

Muslim civil rights group sues Texas officials

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(RNS)—The Council on American-Islamic Relations has sued Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton for labeling the Muslim civil rights group as a foreign terrorist organization.

On Nov. 18, Abbott filed a “proclamation designating the Muslim Brotherhood and CAIR as Foreign Terrorists and Transnational Criminal Organizations under the Texas Penal and Texas Property Codes.”

In doing so, Abbott asserted he could allow the state to shut down CAIR’s Texas chapters and ban them from purchasing land in the state.

The federal lawsuit filed Nov. 20 argues Abbott improperly used his office to target the domestic nonprofit without due process and in violation of federal law.

Attorneys representing the Texas chapters also allege Abbott’s designation is retaliatory, meant to silence CAIR after the group won three lawsuits against the governor in recent months.

“This attempt to punish the nation’s largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization simply because Governor Abbott disagrees with its views is not only contrary to the United States Constitution, but finds no support in any Texas law,” lawyers wrote in the suit filed in U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas.

In recent years, several bills have been proposed in Congress to designate CAIR as a terrorist group, but none have passed. The U.S. State Department, under federal law, alone has the power to designate foreign

terrorist organizations.

States do not have the authority to make such a designation at a federal level, and Abbott appears to be the first governor to attempt to do so at a state level.

“Governor Abbott decided to appropriate that power to himself to retaliate against CAIR,” said attorney Charlie Swift of the Muslim Legal Fund of America, one of the groups suing Abbott and Paxton.

Links to Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood alleged

In Abbott’s proclamation, he alleged CAIR had ties to Hamas, which is designated as a terrorist group by the State Department. CAIR denies any such connection.

“Despite all the conspiracy theories, CAIR has always been an American organization,” said Edward Mitchell, CAIR deputy director. “We’ve never been an offshoot, a partner, an agent, a pen pal of any foreign organizations.”

Abbott also claimed CAIR wanted to advance Sharia—Islamic religious law—in the country and called on local district attorneys to investigate alleged Sharia “courts” in Texas.

“The Muslim Brotherhood and CAIR have long made their goals clear: to forcibly impose Sharia law and establish Islam’s ‘mastership of the world,’” Abbott said in a press release.

Mitchell called Abbott’s allegation about Sharia courts “unhinged,” saying private arbitration courts are legally allowed to resolve civil cases.

“No one is trying to impose Islamic law on America,” Mitchell said. “This conspiracy theory is used by anti-Muslim extremists to whip up fear of Muslims, and in Governor Abbott’s case, he is whipping up this fear because he wants to silence Muslims because so many American Muslims have been critical of the Israeli government.”

Abbott’s designation amassed condemnation from elected officials. The Texas Democratic Party called on Abbott to reverse the designation.

In a joint statement signed by 28 Texas Democratic state representatives, state Rep. Salman Bhojani wrote that the governor’s action singles out Muslim Texans and treats them with suspicion.

“The governor’s action will only further fuel hostility toward Muslim families, business owners, and educators who strengthen our communities every day,” wrote Bhojani, one of the first Muslims to serve in the Texas Legislature.