



United World College-USA students caught in Trump's travel ban turmoil

By T. S. Last / Journal Staff Writer
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Abdulrahman al-Rayyis, 17, from Iraq, and Nadia Sheppard, 18, from Chapel Hill, N.C., are students at the United World College in Montezuma, N. M. Al-Rayyis is one of the school's students who was affected by a travel ban put in place by President Donald Trump. (Eddie Moore/Journal)

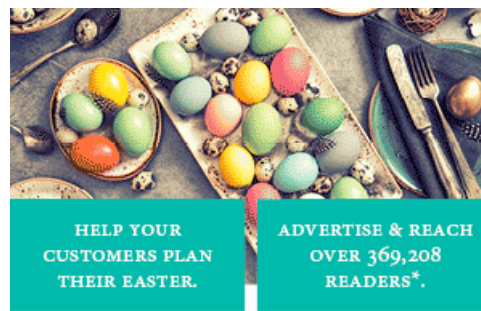
MONTEZUMA, N.M. – Jan. 27 was a day Abdulrahman al-Rayyis will not soon forget.

“I woke up hearing the news about the ban,” the 17-year-old native of Iraq said, referring to the executive order President Donald Trump signed that banned refugees and individuals from seven countries from entering the United States.

“It was a very depressing day,” he said. “Because, one day, you have all your plans set and, on another day, your plans all of a sudden change.”

Al-Rayyis had plans to spend several years getting an education in the U.S. before returning home. But under Trump's order, if he left America, he wouldn't be allowed back.

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“So you have to choose between your education and your family,” he said. “That’s not an easy decision for any teenager.”

Trump’s executive order was struck down in court based on its constitutionality and legality, but the president has promised to sign a new one, likely next week, that reportedly would have much the same effect.



Some 80 percent of the students at the United World College, nestled in the Sangre de Cristo mountains at Montezuma, N. M., are from countries other than the United States. (Eddie Moore/Journal)

Al-Rayyis is one of 238 students attending the United World College-USA in Montezuma, near Las Vegas, N.M., a school founded in Cold War times on the principle that peace can best be achieved when young people come from around the world to live and learn together.

One of 16 UWC campuses in the world, calling it a “college” is a bit of a misnomer in America. Its students are age 16 to 19 and, on graduation, usually continue their education at a university.

Some 188 of the students at UWC-USA – 80 percent of the enrollment – are international, coming from 75 different countries. Ten students were directly affected by the ban: two each from Iran, Iraq and Syria – countries specifically named in Trump’s order – and four others from Palestine, Somalia, Somaliland and Tibet have refugee status.

‘Too much to handle’

“You can tell the students that are affected are under stress and feeling anxiety,” said Nadia Sheppard, one of 50 Americans attending the school.

Sheppard, in her second year at UWC-USA, said that, while she likes the International Baccalaureate curriculum offered there, she didn’t come for the academics.

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“I came here for the people and the relationships,” she said. “I have learned so much more about the world from the people around me. ... It makes you very much globally aware.”

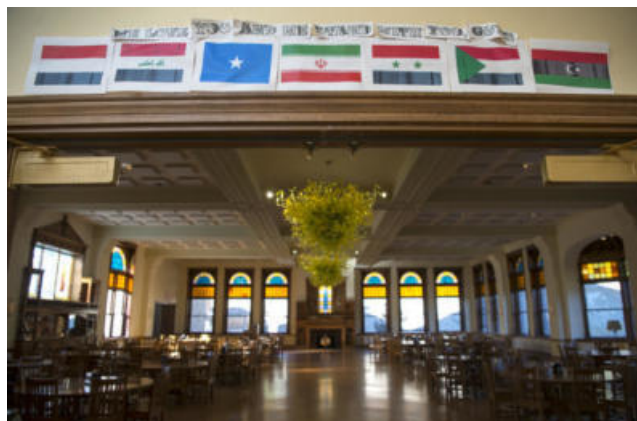
Her roommate is from Hong Kong. “Before, I knew nothing about the independence movement in Hong Kong and now I can tell you a lot about how Hong Kong is very much striving for independence from China,” she said.

Same goes for Syria. Her best friend, whom she met at UWC-USA last year and is now attending college in New York, is from that country. They communicate frequently and Sheppard says her friend is stressed because, like al-Rayyis, she must choose between her family and spending three more years in America completing her education.

Al-Rayyis acknowledges he’s feeling stressed. “Because everything has changed,” he said. “People start treating you differently, you’re now in the position of the victim, everyone is asking if you’re OK – it’s just too much to handle all of a sudden.

“And it’s not just me,” he said. “When I talk to others who are affected, they have social pressures and anxieties. Some days, they don’t want to talk to anyone.”

Al-Rayyis doesn’t know yet what he wants to do in life. He’s thinking about becoming an attorney or maybe going into business. What is clear to him is that he wants to change the world in a positive way.



Flags of the countries under President Donald Trump’s travel ban are hung at the entrance to the dining room at the UWC, with the message “WE LOVE YOU AND WE STAND WITH YOU GUYS.” (Eddie Moore/Journal)

“It’s better to understand the world before you start changing the world,” he said. And that’s one reason why he came to UWC-USA. He felt interacting with other students from all parts of the world will help him

gain that understanding. And maybe they can learn something from him.

“What my country is going through, other countries have been going through. Or maybe there’s a challenge you’re facing back home, another country has successfully overcome that challenge. So that way you can broaden your perspective to look at other people and how they are dealing with their problems. And that will help you deal with your own problems,” he said.

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‘They don’t want us here’

Sheppard said one of the reasons she came to UWC-USA was to challenge her beliefs. Back home in North Carolina, too many people she knew thought like she did. There was little disagreement.

For that reason, she enjoys the Theory of Knowledge class, known as TOK, offered at UWC-USA.

“Basically, what we do is discuss: How do you classify knowledge? How do you get knowledge? Having people from all over the world who come from different cultures and have radically different life experiences makes a class like TOK vastly more enriching,” she said.

“Something I’ve realized in my year and a half being here is that it is such an incredible privilege to be American,” she said. “I have running water and electricity at home, I know my family is safe, I know that I can go home.”

That’s not the case for her Syrian friend. Sheppard said even prior to the ban it was risky for her friend to travel home. If her name is the same or similar to someone on the Syrian government’s watch list, she could be killed.

Sheppard also relishes the fact that she can speak freely without the expectation that she’ll be killed or thrown in jail.

Al-Rayyis also appreciates that.

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“A person from the U.S. might have a different opinion about how much freedom of expression they actually have but, to me, democracy and freedom of expression, they do mean a lot,” he said.

This is al-Rayyis’ second stint in America. He spent about a month here a year or so ago as part of a state-sponsored student exchange program designed to integrate American and Iraqi youths to help form cultural bonds. Because he was with a group that time, and they traveled to rather liberal cities, and because, as a student at UWC-USA, he lives in relative obscurity, he said he’s not felt discrimination in this country. But he knows it happens.

“I understand that there are some people who don’t want you to be here,” he said. “There’s this protectionist view against Middle Easterners, they see us as all scary and all of that, and that’s why they don’t want us here.”

More harm than good

But that’s because they likely never lived next door to a Middle Easterner, he said. Or they’ve never met one, or at least never known one well enough to have an understanding of that person’s life experiences or culture.

“This is why what is happening politically is happening, because of the lack of understanding,” he said of the unrest in the United States.

One thing al-Rayyis can’t understand is the discrimination and prejudice exhibited by some Americans against Muslims.

Yes, the first “I” in ISIS stands for Islamic. But it’s not about religion.

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“ISIS is more of a political organization than a religious organization. The people who are the majority, who know what these groups are, they will never join them,” he said. “ISIS is fighting Muslims. Ninety percent of the Kurdish population are Muslims, yet they are the ones who have the most direct contact against ISIS; they are the ones who have the most losses against ISIS.”

While al-Rayyis considers himself agnostic, his father is Muslim and is with peshmerga, the Kurdish forces fighting ISIS in Iraq. They are America’s allies, yet under Trump’s order his father would not be allowed here.

Al-Rayyis also doesn’t understand the reasoning behind the travel ban. First, he doesn’t see it as a ban against countries that pose a threat to America.

“It’s a ban on countries (Trump) does not do business in,” he said. “If this is true, that it’s for the safety of the country, Iraq and Iran never sent a terrorist to the U.S. But 15 of 19 people involved in 9/11 were from Saudi Arabia. But Saudi Arabia had strong business links to Trump.”

It doesn’t make sense to him that the prime minister of Canada is welcoming people to his country “and then you see the president of the U.S. say the exact opposite thing.”

Carl-Martin Nelson, until Thursday communications director for UWC-USA, said that the college’s guidance counselors have begun suggesting that students from certain countries consider attending the United World Colleges in Canada or the United Kingdom where the ban is not an issue.

Sheppard says some people in this country don’t know how much power the U.S. has. Its policies affect people all over the world.

“It’s very easy to forget that it affects people overseas, unless you know someone,” she said.

Al-Rayyis agrees. “It’s affecting people, and that’s the problem.”

He doesn’t believe the travel ban will be effective and could do more harm than good.

“I don’t think putting yourself in a box and hiding there will protect you,” he said. “Understanding each other is actually what will protect you in the end.”

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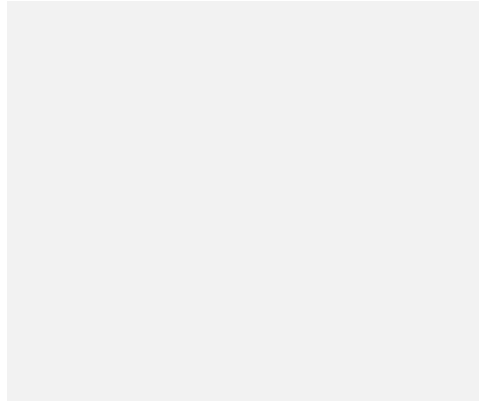


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