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Honeymoon Trip to St. Thomas Turns Into Immigration Nightmare After Bride is Detained, Exposing USVI Legal Grey Zone

Ward Sakeik, a stateless Texas bride with a pending green card, was detained by ICE in St. Thomas during her honeymoon, despite years of compliance. Her case highlights the USVI's unique Customs status and legal risks for immigrants with unresolved cases

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From left to right, newlyweds Ward Sakeik and Taahir Shaikh.

Despite not needing a passport to travel to the U.S. Virgin Islands from the mainland, the territory's special status outside the United States' domestic Customs zone means that travel is still risky for those with uncertain residency status.

A couple on their honeymoon to St. Thomas recently found this out the hard way. Newlyweds Taahir Shaikh and Ward Sakeik, who live in Arlington Texas, chose to travel to the USVI after careful consideration because they believed that the trip would not impact Ms. Sakeik's pending immigration case.

She had been brought to the United States at the age of eight, having been born to Palestinian refugees in Saudi Arabia. Because she was not recognized as a Saudi national, Ms. Sakeik was considered stateless. After arriving in the U.S. on a visa, her family applied for asylum. Although their request was denied, Ms. Sakeik could not be easily deported due to her stateless status. Instead, she was released under a supervision order requiring her to check in with immigration authorities once a year.

Over the past 14 years, Ms. Sakeik graduated from the University of Texas at Arlington and built a career as a wedding photographer. Despite her integration into society, compliance with the supervision order, and pending green card application, Ms. Sakeik was nevertheless detained on St. Thomas by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials in February. She has been detained ever since.

With her green card application now paused due to her detention, Ms. Sakeik is now only able to communicate with her spouse through video calls and weekly visits.

Responding to the publicization of the couple's plight, ICE released a statement to the media informing the public that Ms. Sakeik's arrest was “not part of a targeted operation.” Rather, “she chose to leave the country and was then flagged by CBP trying to re-enter the U.S.”

ICE says that there has been a final removal order by an immigration judge against the newlywed for over a decade. “President Trump and Secretary Noem are committed to restoring integrity to the visa program and ensuring it is not abused to allow aliens a permanent one-way ticket to remain in the U.S.,” the statement concluded.