

Muslim students join lawsuits against Trump

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LOS ANGELES (RNS) Despite President Trump's threat of a "Muslim ban" during the 2016 campaign, Hadil Mansoor Al-Mowafak, a 20-year-old international affairs student at Stanford University, was taken aback when he banned travel from seven Muslim countries including Yemen, where her husband lives.

"I didn't think it was even possible," Al-Mowafak said. "I thought he just used the Muslim ban during his campaign and once he took power he'd face reality."

For the young couple, who married in late 2015, the president's executive order meant they couldn't see each other even though Al-Mowafak is in the U.S. on a student visa. If Al-Mowafak flew home to Yemen to see her husband she risked not being able to return to Stanford.

Even though the order has been blocked in court, the president said he may rewrite it. That would leave the couple in legal limbo, uncertain when they can reunite.

So when Al-Mowafak got a phone call from the American Civil Liberties Union, a nonprofit civil rights watchdog, she jumped at the chance to fight the travel restrictions in court.

Al-Mowafak signed on as plaintiff in a California district court lawsuit against the president and two other federal departments on grounds that the travel ban violates the right to freedom of religion granted under the First Amendment.

"I was very glad to take action against this ban," Al-Mowafak said. "It does not prevent terrorism, it creates hostilities. It divides the fabric of American society."

Al-Mowafak's complaint is one of 60 lawsuits filed against the president by immigrants, government watchdogs and religious organizations, the majority of

which challenge Trump's executive order on immigration. Even Hadil's own school, Stanford University, is taking Trump to court.

Along with Al-Mowafak, two other California students—one from Yemen and one from Iran—with visas affected by the executive order agreed to be co-plaintiffs. Together, their case fights on behalf of an estimated 17,000 other students studying in the U.S. on visas from the banned countries, according to estimates from the Institute of International Education.

Al-Mowafak's case is supported by Jewish Family & Community Services-East Bay, a nonprofit agency with a long history of resettling refugees fleeing religious and ethnic persecution. It has agreed to sign on as an organizational co-plaintiff.

"This is an action we as an agency have never taken before," said Avi Rose, executive director of JFCS-East Bay. "We've been around 140 years and this is a major civil rights moment, a moment for people to stand up and say we're not going to stand by and watch this happen."

Rose said this ban has a particularly powerful resonance for Jewish organizations. "It wasn't that long ago when people stood by and watched U.S. immigration slam the door in the faces of European Jews who were slaughtered," Rose said.

Another Jewish organization—HIAS (formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), a nonprofit that has resettled refugees in America since 1881—filed yet another lawsuit against the president. This suit, filed in U.S. District Court in Maryland, challenges Trump's suspension of America's refugee resettlement program by arguing it discriminates against one religion while favoring others.

"We had no choice but to stand up to it," said Mark Hetfield, CEO of HIAS. "It's one of the moments that calls for a response before it gets totally out of control.

"The Holocaust didn't start out as the Holocaust," Hetfield added. "It started as discrimination that went unpunished. Riots escalated followed by mass arrests, which then elevated to extermination—it took over a decade to become the Holocaust."

Other religious leaders, including evangelical Christians and Catholic clergy, have also denounced Trump's executive order, despite Election Day exit polls showing that the president overwhelmingly won the vote of white evangelical Christians and

white Catholics.

“When you’ve got one party in control of the president, the Congress, and the court, [then] the opposition—the checks and balances have to come from civil society,” said David Cole, ACLU’s national legal director. “That’s where our hope lies. That’s where the power is.”

While the organizational support helps, without students such as Al-Mowafak willing to sign on as plaintiffs the ACLU would have no case to bring forward against the president.

Al-Mowafak said she isn’t fazed by potential backlash from the president, who’s no stranger to expensive and grueling court battles, or his supporters.

“I won’t say I’m afraid,” she said. “It would be concerning if people were anxious about publicly speaking out for their rights.”