

Muslim Passengers: victims of racial profiling?



Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari

There have been numerous incidents reported whereby passengers have been allegedly victimised by airport security screeners as a result of their ethnic origin, religious beliefs or colour of their skin. Few would argue with the fact that, since 11th September 2001, followers of the Islamic faith, on queuing up for flights, have been subjected to increased scrutiny by both officials and even their fellow travellers. As the industry grapples with the dilemma as to how best respond to the very real threat posed by Islamic fundamentalist activity without penalising the vast majority of law-abiding Muslims, Philip Baum asks Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari how the Muslim community perceives airport security, passenger profiling and the solution to the problem.

Have you, as a passenger, ever felt unduly victimised when going through airport security checks?

No, however we have received a number of reports where people have felt unduly victimised.

Can you cite some other examples of Muslim passengers being treated unfairly by airport security, either in Great Britain or overseas?

I am aware of an incident concerning a leading Imam in Blackburn who was apprehended for questioning for seven hours at Heathrow and subsequently missed his flight to Mecca. There's also the case of the two young British Muslims who were refused boarding of their return flight from Malaga to London last year.

A recent incident involved a couple from Wales who missed their flight and had to cancel their holiday plans altogether because of the amount of time taken by security officers to clear them for boarding. The couple are, as far as I understand, considering legal action.

How understandable is it that, following the events of 11th September 2001 and the 2006 plot to destroy airliners operating from the United Kingdom to the United States, followers of the Islamic faith are subjected to greater scrutiny than others?

The community feels they are being unfairly and disproportionately targeted. It is not at all understandable that an entire

community is being punished for the actions of some criminals. Airport staff must ensure that all stops and searches are intelligence led and that staff are given sufficient training and awareness regarding religious and cultural issues.

Do you accept that the greatest threat to aviation security comes from the Muslim community? If not, why not and where does it come from?

I don't accept that the Muslim community poses any threat to aviation security. The vast majority of the Muslim community is law abiding and is appalled by the use of violence in the name of religion. They would cooperate fully to apprehend any individual who is involved in any criminal activity.

“...I don't accept that the Muslim community poses any threat to aviation security...”

Does the Muslim community agree that the most important thing is to prevent another atrocity and that, should one occur and it be perpetrated by a member of that community, it would be even more detrimental to the way in which the community is perceived? And, if so, does the community not welcome additional precautions?

The community welcomes all measures which will enhance security; that is without question. But the fact remains that security and its pursuit should not dwell on any one community but utilise the intelligence gathered to focus on the threat itself and its perpetrators.

Don't customs officials target specific groups known to be associated with narco-trafficking? And immigration agents target ethnic groups most likely to be using fraudulent travel documents? And, if so, why shouldn't aviation security personnel target the Muslim community?

Any targeting has to be based on serious intelligence and not on assumptions. There is no evidence to suggest that the whole of the Muslim community is engaged in terrorist activity. General targeting will damage community relations.

Passenger profiling has been proposed as one solution to the problem, whereby passengers are subjected to different screening processes depending on the perceived risk that they pose. What is your opinion of such an approach?

Passenger profiling will increase racism and ethnic minorities will disproportionately be targeted. It is vital that the aviation industry retains the confidence of all communities.

Is it not true that the identification of the 2006 liquid explosive plot was as a result of the law enforcement authorities focusing their attention on specific groups and that, had they not done so, the plot might not have been identified?

I cannot comment on specific cases as it would prejudice the fair trial of the accused. We will have to wait for the trial to be completed before coming to any conclusions.

Can you envisage a profiling system not racially orientated?

I don't believe that any profiling system will be free from racism.

The issue of the veil has had much publicity in the United Kingdom in recent weeks. How can airport staff effectively screen passengers who wear the veil?

Airport staff can request passengers to remove veil if necessary, but they must do so appropriately and sensitively. Staff should be given training on religious and cultural sensitivities.

“...Islam prohibits the use of violence against civilians in all circumstances...”

It is often said that people find it hard to screen people from a different ethnic background to themselves, hence it is difficult for a white Christian security guard to evaluate a religious Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or Sikh passenger. How can we better educate people to understand the behaviours demonstrated by minority groups?

To pursue good diversity policies and ensure that staff have access to good training and resources. The training programme amongst other matters can include awareness of religious sensitivities, better communication techniques, guidance about the various races and religions. The training should be carried out by individuals who have expertise in diversity and understand it better. There are organisations that are engaged in such programmes.

Aside from a change in the political agenda of a country, what steps need to be taken to ensure that security measures are effective, unpredictable and respond to the current threat?

By ensuring that communities have confidence in the criminal justice system and no group is unfairly or disproportionately targeted. It is essential that the community works in partnership with law enforcement authorities to counter any criminality or threat of it.

What can religious leaders do to dissuade followers of a given faith from perpetrating terrorist acts?

MCB has always condemned the use of violence against innocent civilians and considers it un-Islamic. Islam prohibits the use of violence against civilians in all circumstances. This is something that the scholars' statement released on July 15 2005 (the text of which is available on the MCB website) makes very clear. Religious leaders in their pronouncements have left no room for doubt as to the illegality of terrorism.

Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari, MBE, FRSA, is the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain. He is an educationalist with a PhD and PGCE from King's College London and a Management degree from the Open University. Dr. Abdul Bari has worked as an Air Force Officer, researcher in physics, science teacher and SEN specialist in London. He is the chairman of East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre. He is also a board member of The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games Ltd (LOCOG). He is author of several books on marriage, parenting, and issues of youth and identity. He was elected as Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain at its Ninth Annual General Meeting on 4th June 2006. He is married with four children.