

Innocent suspect haunted by memories



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Imagine yourself at O'Hare airport, flipping through the pages of Newsweek Magazine, sitting at the terminal waiting for your plane to begin an international trip to see your relatives.

Then imagine police in security uniforms surrounding you, handcuffing you and, in front of the hundreds of other passengers waiting to board the flight, marching you off like a criminal.

You're then placed in a small room and ordered to strip your clothes.

Your bags are removed from the plane.

No one will tell you why you are being detained, or what you have done.

But you are certain that you've been mistaken for a drug dealer or a mass murderer.

In this case, 33-year-old Abraham Ahmad, an American citizen for the past five years, was suspected of masterminding the Oklahoma City bombing, a devastating terrorist blast that decimated the Murrah Federal Building and resulted in the killings of the largest number of victims of a terrorist blast in the United States on April 19, 1995.

It had happened only an hour before.

Yet, sitting thousands of miles away in a Chicago airport, Ahmad, who happens to be Middle Eastern, a Palestinian born in Jordan, "looked" the part and was immediately arrested because he "fit the profile."

The authorities said that he had equipment to repair a VCR, and therefore that equipment could also have been used to construct a bomb.

Ironically, hundreds of thousands of passengers pass in and out of O'Hare Airport every day. But Abraham Ahmad, we are told, was the only passenger, from among thousands traveling from Oklahoma to other city destinations around the country, who was carrying any equipment that might have been mistaken for items needed to construct a bomb.

More than likely, Abraham Ahmad was stopped because he had dark skin, a tightly cropped beard, black curly hair and looked Arab.

After being interrogated for four hours at O'Hare, security officials bought him a new ticket, and sent him on his now delayed flight to London, where he was to catch a flight to Amman, Jordan, the capital of a free country that has relations with the United States and is considered one of our international allies.

Stepping off the plane in London, Ahmad was again accosted by security officials, where he was again subjected to the same detention and strip search and interrogation for five hours.

Handcuffed, he was returned to Washington DC where the interrogation continued for at least another day.

By then, the government had released information that a "Middle Eastern" suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing, had been arrested after being detained in Chicago and London, and was now held in Washington DC.

Hundreds of reporters and camera crews swarmed around his little Oklahoma home. And his neighbors, drawn by the media feeding frenzy, joined in the stares.

And suspicions.

And conclusions.

The following day, police, during a routine stop for a broken rear light on a motorist's vehicle, found what appeared to be evidence of bomb-making materials, and arrested one of the suspects.

Non-Middle Easterners Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were arrested and are now, more than a year later, awaiting trial for the worst terrorist bombing ever on American soil.

Since the bombing, Abraham Ahmad's life has been in turmoil.

No one can erase the news reports and suspicions that pointed a finger at him, as teary-eyed Americans suffered through one of the most horrid national experiences of our time.

And, no one has apologized from the government, the FBI or anyone involved in his detention, for the harassment that he went through.

But hundreds of miles away, the FBI and the government issued a formal apology to Richard Jewell, the man they had once said was a suspect in the equally as horrific but less destructive bombing at Olympic Park in Atlanta.

Jewell was at least at the scene of the bombing and had collected "souvenirs" from the deadly explosion there.

Jewell obviously has one thing going for him, an advantage that even Timothy McVeigh probably enjoys.

He doesn't look like an Arab.