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He cast his first vote as a U.S. citizen. Now, he's eager for the 'Muslim ban' to go.

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KNOXVILLE, TENN. — As the polls closed Tuesday, falafel restaurant owner Yassin Terou pulled up to Bearden Middle School and took 150 sandwiches from the trunk of his black SUV. To the volunteers who had been manning the polls for 12 hours, it was like manna from heaven.

“Yassin is here!” one worker said.

“Yassin! Of course!” said another.

“God bless you,” said, Susan Affel, a volunteer who had been peeling election signs off the gymnasium walls. “This is the first time we’ve been fed since I’ve been doing this.”

With the gift of sandwiches, Terou was celebrating his first time voting in an American election after becoming a citizen earlier this year.

This election was special for another reason: It gave him a chance to help end President Trump’s ban on almost all travel from certain Muslim-majority countries. Terou’s brother and father are Syrian refugees living in Turkey, unable to come to America. His father, nearly 70, lives in a wheelchair due to heart conditions and diabetes.

Trump’s “Muslim Ban,” which led to large national protests in 2017, was blocked by several courts and eventually upheld by the Supreme Court in 2018. President-elect Joe Biden has said that on his first day in office, he will overturn the ban, which includes people who are from Terou’s birth country of Syria.

Americans remain deeply divided over the ban. During Trump’s administration, Republicans have become more supportive of the ban, according to the Public Religion Research Institute, while Democrats have become even more opposed. And Terou, along with millions of other Muslims in the United States, have experienced the crosscurrents of this polarization. Hate crimes against Muslims have increased in the last four years. But so has the prominence of Muslims in American life.

Terou’s restaurant was vandalized earlier this year when someone threw a smoke bomb into his store. But the 37-year-old has also become a beloved fixture in Knoxville as the owner of Yassin’s Falafel House.

As he sends a daily WhatsApp voice message to his father and brother in Turkey, he wishes they could join his American Dream. Terou said that while his father’s situation in Turkey is better than it was in Syria, he believes he could get better medical care in the United States. And if he were here, “he could be more connected to his grandchildren,” he said.

The Thursday before the election — the same day he cast his vote as part of early voting — Trump tweeted that Biden was planning to resume accepting refugees from “terror-compromised nations such as Syria” and open “the floodgates to Radical Islamic Terror.”

“I don’t think Trump should make people fear others,” Terou said. “It felt like a stab in the back.”

A new home

On the morning of Election Day, Terou stopped by one of his two restaurants to prepare for the day. He dropped falafels into oil and set a timer for 3 minutes, 48 seconds, sautéed shawarma and shaved gyro slices. The restaurant was decorated with two dozen American flags and a large sign reads: “All sizes, all colors, all ages, all sexes, all cultures, all types, all religions, all beliefs, all people, safe here at Yassin’s Falafel House.”

His menu, when he launched in 2014, started with very simple ingredients adapted to American tastes. He says there are two kinds of Americans: People who avoid spice and people who want “American spicy.”

“Our spicy is not one that will make anyone cry, but you will feel the heat,” he said.

Terou was born and raised in Damascus, the capital of Syria, and his father worked in the government. With just \$300 in cash, he moved to the United States in 2011 on an F-2 visa and later applied for asylum as Syria became engulfed in a civil war. He brought with him only a suitcase and his falafel maker because he assumed he would go back to Syria. He began to sell sandwiches to people outside of a local mosque. A member of the mosque helped him get enough credit to start his first restaurant in downtown Knoxville. He later opened a second location.

In 2015, Terou married his wife, a Palestinian who moved here from Jordan when she was a child. Through his wife, who is a citizen, he was able to apply for a green card and became a citizen in June. They have three girls.

Terou’s 10-year-old daughter, Judy, who was having trouble doing online work for Islamic school, started public school for the first time this past week. He explained to her that she might look different from her classmates and that due to their religious beliefs, they do some things differently, like not eat pork.

Terou’s family loves mountainous East Tennessee and has no plans to leave. Judy has talked about running for president some day. Terou, himself, has become a Knoxville celebrity, praised for donating food after a tornado in Nashville earlier this year and during a government shutdown in 2018. His restaurant won “Nicest Place in America” by Reader’s Digest, featured by Good Morning America.

This year, he has chosen to keep his dining room closed due to the coronavirus, even though indoor dining is allowed. But he still gets a steady stream of takeout and delivery orders, and is hiring new employees. Since he opened, he has hired about 25 refugees, and employees working in his kitchen on the morning of the election were very diverse, with two workers who were Black, three who are Arab and three who were White.

“My team reflects America,” he said.

The impact of the ban

During Trump's campaign in 2015, he called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." That campaign promise, Terou said, troubled him.

On the day after the 2016 election, Terou said his customers — both Republicans and Democrats — came into the store and gave him hugs. On Tuesday, one of the poll workers, Moira Binder, went up to Terou as he gave out sandwiches and reminded him that she had been one of the customers who came in four years ago to provide him support.

"There's such an atmosphere of fear, and he's the kindest man," Binder said, calling him "a Knoxville treasure." "Plus, he has great food."

Now he is anxiously waiting to see the ban overturned before he puts his father and brother through the formal process of trying to bring them to the United States.

Observers say that the impact of Trump's ban will be lasting, even if it is overturned. After his election, surveys found that Muslims experienced discrimination and other forms of anti-Muslim bigotry, including hate crimes.

The ban was also a painful reminder, for many Muslims, of how they feel they have been treated with suspicion since 9/11, since the government singled out Muslims in the name of national security.

Trump's ban applies to nearly all citizens of five Muslim-majority countries, as well as Venezuela and North Korea. A State Department official told members of Congress in 2019 that the Trump administration has fielded 72,000 visa applications from the five Muslim-majority countries and that about 10 percent received waivers to enter the United States.

Since America's founding, immigration has been tied to families, and the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 formally set family ties as a key path for immigration. But the ban kept thousands of families from reuniting in the United States. The U.S. government was on pace to separate an estimated 15,000 spouses and adopted minor children of U.S. citizens under the policy by Sept. 30, 2019, according to the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington.

"For a family that has been separated for several years, they're not getting that time back," said Shoba Sivaprasad Wadhia, a professor at Penn State Law. "The lasting effects of separation are not going to be repaired on [Biden's] Day 1."

Yet, the Trump administration has also been a time of unexpected progress for American Muslims. Many observers said that while they felt the ban emboldened Islamophobia, a backlash against it and against Trump also inspired widespread sympathy for Muslims.

"The Muslim ban galvanized so many people," said Dalia Mogahed, director of research at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a Muslim research organization. "It gave them a concrete policy to rally around and point against. It has been a touchstone for a wider problem that sometimes people deny exist."

Since Trump came into office, polls show that American views toward Islam have become slightly more favorable. And, under Trump, Muslims have also become more visible in politics, culture and in everyday life. During the Trump administration, Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.)

and Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) became the first two Muslim women elected to Congress. Five states elected first-ever Muslim lawmakers in this election.

In pop culture, Mahershala Ali won an Academy Award for best actor, Hasan Minhaj hosted his own Netflix show and Ramy Youssef won a Golden Globe for best actor. Big brands are catching on: Nike released a hijab among its performance wear, Gap released an ad with a hijab-wearing girl and Sports Illustrated featured a hijab-wearing athlete.

About 3.45 million Muslims, 1.1 percent of the population, live in the United States, and they are expected to replace Jews as the nation's second-largest religious group after Christians by 2040, according to the Pew Research Center. About two-thirds of Americans who are Muslim are immigrants.

Mogahed said that some in the Muslim community are uncomfortable with the mainstreaming of Muslims in America because they fear it might compromise their religious or cultural traditions.

“By highlighting these success stories, are we saying that people have to be these exceptional success stories for Americans to accept them?” she said. “Can they be ordinary people like everyone else?”

“We will see what God wants.”

After giving sandwiches out to poll workers, Terou went home to his four-bedroom house and settled into a recliner in his living room, his eyes glued to the 65-inch TV above the fireplace.

Throughout election night, he fiddled with his phone, the baby monitor and the remote. In Syria he would check the state media and the revolutionaries' media, so he had to check both Fox News and CNN. He wouldn't say whom he voted for, but he said he preferred the candidate who said he wanted to unite the country.

It was no surprise to him that Tennessee was an early state called for Trump. Several customers come into his store with MAGA hats. When the early results looked as though Trump could pull off another victory, text messages started streaming in.

A friend texted him, “Well, your family's not going to be here for another four years,” he wrote when it seemed as though Trump could win.

“It's a mean joke, but we're friends,” Terou said.

A friend who supports Trump texted him and said, “I'm feeling good.”

Terou didn't text back.

Growing nervous, Terou moved to the floor and began cracking open pistachios. With one knee up, he rubbed his temples.

“It's not just about the election,” he said. “It's about what's going to happen next. What Trump says affects the whole community.”

Around 1 a.m., his brother who was waking up in Turkey asked him through WhatsApp what was going on in the United States. He told him it wasn't clear, that the states were still counting votes.

“We will see what God wants,” he said.

In the days after the election, Terou said, he had trouble sleeping and stayed near the television.

“I think my English got better from just watching the news this week,” he said.

On Saturday after they learned Biden had won, his wife was nervous that Trump wouldn't accept the results. But Terou was relieved.

“I think the American people have had their say,” he said. “Finally, we can sleep now.”