Testimony from Waleed Alhariri

Your Excellencies,

My name is Waleed Alhariri. I was born in Yemen and grew up under an authoritarian regime. We were ruled by the politics of fear, and our rights were suppressed behind countless justifications and corruption by the elites. It was only when I moved to the US and became a US citizen in 2015 that I first tasted freedom, where for the first time I felt that the social contract, the Constitution, granted me the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I learned here about what makes us a great nation regardless of race, religion, national origin, or sex; it is our American values.

I never thought our values would be at risk, until the moment when the Executive Order on the travel ban was signed on January 27. It has since, in various different ways, had negative effects on my older brother, on my international Yemeni student friends studying at US universities across the country, and my working collaboration with US based civil society institutions.

Shortly after the Executive Order was signed, my family and I here began to wonder if we would be separated from my older brother indefinitely. This is because he only has a Green Card and was then in Yemen with his wife and kids. When speaking to him over the phone, I told him the Executive Order was temporarily, for 90 days, but that it also had provisions allowing it to be extended indefinitely. There was a moment of silent panic; we could not make sense of the Executive Order. We slept that night thinking my brother may never be allowed back into the United States.

Also, I saw the fear in the eyes of Yemeni friends studying here. They were afraid of what the Executive Order means to them. It also bars them from returning to the US to finish their studies if they decide to travel abroad to visit their families or attend conferences.

Two of my colleagues from the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies—an independent Yemen based think tank—also had to cancel a visit to the US they had planned for late February. My Yemeni colleagues, prominent
Yemeni civil society leaders, have visited the US multiple times before. We met and briefed the US administration and policymakers on local developments and perceptions of America’s role in Yemen. Previous meetings and briefings included the National Security Council, DoD, USAID, State Department, USUN, NEA, DRL, and offices of senators from the Republican and Democratic parties.

US officials consider the local knowledge of great importance and useful for understanding the situation in Yemen from a contextual and neutral viewpoint. This is especially the case since the US is currently engaged in counter-terrorism operations, and provides support to the Saudi-led coalition’s ongoing military intervention in Yemen. Conflict zones like Yemen are difficult for Americans to access and the US has no diplomatic presence since it moved its embassy staff out of Yemen in September 2014. In short, the primary source of quality information about Yemen has come from local civil society actors, who have often risked their lives to come to America and explain to US policymakers critical developments.

The Executive Order also affected a joint research project between the Sana’a Center and Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic. We want to study mental health and the psychological impacts of war on individuals, families, and communities in Yemen. I had to inform our lead researcher in Yemen, who is a doctor in psychology, that she no longer could attend a workshop here because the Executive Order bars Yemenis from visiting the US. My colleagues and I now have to look for other countries to host the workshop where the lead researcher and Yemeni staff will be allowed to attend. We have received a great number of invites from other countries, especially from Canada.

Researchers from outside of the US have always looked at the US as the epicenter for international relations and the convening and crafting of international frameworks. With the Executive Order, they will look to other countries for global leadership and innovation.

Ordinary Yemenis, who came from a country where they were oppressed, are now feeling the threat looming again in the US. Though all of us were relieved by the 9th Circuit Court’s recent ruling, there is a growing fear in the Yemeni community regarding the new administration’s expressed intentions to create immigration policies similar the Executive Order, which will target them for their country or origin.

Thank you.