

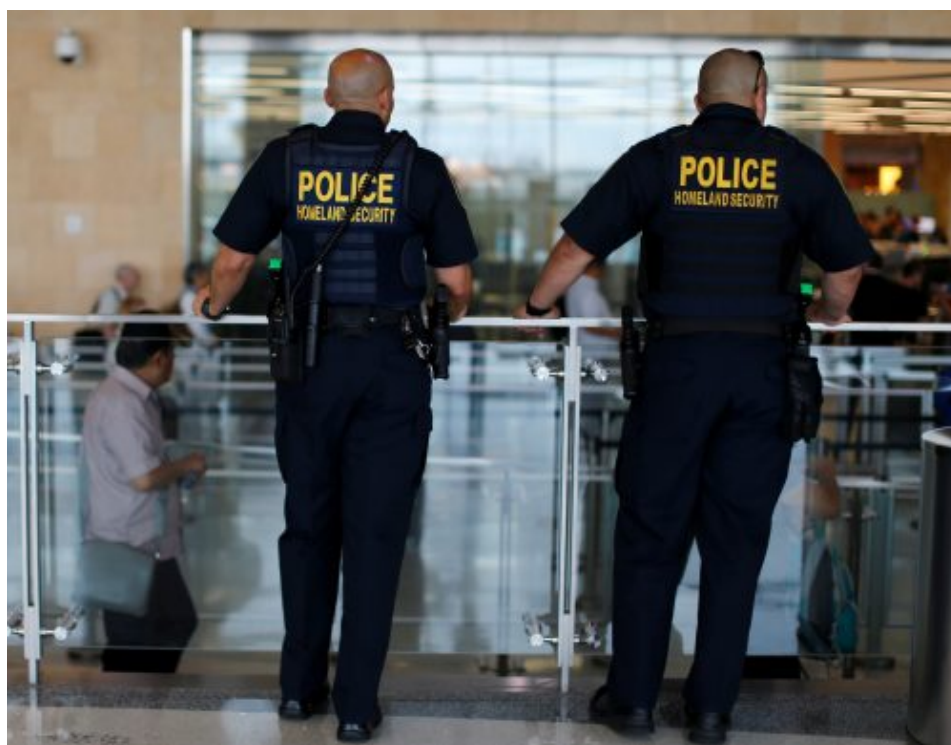


DHS moves to collect fingerprints before visitors depart for America

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The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) decision to expand its preclearance program, which checks travelers' documents and fingerprints before they board a flight to the United States, is a critical step to prevent a terrorist attack and secure our ports of entry.



(http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/RTX2JA1N_dhs-e1469541724588.jpg)

Homeland Security personnel at Lindbergh Field airport in San Diego, July 1, 2016. REUTERS/Mike Blake.

When I wrote [an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal last December urging reforms to the](#)

[Visa Waiver Program \(VWP\)](http://www.wsj.com/articles/its-too-easy-for-terrorists-1449705080) (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/its-too-easy-for-terrorists-1449705080>) run by the DHS, the status quo inside the Beltway reacted as if I had recommended shutting down the program. The thrust of my piece was that vulnerabilities existed in the program that needed to be closed, with a specific emphasis on how VWP exported our security to the processes of European partners who were being flooded by refugees with faulty, minimal, or no identity documentation. My main reform required the DHS to “collect fingerprints from all travelers... headed here” prior to departure because it “would enable the FBI and other three-letter security agencies to analyze biographical information and screen travelers against fingerprint databases.” I specifically referenced the example of “a terrorist bomb-maker who remains at large after an attack [where] [I]aw enforcement may not know his identity—but it likely will have his fingerprints from bomb fragments, and possibly where he made the bombs.”

In [a follow-up piece to the WSJ op-ed](https://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/>), I stated:

These measures (collecting fingerprints and other biographical data) would give us two layers of security. The first layer would give us plenty of time to analyze the fingerprints, comparing them against US government databases to identify threats. The second layer allows us to verify the passport holder’s fingerprints with the person using the passport before entering the security screening at the terminal at the departure airport. Why wouldn’t we want to push our border from the arrival process in America to the check-in process in Europe (and other VWP countries)?

Thankfully, someone at DHS agreed with my recommendation.

As [reported in the New York Times](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/07/25/us/politics/preclearance-at-foreign-airports-seen-as-a-necessity-to-fight-terrorism.html?_r=0&referer=) (http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/07/25/us/politics/preclearance-at-foreign-airports-seen-as-a-necessity-to-fight-terrorism.html?_r=0&referer=), DHS “is pushing to increase the number of American law enforcement personnel stationed at airports abroad to screen passengers before they board planes to the United States.” The increase will occur under the DHS’s Preclearance program “where they collect fingerprints and photos and check travel documents before allowing passengers to board a plane traveling to the United States.” Commissioner Gil Kerlikowske, head of US Customs and Border Protection, noted, “The expansion of Preclearance in strategic locations will further strengthen our ability to identify those who may pose a national security threat prior to encountering them on US soil.” The expansion largely is focused on European airports.

The [Preclearance program currently runs largely in Canada](#)

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[and the Caribbean \(https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/ports-entry/operations/preclearance\)](https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/ports-entry/operations/preclearance), as well as in two airports in Ireland and one in Abu Dhabi. As the NYT article notes, counterterrorism experts believe “the Preclearance program adds an extra level of protection against attacks in the United States by creating a security buffer thousands of miles from its borders.” As I [noted in response to critics \(https://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/\)](https://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/), the issue isn’t just stopping someone from getting into the United States; rather, the issue is also about stopping terrorists from getting on airplanes that they could take down mid-flight. As the article cites, the most famous example of when Preclearance could have stopped a terrorist involved underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab who tried, but failed, to take down a flight headed to Detroit from Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport.

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This critical reform will unequivocally make travel to the US safer and make it harder for terrorists to reach our shores.

Learn more: ['Crucial loopholes' in visa programs must be closed](http://www.aei.org/publication/crucial-loopholes-in-visa-programs-must-be-closed/)
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/crucial-loopholes-in-visa-programs-must-be-closed/>)
| [The importance of fingerprints to America's security](http://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/)
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/>)
| [It's too easy for terrorists](http://www.aei.org/publication/its-too-easy-for-terrorists/)
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/its-too-easy-for-terrorists/>)

This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/dhs-collect-fingerprints-before-visitors-depart-for-america/>