



'I need him home': Families hit by Muslim ban speak out ahead of vote

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People gather at Copley Square in Boston, Massachusetts to decry US President Donald Trump's first Muslim ban

Pamela and Afshin Raghebi will celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary this December -- but whether it's a joyful occasion or one marred by the pain of their ongoing forced separation depends on the outcome of the November 3 election.

"I need him home," Pamela tearfully told AFP, two years after her husband left the US to complete a routine legal process to finalize his permanent residency, but was prevented from returning because of the "Muslim ban."

In June 2018, the Supreme Court upheld Donald Trump's third travel ban, which focuses its most restrictive measures on citizens of five Muslim-majority countries -- Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen -- as well as North Korea and Venezuela.

An analyst at the Cato Institute estimated that as of October 2019, more than 15,000 spouses and adopted minor children of US citizens were impacted, a figure that could be far higher now.

The Raghebis met in the summer of 2010, when Pamela was working as a receptionist at a Seattle retirement home and Afshin, a glazier, was assigned there on a project.

"Right away, I was impressed with how gentle he was with our residents," said Pamela.

One day she approached him for a chat, they went on their first date, and were married by the end of that year.

The couple started their own window and glass business, building together a happy life.

Afshin, 51, was born in Iran and had been forced to become a child soldier in the war against Iraq. He later took up a job as a chauffeur, and was assaulted by secret police for refusing to spy on his boss.

He fled to Sweden in his twenties to stay with his sister, and, like her, became a Christian.

But with little by the way of formal training, he couldn't remain there and eventually came to the US in 2006.

Afshin intended to apply for asylum based on his fear of religious persecution if he went back to Iran, but worried about being deported and didn't follow up.

The couple applied for Afshin to become a permanent resident in 2016 after immigration services were satisfied they had a bona fide relationship.

But because of Afshin's undocumented entry, they had to procure an additional waiver, another arduous process which they nevertheless achieved. To complete the process, Afshin had to exit and re-enter the US, but has been stranded in Turkey since 2018 because of the travel ban.

"I felt like my country had divorced me from my husband," said Pamela -- and the trauma has been compounded by mounting financial hardship.

Some stories have had a happier ending following years of struggle, like that of Ramez Alghazzouli, 31, and his wife, 28-year-old Asmaa Khadem Al Arbain.

They were acquaintances at college in Damascus but the Syrian war scattered their families to different parts of the world.

Ramez settled in Arizona where he became a business analyst for the government.

He reconnected with Asmaa, whose family moved to Turkey in 2014, and they developed a romantic relationship before getting married by proxy in 2015.

He then petitioned for her to join him -- but when her visa appointment came up in 2018, the officer told her she couldn't be granted a visa because of the ban.

Ramez, who has deep faith in America's institutions, began contacting his lawmakers, immigration officials and even the FBI and CIA to help get a waiver.

When none of that seemed to work, he turned to the media.

Finally in October 2019, an email landed informing them Asmaa's visa had been cleared. "You would think it's a miracle after fighting it that hard and that long," said Ramez.

Last month, they had their first child, Radwan.

Former vice president Joe Biden has promised to undo the ban on day one if he wins, but even if that happens, it will be too late for many, Cato Institute immigration analyst David Bier said.

"We're talking about relationships broken up, marriages ended, we're talking about people who were sponsored by Americans to come to the United States and those sponsors are no longer around to sponsor them."

That's why campaign groups like the No Muslim Ban Ever coalition want the "NO BAN Act," which passed the House this summer and would make discriminatory bans illegal, to be passed by Congress.

Pamela, who has Trump supporters in her own family, said people should remember America is a nation of immigrants and gets its strength from its diversity.

"Go vote, vote, vote! We have to have a new government," she said.