

## Torrance Islamic community shaken by travel ban

Saima Fariz

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On January 30, 23-year-old Torrance resident Ruhi Khan drove her brother to Los Angeles International Airport for his routine departure to American University of Antigua, a medical school in the Caribbean. She did not intend to join the thousands of protesters assembled at Tom Bradley International Terminal demonstrating against President Donald Trump's travel ban.

Her brother's unexpected encounter with airport security quickly changed her evening plans.

"Honestly my brother has a very Muslim name," Khan said. "And for the first time ever, he got questioned. [Airport security] looked down at his passport and asked: 'Where are you going?' 'What are you going there for?' 'Do you have proof?'"

Khan's brother, a U.S. citizen, was eventually faced with an ultimatum: "We need to see proof that you're going to school or we can't let you go through."

He was able to produce proof and clear security, but the damage had been done for his younger sister. She decided to converge with fellow protestors at Arrivals to voice her opposition to the travel ban, which temporarily prevented travelers from seven Muslim countries from entering the United States.

Many local Muslim families have experienced growing anxiety for their children and the Islamic community at large in the wake of President Trump's travel ban.

Congressman Ted Lieu, a Democrat from Torrance, has been an outspoken opponent of the ban and other policies from the Trump Administration that target immigrants. Lieu, whose own family immigrated from Taiwan, was also at the LAX protest.

"As an immigrant and an American, I find the ban un-American and cruel," Lieu said. "You are separating families. And it is not based on an any rational basis. A well-respected think tank, the Cato Institute, did a report that said your chances of being killed by any refugee in the United States in a terrorist attack is one in 3.6 billion. By comparison, the chance of being struck by lightning twice is one in 9 million. This is a policy in search of a problem."

Lieu, a former active duty U.S. Air Force officer, was unequivocal in saying that the U.S. needed to target ISIS and Al Qaeda "to hunt them down and kill them." But the Congressman said the

ban does nothing to actually combat terrorism by failing to differentiate innocent families from terrorists.

“We have a president who doesn’t understand that, and put out an executive order that is instead based on bigotry,” Lieu said.

A common story among Torrance’s Islamic community concerns increasing pressure on young women wearing hijabs. Many fear their headscarves make them targets for discrimination, violence and harassment.

One of the countries listed in the ban is Iran, which is where part of Khan’s family currently resides.

“I do have family in Iran, and it scares me to know that now when I want them to come here, I’m going to have in the back of my mind: ‘What if they’re not allowed? What if they can’t?’” she said. “It’s unfair.”

As Khan witnessed people being detained at the airport protest, she felt disgusted by what she perceived as the Islamophobic agenda of the president, who also happens to be her former boss.

In March 2012, Khan began working as a hostess at Trump National Golf Course’s restaurant in Palos Verdes where she met Donald J. Trump, the businessman, on several occasions. Notices for employees to be on “good behavior,” which included stricter policies on phones, attire and etiquette, often signaled his arrivals for Khan and fellow employees.

“I remember the first time I met him, I was standing next to a white hostess,” Khan recalls, “and he asked us how we liked working there, and we both said we liked it because obviously we had to. I remember he tipped me \$10 and he gave her more, maybe \$20 or \$50. The first thing I thought was: ‘Wow, alright, this is the man I work for.’”

Khan’s co-worker took note of the gesture and offered to switch tips; Khan declined, trying to downplay the event to prevent any negative effects on her new job.

Khan continued to work as a hostess until September 2015 when Trump’s characterization of Mexicans as “criminals, drug dealers” and “rapists” surfaced during his presidential campaign and became harder to ignore.

“I felt so ashamed in myself that I was working for a man who was so racist,” she said. “I thought: ‘I don’t respect this man and I’m not going to vote for him, so I’m not going to work for him either.’”

Khan thought that Trump’s behavior and ideology was exposed during the campaign — the LA Times, for example, ran a story which revealed that Trump suggested women workers at his Palos Verdes property be fired because they were not “pretty enough” — which made his victory on Election Day an unsettling surprise.

“He was so hated by everyone I knew, I didn’t realize there was another side of the country who loves him,” she said.

Following Trump's victory, Khan witnessed a resurgence of racism and prejudice against Muslim communities on social media that recalled the bullying that plagued her childhood.

Khan and her family emigrated to Torrance from India in 1998. She grew up in the shadow of the 2001 terrorist attacks and witnessed firsthand the difficult task for Muslim communities to rebuild post-9/11. She experienced being "kicked," "pushed," and "sat on" due to her Islamic faith.

"I went to Victor Elementary School, and I noticed in the beginning of the third grade that my friends weren't talking to me," Khan recalled. "After weeks and months went by, I started putting pieces together that their parents were telling them not to hang out with 'that Muslim girl.'"

"I was young, I still didn't get it until I reached Jefferson Middle School," she said. "And at Jefferson for the first time, I was called a terrorist, a towelhead, Osama's daughter... people put pictures of bombs in my locker, [so when] I would open up my locker sometimes pictures would just fall out. People even dr[e]w pictures of a girl in a scarf with an 'X' on it."

After someone with a Sharpie wrote 'Go back to your country' on Khan's locker, she was allowed to switch locker bays as these occurrences were happening so frequently to her and fellow Muslim students at school.

Khan said her traumatic experiences made her fearful of attending high school because she did not feel as if she could physically or mentally handle another four years of bullying on a "bigger, scarier, and meaner" level. While the first two years of high school subjected Khan to "typical" racial slurs like "towelhead" and "go back to your country," she also witnessed kids pulling off hijabs from other girls' heads.

"I did not wear a hijab because my parents feared for my safety. In high school, I saw people pulling [a girl's] hijab off sometimes," she said. "I was never able to speak up for her and I regret that. I was so scared if I said something, they would attack me, too."

Khan said her years of bullying were "a long time ago" but acknowledged that hate speech appears to be once again on the rise in Torrance.

As Khan left jury duty a little over a week ago, she witnessed a car drive past her and a girl wearing a hijab near Katie Geissert Civic Center Library, shouting, "You towelhead!" The racial slur took Khan aback. She fears recent politics will reverse the sixteen years of healing the Islamic community has strived for post-9/11.

"I looked up and I looked at her face," Khan said. "And the way she looked was as if she was not bothered at all, as if she was used to hearing it, which is so sad. I asked her, 'Are you okay?' and she responded, 'Yeah I'm okay, it's to be expected now.' And that hurts to hear."

Congressman Lieu said Trump's rhetoric has emboldened anti-Muslim behavior.

“In his campaign, Donald Trump said he wanted ‘a total shutdown of Muslims’ in the United States,” Lieu said. “I mean, that’s just what he said — you can’t take it back that this is what he said. I think it’s important people see where this is coming from.”

“You know when you’re younger and this is happening to you,” Khan said. “I did think, ‘Holy crap, I did not choose to be Muslim — I was just born Muslim.’ But seeing all of this and growing up as an American Muslim, it just makes us stronger and more aware of what’s going on around us.”

Zeina Alameddine, a 21-year-old Torrance resident and undergraduate at University of Southern California’s Leventhal School of Accounting, echoes the difficulty of assimilation post-9/11.

Although the daughter of a “proud Lebanese woman,” Alameddine said it was difficult for her to come to terms with her immigrant background, cultural heritage and Islamic upbringing.

“I hated any cultural difference I had,” Alameddine reflected. “I would straighten my hair every single day in high school because I didn’t want anyone to know I was [Middle Eastern].”

Alameddine said stigmas and false perceptions can immediately affect families and lives.

“I was born in Paramount, but I moved to Lebanon when I was five years old,” Alameddine said. “When I moved back to America, it was right after 9/11, so if I mentioned anything about the Middle East and that I was from there, I would get called a terrorist.”

“Coming to Torrance, I don’t think anyone mentioned terrorism, but they would lightheartedly poke at it like, ‘Oh, is Osama your uncle?’” she added. “I think in general Torrance is a bit more diverse and accepting, and you’re surrounded by really understanding people.”

But Alameddine also knows how difficult it can be to combat people’s fear of Islamic presence in the city.

“My brother is Muslim and he practices it quite strongly,” Alameddine said. “Last summer after Ramadan, on Eid, two detectives from the Torrance Police Department came knocking on our door. They [were] already talking to my brother and mom, and I went to the kitchen because I didn’t want to be a part of it. And then my mom called me and said that the detectives want[ed] to talk to me.

“They start asking me my name, my phone number, where I go to school, and all of these questions, but I didn’t understand what was going on. They finally said, ‘Well someone reported your brother’s license plate as being suspicious and we’re just here to clear the air and get a little more insight on this.’ They then asked my brother, ‘Do you and the mosque have any plans today? What are you doing?’”

Alameddine felt outraged because Eid is one of the biggest religious holidays in the Islamic community. Following the end of Ramadan, Eid-al-Fitr marks the beginning of festivities, prayers, family parties and more celebratory activities among practitioners.

“To come on Eid and to ask these questions is like going to a Christian’s or Catholic’s [house] on Christmas when it’s a time you’re supposed to be with your family,” she said. “And that’s what really struck me.”

Reached for comment, the Torrance Police Department was unable to find any report regarding the incident. But TPD Sgt. Ronald Harris stressed that anyone who feels they’ve been treated unfairly is encouraged to contact the department. “It’s something we really want to know about,” Harris said.

While Lebanon is not among the seven countries currently listed in the travel ban, Alameddine said that surrounding countries and families are affected as well.

“My aunt was supposed to come [to the US] in April and spend like a month with us because we haven’t seen her in three years,” she said. “It’s something that’s been planned out for a good while, but hearing about the ban was disheartening because it makes it harder for her to come. A lot of people in Lebanon are scared to even try to get a visa.”

From her own circle of friends and acquaintances, Alameddine estimates knowing 5-10 people directly affected by the ban. Yet she knows how the stigma of radical Muslims follows everyone in the community, even if they do not identify as Muslim like herself.

“It’s kind of sickening. I understand that you have to take threats seriously, but I don’t know how it will ever stop,” she said. “If you don’t see someone doing harm and you report them because you’re uncomfortable with how they look, I don’t know how you can break that stigma.”

Sadiyah, a 22-year old nursing student and Torrance native, emphasized the need to report suspicious behavior and activity.

Last year during Ramadan, Sadiyah attended Lomita Masjid with her family for a popular evening prayer called Laylat-al-Qadr. Many Muslims consider Laylat-al-Qadr one of the holiest nights of the year as it is believed to be the night that the Qur’an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad.

Due to the popularity of this event, the mosque was packed, and some people began to park in a neighboring church’s parking lot. However, after the event, some people realized their tires were punctured and slashed. Police were called to investigate the vandalism. Sadiyah recalled a woman using her truck to block the entrance of the parking lot and approaching her sister and her assertively. They quickly got into their car and exited from the opposite side of the lot.

“Who wouldn’t be scared?” she asked. “My mom is like, ‘Don’t be super-proud to be Muslim. Lay low in our tough times.’”

Yet Sadiyah insists that Western and Islamic ideology can go hand-in-hand.

“It’s the twenty-first century,” she said, with a laugh.

In the wake of the ban, however, she realizes how lucky she is to be an American citizen and to live her life in Torrance.

“Islamophobia is real and it’s scary,” she said. “It definitely hurt to see this Muslim ban and how people are being distanced... this was so unexpected.”

Alameddine has adopted a different approach from the “lay low” advice many community elders have counseled. She’s made a point to take pride in her the perceived differences of her cultural identity.

“Why should I change myself for anyone else?” she said. “I should be appreciative of who I am, and I’m glad I was raised the way I was no matter how ugly it’s been.”

Khan offers a more expressive approach.

“I know a lot of people and parents who are afraid. Do not be afraid,” she said. “You need to stand up for yourself. You are a Muslim: be proud and show people why we deserve a chance.”

At the January 30 protest, Khan says she stood by thousands of non-Muslims and protesters not directly affected by the ban. She was touched by their empathy, which helped her realize that Muslim communities are not standing alone during this time. Protesters waited for hours and demanded detainees be released, which Khan witnessed in small doses. The look of happiness on their faces as they finally stepped foot in the United States is something she remembers most vividly, a reminder why immigrants like herself chase the American Dream.

“If you ask any immigrant child, ‘Why did your parents bring you here?’ Their exact response would be: ‘For a better life,’” she said. “That is why immigrants come to America, that is why my parents brought my brother and I from India.”

Congressman Lieu is a living example of that American Dream. His family came from Taiwan when he was three. The family lived in a basement apartment in Cleveland, Ohio and worked at flea markets selling jewelry and other goods, saving up money to open a storefront, and eventually six stores. He attended Stanford University and Georgetown, working his way through college by serving in the Air Force — including four years active duty and ongoing reserve duties.

“I love living in Torrance and the South Bay,” Lieu said. “We are a remarkably inclusive and kind community. But when the president of the United States is being divisive and writing executive orders that are unconstitutional and based on an alternative set of facts, it’s going to impact people all over the United States, including the South Bay. I think it’s important people really stand up and push back against the president’s policies.”