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Hera Hashmi '11 with Dean Phoebe Haddon at the UM Diversity Recognition Awards Ceremony.

## At the Intersection of Human Rights and Islamic Law

By Christine Grillo

Hera Hashmi '11 was honored in February with UM's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Diversity Recognition Award.

As more than a dozen U.S. states attempt to pass controversial bans of Islamic law, Hera Hashmi '11 encourages conversation on the touchy subject. Recently, she helped to organize “Confronting Islam,” a symposium that drew more than 100 members of the University of Maryland (UM) community to discuss topics including recent developments regarding Islamic law in the U.S., and American Muslim civil rights.

The symposium was a follow-up to an earlier conference that aimed not only to explain Islamic law, known in Arabic as Shari’ah, but also to tackle questions about whether secular constitutions and religious law conflict. Participants also discussed the civil rights issues facing American Muslims in the current climate.

Hashmi notes that some American Muslims turn to Shari’ah in civil matters such as marriage contracts and wills. Secular judges may take into account these contracts as they make rulings. Thirteen states, however, have introduced anti-Shari’ah bills: “These states are trying to ban judges from even considering Islamic law,” she says.

In February, Hashmi received UM’s annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Diversity Recognition Award, mostly for her work in organizing the symposium. She was particularly thrilled to receive the award, she says, because it was in eighth grade, while studying the American Civil Rights Movement, that she discovered her passion for justice. “I admired Dr. King from a very young age,” she says.

With a background in government and politics and studio art, Hashmi also supports the Muslim Interscholastic Tournament—D.C. branch, which organizes competitions in fine arts, poetry, debate, and more for Muslim high school students. While at UM Carey Law, she helped judge the competitions and presented workshops on Muslim Americans and civil rights.

Hashmi has been especially interested in the intersection of human rights and Islamic law in her research and academic writing in law school. There are often two interpretations of Islamic law, she explains. One is the law based on the Quran and other divine sources. The other is what Muslim countries claim to be Islamic law. For example, a country may punish men and women who have sex outside of marriage by imprisoning them. In criminalizing adultery and fornication, the country may cite Shari’ah—but if proper evidentiary standards are not upheld, she says, doling out harsh punishments and claiming they are Islamically mandated is incorrect. In many cases, she says, “Islamic law has been misused as a patriarchal tool by men who are unhappy with their daughter’s choices [in marriage or other relationships].”

When Hashmi did an externship for a human rights organization in Turkey, a secular democracy, she saw another side of the civil rights issue. With a Muslim majority of 99 percent, “Turkey is going through its own civil rights struggle,” she says. While there she worked with advocates for Kurdish and Christian minorities. During her stay, at one point she was prohibited from entering a university because she was wearing a headscarf. The experience inspired her to research the way secular democracies treat the headscarf in France, Turkey, and the United States. She used the research to write a paper that was published in the *Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender, and Class*.

After graduation, Hashmi plans to work in the international human rights field.