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## Name's Khan? Too bad for you



Aijaz Zaka Syed

Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains, lamented French philosopher Jacques Rousseau. Inspired by Rousseau and other French philosophers, America's Founding Fathers made liberty, equality and justice the cornerstones of their Constitution.

Thomas Jefferson, the first secretary of state who went on to lead the country as its third president and is largely responsible for its incredibly powerful and immensely inspiring Declaration of Independence, borrowed from Rousseau to argue that, "all men are born equal," the most quoted phrase in modern political discourse.

The opening of the Declaration of Independence written by Jefferson declares: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Watching the circus of Shahrukh Khan's reception in the U.S. unfold this week, I couldn't help wonder how America's Founding Fathers would have reacted to a guest being treated this way, that too someone with the popularity and following he enjoys worldwide as India's biggest superstar. Celebrated as the global brand ambassador of his country, the Bollywood's big gun was rated last year as the planet's biggest superstar by the Time magazine, ahead of Will Smith and Tom Cruise.

In a delicious quirk of irony, the actor only recently finished shooting for his much-awaited movie, "My Name is Khan", set in the U.S. The movie, being distributed worldwide by Rupert Murdoch's 20th Century Fox and Star, is supposed to chronicle the journey of self-discovery of an Indian Muslim in the U.S. who gets caught in the madness of the Sept. 11 attacks and its aftermath.

This is no defense of Shahrukh or a protest over his treatment at Newark's rather absurdly named Liberty International Airport, although I can't deny my weakness for his onscreen shenanigans.

What really fascinates me is how even as our world shrinks to become smaller and more networked

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thanks to technology, we come up with more inventive ways of dividing and separating ourselves from each other.

Instead of using our amazing scientific progress to build more bridges between people, we are building more and more walls.

What the superstar had to go through at the Newark airport, detained and grilled like a common thug for nearly three hours without being allowed to make a phone call to his hosts because of his suspicious last name, is shocking.

But it happens all the time with thousands of Arabs, Muslims and even non-Muslim Asians. Only it doesn't get reported or is often taken in their stride literally by helpless travelers who have to go about their lives. The Newark episode has outraged a billion-strong nation, and many around the world, because it involves a popular icon like Shahrukh Khan, who frequently visits the U.S. and other nations in Western Hemisphere.

But what about the tens of millions of others who routinely and silently suffer this harassment at airports, railway stations and other entry points on a daily basis? Who cares about them? Apparently, no one. According to a recent report of the Asian Law Caucus, Muslim Americans are being increasingly targeted for unwarranted house searches and interrogation, especially after trips abroad. Soon after 9/11, eminent Indian Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry called off his tour when he was stopped at almost every single airport in the U.S.. His unusual last name and beard apparently triggered alarm bells in a jittery America. (Why even poor Sikhs, sitting ducks with their beards and turban, came under attack in the wake of 9/11 strikes!)

But Shahrukh Khan is no Rohinton Mistry — an engaging writer but otherwise lost in the obscurity of a North American winter. His is easily the most popular and recognized face of India and an epitome of the country's religious and cultural diversity.

He has ruled the world's biggest movie industry for nearly two decades and launched a million brands. No wonder he has a billion people around the world rooting for him, including senior ministers of the Indian government.

But as a U.S.-based writer Deepa Iyer says in her blog, "Khan's incident might be gaining international attention because he is a celebrity, but the truth is that ordinary American citizens and immigrants here in the U.S. grapple with racial and religious profiling routinely at airports."

What happens to those "usual suspects" whose name pops up by mistake or a quirk of fate on a list of suspects? Shahrukh had the entire Indian government and Indian missions in the U.S. move to rescue him.

But what about the thousands of others whose last names happen to be Khan, Sheikh or Muhammad? What happens to them? Who intervenes and speaks on their behalf? Even if they survive the trauma, they will never be the same people again.

Some of them might just disappear. Like Maher Arar did; he was sent to be tortured in Syria as a "terror suspect" after he was picked up at JFK Airport in transit after a family holiday in Tunisia in 2002. A false tip here, a case of mistaken identity there have wrecked thousands of lives like that of Maher Arar's.

In the end, not everyone can be as lucky as SRK, who's been invited by President Obama for a beer in the White House. Who knows how many Maher Arars have disappeared down this Orwellian black hole?

How did Jefferson's and Lincoln's America end up here? In fact, it's as though the whole world has gone round the bend. No one trusts any one anymore. Osama Bin Laden after all has got the West, and

the whole of civilized world, where he wanted it: Without peace and afraid, very afraid, and paranoid of its own shadow, as he promised.

It's not just the fear of flying. We are afraid of everything now. We are afraid of each other. We are even afraid of carrying a harmless bottle of liquid with us. A 100 ml bottle is a weapon of mass destruction now. Well, this is what the terrorists wanted. They have us where they wanted. Our civil liberties suspended, our rights undermined and just about everyone going bonkers.

Eight years of America's terror war and end is still nowhere in sight. More than a million innocent lives have been lost in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention America's own nearly five thousand brave men and women and hundreds of others from its allies. And for what? No one knows what this war is all about anymore and why the world is fighting it. Not even the Americans seem to have the faintest idea.

In his historic inaugural address, President Barack Hussein Obama promised a "new way forward" with the world, especially with its Muslims. It is time to show America has moved on, Mr. President!

\*Published in the Saudi based ARAB NEWS on August 21, 2009. Aijaz Zaka Syed is a Dubai-based commentator.