

Statement to the
Committee on the Judiciary's Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship and
Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Joint Hearing on
"Oversight of the Trump Administration's Muslim Ban"
September 24, 2019
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Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member Buck, Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Zeldin and members of both subcommittees, PAAIA is pleased to take this opportunity to address the effects of the Muslim/Travel Ban on American families and publicly support the National Origin-Based Antidiscrimination for Nonimmigrants (NO BAN) Act introduced earlier this year by Rep. Judy Chu (D-CA) and Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE).

For your background, the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) is a non-profit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian organization that serves the interests of Iranian Americans and represents the community before U.S. policymakers and the American public. Today there are an estimated 1 to 1.5 million or more Iranian Americans living in the United States. Iranian Americans are among some of the most successful immigrant communities in the U.S. – serving in law enforcement, the military and elected office. The longest serving Special Forces A-Team soldier in U.S. history is an Iranian American and last year we proudly observed the historic election of three Iranian American women to state legislatures. Iranian Americans are highly educated, founders and/or senior leaders at many major U.S. companies and give back to the communities in which they live. A study by the Small Business Administration (SBA) found Iranian immigrants to be among the top 20 immigrant groups with the highest rate of business ownership, contributing substantially to the U.S. economy.

And while Iranian Americans are proud contributors to American culture, business, science and the arts, we remain deeply connected to family back in Iran. According to a 2018 survey by PAAIA, 90 percent of respondents have family in Iran. This is largely due to the fact that we are a relatively new and young immigrant community, many of whom fled Iran during the 1979 Islamic Revolution to put down roots in countries including the United States. With the majority of Iranian Americans between the ages of 25 and 64, there are countless times – from weddings and graduations to education and careers – when travel between Iran and the United States is necessary. Unfortunately, President Trump's ineffective and anti-American ban has put an end to that travel, disconnecting families and causing undue hardship on Americans across the country.

Every day I am flooded with concerns and requests for information about family reunification. Brian Swank and his fiancée, Mehraneh Rayatidamavandi, are one such example. New Jersey resident and American citizen Brian met the love of his life, Mehraneh, while studying at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, where Mehraneh was studying as a visiting research scholar working on her Ph.D. Upon

completion of her research in the U.S., Mehraneh was required to return to her home country of Iran for two years before being able to get another visa and move back to the U.S. While they knew this transitional period would be tough, the knowledge that they would be together again soon kept their hopes up – but then came the travel ban.

Despite having already passed intensive background checks to get her previous visa, Mehraneh remains separated from her fiancé. It has been over a year since her initial interview with the consulate and they know nothing more than that her application is at the "administrative processing" status. Mehraneh is exactly the type of person we should want to be a part of America. Instead, due to the discriminatory travel ban, she and Brian remain separated and unable to begin their journey of starting a new family.

Iranian nationals make up the largest number of immigrants or non-immigrant visitors among the listed travel ban countries and already undergo extensive security screening. Unfairly targeting the Iranian people undermines the solidarity between the peoples of both countries and overlooks the countless contributions Iranian Americans have made to the security and economic prosperity of the United States. The restrictions run counter to U.S. policy of engaging the Iranian people and supporting their democratic aspirations. They also make our nation less safe by feeding into extremist narratives that the U.S. is at war with Islam and alienating the groups that we need to be working with in countering violent extremism.

The third iteration of the travel ban includes a provision that permits consular officers to grant waivers on a case-by-case basis if the applicant meets specific criteria. Unfortunately, our efforts revealed that very few waivers are being granted, even when applicants meet the Proclamation's criteria. In a letter released by Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) in June of this year, the U.S. State Department admitted that as of October 2018, only six percent of total applicants and only 1 percent of Iranian applicants have been "cleared for a waiver," further demonstrating the intentionally discriminatory nature of the travel ban.

PAAIA commends Rep. Chu and Sen. Coons for their leadership in introducing the NO BAN Act. The legislation is a meaningful and practical step forward for the Iranian American community and others that have been negatively impacted by the president's policy. The NO BAN Act would not only rescind the Travel, Asylum and Refugee Bans, but also amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to make it more difficult for future administrations to enact similar policies and prevent religious-based discrimination of anyone seeking entry into the United States. The legislation would also require that Congress, through its appropriate committees, be routinely notified and briefed on the status, implementation and authority of the executive branch's actions pertaining to immigration and travel bans issued on the basis of national security and human rights.

In sum, the NO BAN Act incorporates substantive criteria and accountability to safeguard against potential abuses of power. While the legislation does not prevent the executive branch from barring the entry of individuals or groups for the benefit of national security, it does ensure there is verifiable evidence in support of such claims. In doing

so, this legislation eliminates partisan lines by codifying congressional oversight on immigration-related executive decisions of any administration.

The toll of the travel ban is both devastating and discriminatory. The ban undercuts a core American value - strong families – and punishes millions of people without any clear U.S. national security rationale. I thank Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member Buck, Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Zeldin and members of both subcommittees for the opportunity to convey today the immense hardship that the travel ban has placed on American families and encourage Congress to support the NO BAN Act.