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Airport Security: Let's Profile Muslims

by *Asra Q. Nomani*

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In the wake of yet another Muslim terror plot, we can't ignore the threat profile any longer—or the solution. Asra Q. Nomani argues the case for religious and racial profiling.

For all those holiday travelers negotiating the Transportation Security Administration's new cop-a-fee strategy, there is a difficult solution we need to consider: racial and religious profiling.

As an American Muslim, I've come to recognize, sadly, that there is one common denominator defining those who've got their eyes trained on U.S. targets: MANY of them are Muslim—like the Somali-born teenager arrested Friday night for a reported plot to detonate a car bomb at a packed Christmas tree-lighting ceremony in downtown [Portland, Oregon](#).

We have to talk about the taboo topic of profiling because terrorism experts are increasingly recognizing that religious ideology makes terrorist organizations and terrorists more likely to commit heinous crimes against civilians, such as blowing an airliner out of the sky. Certainly, it's not an easy or comfortable conversation but it's one, I believe, we must have.

This past week, as part of a debate series sponsored by the New York-based group [Intelligence Squared](#), I argued that U.S. airports should use racial and religious profiling. (Taking the opposite stand was a "debating team" that included the former director of the Department of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff; Columbia University scholar of Pakistan, Hassan Abbas; and Debra Burlingame, a former flight attendant whose brother was a pilot of one of the planes hijacked on 9/11.)

I realize that in recent years, profiling has become a dirty word, synonymous with prejudice, racism, and bigotry. But while I believe our risk assessment should not end with religion, race and ethnicity, I believe that it should include these important elements, as part of a "triage" strategy that my debate partner, former CIA case officer Robert Baer, says airports and airlines already do.

Profiling doesn't have to be about discrimination, persecution, or harassment. As my debating partner, conservative columnist Deroy Murdock put it: "We are not arguing that the TSA should send anyone named Mohammad to be waterboarded somewhere between the first-class lounge and the Pizza Hut."

In an online posting of the Intelligence Squared video, a Muslim viewer called me
an “Uncle Tom.”

And more Americans, it seems, are willing to choose racial and religious profiling as one part of keeping our skies safe. At the beginning of the debate, 37 percent of the audience was for religious and racial profiling, while 33 percent were against and 30 percent were undecided. By the end of the debate, 49 percent of the audience was for religious and racial profiling, 40 percent were against and the rest were undecided, meaning that that the motion carried. Of course, this “victory” in a scholarly debate doesn’t mean that the motion would necessarily win any broader popularity contests.

In the debate, I said, “Profile me. Profile my family,” because, in my eyes, we in the Muslim community have failed to police ourselves. In an online posting of the Intelligence Squared video, a Muslim viewer called me an “Uncle Tom.”

But to me, profiling isn’t about identity politics but about threat assessment.

According to a terrorism database at the University of Maryland, which documents 60 attacks against airlines and airports between 1970 and 2007, the last year available, suspects in attacks during the 1970s were tied to the Jewish Defense League, the Black Panthers, the Black September, the National Front for the Liberation of Cuba, Jewish Armed Resistance and the Croatian Freedom Fighters, along with a few other groups.

In each of these groups’ names was a religious or ethnic dimension. For that time, those were the identities that we needed to assess. Today, the threat has changed, and it is primarily coming from Muslims who embrace al Qaeda’s radical brand of Islam.

Data in reports released over the past several months from New York University’s Center for Security and the Law; the Congressional Research Service, and the Rand Corporation reveal that over the past decade not only are many defendants in terrorism cases Muslim, but they trace their national or ethnic identity back to specific countries.

According to the Rand study “Would-Be Warriors,” the national origins or ethnicities most defendants came from was Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Jordan and Egypt, with a handful from the Muslim areas of the Balkans.

To be sure, according to New York University’s Center for Security and the Law “Terrorist Trial Report Card,” an analysis of terrorism cases prosecuted between 2001 and 2009 reveals that identifying race and ethnicity doesn’t mean stereotyping according to country. Among the hundreds of defendants in the study, most held U.S. citizenship. Still, many of the Americans were ethnically connected to Pakistan, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

The track record of Muslim plots against airliners and airports is clear, starting with the 1989 bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. After the first World Trade Center attack in 1993, Ramzi Yousef schemed with his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a Muslim of Pakistani Baluchi ethnicity, to blow up 12 jetliners traveling from Asia to the U.S., intending to kill as many as 4,000 people. The plan fell apart in

1995 after a chemical fire caught the attention of police in the Philippines, but a test run had already killed one passenger seated near a nitroglycerin bomb on a Philippine Airlines Flight.

Three years later, Osama bin Laden threatened to bring down U.S. and Israeli aircrafts through the International Islamic Front for Fighting Against the Jews and Crusaders, warning the attacks would be “pitiless and violent” and announcing that “the war has begun.”

“Our response to the barbaric bombardment against Muslims of Afghanistan and Sudan will be ruthless and violent,” he said in a statement. “All the Islamic world has mobilized to strike a prominent American or Israeli strategic objective, to blow up their airplanes and to seize them.” A declassified CIA memo written in December 1998 warned: “Bin Ladin preparing to hijack U.S. aircraft.”

In 1999, we had a “Millennium bomber,” targeting Los Angeles International Airport. And, in a case that became very personal to me, on Dec. 24, 1999, a group of Pakistani Muslim militants hijacked an Indian Airlines jet from Kathmandu, Nepal, diverting it to Kandahar, Afghanistan, killing one newlywed passenger. In exchange for the passengers, India released Muslim militants, including a Pakistan-British Muslim militant named Omar Sheikh. Sheikh went on to mastermind the 2002 kidnapping of my friend, Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, whom Khalid Sheikh Mohammed later confessed to killing.

After the Kathmandu hijacking, we had the 9/11 attacks. And since then, we’ve had the “Torrance Plotters,” the “JFK Airport Plotters,” the Glasgow, Scotland, bombers, and the “Transatlantic bombers,” all targeting airlines and airports. More recently, there was the attempt by the “underwear bomber,” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who last Christmas attempted to blow up explosives in his underwear—a foiled attack that brought the pat-downs of today. In addition to the Portland plot, most recently, we had the package bomb attempt out of Yemen last month.

Victor Asal, a political science professor at State University of New York at Albany, and Karl Rethemeyer, a professor of public administration and policy at SUNY at Albany, have studied 395 terrorist organizations in operation between 1998 and 2005, and Asal concludes, “What makes terrorist organizations more lethal is religious ideology. When you combine religion and ethno-nationalism, you get a dangerous combination.”

Asal, the son of a Tunisian father, says there hasn’t been enough research done for him to take a stand on racial and religious profiling, but favors “behavioral profiling,” which assesses risky behavior like buying one-way tickets with cash and flying without checked baggage.

As attorney R. Spencer MacDonald put it in an article in the Brigham Young University Journal of Public Law, we can have “rational profiling.”

I know this is an issue of great distress to many people. But I believe that we cannot bury our heads in the sand anymore. We have to choose pragmatism over political correctness, and allow U.S. airports and airlines to do religious and racial profiling.

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