

## Ethnic Profiling Alleged at Georgetown

From — [Andy Guess](#)' Inside Higher Education article

A graduate student filed suit against Georgetown University on Tuesday, alleging discrimination and unlawful search and seizure when campus police detained him while he was attending a friend's graduation ceremony last year. Two months later, the university issued a report responding to the student's initial complaint stating that the officers had followed proper policies.

The student, Kambiz Fattahi, is in his final year at Georgetown's graduate security studies program while also working for the BBC's Persian Service, according to the complaint. After the incident in May, Fattahi wrote a [first-person piece](#) that appeared on the BBC News Web site describing the sequence of events. "I was there to support a graduating classmate. Sitting in the front row among proud parents, family and friends of graduating students, I was captivated" by the words of Bernard Bailyn, the Harvard historian giving the commencement address, he wrote.

"Nations and people do have dominant characteristics, and it's a good time, a necessary time, to think briefly about our own essential characteristics. What others think about us, how we see ourselves, and how we actually are, matters," Fattahi quoted the professor as saying. But, he wrote, "the sense of awe did not last long. Two portly university security guards brought me back to reality.

"'Please come with us,' one of them ordered. He caught me off guard. When I asked why, he told me, 'You're making some people here nervous.'"

"It was disturbing to think that nothing more than my Middle Eastern appearance had aroused someone's suspicion. More shocking was the blunt inquiry of one of the guards about my national origin," he continued; he was born in Iran and holds dual Iranian and American citizenship. "After showing forms of identification, including my card from the BBC Persian Service, he commented: 'So, you're from Persia. Aren't Babylon and the Tigris River in Persia?'" (They are in Iraq; Persia refers to present-day Iran.)

He wrote at the time: "Officials at Georgetown say they have strict policies prohibiting racial and ethnic profiling, and have begun an investigation into the matter." That investigation resulted in a report backing the officers — who deny that they mentioned Babylon or the Tigris River — and stating that the questions on national origin were intended to "see if he needed a translator," the lawsuit said. Fattahi speaks fluent English. "Georgetown officials took these allegations very seriously and immediately began a review of the matter. The incident was fully investigated by the Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity and Affirmative Action (IDEAA), with input and cooperation from the complaining individual," says a [statement](#) on Georgetown's Web site dating back to August 2007. "... The investigation determined that Georgetown University's Department of Public Safety officers responded in an appropriately calibrated way to reports from an audience member that an individual was behaving in a suspicious manner during the commencement ceremony on May 18. In response to that information, and given the heightened security status on campus at that time, officers responded by taking appropriate and necessary steps to engage and to request identification from the individual."

For half an hour, the officers detained and questioned Fattahi, who had been sitting in the audience and periodically checking his phone to look for messages from friends he was planning to meet there. The suit says he was carrying a backpack, his cell phone and a box of cookies for the friend who was graduating.

Georgetown's statement continues: "A combination of factors including the then recent tragedy at Virginia Tech, receipt of an anonymous threat of violence on Georgetown's campus 10 days earlier, and the presence of a foreign dignitary at the graduation ceremony contributed to increased event security. After the individual's student status was confirmed, he was permitted to return to his seat for the remainder of the ceremony. There was no finding of improper behavior or violation of University policy by the officers."

The complaint, filed in D.C. federal court, seeks no less than \$75,000 in damages. A spokeswoman told the Associated Press that while Georgetown could not comment on pending litigation, "we would expect to defend

ourselves vigorously."

#### Reader Comments

Years ago, when I myself was a college student in KY, I was pulled over by TWO police cars for questioning. It didn't take me off guard because they had been following me to work for a couple of days prior. In this case it was the jalopy with a PA plate in an affluent neighborhood that caused their suspicions. They questioned me for over 45 min. causing me to be very late for my nannying job. There were no such things as cell phones to notify my boss who would be behind schedule with his patients. I wonder if a five foot white girl could have had a case claiming classism or regionalism? Perhaps I could have had my college bills taken care of. But considering the state of my car (even though KY had no inspection laws at the time) I was able to conjure up a certain level of understanding of why they might have had some concerns.

**denise**, at 7:55 am EDT on April 30, 2008

#### need a translator?

the questions on national origin were intended to "see if he needed a translator,"

I suppose the need to question his national origin is because of his appearance. So if you don't look like an "American", you must be a foreigner. If you are a foreigner, you must not speak English. And if you don't look like an American, and you are a foreigner, and you don't speak English, you are probably planning something violent, just like what happened in Virginia Tech.

If this is not ethnic profiling, please tell me what it is.

**C Lin**, at 9:40 am EDT on April 30, 2008

#### translator

We recently had a case at Vancouver Airport where a foreign traveler was detained for acting strange. I wish our police had acted as carefully as these people seem to have done. If we had taken the time and really made an effort to figure out wherethis guy was from perhaps we could have brought in a translator and defused the situation. Instead the police ended up tasering the man and he died in the Arrivals lounge... with his mother outside waiting for him. He was Polish by the way. It seems to me that these officers acted on a report (as is their duty), did their investigation, determined that the person in question was no threat and he was allowed to return to his seat. Sounds professional enough to me. I hope they apologized to the gentleman for the inconvenience. Inconveniences, like the time I was detained by US Customson the suspicion that I may be looking to work in the US (I own a business in Canada) and missed my flight, are a fact of life in our world. We all need to be aware that this is part of the price we pay for the security we demand from our governments. It's a sad but true reality.

**Paul**, at 11:45 am EDT on April 30, 2008

#### Of course it is profiling

You can not be providing competent security without profiling.

Even metal detectors are a tool for profiling. I could have a legitimate reason for carrying a concealed handgun without having any malicious intention to use it as the same graduation ceremony. However, a metal detector would profile me and make me subject to scrutiny by security.

The job of security is to ride the fence of what is proper and what is not proper in the cause of preventing a tragedy.

If there is no profiling, then security would be relegated to doing nothing until an overt action had already occurred.

The problem with this case is that the suspicion was raised by a concerned, but likely untrained spectator. Security did not single him out.

**Bret**, Of course it is profiling, at 11:45 am EDT on April 30, 2008

### **Another Career Launched**

The self-alleged victim here is “is in his final year at Georgetown’s graduate security studies program while also working for the BBC’s Persian Service.”

I’m going to take a wild guess: Our hero will pursue a journalism career, not one in the security field. And he will document his first-person experience of this heart-breaking deviation from the ideal and submit it as a — what? An article for The New Yorker? A \_book\_?

**Rod Bell**, Adjunct Professor at College of DuPage, at 1:25 pm EDT on April 30, 2008

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**Instructor Note:** Here is the account that Kambiz gave himself for the BBC News

### **Does US insecurity put liberty at risk?**

By Kambiz Fattahi  
BBC News,  
Washington

**BBC NEWS**

**The BBC Persian Service's Kambiz Fattahi recounts his own experience of being singled out on the basis of his appearance and asks whether fears of terrorism are undermining America's traditional values.**

People often ask if I have ever experienced prejudice in the US because of my Iranian background.

Up to now, I have always replied in the negative.

The last place I ever expected to encounter ignorance and apparent discrimination was at my university, a place renowned for international studies.

But last week, at Georgetown University's graduation ceremony, I found myself in shock and awe.

In awe at the inspiring keynote speech about America's tradition of freedom made by Harvard historian Dr

Bernard Bailyn.

In shock at one particular display of America's post-9/11 insecurities and hyper-vigilance.

### **Back to reality**

The university is located in the well-to-do Georgetown neighbourhood of Washington DC.

### **It was disturbing to think that nothing more than my Middle Eastern appearance had aroused someone's suspicion**

I was there to support a graduating classmate. Sitting in the front row among proud parents, family and friends of graduating students, I was captivated by the speaker's words.

"Nations and people do have dominant characteristics, and it's a good time, a necessary time, to think briefly about our own essential characteristics. What others think about us, how we see ourselves, and how we actually are, matters."

But, the sense of awe did not last long. Two portly university security guards brought me back to reality.

"Please come with us," one of them ordered. He caught me off guard. When I asked why, he told me, "You're making some people here nervous."

It was disturbing to think that nothing more than my Middle Eastern appearance had aroused someone's suspicion. More shocking was the blunt inquiry of one of the guards about my national origin.

I told him I was a US citizen. After showing forms of identification, including my card from the BBC Persian Service, he commented: "So, you're from Persia. Aren't Babylon and the Tigris River in Persia?"

Officials at Georgetown say they have strict policies prohibiting racial and ethnic profiling, and have begun an investigation into the matter.

### **"Pluralism in Action"**

This prominent university boasts on its website of a student body representing over 130 countries, and requires its first-year students to complete a "Pluralism in Action" programme even before beginning their studies.

Given this, the guard's cultural insensitivity took me by surprise. But observers note that this kind of singling out has become pervasive in the US since the terror attacks of 9/11.

A quarter of Muslim Americans say that, in the past year, "people have acted as if they were suspicious" of them, according to a new Pew Research Center study.

But, as my case demonstrates, this phenomenon is by no means limited to the Muslim community.

"People who are perceived to be Muslims, that are Middle Eastern, are being disparately treated," says Arsalan Iftikhar, the legal director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"A Sikh, who is not a Muslim, gets attacked and gets told, 'terrorist go home'."

Arshiyar Ali Shirazi, a Christian Iranian-American who has lived in the US since the age of two, recognises this trend.

### **Most people see names like Ali, Mohammad, Abdul, Reza and automatically associate them with the Middle East and terrorism**

Arshiyar Ali Shirazi

Having graduated from university and dreaming of landing a job with the government, he goes by a more "American" name, Al.

"I figured since the 'from' line in a recruiter's inbox is the first thing they see from you, why risk associating a strong resume and solid qualifications with a Middle Eastern-sounding name?"

"Most people see names like Ali, Mohammad, Abdul, Reza and automatically associate them with the Middle East and terrorism."

The guards at Georgetown eventually let me go, too late to see my friend walk across the stage to collect her degree.

As I left the building - which nine months earlier had housed the Pluralism in Action programme - Georgetown's President John J DeGioia's remarks to the graduating class resonated in my head.

"You will face challenges - and enjoy opportunities - that previous generations of citizens and leaders, scientists and scholars could not even have imagined."

Apparently, one of these challenges will be how America can address its insecurities, compounded by 9/11 and the immigration debate, all the while preserving its ideals of "liberty and justice for all".