

Murdock: It's time to profile terrorists at U.S. airports

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NEW YORK - As Americans fly this Thanksgiving holiday, critics of new security measures are arriving at airports in kilts. Subsequent pat downs will be quite enhanced, indeed.

Pre-flight screening has moved from safety to comedy. Before it devolves into tragedy, airline employees and government officials should start profiling terrorists. America must focus its finite capabilities on those who crave the destruction of planes and the people who ride them.

How would that profile look? Today's threat comes almost exclusively from militant-Islamic males between about ages 18 and 35 who hail from the Middle East and predominantly Muslim African and south-Asian nations. This profile was not drawn by anti-Muslim bigots, nervous Jews, or paranoid Southern Baptists. The terrorists themselves created this profile. Aviation has obsessed them for years.

"Bring down their airplanes," demanded Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, who inspired the 1993 World Trade Center attack. "Slaughter them on land, sea and air."

"Any time you hit Kennedy, it is the most hurtful thing to the United States," said Russell Defreitas, a Muslim who targeted fuel tanks at New York's JFK International Airport. "To hit John F. Kennedy, wow," he said on surveillances tapes. "They love John F. Kennedy like he's the man...If you hit that, this whole country will be in mourning. You can kill the man twice."

Those who plot rather than prevent jet explosions usually meet this profile. The September 11 hijackers fit it perfectly. So did Ramzi bin al-Shibh, who was arrested while conspiring to crash airliners into London's Heathrow Airport. The airborne Christmas Day crotch bomber was a young Nigerian male, and the so-called Shoe Bomber was a young, male Muslim convert.

Had security personnel at Newark, Dulles, or Boston Logan Airports profiled terrorists, they might have stopped the 9-11 hijackers. If so, al-Qaida's 2,980 victims would be feasting on turkey.

So, should anyone named Mustafa be waterboarded beside the first-class lounge? No. However, if he is between about 18 and 35 and from the Middle East or a predominantly Muslim country, it might be wise to ask him a few extra questions, carefully peruse his papers, and perhaps inspect him and his possessions.

Terrorist profiling recalls police deployment of limited resources. If the NYPD sought a Mafia hit man who was about to whack somebody, it most likely would not hunt him in Harlem. If the LAPD wanted an especially brutal Crip, Malibu might not be the first place to track him.

While officials need to respect the rights of innocents who fit this profile, passengers also have an overarching right to land at their destinations intact.

At best, avoiding terrorist profiling will waste scarce resources by subjecting everyone to the same time-consuming, often humiliating searches that have ignited public rage. The Transportation Safety Administration can keep checking the prosthetic breasts of American women who have endured mastectomies -- as recently befell Cathy Bossy, a 32-year veteran airline employee.

At worst, TSA officers might encounter a bomb-wielding passenger who matches the terrorist profile, but then breeze him through security so he doesn't feel uncomfortable. The result could be the sky-high calamity that Americans have feared since September 11.

At a Monday night Intelligence Squared debate on this topic in New York City, one of my opponents was Debra Burlingame, sister of Charles "Chic" Burlingame, the pilot of American Airlines Flight 77, which al-Qaida smashed into the Pentagon. She cited her conversation with an American Airlines customer-service agent who worked on September 11. He checked in Nawaf and Salem al-Hazmi, two of those who hijacked that vessel. While American's seasoned staffer found these two suspicious, Burlingame says he told her he did not flag them for further scrutiny, "because I didn't want my colleague to think that I was a racist and a bigot."

Such political correctness eventually will kill innocent civilians. It's past time to employ terrorist profiling to shield Americans from those who want to murder us.

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