

N.J. veteran of Iraq war who is Muslim sues military contractors for discrimination

After serving two years in Iraq with the National Guard, a decorated New Jersey veteran claims in a federal discrimination case that she was called a "spy" and "terrorist" when she returned to civilian duty with military contractors in the Middle East because she is Muslim.

Hina Shah, a 28-year-old woman who joined the New Jersey Army National Guard in 2000, rode along with more than 400 combat patrols in Iraq from May 2004 until her honorable discharge in November 2005. In recognition of her "heroism," Shah was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with a "V" Device for valor, along with eight other honors, including an Army Commendation Medal and an Army Good Conduct Medal, according to military records.

In 2007, Shah worked with a private contractor as a security screener and linguist at a U.S. military base in Nasiriyah, Iraq. There, her civilian supervisors called her "suspicious," mocking her religion and the fact that she was a naturalized American citizen who had moved from Pakistan with her family when she was six years old, according to a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Newark.

"I didn't even look at myself as a Pakistani or Muslim, but as an American soldier," said Shah, who had been a .50 caliber gunner, intelligence observer, interrogator, language specialist and truck commander in Iraq. "I was completely shocked, thinking anyone would treat me like that, being an American and then having been in the National Guard and going through everything I went through."

The lawsuit targets three military contractors handling linguist services, communications and intelligence at the base—Centurum Inc., L-3 Communications Inc. and Global Linguist Solutions, which employed Shah from February 2007 to March 2009.

"We know Ms. Shah. She was an employee of Centurum. We talked back and forth with her and her attorney for some time," said Jeffrey Hughes, a vice president and CFO at Centurum in Washington, D.C. "It's hard to comment. We have not seen the lawsuit. ... We will have to wait until we see it,"

The other firms did not respond to requests for comment.

"This case calls into question whether American tax dollars should go to companies that discriminate so openly. ... It should be a substantial criteria on whether our government does business with these contractors," said Ravinder Bhalla, Shah's attorney.

Shah said the most intense discrimination from older, male veterans who told her to "suck it up" when she complained. One supervisor added, "This is not America" and U.S. discrimination laws did not apply, the lawsuit claims.

Shah said, despite the experience, she still wants to return to either the military or working with other military contractors.

"It's my passion, serving my country," she said. "My parents came here for a better life and better education, and I got all of that. My older brother joined the military. Since then, I wanted to be in uniform and pay my country back."