

Palestine is not a nation, N.J. school board claims in court

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FLEMINGTON -- In defending a lawsuit by a Palestinian-American teacher who alleges she was fired because of her race, national origin and religion, Hunterdon Central Regional High School is claiming that "Palestine is not a nation," according to the teacher's attorney.

Hunterdon Central Regional High School. (File photo)

The defense was recently raised in court during hearings on the 2015 religious discrimination lawsuit in which Sireen Hashem, an Arab and Palestinian Muslim, alleged she was prevented from discussing topics covered by her colleagues and teaching the way her colleagues taught, and was retaliated against for questioning why she was being treated differently.

"I think it's a bogus and baseless argument," said New York-based attorney Omar Mohammedi, who represents Hashem. "She is Palestinian. It doesn't matter if the United States recognizes Palestine or not. We believe this is a case of discrimination.

"We're very confident. We believe we have a strong case. We're prepared and happy to go to trial and try this case."

A motion to dismiss the lawsuit has been denied, Mohammedi said. He said the case, which is being heard in Federal court in Trenton, is currently in the discovery phase. He claimed that Hunterdon Central is seeking outdated and irrelevant information about his client, some dating back more than 25 years, and has served her eight subpoenas.

"They're very general in their requests," said Mohammedi. "They're not even describing exactly what they want. We believe our client is being harassed. It's a fishing expedition."

Anne Myers, a partner in Comegno Law Group, which represents Hunterdon Central, said the firm doesn't comment on on-going litigation.

Hashem, an Arab and Palestinian Muslim who was a full-time teacher at the school from September 2013 to June 2015, alleges she was prevented from discussing topics covered by her colleagues and teaching the way her colleagues taught.

[Fired Muslim teacher appears on CNN](#)

The 17-page lawsuit details two years of interactions between Hashem and those named as defendants leading up to the district's decision not to renew her contract. The defendants include former Hunterdon Central Regional District Superintendent Christina Steffner, Principal Suzanne Cooley and a teacher who supervised her, Rebecca Lucas.

Hashem's lawsuit argues that her problems with school officials began in October 2013 when she used a video featuring Malala Yousafzai, a young girl who survived being shot in the head by the Taliban, during a lesson. She used the video after another teacher, who had also used the video in class, recommended it, according to the suit.

The school's principal received a complaint from a parent and Hashem was called to a meeting where she was told "she could not teach current events in the same manner as her non-Arab, non-Palestinian and non-Muslim colleagues," the suit states.

Additional incidents questioning her methods of teaching followed, the lawsuit says.

Hashem was notified in April 2015 that her contract was not being renewed, and she pleaded her case before the board in June. Her employment was terminated on June 30.