**Casting the profiling net**

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From: [*The Australian*](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/)

January 16 2010

**ASK THE PHILOSOPHER: Should we apply racial or national profiling when screening passengers at our airports?**

WHAT do Afghans and Algerians, Lebanese and Libyans, Saudis and Somalis all have in common? Well, if you happen to bear these nationalities, life as an airline passenger has now become a little less relaxed and potentially a lot more unpleasant.

Following the alleged Christmas Day bomb plot by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, US authorities have introduced national profiling for all flights departing from or entering the country. All passengers from the 14 countries deemed state sponsors of terrorism or otherwise "of interest" to the US State Department are now subject to a full body search and extensive scrutiny of carry-on luggage.

Here in Australia, there are growing calls for the federal government to introduce similar measures. Some say we should go further than national profiling and introduce racial profiling to account for the risk of radicalised local citizens.

For the advocates of racial or national profiling, the case is a no-brainer. Obviously, its introduction will discriminate against people of certain nationalities or backgrounds. Ordinarily, this would be an affront to our sense of fairness. But, the argument goes, these are no longer ordinary times. Better to do all we can to prevent the loss of lives, even if it should cause inconvenience and, yes, offence to some.

The logic of profiling is understandable. We know the source of danger. Airline terror plots are being planned by jihadist extremists inspired by al-Qa'ida, whose influence is stronger in some parts of the world than in others. There are no Zen Buddhists from Japan signing up to become airborne martyrs. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that profiling works: Israel has employed racial profiling in airports since 1972 with resounding success.

Yet we should not be premature in declaring in favour of its introduction.

As the Christmas Day incident shows, preventing acts of terrorism requires authorities to make judicious use of available intelligence. The potential problem with profiling, with its overt targeting of groups, is that it can lead authorities to overlook statistically unlikely threats. Yet just one militant slipping through the net is all it takes for a plot to become deadly.

There is also a moral risk in embracing consequentialism, that is, justifying our actions according to their purported consequences. This has long been held a fatal problem with any utilitarianism or belief in achieving the greatest good for the greatest number. Committing ourselves to the principle of utility as outlined by Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick leaves little room for individual rights.

It seems to me this is something that counts rather decisively against racial or national profiling. For all that the approach may enhance security, it may deal a devastating blow to liberty and equality. Even national profiling aimed at outsiders can contaminate relations among citizens.

The experience of profiling demonstrates this problem. Its use in the US by police has exacerbated discrimination against African-Americans and Hispanics. The foreseeable effects of profiling are more troubling than they may initially appear.

Foregoing a means of security in the name of liberty may seem too big a sacrifice when there remains a real terrorist threat. But then we should not forget, as the saying goes, that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:* [*philosophercolumn@gmail.com*](mailto:philosophercolumn@gmail.com)

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