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Turban Searches Rile Sikh Community

Rule Change Gives Airport Workers Wider Leeway in Screening Headgear

By [Pamela Constable](#) and [Del Quentin Wilber](#)

Washington Post Staff Writers
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Like all practicing Sikhs, Gurpreet Singh Tuteja wears his turban as a sacred symbol of his faith and its values of discipline and austerity. Every morning, the [Arlington County](#) business consultant winds a long bolt of black or saffron cloth tightly around his uncut hair, where it remains until he returns home. He has worn the turban on hundreds of business trips, without incident.

But several weeks ago, when he was boarding a flight in [Cedar Rapids, Iowa](#), to return to Washington, Tuteja, 24, said he felt shocked and humiliated when a Transportation Safety Administration screener pulled him aside to "pat down" his turban as part of a new policy, even though he had passed through the metal detector without incident.

"For us, the turban is a sign of respect for God. It is not like a cowboy hat. It was very uncomfortable having someone touch it," Tuteja said Friday. "I am all for the security of the United States. I am an American, too. But it should not come to the point where civil liberties are denied. I want the airways to be safe, but I also want my rights."

The new TSA policy, enacted Aug. 4 along with other rule changes, gives airport screeners additional discretion to search passengers' headgear, including turbans, which could conceal plastic or other nonmetal parts of explosive devices. Agency officials said the policy is not meant to single out any groups.

"We were looking at where people can hide" bomb components, TSA Administrator Kip Hawley said of the policy in a recent interview. "Whether it's a cowboy hat or a turban, this is

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what it is. And it was not directed at any one type of person or religion. It was directed at keeping bomb parts off of airplanes."

The measure set off an uproar in the country's well-organized Sikh community, whose members are sensitive to religious slights and are on guard against being unfairly suspected as terrorists. To many, the new rules seem to cross a line from inconvenience to insult, from prudence to prejudice.

About a half-million Sikhs live in the United States, with 10,000 in the Washington region. Many are technology and science professionals, and most are first- or second-generation immigrants from [India](#), where Sikhism was founded several centuries ago as an offshoot of Hinduism.

"Our religion is one of peace and harmony, and our turbans stand for everything that is against terrorism," said Amardeep Singh, executive director of the Sikh Coalition in [New York](#). "By saying that our turbans should be subject to additional screening, the federal government has equated our most precious article of faith with a terrorist implement."

Sikh groups, who say that about 50 Sikhs have had their turbans inspected since Aug. 4, said that the policy change goes against an agreement they made with TSA officials after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Under that agreement, Sikhs were allowed to wear turbans through airport detectors when other passengers had to remove their hats. If the machine did not beep, the traveler could continue. If it beeped, the turban would be screened with a wand, patted down, or removed and examined in a private screening area.

Under the new rules, even if there is no alarm, a TSA screener can ask to examine a turban.

"The procedure we came up with in 2001 was working fine. It was respectful of religious practice while also allowing airports to do screening," said Ranjit Singh, an official with the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund in Washington. The new procedure, he said, is misguided and subject to abuse. "A Sikh's turban becomes like part of his body. To have it removed is like being strip-searched."

As a result of the outcry, TSA officials have spoken with Sikh groups and plan to meet with them this week. Officials said they would normally have alerted Sikh groups to the changes but were focused on other adjustments, such as loosened restrictions on carrying lighters and breast milk.

"It wasn't intentional," Chris White, a TSA spokesman, said last week. "It was just an oversight."

The turban controversy is not the first clash between public safety and Sikh culture, which also requires male devotees to carry a small ceremonial dagger, called a kirpan, as a symbol of martial traditions. After dozens of post-9/11 confrontations over carrying kirpans in airports or courthouses, Sikhs have become accustomed to putting kirpans in checked luggage.

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