

Ending with an “i”

My name is on a U.S. security watch list

by Kouroos Esmaeli (<https://iranian.com/author/kouroos-esmaeli/>) · October 27, 2004 (<https://iranian.com/2004/10/27/ending-with-an-i/>)

No doubt about it: I am being monitored by the Department of Homeland Security.

I have been stopped, searched and interrogated 3 out of the 4 times that I have passed through US borders in the past four months. What started as a “routine and random check” two months ago at JFK airport in New York turned into individual interrogations, a two-officer escort from an airplane, and an active file with my name on it. Hard not to get paranoid. Last night I waited 15 minutes before entering my building because there was a cop standing outside.

I am currently on one of “The Lists.” There are quite a few lists at the moment, and apparently they contain a mish-mash of names. That includes any person whose family name ends with an “i”; any man whose first name has any combinations of the three letters “HMD” having to do with the word “praise” in Arabic (Ahmad, Hamid, Hamed, Mohammad, Mahmood ...), and such dangerous public figures as Cat Stevens and Senator Edward Kennedy.

I fall in List Number One: Esmaeli. As in: from the family of Ishmael.

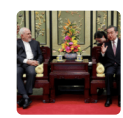
I was first identified as a risk to national security a month ago when I arrived after a six-week stay in Europe. One look at my US passport and the passport control guy led me to the JFK airport security office. I was let go after my passport and NY State driver’s license were taken and copied, and two phone calls were made about me.

Round two was the trip out of JFK two weeks ago. This time the Air France employee at the gate put four “S”s on my boarding pass and asked me to go get inspected. I told the woman who was escorting me to the inspection point that I think I am being profiled. She looked and sounded genuinely embarrassed, and then earnestly added that I should probably get used to it.

So I was searched, de-shoed and undressed as much as decently possible in public. The guy even put his hand under my shirt. But it was all good-natured. I asked him if he found anything other than a fist full of hair, and he laughed uncomfortably. The only nastiness came from one of the French employees of Air France.

But that’s normal. Anyone who has ever dealt with French bureaucracy knows how getting trapped in a compromised situation gives ample opportunity to their petit-bureaucrats to make digs and jabs that they think they can get away with. When I lived in France with an

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American Refugee Travel Document, I had to stand in various French gendarmeries, immigration centers and airports and take their nastiness with little ability to respond.

Now that I am no longer 'under-status'-ed, there was no reason to accept any BS, so I gave the woman at Air France a piece of my mind and complained to her superior officer before getting on the plane. It's probably not a good time or place to unload resentments stewing from 'Junior Year Abroad', but it felt good and 15 years too late. I got off to Paris and then Prague with no other incident.

On the way back to New York last Wednesday, they didn't wait for me to make it to the gate at Charles de Gaulle. They called my name on the loudspeakers of the airport. Waiting for the interrogator at the gate, I saw the roster of passengers sitting on the desk and the words "no fly" handwritten next to my name. But after another round of questions from a member of the airport security and an interview with the International Air Security Agency, I was allowed on the plane.

On the plane, the captain announced the rules for international travel. For the sake of security, no more than three people could wait in the aisles around the bathrooms. Furthermore, you could only relieve yourself in the bathroom of your own class. I am not sure if this was because of MY presence on the plane, or because this last leg of the trip was on a US carrier rather than Air France.

In any case, we land in JFK with no incident of over-congregation or the crossing of class barriers for the bathroom. Before deplaning, the captain made an announcement that airport security has requested for all passengers to show their passports on their way out of the plane.

At this point, I am still not aware of the nature of the problem and my role in the afternoon's theatrics. But it becomes clear that there is nothing routine about all this when the two officers at the airplane door escort me away without finishing with the rest of the passengers. One of them has a fax paper with my name and information on it.

"Is that my name on that piece of paper?"

"..."

"Excuse me, officer, why do you have a piece of paper with my name on it?"

"..."

"I'd like to know why my name is in the hands of a police officer. Can you tell me, please?"

And he just mumbles something in the vicinity of 'routine' and 'just doing my job' and I just got more angry.

I am still not aware of the seriousness of the events until the two officers bring me over to the two plain-clothed federal agents waiting outside the security office. They are nervous and clumsy enough for me to see the folder with my name on it. I inquire where I could obtain a copy, a request which they dumbfoundedly ignore.

The federal agents have been obviously waiting for me, but the police officers lead me into the airport security center and ask me to sit and wait in a room with other detainees. The security office is enclosed by a one-way mirror. I am on one side, they on the other. They were probably looking at me, checking for any incriminating signs, during the fifteen minutes that it took to come and lead me into a room for an individual interrogation.

They start by showing me their badges.



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"You are with US Customs?"

One of them does most of the talking. His last name ends with a vowel other than "i." He speaks with a light-yet-obvious New York-Italian accent.

"Yes we are." He is obviously uncomfortable with my unwillingness to look scared.

"So you brought me here to see if I've smuggled fresh fruit from Europe?"

Awkward silence.

"No... uh ... We are now part of a larger task force having to do with national security."

I am pissed off and look it. "So why are you talking to ME?"

He, on the other hand, is being very nice. "Just some questions, sir. Don't take it personally."

"Don't take it personally? I've been stopped every time I go through this airport. And this time you come and escort me from the airplane."

"There are a lot of lists getting crisscrossed. You are on one of them, so we are just going to ask you a few questions."

"Which list am I on?"

"I really don't know ... there's a bunch of them..."

"A bunch?"

"Yeah, quite a few."

He smiles at me with his big black eyes. He is very interested in making me feel comfortable. I am still too pissed to let him.

"But you know, in two weeks you will have the opportunity to vote for somebody who can make sense out of all this mess. I am not allowed to talk politics on the job ... I can't tell you who to vote for ... all I can say is this: you are going to have a choice as to who will have control over all this; and I hope you exercise it."

With this, he breaks the ice. He is very handsome and I wish he would not stop smiling. I think I even start smiling back.

So the interrogation starts. He is taking notes on the back of another document in the folder. I can't take my eyes off of his hand as his pen bobs between his hairy knuckles.

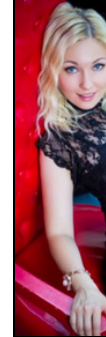
His scribbles are now snuggled next to the copies of my American passport, NY State Drivers License and who knows what else:

- Born in Iran
- Came to US 1979, at the age of 11
- Received political asylum through his mother and then a green card; naturalized in 1997
- Father lives in Tehran, mother in Orange County, California
- Studied at Columbia University; undergrad and grad school
- Lives in New York City ... Washington Heights

"You live in the Heights? How is it up there, now?"

"It's Ok. Pretty quiet."

"It's quiet? I used to be up there in the 34th Precinct. It wasn't quiet when I was there."



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"It's quiet now. And I live on top of the hill ... Where the yuppies are."

"Oh."

Recent travels: Iraq in November and December 2003.

"Why were you in Iraq"

"For work. I was making a documentary about young Iraqis and American soldiers for MTV."

He asks me what the Iraqis were saying about the US and the war. I tell him they were generally relieved at getting rid of Saddam, but that they were also wondering why America hadn't closed their borders and allowed these fighters to pour into their country.

"Yeah ... it makes no sense. We close down our own borders and leave theirs open."

"Yep, exactly."

I hope that wasn't a set up. But he has stopped writing by this time.

"So where are you coming from now?"

"I am coming back from Prague. I am making a documentary about one of those young Iraqis I filmed. The guy was brought to Prague by Liev Schreiber, who saw the young Iraqi on MTV and invited him to go and learn about filmmaking on the set of Liev's new film."

The other guy, who has been quiet up to then, interrupts our flow. "Liev Schreiber the actor?"

"Yes, Liev Schreiber the actor. He is directing his first film and I am making the documentary about him and this young Iraqi guy."

"Oh."

"Anything else you'd like to know?"

They both look embarrassed. Embarrassed and a little bit more eager to seem like good guys who are just doing their job. I guess neither of them can imagine sending an independent documentary filmmaker to Guantanamo.

"Ok. What now?"

The first guy is really looking to be nice. "We'll do a quick search of your bags and you can go home ... I'll try to get your name off these lists."

"Great."

"I mean... I'll make a recommendation ... but these things take time, you know."

"Ok ... But, I'll appreciate it if this doesn't happen again."

"I understand. But I really couldn't guarantee that the next time you come back into the country, the same thing won't happen."

I thank him again. They lead me out and leave the younger officer to give a quick uncomfortable look through my bags.

All this would all be a lot more horrendous if it weren't for the apologetic skepticism of the people who are carrying out the procedures. It makes you wonder what would have happened if I were a guy with an accent and a natural fear of police and federal agents,

instead of a smart-ass filmmaker . It also made me wonder how long this will last and what will happen if the fear and paranoia get worse.

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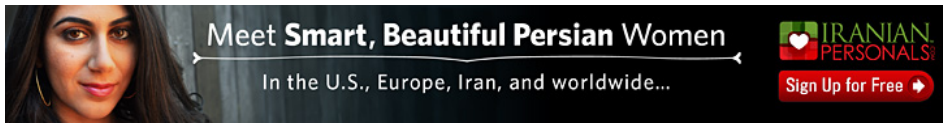
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