees from a regime, such as the Syrian regime, that is infamous for their lack of basic human rights and committing war crimes on their people. These crimes are the reason refugees are escaping their country. This kind of regime would never provide fair information on these refugees.

I believe that the United States, with its generous history of welcoming and helping immigrants and refugees, is still capable of accepting victims of conflicts, especially the Syrian refugees. I hope the United States continues to offer all refugees – regardless of where they come from or what religion they practice – a safe place to rebuild their lives.