



What Israeli security could teach us

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The safest airline in the world, it is widely agreed, is El Al, Israel's national carrier. The safest airport is Ben Gurion International, in Tel Aviv. No El Al plane has been attacked by terrorists in more than three decades, and no flight leaving Ben Gurion has ever been hijacked. So when US aviation intensified its focus on security after 9/11, it seemed a good bet that the experience of travelers in American airports would increasingly come to resemble that of travelers flying out of Tel Aviv.

But in telling ways, the two experiences remain notably different. For example, passengers in the United States are required to take off their shoes for X-ray screening, while passengers at Ben Gurion are spared that indignity. On the other hand, major American airports generally offer the convenience of curbside check-in, while in Israel baggage

and traveler stay together until the security check is completed. Screeners at American airports don't usually engage in conversation with passengers, unless you count as conversation their endlessly repeated instructions about emptying pockets and taking laptops out of briefcases. At Ben Gurion, security officials make a point of engaging in dialogue with almost everyone who's catching a plane.

There is a reason for these differences. Nearly five years after Sept. 11, 2001, US airport security remains obstinately focused on intercepting bad *things* -- guns, knives, explosives. It is a reactive policy, aimed at preventing the last terrorist plot from being repeated. The 9/11 hijackers used box cutters as weapons, so sharp metal objects were barred from carry-on luggage. Would-be suicide terrorist Richard Reid tried to ignite a bomb in his shoe, so now

everyone's footwear is screened for tampering. Earlier this month British authorities foiled a plan to blow up airliners with liquid explosives; as a result, toothpaste, eye drops, and cologne have become air-travel contraband.

Of course the Israelis check for bombs and weapons too, but always with the understanding that things don't hijack planes, terrorists do -- and that the best way to detect terrorists is to focus on intercepting not bad things, but bad *people.* To a much greater degree than in the United States, security at El Al and Ben Gurion depends on intelligence and intuition -- what Rafi Ron, the former director of security at Ben Gurion, calls the "human factor" that technology alone can never replace.

Israeli airport security, much of it invisible to the untrained eye, begins before passengers even enter the terminal. Officials constantly monitor behavior, alert to clues that may hint at danger: bulky clothing, say, or a nervous manner. Profilers -- yes, that's what they're called -- make a point of interviewing travelers, sometimes at length. They probe, as one profiling supervisor recently explained to CBS, for "anything out of the ordinary, anything that does not fit." Their questions can seem odd or intrusive, especially if your only previous experience with an airport interrogation was being asked whether you packed your bags yourself.

Unlike in US airports, where passengers go through security after checking in for their flights and

submitting their luggage, security at Ben Gurion comes first. Only when the profiler is satisfied that a passenger poses no risk is he or she allowed to proceed to the check-in counter. By that point, there is no need to make him remove his shoes, or to confiscate his bottle of water.

Gradually, airport security in the United States is inching its way toward screening people, rather than just their belongings. At a handful of airports, security officers are now being trained to notice facial expressions, body language, and speech patterns, which can hint at a traveler's hostile intent or fear of being caught.

But because federal policy still bans ethnic or religious profiling, US passengers continue to be singled out for special scrutiny mostly on a random basis. Countless hours have been spent patting down elderly women in wheelchairs, toddlers with pacifiers, even former US vice presidents -- time that could have been used instead to concentrate on passengers with a greater likelihood of being terrorists.

No sensible person imagines that ethnic or religious profiling alone can stop every terrorist plot. But it is illogical and potentially suicidal not to take account of the fact that so far every suicide-terrorist plotting to take down an American plane has been a radical Muslim man. It is not racism or bigotry to argue that the prevention of Islamist terrorism necessitates a heightened focus on Muslim travelers, just as it is not racism or bigotry when police trying

to prevent a Mafia killing pay closer attention to Italians.

Of course most Muslims are not violent jihadis, but all violent jihadis are Muslim. "This nation," President

Bush has said, "is at war with Islamic fascists." How much longer will we tolerate an aviation security system that pretends, for reasons of political correctness, not to know that?