

Leading LAWYERS

Ten of the D.C. Area's Top Immigration Attorneys

Denyse Sabagh

Duane Morris

If one word describes Denyse Sabagh's immigration practice, it's diversity—not just the diversity of her clients but a diversity of problems they face.

On one hand, there's the large corporation that needs help securing a visa for a highly skilled employee. On the other, there's the Saudi Arabian student held on an immigration violation and interrogated about his alleged ties to terrorists. With equal aplomb, the 57-year-old Duane Morris partner handles it all.

"She is the best of the best," says Abdelhaleem Ashqar. Sabagh has been representing Ashqar, a Palestinian professor, for the past eight years in a complex asylum case.

Ashqar, the former head of public relations for Islamic University in Gaza, came to the United States to study for a master's degree at the University of Mississippi. In 1997 he was subpoenaed to testify before a grand jury in New York in a case involving money laundering and the Islamic group Hamas. He refused to testify and was jailed for civil contempt for six months.

After that, Ashqar was afraid he would be persecuted if he returned to Israel, so he filed for political asylum. But the process dragged on, and eventually, he agreed to leave the United States.

Before he could go, he was again called to testify and again refused. Now he faces criminal charges for conspiring to furnish cash and aid to Hamas. A hearing in Chicago federal court is scheduled for next month. (Ashqar's trial counsel, William Moffitt of Moffitt & Brodnax, also hails from the D.C. area.)

In an e-mail message, Ashqar describes Sabagh as "a highly skillful and a well articulated attorney. She is an expert on the immigration law. Above all, she is a decent lady with a big heart."

He is not Sabagh's only client to face terrorism-related questions. Sabagh also represents Abdullah Tuwalah, a Saudi Arabian graduate student at Towson University. After 9/11, he was picked up by the FBI and detained for failing to sign an immigration form. He was subsequently held as a material witness. After four months and a series of interrogations, the FBI released him.

The head of the FBI's D.C. field office wrote a letter to immigration authorities explaining that Tuwalah was not a person of interest. Still,



DIEGO M. RADZINSKI

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is moving to deport him for failing to sign the form. A hearing is scheduled for October.

"This person was in jail for four months for no good reason, and he's being treated as if he was a terrorist," says Sabagh. "Even in this climate, it shouldn't be a crime to be Saudi."

A member of the FBI's Arab, Muslim, Sikh American Advisory Committee, Sabagh traces her roots in the Middle Eastern community to grandparents who emigrated from Lebanon. Today she is working to win temporary protected status for Lebanese citizens currently in the

United States. Such a designation, which would be made by the attorney general, would allow Lebanese citizens to remain here until the situation in their home country stabilizes.

Sabagh has helped individual Lebanese as well. Maya Shawwa, an administrator at Georgetown University Hospital, hired Sabagh in 1993 to help her get a green card and then citizenship. Sabagh has also aided Shawwa's two brothers and her mother in becoming citizens. Shawwa credits Sabagh with "saving the lives of my family and me."

"She was there with us in every step, the good and the bad, and we will be eternally grateful to her," says Shawwa.

Sabagh's corporate clients sing her praises, too. She obtains visas for their high-tech and skilled employees, as well as doctors and religious workers, and assists companies with ICE audits.

"She has a real legal and practical understanding of the law and how it works and applies to today's business," says Greg Santi, director of human resources at Widex USA. Sabagh assists the hearing-aid manufacturer with labor certifications and visas. "She and her staff have always been 100 percent available and supportive."

Sabagh earned her law degree in 1977 from George Mason University Law School. Her first job was at Shadyac, Berg & Sherman, a small general-practice firm in Northern Virginia. In 1997 the firm (by then known as Metzger, Hollis & Gordon) was acquired by Duane Morris. She heads the firm's eight-lawyer immigration group.

Although Sabagh has practiced law for nearly 30 years, she wasn't always just an attorney. She also went to massage school and, until 2002, had an active massage practice on weekends. She gave it up after 9/11, when her legal work became too demanding, she says.

That legal work has also been "very rewarding and colorful and filled with rich life stories," says Sabagh. "There's never a dull moment."