

# The Washington Post

## Muslim Sent Home

Advertisement » Your Ad Here

A Legal Visa Holder Meets Unreason at Dulles

By John Marks

Monday, March 2, 2009; A17

On Jan. 26, my office received a call from an immigration agent at Dulles International Airport, who said that my colleague Rashad Bukhari had been refused entry to the United States. He was not charged with anything, the agent said, and would be eligible for a future visa.

In fact, when Rashad arrived at Dulles, his Pakistani passport contained a valid, multi-entry visa, issued less than two years before by the U.S. State Department in Islamabad. He used this visa in 2007 to enter the United States without difficulty. Rashad is 36, and he worked for two American organizations, including the U.S. Institute of Peace, before he joined us at Search for Common Ground in 2007. He is Urdu-language editor of our [Common Ground News Service](#), whose goal is to build bridges between the Muslim world and the West.

Immigration officials at Dulles could have easily verified all of this if Rashad had been allowed to make a phone call or if they themselves had chosen to check. Rather, they detained him for 15 hours, temporarily took away his cellphone and laptop, and eventually put him on a plane back to Pakistan. They prepared a transcript of the encounter in which an official justifies the United States not honoring Rashad's visa by saying, "You appear to be an intending [sic] immigrant."

Rashad answered that he has a wife and three children in Pakistan, that his job is based there, that he had a return ticket and that he had no intention of remaining in the United States.

Rashad later told us that the agent said -- in words that do not appear in the transcript -- that if he "voluntarily" withdrew and did not try appealing to more senior immigration officials, he would have a chance to return to the United States after getting a new visa; otherwise, he would face a five-year ban. In either case, Rashad was told, he would have to leave.

Faced with this Hobson's choice, Rashad "voluntarily" left the country.

Rashad noted afterward, "The immigration officer was actually very polite and remained nice to me. We chatted a little about my work and about international politics. He said, as an individual, he regretted the decision, saying he saw me as a good man. He repeatedly suggested that I should come back again with a new visa. He told me that he had studied history and politics and said that the work I am doing is more important than any military action."

Since Sept. 11, 2001, I have heard of many incidents similar to this one. My first reaction when I was told about Rashad's treatment was: In dealing with immigration and visa issues, nothing can be done.

And no, I do not believe that what happened to Rashad, who is Muslim, would have occurred to, say, a white Englishman of the same age.

I travel frequently to Muslim countries, and I know there is a widely held perception that the United States is not a welcoming place for Muslims. This has done serious damage to our national reputation at a time when improving the U.S. image in Pakistan and other Muslim countries and rallying support against extremism are major American foreign policy objectives.

I also know that, only days before this incident, Barack Obama declared in his inaugural address, "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

I hope that means the Obama administration will carry out a full review of policies and procedures regarding how immigration officers deal with Muslims from other countries. There need not be a contradiction between securing our borders and providing equitable treatment to all those who wish to enter the United States legally.

And, on the human level, it would be wonderful if the federal government apologized to Rashad and to others who have been badly treated at our airports and borders.

Rashad later told me, "My friends in Pakistan, as well as in [the] U.S., are equally disturbed and upset. I prefer to go where I am welcome. Please understand how many layers of impact such incidents create. At a personal level, it puts a stain on my record and a question mark over my future international travel; at a more general level, it reinforces the negative reality that we at Search for Common Ground are trying to shift. I understand that security agencies need to protect their country from harm. And I support them. But unnecessary screening and overreacting because of distant fears and suspicions do not get us anywhere."

Rashad concluded his message with the hope that what happened to him will be a "catalyst for positive change." Would that this will be the case.

*The writer is president and founder of Search for Common Ground, a Washington-based nonprofit organization that works to find peaceful solutions to conflict around the world.*

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

© 2009 The Washington Post Company

#### Ads by Google

##### [Iran Tour & Travel](#)

Visa, Hotel, Car, Airfare, Guide. We Arrange All For You.  
[www.IranGashtTour.com](http://www.IranGashtTour.com)

##### [Visa Inde à domicile](#)

Affaires, tourisms, stages Enregistrement en ligne Gratuit  
[www.homevisas.com](http://www.homevisas.com)

##### [Middle East In Prophecy](#)

What is the future of the Middle East & Israel? Find out now free.  
[www.gnmagazine.org/middleeast/?S=2](http://www.gnmagazine.org/middleeast/?S=2)