

Muslim women at center of suits over hajj, headscarves

by [Omar Sacirbey](#)

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(RNS) The federal government has filed suit against an Illinois school district for not allowing a Muslim teacher to make the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and the ACLU has filed suit on behalf of a Georgia woman who was thrown in jail after refusing to remove her headscarf.

U.S. officials on Monday (Dec. 13) sued Berkeley School District 87 in suburban Chicago for denying a Muslim schoolteacher's request for almost three weeks of paid leave of absence so she could perform the hajj, the pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of Mecca.

Middle school teacher Safoorah Khan alleges that the school district that hired her in 2007 violated her First Amendment rights in November 2008 when officials turned down two requests for an unpaid leave of absence.

She resigned shortly after, stating that she could not delay the hajj, which is required of all Muslims who are physically and financially able at least once in their lives.

On Tuesday (Dec. 14), the ACLU filed a lawsuit against the city of Douglasville, Ga., charging that police officers at a municipal courthouse violated Lisa Valentine's First and Fourth Amendment rights when they told her she could not enter a courtroom while wearing an Islamic headscarf.

When Valentine, who was accompanying her nephew at a traffic hearing, tried to leave the courtroom and protested to the officers, they arrested her and brought her before a judge who charged her with contempt of court and sentenced her to 10 days in jail. She was released several hours later after police determined she had done nothing wrong.

The city of Douglasville later issued a press release stating that officers erred; the Georgia Judicial Council adopted a policy in 2009 stating that religious head coverings were permissible in state courthouses.

"Ms. Valentine's treatment by these officers and the judge was plainly unlawful and simply wrong," said Daniel Mach, Director of the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief, in a statement.