

**Department of Computer Science**

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June 9, 2013

The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

Omar F. Zaidan, a Jordanian citizen, was denied re-entry to the US on the eve of his PhD defense at Johns Hopkins University. It has been over a year and a half, and he has not yet been allowed to return. This is madness. Omar is exactly the type of person who the US should be actively recruiting to come to the country. Here is a shortlist of reasons why:

- The US government invested approximately \$200,000 in Omar's education through DARPA grants that paid for his tuition and his PhD stipend.
- Omar had accepted a job at Microsoft Research in Seattle, where he would have repaid his moral debt to the country many times over by paying taxes on his high salary, and through his intellectual contributions to the US tech industry.
- Omar is the best PhD student who I have supervised in the 6 years that I have been a computer science professor. Omar's research into computational linguistics and Arabic dialects has implications for national defense as well as for the technology sector.
- Omar is a model Muslim. Omar perfectly assimilated into US culture, while being proud of his own culture and religion. He made efforts to be an ambassador for Islam, patiently explaining aspects of his religion (like fasting at Ramadan) to his friends and classmates.

The US government's treatment of Omar was shameful. The month before Omar's thesis defense, he got married to his lovely long-time sweetheart, Dima. On his return flight back to Baltimore to defend his thesis, he was not allowed to board his plane in Cairo. The flight staff tore up his ticket without explanation. He returned home to Jordan and went to the US embassy where they told him that nothing was wrong with his student visa. A week later, the embassy called him back to say that they had found the problem. They said that if he came in, they would fix it. Instead of fixing it, they stamped CANCELED across his student visa without explaining what was wrong, and refused to answer any questions as to why. They handed him a piece of paper saying that there was no appeal process and that he would have to re-apply for a visa. He did. The interview went perfectly well, but the application remained stuck in "Administrative Processing". After months of waiting, we finally held his thesis defense via video conferencing, and Johns Hopkins University awarded him his PhD. Omar was unable to participate in the graduation ceremony since he was never allowed to return. Microsoft sought an H1B visa for him, but because of prolonged delays in securing that visa for Omar,

the company has given up its efforts and instead placed him in its Munich office. The process has been horrible. The visa processing was inscrutable. Omar's once unbridled enthusiasm at moving to Seattle and working in the US was ebbed away by the months (and now years) of delays. The process has so soured Omar that I doubt he will ever return to America, even if finally given the chance.

I want to mention one additional fact, which I believe will resonate with you, Mr. President, since your father was a foreign graduate student. In the year and a half since Omar has been excluded from the US, he and his wife had a child. If their daughter had been born in the US, she would have been an American citizen. If this girl grew up with her father's intellect and her mother's compassion, she could have followed in your footsteps. She would have lived the American dream. She would have been an ambassador for her faith and her heritage. She would have been a perfect addition to our country, in a time when so many of our citizens would benefit from this perspective on who Muslims are.

The US squandered its financial resources and gave up on a great intellectual opportunity when we excluded Omar Zaidan from the country. The unthinking bureaucracy and its inaction saddens me deeply. But nothing breaks my heart more than the thoughts of Omar's daughter not growing up alongside my son, and how much different his family would have been (and the community that they would have touched) if the US had been able to recognize Omar's inherent goodness.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Callison-Burch". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris Callison-Burch  
Associate Research Professor  
Johns Hopkins University  
Computer Science Dept.

CC: Senator Barbara Mikulski, Senator Ben Cardin, Representative Elijah E. Cummings, DARPA Director Arati Prabhakar, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, Johns Hopkins University president Ronald J. Daniels