

# The Washington Post

## [Is it time to set up checkpoints outside airports?](#)

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The terrorist attack on Belgium last week caused some European security officials to reconsider strategies for protecting air travelers, including the idea that perhaps the checkpoint perimeter should be moved further out to airport entrances or beyond.

It's a discussion that should happen here too.

The idea that many countries are risking disaster by not setting up checkpoints at the entrances or even on the outskirts of an airport came from Pini Schiff, the former security chief at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International Airport and now the chief executive of the Israel Security Association, an organization that provides security for companies and government offices.

Schiff called the Belgium attack ["a colossal failure"](#) for allowing the terrorists to enter the Brussels airport's crowded departures hall with a huge amount of explosives. The rest of the world should reevaluate security procedures by setting up concentric circles, including checkpoints perhaps six kilometers from the airport itself, Schiff said in an interview with Israel Radio that was reported by Reuters and picked up in many papers. Others talked of the [importance of profiling](#).

Jim Hutton, who is chief security officer for On Call International, a New Hampshire-based travel-risk consultant, said security officials have long talked about the appropriate point for setting up a "hardline" perimeter, through which attackers cannot pass. But they have to balance that impermeable limit with variables such as convenience, politics, economics and culture.

The discussion has sharpened since the March 22 attacks in Belgium when radical Islamic terrorists struck the airport outside Brussels and the city's subway, killing at least 35 people and injuring 340.

"I think that's going to be a rapidly emerging question: 'Where's the hardline in a free society?' And, boy, it's a loaded conversation," Hutton said. "But I think it's important to think about pushing that hardline out."

Hutton, whose clients include corporations, universities, faith-based and nongovernmental organizations that send people overseas, said airports could perhaps require people to park at satellite parking lots and undergo screening before boarding shuttle buses to the terminals. Baggage screening might also occur offsite, similar to the way that mail for the U.S. Capitol or other governmental installations is sorted and inspected off-site.

Pete Dordal Jr., senior vice president & managing director at GardaWorld International Protective Services, said he was skeptical about widening the concentric rings of security but wouldn't rule out such procedures in the United States.

But the Belgian attack yet again highlighted the consequences of failing to detect attackers before they reach the terminal. In this case, security personnel failed to notice a three-person team of terrorists

wheeling a very large payload of explosives into the airport, even though two of them were wearing black gloves on one of their hands that some believe were used to hide detonators.

“I think my daughters would have caught that right away,” Dordal said. “This is a failing of aviation security, not to be able to detect that, or at least not to be able to push that screening process out further and not have it in that common area.”

But Dordal — whose company helps provide security for more than 40 airports around the world, primarily in Canada — said he doubted Americans would tolerate security procedures, such as setting up security checkpoints on access roads, that for now are generally found only in conflict zones or developing countries plagued by terrorism. The location and footprint of most airports, especially at some of the nation’s older terminals, wouldn’t allow it.

“That’s just impractical,” Dordal said. “There’s the convenience factor, and that’s always there weighing on security, and not just at airports. It’s the ability to conduct commerce, to live your life normally, to — quote-unquote — not let the terrorists beat us.”

Furthermore, security officials could set up security checkpoints a mile from the airport — as in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Somalia — and still not be foolproof, Dordal said. He said there are checkpoints a mile from Aden Adde International Airport in Mogadishu, and yet insiders there are believed to have assisted a suicide bomber who [set off an explosive inside an airplane in February](#).

The Transportation Security Administration declined to say whether pushing back the outer ring of security to airport entrances or beyond has been under consideration in the United States.

“Unfortunately, this isn’t something we can discuss publicly at this juncture,” TSA spokesman Mike England said in an email.

For now, private security experts said it’s more likely that the United States and other western nations will continue to monitor airports using other methods. That’s likely to involve using highly trained security personnel to look for telltale signs of a threat. Or it might entail using more K-9 teams trained to detect explosives, or high-tech sensors and robots at the entrances that can also sift the air for their chemical fingerprints. And it’s likely to mean more profiling, some experts say.

“Someone who focuses on taking a water bottle away from some old lady will never find explosives,” Shlomo Harnoy, another Israeli security consultant, was quoted by [Reuters](#) as saying. He told The Washington Post [something very similar](#) more than five years ago.

But profiling must be done in ways that can identify potential threats without engaging in blanket discrimination against people based on their nationality, religion, or ethnicity, Dordal said. To be done fairly — and legally — it has to focus on suspicious behaviors.

“You can’t be selecting people because of their nationality, or religion, or how they look, their facial features,” Dordal said. “And the pure security person in me says you can’t discount the old lady.”

Dordal said U.S. military forces learned the hard way that giving too much deference to customs regarding the treatment of women at security checkpoints in Afghanistan allowed [the Taliban to evade checkpoints by disguising men in burqas](#).

Hutton, whose resume includes work in diplomatic security for the State Department, said profiling is acceptable as long as officials can articulate a logical reason as to why a person was given more scrutiny—and share that criteria with the public.

“We need to do a better job of managing public expectations around this,” Hutton said.

So no one’s suggesting that the TSA set up roadblocks on the access road to Dulles International Airport. But perhaps there should be more debate in the United States about whether it’s time to push the perimeter back at its airports, too.