

Imams Kicked Off Flight Sue US Airways

Six Muslim scholars who were kicked off a US Airways flight last fall have filed a lawsuit claiming the airline discriminated against them and violated their civil rights.

The imams, most of whom are from Arizona, were returning from a religious conference in November when they were taken off a plane in Minneapolis, handcuffed and questioned. They had prayed on their prayer rugs in the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport before the flight, and after they boarded, a passenger passed a note to a flight attendant.

The 39-page complaint, filed Monday in federal court in Minnesota, seeks an undisclosed amount of money for punitive and compensatory damages. Besides US Airways, the lawsuit names the Minnesota Metropolitan Airports Commission, the owner of the airport, as a defendant.

Ahmed Shqeirat, 42, Mohamed Ibrahim, 31, Didmar Faja, 26, Omar Shahin, 45, Mahmoud Sulaiman, 49, and Marwan Sadeddin, 55, all live in or near Phoenix, except Ibrahim, who is from Bakersfield, California.

They said they were handcuffed, questioned by police, surrounded by police dogs and held in a cell with loud music. Two Secret Service officers asked some of the scholars whether they "liked the president of the United States" and if they "would like the president to be harmed," according to the complaint.

"We have a major problem with discrimination against Arabs and Muslims, and airlines (are) not an exception," said the imams' attorney, Omar T. Mohammedi, in a telephone interview. "People have to protect themselves from this type of discrimination."

US Airways Group Inc. has said prayer was never the issue. A passenger reported overhearing anti-U.S. statements, and the men got up and moved around the airplane, the airline said. The men said they had done nothing to arouse suspicion.

The airline released a statement saying that it had not seen the lawsuit, but that its initial position had not changed: that its employees "acted appropriately, and we continue to back the actions of our crew and ground employees in this case."

The airport commission was included in the lawsuit because it employs the officers who removed the scholars from the plane.

Commission spokesman Patrick Hogan denied the claims in the lawsuit, saying "the airport commission believes that airport police acted appropriately in responding to US Airways request for assistance."

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