The importance of fingerprints to America's security

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Back in December, the Wall Street Journal published my op-ed (https://www.aei.org/publication/its-too-easy-for-terrorists/) on reforms to the Visa Waiver Program. In that, I noted the importance of obtaining fingerprints before participants arrive in the United States. Specifically, I wrote:

> Congress should also adopt a Senate proposal requiring countries in the Visa Waiver Program to collect fingerprints from all travelers…
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> These measures would enable the FBI and other three-letter security agencies to analyze biographical information and screen travelers against fingerprint databases. Consider, for example, a terrorist bomb-maker who remains at large after an attack. Law enforcement may not know his identity—but it likely will have his fingerprints from bomb fragments, and possibly where he made the bombs.
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> These changes may not catch a terrorist foot soldier. But they would increase the odds of detecting the masterminds and technicians who leave evidence of their activities.

Currently, fingerprints of non-US citizens are taken at the traveler's destination airport, here in the US. Does anyone believe our computer systems are able to analyze the prints against all available databases fast enough to ensure a positive identification? More importantly, obtaining fingerprints upon arrival does us no good if the aim is to bring down the airplane over the Atlantic.

(http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01
/RTX1XYWJ_airport_customs-e1452805865992.jpg)

A traveler passes through US Customs and Immigration in San Diego, California December 9, 2015. REUTERS/Mike Blake.

Despite the naysayers, it wouldn't be that hard to add fingerprints to the security system in the departure airport. The aforementioned Senate proposal would require VWP countries to collect fingerprints from anyone travelling through their airports to the US. This would allow comparisons between the fingerprints associated with the passport, for countries that collect fingerprints when issuing their citizens passports, and those scanned during the check-in process.

These measures 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)?

Any fingerprint requirement could include a "pre-clearance" process similar to the TSA-Pre program. An individual could voluntarily submit required information thereby allowing them to receive pre-clearance. This process would clear nearly all travelers, which would allow our security forces to focus their efforts on a more manageable subset of travelers.

In just the last three days, three news reports have illustrated why tightening all

of our security programs is important. The first piece is a January 12 op-ed in the WSJ (http://www.wsj.com/articles/sharing-fingerprints-and-dna-in-the-antiterror-fight-1452641698) by John Woodward, the former Director of Defense Biometrics Management Office in the Pentagon, titled, "Sharing Fingerprints and DNA in the Antiterror Fight." Woodward notes:

> Fingerprints searches might be especially helpful. US military and law-enforcement agencies, such as the FBI, have collected fingerprints, facial photographs, iris patterns and DNA from foreign fighters, local hires working on US bases, and other places like Afghanistan and Iraq. They also recovered fingerprints from terrorist safe houses and even bomb fragments from IEDs (improvised explosive devices). Through fingerprint matching, the military has been able to link individuals in custody for relatively minor offenses to terrorist safe houses or bombings.

Woodward cites the case of Mohammed al-Qahtani, the suspected "20th hijacker" of the 9/11 attacks, where fingerprints connected him to al Qaeda activity. One key hurdle in using fingerprints more expansively is that the European Union "does not permit routine and regular sharing of the data with the US." As Woodward concludes, using fingerprints more robustly is just the beginning, as the US works on perfecting other biometric markers.

The second piece is a January 13 New York Times article (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/world/europe/belgium-paris-attacks-safe-houses.html?ref=world&_r=0), "Belgium Identifies 3 Houses Used to Prepare for Paris Attacks." The article points out:

> In the Schaerbeek home, the authorities also found fingerprints belonging to Salah Abdeslam, a fugitive and the only participant in the attacks believed to be still alive, and DNA traces from Bilal Hadfi, a 20-year-old who was the youngest of the attackers and who blew himself up outside the Stade de France. The apartment was rented on Sept. 1 by a man using the fake name of Fernando Castillo, prosecutors said.
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> Fingerprints belonging to Mr. Hadfi and Abdelhamid Abaaoud, believed to be one of the main organizers of the attacks, were found in the Charleroi apartment — which was rented, also in September, by someone using the fake name of Maaroufi Ibrahim, prosecutors said.
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> At the home in Auvelais, only mattresses were found. It was rented in October by someone calling himself Soufiane Kayal, an identity used by one of two people whom Mr. Abdeslam picked up in Budapest in

> early September, prosecutors said.

Though the article wisely didn't disclose it, my guess is authorities found other fingerprints in the safe houses that don't currently have matches with the known perpetrators of the Paris attack. After all, we know there was a bomb-maker involved in the attack who has yet to be identified or located. Fingerprints will be key to capturing him.

The last piece is a January 14 WSJ article (http://www.wsj.com/articles/istanbul-suicide-bomber-entered-country-as-syrian-refugee-officials-say-1452685264), "Bomber Arrived in Turkey as a Refugee," which highlights why fingerprints aren't the end-all-be-all for US security. In detailing the bombing in Istanbul, the article states:

> Turkish officials identified the Istanbul bomber as Nabil Fadli, a Syrian born in 1988, who was fingerprinted in Turkey last week while registering as a refugee with immigration officials, but wasn't on any watch list. …
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> Investigators matched Mr. Fadli's fingerprints to those found Tuesday at the blast site, where 10 German tourists were killed and at least 11 other people were wounded. Five suspects have been arrested in connection with the attack, officials said without providing details. …
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> Mr. Fadli's apparent ability to enter Turkey, register with immigration officials and carry out the attack without triggering any international terror alerts is likely to fuel concerns that Islamic State extremists are exploiting the migrant crisis (http://www.wsj.com/articles/angela-merkel-faces-new-challenge-over-refugee-policy-1447957960)to sneak across borders to stage attacks. …
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> When he was fingerprinted, Mr. Fadli said he had been smuggled into Turkey from Syria five days earlier, according to one Turkish official. Adnan Alhussen, another Syrian opposition activist, said Mr. Fadli had been part of a rebel group near Aleppo that joined Islamic State in 2014, when it took over his town.

The fact that the Turkish bomber was one of the refugees from Syria, was not on any watch list (i.e., a clean skin), and evaded border control is a flashing red light for European and American security forces.

Does any of this sound familiar? As I noted in my WSJ op-ed:

> Getting into the Middle East from Europe—and back again to Europe

—without being monitored by a European security agency has never been easier. And if these agencies don't know, we don't know. ISIS today is likely working hard to identify a group of Europeans who can reach America with only a perfunctory security check to launch an attack. That cannot be allowed to happen.

The second problem with the Visa Waiver Program is the ease with which Middle Eastern refugees arriving in Europe seem able to assume new identities. Press (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3235320/PASSPORT-TERROR-MailOnline-reporter-buys-Syrian-papers-sold-ISIS-fighters-sneaking-Europe-hidden-refugees.html) reports suggest that ISIS can produce forged documents, such as Syrian passports and driver's licenses. We also know that refugees are discarding legitimate documents that would help identify who they really are and where they come from. After Paris, processing these refugees takes on new significance. …

With the wave of refugees overwhelming European countries, which are struggling to process them and give them Western identification, the possibility of clean skins being granted is at an all-time high.

It is only a matter of time before our enemies dodge our current security measures. Let's act before they can.

This article was found online at:
http://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/