Being Muslim at an American airport

When I fly I smile a lot, type only in English, and pretend I'm not reading a book about the rise of ISIS.

by Rafia Zakaria in the October 25, 2017 issue

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In the fall of 2016, I was to fly to Denver for the launch of a paper at the Online News Association's annual conference. As a Muslim American, I have a standard protocol that I follow prior to and during air travel. I stay away from the brightly colored tunics that I usually wear, I wear more makeup than usual, and I smile a lot whether or not I have any reason to.

It is not just how I appear that I worry over; there is also the issue of what I carry with me and what I carry it in. A tote bag that has Urdu lettering and in which I usually carry my computer is a no. The keyboard overlay with Urdu letters that I use if I want to type in Urdu is also a no. I go through the call and message log on my cell phone and erase all the text messages that are in Urdu. I ponder over whether I should delete all the text messages from people with Arabic names, even when they are written in English, and keep only the ones with safe American names. I wonder if I should give safe American code names to all my family and all the friends who don't have them. I have a bad memory and so I do not do this, plus having a code may appear incriminating just in itself.

On this day and this flight to Denver, there is an additional conundrum. I have been reading Joby Warrick's book *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* and am about a hundred pages in. I want to use the hours of waiting—at the airport, on the flight, and at the many other junctures of travel that require it—to get further into the book. I write about terrorism and the conference paper I am presenting is about terrorism, so it makes sense to read this book.

At the same time, I know that it is a risk. As an American Muslim I cannot be reading a book about terrorism on an airplane. I have friends and colleagues who have been pulled off planes for far less, for reading books about Syria, for watching soap operas in Urdu, for listening to Arabic music, and even just for saying *inshallah* (God willing) as they hang up their cell phone. The book in my hands on an airplane is a provocation in an America whose fear has made it rabid, where all Muslims are only terrorists, never doctors or lawyers or even journalists. Where truth is not tolerated, trickery must intervene. I look through my bookshelf, then proceed to exchange the dust jacket of the Warrick book with that of another hardback. *The Rise of ISIS* accompanies me in drag, dressed now as *Georgia*, Dawn Tripp's novel on the life of the artist Georgia O'Keeffe.

I get through security that day without event. If the calculations of wins and losses were simple, my passing through would be a triumph. I had navigated the narrow bridge over the river of fire that the security checkpoint is for America's Muslims. The truth, of course, is complicated, not so easily enclosed within a single metaphor. Altering one's appearance is an abridgment of the self. Subterfuge based on changing all that is visible, all that can be changed, feels inherently subversive. An enormous chunk of identity we know comes via ascriptions, the constantly present judgments of others. It is no surprise, then, that even when I do make it through

security, based on the sum of all my machinations, I feel no relief but rather shame. To have succeeded in hiding something that should not need to have been hidden is no success at all.

Poised at the post-checkpoint moment, I wonder if I should confess that I am Muslim, that the book is really about ISIS, that there's been a mistake in letting me through. All the effort at passing has left me with a scabrous sore; it itches and instinctively I want to scratch, even bleed. I feel angry and resentful that my potential as a terrorist is being judged and gauged by others who know nothing about me. Within this scheme of evaluation and judgment operative at America's airports, there is no room for the truth I know about myself—that I am not and never will be a terrorist.

I have reasons for fear that go beyond being checked at airport security. In the days and weeks prior I have been immersed in research related to the prosecution of ISIS terrorists in the United States. My bafflement and alarm at the scant proof and zealous prosecutions I have read about have left me playing a perverse game with myself. Per its prescriptions, I imagine I am the FBI and develop a case against myself under the U.S. statute outlawing material support for terrorism.

Unlike nearly all other criminal statutes in the United States, this one, whose words and provisions I have read over and over again, criminalizes not a criminal act, or even the intent of a criminal act, but simply anything or something that can be interpreted as possibly supporting terrorism. In one case, trips to visit family in a Muslim country have qualified as "connection or collaboration with a foreign terrorist organization," and in another, posting on a website that is frequented by some belonging to extremist groups has been enough to yield a conviction and a decades-long sentence. A disaffected 16-year-old posting about the transfer of funds via Bitcoin from his mother's basement in Virginia has been tried and convicted.

In all these cases, what the defendants *said* about themselves or their intentions is irrelevant; it is some unseen process of radicalization imagined as being underway by their accusers that is determinative. A random set of visible factors is deemed incontrovertible evidence pointing to this invisible process, a potentiality that justifies punitive measures, despite its own unreality.

In the macabre game I play in my own head, I wonder how close I come to being one of this sorry group, and I put together the random facts that could be assembled for my own prosecution. I have taken several trips to Pakistan and even one to Turkey,

both countries where terrorist activity takes place. I have on numerous occasions downloaded jihadist propaganda. (Would it matter that I opposed it, had to write about it?) I have at one time or another interviewed people who may know people who have had extremist sympathies.

Then there is social media, the basis of more than 80 percent of the actual prosecutions under the statute. Here too I could be made to appear culpable; I have a number of Facebook friends and Twitter followers whose true identities I do not know, who could know jihadists or even be jihadists. To top it all off I sometimes conclude, as I build the case against myself, my careful efforts at passing, the fake file names, the unacknowledged proficiency in Urdu, can all be construed as the wrong kind of deceptions, the sort that portend the very worst.

At the conference in Denver I do a show-and-tell. I hold up my book and peel back the floral cover of *Georgia* to reveal what I have really been reading. I know that my audience of journalists cannot imagine themselves being thrown off a plane, let alone prosecuted, for made-up terror crimes. I tell them that while I am a journalist to them, justified hence in my curiosity about ISIS or my downloads of jihadist propaganda, that reality does not extend into the world on the other side of the hotel's glass walls. Beyond those, at airport security, on the street and in the eyes of law enforcement, I am just another Muslim in America, lacking specificity, part of a suspicious mass of potential terror that must be policed and profiled and, if at all possible, preemptively imprisoned.

It is a reality from which I cannot escape and a perverse contest that I cannot win. Looking too much like a terrorist makes me suspect and looking too little like a terrorist also makes me suspect. After all, the FBI could say, wouldn't ISIS select someone who can pass, appear unthreateningly innocent, as the perfect operative, as their ideal operative?

I realize that some of my conundrums as a Muslim, as an American, as a Pakistani, and as a woman are born of an identity that exists and inhabits the margins of several separate wholes. The fraught relationships between the constituent parts of myself are fought on the terrain of my physical and visible self. What I choose to wear or not wear, what I say, the language in which I say it, the conventions I follow, the conventions I flout are all a paean of loyalty to one or another. Each side demands more than the logic of a world made up mostly of wholes requiring that I choose one and renounce the other, be only American or only Pakistani, only Muslim

or only female.

The burden of passing, its central fault, lies not in its success or failure as an endeavor, but rather in the requirement of deception that it imposes on all those who engage in it. Inherent in this deception is the clear message of inadequacy, of falling short, of being less than an ideal, inferior to an original. It is this kernel of untruth demanded, of selfhood corroded, that is the burden of passing, one that weighs down the manner and mien of all those on whose shoulders it rests.

A version of this article appears in the October 25 print edition under the title "Being Muslim at the airport." It was adapted from Rafia Zakaria's essay "Terror and Passing," from the forthcoming collection We Wear the Mask: 15 True Stories of Passing in America*, edited by Brando Skyhorse and Lisa Page (Beacon Press). Reprinted with permission from Beacon Press.*