

# The TSA Report Card

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

April 2008

## Screening Sikhs by the Numbers:

Sikhs sent for additional screening who reported feeling singled out	<b>64%</b>
Sikhs who were not informed of their option to conduct a self-pat-down of their turbans	<b>22</b> (out of 80)
Sikhs who were told that turban screening is a mandatory security measure	<b>18</b> (out of 80)
Screening complaints stemming from California airports	<b>49%</b>
Sikhs who reported being subject to additional screenings at U.S. airports*	<b>71%</b>

\*Note that this number is based on self-reporting by Sikh travelers. As a result, since more people are likely to complain about unpleasant experiences at security, this percentage is likely weighted towards bad experiences.

## Worst Case Scenario: San Francisco International Airport

Since the new bulky clothing policy went into effect in October 2007, the Sikh Coalition has repeatedly received complaints about its implementation at San Francisco International Airport (SFO).

Of the 113 reports we received between December 1, 2007 and March 31, 2008, 80 described additional screenings. Twenty-eight of those 80 people complained about screening at this airport. Only one Sikh traveler departing from SFO told us that he had not been screened.

This disproportionate focus on Sikhs is because TSA screeners at SFO are interpreting the revi-

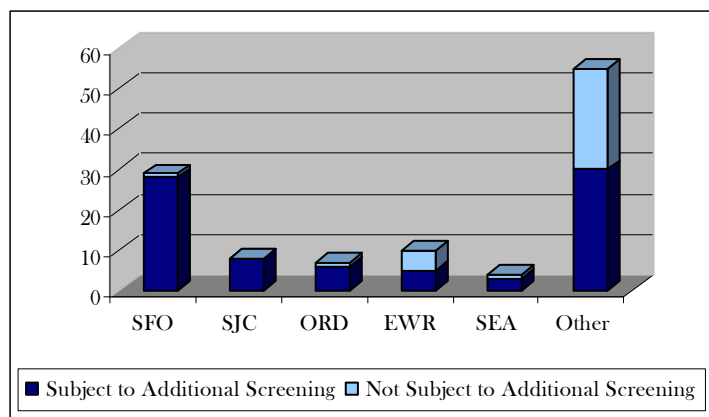
sion as a "mandatory turban screening policy." As a result, all turban-wearing Sikhs boarding flights at SFO will necessarily be subject to one of the three forms of additional screening - a puffer machine, a self-pat-down of the turban, or a screener pat-down of the turban.

We have brought the issue to the TSA's attention repeatedly over the last six months, and have been told that the policy is not intended to mandate additional screenings for Sikhs. Still, no action has been taken to remedy the problem.

In the meantime, Sikh Americans are feeling the pinch. "I did not

mind it very much as I was talked to politely. But the fact remains that only people with turbans are asked to go thru puffers..." said Bhavdeep Singh, a traveler on his way to China from SFO.

**Proportionate Number of Sikh Travelers Subject to Additional Screening of their Head Coverings at Key U.S. Airports**



## The Good & the Bad: Mixed Reactions from Sikh Travelers

The 113 reports filed with the Sikh Coalition by Sikh air travelers reflected both good and bad experiences with airport security.

Several passengers specifically mentioned that the screener they encountered was respectful, polite or sensitive. One person favorably noted the presence of a turbaned Sikh as a TSA officer at their airport.

Airports in Los Angeles, California; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; and St. Augustine, Florida were especially mentioned as having culturally sensitive staff who implemented the new policy in a fair manner.

Nevertheless, many travelers expressed their frustration at being singled out because of their religious appearance. One Sikh told us "It is pretty clear to

me as a Sikh that I am being subjected to unreasonable procedures that do not apply to other US citizens."

Safety and racial profiling were also a concern. "I felt less safe after going through security because it really is so illogical and inadequate," said one Sikh passenger. Another described the policy as "arbitrary and conditional upon the prejudices of the

person doing the screening."

Nevertheless, at most airports, a turbaned Sikh was as likely as not to be subject to additional screening. What still bothers travelers, though, is feeling of being singled out as somehow inherently "suspicious."

## Isolated Incidents

In addition to patterns at specific airports, a number of Sikh travelers reported procedural discrepancies at various airports.

1. A Sikh passenger at **Dallas Fort-Worth Airport** was informed that he would need to remove his turban to go through a puffer machine in November.
2. A passenger who had successfully cleared a puffer machine screening at **Las Vegas Airport** was nevertheless asked to submit to a pat-down search of his turban in December.
3. A turban pat-down was conducted in full public view and without permission at **Orlando Airport** in January.
4. At **Dallas Fort-Worth Airport** in January, TSA screeners refused to allow a Sikh passenger to conduct a self-pat-down of his turban, saying it was not permitted.
5. TSA personnel at **Philadelphia Airport** in January refused to provide a passenger with complaint forms, their badge numbers or their names after being incredibly disrespectful to the gentleman during a search procedure.
6. In line for security at **Tampa Airport** in February, a Sikh passenger reported seeing a small poster that showed men from other faiths wearing turbans and being called terrorists. This created an incredibly uncomfortable situation for him vis-à-vis his fellow passengers.
7. In February, TSA screeners in **Newark Airport** informed a Sikh passenger that the TSA requires all “hats” to be removed.
8. TSA personnel at **Dallas Fort-Worth Airport** in March told a Sikh passenger that “the message we are getting from Washington makes this [the turban search] mandatory” and that he should expect to be screened more often in the future.

## Recommendations: Doing Better Next Time

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

1. Address the mandatory turban screening policy at San Francisco with TSA staff at that airport. If travelers going through SFO know to expect a particular mode of treatment by TSA personnel, it frustrates the “random” intent of the policy, and makes passengers less safe.
2. Audit TSA screeners in the exercise of their discretion, to ensure that individual TSA employees are not engaging in racial profiling in U.S. airports.
3. Guide TSA screeners to inform Sikh passengers of their three options as soon as a passenger is identified for additional screening of their turban.
4. Involve Sikh civil rights groups in the development of cultural sensitivity training materials for TSA screeners. Such materials should include training on how to defuse tensions with Sikh passengers.
5. Conduct outreach to the Sikh community to explain the purpose and functioning of the revised policy. This includes posting information about the procedure in Punjabi.

## Profiling Problem; Self-Audit Solution

In October 2007, the United States Transportation Security Administration (TSA) revised its existing policy on bulky clothing to include headwear. As a result, Sikh turbans may now be subject to additional screening at U.S. airports, if the individual TSA screener deems the turban to be “bulky.”

While this policy is neutral on its face, anecdotal reports over the last few months indicate that Sikhs are being disproportionately impacted by its implementation. Because TSA screeners have broad discretion to decide when to stop a Sikh for additional screening, personal prejudices or misinformation about Sikhs may be playing a role in their decision to search a Sikh’s turban.

To help the TSA determine whether religious profiling is a real threat, the Sikh Coalition has been collecting data from Sikh Americans. We asked Sikh travelers to tell us about their screening experiences - both good and bad - when flying through U.S. airports. We received a total of 113 reports of Sikh air travelers between December 1, 2007 and March 31, 2008. Of those 113, 80 reports involved additional screening of a Sikh’s turban.

Because our process is restricted to self-reporting, these numbers are likely to be skewed towards those who had bad experiences at security. People rarely report good news! But the data they provide is the only information about the impact of the new policy on Sikh Americans.

To get the numbers right, the TSA must collect its own data by monitoring its employees for racial profiling. That is the real solution to ensuring that this policy is keeping our country safe while still protecting our citizens’ civil liberties.