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Airline checks claim of 'Muslim while flying' discrimination

MINNEAPOLIS, Minnesota (CNN) -- US Airways said Tuesday it is investigating the removal of six Muslim imams who were passengers on a Monday flight heading to Phoenix, Arizona.

The clerics, who had been in Minnesota for a national imams conference, were guilty of nothing more than "flying while Muslim," according to a national Muslim advocacy group.

The alert was raised after the men performed their normal evening prayers in the airport terminal before boarding Flight 300. ([Watch how one of the men was treated at a US Airways desk](#))

A passenger who had seen them pray passed a note expressing concern to a flight attendant, US Airways spokeswoman Andrea Rader told The Associated Press.

The passenger thought the imams -- who were speaking in Arabic and English -- had made anti-U.S. statements before boarding and "made similar statements while boarding," said Russ Knocke, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security.

Once on board, Knocke said, the six split up into groups of two and did not sit in their assigned seats.

US Airways had the imams removed from the plane, and according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim advocacy group, the airline denied the clerics access to another flight and did not assist them in obtaining tickets on another carrier.

"This discrimination should not stand," said Nihad Awad, the council's executive director. "We call on religious communities, civil rights movements and other people to stand up and speak up."

He said the group was getting more reports of 'flying while Muslim' and racial profiling incidents across the country.

"We are concerned that crew members, passengers and security personnel may have succumbed to fear and prejudice based on stereotyping of Muslims and Islam," Awad said in an earlier press release calling for an investigation.

US Airways pledged a thorough probe.

"We do not tolerate discrimination of any kind and will continue to exhaust our internal investigation until we know the facts of this case and can provide answer for the employees and customers involved in this incident," the airline said in a written statement.

The clerics were returning from a conference in Minneapolis of the North American Imams Federation, Omar Shahin of Phoenix, president of the group, told the AP.

"They took us off the plane, humiliated us in a very disrespectful way," Shahin said.

Shahin said three members of the group prayed in the terminal before the six boarded the plane.

They entered individually, except for one member who is blind and needed to be guided, Shahin said. Once on the plane, the six did not sit together, he said.

"We did nothing" on the plane, Shahin said.

According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the clerics were handcuffed and questioned for several hours by authorities before being released.

The imams denied reports they chanted "Allah" as they were escorted from the flight, the council said in a written statement. ([Watch passengers describe how the cops, airplane crew and imams acted](#))

DHS spokesman denies discrimination

Knocke of the DHS defended the airline's action. "We do not criticize anyone who errs on the side of security," he told CNN, but "we have absolutely no issue with any of these individuals."

Asked whether any federal agencies discriminated against Muslims in this case, Knocke said that was "categorically not true."

"This was a difficult spot for the airport police and for the pilot," he said. "This is an unfortunate circumstance, and we recognize that these six individuals were inconvenienced and delayed about three hours."

After the six imams were removed, they and their luggage were re-screened and the plane was checked out with dogs, Knocke said.

"Everything checked out. The FBI and Secret Service conducted interviews and everything checked out fine," he said.

Accounts of what transpired on the plane differ.

Police were called after the captain and airport security workers asked the men to leave the plane and the men refused, Rader told the AP.

Patrick Hogan, spokesman for the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Airports Commission, told the AP the airline asked airport police to remove the six men from the flight because some witnesses reported the men were making anti-American statements involving the Iraq war.

Hogan said one of the imams asked to change seats once inside the cabin and another requested an extender to make his seat belt larger even though he did not appear to need it and that in general "there was some peculiar behavior."

Shahin told AP no one asked them to leave until police arrived. The group immediately complied, he said.

Shahin expressed frustration that many Americans know so little about Islam -- despite extensive efforts by him and other Muslim leaders since even before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

"If up to now they don't know about prayers, this is a real problem," he said.

Shahin told AP the group spent the night at the home of a local imam in Minneapolis.

Shahin told the AP that when he went back to the airport Tuesday morning, he was told by a ticketing agent his payment for the flight had been refunded. He said the agent told him that neither he nor the other imams could purchase tickets from US Airways.

An airline spokesman in Arizona told the AP he was unaware such a decision had been made and could not comment.

The other passengers on the flight, which was carrying 141 passengers and five crew members, were re-screened for boarding, Rader said.

The plane took off about three hours after the men were removed.

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