



'Flying While Arab' A Frightening Experience

Gay Palestinian Writer Compares Attitudes to 'Gay Cleansing'

The recent headlines about Arab-Americans and Muslims being removed from airplanes because of uncomfortable passengers and crew gave me a sinking feeling of déjà vu.

It reminded me of the time in 1993 when American Airlines did a special cleaning of one of its flights after a large group of gay and lesbian passengers returned from the March on Washington. The airline staff was worried about the gay passengers passing on the HIV virus to passengers who followed.

It reminded me of how little Ryan White was forced from his school when it was discovered he had HIV. At the time, the school district that expelled him said it was better to be safe than sorry. After all, the lives of little kids were at stake.

And it reminded me of the racial profiling that runs rampant in this country for African Americans, particularly those who drive their automobiles in all-white neighborhoods.

In these cases, blacks are stopped by the police simply because of the color of their skin, and the gross assumption that a black person in a nice car in a white neighborhood must be up to no good. The problem has been aptly nicknamed driving while black. Now we have flying while Arab, and flying while Muslim.

In the first 10 days following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, there were at least five incidents in which either Muslims or people of Arab descent were removed from airlines simply because of the way they looked and talked.

Ashraf Khan, a Pakistani-American

Muslim traveling from San Antonio to Dallas, was forced off a Delta flight after the captain told him crew members didn't feel safe with him aboard. Khan's flight was the last one of the day. Being forced off the flight caused him to miss three other connecting flights, which were scheduled to take him to his brother's wedding in Pakistan.

The day after Khan was removed from his flight, two pilots on a Northwest Airlines plane performed a dramatic escape from the cockpit of their plane as it sat on the tarmac at Dulles International Airport near Washington, D.C.

The pilots bailed out of the cockpit, lowering themselves to the ground on ropes. The scare? They had discovered an Arab man was aboard the plane. Though he had gone through the same tight security measures all passengers are now required to undergo, the Arab man was removed by security, searched and questioned. As it turned out, his only crime was his ethnic origin. A Northwest Airlines spokesman later defended the action, saying the man posed a perceived threat.

In another incident involving Northwest Airlines, three Arab men on their way to Salt Lake City were removed from their plane in Minneapolis because they were reportedly "suspicious." The men were forced off the flight, and subjected to further interrogations and searches by security. As it turns out, they were simply three Arab men flying to Salt

Lake City. But here's what's most amazing: Even after being removed from their scheduled flight, and undergoing further intensive security checks, Northwest refused to let the men fly, instead booking them on another airline. The reason, according to a Northwest spokesman, was that other

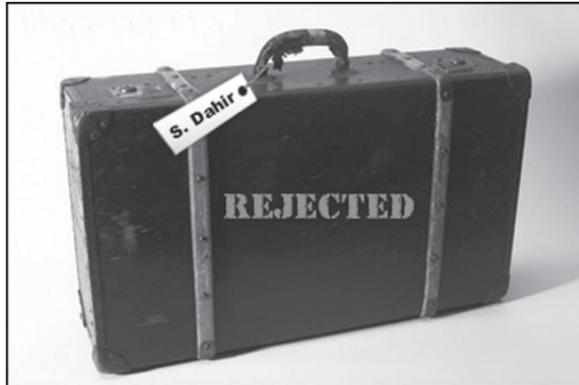
you. And then think of all the restrictions that could be placed on you because other people were "uncomfortable" by your presence. Could you be prohibited from being near schools because some people feared you would recruit children? Could you be prevented from using public parks because some men feared you might hit on them? Could you be prevented from sharing athletic facilities because some people feared you might have HIV and spread it to them?

The panicked reaction to Arabs and Muslims in this country is no different, with one frightening exception: Too many Americans are dismissing the discrimination—particularly the kind practiced by the airlines—under the guise of security. Others are excusing it as understandable in the wake of the recent horrific attacks.

But it is not acceptable in any way, for any reason. Indeed, it should abhor and frighten all of us as Americans. We must not let fear and panic and prejudice threaten the very ideals we cherish as Americans.

As gay and lesbian people in particular—people who have long been at the receiving end of irrational, reactionary behavior of the masses based on prejudices and stereotypes—we must be an active part of the voices calling for reason, rejecting any rationalization for such prejudice and discrimination.

Mubarak Dahir receives email at Mdahir@expressgaynews.com



passengers felt "uncomfortable" flying with the three Arab men on board.

That same day, a 15-year-old boy of Saudi descent trying to fly from Atlanta to Washington was forced off his flight. His 'crime': Flying while Arab.

And on the same day as the incidents on the Northwest flight in Minneapolis and the Delta flight in Atlanta, Egyptian-American Maged Eisherbiny was told to get off his United Airlines flight from Chicago to Los Angeles. Why? The crew felt "uncomfortable" with him on board.

Imagine if someone could easily identify you as gay or lesbian simply by looking at

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