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Airport Scrutiny of Headgear Raises Bias Claims From Sikhs

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

WASHINGTON, Aug. 29 — A new federal policy that subjects travelers who wear any type of head covering to possible additional screening at airport checkpoints has prompted vociferous protests from Sikh organizations, who say they are being singled out for ethnic profiling.

Muslim women who veil their hair are also expressing concern that the change — particularly because further screening is at the discretion of each screener — will single out Muslims.

“The federal government has equated our most precious article of faith with terrorism,” said Amardeep Singh, the executive director of the Sikh Coalition, an advocacy group for Sikhs, whose faith dictates that men wear turbans, though some women do as well. “To send a message that the turban is dangerous sends the wrong message to society.”

The [Transportation Security Administration](#), which adopted and is enforcing the policy, said that it was aimed not just at turbans but at any headgear and that it was one of the periodic adjustments made to address changing threats. It addresses nonmetallic threats including some explosives.

The change allows for screeners to pat down anyone who is wearing a hat or other head covering, even if the person clears a metal detector.

“It is a matter of when the security officer cannot reasonably determine that the head area is free of a threat item,” said Amy Kudwa, a spokeswoman for the agency.

The change was part of several adjustments made on Aug. 4, including allowing passengers to carry cigarette lighters and small quantities of bottled breast milk. But the change regarding headgear was not publicized and came to light only after many Sikh passengers underwent additional screenings.

A Sikh businessman, Prabhjit Singh, said he was made to leave the screening line when he balked at the secondary search before an early flight on Aug. 17 from Baltimore/Washington International Airport. Mr. Singh was not told of the new policy until after his turban was inspected by hand in a private room.

“The supervisor made me feel like I had done something wrong,” said Mr. Singh, 27, a motivational speaker from Maryland. “I felt for the first time in America that I had been targeted, and it was because of the way I looked.”

The fact that the policy was put into effect without consulting Sikhs also rankled the Sikh Coalition, which puts the number of Sikhs in the United States at 280,000, part of about 21 million in the world. Ms. Kudwa said the Transportation Security Administration was now discussing the policy with Sikh leaders.

Neither the transportation agency nor the [Department of Homeland Security](#) would say whether the change was prompted by a specific threat.

Sikh advocates say passengers should be searched randomly if the policy's intent is to look for nonmetallic explosives.

Although Sikhism has nothing to do with Islam, its members often suffer from anti-Muslim sentiment because their turbans lend them a superficial resemblance to men like the Ayatollah [Ruhollah Khomeini](#) of Iran and [Osama bin Laden](#). They say law enforcement officers are often ignorant of the difference.

Being stopped at airport checkpoints has also caused concern among Muslim women who veil their hair, prompting some to wear American-looking attire — like a baseball cap — to avoid added scrutiny while traveling.

Muslim women said their main concern was that there was no uniform code.

“There is the problem of abuse depending on who is in charge of a particular airport and if that individual has any bias toward Muslims,” said Maha ElGenaidi, president of the Islamic Networks Group, which helps conduct cultural sensitivity classes for police groups and other organizations.

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