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Experts: U.S. airports need more armed officers outside terminals

By Bart Jansen
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In the aftermath of the deadly bombing Tuesday at Istanbul's international airport, security experts urged airports to assign more armed officers at terminal doors to prevent attackers from reaching crowds of travelers farther inside.

The three suicide bombers killed 42 people, but the death toll was likely lower after an encounter with guards at the doorway forced them to split up and set off the explosives earlier than planned.

"The explosive effect of that same bomb going off (farther inside the airport) is exponential, the collateral damage and casualties is exponential," said Anthony Roman, president of Roman & Associates, which consults on security and risk management. "It would have been hundreds dead."

All three attackers arrived together at the lower-level arrivals hall; one went inside, opened fire and then detonated his explosives, an Interior Ministry official and another official told the Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about the investigation.

The second attacker went upstairs to departures and blew himself up. The third man waited outside during the whole episode and detonated his explosives last as people flooded out of the airport, the officials said.

One of the attackers drew the attention of guards posted outside the terminal because he wore a jacket in 80-degree summer heat, Turkey's *Hurriyet* newspaper reported. The guards followed the suspect as he met up with two other men. When the men realized they had police attention, they hurried to hit their targets.

"When the terrorists couldn't pass the regular security system, when they couldn't pass the scanners, police and security controls, they returned and took out their weapons out of their suitcases and opened fire at random at the security check," Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildririm said Wednesday.

The airport's new security approach of placing armed guards at the doors came after bombings at Brussels airport and a nearby subway station killed 32 people in March. Brussels airport shuttered for weeks after suicide attackers detonated bombs at a check-in area, causing extensive damage. The explosions in Istanbul caused far less damage, and the airport reopened Wednesday.

The Brussels attacks spurred calls for the Transportation Security Administration to move security checkpoints to doorways, but experts pointed out such a move would only push crowds of travelers onto sidewalks or parking lots where they would remain targets.

A better goal, security officials said, is to post armed officers such as local police or National Guard members at all terminal doors to gauge the behavior of suspicious travelers before they enter the building. Checkpoints inside would still screen passengers and bags for weapons and explosives.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey posted more armed police and National Guard members Wednesday at John F. Kennedy, LaGuardia and Newark airports.

Any checkpoints should be behind bollards — short vertical posts that can halt a vehicle — to reduce the threat of car bombs, according to Jeff Price, an aviation-security professor at Metropolitan State University in Denver.

"Putting screening checkpoints too close to the entrances creates an additional vulnerability as you're exposing those waiting in line to a much more powerful vehicle bomb, versus a less powerful backpack or suicide bomber farther inside the terminal," he said.

Peter Martin, CEO of AFIMAC Global, a consultancy that assesses threats at airports and gauges risks in high-risk environments such as Istanbul, said the key is to push security out as far as possible to blunt the impact on crowds.

"There's not anything really designed to keep those areas from being overrun," Martin said. "This is a prime example of people targeting where the people are."

Martin said the hope is for security to appear the strongest so that terrorists will move on to a different target. "You don't want your target to be the softest perceived target," he said.

Another tactic, adopted by Los Angeles airport, is posting armed officers along airport roads to observe vehicles that appear weighed down with explosives or are carrying people who look uncomfortable or suspicious.

"You need to have armed personnel outside the terminal, as well as inside the terminal, so that if a threat is engaged, it's engaged effectively," Roman said. "Let's forget passenger convenience for a minute. It's very inconvenient to die."