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Six Muslim imams removed from U.S. airliner

Group says US Airways and airport staff overreacted, calls for investigation

AP Associated Press

Updated: 1:02 p.m. ET Nov. 21, 2006

MINNEAPOLIS - The Council on American-Islamic Relations called Tuesday for an investigation into the behavior of airline staff and airport security in the removal of six Muslim scholars from a US Airways flight a day earlier.

A passenger raised concerns about the imams — three of whom said their normal evening prayers in the airport terminal before boarding the Phoenix-bound plane, according to one — through a note passed to a flight attendant, according to Andrea Rader, a spokeswoman for US Airways.

“We are concerned that crew members, passengers and security personnel may have succumbed to fear and prejudice based on stereotyping of Muslims and Islam,” Nihad Awad, the council’s executive director, said in a news release.

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

“They took us off the plane, humiliated us in a very disrespectful way,” Shahin said after the incident.

‘We did nothing’

Shahin said Tuesday that three members of the group prayed in the terminal before the six boarded the plane. They entered individually, except for one member

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• Muslims removed from plane

Nov. 21: Six Muslim imams were pulled off a Minneapolis to Phoenix flight Monday night and questioned by police for several hours.

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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.

The six were among passengers who boarded Flight 300, bound for Phoenix, around 6:30 p.m. Monday, airport spokesman Pat Hogan said.

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

Shahin said no one asked the six to leave until police arrived, when the group complied.

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.

Shahin said the group spent the night at the home of a local imam.

Airline probes incident

When Shahin went back to the airport Tuesday morning, a ticketing agent told him his payment for Monday's flight had been refunded and the airline wouldn't sell more tickets to him or the other imams. An airline spokesman in Arizona said he wasn't aware of the ticketing decision and could not comment.

“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 answers for the employees and customers involved in this incident,” the airline said in a news release Tuesday.

“Unfortunately, this is a growing problem of singling out Muslims or people perceived to be Muslims at airports, and it's one that we've been addressing for some time,” council spokesman Ibrahim Hooper said.

Hooper said the meeting drew about 150 imams from all over the country, and that those attending included Rep.-elect Keith Ellison, D-Minn., who just became the first Muslim elected to Congress. Shahin said they went as far as notifying police and the FBI about their meeting in advance.

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

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

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