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Criticism of Delta unfair, some travel industry experts say

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

Updated 06/24/2011 6:16 PM

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Some travel industry experts say [Delta Air Lines](#) is being treated unfairly — and is the victim of misinformation — because of its pending marketing alliance with [Saudi Arabian Airlines](#).

Delta was criticized by some Jewish and Christian

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leaders Thursday after a [Religion News Service](#) story hit the Internet questioning the two airlines' partnership because [Saudi Arabia](#), like some other Mideast countries, has some restrictive visa and entry policies.

The news service provides stories to usatoday.com, which briefly posted the story Thursday before finding factual problems and removing it. The story stated that, under the marketing alliance, Jews and Israelis would not be able to fly from the [USA](#) to Saudi Arabia.

"Delta has been unfairly singled out," says travel expert Henry Harteveltdt, a Jewish American and a vice president of [Forrester Research](#). "We may find a lot of Saudi Arabia's policies unpleasant and not agree with them, but any airline flying into any country is obliged to act by the rules of that country."

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Delta doesn't fly into Saudi Arabia, but critics expressed concern that its SkyTeam marketing alliance with Saudi Arabian Airlines — which flies between the USA and Saudi Arabia — would develop into a code-share agreement. That would enable each airline to sell one another's tickets.

Delta officials wouldn't comment Thursday whether they planned to code share, but they issued a definitive statement Friday.

"Delta does not intend to code share or share reciprocal benefits, such as frequent flier benefits, with Saudi Arabian Airlines," said Delta spokesman Trebor Banstetter.

Delta's only agreement with Saudi Arabian Airlines, he says, "is a standard industry interline agreement," which allows travel agents to book passengers on multiple carriers and passengers' checked bags to transfer between airlines on a multi-airline itinerary. Saudi Arabian Airlines has such agreements with other U.S. airlines, he says.

Banstetter says Delta does not discriminate or condone discrimination against any of its customers "in regards to age, race, nationality, religion or gender."

Saudi Arabian Airlines flies to 26 domestic and 55 international destinations and carries about 19 million passengers annually. It is owned by the Saudi government but expects to be privatized by the end of 2013.

The Saudi government, according to the [U.S. State Department](#), prohibits criticism of Islam and "the public practice of religions other than Islam." Non-Islamic religious articles such as crosses and Bibles are forbidden, the [State Department](#) says.

Nail Al-Jubeir, a spokesman for the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington, says Americans of all religions, including Jews, will be issued visas for entry into Saudi Arabia. Until 1994, visas were denied to Americans holding passports with a stamp showing a visit to Israel, but that practice has ended, Al-Jubeir says.

He says Israeli passport holders are still denied visas because Saudi Arabia has no diplomatic relations with Israel.

[Rabbi David Saperstein](#), director of the [Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism](#), says he's known a lot of Jewish-American business men with Jewish-sounding names who were provided visas to enter Saudi Arabia and were not "harassed" during their stay.

"But I think the far more significant problem is that, according to the State Department, no

By Paul Sancya, AP

"Any airline flying into any country is obliged to act by the rules of that country," says travel expert Henry Harteveltdt.

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religious practices other than Islam are allowed to be practiced openly in Saudi Arabia," he says.

Saudi Arabian Airlines signed an agreement in January to join SkyTeam and will become its first member from the [Middle East](#) next year.

SkyTeam, founded in 2000 by Delta, [Air France](#), Aeromexico and [Korean Air](#), includes nine other airlines — Aeroflot, [Air Europa](#), Alitalia, China Southern, [Czech Airlines](#), [Kenya Airways](#), [KLM Royal Dutch Airlines](#), TAROM and [Vietnam Airlines](#).

[Garuda Indonesia](#), Aerolineas Argentinas, [China Airlines](#), China Eastern and its affiliated company, [Shanghai Airlines](#), have confirmed future membership.

Joe Brancatelli, a business travel columnist for Portfolio.com, says criticism of Delta's SkyTeam relationship with Saudi Arabian Airlines may have been blown out of proportion, and Delta may have been the victim of misinformation.

But he questions whether U.S. airlines should be more careful about the marketing alliances they form.

"Does Delta want to be in business with an airline whose government has policies we find repugnant?" he asks.

Other U.S. airlines, including American and United, have marketing alliances with foreign airlines, including some who fly to Saudi Arabia.

Many airlines in alliances have code-share agreements that allow airlines to earn revenue by selling tickets on a partner's flight. Such agreements can mislead travelers who believe they bought a ticket on one airline but later find they are actually flying on another.

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