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Muslim Teacher Fired After Showing Malala Video

A Muslim teacher is suing her former school district and claims she was fired after administrators allegedly banned her from mentioning Islam.

New Jersey teacher Sireen Hashem says she followed the same curriculum as other history teachers at her school.

She was one of multiple teachers, she says, to show classes a film clip about Nobel Peace Prize winner [Malala Yousafzai](#). Upon request, she helped another teacher translate an interview with a schoolbook's Palestinian subject.

But unlike her coworkers, Hashem was fired from Hunterdon Central Regional High School, allegedly over her lesson plans. A self-described "Muslim American of Palestinian descent," Hashem says she was prohibited from mentioning Islam or the Middle East in her history classes after parents and local religious leaders complained about her to school administrators.

The high-school administration did not respond to requests for comment on this article.

Hashem filed suit against her former employers on Dec. 14. According to the suit, her trouble with administrators began shortly after she joined the history department full-time in September 2013.

Her coworker Lindsay Wagner had shown students a video about [Malala Yousafzai](#), a young woman who would go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her advocacy for children's education. Hashem says she showed the video in her own class later that day, at Wagner's suggestion.

Parents and administrators were allegedly unconcerned when Hashem's non-Muslim colleague showed the Malala video. But when Hashem played the clip in class, she says parents read a more political tone into the video.

"[Principal] Suzanne Cooley received a complaint from the parent of a student about Plaintiff's use of the Malala Yusufzai video during a lesson," Hashem's suit reads. Her supervisor allegedly "told Plaintiff that she could not teach current events in the same manner as her non-Arab, non-Palestinian and non-Muslim colleagues."

During a later meeting with the district's superintendent, Cristina Steffner, Hashem says she pointed out that her colleague had played "the same video and it was not a problem," the suit reads. "Defendant Steffner slammed her hand on the table and said, 'You are not Lindsay.' Unlike Plaintiff, Lindsay Wagner is not Arab, not Palestinian and not Muslim."

Parental complaints apparently started to stack up against Hashem. Some allegedly objected to Hashem's involvement in a class discussion on a book called *Lemon Tree*, which tells of an unlikely friendship between Israeli and Palestinian men. A coworker had allegedly asked Hashem to translate a Skype conversation between the students and the Palestinian man featured in the book.

Other parents allegedly complained that Hashem had used a common document-based question that asked students to "compare the actions of John Brown at [Harper's Ferry](#) to the actions of Osama bin Laden on September 11, 2001." The question is frequently shared on blogs and online databases for U.S. History teachers, according to the lawsuit.

Students allegedly began targeting Hashem online. The lawsuit claims that one student, whose parents had previously complained about Hashem, wrote a Facebook post accusing her of being anti-Israel. Hashem's brother was a terrorist, the student allegedly claimed in the Facebook post, adding that Hashem was attempting to indoctrinate students with anti-Semitic views.

The Facebook post prompted another meeting with school administrators, according to the lawsuit, in which they allegedly "accused her of discriminating against Jewish students, and also questioned her about her place of birth, her family, and her personal life."

Hashem was allegedly asked not to reference her cultural or religious background in the classroom, and to refrain from referencing Islam or the Middle East.

But it wasn't apparently enough for a growing contingent of parents.

"A local rabbi and several parents contacted the high school administration, including Defendants Cooley and Steffner, and Defendant Board of Education in an attempt to have Plaintiff removed from her teaching position, solely because of her heritage and religion," Hashem's lawsuit claims.

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By April 2015, the school district laid the groundwork for Hashem's removal. The lawsuit claims that the principal and superintendent "wanted her gone," and says that Hashem's supervisor allegedly gave her

a poor performance review, indicating that her contract would not be renewed for the following school year. (Hashem has a 3.47/4 rating on the website [RateMyTeachers.com](#), which allows students to anonymously grade their teachers. Her five ratings are generally positive, except for one negative review uploaded after Hashem filed her lawsuit.)

Hashem appealed her contract's non-renewal in a May 2015 meeting. But while approximately 60 students and parents arrived to support Hashem, according to the lawsuit, the school district's attorney allegedly turned them away at the door, opting to hold the meeting in private except for five supporters who were allowed in one at a time to speak in Hashem's defense. Hashem was only given 30 minutes to present her case, she says.

Even after her contract expired, leaving her out of a job, Hashem says she faced residual harassment. In July, two FBI officers appeared at her door, according to the lawsuit. They allegedly had received a tip that Hashem had told the school board "they will be sorry if she is fired." Hashem denies ever making such a statement.

Omar Mohammedi, an adjunct professor at Fordham and the lead attorney on Hashem's case, says the alleged visit from the FBI following her termination was particularly appalling. "They not only get rid of her and dismiss her unlawfully, but then they call the FBI on her?" Mohammedi said to *The Daily Beast*. "It's an outrage."

In Mohammedi's opinion, the alleged phone call to the FBI was made more out of spite than fear—from a person who supposedly recognized how sensitive the FBI would be to an allegation against a Muslim. "Because of who she is, they knew they could do whatever they want," said Mohammedi. "They knew the FBI would respond because being a part of that world you're an easy target."

Mohammedi declined to comment on whether or not Hashem has found another job, saying only that she is having a "hard time psychologically." "She is crying all the time," he said. "She is really hurt emotionally. It has not been easy." Before working as a history teacher, Mohammedi says, Hashem worked on an international relations team at the United Nations. She'd never imagined that it was at a high school where she'd face the same discrimination she'd spent years trying to resolve on a larger scale. "It was truly a shock," he says.

Meanwhile, some students are defending their former teacher online.

"Hunterdon Central lost an amazing teacher over false comments a student in my class made," one student wrote on Hashem's [RateMyTeacher](#) page. "[H]er firing was a huge mistake and any school who hires her next should consider themselves lucky."

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