

“Yesterday I found out that I might never see my grandfather again,” said an emotional but composed Anwar Omeish, who is a junior at Harvard and the director of external relations of the Harvard Islamic Society.

Omeish was moderating a forum hosted by CAIR Massachusetts on the Trump administration’s travel bans and other policies that target Muslim communities, students, professionals, and families. Her personal story detailed the efforts of her and her family to obtain her grandfather a Visa so he could attend her graduation ceremony next year. She said her family had to work quickly to get the process completed before “something else happened”. But the day before the forum, the Supreme Court allowed the third version of the travel ban to go into full effect while legal challenges against it continue, barring her grandfather from entering the country from Libya.

The forum involved a multidisciplinary discussion about the events that have led to the travel bans, refugee bans, and anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the government and the country.

Starting the presentation was Ayesha Kazmi of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center. She asked the room when people thought Islamophobia became prominent in the United States. Some people in the room called out “9/11”, while others said “slave trade”. Kazmi’s presentation did in fact begin in the 15th and 16th centuries, and detailed the history of anti-Muslim sentiment during the colonization of the United States.

Acknowledging that Christian and Muslim strife can be traced back much further, she chose this as a particularly unique time for fears and concerns about Islam to be embedded in “new world” culture, particularly due to Spanish colonizer’s history with Muslim rule and a desire to spread Christianity. She added that a large population of slaves brought over from African countries during settlement were also Muslim, further dehumanizing Islam during these formative years.

The next speaker was Saher Selod, assistant professor of Sociology at Simmons College. Selod’s research examines racialized surveillance on Muslim Americans. She continued the chronology of post-9/11 regulations, including the USA Patriot Act, Alien Absconder Initiative, no-fly lists, selectee lists, and increased FBI surveillance of not only Muslim immigrants, but of citizens as well.

Law professor at Northeastern University Rachel Rosenbloom then shared the evolution of the travel bans and refugee bans over the past year, and the ways the administration has attempted to maintain that it is not a “Muslim ban” by adding and dropping various countries, adding exceptions and waivers, but still requiring heightened security of Muslim majority countries not on the list.

Selod had mentioned that when the first executive order for a travel ban was established in January 2017, what shocked her were the thousands of people who showed up in airports to protest. “We have not seen people protesting the hyper-surveillance of Muslims that has been in

place largely since 9/11,” she said. If there is any upside to these developments, she explained, it is that this issue has attracted more mainstream attention since the Trump administration.

Maheen Haider, a doctoral candidate at Boston College, spoke on the heavy mental and emotional distress of immigrants and DACA recipients in such a turbulent time. The young people relying on DACA, for example, were already in vulnerable positions before the possibility of repeal began. “Imagine trying to go to school, trying to work, trying to get a driver’s license in the middle of all of this,” she said, “not having been born in the United States but having no other country.”

The event concluded with questions from the audience, including one member asking if “Islamophobia”, namely “fear”, is the right word for aggression, hostility and prejudice against an entire religion and population. The panel offered that anti-Muslim sentiment is far beyond fear, and could be better labeled as anti-Islam racism.