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Ayman Soliman, center, talks to children at a Cincinnati mosque. Soliman is in ICE detention and facing deportation to Egypt. (Faces blurred by ProPublica)
(ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

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In the weeks leading up to July 9, Ayman Soliman told friends he was terrified of losing the sanctuary he'd found after fleeing Egypt in 2014 and building a new life as a Muslim chaplain at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

Soliman, 51, was to show up at 9 a.m. on that date for his first check-in with Immigration and Customs Enforcement since losing his asylum status. He'd been granted the protections in 2018 under the first Trump administration. Then, in the last month of the Biden presidency, immigration authorities moved to revoke them based on sharply disputed claims of fraud and aid to a terrorist group. Once President Donald Trump returned to office weeks later, court records show, immigration officials bumped up the terrorism claims and formalized the asylum termination June 3.

By the time of Soliman's ICE appointment, friends said, he was distraught over the prospect of being returned to the regime that had jailed him for documenting protests as a journalist. He arrived at the agency's field office in Blue Ash, Ohio, accompanied by fellow clergy and a couple of Democratic state lawmakers.

"I didn't come to America seeking a better life. I was escaping death," he said in [a video](#) filmed just before he entered.

Inside, Soliman's attorneys said, he was shocked to find FBI agents waiting for him. They interrogated him for three hours about his charity work more than a decade ago in Egypt, the basis for the Department of Homeland Security accusations of illegal aid, or "material support," to Islamist militants.

His lawyer eventually emerged from the ICE office holding a belt and a wallet. Soliman had been swept into custody, joining a record 61,000 people now in ICE detention. As he awaits an immigration court trial Sept. 25, he is being held in a county jail run by a sheriff who posted a sign outside reading, "Illegal Aliens Here."

'I didn't come to America seeking a better life. I was escaping death.'

—Ayman Soliman

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Legal observers are watching the chaplain's case as a bellwether of the Trump administration's ability to merge the vast federal powers of immigration and counterterrorism. The case is also a reminder, they say, of sweeping post-9/11 statutes that both Republican and Democratic administrations have been accused of abusing, especially in cases involving Muslims.

Material support laws ban almost any type of aid to U.S.-designated foreign terrorist groups, extending far beyond the basics of weapons, personnel and money. Prosecutors describe the laws as an invaluable tool against would-be attackers, but civil liberties groups have long complained of overreach.

Over the years, successive administrations have faced legal challenges over how they wield the power; a [milestone Supreme Court decision](#) during the Obama administration upheld the laws as constitutional. Now, however, there are particular fears about the material support "sledgehammer," as one legal scholar put it, in the hands of Trump, who has been [openly hostile toward Muslims](#) and determined to [deport a million people](#) who are in the United States without permission.

"These statutes are written extraordinarily broadly with the unstated premise that discretion will be exercised responsibly. And one thing this administration has shown is that it doesn't understand what it means to exercise discretion responsibly," said David Cole, a Georgetown Law professor who argued high-profile material support cases and served as national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union.

At issue are DHS allegations that Soliman's involvement with an Islamic charity provided material support to the Muslim Brotherhood. But neither the charity nor the Brotherhood is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, and an Egyptian court found [no official ties](#) between the groups.

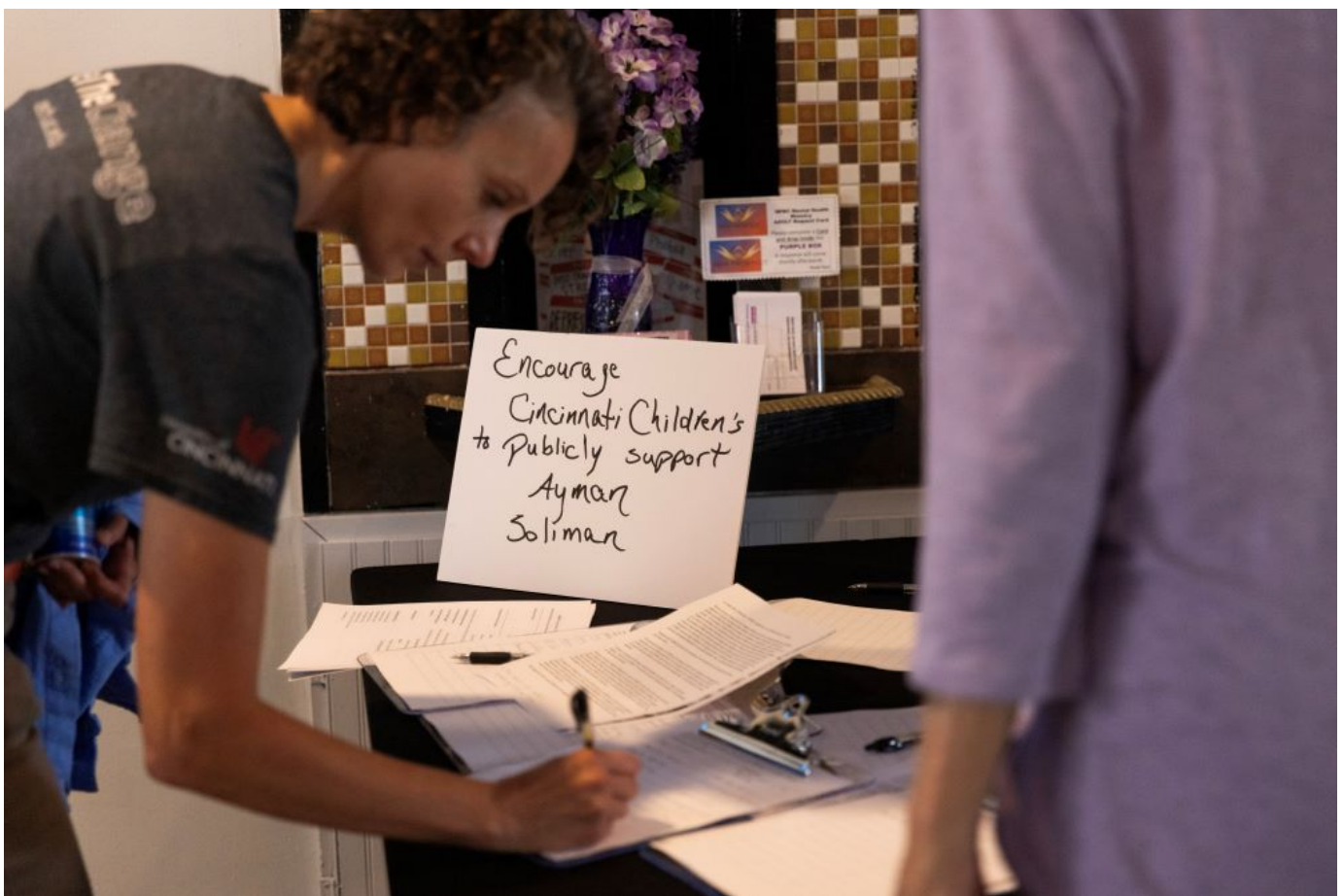
The Biden-era DHS, which first flagged the issue, said it would revoke Soliman's asylum if "a preponderance of the evidence supports termination" after a hearing, according to the December notice. At the time, court records show, the material support allegation was listed as a secondary concern after more common asylum questions about the veracity of official documents and his claims of persecution in Egypt.

[Read this next: Catholics, faith leaders rally around Muslim chaplain targeted by ICE](#)

Once Trump came to power weeks later, Soliman's attorneys said, the material support claims metastasized, with U.S. authorities declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a Tier III, or undesignated, terrorist group and adding new arguments about ties to Hamas. The Brotherhood, a nearly century-old Islamist political movement, renounced violence in the 1970s, though Hamas and other spinoffs are on the U.S. blacklist. In addition to the Egypt-related concerns, DHS filings about Soliman had noted warrants for "murder and terrorism" in Iraq — a country Soliman says he's never visited.

By elevating the national security argument, Soliman's lawyers said, DHS was able to bypass an immigration judge and order the chaplain held without bond as "potentially dangerous." An established terrorism nexus means less transparency for immigrants — and more power for the authorities.

"DHS is judge, jury and executioner," said Robert Ratliff, one of Soliman's attorneys.



Supporters attend an interfaith service in support of Ayman Soliman, a chaplain at Cincinnati Children's Hospital who is in ICE detention. (ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

The idea of Soliman as a secret militant has outraged residents who know him locally as "the interfaith imam" and the first Muslim on the pastoral care team at Cincinnati Children's, a top-ranked pediatric hospital. Colleagues described a popular chaplain with nicknames for the tiny patients and soothing words for their bleary-eyed parents.

Judy Ragsdale, the former pastoral care director who hired Soliman in 2021 shortly before retiring, said she wrote a letter to hospital leaders imploring them to speak out against the allegations that could return him to certain persecution in Egypt. He lost authorization to work in June, when his asylum was terminated.

"This is a 'Schindler's List' moment," Ragsdale said she told hospital leaders. "And if you don't stand up for Ayman, you're complicit in what's happening to him."

Some fear DHS is parlaying the scope and secrecy of counterterrorism laws into a weapon to boost the president's mass-deportation mission.

Immigrant rights groups say a sped-up campaign with fewer guardrails for due process is already leading to removals based on evidence that hasn't been fully vetted. If DHS is successful in test cases like Soliman's, they say, material support claims could be more easily applied to immigration cases with even tenuous links to militant factions, including newly designated cartels.

The White House referred questions to Homeland Security, which routed a request for comment to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; a spokesperson there said in a statement that the agency generally "does not discuss the details of individual immigration cases and adjudication decisions."

"An alien — even with a pending application or lawful status — is not shielded from immigration enforcement action," the statement said. The FBI declined to comment.



Imams Mutazz Alabd and Ihab Alsaghier visit the Butler County Jail in hopes of seeing Ayman Soliman, who fled Egypt and is in ICE detention awaiting an asylum hearing. (ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

Jeffrey Breinholt, an architect of the [material support statutes](#) who spent three decades as a federal terrorism prosecutor, defends the laws as crucial to closing loopholes that were exploited by foreign militant groups and their domestic sympathizers.

Breinholt, who retired in 2024, said he has no concerns about the widening scope as it converges with Trump's deportation push. The designation of cartels, he said, "is a natural outgrowth of the success we have had with 'material support' crime."

To Cole and other critics, however, the Soliman case could be "the canary in the coal mine."

More than a chaplain

Within a few hours of Soliman's detention, dozens showed up for an impromptu rally and news conference in the ICE center parking lot. That backup has since grown into a hundreds-strong campaign to refute the DHS allegations, which supporters call a resurgence of anti-Muslim fearmongering that has persisted across party lines since the 9/11 attacks 24 years ago this month.

"Any time you have a brown man or a Muslim man and you use the words 'FBI' and 'red flag,' you don't have to say any more," said Tala Ali, a friend of Soliman's who heads the board of a Cincinnati mosque where he sometimes led prayers.



Tala Ali is a close friend of Ayman Soliman and board chair of the Clifton Mosque where he sometimes led prayers. (Pro Publica/Maddie McGarvey)

Voices calling for Soliman's release include parents who met him in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit. The families are in disbelief that the chaplain they'd grown close to is now jailed in a high-stakes international case. They knew he'd fled Egypt but said they were learning details of his ordeal through the campaign to free him.

"It would be very easy to be resentful and be angry with the world when you have to live through that kind of trauma, and he's not like that at all. He's taking on other peoples' trauma," said Heather Barrow, whose infant daughter, Mya, died in the NICU last year.

She said Soliman stepped in to spare her grieving family the heartache of making funeral arrangements for a 5-month-old. He attended Mya's celebration of life and, later, a butterfly release on June 7, which would've been her first birthday. A month later, he was in an ICE cell.

"I was like, how is this happening? He was just at our house," Barrow said.

Another couple, Taylor and Bryan McClain, also came to rely on Soliman when their newborn, Violette, arrived at Cincinnati Children's last year with life-threatening complications. The chaplain steadied them during their 271 days in the NICU, which Taylor said felt like "a roller coaster in a tornado and it's on fire." The McClains call him "family."

"I say with full confidence: Violette is alive because of the advocacy that Ayman gave us," Taylor said one recent afternoon as she held her daughter, now just over a year old.



Bryan and Taylor McClain sit with their daughter, Violette. Ayman Soliman was their chaplain in the neonatal intensive care unit at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. (ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

Clergy members make up another bloc of support — so many that they built a spreadsheet to divide visiting hours among imams, rabbis and pastors. Immigration advocates and Ohio civil rights leaders have added their names to petitions. So have University of Cincinnati student groups including the Ornithology Club and the Harry Potter Appreciation Club.

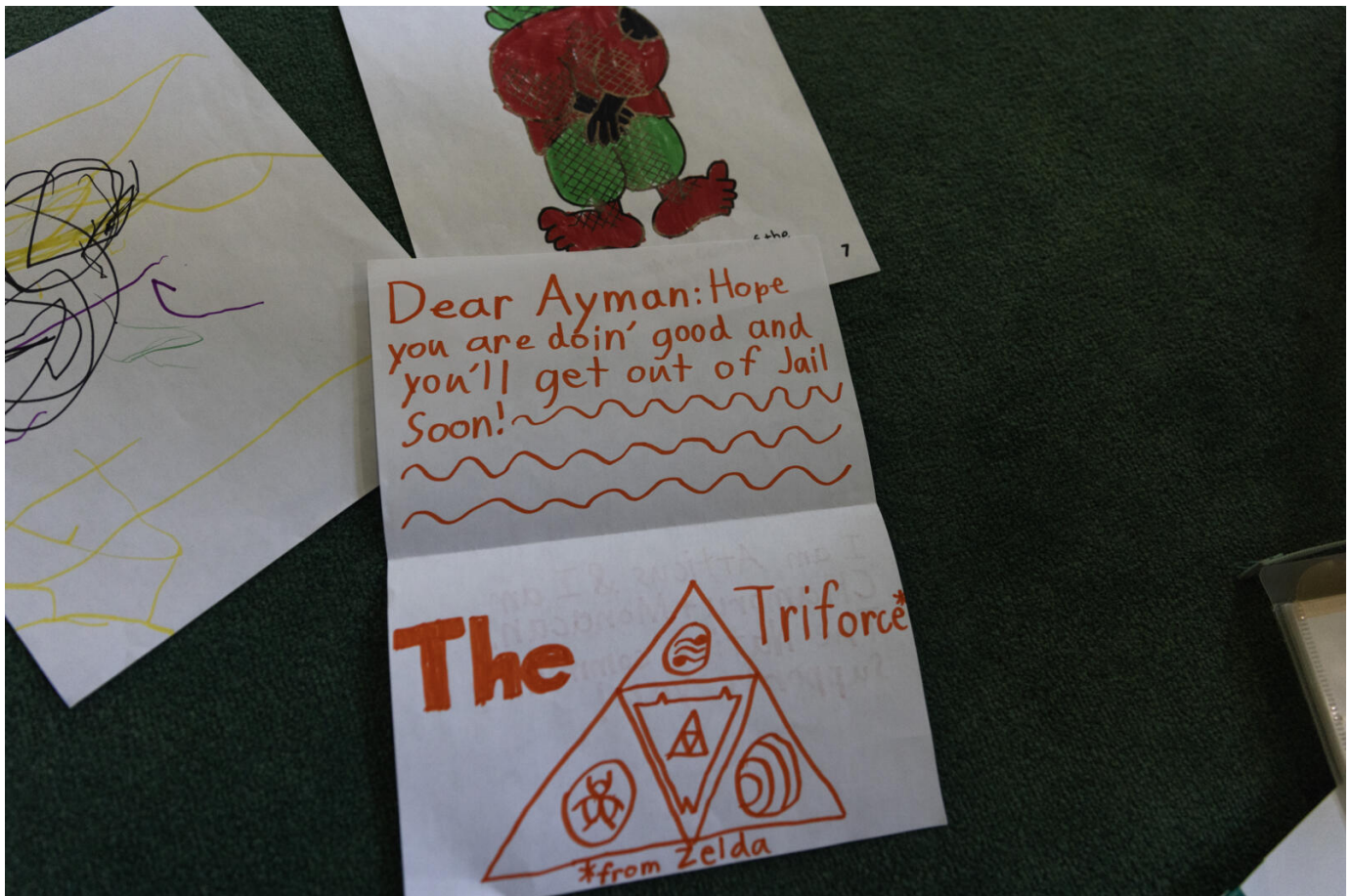
More than a dozen people faced [criminal charges stemming from a melee](#) after a rally in Soliman's support; demonstrators and police blame each other for the violence July 17.

Two of Soliman's fellow chaplains at Cincinnati Children's, Adam Allen and Elizabeth Diop, said they [lost their jobs](#) for refusing to keep quiet about their jailed colleague. Meanwhile, the hospital, a cherished local institution, is taking heat for its silence. Soliman's supporters launched a [letter-writing campaign](#) demanding a response

from the hospital, which has said it does not discuss personnel issues.

Signs appeared outside the hospital. "Missing Chaplain," they said. "Abducted By ICE."

Cincinnati Children's Hospital did not return messages seeking comment. In an internal memo published by The Cincinnati Enquirer, hospital CEO Dr. Steve Davis told employees that the lack of response "should not be mistaken for a lack of caring or action." As a nonprofit, Davis stressed, the hospital has strict rules about "activities that could be characterized as political."



Children at Clifton Mosque have sent notes to Ayman Soliman, who is in ICE detention awaiting an asylum hearing. (ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

Soliman's supporters press on. One recent Sunday evening, about 200 filled a Cincinnati church where preachers from several faith backgrounds urged them to demand his freedom.

"The trial that Imam Ayman is going through is our trial," Abdulhakim Mohamed, head of the North American Imams Fellowship, told the crowd. "His justice is ours to own. The injustice is also ours to bear."

Escape from Egypt

Soliman's entanglement with the Egyptian security apparatus began in 2000 when he joined fellow college students to protest repressive laws, he said in asylum papers.

He was periodically locked up and intimidated after that, he said. The persecution worsened more than a decade ago during uprisings that remade the Middle East by toppling dictators — including Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak — but in some places spiraled into civil war.

Soliman worked as a freelance journalist covering pro-democracy revolts in Egypt and neighboring Libya. Friends say he was also studying to become an imam and served on the board of a local chapter of the Islamic charity Al-Gameya al-Shareya, which is known for its network of hospitals and orphan programs throughout Egypt.

The charity, whose name has multiple English spellings, launched in 1912 and is often described as "[one of the most established national Islamic organizations](#)." Scholars have written that early leaders came from the Muslim Brotherhood, archenemy of Egypt's current military leadership, but that ties ended around 1990 under government pressure.

In the years since, researchers found, the group maintained smooth relations with the government as its more than 1,000 chapters nationwide encompass Egyptians of all political leanings. That delicate balance faltered briefly in 2013 when a military-led counterrevolution quashed the nascent democratic movement and deposed elected leaders who were part of the Muslim Brotherhood.



Supporters participate in an interfaith service for Ayman Soliman.
(ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

Egypt's military rulers declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization and shuttered any organization it suspected of ties. Al-Gameya Al-Shareya was among more than 1,000 civil society groups blacklisted in the crackdown, court filings say, and chapters suspected of helping the Brotherhood during elections were dissolved. The group resumed operations the next year, when an [Egyptian court lifted the ban](#), ruling that the charity "has no ties to the Muslim Brotherhood," according to news reports.

Egypt's return to zero tolerance for dissidents made Soliman's activism dangerous, he said in court papers. As a journalist and Islamic scholar, he represented two fields the Egyptian government views as existential threats: a free press and religious organizing.

Soliman fled to the United States in 2014 on a visitor visa and later filed a petition for asylum, describing how security forces over the years had locked him up on false

charges and tortured him with electrical shocks. In one incident, his attorney said, Egyptian forces with machine guns stormed into an apartment where Soliman was asleep with his wife and young child. (Through attorneys, Soliman asked to withhold details about his family because they remain in Egypt.)

"For me, it's life or death," Soliman later told a U.S. immigration officer of his need to escape.



Ahmed Elkady said Ayman Soliman told him on a jail visit he was stunned to be linked to Iraq, a place he's never been. (ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

Officials in Cairo referred questions to the Egyptian Embassy in Washington, which did not respond to requests for comment.

The asylum application asked whether Soliman had belonged to political parties or other associations in his home country. Ratliff, the attorney, said Soliman marked "yes" and attached a statement that mentioned Al-Gameya Al-Shareya and his role in fundraising for the local chapter.

Friends said Soliman rejoiced when he was granted asylum in 2018, under the first Trump administration, and sought permanent residency as the next step toward reuniting with his family. But the process stalled. "Bureaucratic hurdle after bureaucratic hurdle," Ratliff said.

Then came a more serious snag. In 2021, Soliman learned he was on a federal watchlist when a background check for a chaplain job at an Oregon prison showed that the FBI had flagged him, court papers show.

His attorneys said they have no idea why. It could've been about a specific piece of intelligence. It could've been a misspelling or mistaken identity, simple errors that have landed ordinary Muslims on opaque ["war on terror" watchlists](#) that are nearly impossible to get off.



Adam Allen, a former chaplain at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, says he lost his job for refusing to keep quiet about Ayman Soliman. (ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

Soliman, friends say, insisted on trying to clear his name. With the help of the Muslim Legal Fund of America, he [sued government agencies](#) including the FBI and the Transportation Security Administration. That route led to open-ended legal battles that yielded no clear answers and no green card.

Instead, his place in the country became more vulnerable. In December, the final stretch of the Biden administration, Soliman received notice that the government intended to terminate his asylum based on "inconsistencies" in his claims of persecution and concern that his charity work made him inadmissible based on "possible membership in a terrorist organization."

Some of his friends are convinced it was payback for the lawsuits, but attorneys say there's no telling what triggered a review.

"What Ayman has experienced is something that, post-9/11, has been the reality of Muslims in this country," said Ali, his friend and advocate. "All he did was try to get answers and accountability for what he'd been put through."

Big claims, little transparency

Contested asylum cases like Soliman's were prime targets when Trump took office the next month and supercharged deportations, a top campaign pledge. Since his return to office, [ICE arrests have doubled](#).

Soliman was called to an asylum hearing in February, a month into the new administration, for a last shot at defending his eligibility. A DHS officer asked about claims in the Biden-era notice alleging "discrepancies in date and number of times he suffered harm" and raising doubts about a handwritten Egyptian police report and letters authenticating his journalistic work.

A transcript shows Soliman explaining that he sometimes got confused when describing traumatic incidents from years ago in English, his second language. He said the police report was a rough translation included by mistake and submitted statements verifying his journalism.

Then the DHS officer's questioning took a turn: "When did you start supporting Al-Jameya Al-Shareya?"

For the rest of the meeting, the transcript shows, the officer drilled down on Soliman's knowledge of the charity: fundraising, chapter size, support for violence and whether he had been aware of a Brotherhood link.

Another of Soliman's attorneys interrupted when the immigration officer said the Brotherhood had been a Tier III group since 2012. That's not how it works, the attorney countered — only top-tier terrorist organizations like al-Qaida or the Islamic State are given dates of designation. Tier III, she said, is for undesignated groups and is determined on a case-by-case basis, with the burden of proof on the government.

"Counsel, I'll give you an opportunity at the end to make a closing," the DHS officer said.

"I understand," the attorney replied, "but we're talking about something factual."

The next time Soliman heard from DHS was the official termination of his asylum, effective June 3. This time, there was no hedging in language that declared he was ineligible based on "evidence that indicated you provided material support to a Tier III terrorist organization." A few weeks later, he was taken into custody and notified of his pending removal.

Soliman's legal team sued, arguing that he was stripped of asylum on illegal grounds because the designations had been made "without proper findings" and based on no new evidence.

Court filings show DHS attorneys introducing, then withdrawing or amending, materials to build a case linking Soliman to the Brotherhood through the charity.

"It looked like, 'What can we put here to get to there?' " said Ratliff, a former immigration judge.

Among the supporting evidence filed by the government are three academic reports by scholars with deep knowledge of Islamic charities in Egypt. Soliman's legal team filed statements from all three balking at how DHS had cherry-picked their research.

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Steven Brooke at the University of Wisconsin-Madison detailed "important mistakes of fact and interpretation." Neil Russell, an academic in Scotland, called the U.S. conclusions "a mischaracterization of my findings." Marie Vannetzel, a French scholar who has conducted field research with Al-Gameya Al-Shareya, rebutted what she called "a dishonest manipulation of my text and my work."

Vannetzel wrote that she rejects the idea that Soliman, "simply by virtue of his activity in the association, could be accused of providing material support to the Muslim Brotherhood."

Observers of Cairo's unsparing campaign to uproot Islamist opposition say the matter is clear-cut: If the charity survived the scrutiny of Egyptian intelligence, then it's not Muslim Brotherhood. "It's really striking that this group is not proscribed," said Michael Hanna, an Egypt specialist and U.S. program director of the nonprofit International Crisis Group.

Soliman's attorneys also criticized the government's assertion in court filings that he, as a board member of one local branch, would've been aware of any Brotherhood affiliation of chapters nationwide. "If a Rotarian in Seattle commits murder, we don't go charging Rotarians in Des Moines with conspiracy," Ratliff said.

Separate from U.S. attempts to tie Soliman to the Brotherhood was a puzzling footnote about Iraq that appeared in a later filing. Without detail, DHS attorneys alluded to warrants for "murder and terrorism activities." Ratliff said a DHS attorney later confirmed to him in a phone call that it wasn't about Soliman, but didn't explain why it was there.

The error remained uncorrected in filings until Sept. 3, when DHS attorney Cheryl Gutridge acknowledged in court that it was an "inadvertent" reference to another case, [Ohio news outlets reported](#). The original wording suggesting that Soliman faced murder charges in Iraq had been included in the government's successful argument for keeping him in custody.

DHS did not address questions about the Iraq reference.

A close friend, Ahmed Elkady, said Soliman told him on a jail visit he was stunned to be linked to Iraq, a place he's never been: "He said, 'How can I become a virtual terrorist?'"

Sheriff's ICE fiefdom

As he awaits trial in immigration court, Soliman is in custody at the Butler County Jail, about 30 miles outside Cincinnati, past cornfields and a German social club and the Town and Country Mobile Home Park.

For more than 20 years, this outpost has been the domain of Sheriff Richard Jones, a cowboy hat-wearing firebrand who keeps a framed photo of Trump in his office. In the run-up to the 2024 election, Jones mused that a Trump victory might put him "[back in the deportation business](#)."



ICE parking spots outside the Butler County Jail (ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

From 2003 to 2021, the jail had been contracted to house immigration detainees until the arrangement dissolved in the Biden era. As predicted, the county entered into [a new agreement with ICE](#) in February, after Trump returned to power, to hold around 400 detainees: \$68 a day per person, plus \$36 an hour for the sheriff's office toward transportation.

Jones celebrated the restored partnership by posting a fake image showing inflatable gators outside the jail, a nod to ICE's "Alligator Alcatraz" detention center in Florida. A Black Lives Matter group in Dayton [issued a statement](#) calling the sheriff's post an "egregious act of cruelty and historical mockery."

As it returns to deportation work, the jail still faces a federal [civil rights lawsuit](#) filed in 2020 by two ICE prisoners who said they endured beatings and discrimination. One plaintiff, a Muslim, said a jailer called him a "fucking terrorist" and threatened to throw his prayer rug in the toilet. Jones has disputed the claims.

The sheriff is in the news again because of Soliman. In court filings, the Muslim chaplain says he was denied access to a space where he could lead communal prayers and then placed in "isolation" for nearly a week with only an hour of phone access between midnight and 1 a.m.

Soliman's attorneys say in court papers that the episode was related to "targeted harassment" over his religion. The sheriff's office [told local outlets](#) that it respects religious freedom and said Soliman was placed in isolation because he was "argumentative" and "threatening."

After agreeing to an interview with ProPublica, Jones later decided he was "no longer interested," the sheriff's spokesperson, Deputy Kim Peters, wrote in a text message.



Ayman Soliman's apartment has become a way station for his supporters.
(ProPublica/Maddie McGarvey)

As he languishes in jail, Soliman's empty apartment in Cincinnati has become a way station for an inner circle of supporters, who said they felt like "intruders" when they first gathered there. Soliman is known as an elegant dresser, but his apartment was in bachelor-pad disarray, a reflection of his long hours at the hospital and the abruptness of his detention, said his friends, also clerics. The imams laughed when one confessed that he first thought the FBI had ransacked the place.

Over water bottles and energy drinks scavenged from Soliman's fridge, they talked about the deportation threat. In Egypt, pro-government news outlets [already have trumpeted](#) the case as proof that Soliman was leading a secret Brotherhood cell in America.

Despite Soliman's predicament, they said, being in limbo here is preferable to the alternative.

"You think I'm afraid of being here in jail?" Soliman told fellow imam Ihab Alsaghier during a recent visit. "Every moment I'm alone, I imagine I'm on a flight back to Egypt."