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## 'Flying While Muslim'

When six Muslim leaders were pulled off an airplane this week, some advocacy groups said it was another example of religious and racial profiling.

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Janet Hostetter / AP

Omar Shahin purchased a ticket from Northwest Airlines on Tuesday after being removed from a U.S. Airways flight the previous evening

### WEB EXCLUSIVE

**By Jessica Bennett and Matthew Philips**

Newsweek  
Updated: 6:00 p.m. ET Nov. 22, 2006

Nov. 22, 2006 - As a Muslim-American and president of the North American Imams Federation, Dr. Omar Shahin is no stranger to the heightened security of a post-9/11 world. On more than one occasion, the Phoenix, Ariz., resident says he's been picked out of a crowd by the color of his skin—interrogated, finger printed or detained. So when Shahin headed to the airport Monday with five other imams for a flight out of Minneapolis—where the NAIF had met for

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a conference—the group did everything they could according to Shahin. They wore Western clothes, spoke only English. They didn't book their seats together. And when it came time to conduct their sunset-time prayers, Shahin says, they did so quietly, and not all together—hoping to avoid any unwanted attention.

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But when the group boarded their U.S. Airways flight bound for Phoenix, on which Shahin (a frequent flier on the airline) had been upgraded to first class, they would never leave the ground. After finding their seats and preparing for takeoff, Shahin and the other imams were escorted from the flight in handcuffs after a passenger handed a note to a flight attendant expressing concern over the group's "suspicious activity," according to the airport police report. After several hours of questioning by federal authorities, the group was released. Yet though the airline refunded their tickets, U.S. Airways—which released a statement Tuesday saying it does "not tolerate discrimination of any kind"—reportedly denied them passage on any of its other flights and refused to help them obtain tickets through another airline. "This was the worst moment in my life," says Shahin, who, after an overnight delay, was able to get himself and his colleagues a flight on Northwest Airlines. "When they took us off the plane, six big leaders, it was very humiliating." U.S. Airways told NEWSWEEK late Wednesday that it would not comment on the case beyond its issued statement.

What was the group's suspicious activity? According to the report filed by the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport police, the group's loud chants of "Allah, Allah, Allah," initially drew the suspicion of nearby passengers—one of whom said he heard the imams make anti-American comments regarding the war in Iraq. Once on the flight, the men—who allegedly boarded the plane with no carry-on luggage and used one-way tickets—seated themselves in pairs, two at the front of the plane, two in the middle, and two in the rear (all according to the police report). The men, three of whom are U.S. citizens, two of whom have green cards and one who has a worker's permit, also allegedly asked the flight crew for seat belt extensions.

But Shahin, a lawyer, disputes many of these details. He says everyone in the group had round-trip tickets that he had booked—and that he has the documentation to prove it. The reason he was at the front of the flight was because he was upgraded to first class because he's a frequent flyer on the airline. And the reason he asked for a seatbelt extension? Shahin says his 290-pound frame should make that obvious. As for the anti-American remarks, Shahin says the group was talking about the conference, which, ironically, was focused on building bridges to the non-Muslim community. And to avoid this very type of incident, Shahin says he'd already notified both the F.B.I. and local Minneapolis police department of the NAIF conference, as a precaution. "What they claim [in the police report] is just not true," he says.

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