



The TSA Report Card

A Quarterly Review of Security Screenings of Sikh Travelers in U.S. Airports

December 2008

Oakland Airport Tops the List for Mandatory Screenings

Based on reports we received from Sikh travelers in the fourth quarter, Oakland Airport appears to be engaging in mandatory secondary screening for Sikh turbans and patkas. Eighteen out of 18 incident reports we received from Oakland in the fourth quarter indicated secondary screenings at that airport.

In addition, the Sikh Coalition heard from at least two frequent fliers who asserted that they were secondarily screened every single time they flew out of Oakland in the last year. A formal complaint has been filed with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) on behalf of one of these men. The TSA has not yet provided a response to the complaint.

In addition to the problems at Oakland Airport, mandatory screenings overall appear to be spreading to more airports around the country. Travelers identified six airports where they were told by Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) that all turbans must be checked. These airports include **Chicago O'Hare, Seattle-Tacoma, Boston Logan, Richmond, Reagan International, and Memphis**. Three of these airports have been appearing in our "problem airports" list for the past two quarters.

The Sikh Coalition has approached the TSA a number of times since November 2008 to resolve the problem at Oakland Airport. The TSA has refused to meet with us to date. A roundtable conference is scheduled for early February. TSA personnel from headquarters and all Northern California Airports, United Sikhs, SALDEF and the Sikh Coalition have been asked to attend.

The total number of airports represented in our fourth quarter data was 32 nationwide. The total number of incidents—good and bad—reported to us in the fourth quarter was 83.

Screening Sikhs by the Numbers:	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Sikhs who were not informed of their option to conduct a self-pat-down	22 (out of 80)	7 (out of 37)	4 (out of 39)	11 (out of 59)
Sikhs who were told that turban screening is mandatory	18 (out of 80)	15 (out of 37)	4 (out of 39)	7 (out of 59)
Screening complaints stemming from California airports	49%	35%	31%	42%
Sikhs sent for additional screening who reported feeling singled out	64%	92%	70%	51%

*Note that all these numbers are based on self-reporting by Sikh travelers. As a result, since people are more likely to complain about negative experiences, this percentage is likely weighted towards bad experiences.

Year in Review

The Sikh Coalition has tracked implementation of the turban screening policy since its revision in October 2007. In the first few months after the revision, we saw that TSOs understood that a turban should not be removed, but many were not offering Sikhs the three optional methods of secondary screening. This has improved over the year.

In the first six months of 2008, we received an overwhelming number of complaints regarding 100% screening at San Francisco Airport. That issue was resolved at the end of the summer, through direct advocacy with the TSA and local lawmakers.

Throughout the year, we flagged incidents nationwide in which Sikh travelers were incorrectly screened or were told about mandatory screenings. This continues to be the case, and we pledge to tackle this continuing problem in 2009.

Why Numbers Matter

- Numbers speak louder than words.
- Sikhs who speak out are the reason we have been able to make any progress on this issue since the TSA's headwear policy went into effect in 2007.
- And we still need your help. If you wear a dastar or other head covering, please report your experience **each time you fly**—whether you are secondarily screened or not.

Change is only possible if Sikhs like you tell us what is happening on the ground.

Please report.

Isolated Incidents

In addition to patterns at specific airports, some Sikh travelers reported procedural discrepancies at various airports.

1. A passenger travelling through **Philadelphia Airport** was allowed to pass through by the TSO standing at the metal detector. However, a separate TSO then came up and told the first TSO to stop the passenger for additional screening.
2. A Sikh passenger traveling through **John Wayne Airport in Orange County, CA** was told that he did not have the right to pat-down his own turban.
3. A passenger traveling through **Newark International Airport** cleared secondary screening in a puffer machine, but was told he must still submit to a pat-down of his turban. The TSO advised him that a secondary screening of the turban is mandated, regardless of the results of the puffer machine.
4. A Sikh passenger traveling through **Dallas Fort-Worth Airport** was not given the option to conduct a pat-down in a private area. This passenger was also told that baseball caps do not need to be checked by security, but that his turban was non-form-fitting headwear.

Is This Standard Procedure?

The reports we continued to receive in Q4 indicate a systemic issue with screeners' perception of "the policy." Many of you reported that when you asked a screener why you had been chosen for secondary screening, you were told "this is standard procedure" or "this is our policy."

The statement itself is difficult to dissect. Is the screener stopping you because they misunderstand the policy to be a mandatory turban search? Or is he/she stopping you because they've correctly applied the policy in your particular case? When a Sikh is pulled aside for secondary screening of his/her dastar, it is unclear whether the reason is profiling or an incorrect application of the policy.

Sikh turbans should only be secondarily screened if the TSO at the metal detector thinks that a particular Sikh's turban is "bulky." That is the policy. The policy is **NOT** that all turbans need to be screened.

A patka, unlike a turban, is very closely fitting to the head, and therefore should not be constantly getting screened as a "bulky item." If your or your son's patka is being screened every time, you can advise the screener that there is nothing about a patka that makes it bulkier than a woman's blouse. Hence, if women's shirts are not being searched, the patka should not reasonably be searched as "bulky" either. If you or your child are asked to submit a patka to secondary screening, please report that to us as a separate incident.

When stopped for a secondary screening, ask why the TSO stopped you. If the answer is "it's policy," ask what that means—it should not be policy to always search a turban. "It's policy" is only a valid response if the TSO says your turban is bulky.

Recommendations

The Sikh Coalition recommends the TSA take the following steps to improve service to the Sikh community.

1. Based on complaint patterns, follow up with problem airports that seem to be interpreting the policy as mandatory turban screening.
2. Audit TSA screeners in the exercise of their discretion to ensure that individual TSA employees are not engaging in racial profiling at U.S. airports.
3. Substantively involve Sikh civil rights groups in the development of training materials for screeners.
4. Conduct outreach to the Sikh community to explain the purpose and functioning of the revised policy. Post information about the procedure in Punjabi.

Are you a turbaned Sikh?
Have you flown through these cities lately?

Seattle, WA
Chicago, IL
Memphis, TN
Richmond, CA
Boston, MA

Help us get accurate information for our report cards by reporting your screening experiences—good or bad!

Report your experience online through
www.sikhcoalition.org, or directly in our online survey at
https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=NR_2b9q39Bf9bgnsn3UBnAGA_3d_3d.