

Terror Fears Hamper U.S. Muslims' Travel

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Erin Trieb for The New York Times

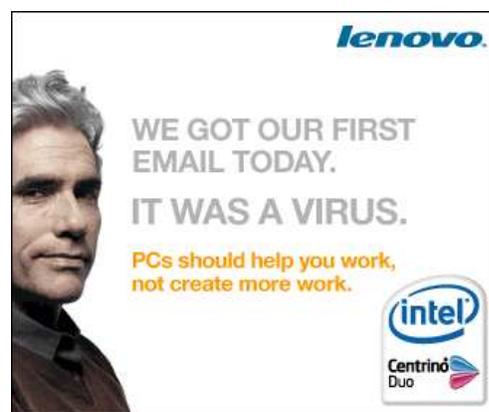
"If I was a crazy Muslim fundamentalist, this is not the disguise I would go with," says Azhar Usman, who performed recently in Carrollton, Tex. But what is funny on stage hurts the comedian in real life.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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SAN FRANCISCO, May 31 — Azhar Usman, a burly American-born Muslim with a heavy black beard, says he elicits an almost universal reaction when he boards an airplane at any United States airport: conversations stop in midsentence and the look in the eyes of his fellow passengers says, "We're all going to die!"

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Kenneth Dickerman for The New York Times
Ahmed Ahmed, whose name matches an alias of a colleague of Osama bin Laden, jokes about his visits to airports, but underneath the

For Ahmed Ahmed, a comedian, it is even worse. His double-barreled name matches an occasional alias used by a henchman of [Osama bin Laden](#). "It's a bad time to be named Ahmed right now," he riffs in his stand-up routine, before describing being hauled through the Las Vegas airport in handcuffs.

Taleb Salhab and his wife say they too were dragged away in handcuffs at the border crossing in Port Huron, Mich., as their two preschool daughters wailed in the back seat of their car. The Salhabs were discharged after four hours of questioning, with no explanation from customs officers.

Getting through United States airports and border crossings has grown more difficult for everyone since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. But Muslim Americans say they are having a harder time than most, sometimes facing an intimidating maze of barriers, if not outright discrimination. Advocacy groups have taken to labeling their predicament "traveling while Muslim," and accuse the government of ignoring a serious erosion of civil rights. Next month, the American Civil Liberties Union will go back to court to broaden a suit on behalf of Muslims and Arab-Americans



one-liners, the treatment grates. He performed recently in Orland Park, Ill.

who are demanding the United States government come up with a better system for screening travelers.

The delays, humiliation and periodic roughing up have prompted some American Muslims to avoid traveling as much as possible. Some even skip meeting anyone at the airport for fear of a nasty encounter with a law-enforcement officer. Those who do venture forth say they are always nervous.

"I find myself enunciating English like never before, totally over-enunciating just because I want the guy to know that I am an American," says Maz Jobrani, an Iranian-born, Berkeley-educated actor. "Middle Easterners are just as scared of [Al Qaeda](#) as everybody else, but we also have to be worried about being profiled as Al Qaeda. It's a double whammy."

Many Muslim Americans fault the [Department of Homeland Security](#) and its various agencies, chiefly the Transportation Security Administration, as failing to develop an efficient system to screen travelers. In particular, they deplore the lack of a workable means for those on the federal watch list by mistake — or those whose names match that of someone on the list — to get themselves off.

Mr. Salhab, 36, says his family remains shaken by their treatment at the border. Officers, their hands on their guns, swarmed around his vehicle, barking at him to get out as alarm bells clanged, he said.

"If I had sneezed or looked the wrong way, who knows what would have happened," Mr. Salhab said in a telephone interview. "I feared for my life."

Now, he said, every time his daughter, 4, sees uniformed officers, she asks if they are going to take him away.

"What happened to me at the border is inexcusable," Mr. Salhab said.

A complaint filed with the Department of Homeland Security in January got Mr. Salhab a form letter saying the government was looking into the situation. There has been no further response.

A number of American Muslims similarly upset by how federal agents treated them and their families are seeking relief through the courts. About eight men with Muslim or Arab roots are joining a suit already filed last year by the American Civil Liberties Union branch in Illinois demanding that the government improve its treatment of returning American citizens.

But similar suits have made little headway. In general, the Constitution protects all Americans against unreasonable search and seizure. But much more aggressive searches have been deemed reasonable at airports and at the border than elsewhere. Just how elastic that standard can be is what the lawsuits are addressing.

The Department of Homeland Security denies engaging in racial profiling. Agents should not base their decisions on a face or a name, said Dan Sutherland, head of the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. "They should look at behavior, concrete action, observable activities," he said.

Mr. Sutherland said the department was aware of some problems with the watch list, but he argued that many Muslim Americans traveled without encountering difficulties.

Still, traveling makes many Muslim Americans feel like second-class citizens. Mr. Ahmed, the comedian, often travels wearing a T-shirt that says "Got rights?"

"That's the whole question of my existence right now," he said. "Do we have rights? I'm a taxpayer and I'm an American, and I want to be treated like one."

The problem has become such a part of being a Muslim American that some comedians have built routines around it. Mr. Ahmed and Mr. Jobrani both perform on The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour. Mr. Jobrani jokes about his heightened state of anxiety as he passes through

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security.

He says, "If anything beeps in the metal detector, I think, 'Dammit, I'm a terrorist! I knew it!'"

But underneath the one-liners, the treatment grates. Mr. Ahmed, 35, now avoids flying on the day of a show lest he be barred from his flight. The stress reached a level that the whiskers in his beard started to fall out, he says. ("Your body is trying to de-Muslimize," Mr. Jobrani said jokingly, sitting next to him in a Los Angeles coffee shop. "Next, your skin will get lighter.")

Mr. Ahmed was handcuffed in the Las Vegas airport in November 2004, and, he said, a young black police officer leaned over and said, "Yo man, now you know what it was like to be a black man in the 60's."

It is an apt comparison, Mr. Ahmed feels, noting that after the 1995 Oklahoma City terrorist bombing by a white former soldier, [Timothy J. McVeigh](#), not every blond with a buzz cut was pulled over.

"I know I have to be demure and humble when I approach a ticket agent," Mr. Ahmed said. "If you show any ounce of negativity or righteousness, they'll deny you, they'll say, 'You're not getting on this flight, I don't like your attitude.'"

When he called a phone line for those with travel problems like his, he said, he got no response. "I understand the need for security, but they go overboard, they always have to put on this public display," he said. Mr. Usman, 30, and part of a different comedy act called Allah Made Me Funny, draws big laughs when joking about his obviously Muslim appearance. "If I was a crazy Muslim fundamentalist, this is not the disguise I would go with," he cracks.

He refuses to shave his beard. "I have a problem that people associate a certain look with Muslim terrorists," he said by telephone from his native Chicago. "The look of someone trying to live a religious life, having a long beard, has been around a lot longer than Osama bin Laden and will be around a lot longer than Osama bin Laden."

Most of those wrongly placed on the watch list seethe with frustration and anger, finding it unbelievable that a technologically advanced country like the United States has been unable to develop a list that can distinguish between a lurking terrorist and a harmless citizen with a Muslim name.

Khurram Wahid, a lawyer, said that the Transportation Security Administration had made empty promises for years about making improvements. "If the name John Smith was on the designated list," Mr. Wahid said, "I guarantee they would have come up with some way to check that list."

Dr. Sam Hamade, 33, was born in Lebanon and carries a Canadian passport but is a permanent United States resident and is seeking citizenship. A senior resident at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, Dr. Hamade legally changed his name from Osama to Sam to make his patients more comfortable.

In the last two years, driving back from Canada after visiting relatives or his fiancée, Dr. Hamade said, he has been detained at least six times. He has found himself weeping with frustration, he said, because the same thing happens every time — he is photographed, fingerprinted and his body groped — and every time the border police say that they are just following procedures.

Dr. Hamade was handed a "Fact Sheet" instructing him to write to the Border Patrol's "Customer Satisfaction Unit" in Washington. He wrote, but has received no answer. A complaint filed with the Department of Homeland Security in April has also elicited no response.

"It's a nightmare," Dr. Hamade said.

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