

Muslim woman strip-searched at Chicago's O'Hare airport

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In another example of the growing attacks—ranging from blatant discrimination and state-sanctioned bigotry, to outright physical brutality—faced by people of Arab descent in America, the Chicago, Illinois chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has filed a lawsuit on behalf of an American Muslim student who was singled out and strip-searched at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport because of her ethnic background.

Samar Kaukab, a 22-year-old Ohio State University student, who is an American citizen of Pakistani descent, charges in her lawsuit that an Illinois National Guardsman and three security personnel subjected her to a degrading, unnecessary and illegal search.

The suit is believed to be the first in over 100 cases pending of alleged airport discrimination against Muslims since the September 11 terrorist attacks. The lawsuit names the Illinois National Guard and Argenbright Security, Inc., as defendants.

“We believe this case is about ethnic intimidation and discrimination and that she was searched based on her ethnicity and religion,” Edwin Yohnka of the Chicago office of the ACLU told the *WSWS*. “This is a violation of her civil rights and it also raises constitutional issues. We believe that when she was asked to take off her hijab it was a violation of her freedom of religious expression. And we believe that singling her out the line was a violation of her 14th amendment rights (the equal protection clause).”

At a press conference called by the ACLU and attended by Ms. Kaukab, they explained that on November 7, 2001, Kaukab was returning to her Columbus, Ohio home after attending a Volunteers in Service to America (VISA) conference. Kaukab works for VISA, a US government agency that helps low income students. Along with many other coworkers,

she checked in her luggage at the airport and proceeded through the security metal detectors when the incident began.

Despite the fact that the metal detectors did not go off, the ACLU reported, a member of the Illinois National Guard instructed a security guard to search Ms. Kaukab more carefully. The security employee then passed a metal detector over Ms. Kaukab's body and inside her boots. He continued by patting her upper body and pulling at the straps and hook on her bra.

At that point, the ACLU states, a crowd began to gather, watching the embarrassing examination by the security team. The guard then began to slowly pass the wand repeatedly around Ms. Kaukab's head. At no point during this extensive search was there any indication of a metallic or any other prohibited item. Nevertheless, the security guard, abiding by the instruction of the National Guardsman, further demanded that Ms. Kaukab remove her hijab, the traditional headscarf of Muslim women.

Ms. Kaukab told the press conference, “I explained that my reticence about removing the hijab was not an effort to be uncooperative. It simply reflected my own religious beliefs and practices...I offered to take the hijab off but only in a private area or behind a screen and only if it was in front of a woman.”

Initially both the security guard and National Guardsman, who continued to demand that Kaukab remove the hijab, rejected the proposal.

“The security personnel and the National Guardsman were completely insensitive to Ms. Kaukab's religious beliefs,” stated Lorie Chaiten, a lawyer for the Illinois ACLU. “The search continued to escalate even though Ms. Kaukab passed through the metal detector without incident, and further searches produced no indication of anything being hidden beneath her hijab. The escalating

nature of the search was completely unjustified.”

Ms. Kaukab was then escorted to a small room where she was searched by two female security guards. During the inspection the male security guard walked in, prompting Kaukab to again protest the violation of her privacy and insensitivity to her religious beliefs. Only after her strenuous demands did he leave.

The search, however, became even more humiliating after his departure. Kaukab removed her hijab, and the female guards combed their fingers through her head and scalp and began to strip the young woman unwillingly of her clothing.

Yohnka said the two female guards’ search was invasive. “They open her sweater, feel her breasts, and one woman unbuckles her pants and unzips her. Then she sticks her hand down her pants, and patted down her lower abdomen and between her legs over her underwear.”

“After the incident they just tell her that she can go,” continued Yohnka. “Throughout the ordeal they did not tell her anything, including what they were doing or what to expect.”

Lorie Chaiten, another ACLU lawyer, emphasized, “Ms. Kaukab was identified and subjected to a humiliating search not because she posed any security threat, but only because her wearing a hijab identified her as a Muslim.” Chaiten said Kaukab was subjected to the subjected to the degrading treatment solely because of her “ethnicity and religion.”

Ms. Kaukab told the local media in Columbus, “It’s not just a piece of cloth that I wear. It gives me control of the privacy of my body.” The 30-minute ordeal she said was “embarrassing, intrusive and humiliating.”

The Illinois ACLU Legal Director Harvey Grossman pointed out that the agency is aware or at least 100 cases of Muslim Americans being harassed at airports since September 11. The lawsuit demands that the district court issue an injunction preventing any future unreasonable searches and seizures based on ethnic and religious discrimination.

The web site of the American Arabic Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) has recorded 520 incidents of violence against Arab Americans since September 11. These cases do not include the hundreds of cases of employment discrimination, police searches, and a significant increase in tensions at schools where Arab students have had problems with students,

teachers and school administrators.

Referring to the Kaukab case, Yohnka told the WSWS, “When something like this happens, you always hope that this will bring about a change. You hope that it will lead to reforms and put in place the training needed in airports around the country.”

“One of the reasons that case has developed,” continued Yohnka, “is because she had the courage to come forward and file this suit.”



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