

MPRnews

Being Muslim in Minnesota

Laura Yuen Minneapolis September 8, 2011 6:00 p.m.



Minneapolis police officers Abdiwahab Ali, left, and Mohamed Abdullahi take a break in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minn. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011. The partners have been working the Cedar-Riverside beat for nearly two years.

MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson

The fact that Minnesota is home to the Mall of America, an international airport and a large Muslim population has drawn a significant amount of official attention to the state since the Sept. 11th terrorist attacks.

Over the past decade, Muslims living here have wrestled with the actions of the 9/11 hijackers, who they say distorted their religion in the worst possible way. At the same time, they're navigating a new terrain of terror alerts and fears about skin color, facial hair and clothing.

Even those with successful careers believe the state's vigilance has come at a price to their civil liberties. Two Minneapolis police officers are a case in point.

Partners Mohamed Abdullahi and Abdiwahab Ali are cruising the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis in their squad car. The officers jokingly call this neighborhood, with its high-rises and Somali shops, "the motherland."

It was their first home when they arrived as Somali refugees in America. And now this is their neighborhood to protect and serve.

Abdullahi and Ali are tall and are in their 30s. When they walk about Cedar in their blue uniforms, some kids treat them like rock stars. Somali cops are still a rare sight, even in the "motherland."



Minneapolis police officer Mohamed Abdullahi communicates with the MPD after stopping a car in the Cedar-Riverside area of Minneapolis, Minn. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011. Abdullahi, who was the first Somali-American officer in Minnesota, said his civil rights were violated last month when he was detained at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson

Abdiwahab Ali says it was 9/11 that inspired him to consider a career in law enforcement. He remembers watching TV footage of emergency workers running toward the burning World Trade Center.

"I saw the police officers and firefighters doing something, protecting these people, and going to the buildings," Ali recalled. "That's exactly when I thought, 'You know what? You can be one of these guys. There's something you can do that empowers you. You don't feel helpless, like when you felt in Somalia when the civil war happened, and you just ran away.'"

Ali didn't realize at the time how the war against terror would soon spread to his own neighborhood. In November 2001, two months after the terrorist attacks, the FBI shut down several money transfer offices in Cedar-Riverside and in cities across the country. These

are businesses that local Somalis use to send cash to family in their war-stricken homeland.

President George W. Bush said the government acted on evidence linking al-Qaida to two financial networks. He called the raids a "new step" in the war against terrorism.

"The entry point to these networks may be a small storefront operation, but follow the network to its center, and you discover wealthy banks and sophisticated technology, all at the service of mass murderers," Bush said at the time. "By shutting these networks down, we disrupt the murderers' work."

That case, however, did not lead to any terror-related charges. The FBI later closed the investigation.

MUSLIMS SINGLED OUT AT AIRPORT

That was just the beginning of the changes affecting Muslims in Minnesota. Even these two police officers say they've felt the extra scrutiny since 9/11. For both of them, it came at the epicenter of national anti-terrorism defense -- the airport. And both believe they were singled out because of their Muslim names.



Minneapolis police officers Mohamed Abdullahi, right, and Abdiwahab Ali share an Iftar meal with community members during Ramadan in Minneapolis, Minn. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011. MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson

Officer Abdullahi recounts how he returned to the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport last month after visiting family in Kenya. Abdullahi says as a customs agent inspected his luggage, he flashed his badge and identified himself as a Minneapolis police officer, "just to make the job easy for them, (so they knew) who they were dealing with."

But the customs agent handed his passport to a supervisor. Abdullahi was escorted to an office, where

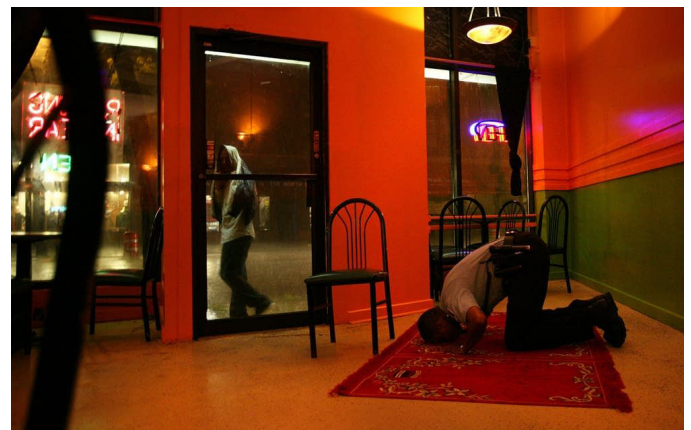
he says he was detained for two hours.

"They started asking me whether I was a Muslim, a practicing Muslim. Deep down, it really bothered me," he said. "They know my name is Mohamed Abdullahi. Obviously, I'm a Muslim. What does that have to do with me being in their office?"

Abdullahi gets emotional when he tries to make sense of it. He says it was the first time in this country that he felt like his civil rights were violated.

He acknowledges there is a legitimate threat of radicalized young Somali-Americans coming back to the U.S. to do harm. Federal authorities allege that about two dozen young Twin Cities men traveled to the Horn of Africa to train with al-Shabab, a terrorist group with links to al-Qaida.

But Abdullahi says he and the customs officer are on the same side of this war.



Mohamed Abdullahi prays after breaking his fast at a restaurant in Minneapolis, Minn. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011. As a Muslim, Abdullahi MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson

"I'm out there to get the bad guys. And I felt I was the bad guy," he said.

Customs and Border Protection officials would not speak about Abdullahi's case for privacy reasons. They deny profiling travelers based on ethnicity or religion, but say they do act on intelligence. Federal authorities have always been concerned that the al-Shabab recruits from America could slip back into the U.S. and wage an attack here.

A CBP officer might ask about a traveler's religion or at which mosque they worship to break the ice, said Kathleen Koetz, assistant port director at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport.

CBP spokesman Brian Bell said a customs officer tasked with preventing terrorists from entering the U.S. must take precautions to protect national security.

"We base our actions on intelligence," Bell said. "If there's an issue with a concern or threat that young Somali teenagers are leaving Minneapolis and being trained with the intent of returning and doing harm, it's our responsibility to act accordingly."

The FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office in Minnesota say their recent outreach efforts, particularly with the Somali-American community, are paying off. A broader roundtable discussion involving various local, regional, and federal law enforcement agencies meets regularly with local Somalis.

FLYING WHILE MUSLIM

MPR News invited seven Muslim professionals from the Twin Cities to discuss how life has changed for them since 9/11. All were in the United States at the time of the attacks. The group included a pharmacist, a college student and an electrical engineer. They come from a diverse tapestry of roots: Indian, Pakistani, Somali, Ethiopian and Afghan.

Four of the seven say they've been stopped for secondary questioning at airports, and that flying while Muslim is one of the most pressing civil liberties issues for Americans of their faith.



Officer Mohamed Abdullahi handcuffs a young offender as his partner Abdiwahab Ali assists in Minneapolis, Minn. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011. MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson

"Personally, I think twice if I want to travel," said Indian American Nausheena Hussain. "When my husband has to travel, I really do not like it if he is traveling alone."

Hussain covers her hair in public and says she's stopped almost every time she flies, including on a recent family vacation to the Caribbean.

"My husband was taken to a different room, and me and my kids were separated. Not knowing what's happening and what to do is very scary," she said.

Muslims pray five times a day, even in public places. And if they're on a plane, some will take the step of alerting nearby passengers.

University of Minnesota student Lolla Mohammed Nur, who's of Ethiopian descent, says she also tips off airport security before she finds a place to worship.

"I found that it actually works because then they know, 'Oh, she's actually talked to us.' And if somebody does try to accuse me of planning something, somebody from the TSA knows," said Nur. "But I think it's unfair that in our own country, we have to be questioning the way we dress and even our own religion, every time we travel."

From a practical standpoint, Tamim Saidi, who is from Afghanistan, says putting extra scrutiny on Muslims while flying won't make the nation safer.

"Law enforcement knows they need the Muslim community to be on their side for them to report if they see anything unusual," said Saidi. "But if the Muslims are feeling disgruntled, harassed, and embarrassed all the time, they're going to be less likely to share it with them."

IN MINNESOTA, LESS BIGOTRY, MORE IGNORANCE

On the whole, many Muslims say Minnesota is much more accepting of their faith than in other states. They tell stories of how neighbors, co-workers and even police officers checked in with them after 9/11 to show their solidarity with them as Americans.

Lori Saroya of the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations says the aftermath of the terrorist attacks seemed to unify the country. Saroya says a more concerning spike in anti-Muslim rhetoric came more recently, with the election of President Barack Obama.

Still, she says hate crimes against Muslims are relatively rare in the state.

"In Minnesota, it's a little different because we don't see a lot of outright bigotry and hate. What we're

seeing in Minnesota is a lot of ignorance," she said.

Mosques and organizations like the Islamic Resource Group say through interfaith events and educational visits to workplaces and schools, they're determined to show other Minnesotans the Islam they know is a religion of peace.

Bill Braniff of West Point's Countering Terrorism Center trains law enforcement agencies on how to use community-oriented policing in the battle against extremism.

"The idea is to recognize that the Muslim-American community is beset by dual predators," he said. "One one hand, you have jihadist recruiters and radicalizers preying upon Muslim-American community."

On the other hand, Braniff says, you have rising levels of Islamophobia. He says the two threats, ironically, reinforce each other. Jihadists say the West is at war with Islam, and anti-Muslim voices say Islam is at war with the west. Braniff says this makes the job tougher for law enforcement, especially if Muslims view the agencies as predators or not trustworthy.

The FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office in Minnesota say their growing outreach efforts, particularly within the Somali-American community, are paying off. A broader group of law-enforcement agencies, ranging from local police to federal agencies, such as Customs and Border Protection, also meets regularly local Somalis.

INCREASED SCRUTINY AT MALL OF AMERICA

Yet as the government encourages private citizens and businesses to report suspicious behavior, Muslims say they're often the ones flagged.

A [joint investigation](#) by NPR and the Center for Investigative Reporting examined more than 100 suspicious-activity reports filed by the Mall of America with Bloomington police. Out of all the suspicious people the mall says it reported to police, nearly two-thirds of them appeared to be people of color. That's a lot higher than the national and statewide percentages for people of color.

Nauman Tariq was one of the so-called suspicious people. Tariq is a resident neurologist at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview.

One evening in August 2010, Tariq says he and his



Nauman Tariq of New Brighton, a neurology resident physician, is shown at work at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview, one of many hospitals where he rotates in the Twin Cities. Tariq was stopped by Bloomington police last year after a Mall of America security officer reported he was acting suspiciously. Tariq believes he was targeted because of his appearance. "I look like a Muslim a mile away." MPR Photo/Laura Yuen

father, who was visiting from their native Pakistan, were leaving the mall and had pulled up into the IKEA parking lot. That's when Tariq noticed a Bloomington police car following him with the lights on. Tariq assumed he was speeding, or had missed a stop sign.

The officer approached Tariq's car and asked something that stuck with the doctor.

"First question he asked me was where was I originally from," Tariq recalled.

As other shoppers watched, Tariq was asked to put his hands above his head while the officer patted him down.

The officer explained that the mall called police because Tariq was acting suspiciously.

"I asked him, 'What did I do?' All he could tell was I used the bathroom, and then he said it looked like I was walking fast with my father, and I was using my cell phone a lot. These three things he was telling me."

Tariq says he later was asked to get into the back seat of the squad car. That's when he spotted something on the officer's laptop computer that caused his mind to race.

"My name was on there on the laptop with my address, and there was this highlighted sentence saying 'possible terrorist threat.' That's when I realized there was something really wrong here," said Tariq.

“Please bear in mind that 'suspicious' does not equate to 'guilty.'”

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The Mall of America created a special program to protect itself from terrorists who might be attracted to the mall simply for its name. A mall spokesman says its counterterrorism unit conducts interviews based on suspicious behavior, not appearances. He noted that the label "suspicious" does not amount to guilt, but mall security is obliged to follow up whenever there's a concern.

"Research indicates that profiling based on ethnic or racial characteristics is ineffective and a waste of valuable time and resources," mall spokesman Dan Jasper said in a written statement. "Please bear in mind that 'suspicious' does not equate to 'guilty.' However, we have an ethical obligation to follow up whenever we have a concern."

That's of no comfort to Jatani Boru of St. Paul. Two years ago, Boru says he took his friend, who was visiting from New Hampshire, to the mall for some sightseeing. His friend brought his new camera and shot photos and video, raising the suspicion of security guards. Boru says two officers who appeared to be in their 20s began to question them.

The mall's incident reports show the officers were concerned that the men were "mapping" the mall's HVAC system and infrastructure.

Boru, a U.S. citizen who helped found a St. Paul mosque, says he became frustrated with the officers as the questioning wore on. He thinks he looked suspicious because he has a beard and was wearing Islamic dress.

"I think this is a bunch of kids who have no experience of what they're doing," said Boru. "I don't assume they're there to hurt people, but they're not equipped or trained, they have no maturity or understanding to do that kind of work."

Boru says a Bloomington police officer who was called to the scene quickly determined that Boru and his friend were not a threat. But a copy of the report was sent to regional and national law enforcement agencies, and that troubles him.

"I have no way of removing my name from the government list," he said.

Aside from the incident at the mall, Boru says life in the decade since 9/11 has been largely normal.

One benchmark for measuring a community's climate toward Muslims is the public response to proposals for new mosques. That test played out recently in the northwest suburb of Plymouth.

Despite an outburst from one man at a recent city meeting, council members unanimously approved the plan. The Islamic center will become the newest mosque to serve the growing Muslim community in the Twin Cities.

Muslim residents say it was a small but important victory in their post-9/11 world.

Gallery



Minneapolis police officers Abdiwahab Ali, left, and Mohamed Abdullahi take a break in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minn. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011. The partners have been working the Cedar-Riverside beat for nearly two years. **MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson**

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