

## Good morning Mrs. Hashmi

### **A Muslim scholar is here illegally -- teaching an extreme brand of Islam**

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A controversial Pakistani scholar living in Canada who, critics charge, teaches her female students a fundamentalist brand of Islam promoting polygamy and subservience to men, remains here illegally some nine months after immigration officials demanded she leave the country, federal court documents obtained by *Macleans's* reveal.

Farhat Hashmi arrived in October 2004 on a visitor's visa, and has twice been denied the work permit she sought to teach her interpretation of the Koran in Canada. But she has nevertheless established a school where she lectures to mostly young, middle-class women from mainstream Muslim families, not only from across the country but also from the U.S. and as far away as Australia. Moderate Muslims believe her lessons encourage extremist views among her students in Mississauga -- the same Toronto suburb where many of the 17 men arrested last month on terrorism-related charges grew up and allegedly developed into radicals. Some of those young men's militant views are reputed to have been influenced by their ideologically inclined wives.

A charismatic figure who cloaks her face and body in orthodox garb, Hashmi amassed considerable wealth in the 1990s by establishing a chain of religious schools across Pakistan. Focusing her instruction on young Westernized women from monied families who had hitherto preferred a pair of jeans to the hijab, Hashmi became famous converting them to a stricter form of Islam. Stories abound of young Muslim party girls changing their ways after just a few lectures, donning the black veils that Hashmi is said to make available for purchase at her schools, along with her lectures in print, audio and DVD formats. "Her network of schools in Pakistan caters exclusively to the upper class," says Tarek Fatah, of the Muslim Canadian Congress. "And that is where she is turning women into mothers who are then converting their sons into extremists."

Perhaps more worrying, Hashmi, who claims to have come to Canada to teach at the request of local Muslims, has been the subject of observation by Pakistani intelligence, a highly placed federal government source told *Macleans's*. Although it is not clear what would drive Pakistani authorities to monitor the woman, who holds a doctorate in Islamic studies from the University of Glasgow, that investigation and subsequent complaints in this country may have led authorities to deny her permission to work as a teacher in Canada, the source adds.

"We regret to inform you that we are unable to approve your request," wrote an immigration official in a letter dated Sept. 30, 2005, and addressed to Hashmi and her family. "You are required to leave Canada immediately. Failure to depart Canada may result in enforcement action being initiated against you." Days after that stern letter, which has yet to be followed up by a removal order that would permit the federal government to force her from Canada, Lorne Waldman, a high-profile Toronto immigration lawyer who also represents Maher Arar, filed an application for leave and for judicial review on Hashmi's behalf. That application, should it succeed, would lead to a review of the case. (Waldman did not return calls seeking comment for this story.) Yet the legal gambit does not supersede the official's request that Hashmi and her family leave Canada, where she continues to live and to teach.

Hashmi is no stranger to controversy. Last year, an undercover documentary filmmaker and freelance journalist, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, infiltrated the al-Huda Islamic Centre of Canada, Hashmi's Mississauga-based school, and heard her describe the Kashmiri earthquake as God's punishment for "immoral activities." According to Hashmi, "The people in the area where the earthquake hit were involved in immoral activities, and God has said that he will punish those who do not follow his path." She has also been quoted arguing that Muslim women should permit their husbands to marry more than once so that "other sisters can also benefit."

Such views frighten more progressive Muslims, concerned that her teachings could further marginalize their communities. "You ought to be worried about her in Canada, because there are young women who are growing up here who are being sent by their parents to her and who are coming out really conservative in their outlook of Islam," says Obaid-Chinoy. Farzana Hassan-Shahid, a researcher and freelance journalist who has attended several of Hashmi's lectures -- including one last month at al-Huda -- describes as many as 200 women sitting on the classroom floor, turning the pages of their textbooks in unison so as not to irritate Hashmi. "These women are sitting just absolutely rapt," she says, noting the students call Hashmi "madam" and carry her purse behind her. "She's not loud and vociferous -- in her gentle, meek way she's very assertive."

Hashmi arrived in 2004 with her husband, Idrees Zubair, also an Islamic scholar educated at the University of Glasgow, and two of their children. In interviews with immigration officials, court documents show, Hashmi said "her focus is to liberate and educate the Islamic women." Indeed, she calls herself an "Islamic feminist" whose teachings provide women a voice in their families. Still, she instructs them to "listen to your husband -- he's your leader," says Hassan-Shahid.

At the time, Hashmi and her family prompted no concern from Canadian authorities. Her first work permit in Canada was denied because of an error in the application. Her second -- which like the first was based on an invitation for employment by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) -- was denied because at \$43,500, the proposed salary exceeded the amount allowed to religious teachers, who are expected to work on a volunteer basis and are permitted only a small stipend. In a reply filed at federal court in March, Waldman argues that the \$43,500 is just enough to cover the family's living expenses "and, therefore, met the definition of stipend."

Mubeen Qureshi, who works with Hashmi and was a key figure in bringing her to Canada, refused comment on this story and said Hashmi does not speak with media. She added: "Do you want to speak to my lawyer?" Asked for her lawyer's name, Qureshi hung up the telephone. Calls to Hashmi's home met with similar protestations. "Being a lady, she can't speak with gents," said a man at her number who refused to identify himself. When asked about Hashmi's status in Canada, he too hung up the telephone. But Mohammad Ashraf, secretary general of ISNA Canada and the man who signed Hashmi's letter of employment, defended her. "We need people like her -- men and women who really teach what the Koran says," he told *Maclean's*. "These people who are criticizing her, they are just going around the bush because they don't practise Islam themselves."

Among those who have expressed concern about Hashmi is Wajid Khan. MP for Mississauga-Streetsville, Khan made news last month when he revealed he'd confronted Qayyum Abdul Jamal, 43, one of the 17 Toronto-area men arrested in June on terrorism-related charges, after he told a congregation of Muslims that Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan were raping women. But last August, Khan's office also made inquiries into

Hashmi's work permit application, which Khan told *Maclean's* he could not support. "If she's been asked to leave the country, she should leave the country," he says. The federal government, he adds, should move to have her returned to Pakistan. "I don't understand why they haven't taken action so far."

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