

Black Muslim men sue Alaska Airlines for being deplaned over Arabic texts

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An Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 at Seattle Tacoma airport (Getty Images)

Seattle, August 12 (RHC)-- Two Black Muslim men have filed a lawsuit against Alaska Airlines for being wrongfully deplaned from one of its flights in Washington after a fellow passenger complained about one of the men sending a text message in Arabic.

The federal lawsuit, which was made public this week, was originally filed on August 2nd in the U.S. District Court for the District of Washington by Abobakkr Dirar and Mohamed Elamin who boarded the flight in Seattle headed to San Francisco on February 17, 2020.

According to the lawsuit, the duo who were seated in their first-class seats were escorted out of the aircraft by uniformed law enforcement personnel after a co-passenger who couldn't even speak or read Arabic complained about one of them texting and conversing in his native Arabic language.

Moments before takeoff, Dirar sent text messages and emojis to one of his friends. Their co-passenger, who couldn't read or speak Arabic, saw the text messages and complained to a flight crew member, Dirar and Elamin's lawyers said in a statement.

An Alaska Airlines manager then asked Dirar and Elamin to deboard the plane, which was followed by extra security checks and a seizure of Dirar's cellphone, the lawsuit notes.

After the complaint, the co-passenger decided to leave the plane, while Dirar and Elamin after getting off the plane spoke with an FBI agent who was called to the scene to translate and check their text messages and concluded that they "posed no threat."

"Alaska Airlines' discrimination of these men not only interrupted their business trip but also caused them serious long-lasting emotional distress and immense pressure to avoid the attention of others and conduct themselves in ways which conceal their ethnic and religious identities when flying," their lawyers said.

Dirar and Elamin were hours later rebooked on two different downgraded economy class tickets and were prohibited to fly together. Alaska Airlines said the men were de-boarded off the plane because of a "ticket issue" while refusing to comment in detail about the case.

"Our greatest responsibility is to ensure that our flight operations are safe every day, and that includes complying with federal regulations on investigating any passenger safety reports," the airlines said in a statement to CBS News.

Dirar and Elamin were born in Sudan but are now American citizens, according to the lawsuit. They were supposed to drive back cars their friends planned to purchase in San Francisco to Washington state, according to the lawsuit.

The issue was first publicized by the Washington state chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the attorney in December 2020. They said in a statement that the lawsuit claims a federal and state violation of the men's civil rights as paying passengers on the flight.

After two years of no action, the duo decided to take their complaint to a Federal Court alleging civil rights violations. Dirar said in a statement that he's planning to sue the airlines in hopes that Alaska Airlines will never mistreat other Muslim Americans.

"I will go to the end of this process because I want the airlines to stop doing this to any person," he said in a statement. "When we traveled that day, we were not treated the same as other people, and it made me feel like I was not equal to other people."

The 25-page lawsuit was filed by attorneys Luis Segura and Lena F. Masri who work with CAIR, the Council on American Islamic Relations. Their attorneys said in a statement that the airline "could have acted responsibly by calming tensions, apologizing to our clients for their mistreatment, and allowing our clients to remain in their rightful seats" but instead "chose to pile onto the bigotry by using these two Black, Muslim American passengers as props in an admittedly unjustified, unnecessary, and self-serving display of security theater."

"Our clients not only seek justice for themselves, but also for an entire community tired of being scapegoated to justify discrimination in air travel," they said.

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