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The St. Petersburg Bomber Who Wasn't

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Ilyas Nikitin, a man wrongly accused to bombing the St. Petersburg subway. **Islam News**

Ilyas Nikitin grew up in Bashkortostan, a Russian region tucked between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains. He graduated from the Ryazan Military Academy, and served with Russia's armed forces in Chechnya. A reserve army captain today, he works as a truck driver.

Ilyas Nikitin didn't murder anyone in St. Petersburg yesterday, but for several hours the Russian mass media circulated his blurry photograph captured on security camera, claiming that he was a suspect in the deadly bombing that killed 14 people in the city's subway on Monday.

Not long after sharing his photograph, the local news site Fontanka published an op-ed claiming that the image was "unambiguous." "If the speculation is correct," columnist Denis Korotkov wrote, "this is a demonstration. A man in a taqiyah cap, with a characteristic Islamic beard, who looks like he stepped right out of a poster for the illegal terrorist group ISIS."

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When Nikitin learned that he'd been fingered as a terrorist, he did what any good citizen should: he went straight to the police and explained his innocence. Later, in comments to the website Islam News, he even praised Russian law enforcement for their "efficient and effective work."

By the end of the day, Nikitin boarded a plane to Moscow, apparently to reach a connecting flight to Orenburg, scheduled to leave the next day.

Nikitin never made it to Orenburg, however. When he tried to board the plane, terrified passengers protested, insisting that this was the man identified in the media as a potential terrorist. They had no idea that the reports were inaccurate, or that Nikitin had already presented himself to police for questioning.

Airport security guards soon arrived, but the travelers refused to calm down, and — in the end — Nikitin was booted off the flight, and a canine unit was called out for a second inspection of all passengers. Nikitin told Islam News that he hopes to catch another plane on Wednesday.

It's anybody's guess if he's allowed on the plane.

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