

# U.S. Jews not able to fly on Delta flights to Saudi Arabia

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JERUSALEM (RNS) Jews and Israelis, or passengers carrying any non-Islamic article of faith, will not be able to fly code-share flights from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia under Delta Air Line's new partnership with Saudi Arabian Airlines that is set to begin in 2012.

Although Delta announced in January that the Saudi airline would join its SkyTeam network next year, the implications of the deal only came to light recently, according to people who have scrutinized the details.

Saudi Arabia, which is governed by strict Islamic law, requires citizens of almost every country to obtain a visa. People who wish to enter the country must have a sponsor; women, who must be dressed according to Saudi standards of modesty, must be met at the Saudi airport by a man who will act as a chaperone.

Saudi Arabia bans anyone with an Israeli stamp in their passport from entering the country, even in transit. Many Jews believe the kingdom has also withheld visas from travelers with Jewish-sounding names.

Religious items such as Bibles that are not related to Islam may be confiscated at the airport.

Colby M. May, senior counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, a conservative legal group founded by religious broadcaster Pat Robertson, said his office is trying to determine if the agreement runs afoul of U.S. law.

"The very idea that there is a common carrier airline service that would deny an American citizen in America access to their services because they are Jewish or have religious items such as a yarmulke, a cross or a priestly collar, is deeply disturbing," May said.

May said he is "trying to get answers" from Delta.

"They have not responded in a way that answers the question," he said. "Hopefully they'll do so."

In a statement to Religion News Service on Thursday (June 23), Delta said it "does not discriminate, nor do we condone discrimination against any protected class of passenger in regards to age, race, nationality, religion, or gender."

The airline, which did not deny the new policy, insisted that it has no control over who may fly to Saudi Arabia.

"Delta must also comply with all applicable laws in every country it serves," adding that passengers are responsible for obtaining the necessary travel documents required for entry.

"If a passenger travels without proper documents, the passenger may be denied entry into that country and our airline may be fined," the statement said.

The Jan. 10 agreement allows Saudi Arabian Airlines to become a member of SkyTeam in 2012 after "fulfilling all membership requirements," according to a SkyTeam statement. The Saudi airline is SkyTeam's first member from the Middle East.

The policy has deeply angered U.S. Jewish groups, especially since Delta is an American carrier.

"Saudi Arabia, a U.S. ally, should be strongly condemned for its despicable discrimination against Jews," said Kenneth Bandler, a spokesman for the New York-based American Jewish Committee.

"For an American company, our nation's values should trump narrow business interests. Delta should be the first to reject Saudi airlines

as a SkyTeam member."

Dan Diker, secretary general of the World Jewish Congress, said he hoped "Delta will not be complicit with what appears to be a demonstrably anti-Semitic and racist policy by Saudi Arabian Airlines."