WASHINGTON — Nine Muslim passengers were kicked off a flight from Washington, D.C., to Florida after other passengers reported hearing a suspicious remark about airplane security.

AirTran Airways spokesman Tad Hutcheson called the incident on the New Year's Day flight from Reagan National Airport to Orlando, Fla., a misunderstanding, but defended the company's response. He said the airline followed federal rules and did nothing wrong.

One of the Muslim passengers, Kashif Irfan, told The Washington Post the confusion began when his brother was talking about the safest place to sit on an airplane.

"My brother and his wife were discussing some aspect of airport security," Irfan said. "The only thing my brother said was, 'Wow, the jets are right next to my window.'"

Irfan told the newspaper he thought he and the others were profiled because of their appearance. The men had beards and the women wore headscarves, traditional Muslim attire.

Irfan, 34, is an anesthesiologist and his brother is a lawyer. Both live in Alexandria, Va., with their families, and were born in Detroit. They were traveling with their wives, Irfan's sister-in-law and Irfan's three sons, ages 7, 4 and 2. A family friend also was traveling with the group to a religious retreat in Florida.

Federal officials ordered the rest of the passengers from the plane and re-screened them before allowing the flight to depart about two hours behind schedule.

The family was upset that AirTran didn't allow the Muslim passengers to book another flight. The airline said in a news release Friday that one of the passengers became irate, made inappropriate comments and had to be escorted away from a gate podium by local law enforcement.

"The FBI agents actually cleared our names," Inayet Sahin, one of the family members kicked off the flight, told CNN. "They went on our behalf and spoke to the airlines and said, 'There is no suspicious activity here. They are clear. Please let them get on a flight so they can go on their vacation,' and they still refused."

The family and friend eventually made it to their destination on a US Airways flight.

Hutcheson said AirTran initially refused to rebook the family because the airline had not been notified the investigation was complete. He said the passengers were offered full refunds and are now welcome to fly on AirTran after being cleared by authorities.

"At the end of the day, people got on and made comments they shouldn't have made on the airplane, and other people heard them," Hutcheson said. "Other people heard them, misconstrued them. It just so happened these people were of Muslim faith and appearance. It escalated, it got out of hand and everyone took precautions."

Christopher White, a federal Transportation Security Administration spokesman, said the situation was handled appropriately.

White said the pilot, after being informed of the remarks, requested that two federal air marshals on board remove the individuals. TSA then alerted authorities, including the FBI, which conducted an investigation. Once authorities determined there was no threat, it was up to the airline whether to allow the family to reboard.

"If the pilot is uncomfortable with someone flying on their plane, that's their decision," White said.

A spokesman for the FBI did not immediately respond to a request for comment Friday.

One of the passengers removed, Abdur Razack Aziz, said he will consider a lawsuit.

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