Trump's travel travesty

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On January 27, US President Donald Trump made good on one of his campaign promises and issued an executive order that bars citizens from seven countries from entering the USA for 90 days. It also suspends the admission of all refugees for 120 days, nominally “to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States”.

It has left citizens of Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Iran stranded in their countries or at airports in transit to the USA, including patients on their way to medical treatment. Among those affected are researchers and students returning from conferences or about to start a new job in the USA. Samira Asgari, an Iranian computational biologist made worldwide headlines after she was stranded in Frankfurt Airport on her way from Geneva to Harvard Medical School.

While it is unclear how many were caught out by the unannounced measure, the principle of a blanket ban sends a chilling message to all who are accustomed to and rely on international exchange and cooperation. The executive order is also at odds with a core tenet of science: that research transcends national boundaries.

The effects of the travel ban reach far wider than barring scientists from entering the USA: many students, scholars and researchers also fear leaving the country to go to conferences or meet collaborators, because they may not be able to return. Abdulmageed Traish, Professor of Biochemistry and Urology at Boston University School of Medicine has just canceled his next conference. “My wife and I were planning to attend a neurology meeting in London. But upon advice from an immigration lawyer, we decided not to go forward with our plans,” said Traish, who immigrated to the USA from Libya in 1972. “However, under the current environment, I do have serious concerns, especially knowing that individuals with green cards were turned down or held in various airports in the USA.”

Even US citizens who originally came from predominantly Muslim countries are having second thoughts. “I have several contributions for a conference in Italy in March, but now I am putting my plans to attend on hold. Although I have a US citizenship, being originally from Syria and fast and arbitrary decisions coming out about travel, made me think about cancelling attending,” said Wasim Maziak, Professor of Epidemiology and department chair at Florida International University, adding “I have two post docs on my grants from the designated countries (Libya, Yemen), and they both are not going to travel anywhere for now.” The executive order may directly affect nearly 17,000 students from the seven countries who currently reside legally in the USA (<https://tinyurl.com/jmc82s>). However, US higher education and science may be affected more broadly as some among the 10 million foreign students are likely to consider alternative opportunities.

The travel ban will impact collaborations and exchange of information. “An immediate concern is individuals who wish to present their work at scientific meetings in the USA,” commented Traish. It is too early to assess the impact on conferences as attendants cancel their registration, but scientific meetings in the USA and elsewhere that rely on an international audience and speakers will undoubtedly be affected. Often, these represent essential income for scientific societies.

Impeding free travel also has a chilling effect on international collaboration, in particular with Middle Eastern countries. “Most of my research work is in the Middle East. Currently I am collaborating with Lebanon, Jordan, and Tunisia, as well as other countries, so the long term potential is unknown,” commented Maziak. “However, much of our work in the region is capacity building and training, and this directive will affect our work with professionals from the countries indicated.”

Executives of major US companies such as Ford's Mark Fields and Tesla's Elon Musk have openly criticized President Trump's order; Amazon and Microsoft announced that they would support a lawsuit against the travel ban by Washington state's attorney general. Starbucks, airbnb and Uber offer to materially support those affected.

Academics and their organizations also reacted quickly. An online petition, notoimmigrationban.com, attracted more than 27,000 signatories within a week, including more than 50 Nobel laureates. EMBO set up an exchange forum for scientists who offer anything from temporary lab space and accommodation to coffee and a warm welcome to scientists affected by the travel ban [Editor's note: *EMBO Reports* is owned and published by EMBO]. Within less than 4 days, more than 600 scientists from all over the world signed up (www.embo.org/science-solidarity).

AAAS was among the many US institution that spoke up, including MIT, Rockefeller University and ASCB. “[T]he detaining of students and scientists that have already been screened, processed, and approved to receive a visa to visit the United States is contrary to the spirit of science to pursue scholarly and professional interests. In order for science and the economy to prosper, students and scientists must be free to study and work with colleagues in other countries,” said AAAS President Rush Holt in a statement.

“[The immigration ban] contravenes anything that science stands for,” commented EMBO Director Maria Leptin. Traish shares these sentiments. “[S]cience knows no borders and therefore the scientific community should stand together and fight this evil action. This is a real danger to science and cannot be allowed to stand,” he said. While going to press, the travel ban was temporarily blocked by a federal judge. The legal system along with dialogue and solidarity among scientists are the right approach to challenge isolationism and fear-mongering.